



## Focus: Institutional Grit

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# The Link between Institutional Grit and Non-cognitive Skills

by Hector Bojorquez

The education research and practice community is anxiously looking toward “the promise” of building certain non-cognitive skills to close student achievement gaps. The logic behind the most current idea is that students must learn to persist, have greater optimism and be confident because these traits may be better predictors of success than achievement on standardized tests (Farrington, et al., 2012). Each skill – including grit, persistence and growth mindset – carries its own definition, practices and promise of greater academic rewards.

Furthermore, the latest review by seminal authors on non-cognitive skills, Kautz, et al., (2014), validates these theories: “Non-cognitive skills predict later-life outcomes with the same, or greater, strength as measures of cognition. They have strong effects on educational attainment but have additional effects on important life outcomes beyond their effects on schooling.”

There is, however, a larger issue that many of these ideas lack: nearly all of them concentrate on a perceived lack of positive traits among underserved and underrepresented students without taking a serious look at the role institutions play in developing or hindering non-cognitive factors.

The question of addressing grit, resilience and growth mindsets in our most vulnerable students should begin by questioning our own academic practices, our own words, and our *institutional* grit as we provide experiences, support and services that bolster students’ sense of competence in the

world. Basically, what do we do as members of an educational institution to achieve greater success through these non-cognitive factors?

### **Institutional Grit Needed at Key Transition Points**

The question is not new. The Consortium on Chicago School Research’s seminal report on non-cognitive factors finds that middle school and high school are places where students’ sense of academic belonging, ability and worth drop off just as academic performance drops off (Farrington, et al., 2012). It is a truism in education that middle school is where “we lose them.”

The report finds that these transition points are where our institutional practices become much less supportive and sometimes are overtly aggressive. How many times do we say to students in middle school: “You’re not in elementary school anymore; You have to step up,” or “This is the time you must prove yourselves,” or “Figure it out yourself”?

At a time when students are experiencing more turmoil, schools often pull out supports in the expectation that students must toughen up. This has absolutely nothing to do with a student’s intellectual abilities or non-cognitive factors but rather an institutional attitude about how to make students more self-reliant or grittier.

The Consortium on Chicago School Research publication validates these observations and  
*(cont. on Page 2)*

*“Regrettably, some researchers and school administrators around the country are thinking only about assessing students’ grit and resilience. They are already assuming that students are lacking, rather than exploring how schools must change.”*

*– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO*

(The Link between Institutional Grit and Non-cognitive Skills, continued from Page 1)

reports an all too common situation: “A persistent and ambitious high school student who works hard to get to college, opts to take calculus in her freshman year. Her college instructor does a poor job of explaining the course material and grades harshly on quizzes, causing the student much anxiety. Her attempt to get help during the instructor’s office hours ends with him denigrating her intelligence. After failing her second quiz in a row, she sees no way to be successful and drops the course. Despite the innate tenacity that got her to college in the first place, she [gives] up on calculus when, in a particular context, she [thinks] it [is] futile to keep trying. The context in which this student tried to learn calculus gave rise to a mindset that she could not succeed, which affected her ability to persevere in that context.” (2012)

While this scenario occurs in college, what do similar actions and institutional barriers do to students in the K-12 system? What are we doing and saying at these transition points that inadvertently affect students in at-risk situations? What do our practices say to students? What do our words do to students?


### Building Institutional Grit

As members of educational institutions, we have to ask ourselves serious questions. First, do we believe that all of our students are capable of the highest academic achievement possible? This belief must be at the core of all we do. Without it, our students lose out, and we are to blame.

Second, do our practices as an institution demonstrate high expectations and support for all students to meet high academic achievement?

These are not abstract questions.

Using the IDRA Quality Schools Action Framework as a point of reference, leaders in any institu-



**Courage to Connect**  
A Quality Schools Action Framework™

Edited by María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, Ph.D.,  
and Christie L. Goodman, APR

The Quality Schools Action Framework shows how communities and schools can work together to strengthen their capacity to be successful with all students. The framework is based on experience and empirical evidence that emerges from existing theories of change. It gives a model for assessing a school’s conditions and outcomes, for identifying leverage points for improvement, and for informing action.

