

Including Measures of Student Behavioral Skills in Accountability Systems

DAN VITALE

Introduction

The recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), affirms the importance of holding all students to high academic standards and preparing all students for college and career, but grants states greater autonomy than in the past over how they ensure students' progress toward readiness.

ESSA continues to require accountability systems that include academic indicators while also recognizing that academic achievement represents only one dimension of success. ESSA allows states to include measures of school quality or student success in their federal accountability systems when those measures provide meaningful differentiation in school performance and are valid, reliable, comparable, and applied statewide. Examples provided in ESSA include (but are not limited to) measures of student access to and completion of advanced coursework, student and educator engagement, student postsecondary readiness, or school climate and safety.¹

States have expressed interest in including a measure of students' acquisition of specific personal skills related to education and workforce success: skills such as persistence, dependability, working effectively with others, adapting, and managing stress. In the research literature as well as the media, these skills go by many names, including "noncognitive skills," "socioemotional skills," and "grit."²

ACT research has empirically demonstrated the relationship between a number of these skills and performance on a variety of academic and academically related indicators, and has reliably measured these skills in school environments. Broader research has also repeatedly shown the relationship between these skills and academic and workplace performance.

This paper summarizes ACT's findings, discusses the benefits of measuring students' behavioral skills as part of an accountability system, and provides recommendations for educators and policymakers interested in including measures of behavioral skills in their accountability systems.

Dan Vitale is a senior associate in the Office of Policy, Advocacy, and Government Relations at ACT.

What Are Behavioral Skills?

Through extensive research on the topic, ACT has divided into six domains the behavioral skills that are most directly related to student success:³

1. **Acting Honestly.** Describes the extent to which a person values and adheres to ethical and moral standards of behavior, as well as personal level of humility.
2. **Keeping an Open Mind.** Describes a person's level of open-mindedness and curiosity about a variety of ideas, beliefs, people, and experiences.
3. **Maintaining Composure.** Describes the extent to which a person is relatively calm, serene, and able to manage emotions effectively.
4. **Socializing with Others.** Describes a person's preferred level of social interaction, behavior in interpersonal situations, and optimism.
5. **Getting Along with Others.** Describes the extent to which a person interacts positively and cooperates with others, and is generally kind, friendly, and tactful.
6. **Sustaining Effort.** Describes a person's level of diligence, effort, organization, self-control, and compliance with rules.

What Has ACT Research Found about Behavioral Skills?

ACT research shows that as early as middle school, behavioral skills are correlated with academic risk in those grades; high school success; and postsecondary enrollment.⁴ Specifically, compared to middle school students who demonstrate lower levels of

behavioral skills, middle school students who demonstrate higher levels of these skills are:

Less likely to

- Fail courses in middle and high school
- Be absent from school in middle and high school
- Be disciplined or suspended in high school
- Drop out of or be expelled from high school

More likely to

- Earn higher GPAs in high school
- Meet a higher number of benchmarks indicating progress toward college readiness in grades 8 and 10 and attainment of college readiness in grade 11 or 12
- Complete high school
- Enroll in college

Why Should Measures of Behavioral Skills Be Included in Accountability Systems?

Students with deficiencies in behavioral skills may not complete high school and thus fail to reach their potential. Even students who are strong academically may nonetheless demonstrate deficiencies in some behavioral skills that may later hinder their chances of successful completion of high school and college. Alternatively, students who are not as strong academically but have strong behavioral skills will have greater chances of completing high school and college than those students without these behavioral skills. Behavioral skills also contribute to general work attitudes and conduct, such as diligence on the job, persistence to task completion, cooperation, teamwork, ethical behavior, and rule compliance. Employers often cite these skills as expected from

incoming employees and critical to overall job effectiveness.⁵

In short, students and individuals who demonstrate strong behavioral skills overcome challenges, persist at tasks until they are completed, and are seen as valuable and productive employees.

Measures of behavioral skills can be used to identify students at risk for academic failure or dropout; educators can make earlier and more effective interventions to help these students complete high school, alleviating minor issues before they become insurmountable ones.⁶ These measures are also a useful means of identifying whether students are on target to be ready for the challenges of postsecondary education and training when they do graduate.

Recommendations

By underscoring the importance of developing behavioral skills so that students are better prepared for future success, ACT research provides insights that demonstrate the relevance of behavioral skills as an accountability measure. To enable educators and policymakers to benefit from these insights in meeting the requirements of ESSA, ACT recommends the following:

1. **States should consider including measures of behavioral skills as part of their federal accountability systems.** Measuring students' behavioral skills is not only possible but adds new and valuable information to what is already captured in schools, contributing to a broader picture of student and school performance.⁷

Careful administration of a measure of behavioral skills requires attention to important considerations. For example, cultivation of behavioral skills is not

easily associated with a specific teacher or subject. Rather than prescribing where these skills should be learned, the focus should be on determining a student's current level of skills and suggesting actions that can reinforce and further develop them. In addition, the value of measures of behavioral skills may be affected by the relativity of students' self-judgments in a given school environment: That is, students may compare themselves to their peers when determining how high or low to rate themselves on particular skills.⁸ This can have important implications if a state is making comparisons across districts or schools.

