

# GETTING SMART ON

## ASSESSING & MEASURING Social & Emotional Learning



PUBLISHED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	01
Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Assessment: The Demand is Clear.....	04
Schools Really Can (and Should) Measure Social and Emotional Learning.....	07
Can Grit be Grown?.....	10
10 Ways Educators Can Use SEL Measurement and Assessment for Student Success.....	13
3 Reasons SEL Assessments Aren't "Just Another Test".....	16
Conclusion.....	20

When Rich Roberts remembers growing up on the other side of the world in the city of Perth, his most vivid recollections are of his love for Australian Rules football.

“

*I was a skinny kid, and at first glance, my rivals didn't expect much of me on the field. But I had an unorthodox playing style, and what my coaches praised me for most for was my determination, the tenacity that kept me fueled throughout that very physically demanding game.*

*My coaches' observations and encouragement really connected with me – I think it can be said it formed in me deeply the understanding that your commitment to the project, your conscientiousness I'd now say, was what was really most important in life. This was something I recognized first in myself on the playing field, and later saw as critical to everyone in every situation.*

”

During college at the University of Sydney, Rich felt conflicted between his interests in journalism and his love of mathematics. After feeling pressure from his professors in both fields to choose, he instead sought out what seemed to be the happiest compromise: quantitative psychology, where “statistics meets the study of human behavior.”

After a swift progression to a Ph.D, Rich became a tenured professor at the University of Sydney before being recruited across the Pacific to join the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton, New Jersey. He eventually became one of its most prolific scientists and writers in the field of cognitive science and measurement.



When Daniel Goleman published the bestselling book *Emotional Intelligence*, Rich began to look across the divide between the cognitive and the Social and Emotional Learning components of human capacity. He explains, “That book was very provocative to the cognitive science community. It forced cog scientists, as we affectionately refer

to ourselves, to think much harder about whether there is something real there in social and emotional intelligence.”

Ironically, Rich’s first reaction was that there wasn’t any “there there” to emotional intelligence; he wrote several critiques to Goleman’s work before he began to change course.

“

*All that time spent studying emotional intelligence led me to appreciate that there was something to it, that could be really important for success in school, careers and life. The problem was that the measurement systems were sorely lacking; that was their Achilles heel, and because of my expertise in assessment and design, and being frankly more open-minded than some of my colleagues, I saw an opportunity to make a contribution. Anyone can be a critic – it’s so much easier than being a creator – but I thought maybe there was an opportunity here to be a meaningful contributor, and brought my measurement expertise to the field.*

”



Over the past decade, Rich has become one of the world's leading experts in social and emotional intelligence (also known as Social and Emotional Learning) and measurement. He advises the Paris-based Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on measuring Social and Emotional Learning in adults, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the U.S. Department of Education. He's had contracts with the U.S. Army, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Culinary Institute of America. He has presented in more than thirty countries and played a key role in shaping a national program in Brazil to inculcate and assess these valuable, other-than-academic capacities.

When asked why this has become his life's work, he answers,

*Whether you can change the world is hard to say these days, but I believe you can have an impact — and it starts with your own kids. With my own youngest son, now eight, I play in ways I know as a scientist will best inculcate skills such as empathy, persistence and responsibility.*

*I do think it is possible to take these techniques to scale, and if we can better cultivate them widely in all children, I believe we can genuinely reduce the likelihood of both terrorism and war. This may be the single best way in the long run to make for a more peaceful and prosperous planet.*

*Measuring is essential to the work. Better measurement gives individuals and institutions better insight and information to deeply strengthen these capacities. People like to know more about themselves: it gives them better self understanding so they can know more about how to grow, what to focus on and what strengths to rely on. If you work on any one of these Social and Emotional Learning skills, you can get better at it, which is very empowering.*

*In the end, we have to recognize that 'what gets measured gets treasured;' indeed, no scientific field of any kind ever has advanced without measurement. Simply put, no measurement, no science. Future generations may well hold us to ridicule if we don't get this right, now!*

Currently Vice President and Chief Scientist for the Iowa City based nonprofit company ACT, Rich along with noted scientist Jeremy Burrus, Ph.D, is designing and constructing multiple innovative social and emotional assessment systems for many different audiences and populations, including Tessera for students in grades six to twelve.

Over the past decade, psychology professors and researchers such as Rich and Jeremy, Angela Duckworth, Ph.D, Brent Roberts, Ph.D, Kate Walton, Ph.D, Carolyn McCann, Ph.D, and many others have led an important and exciting new chapter in U.S. and global education in which a much greater commitment is being made to educating the whole child, implementing Social and Emotional Learning, measuring the impact of these programs and assessing the growth of students' Social and Emotional Learning.