**“I believe it is time to dream together – to dream about education not for a lucky few but for all. And it is time to make the dream of education for all become fact.”**  
– Dr. María Robledo Montecel, IDRA President & CEO

<http://www.idra.org/change-model/courage-to-connect>

tion can ask themselves pertinent questions about the relationship between student achievement and non-cognitive factors (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010). This framework outlines the set of inputs, indicators and outcomes that lead schools to achieve greater school holding power and high college going rates. It posits four school system indicators – curriculum quality and access, teaching quality, student engagement, and parent involvement/community engagement – as places where schools can focus their change strategies. These indicators have direct relationships with non-cognitive factors.

For example, in the area of curriculum quality and access, the most basic questions that educational institutions should ask themselves are:

- What are our organization’s practices that ensure all students have access to curricula that lead to a college-going future?

- Do we provide Pre-Algebra and Algebra I for all students? And do we provide differentiated support for students who struggle with the subject? or
- Does our district simply provide a pathway to remediation?

The relationship between high expectations and non-cognitive factors lies in (1) the assertion that all students are college bound, and that (2) as institutions, we must have the grit ourselves to provide supports for all students instead of sending them down remediation pathways or tracks (Bojorquez, 2014).

There is a wrong-headed notion by some that addressing non-cognitive factors is a sign of an entitlement culture that coddles students. This is not the case. When institutions rise up to serve (cont. on Page 8)

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# Institutionalized Discrimination...

## Does it Exist in Your School?

by David Hinojosa, J.D.

Despite much progress over the years in striking down various discriminatory acts, many schools and communities continue to target or exclude hundreds of thousands of students each year on account of race, sex, gender, national origin, religion, disability, among other factors (see, e.g., Alexander, 2012). When the discriminatory treatment manifests itself through the behaviors, actions and policies of public institutions, such as schools, it is typically characterized as *institutionalized discrimination* (see, e.g., Rupande, 2015).

Institutionalized discrimination may result from explicit, intentional acts or from indirect, unintentional acts. Often, such patterns and practices result from standard, historical norms, making it difficult for educators to identify.

Several practices of institutionalized discrimination impact education every day. From zero tolerance policies to English-only instruction, from faculty hiring to drawing school boundaries, state and local institutional practices harm underserved students and communities. Focusing on three critical areas – expectations, school funding and curriculum – this article seeks to assist schools and communities in identifying types of institutionalized discrimination that may exist in their schools and, importantly, some equitable approaches to replace such policies and practices.

### **Institutionalized Discrimination of Low Expectations**

Low expectations are perhaps one of the most pervasive forms of institutionalized discrimination that harms students. Deficit mindsets and behaviors often lead to educators developing negative attitudes toward underserved communities (Montemayor, 2015), which can lead to low expectations and low student performance.

It can be seen in math classrooms where teachers do not sufficiently challenge girls as they do boys. It can occur in schools that track students of color into regular or basic courses because educators perceive some students as less capable.

At the district level, poor family engagement by under-resourced schools may result from false perceptions of families in those schools as caring less about education (Valencia, et al., 2001).

At the state and federal levels, policymakers may senselessly lower accountability measures for immigrant English learners based on negative assumptions of student groups rather than on students' individual capabilities. In turn, schools may be less supportive and demanding of those students.

**Workable Solution:** Schools can study disaggregated course grades, test scores, resource inequities and course enrollment patterns to determine any differences between groups of students based on race, national origin, sex, gender, disability, language and religion. They can critically examine their own behaviors, policies and practices that may contribute to the inequities, such as prerequisite requirements that disparately prevent underserved students from enrolling in advanced courses. They also can provide deep training for teachers on cultural competency and implicit bias, focusing on both the individual and the institution.

### **Institutionalized Discrimination of Funding Inequities**

School funding can positively impact learning, student performance and lifetime outcomes, especially for underserved students (LaFortune, et al., 2016; Jackson, et al., 2016). Schools with greater resources can offer smaller class sizes, full-day prekindergarten programs, higher teacher pay, a greater range of advanced coursework, and access to 21st century buildings (see, e.g., U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2018). Yet, policymakers often design school finance systems without any regard for student need, resulting in schools with the highest needs often receiving far fewer resources.

