

# David Berliner: Kids Missing School? Don't Worry.

From Diane Ravitch

David Berliner, one of our nation's most eminent researchers, advises parents not to worry that their children are "falling behind." School is important. Instruction is important. But "soft skills" and non—cognitive skills matter more in the long term than academic skills. Relax.

He sent this advice to the blog:

*Worried About Those "Big" Losses on School Tests Because Of Extended Stays At Home? They May Not Even Happen, And If They Do, They May Not Matter Much At All!*

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Although my mother passed away many years ago, I need now to make a public confession about a crime she committed year in and year out. When I was young, she prevented me from obtaining one year of public schooling. Surely that must be a crime!

Let me explain. Every year my mother took me out of school for three full weeks following the Memorial Day weekend. Thus, every single year, from K through 9th grade, I was absent from school for 3 weeks. Over time I lost about 30 weeks of schooling. With tonsil removal, recurring Mastoiditis, broken bones, and more than the average ordinary childhood illnesses, I missed a good deal of elementary schooling. How did missing that much schooling hurt me? Not at all!

First, I must explain why my mother would break the law. In part it was to get me out of New York City as the polio epidemic hit U.S. cities from June through the summer months. For each of those summers, my family rented one room for the whole family in a rooming house filled with working class families at a beach called Rockaway. It was outside the urban area, but actually still within NYC limits.

I spent the time swimming every day, playing ball and pinochle with friends, and reading. And then, I read some more. Believe it or not, for kids like me, leaving school probably enhanced my growth! I was loved, I had great adventures, I conversed with adults in the rooming house, I saw many movies, I read classic comics, and even some "real" literature. I read series after series written for young people: Don Sturdy, Tom Swift, the Hardy Boys, as well as books by Robert Louis Stevenson and Alexander Dumas.

So now, with so many children out of school, and based on all the time I supposedly lost, I will make a prediction: every child who likes to read, every child with an interest in building computers or in building model bridges, planes, skyscrapers, autos, or anything else complex, or who plays a lot of "Fortnite," or "Minecraft," or plays non-computer but highly complex games such as "Magic," or "Ticket to Ride," or "Codenames" will not lose anything measurable

by staying home. If children are cared for emotionally, have interesting stuff to play with, and read stories that engage them, I predict no deficiencies in school learning will be detectable six to nine months down the road. It is the kids, rich or poor, without the magic ingredients of love and safety in their family, books to engage them, and interesting mind-engaging games to play, who may lose a few points on the tests we use to measure school learning. There are many of those kinds of children in the nation, and it is sad to contemplate that.

But then, what if they do lose a few points on the achievement tests currently in use in our nation and in each of our states? None of those tests predict with enough confidence much about the future life those kids will live. That is because it is not just the grades that kids get in school, nor their scores on tests of school knowledge, that predict success in college and in life. Soft skills, which develop as well during their hiatus from school as they do when they are in school, are excellent predictors of a child's future success in life.

Really? Deke and Haimson (2006), working for Mathematica, the highly respected social science research organization, studied the relationship between academic competence and some "soft" skills on some of the important outcomes in life after high school. They used high school math test scores as a proxy for academic competency, since math scores typically correlate well with most other academic indices. The soft skills they examined were a composite score from high school data that described each students' work habits, measurement of sports related competence, a pro-social measure, a measure of leadership, and a measure of locus of control.

The researchers' question, just as is every teacher's and school counselor's question, was this: If I worked on improving one of these academic or soft skills, which would give that student the biggest bang for the buck as they move on with their lives?

Let me quote their results (emphasis by me) Increasing math test scores had the largest effect on earnings for a plurality of the students, but most students benefited more from improving one of the nonacademic competencies. For example, with respect to earnings eight years after high school, increasing math test scores would have been most effective for just 33 percent of students, but 67 percent would have benefited more from improving a nonacademic competency. Many students would have secured the largest earnings benefit from improvements in locus of control (taking personal responsibility) (30 percent) and sports-related competencies (20 percent). Similarly, for most students, improving one of the nonacademic competencies would have had a larger effect than better math scores on their chances of enrolling in and completing a postsecondary program.

This was not new. Almost 50 years ago, Bowles and Gintis (1976), on the political left, pointed out that an individual's noncognitive behaviors were perhaps more important than their cognitive skills in determining the kinds of outcomes the middle and upper middle classes expect from their children. Shortly after Bowles and Gintis's treatise, Jencks and his colleagues (1979), closer to the political right, found little evidence that cognitive skills, such as those taught in school, played a big role in occupational success.

Employment usually depends on certificates or licenses—a high school degree, an Associate's degree, a 4-year college degree or perhaps an advanced degree. Social class certainly affects those achievements. But Jencks and his colleagues also found that industriousness, leadership,

and good study habits in high school were positively associated with higher occupational attainment and earnings, even after controlling for social class. It's not all about grades, test scores, and social class background: Soft skills matter a lot!

Lleras (2008), 10 years after she studied a group of 10th grade students, found that those students with better social skills, work habits, and who also participated in extracurricular activities in high school had higher educational attainment and earnings, even after controlling for cognitive skills! Student work habits and conscientiousness were positively related to educational attainment and this in turn, results in higher earnings.

It is pretty simple: students who have better work habits have higher earnings in the labor market because they are able to complete more years of schooling and their bosses like them. In addition, Lleras's study and others point to the persistent importance of motivation in predicting earnings, even after taking into account education. The Lleras study supports the conclusions reached by Jencks and his colleagues (1979), that noncognitive behaviors of secondary students were as important as cognitive skills in predicting later earnings. So, what shall we make of all this? I think poor and wealthy parents, educated and uneducated parents, immigrant or native-born parents, all have the skills to help their children succeed in life. They just need to worry less about their child's test scores and more about promoting reading and stimulating their children's minds through interesting games – something more than killing monsters and bad guys. Parents who promote hobbies and building projects are doing the right thing. So are parents who have their kids tell them what they learned from watching a PBS nature special or from watching a video tour of a museum. Parents also do the right thing when they ask, after their child helps a neighbor, how the doing of kind acts makes their child feel. This is the "stuff" in early life that influences a child's success later in life even more powerfully than do their test scores.

So, repeat after me all you test concerned parents: **non-academic skills are more powerful than academic skills in life outcomes.** This is not to gainsay for a minute the power of instruction in literacy and numeracy at our schools, nor the need for history and science courses. Intelligent citizenship and the world of work require subject matter knowledge. But I hasten to remind us all that success in many areas of life is not going to depend on a few points lost on state tests that predict so little. If a child's stay at home during this pandemic is met with love and a chance to do something interesting, I have little concern about that child's, or our nation's, future.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in Capitalist America*. New York: Basic Books.

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