

Soft Skills Give Workers a Big Edge. It's Time to Start Focusing on Them in School, Report Says

Students with strong soft skills have higher earnings and are more likely to graduate college and work full-time

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Teaching and improving soft skills—such as conscientiousness, adaptability and perseverance—can provide huge economic gains for young people, and should receive more attention from education policy makers, according to a new report from the Hamilton Project.

Soft skills, also known as noncognitive skills or foundational skills, are increasingly in demand in today's economy.

Seven Facts on Noncognitive Skills from Education to the Labor Market Introduction
Cognitive skills—that is, math and reading skills that are measured by standardized tests—are generally understood to be of critical importance in the labor market. Most people find it intuitive and indeed unsurprising that cognitive skills, as measured by standardized tests, are important for students' later-life outcomes.

For example, earnings tend to be higher for those with higher levels of cognitive skills. What is less well understood—and is the focus of these economic facts—is that noncognitive skills are also integral to educational performance and labor-market outcomes.

Due in large part to research pioneered in economics by Nobel laureate James J. Heckman, there is a robust and growing body of evidence that noncognitive skills function similarly to cognitive skills, strongly improving labor-market outcomes. These noncognitive skills—often referred to in the economics literature as soft skills and elsewhere as **social, emotional, and behavioral skills**—include qualities like **perseverance, conscientiousness, and self-control, as well as social skills and leadership ability** (Duckworth and Yeager 2015).





The value of these qualities in the labor market has increased over time as the mix of jobs has shifted toward positions requiring noncognitive skills. Evidence suggests that the labor-market payoffs to noncognitive skills have been increasing over time and the payoffs are particularly strong for individuals who possess both cognitive and noncognitive skills (Deming 2015; Weinberger 2014).

Although we draw a conceptual distinction between noncognitive skills and cognitive skills, it is not possible to disentangle these concepts fully. All noncognitive skills involve cognition, and some portion of performance on cognitive tasks is made possible by noncognitive skills. For the purposes of this document, the term “cognitive skills” encompasses intelligence; the ability to process, learn, think, and reason; and substantive knowledge as reflected in indicators of academic achievement. Since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, education policy has focused on accountability policies aimed at improving cognitive skills and closing test score gaps across groups. These policies have been largely successful, particularly for math achievement (Dee and Jacob 2011; Wong, Cook, and Steiner 2009) and among students most exposed to accountability pressure (Neal and Schanzenbach 2010). What has received less attention in policy debates is the importance of noncognitive skills.

The U.S. economy is demanding more noncognitive skills.

1. There are strong labor-market payoffs to both cognitive and noncognitive skills.
2. The labor market is increasingly rewarding noncognitive skills.
3. Those in the bottom quartile of noncognitive skills are only about one-third as likely to complete a postsecondary degree as are those in the top quartile.
4. Noncognitive skill development interventions improve student achievement and reduce behavior-related problems.
5. Preschool interventions emphasizing cognitive and noncognitive skill development have long-term economic benefits for participants.
6. A teacher’s ability to improve noncognitive skills has more effect on graduation rates than does her ability to raise test scores.