In the pages that follow, you'll read about the clear demand for these assessments and the strong evidentiary basis for these methods. You'll also read how Angela Duckworth's new book, *Grit*, establishes the critical importance of Social and Emotional Learning for student (and life) success and you'll gain a sense of the many and myriad ways educators can use these assessments to improve learning outcomes for kids.

You'll also see that no, this is not "just another test!" Rather, students view it as being categorically different from other standardized testing and see the benefits it might yield for their future life trajectories.





# Social and Emotional Learning and Assessment: **THE DEMAND IS CLEAR**

Jonathan E. Martin, ACT Consultant

A great new consensus is emerging in K-12 education today: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is essential not just for its own sake, but for its wide range of outcomes in academic and life success. Schooling in all its forms must place a greater priority on developing student Social and Emotional Learning.

**This is not news to teachers.** Ask a preschool assistant teacher or an AP Physics instructor and you'll likely find resounding, impassioned agreement: dependability, persistence, ambition, curiosity and getting along with others matter as much as (or very often much more than) cognitive ability for success.

Education leaders have similarly embraced this understanding —ASCD made the “whole child” its slogan — and many district leaders are shifting the emphasis of schooling from content knowledge to intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and college readiness.

In the past decade or so, this common sense point of view — the importance of whole child education — has been emphatically endorsed by researchers, social scientists and think tanks including Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman, New York Times journalist Paul Tough, MacArthur “genius” prize winner Angela Duckworth, the Hewlett Foundation, the RAND Corporation, the National Research Council, the Brookings Institute, the Economic Policy Institute and the New America Foundation.

Evidence abounds showing that the field of education is working to strengthen its effectiveness in developing and implementing Social and Emotional curricula. Schools are preparing improvement initiatives, districts are creating new strategic plans, counselors are better targeting particular skills for growth and teachers are providing more formative feedback.

**Required for these efforts is effective measurement and assessment methods.**

Indeed, upon surveying the national conversation about strengthening SEL, the demand becomes

abundantly clear: Social and Emotional Learning assessment is a necessary, even critical component of all related efforts.

**Let's review these needs:**

- ▶ **For Accountability:** As the New York Times reported on the brand-new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (Dec. 2015), in the new accountability system, “a student performance measure, like grit or school climate, has to be part of the evaluation equation.”
- ▶ **For Institutional Dashboards:** There's expanding interest from school board members in institutional dashboards that annually report the school or district's progress on a wide array of the most important metrics, which usually include character competencies.
- ▶ **For Evidence of ROI:** In charter schools, there is demand from all quarters — charter authorizers, foundation funders, millionaire and billionaire donors (who prioritize the “ROI” of their philanthropic support) and comparison shopper parents — for more data regarding the effectiveness of their alternative educational programs. Private and independent schools seek more data to demonstrate their value in a crowded marketplace as well. Formative assessment is being widely implemented, thanks in part to the influence of John Hattie's Visible Learning movement, and accordingly

many schools and districts are seeking assessment tools and systems to provide better and more frequent dollops of feedback to students about their SEL progress.

► **For Continuous Improvement:** From the Carnegie Endowment for the Advance of Teaching and elsewhere are demands for and interest in a greater use of measurement for continuous improvement. The example provided in Carnegie's recent book about improvement measurement is of "productive persistence." But as all this happens, an important gap is being increasingly perceived by nearly all involved: we lack the effective measurement and assessment instruments and methods needed for improving and developing Social and Emotional Learning.

### **THIS DEMAND, HOWEVER, IS STILL UNMET.**

As much as these measurements are needed, the tools are still lacking. The National Research Council, in its 2012 landmark authoritative report, *Education for Life and Work*, declared for that for "intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies [there is] a paucity of high-quality measures for assessing them."

In 2013, the much-discussed Gordon Commission report stated among its nine core arguments that "assessment must fully represent the competencies that the complex world demands." In 2016, the World Economic Forum report "Fostering Social and Emotional Learning" explained that the most challenging obstacle to strengthening SEL is the "lack of consensus about valid and reliable SEL measurements, [which is] a key concern among stakeholders. Lack of measurement emerged from our survey as one of the most important impediments to promoting SEL among parents and teachers in the U.S., UK,

China and South Korea, with 48 percent to 72 percent of respondents citing this as one of the main barriers to teaching social and emotional skills."

Yes, there are student surveys and self-report instruments which provide students Likert-type rating scales and ask them the extent to which they agree with a number of statements about themselves. They are the most frequently employed assessment tools by far, and though they can be used in some ways for certain purposes, they are distinctly limited as a complete measurement solution.