A recent study of school funding showed that districts with the highest enrollment of Latina/o, Black or Native American students received, on (cont. on Page 4)

*Institutionalized discrimination may result from explicit, intentional acts or from indirect, unintentional acts. Often, such patterns and practices result from standard, historical norms, making it difficult for educators to identify.*

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(Institutionalized Discrimination... Does it Exist in Your School?, continued from Page 3)

average, about \$1,800 less per student than the districts enrolling the fewest students of color (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018).

Inequities also can exist at the local level. One study showed that some districts allocate \$300 to \$500 more to schools enrolling fewer percentages of underserved students (Edjemyr & Shores, 2017).

**Workable Solution:** Putting politics aside, inequitable funding can be most easily addressed because any inequities are by design, not behaviors. IDRA created a “School Finance Roadmap to Equity” to assist states and advocates in applying an equity lens to school finance systems based on student needs and legitimate cost differences (Hinojosa, 2018). This roadmap connects educational standards and goals and fair, adequate revenue sources with essential building blocks of school finance, research-based costs, equitable distribution, and monitoring to ensure meaningful educational opportunities for all children.

Locally, school districts can monitor their own funding distributions between schools and examine resource inequities as identified in a U.S. Department of Education dear colleague letter (Lhamon, 2014).

### Institutionalized Discrimination of Standard, Narrow Curriculum

Institutionalized discrimination also can exist in the biased content of the curriculum. When students of color do not see their own cultures and experiences reflected in the curriculum, or worse, when they receive a curriculum that denounces their culture, they can become detached and disinterested through subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999). For instance, lessons on the Battle of the Alamo or the American Indian wars may reflect the heroic efforts of the White American or European “settlers” and fail to critically examine the invasion by Anglos into occupied foreign land.

Other examples of curriculum discrimination include literature that fails to include diverse perspectives, examinations of religious conflicts solely from a Christianity perspective, and historical lessons that fail to account for female experiences or perspectives.

Biased testing questions also can fail to reflect more diverse student experiences, compounding the negative impact on underserved students (Reynolds, et al., 2009).

The graphic features a smartphone displaying the IDRA app interface. To the right of the phone, the text reads: "Download Our Free News App". Below this, it lists the app's features: "Get IDRA's email newsletters, Classnotes Podcast, videos, infographics and more!". It also includes logos for "Available on the App Store" and "Available on Google play". A QR code is positioned to the right of the text. At the bottom, it says "Scan this code or visit www.idra.org/apps".

**Workable Solution:** States and school districts can carefully analyze their curriculum and eliminate biases. Culturally-relevant education (including culturally-relevant and sustaining pedagogy and culturally-responsive teaching) can act as gateways to a more inclusive, challenging educational experience (Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

*Culturally-responsive teaching* involves using ethnically diverse cultural knowledge, experiences, frames of reference and performance styles to help better reach students (Gay, 2013).

*Culturally-relevant pedagogy* focuses on teacher posture and “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 2009). When implemented appropriately, research demonstrates that culturally-relevant education leads to increased critical thinking, engagement, interest, motivation, self-perception and academic achievement (Aronson, & Laughter, 2016).

### Conclusion

Confronting, much less overcoming, institutionalized discrimination is not an easy process. Power players (including racial minorities) often are unwilling to give up protections of privileges and advantages. However, stopping institutionalized discrimination from continuing to harm generations of children makes the effort more than worthwhile.

Several schools and communities use IDRA’s Six Goals of Educational Equity and Reform to assist in their efforts of identifying and examining inequities in their school systems (Scott, 2006). The tool includes an equity ranking scale that schools can adapt to address institutionalized discriminatory policies, practices and outcomes as well.

Should your school or district require technical assistance in this area or in other areas impacting race, national origin, sex/gender or religion, please contact the IDRA EAC-South.

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# In-grade Retention National Trends and Civil Rights Concerns

by Paula N. Johnson, M.A.

Retaining students is a costly intervention that research shows is both counterproductive and unsuccessful (Johnson, 2016). States pay upwards of \$12 million annually to implement a practice that has long-term negative impacts on students' psychological, behavioral, economic and social well-being (West, 2012).

This article calls attention to the problematic trends in our national data, research on retention and its traumatic effects and how in-grade retention must be addressed as a civil rights issue. Strategies for increasing student success through more valuing approaches and recommendation for parents also are discussed.

