Teach SOFT SKILLS to Increase Student Success

Strategies to Enhance Students' 21st Century Competencies

SOFT SKILLS encompass a wide array of characteristics, including:

- Organization
- Timeliness
- Study habits
- Manners
- Curiosity
- Responsibility
- Grit
- A growth mindset
- Perseverance
- Optimism
- Ambition
- Communication
- Cooperation
- Social awareness
- Self-confidence
- Self-control

Success in school, work, and life depend on more than concrete skills and content knowledge.

While a strong education in how to do something specific – in teaching or engineering, in plumbing or computer science – goes a long way towards supporting students' employability, there's been a recent burst of awareness for just how important so-called "soft skills" are for success as well.

Incorporating soft skills into your curriculum will give your students an advantage in completing their education. Additionally, they will be better prepared to meet workplace expectations, increasing their confidence as they embark on careers.

Best practices in teaching soft skills

This brochure outlines strategies for strengthening students' soft skills, drawing on the best research to date, and highlights innovative programs that teach soft skills.

What are soft skills?

These less tangible traits fall under many titles: Soft skills, noncognitive skills, employability skills, character, social and emotional learning, 21st Century learning, and more. Each of these addresses similar and overlapping sets of strengths.

These characteristics go a long way in supporting success in nearly any field, yet they are generally learned on the job or around the dinner table rather than in the classroom. Your guidance and classroom activities can reinforce the importance of these skills and enable students to practice behaviors sought by employers.

Soft skills prepare students for employment

Part of the value of soft skills lies in their flexibility: they may be shaped well into adulthood, providing students with second (and third, and fourth) chances to succeed in school and work, even after their cognitive skills have been more firmly set. If schools were to actively foster students' soft skill development, students would likely advance in their careers more quickly.

Methods to Strengthen Students' SOFT SKILLS

A substantial body of research offers insights into how SOFT SKILLS can be developed in a classroom, including all of the following:

Inspire curiosity

Make it okay to say "I don't know" within a classroom, and admit when you as a teacher don't know an answer. Provide just a bit of information on something new to spark deeper interest. Introduce contradictions and ask students how we might understand them. Ask open-ended questions.

Cultivate grit

Ask students to reflect on challenges they've overcome on their own path to achievement, and share the gritty path to success others have taken, as the obstacles others have overcome often go unseen.

Encourage optimism

Be mindful when giving negative feedback, redirect students towards positive behaviors, and help students to keep their own focus toward the positive.

Teach self-control

Create classrooms with minimal distractions, and encourage students to reflect on past times when they exercised self-control.

FOSTER PROFESSIONALISM

Proper Job Attire
Appropriately formal, avoid too tight or revealing clothing

Conversation
Do not unnecessarily discuss personal problems or bad feelings toward past jobs

Online Communication
Use a professional email address and social media handle (no sexystud@gmail.com) and compose emails as you would a professional letter

Attendance
Be punctual, call in when sick, and ask permission to leave early

Provide real-world work experience

Experience on the job such as apprenticeships, job shadowing, and volunteer roles give students a chance to learn from mentors; see and emulate career-relevant skills including timeliness, self-presentation, social awareness, and cooperation; and help build networks to draw on for future roles.

Foster a growth mindset

Teach students that much like a muscle, the mind grows stronger with exercise: working through challenges strengthens intelligence. Ask students to describe a growth mindset in their own words, or to give advice based on a growth mindset to (hypothetical) students who think they're not smart enough for school.

Reward effort

A growth mindset may also be encouraged by rewarding students' efforts in addition to their outcomes, as this underscores the value of wrestling with challenges.

Evaluate what students can do at the end of the course

Base grades on what students can do at the end of a course rather than on their performance on quizzes throughout a course. This allows students to take risks and struggle through challenges earlier in the course, and avoids self-doubt from receiving low grades early in the term.

Develop students' sense of purpose

Help students think about how their education will allow them to reach meaningful goals such as improving their communities or setting a good example for others. These beliefs can help students keep motivated through challenging or less engaging aspects of their learning. Explain how many students study in order to improve the world or make their families proud; then ask students to write about how school can help them reach their own goals.

Teach teamwork

Assign students to groups in which every student has a role (e.g., director, presenter, scribe). This requires each student to be independently responsible while also depending on team members to carry out their roles well. Teaching teamwork in this way is part of interventions like Process Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning, which serve to teach collaboration and written communication.

With strategies to strengthen SOFT SKILLS broadly applied, the academic and employment futures of all students flourish.

SOFT SKILLS
Teaching Resources

- **Stanford's Project for Education Research That Scales (PERTS)** offers brief online programs to help students think about school and learning in more adaptive ways, and works to reduce demographic gaps in college.

  www.perts.net

- **Hewlett Foundation's Deeper Learning Initiative** strives to teach students to apply their learning in the real world. Examples from over 500 schools across the country are provided online.

  www.hewlett.org/programs/education/deeper-learning

- **Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21)** emphasizes how soft skills must be applied in combination with strong content knowledge, and demonstrates the need for students to be fluent in creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration to succeed in today's economy.

  www.p21.org

- **EdLeader21** offes educators tools and resources for strengthening students' critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity, and offers opportunities to network and collaborate.

  www.edleader21.com

- **The Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges' Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST)** emphasizes developing soft skills like professional dress, punctuality, calling in when sick, and asking permission to leave early.

  www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/programs-services/i-best/default.aspx

- **Year Up** requires that students enroll at a local community college while participating, teaches marketable skills for middle-skill jobs, and develops soft skills such as how to relate in an office setting.

  www.yearup.org

- **Opportunity Network** aims to increase all students' potential to graduate from college ready for careers by helping students to build valuable networks, and by providing access to classroom career speakers, internship hosts, networking leaders, college application tutors, and advisors.

  www.opportunitynetwork.org

- **Historically Black Colleges** are boosting minority representation in STEM fields in part by training students in soft skills. For example, at Howard University early engineering classes explicitly teach professionalism and emphasize communication skills.

  www.ceacs.howard.edu

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