Respondents to such surveys often inflate their own skills to provide more socially desirable answers and suffer from "reference bias," which is to say there is no consistent comparative set for different responders as they self-evaluate their skills. Yes, there are teacher ratings of students, but many schools and districts find it difficult or impossible to add more tasks and time to the already demanding teacher workload.

What's needed are more robust systems of assessment and measurement that combine multiple methods, provide fake-resistant item types and ask students to think and learn as they imagine themselves in complex scenarios and rate various options as being of more or less effective.

The demand is clear and the time is now: let's seek and support more robust measurement and assessment systems to empower educators to advance Social and Emotional Learning for all students.



# SCHOOLS REALLY CAN (and Should) Measure Social and Emotional Learning

Jonathan E. Martin and Jeremy Burrus, Ph.D



The headlines shout that it can't be done. That there aren't effective, evidence-based methods for measuring Social and Emotional Learning.

Our response:  
**Yes it can and yes there are.**

A front page news article in *The New York Times*, *Testing for Joy and Grit? Schools Nationwide Push to Measure Students' Emotional Skills*, prompted several swift follow-up pieces around the web.

It is excellent to see effort and attention being dedicated to this subject. We now know that social and emotional skills — which overlap with what many call character strengths and others label noncognitive attributes — are equally or more important than intellectual ability and cognitive aptitude for success in school, college, career and life.

## **SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING EFFORTS**

Developing Social and Emotional Learning strengths is something almost every teacher addresses daily. Increasingly, schools, districts, networks and states are upping the ante on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and investing more time, energy and expense into these programs. Accompanying this increased focus is greater attention paid to the evaluation of what's working for whom by collecting evidence and assessing needs, opportunities and impact.

Regarding SEL measurement, *The New York Times* quotes California CORE districts Chief Accountability Officer Noah Bookman: "This work

is so phenomenally important to the success of our kids in school and life.” Were it only so simple. Angela Duckworth, Ph.D, a University of Pennsylvania professor who has become widely known for popularizing the term “grit,” is quoted in the piece and provides many readers its most salient takeaway: “I do not think we should be doing this; it is a bad idea.”

Their concerns are reasonable: the specific measurement methods cited in the article do have limitations. We concur with reporter Kate Zernike in her statement that relying on “surveys asking students to evaluate recent behaviors or mind-sets, like how many days they remembered

their homework, or if they consider themselves hard workers . . . makes the testing highly susceptible to fakery and subjectivity.”

We get it. Our colleague Rich Roberts, Ph.D, Vice President and Chief Scientist at ACT, former principal research scientist at ETS and senior lecturer at University of Sydney, literally wrote the book on the issue of faking and other problems associated with self-report and survey.

We are familiar with concerns regarding what Zernike refers to as subjectivity, also known as reference bias. When you’re evaluating your own proficiency or growth over time, to which peer groups and standards do you compare yourself?



## OVERCOMING THE ISSUES

Overcoming these obstacles is the task to which Dr. Roberts and his many colleagues and co-authors have devoted most of their careers. His team at ACT has built Tessera, a multifaceted assessment solution that gives K-12 students and schools comprehensive reports of Social and Emotional Learning.

Contrary to some headlines, researchers have now established that we can effectively build and deploy reliable and valid multi-method assessment systems that are largely insulated from faking and other problems.

Two methods that were overlooked are “forced choice” and Situational Judgment Tests (SJT). In the former, respondents are asked to select which of several socially desirable statements (such as “I keep trying when something is hard”) is most relatable. Forced choice surveys have been demonstrated by researchers to be strongly predictive of success and, because the responder doesn’t know which answer will best serve them, extremely difficult to fake.

In SJT scenarios, responders are required to rank in order the choices they would make from several potential courses of action. These methods have been widely deployed in arenas outside of K-12 education with demonstrated effectiveness for predicting academic achievement and future job performance. They are also hard to fake.

Effective use of these measurements is greatly improved when they are combined or “triangulated”—measuring multiple skills with multiple methods. Indeed, it seems likely that a range of these new methods (including forced choice and SJTs) will be utilized and researched both nationally and globally by measurement scientists at NAEP and PISA.

Teachers, counselors, parents and principals everywhere are already working hard to support students through formative assessments of Social and Emotional Learning, and their work can only be enhanced by more and better measurement instruments. The data provided will help inform

district leaders which schools need more resources and support; whether some student groups aren’t progressing equally in their strength developments; and whether particular initiatives are having the desired impact.

With more informative data, principals can better determine if an expensive or time-consuming SEL program should be renewed. Counselors can know whether to spend more time training for the development of students’ social skills or their perseverance. Teachers can evaluate whether it’s best to prioritize student curiosity, communication or resilience when planning curricular programs for the coming year.