## Trends and Opinions Across the Nation

Retention of a student in the same grade from one year to the next usually occurs for one of three reasons: (1) poor performance on standardized proficiency or achievement tests at the end of specific years; (2) emotional immaturity that results in disruptive behavior; or (3) developmental immaturity resulting in learning difficulties, such as limited reading ability. Many times, absenteeism due to truancy and medical issues can play a role in a student being held back.

The United States saw an increase in retention with the introductions of education policies that hold schools accountable for student performance in ways that harm students. For many, the response to the pressure has been to either hold back students suspected to be unlikely to pass an upcoming standardized test or to impose consequences after students do poorly on a test.

Retention supporters believe that students will “catch-up” given the opportunity to repeat the previous years’ instruction, or time to mature. Studies have proven however that in-grade retention is counterproductive and harmful to students in the long run.

Students are most likely to be retained in first grade, but they are overall more likely to be retained in 1st through 3rd grades (Warren &

Saliba, 2012). Research on secondary effects of retention have shown that retained students are 11 times more likely to drop out of school (Andrew, 2014).

## In-grade Retention as a Civil Rights Issue

On average, both Hispanic and Black students across grade levels are one and one half times more likely to be retained than White students (see graph on next page). Additionally, English learners are retained at disproportionate rates nationally.

In-grade retention has been linked to increased rates of disciplinary actions and limited access to rigorous educational programs for students of color (Jimerson, et al., 2005). These disparities alone do not constitute a civil rights violation but they are a concern. It is critical that we investigate and address the underlying causes of these inequalities.

For example, students of color tend to have less access to quality instruction. Many times, they are under the care of teachers with little cultural competence and limited experience with the subject matter (Harris, et al., 2017). Racial bias impacts all areas of education, from policy to practice.

IDRA has nearly 50 years of successful partnerships with schools to address these concerns. Our capacity-building technical assistance, training and professional development has assisted hundreds of schools and districts in addressing civil rights-related complaints and equity issues, including:

- Increasing access to advanced courses for all students,
- Improving teaching quality for English learners,
- Creating positive school climates and reducing bias, and
- Countering opportunity gaps and resource inequities.

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*Students should not be held back to escape the pressures of academic standards placed on schools and students. Underserved youth benefit far more from systemic academic supports than from repeating a year of schooling.*

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(In-grade Retention National Trends and Civil Rights Concerns, continued from Page 5)

In particular, through our IDRA EAC-South, we build bridges among administrators, teachers, parents, students and community members so that all stakeholders can find that common higher ground where all students will benefit inclusive of race, gender, national origin or religion.

### Parent Rights

Experts advise that parents should be included in all decisions related to the promotion or retention of their child and should voice their concerns to the teacher and school (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012), and be aware of their school district's policies on retention.

Parents can ask for the evidence that is being used in support of a retention decision, including examples of their child's academic performance, standardized test results, and other related measures, including the student's history of behavior in class and emotional maturity.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) advises parents to advocate for their child early on if the student is falling behind. Proactive interventions can range from requesting instructional assistance, such as tutoring, to an evaluation to identify potential learning disabilities.

### Effective Alternatives

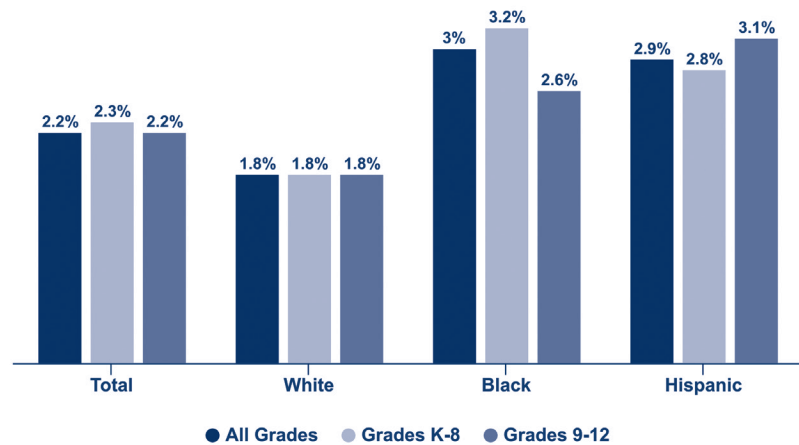
Grade retention is an ineffective method for addressing the needs of students experiencing behavioral, social and emotional, or academic difficulties (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Students should not be held back to escape the pressures of academic standards placed on schools and students. The idea that repeating a grade with the same material as a method of improving learning is already flawed, especially if nothing about the academic environment changes.

