

FOSTERING GRIT

*How do I prepare my students
for the real world?*

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Grit and Competition

Although the recently adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English language arts and mathematics do not speak directly to the teaching of grit, they still offer support in this area. According to the official CCSS website (www.corestandards.org), “No state in the country was asked to lower their expectations for their students in adopting the Common Core. The standards are evidence-based, aligned with college and work expectations, include rigorous content and skills, and are informed by other top performing countries” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). The fact that rigorous content and skills are explicitly mentioned in the CCSS may make it more likely that students will experience the frustration and failure that are integral to learning grit.

Where did *you* learn your grit? I’ve asked this question a lot to parents and educators who invariably tell me that they developed their grit during extracurricular activities. Most of them say they did so learning to play sports or a musical instrument; only rarely do they attribute their grit to academic experiences.

I, too, developed my grit learning to play sports. My journey began on the football field in high school. Though I loved the game, I wasn’t a particularly good player. For the

first time in my life, I was pushed beyond what I thought I could handle, but I survived. I learned to pick myself up and try again when I failed. Now, decades later, that message remains with me. Although I sure didn't know it at the time, my lack of football skills may have actually benefitted me in the long run!

Extracurricular experiences offer great opportunities for students to learn grit. In sports, children are relentlessly pushed—by the coach, by teammates, sometimes by their parents—to do better and better; performances can always be improved. When you fail at athletics, you do so publicly—the pitcher's mound offers no place to hide. Of course, there are also winners and losers. Effort, improvement, and teamwork all matter, but a scoreboard publicly proclaims the victor. (One of the soccer teams at my school once played in a league that did not record goals in order to reduce competitiveness. The players kept score anyway.) Of course, our hearts go out to the children in tears after losing or in pain due to physical exertion. We would be appalled to find these things happening in our classrooms, but on the field or in the gym, they can help students learn about grit.

Of course, many of the same grit-building experiences found in sports can be found in any number of extracurricular activities, whether it's the drama club or the debate team. In all cases, these experiences have two things in common: they are public, and students are held accountable by their peers (their club or team).

The Need for Grit in Our No-Pain Culture

The need to formally teach grit is greater today than it was in the past. As parents become increasingly overprotective, they encounter fewer opportunities to expose their kids to grit-building frustration. The term *snowplow parents*—for parents who feel their job is to remove the barriers that their children might encounter—captures this attitude. Of course, parents should be their children’s foremost advocates, but they aren’t helping their kids by serving as a buffer between them and failure. When making the case for grit to parents, consider sharing writings that speak to the importance of perseverance. Here are a few good examples (see References for URLs):

- “Math and Science Engagement: Identifying the Processes and Psychological Theories That Underlie Successful Social-Psychological Interventions,” a briefing paper by Nancy Stano (2012).
- “The Mindsets That Foster ‘Productive Persistence’ in Students,” a blog post by Michael Keany (2013).
- “Teaching Kids to Have a Strong Work Ethic,” a blog post by Michele Borba (2012).
- “Struggle for Smarts? How Eastern and Western Cultures Tackle Learning,” a blog post by Alex Spiegel (2012).
- “For President, I Want the Guy Who’s Failed,” a blog post by Jeff Stibel (2012).
- “America Needs More Free-Range Kids: Grit Made America Great,” an article by John Stossel (2013).



About the Author



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