## SHOULD THERE BE CONCERN?

Are the experts whose concerns are cited in The New York Times article and the many outlets recirculating their critiques right to raise questions and express alarm? Yes, they are. Many of the methods currently being promoted and implemented do have limitations. It’s also true that nobody believes Social and Emotional Learning measurement should be employed in the same over-the-top, high stakes and punitive assessment manner for which academic achievement testing was used in the No Child Left Behind era.

But is there a genuinely profound opportunity to measure these important skills and strengths using multiple, innovative methods?

**Yes there is.**

And do we have a responsibility — even an obligation — to implement effective measurements and assessments of these profoundly important Social and Emotional Learning skills in our students?

**Yes we do.**





# Can Grit Be **GROWN?**

Jonathan E. Martin, ACT Consultant

Can we grow grit in ourselves and others? And if so, how?

Since the concept of grit grew to great heights of public awareness in the early 2010s thanks to a combination of magazine articles, best-selling books and TED talks, its significance has preoccupied many educators. Dr. Angela Duckworth's research struck a nerve, secured her a MacArthur genius grant and launched a million conversations across the nation.



Many educators have appreciated seeing their common-sense beliefs ratified by scientific research; many have also appreciated that the attention given to grit has led to an expanded recognition of the significance of Social and Emotional Learning in general.

On the other hand, some thoughtful educators believe we might be blaming students for their own lack of grit, trading in stereotypes of race and class, and/or perpetuating a Horatio Alger myth. Accordingly, it is essential we carefully weigh this counter-narrative in our judgments and actions when promoting grit.

But for some, the buzz about grit was only appetite whetting — drawing us in but not filling us up. OK, so grit is great, but what do we do with that? Knowing its importance is barely half the battle: what we really need to know is how to grow it in ourselves and others.

### **GROW YOUR GRIT FROM WITHIN**

Understandably then, readers are flocking to Dr. Duckworth's first book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. At the time of this writing, it is the eleventh best-selling book overall on Amazon and second on the New York Times nonfiction bestseller list.

Dr. Duckworth is to be congratulated: her historical review and scientific research about this somewhat complex psychosocial construct is rendered in extremely accessible language and colored by warm personal stories. Convincingly, she articulates the value of grit for success, provides illustrative examples and — most importantly — points the way for educators and others to understand how grit can indeed be grown in children and adults alike.

Tenacity matters so greatly because, as she explains, “effort counts twice.” To get to any significant achievement requires a multiplication of skill by effort, and to develop and master that

prerequisite skill requires a multiplication of talent by (again) effort. So sure, talent is in the equation — but effort is there twice. Though the research remains mostly in the narrative's background, her arguments are regularly supported with appropriate evidence where it exists, and she is careful to clarify when she's going “off-evidence” to provide speculation.

So can you grow your grit over time? Yes, certainly. Dr. Duckworth addresses this question forthrightly, citing important longitudinal research from Dr. Brent Roberts to the effect that qualities associated with grit “do, in fact, change” over time.

How? In a series of breezy and engaging chapters, she offers four core suggestions for how we might grow our own grit from within:

- **Interest:** People grittily pursue what interests them. But it is not as easy as saying “follow your passion.” One must carefully experiment, try various activities and stick to them for periods of time in order to discover where indeed your true interest lies.
- **Practice:** This is the next element of strengthening grit — but it doesn't mean just any kind of practice. Determined, intentional, goal-setting, progress monitoring and extremely effortful practice is required for what's known as “deliberate practice.”
- **Purpose:** For many of her gritty exemplars, she notices the work to which they are so committed is on behalf of others —work for a public purpose and social good (though there are exceptions).
- **Hope:** Drawing from her mentor Marty Seligman, she closes this section arguing for the value of optimism as part of the grit formula, giving particular attention to the Dweckian “growth mindset” as an essential aspect of hope.



That's what people can do for themselves. But how can schools grow grit in students?

- Ensure teachers teach in a way that demands very high expectations of all students while being supportive and respectful.
- Provide highly engaging and challenging extracurricular programs for all students (not only those who can pay for them).
- Generate a so-called “culture of grit” through constant and consistent communication about the importance of tenacity, never giving up and the value and power of effort versus talent.
- The most interesting example of cultivating grit comes from the championship-winning University of North Carolina women's soccer team. As Dr. Duckworth relays, its coach practices all the above strategies and adds one additional approach; requiring players to complete a grit assessment annually. She writes that he “makes sure the entire team scores themselves on grit each spring so that they have a ‘deeper appreciation for the critical qualities of successful people.’ Returning players take the scale again — and again — each year so they can compare their grit now to what it used to be.”

