

MEETING THE CHALLENGE:

Envisioning Schools That Can Address
Both Academic and Non-Cognitive Skills

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As I travel the country to meet with school leaders, I am hearing the same concern in district after district, state after state: our students' mental health is a growing and serious crisis. Most recently, I met

with leaders in school districts in Massachusetts, Virginia, North Carolina, New York, Colorado, Texas, Arkansas, and Mississippi. Mental health concerns came up in every discussion. The issues they are seeing with students run the gamut from relatively minor things, such as absenteeism and discipline issues, all the way to an alarming increase in student suicides.

Leaders are struggling with how to confront these issues. Some, perhaps too many, are simply not talking about it. Some are beginning to talk about it, but are overwhelmed with finding a solution. From my perspective, non-cognitive education—often called social emotional development—is an important part of the solution.

To us, the term one chooses to speak to these issues of non-cognitive skills and mental health are irrelevant. What matters is that we get serious about this crisis and resist the urge to avoid talking about it because it's too uncomfortable. We need a clear understanding of what's causing this crisis, what non-cognitive learning and other strategies are showing early promise, and what role schools need to play in supporting all of our students' mental and emotional health.

Many of you know the story of my earlier years in education. I have a track record of sounding the alarm on uncomfortable conversations we need to have. First was the need to get our students using technologies in schools in the 1970s. Once I was at the New York Department of Education, I was charged with getting sex and drug ed in all New York State schools. Talk about resistance! This was uncomfortable for everyone, including me. But we prevailed. Now I see social media as similar to the drug and sex ed issue of this century so far. The risks social media pose to our students can be as dangerous as drugs (and in

my view, social media is contributing to the youth mental health crisis).

In each of these cases, I knew I was going after an important cause. I also had the confidence of knowing there were great ideas about how to handle these issues in our schools. These conversations made a lot of people uncomfortable, but collectively, we all pushed through.

In the 1990s, we at the International Center for Leadership in Education had a different experience when we did some work with districts to design what we then called character education. We learned an important lesson, one I want to share with you so that together we avoid similar setbacks. There were many people who worried that if schools taught character, they would be indoctrinating students with whatever their beliefs might be. To these people, their perceptions became their reality, when in fact, we were trying to nurture personal and interpersonal traits such as trustworthiness, perseverance, collaboration, compassion, and responsibility. Pushback was strong enough that we pulled back on our efforts.

But today, we have to push forward before this crisis gets even more severe. Today, I know I'm again going after a vitally important cause for our students. But this time, I am not armed with the confidence of knowing how to address a non-cognitive education for mental health issues. It seems very few are. I think that's part of why we don't want to talk about it. This conversation makes almost all of us feel uncomfortable, deeply sad, angry, and powerless. And for major reasons: we are, in some cases, talking life and death. Yet, we know we're duty bound to protect our students when they're under our care. We know we're duty-bound to prepare them not just for the next grade, but also for life. Being scared to talk about this and grapple with a path forward can no longer be the reasons we don't.

Therefore, I feel all the more morally obligated—and apprehensive—to start talking and ask people to come, bravely, with me into this uncomfortable, scary, but most critical conversation about how to approach non-cognitive education in our schools.

The theme of the 2018 Model School's Conference is "Be a Visionary."

Dictionary.com defines "visionary" as:

adjective

given to or characterized by fanciful, not presently workable, or impractical ideas, views, or schemes

noun

a person of unusually keen foresight

a person who is given to audacious, highly speculative, or impractical ideas or schemes; dreamer

Today, a vision of an entire education system that views an effective non-cognitive education as of equal or more importance than academic education is that of a dreamer. Presently, it might feel impractical, not workable, way too audacious. But that's why it's the dream of visionaries. We have to start somewhere. Sometimes impractical is the only practical starting point available.

I recognize that an emotional plea is not always the best way to get skeptics on board. For those of you who prefer tangible evidence, there's plenty out there that will, I think, make you know that we educators no longer have a choice: we have to address non-cognitive skills in all of our schools. Multiple research studies show that non-cognitive skills are a better predictor than academic skills of:

- Graduating from high school
- Graduating from college
- Greater academic achievement in K-12
- Being hired and retained
- Winning employer priority
- Earning more and achieving financial stability
- Owning a home
- Never being on public assistance
- Never being convicted of a crime
- Avoiding teen pregnancy

All of those points amount to a well-adjusted person with strong self-control, self-awareness, and fortitude. They show a person who can function healthily with themselves and others.

I believe that as a system, we have lost sight of what is most important for our children and what our true responsibility as educators is: to teach the whole child.

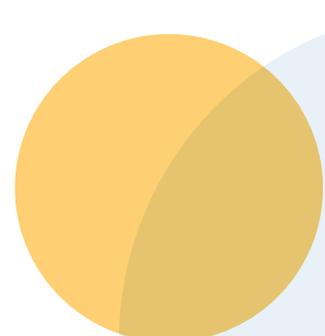
To face this crisis with confidence, we have to ask ourselves three bold questions:

1. Is our responsibility just academic, or is it to develop the whole child?
2. Can we be effective in addressing non-cognitive skills and needs?
3. And if so, how, and what's the plan?

I hope you and your teams will join me and fellow visionaries at the [2018 Model Schools Conference](#) to dare to dream big, discuss the impractical, be audacious, and begin to make workable plans from the unworkable. Our students are counting on us.

Stay tuned for the second paper in this non-cognitive series where I will discuss:

- Observations and thoughts on what is driving this mental health crisis
- The spectrum of mental health issues
- Why non-cognitive education is the key to the solution
- How ICLE's Rigor/Relevance Framework® needs to evolve to account for the role non-cognitive learning and skills plays in reaching rigorous and relevant learning



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