

True Grit: The Best Measure of Success and How to Teach It

Can you predict academic success or whether a child will graduate? You can, but not how you might think.

When psychologist [Angela Duckworth](#) studied people in various challenging situations, including National Spelling Bee participants, rookie teachers in tough neighborhoods, and West Point cadets, she found:

One characteristic emerged as a significant predictor of success. And it wasn't social intelligence. It wasn't good looks, physical health, and it wasn't IQ. It was grit.

Why is Grit So Important?

Using the [Grit Scale](#) that Duckworth developed with Chris Peterson, they found that grit is a better indicator of GPA and graduation rates. (IQ, however, is very predictive of standardized test scores.)

Add to this the [findings](#) (from Bowen, Chingos and McPherson's [Crossing the Finish Line](#)) that high school grades have a more predictive value of college success than standardized tests, and you may just see a shift from standardized test scores to high school GPA by some college admissions officers. As GPA becomes more important, grit will become more recognized as a vital part of 21st century student success -- as well it should be.

What is Grit?

Some would argue that grit is inherent in Albert Bandura's research on [self-efficacy](#), and that resilience is also part of it. But you can't just implement "character education" and think you're teaching grit. In 2008, the [Character](#)

[Education Partnership](#) divided character into two categories: **core ethical values** and **performance values**. In my opinion, grit would be categorized as a performance value.

Can Grit be Taught?

Here are 11 ways that I'm tackling grit in my classroom and school.

1. Read Books About Grit

Read books, hold book studies and discuss trends. Measuring noncognitive factors like grit will be controversial, but just because we struggle to measure it doesn't mean that we can stop trying.

- **Book Reading List:**

- [How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character](#) by Paul Tough
- [David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants](#) by Malcom Gladwell
- [Performance Values Position Paper](#) (PDF) by Character Education Partnership

- **Trend Reading:**

- [KIPP's Character Report Card](#)
- [Promoting Grit, Tenacity, and Perseverance: Critical Factors for Success in the 21st Century](#) (PDF) by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology

2. Talk About Grit

First, I give my students the [grit scale test](#) (PDF) and let them score it. Then we watch [Angela Duckworth's TED video](#) together and talk about the decisions we make that impact grit. Empower students to educate themselves -- they can't wait for educators to figure this out.

3. Share Examples

In my ninth grade classroom, January starts with [a video](#) about [John Foppe](#), born with no arms, who excelled as an honor student, drove his own car, and became a successful psychologist and speaker while creatively using his feet. We also talk to Westwood alum [Scott Rigsby](#), the first double amputee to complete an Ironman competition. These are gritty people. Life is hard, and luck is an illusion.

4. Help Students Develop a Growth Mindset

Carol Dweck from Stanford University [teaches us](#) that students who have a [growth mindset](#) are more successful than those who think that intelligence is fixed. (See David Hochheiser's post [Growth Mindset: A Driving Philosophy, Not Just a Tool.](#))

5. Reframe Problems

Using stories and examples from Malcom Gladwell's book *David and Goliath*, we talk about "desirable difficulties." Students need perspective about problems to prevent them from giving up, quitting or losing hope.

6. Find a Framework

I use Angela Maiers' [Classroom Habitudes](#) as my framework. The [KIPP framework](#) specifically includes grit as one of its seven traits. Find one that works for your school and includes clear performance values.

7. Live Grittily

You teach with your life. Perhaps that is why Randy Pausch's [Last Lecture](#) and David Menasche's [Priority List](#) resonate. These teachers used their own battle with death itself as a way to teach. But you don't have to die to be an effective teacher. Our own work ethic yells so loudly that kids know exactly what we think about grit.

8. Foster Safe Circumstances That Encourage Grit

Never mistake engaging, fun or even interesting for easy. We don't jump up and down when we tear off a piece of tape because "I did it." No one celebrates easy, but everyone celebrates championships and winners because those take grit (and more). We need more circumstances to help kids to develop grit before they can "have it."

Tough academic requirements, sports and outdoor opportunities are all ways to provide opportunities for developing grit. [Verena Roberts](#), Chief Innovation Officer of CANeLearn says:

One of the best ways to learn about grit is to focus on outdoor education and go out into the wild. Grit is about not freaking out, taking a deep breath, and moving on.

9. Help Students Develop Intentional Habits

Read about [best practices for creating habits](#), because habits and self-control require grit.

10. Acknowledge the Sacrifice Grit Requires

Grit takes time, and many students aren't giving it. In their 2010 paper "[The Falling Time Cost of College](#)", Babcock and Marks demonstrate that, in 1961, U.S. undergraduates studied 24 hours a week outside of class. In 1981, that fell to 20 hours, and in 2003, it was 14 hours per week. This is not to create a blame or generation gap discussion, but rather to point out the cost of being well educated. We are what we do, and if we study less and work less, then we will learn less.

11. Discuss When You Need Grit and When You Need to Quit

Grit is not without controversy. Alfie Kohn has some valid points in his [criticism of grit](#). So read and discuss the opponents of grit in class.

In particular, I agree with the point that there is a time for grit and a time to

quit. There are times when it's OK to quit something that just isn't within your range of talents, or when trying something different may enrich your life. Worthy tasks deserve persistence. But there are tasks that would be worthier in a different season of your life. There are jobs that should be left. Sometimes you have to let go of something good to grasp something great. Students need discernment to know when they need grit and when it may be a time to quit.

Educators Need Grit

Now we as teachers just need the grit to do whatever it takes to turn education around, and that starts with hard work and our own modern version of true grit. Teaching it and living it is now front and center in the education conversation.