### CHARACTER IS PLURAL

As Duckworth moves toward her conclusion, she addresses the issue of whether grit stands alone in its importance, explaining that “grit isn't

everything. There are many other things a person needs in order to grow and flourish.” She organizes these things into three clusters:

- Interpersonal (such as social intelligence);
- Intrapersonal (such as grit and organization); and
- Intellectual (such as curiosity).

***“In the end, the plurality of character operates against any one virtue being uniquely important.”***

It is our responsibility as educators to cultivate and develop breadth of character and Social and Emotional Learning in our students, given their great value, with all the strategies and systems available to us. These include improving instruction, promoting and training students in deliberate practice, helping them find their interests and purpose, supporting growth mindsets and more.

Additionally, we should follow Duckworth's advice for assessing grit as part of the growth strategy. We can do so by using character measurement and assessment tools and techniques like those I've written about previously here at Getting Smart.

With the right assessments and the right practices, we can help students better understand themselves and their attributes, set goals, monitor progress and receive formative guidance from their coaches and teachers.

# 10 WAYS

## EDUCATORS CAN USE SEL

### Measurement & Assessment

# for Student Success

Jonathan E. Martin, ACT Consultant

## But what would you do with it?

In sharing a series of posts over the past several weeks about the rising demand for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) assessment, we noted that new methods are emerging for doing it effectively.

Still, some are wondering what a typical (or atypical) school or district would do with the data and reports they received after administering such an assessment to their students.

Because Social and Emotional Learning assessment is still so new to schools, one answer to this question is we don't yet know. We anticipate that five years from now we may be astounded by the diverse and innovative ways in which educators wield what we believe will be a powerful and creative tool.

Nevertheless, we can speculate about how measuring and assessing Social and Emotional Learning might valuably assist educators, both in bolstering students' Social and Emotional Learning skills and elevating their academic skills and traditional test scores.

# A TOP TEN LIST Using SEL Measurement and

## 1. Affirming strengths of schools and districts.

Many schools and districts have made substantial investments in support of their students' Social and Emotional Learning. They've shown strong leadership, established core values, signaled different priorities, allocated previous resources, maintained student counseling in the face of budget shortfalls, trained teachers and implemented new curricular and instructional strategies. Wouldn't it nice if these leaders could collect evidence of the impact of their actions and better demonstrate the effects of their efforts? Affirmation matters: It confirms to these schools, districts and their funders that they are on the right track and better allows them to take their rightful place in the vanguard of SEL educational programming.

## 2. Determining greatest opportunities for improvement.

Whether we're preparing a school improvement plan, planning for re-accreditation, selecting a new administrator or undertaking strategic planning, we are often looking for the greatest opportunity for improvement. Often this opportunity lies in SEL — but where, exactly? Measuring your students' Social and Emotional Learning and studying the results can illuminate what should top your agenda in the next phase of your institution's evolution.

## 3. Analyzing data to determine which Social and Emotional Learning skills might best boost academic achievement.

SEL is both an end in itself and a means to an end. When evaluating how to improve academic achievement, sometimes we miss the mark by looking only at the testing results. Consider how studying which Social and Emotional Learning skills are positively and negatively correlated with achievement — and drilling down to locate the correlations among your underperforming subgroups — might uncover new avenues to improving proficiency. You might find, for instance, that poor math scores among middle school boys highly correlate with low organization skills and arrive at a new strategy for improvement.

## 4. Monitoring impact of interventions.

Say a new superintendent or principal arrives, boldly announcing a critical new academic program she will implement for improved college readiness skills, perhaps project-based learning, advisory programs, or responsibility training. How will the new leader and her supervisors know whether the new program (intervention) is working? Imagine the ability to administer a SEL assessment to students both before and after the initiative and compare the results.

## 5. Providing metrics for school improvement and district/school strategic plans.

While strategic planning, school-leaders often hear from business-trained board members, "what will be your metrics?" Now you have your answer: Our SEL measurements will generate metrics on the impact of our character development, student leadership skills or college readiness strategic initiatives.



# Assessment of Social and Emotional Learning

## 6. Subgroup analysis for discerning and closing gaps.

When it comes to academic achievement, equity is at the top of many educational leaders' agendas. For Social and Emotional Learning it should be just as much so. To close these gaps, we need to know where they exist and whether or not what we're doing is working.

## 7. Identifying high performing schools as best practice exemplars.

In California, the CORE districts have implemented new efforts to pair low-performing schools (both in academics and in SEL) with demographically similar higher-performing schools for coaching and mentoring. Data comparing schools and success rates are required to do so.

## 8. Providing teachers guidance about their students.

When many teachers in middle and high schools have well over 100 students in their care, it's hard for them to quickly appreciate the strengths and limitations of each one. An assessment tool can reveal which children will benefit from support in teamwork, curiosity, and resilience so teachers may tailor their teaching accordingly.