Students who are retained do not receive long-term benefits from the practice and usually perform more poorly than low-achieving peers who were not retained (Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Retention also is associated with increases in behavior problems and issues with peer relationships, self-esteem, problem behaviors, and attendance (NASP, 2003; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

Our underserved youth benefit for more from systemic academic supports than from repeating a year of schooling.

Increased teacher capacity to serve the needs of diverse learners, rigorous instructional programs for all students, and early intervention are the most effective -ways to ensure successful student

## Hispanic Students and Black Students are One and One Half Times More Likely to be Retained, 2015



Data source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October, 2015. See Digest of Education Statistics 2016, table 225.90. Retrieved from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator\\_rda.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_rda.asp)

outcomes (Kenneady, 2004). Specific strategies include early warning systems, special needs testing early intervention, intensified learning, and performance assessments instead of high-stakes standardized testing.

It is time for 21st century educators, researchers and policymakers to abandon the argument regarding grade retention versus social promotion. It is time to embrace equitable and productive courses of action that support success for all students.

### Resources

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See our new eBook on in-grade retention: <https://budurl.me/IDRAeBig>



# Texas Graduation Requirements and Opportunities

## New IDRA's New Parent Involvement Tool for School Districts

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

In the summer of 2013, the Texas Legislature weakened the graduation requirements for Texas students. Schools are now encouraged to put students in different paths, called “endorsements,” toward graduation: some college bound and some bound for jobs that don’t require college preparation. This phenomenon is present in different guises all across the United States. Colleges and universities do not pay much attention to the endorsement (or track) of high school students. Rather, they examine the transcript for the courses and grades: math, science, social studies and English, as key examples.

This month, IDRA is releasing the fourth in a set of toolkits developed from the Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Parent Institute in 2017 for use in training and technical assistance for school districts to strengthen family engagement. The aim of this assistance module is to inform the families on how to best counsel and guide their children, especially those in middle and high school. This workshop and these materials are very specifically for those families whose children are not perceived to merit a path to college. Parents don’t need to know the content of pre-Calculus or chemistry to insist to the counselor or teacher that their child be enrolled in those classes or that, if a course seems too difficult for a student, that the teacher and the school offer other support for achieving in that subject.

The materials present families with specific recommendations, in English and Spanish, and follow-up steps. Good retorts to the admonition: College is not for everybody. The family and student chose the academic path, not the school.

Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., is an IDRA senior education associate. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at [aurelio.montemayor@idra.org](mailto:aurelio.montemayor@idra.org).

**WEBSITE** See the new training kit online:  
<https://budurl.me/IDRAFamPKG4w>

## Resources from the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual IDRA La Semana del Niño Parent Institute™

Our 20th Annual IDRA *La Semana del Niño* Parent Institute earlier this month was a powerful event, thanks to the participation of over 250 parents, community members and educators. Many of the resources from the event are available online for your use.

The event webpage is our home base for resources following the institute. We have posted **presenters’ slides and handouts** there.

<https://budurl.me/IDRApi18w>



And we’ve posted **photos** from the parent institute on our Flickr page. Participants can feel free to download photos you choose.

<https://budurl.me/IDRAflkrApr18>



The livestream **video** shot by Nowcast-SA, is available online at IDRA’s YouTube page, including the closing remarks by Dr. María “Cucu” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President & CEO; Ms. Rosie Castro, Community Advocate; Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program students from South San Antonio ISD; Dr. Diane Melby, President, Our Lady of the Lake University; and Becky Barrera, National Latino Children’s Institute. <https://budurl.me/IDRApi18yt>





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*(The Link between Institutional Grit and Non-cognitive Skills, continued from Page 2)*

our students with high expectations, our students will rise to meet any challenge.

As the CCSR report finds, the “shape-up or ship-out” attitude that seeps into many of our transition points for students has never yielded the results we need because it blames students rather than addressing the context of the school and its institutional practices. The changes must begin with us.

Throughout IDRA's existence, we have championed asset-based practices and high expectations. Our initiatives, frameworks, programs and research all point to the same conclusions: it is up to the adults in schools to make high expectations and rigor possible and to remove the barriers of our own making, because all students deserve excellent and equitable education.

**Resources**

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