

From the Superintendent's Desk
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Since January, I have been writing about the “success skills” Thomas Hoerr wrote about in his book The Formative Five: Fostering Grit, Empathy, and Other Success Skills Every Student Needs. I have written about **empathy, self-control, integrity, and embracing diversity**. In this article, I will write about the last of the success skills: **grit**.

To illustrate what grit is, contrast these two students. Mike was a talented kid and most things came naturally for him. He achieved success in most everything he attempted—played the trumpet in band, was a starting shortstop on the baseball team, and made the academic honor roll. One thing Mike couldn't handle, though, was adversity. When things got hard, Mike gave up. For example, despite his athletic skills, he refused to play any position other than shortstop. He wouldn't try out for any sports other than baseball. When he wasn't named first chair trumpet in band, he quit. Academically, Mike did well, in part because he spent a lot of time finding out what the teacher wanted. His focus was avoiding failure; even the smallest failure overwhelmed him. Mike would quit participating when he stopped succeeding.

Sarah, on the other hand, wasn't the brightest student or best athlete. But, every teacher wanted her in the classroom and every coach wanted her on their team. What she lacked in scholasticism or athletic prowess she made up for in her tenacity, perseverance, and resilience. To her, success meant that she was ready for her next challenge. While she was all about raising her test scores and reducing her time in the mile, she understood there would be frustrating times along the way. But, she could always generate a little more energy and give a bit more of determination when needed.

The difference between Mike and Sarah comes down to **grit**. Never giving up and pushing yourself to perform better than anyone could reasonably expect makes all the difference.

Grit is defined as “tenacity, perseverance, hanging in there, and never giving up.” It's a factor in just about everyone's “against-the-odds” success.

One of the best books/movies that illustrates what **grit** is is Lauren Hillenbrand's Unbroken (2010). It's the story of Louis Zamperini, a 1936 Olympic athlete, who was also an Army Corps bombardier in World War II. He survived on a life raft for 47 days in the Pacific Ocean after his plane was shot down and was held in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp for years after that. Whether challenged by fellow athletes, ocean tides, sharks, or prison guards, Zamperini refused to be defeated. He embodied **grit**. (See the movie—it's powerful!).

Hoerr said that **grit** is one of the five “success skills” we all need. We need to work diligently, work constantly to improve, don't give up so easily, and not be willing to settle for anything less than success.

Sure, we all will face frustrations and have failures in life. But, they are merely obstacles, not walls. Michael Jordan, former NBA basketball player, said, “Obstacles don’t have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don’t turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it.” Before Michael Jordan became the NBA superstar that he was, you only need to look back at how he overcame adversity playing basketball in high school and college. He refused to let those early setbacks deter him.

Anthony Fox, U.S. Transportation Secretary, said, “I’d rather have **resilience** than almost any other quality. **Competence** is obviously critical, but a lot of people who are really smart actually end up walking away from some pretty tough assignments because they worried about whether they could do them or not.”

Having **grit** means possessing an attitude that accepts challenges, a willingness to step out of one’s comfort zone, and refusing to give up.

Angela Duckworth found that students with **grit** were far more likely to succeed in school. Those without it were at a much greater risk of dropping out.

Teaching for **grit** means that you’re also addressing “attitudes” about what it takes to succeed (e.g., hard work, perseverance, practice, not letting failure discourage you, not taking the easy way out, etc.). You learn **grit** by doing it.

Angela Duckworth shared four psychological assets shared by people who possess lots of **grit**:

1. Interest. You can’t be “gritty” about something that you’re not interested in.
2. Capacity to engage in deliberate practice. Knowing what deliberate practice is and what it is not and being willing to do it.
3. A sense of purpose. “Of how and what they do, day in, day out, is meaningful and beneficial to people who are not them.”
4. Hope. The hope is to keep going when hope seems lost.

Hoerr says there are six steps in developing **grit**:

1. Step 1- Establishing the Environment. Schools highlight successes by displaying championship trophies, calling attention to National Merit Semifinalists/Finalists, and posting/publicizing the quarterly honor roll. Schools should also look for ways to applaud effort and progress. Celebrating “stick-to-it-iveness” at graduation ceremonies, back-to-school nights, and at faculty meetings are things schools can do to recognize grit.
2. Step 2- Setting Expectations. Learning to respond well/appropriately to frustration/failure is an important life skill. When we experience frustration/failure, we need to step out of our comfort zones and deliberately work at developing our grit.
3. Step 3- Teaching the Vocabulary. Grit can be described in many ways: tenacity, resilience, stick-to-it-iveness, backbone, guts, courage, bravery, resoluteness, intrepidity, and spunk. All these terms are synonymous to grit. Grit refers specifically to overcoming frustration or failure.

4. Step 4- Creating Frustration. Before teachers intentionally create frustrating experiences for students, it is important that they prepare their students for what they are doing. Educators need to teach students how to channel disappointment productively.
5. Step 5- Monitoring the Experience. Educators need to gain an awareness of students' attitudes toward their learning. Helping them to understand that the learning journey is very important and that the right attitude can turn failure into something good is crucial.
6. Step 6- Reflecting and Learning. Asking students to reflect on how they felt throughout an experience is very helpful. What did they do when they first experienced frustration? How did they respond when they were bored? What did they say to themselves to keep persevering? What did they learn that they will be able to use the next time they become frustrated or fail at something?

A number of strategies for developing **grit** are shared below:

- Have students share stories of how they used **grit**.
- Use “goal-setting” as a tool to work toward **grit**.
- Have students interview their parents, family members, or other adults about their experiences with **grit**.
- Discuss whether the characters in books or articles are exhibiting **grit** or not.
- Routinely challenge students to get out of their comfort zones.
- Have students interview people who are good at their jobs to see how much **grit** contributed to their success.
- Discuss how tenacity, resilience, stick-to-itiveness, backbone, guts, courage, bravery, resoluteness, intrepidity, and spunk are all related to the idea of **grit** and what the differences among them are.
- Bring in newspaper articles showing examples of **grit** and discuss.

Developing the success skills of **empathy, self-control, integrity, embracing diversity,** and **grit** will not only lead to greater success in school but greater success in life. I hope that this series of articles has not only been interesting, but have also been helpful and illuminating!