## 9. Formative assessment for individual student growth.

Few things are more valuable for student growth, as Hattie says, than “dollops of feedback.” Our children deserve regular, ongoing, external, reliable and validated reports of how they're doing and how they can do better. SEL assessment can give teachers the data they need to provide students with ongoing feedback.

## 10. Empowering students with knowledge and data for goal-setting, growth, strategies and monitoring.

We need to help students become, as Ron Berger has written, “leaders of their own learning.” By providing students with easily understood reports about their strengths and opportunities (with embedded guidance and strategies), we can help students take responsibility for their growth and give them systems for monitoring their development.

This list is by no means exhaustive. Even as it was being prepared, colleagues weighed in with further suggestions (e.g., accreditation-reaccreditation, turning the assessments towards the teachers to ensure they too had these skills – not for accountability per se but so they know they model these for the students).

**SO WHAT DO YOU, THE READER, THINK?** Are there still further uses we should consider? Any cautions? Caveats? We welcome feedback to sharpen our ideas and ultimately reach a critical consensus.



# 3 REASONS SEL Assessments Aren't “JUST ANOTHER TEST”

Jonathan E. Martin, ACT Consultant



“Not **ANOTHER** Test!”

This is a common reaction when educators and parents encounter the suggestion that we should begin measuring and assessing social and emotional competencies (also known as Social and Emotional Learning) in manners similar to those measuring academic achievement and cognitive capacities.

This reaction is understandable. In the wake of NCLB, the U.S. saw a massive spike in academic testing of students K-12, including the high-stakes summative tests for accountability and — even more so — a deluge of interim and formative testing to ensure students are prepared and on track for those tests. As Anya Kamenetz states in her book, *The Test: Why Our Schools Are Obsessed with Standardized Testing*, “Standardized assessments test our children, our teachers, our schools — and increasingly, our patience.”

Some surveys report that at least half of parents think we already have too much testing, though these numbers can change depending on whom you’re asking and how you phrase the question. From a comparative international perspective, it should be noted there’s some reason to doubt the widespread perception that U.S. students are terribly over-tested; one recent study concluded that “most nations give their students more standardized tests than the United States does.”

Now the idea of adding SEL assessment has been brought (somewhat suddenly) to national attention, due especially to the new federal law known as ESSA, which calls for the inclusion of non-academic measures to school accountability systems.

### **But won’t this just worsen the problem of over-testing?**

There are three general answers to the question challenging the idea of adding “yet another test.”

**FIRST**, if we care about whole-child education, we can’t let a surfeit of testing in one arena

determine that there should be no testing in other, equally important arenas. It’s not just a matter of fairness to say that because we test approximately seven times a year in math and reading we should test zero times in social skills and emotional intelligence.

It’s really a question of effective, data-driven or data-informed leadership. As we increasingly recognize the value of informing the continuous improvement of our math and reading programs with careful study of what’s really working, we must also realize we can and should do the same with our Social and Emotional Learning programs, using reliable and valid data which reflect the effectiveness of our initiatives and interventions

**SECOND**, measuring SEL is actually a helpful way to discover if academic (over)testing is having a detrimental effect. If we find students in high testing regimes have poor Social and Emotional Learning skills, we then have useful evidence that testing is harming our students. The authors of *Learning to Improve* recommend that schools implement so-called “balancing measures,” which are secondary assessments used as checks to ensure that an initiative measured by the “primary measure” isn’t having unintended negative consequences.

For example, imagine a school seeking to improve its math scores by dramatically increasing time for worksheet drills and times table memorization. That school might (but not certainly) see a small uptick in math scores by one or two points, leading them to believe the improvement effort was successful.

But what if the same school simultaneously observes in its “balancing measure” a deep dip in collaboration, curiosity and communication skills — each declining ten to fifteen points? That changes one’s view considerably; no longer can we see the initiative as worthwhile. But we can only reach such important conclusions — with such deep consequences for our students — if we employ these “balancing” assessments.

**THIRDLY**, and perhaps most importantly, students view these tests differently: kids report that they genuinely appreciate and value the addition of SEL assessment to the mix.

### **STUDENTS SUPPORT SEL TESTING**

In the past few months researchers from ACT have conducted multiple focus groups with students and teachers, sharing sample SEL standardized testing items and asking for their reactions. The responses have been almost universally positive. One California teacher reports that “the students were excited to take a test that asked questions relating to their favorite topic — themselves. They were fascinated to hear that these so-called traits were not fixed but could be changed with deliberate practice. In discussing the importance of conscientiousness and emotional stability, it was as if we had cracked a code that some intuitively understood and others were still trying to figure out.”

