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Rethinking what it takes to succeed in school

Some looking at the role optimism and grit play

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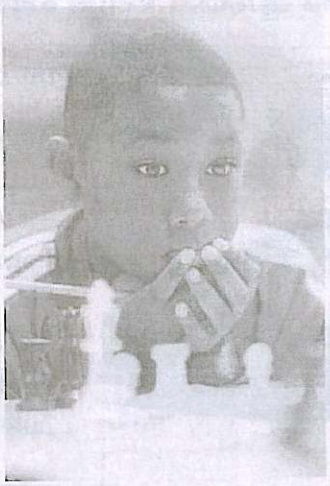
In the late 1960s, Stanford University psychologist Walter Mischel sat preschoolers at desks with a marshmallow, a bell and a bargain: Eat the marshmallow any time you want, but if you wait 15 minutes, you'll get two marshmallows.

When he began tracking down the marshmallow kids in the early 1980s, he found that those who'd waited for two marshmallows at age 4 had much higher SAT scores and better academic records as teenagers. Could something as simple as self-control predict who got into a top-flight college?



Ishmael Bento-Simon looks over the board in chess class.

After decades of failed education policies, scientists, economists and educators are starting to rethink basic ideas of what it takes to succeed in school. They're beginning to look at non-cognitive skills — grit, perseverance, conscientiousness and optimism, for instance — and wondering if they might be as important as cognitive skills.

A decade after Congress passed the No Child Left Behind law, educators are as divided as ever on the law's key goal: how to improve educational outcomes for poor children. On one side, educators say the stresses and deprivations of poverty doom kids' aspirations — cure poverty, they say, and education will follow. On the other side are educators who say a more competitive, focused and accountable education system will lift kids out of poverty by giving them a ticket to college and the middle class.

So far we haven't cured poverty, and the results from several "no excuses" experiments are mixed. Alumni of the highly regarded KIPP middle schools for low-income students, for instance, boast great high school graduation rates. But few get through college.

New research suggests that a third way might be more practical: Alleviate the effects of poverty by helping parents raise more resilient kids — and helping kids develop habits of mind to persevere through difficulty.

"We haven't been able to solve big problems because we've been looking in the wrong places," writes author Paul Tough, whose new book, *How Children Succeed*, is reigniting interest in the topic. Among those heeding the new research: David Levin, a KIPP co-founder who adopted a 24-item "character report card" in the face of the poor college-going results. After more than a decade of no-nonsense academics and harsh discipline, "He (Levin) had created the perfect middle-school student, but he hadn't created the perfect college student," Tough said.

"When we think about the word 'character,' we often think of something that is not at all changeable — it's just like what you're born with," Tough says. "But these strengths are things that are absolutely changeable."

Tough also details the efforts of Elizabeth Spiegel, a chess teacher at a Brooklyn middle school who develops master players. She does it, Tough discovers, by teaching her students to reflect on every move of every game — mistakes included. Her players write out each move and review them afterward, drilling down to figure out why they made a mistake and how to fix it. "Teaching chess is really about teaching the habits that go along with thinking," Spiegel tells him.

She likens the process to psychotherapy, saying her players often make the same mistakes repeatedly. In the end, she says, they must find a way to separate themselves from their mistakes and losses.

Student's Power Lines

	Priority Level (1-10)	Effectiveness Level (1-10)	Power Gap (1-10)
Attitude Power Line			
1. Positive			
2. Open			
3. Risk-taking			
4. Accepting of criticism			
5. Respectful			
6. Interested in learning			
7. Co-operative			
Social Power Line			
1. Group interaction			
2. Kindness			
3. Ability to resolve conflicts			
4. Good problem solving skills			
5. Acceptance of new friends			
6. A positive influence			
7. Manners			
8. Courtesy			

Grade Power Line

1. Proper rest
2. Good study habits
3. Reading ability
4. Comprehension
5. Takes good notes
6. Completed homework
7. Knowledge of test dates
8. Has comprehension
9. Asks questions
10. Attendance
11. Homework
12. Class work
13. Quizzes
14. Tests
15. Projects
16. Participation
17. Attitude Modification

Family Power Line

1. Parent Involvement
2. Teacher Support
3. Student Support
4. School Support
5. Family Support
6. Consistency
7. Book Bag
8. Scheduled Conferences
9. Provisions for Illness

Behavior Power Line

1. Show self-control
2. Identify consequences
3. Realize consequences
4. Create clear goals
5. Respect authority
6. Understand requirements
7. Follow directions
8. Know expectations
9. Respect self/peers
10. Have personal reward system
11. Have clear rules
12. Have clear routines
13. Good seating arrangement
14. Back-up worksheets
15. Class library
16. Extra computer time

Self-image Power Line

1. Good appearance
2. Confidence
3. Eye contact
4. Good posture
5. Proper hygiene

Homework Power Line

1. On time
2. Neat
3. Complete
4. Consistent
5. In an Assignment book
6. On a Check-off List
7. In Homework Copy Book
8. Guided by good study skills

Attendance Power Line

1. On time
2. Prepared
3. Aware of make-up work

Study Skills Power Line

1. Course Expectations
2. Workable Goals
3. Preparation for Class
4. Upkeep and Organization
5. Note taking & Outlining
6. Home Assignment Book
7. Re-read Daily Assignment
8. Proper Study Place
9. Consistent Study Time
10. Test-taking Strategies

Organization Power Line

1. Mail Box
2. Bookshelves
3. Paperwork
4. Class work
5. Homework
6. Study Skills
7. Locker
8. Desk
9. Notebook