



Expanding the Definition of Student Success Under ESSA

Opportunities to Advance Social-Emotional Mindsets, Skills, and Habits for Today's Students

Signed into law on December 10, 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) presents education leaders with a unique opportunity to expand the definition of student success. Compared to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, ESSA empowers states to make more of the critical decisions related to accountability, school improvement, education spending, and public reporting. Although regulations to guide the new law's implementation are still being finalized, ESSA clearly requires states to broaden the concept of school quality and student success to include factors beyond test scores and graduation rates, suggesting that education systems need to take a more holistic approach to preparing students for college and career.

Meanwhile, compelling evidence on the importance of certain social-emotional or intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies has emerged in recent years. TransformEd refers to these competencies as Mindsets, Essential Skills, and Habits (or MESH). A growing body of literature has shown that MESH is crucial to students' success in college, career, and life. For example:

- In the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health & Development Study, 95% of the young people in the top quintile of self-control went on to graduate from high school, compared with 58% for those in the lowest quintile;
- In James Heckman's 2006 analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth from 1979, so-called "non-cognitive factors" were as predictive as cognitive factors in accounting for which young men earned a college degree by age 30;
- And in the Fast Track longitudinal study, kindergartners with high social competency were 1.5 times more likely to graduate from high school and twice as likely to graduate from college.

Consistent with this research, educators already recognize the importance of MESH and are implementing a wide range of practices to support students' development with limited information about which approaches are working. 93% of educators agree that MESH is important, and 95% believe these skills are teachable. Furthermore, schools are already investing heavily in efforts to develop students' MESH: 88% of teachers say that their school is using some practice, program, or intervention to help students develop MESH. School systems nationally are spending approximately \$650M per year on MESH-related instructional resources, and the total cost of teacher time devoted to supporting students' MESH development is estimated at \$30B per year. As a country, we are already investing heavily in approaches that are intended to develop these crucial competencies without evaluating whether our investments are paying off for students.






Strong evidentiary support for the importance of MESH already exists, and regularly assessing these competencies is a key step in the process of serving students more effectively.



Based on the existing research, we believe that MESH should be a significant part of defining, assessing, and supporting student success. We do not believe that MESH measures are ready to be included as a formal part of school accountability. However, we do believe that education leaders have a responsibility to prioritize and begin gathering data on MESH. These data can be used to identify promising practices to develop students' MESH and to target supports to schools and groups of students with the greatest need.

To that end, we make three recommendations to states and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) on how to leverage the flexibility of ESSA in ways that support students' development of MESH:

-  **Start measuring MESH:** States and LEAs should begin routinely collecting MESH data to empower educators to have more data-driven conversations about students' MESH development and to learn more about which instructional strategies and approaches are most effective in supporting MESH development.
-  **Use MESH data for formative purposes, while continuing to explore other potential uses for future years:** We recommend that leaders gather and examine several years' worth of data before deciding whether to incorporate MESH into a formal accountability system. In the meantime, states and LEAs should capitalize on ESSA's flexibility and use MESH measures within needs assessments to target specific supports and interventions for struggling schools.
-  **Leverage new and existing funding to support effective approaches:** States should make use of new funding opportunities, particularly the "Safe and Healthy Student" block grants within ESSA, and existing funding opportunities under Title I and Title II of the law to support effective approaches that develop students' MESH.

This policy brief describes our three recommendations in greater detail and outlines how these recommendations align with the provisions of ESSA. It also provides an example of one school system—the CORE Districts—that has already begun to act on these recommendations to advance students' development of the mindsets, essential skills, and habits that support college and career success.

We are at a critical moment of opportunity to gather the data necessary to better serve the whole child and improve the way we prepare students for college, career, and life. Ultimately, ESSA can serve as an important catalyst for education leaders to expand their definition of college and career readiness to include the mindsets, essential skills, and habits that have been shown to support students' success and to align their systems of assessment to this expanded definition.

To read the full policy brief, please [see here](#).

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For more information on our work, and to learn more about validity and reliability of MESH measures, please see the [CORE Case Study](#) and [Measuring MESH](#).