Students offered statements of support such as, “I think that if I went through a bunch of these

questions, then I’d get a better sense of myself,” and, “It’d be very interesting to see how things change and you grow over time from year to year.”

Student support for this alternative kind of testing was also observed in a recent pilot study of ACT’s new SEL assessment tool, Tessera™. Testing over a thousand high school and a thousand middle school students across 20 schools, researchers found that both the self-report and the situational judgment tests (SJTs) reached acceptable levels of reliability and predicted grades and other educational outcomes in a meaningful and robust fashion. (If you are interested in the fine details of these studies, the researchers are fast tracking their findings using the latest social media for the science community on ResearchGate.)

A quick survey about the testing experience at the end of the pilot studies of about 300 students proved to be quite revealing.

By and large, students responded quite positively to questions about the experience (see the full table below) — especially when comparing this

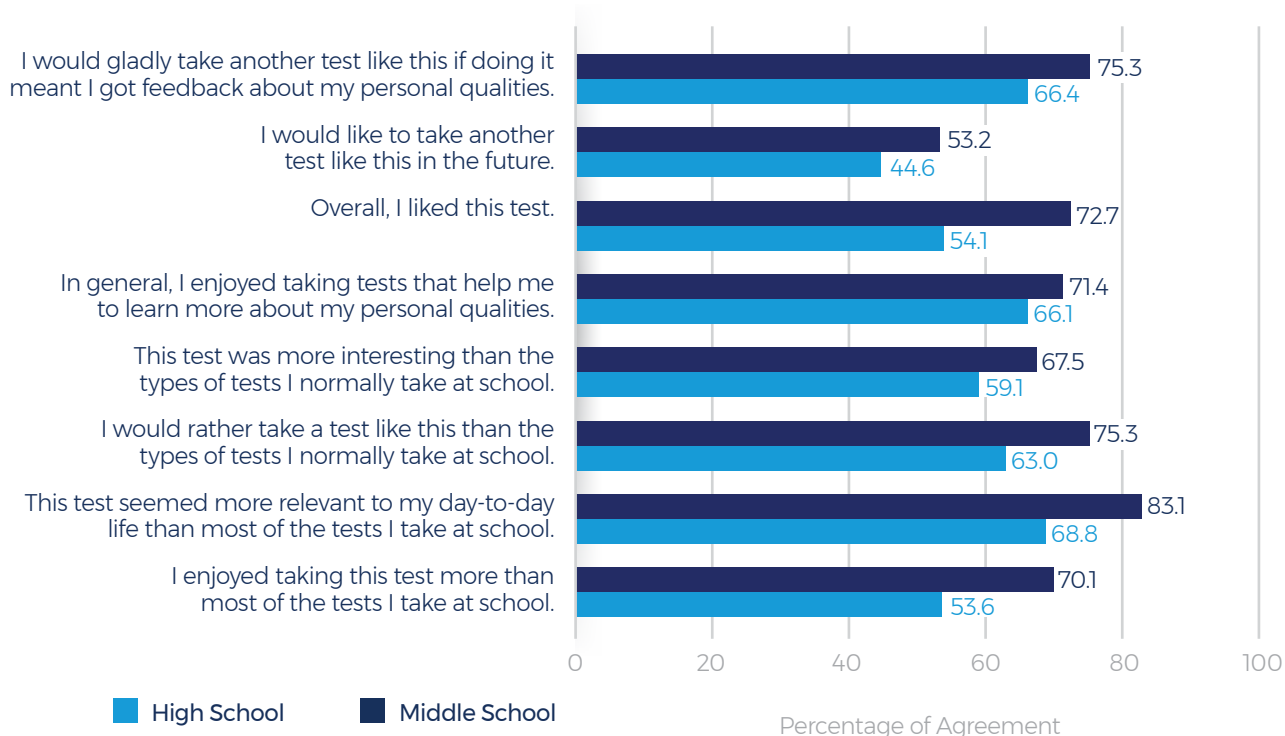




kind of testing experience to the “types of tests I normally take at school.” For instance, when asked if they’d prefer this kind of assessment to a typical test, 75% of middle school students and 63% of high school students expressed agreement.

It’s not just a matter of whim or likability; the more significant numbers emerged when students were asked if this kind of test is more relevant to

their lives (83% agreement middle school, 68% high school) and if they’d gladly take tests like this if they get feedback they can use (75% agreement middle school, 66% high school). For students, this is not just another test; it is an assessment of things that matter to them and that which they seek to improve. They appreciate the useful feedback.



Asking if we ought to add any more assessments to what is already a crowded testing environment is an entirely valid and understandable question. Indeed, it makes all kind of sense for policymakers and assessment directors to consider carefully trimming the current crush of academic testing and cognitive assessment.

