

Principal Connection

Good Failures

Success comes to those who hang in, who get back up after being knocked down again and again, and who try harder and longer.

Resilience and tenacity, what I call *grit*, are in the air. I can hardly pick up a newspaper or an education magazine without seeing a reference to the importance of this trait. More and more, it's clear that success comes to those who hang in, who get back up after being knocked down again and again, and who try harder and longer. That's true in school, and it's even truer in the real world, where problems are complex and amorphous and where closure doesn't come at the end of a class period or semester.

I first wrote a column on grit in March 2012. The research of Angela Duckworth (p. 14 in this issue) illustrates the power of grit; and Paul Tough's *How Children Succeed* (2012) has given grit more momentum. In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell (2008) cited the Beatles and Bill Gates as people who followed the "10,000 hour rule," namely, that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to master a skill. Even though they didn't use the term, Winston Churchill and football coach George Allen deemed the notion of grit important. The line, "Success is going from failure to failure with enthusiasm" is commonly attributed to Churchill, and Allen has been quoted as saying, "People of mediocre ability sometimes achieve outstanding success because they don't know when to quit. Most men succeed because they are determined to." Talent and skill alone don't guarantee success; thousands of hours of practice are necessary, and that requires tenacity and grit.

A 2013 U.S. Department of Education report, *Promoting Grit, Tenacity, and Perseverance: Critical Factors for Success in the 21st Century*, says that "educators, administrators,

policymakers, technology designers, parents and researchers should consider how to give priority to grit, tenacity, and perseverance in curriculum, teaching practices, teacher professional development, programs, technology adoption, and out-of-school support" (p. xii) because "these factors can have just as strong an influence on academic performance and professional attainment as intellectual factors" (p. 1). It is clear we have a responsibility to help children develop grit. But how should a principal begin?

The starting point is recognizing that children cannot learn how to respond to adversity without experiencing it. Don't misunderstand: Children should enjoy learning and want to come to school. And some students already encounter frustration and failure at school. Those students need to be supported and encouraged, and they need to develop grit. But then

there are the "high flyers," the kids who do well at everything. Those students also need to be supported and encouraged, and they need to develop grit. All students need grit because sooner or later they will fail at something. Their success will depend on their ability to hang in, bounce back, try and try again, and persevere. We need to teach that attitude and those behaviors to all our students.

It's important to talk about grit with teachers and students. Knowing the value of grit will help them understand that we push them out of their comfort zones because we care for them and want to teach them to not give up in the face of failure.

We need to teach and embrace the term *good failure*. No one wants to fail, but a *good*



Thomas R. Hoerr (trhoerr@newcityschool.org) is head of school at the New City School, 5209 Waterman Ave., St. Louis, MO 63108. He is the author of *The Art of School Leadership* (ASCD, 2005) and *Fostering Grit: How Do I Prepare My Students for the Real World?* (ASCD, 2013).

failure can help us learn and become stronger. Employing the term *good failure* lets everyone know that failing isn't the end of the world. What matters most is what we do after we fail. With that in mind, we need to go beyond measuring and rewarding students' results and also applaud their effort, trajectory, and progress.

As is always the case with the non-cognitive, affective domain, the best teaching begins with looking inward. We should muse about our own grit. Where did we develop it and how? And we should talk about grit at faculty meetings, asking teachers how they developed their grit. This question not only underscores the importance of grit, but also reminds us that grit can be taught. We need to talk about grit with parents so they understand why students are being stretched beyond their comfort zones. Then, throughout the year, we should allocate time at faculty meetings for teachers to share how they are helping their students develop grit.

In so many ways, teaching for grit runs counter to societal norms that require that everyone on the team gets a trophy and where snowplow parents remove all obstacles from their children's path. We need to be gritty about developing grit! 

References

- Gladwell, M. (2008). *Outliers: The story of success*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Tough, P. (2012). *How children succeed*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- U.S. Department of Education (2013). *Promoting grit, tenacity, and perseverance: Critical factors for success in the 21st century*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from www.ed.gov/edblogs/technology/files/2013/02/OET-Draft-Grit-Report-2-17-13.pdf

Video Bonus

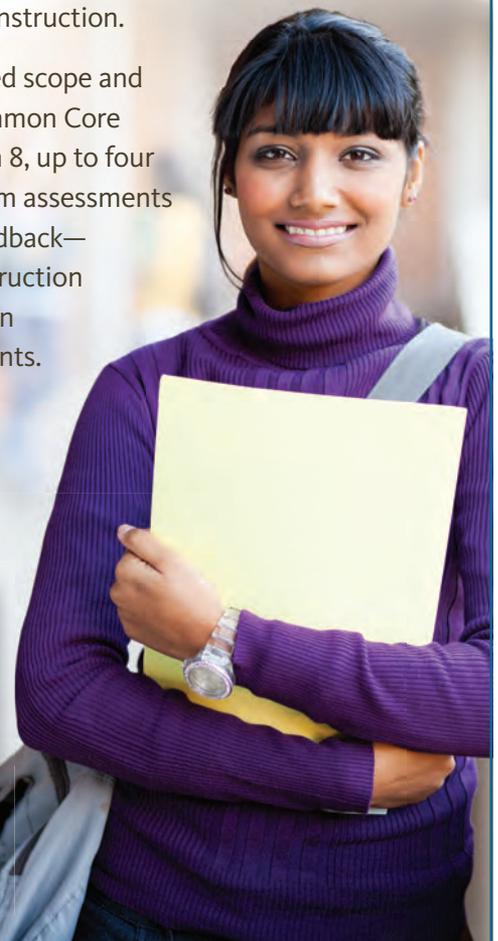
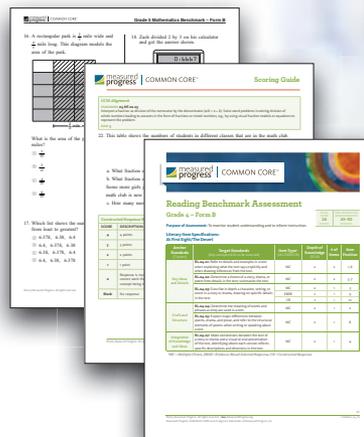
See Thomas R. Hoerr's presentation with Walter McKenzie for the Whole Child Virtual Conference, titled "Grit: Multiple Intelligences and Instructional Technology in the Classroom," at <http://bcove.me/u7a2j4i6>

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