Further, some measures of behavioral skills can be prone to coaching, often because the most "desirable" response can be easily identified.⁹ There are a number of successful approaches that minimize this risk (such as use of forced-choice tasks, situational judgment tasks, or distortion detection scales); nevertheless, states may wish to consider measures of behavioral skills primarily as low-stakes tools that provide diagnostic information and attach the accountability provisions to schools' use of the results and their connection to improvement strategies (e.g., interventions to help students develop more effective skills).

2. **Districts and schools should provide students, educators, parents, and other stakeholders with the information and tools needed to help improve students' behavioral skills.** Integrative reporting that provides

feedback across the various dimensions of college and career readiness is important. For example, students who demonstrate high levels of academic achievement and low levels of behavioral skills could be given different feedback and recommendations than students who demonstrate high levels of both academic achievement and behavioral skills. Such information could help stakeholders enact appropriate interventions to get or keep students on target for postsecondary readiness by high school graduation.

3. **Educators should deliberately and systematically monitor student progress toward development of behavioral skills to better and more quickly identify at-risk students in middle and high school and reduce their likelihood of academic failure or dropout.** Students' academic performance is critical to college and career readiness, but behavioral skills also contribute to students' ability to succeed in postsecondary education and on the job. Early assistance could potentially improve rates of postsecondary completion for at-risk students, especially because the earlier these students are identified, the more time they will have to develop the necessary behavioral skills and improve their chances for success.
4. **Federal policymakers should request further national research into behavioral skills to examine their impact on increasing postsecondary readiness and enrollment.** The research summarized in this brief, as well as other ACT research, indicates that middle and/

or high school students who demonstrate higher levels of behavioral skills are more likely to have higher GPAs in high school; to complete high school; to be academically ready for college; and to enroll in, persist in, and complete college than students who demonstrate lower levels of these skills. Federal policy can focus research agendas—particularly at the US Department of Education—on expanding the understanding of educators and students about the connections between student behaviors and academic and workplace success.¹⁰

Conclusion

Recognizing that student progress toward college and career readiness is not solely a matter of academic performance. Using the greater flexibility granted to them by ESSA, states can now include certain nonacademic indicators in their federal accountability systems. This greater flexibility comes at a time when, based on decades of empirical evidence, ACT is advancing the national conversation around readiness by supplementing core academic achievement with a holistic perspective that encompasses other equally important dimensions of readiness, including students' development of behavioral skills.

ACT welcomes the opportunity to share its research and engage with states in pursuit of the greater understanding of student and school performance—and the greater ability to help all students succeed—that can be gained from measuring student behavioral skills in the classroom. ■

Notes

- 1 States may also include measures of behavioral skills in their own accountability systems.
- 2 ACT includes behavioral skills as one component of its holistic model of readiness for college and career that encompasses skills in four areas. For detailed discussions of the model and ACT's rationale in developing it, see Krista Mattern, Jeremy Burrus, Wayne Camara, Ryan O'Connor, Mary Ann Hanson, James Gambrell, Alex Casillas, and Becky Bobek, *Broadening the Definition of College and Career Readiness: A Holistic Approach* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2014); Wayne Camara, Ryan O'Connor, Krista Mattern, and Mary Ann Hanson (Eds.), *Beyond Academics: A Holistic Framework for Enhancing Education and Workplace Success* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2015).
- 3 Camara et al., *Beyond Academics*.
- 4 This evidence comes primarily from studies using students in grades 6, 7, and 8 who took ACT Engage® Grades 6–9, as well as, where relevant to the context, high school students who took ACT Engage Grades 10–12. ACT Engage is designed to identify students at academic risk by supplementing standardized achievement testing with measures of important skills that have been shown to be of value in predicting academic performance and persistence.
- 5 M.A. Hanson and Walter C. Borman, "Citizenship Performance: An Integrative Review and Motivational Analysis," in Winston Bennett, Jr., Charles E. Lance, and David J. Woehr (Eds.), *Performance Measurement: Current Perspectives and Future Challenges* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 141–173.
- 6 ACT, *Importance of Student Self-Regulation* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, January 2013).
- 7 See, e.g., Martin R. West, "Should Non-Cognitive Skills Be Included in School Accountability Systems? Preliminary Evidence from California's CORE Districts," accessed March 17, 2016 from www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2016/03/17-non-cognitive-skills-school-accountability-california-core-west. According to West, "[O]ur preliminary analysis of the data from CORE's field test provides a broadly encouraging view of the potential for self-reports of social-emotional skills as an input into its system for evaluating school performance. . . . The recently enacted Every Student Succeeds Act provides both opportunity and incentive for experimentation."
- 8 See, e.g., Stephen J. Heine, Darrin R. Lehman, Kaiping Peng, & Joe Greenholtz, "What's Wrong With Cross-Cultural Comparisons of Subjective Likert Scales?: The Reference-Group Effect," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82, no. 6 (2002), 903–918.
- 9 See, e.g., Mattern et al., *Broadening the Definition*; Angela L. Duckworth & David Scott Yeager, "Measurement Matters: Assessing Personal Qualities Other Than Cognitive Ability for Educational Purposes," *Educational Researcher* 44, no. 4 (2015), 237–251.
- 10 ACT, *ACT's Policy Platform: Postsecondary Education* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, n.d.).