But it is nonsensical to say that because we test in one way too frequently we shouldn’t assess any other domains at all. Students see the difference and they value the opportunity to learn more about themselves and strengthen these key 21st century competencies. SEL assessment deserves a place at the testing table.

## CONCLUSION

Leigh VandenAkker regularly encounters students like “Jose\*” in her classroom at Salt Lake City’s East High School (where Disney filmed the “High School Musical” movies). Jose isn’t fitting in — he’s having problems at home and thinking about dropping out.

Fortunately, if she can effectively determine just how best he needs support, she has plenty of ways in which she can help him. Her class is called “Techniques for Tough Times,” and it’s been the subject of a great deal of attention locally and even nationally; a few years back she was named Utah’s Teacher of the Year in recognition of the excellence of her program.

But she would be the first to say it isn’t her magical powers that make her class successful; any teacher can replicate these lessons anywhere if they wish to make the effort and have the institutional support to do so. She believes the use of effective assessment can powerfully bolster her (and any teacher) in personalizing lessons, differentiating instruction and truly meeting individual student needs.

VandenAkker administered an SEL assessment to Jose to identify his particular challenges with social awareness, and then drawing from her rich repertoire of tactics she worked with him on various techniques to improve his social skills such as active listening, empathy, reflection and effective communication. Jose is now much more connected to his peers, involved in school activities and appears very committed to completing his high school education.

More than 170 high school students come into Leigh VandenAkker’s classroom every day, and like every teacher she wants to support each of them individually with the specific resources they can use best. What would help her most? Reliable and validated assessments of students’ Social and Emotional Learning skills she can use to better guide their’ growth.

Greg Maughan, her principal at East High School agrees. Better, more sound Social and Emotional Learning assessment “is critical to our closing the opportunity gaps for our kids; this is the kind of assessment I wish we could do for all of our students so we can see what they need to have a more successful life.”

The educators of East High School are not alone in this view; many others could be similarly cited. For example, Dr. Jeneen Graham, Academic Dean at St. Margaret’s Episcopal School in California, says:

*“As an educator, I have waited years for a valid and reliable test to help students better understand themselves and to grow the skills that will help them to become more successful students. While I’m not inclined to add many more assessments to our very comprehensive arsenal, this is one that I have made time and space for. I’m very excited about the future of this assessment and hopeful that it can help my students be better prepared for school and for life.”*

Nobody’s arguing for more, better Social and Emotional Learning assessment simply for its own sake. Data in and of itself has no value. It’s only when it empowers educational leaders and classroom teachers to implement meaningful changes and strengthen the odds for individual kids that the data matter.

As the recently published Getting Smart infographic displayed, 77 percent of teachers say SEL will improve academic performance and 87 percent (!) believe SEL will be a major benefit in preparing students for the workforce. Another study conducted by a team of researchers led by Columbia University scholar Clive Belfield found that on average, every one dollar invested in SEL programs yields \$11 in long term benefits to society — in everything from higher lifetime earnings to better physical and mental health to lower incarceration rates.

Educators also recognize the opportunities that better, more reliable SEL assessment provides. An EdWeek survey found that teachers in strong numbers see value in its use for identifying specific students for intervention (as in the example above), teacher professional development, evaluation of SEL programs, providing feedback to students on their skills and administrator evaluations.

None of this would matter if we didn't have high-quality measurement tools available. While some observers and educators are quick to dismiss the field as being composed of only conventional self-report items such as "this statement, (i.e. 'I am very punctual') is very much or not at all like me," they are unaware that we are quickly developing new and additional methods to supplement and bolster self-reports and finding acceptable

reliability and meaningful validity evidence to support them.

The demand is clear, the tools are arriving and the time is now. Policymakers, state accountability officers, district assessment directors, school principals and classroom teachers can and should come together to advance the field of Social and Emotional Learning with the use of high-quality assessments.

Because it is not just the quality of our school's educational programs that is at stake. It is the future of our students and their college completion, career success, lifetime happiness and fulfillment.





Next Generation Social and Emotional  
Learning Assessment System

Learn more about how ACT® Tessaera™ can help you accurately assess your students' Social and Emotional Learning skills—and deliver the sound data critical to promoting continued growth and Whole Child development.

**Call Toll Free: 855.730.0400**

**Contact Us: [www.act.org/contact-acttessaera](http://www.act.org/contact-acttessaera)**

**Visit: [www.act.org/act-tessaera](http://www.act.org/act-tessaera)**

PUBLISHED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

ACT, Inc.  
500 ACT Dr.  
Iowa City, Iowa 52243-0168

