How would your school change — your curriculum, your methods of assessment, the very experience of being a student in your school — if you placed the social and emotional skills and character traits that we know are highly correlated with psychological well-being and career success as a central through-line in your mission?

Contemporary culture has wrought profound changes — especially in the lives of children. In today's world, more than ever, schools need to think about what it takes to educate children to be psychologically healthy and of good character, to give them the tools that will enable them to find meaning in their lives both in school and after they graduate. Straight academics are certainly not enough, if they ever were.

**BY CATHERINE STEINER-ADAIR**
At independent schools, students are already the beneficiaries of some of the world’s most creative, rigorous, and expertly designed educational programs. However, too many of these students are also stressed to the breaking point by pressures to be super-achievers and pleasers in every facet of their lives — with little sense of what truly matters to them. Too many graduate academically accomplished, yet unfamiliar with their inner selves. Too many don’t know how to build meaningful relationships with others, or how to tap the unique motivation that will sustain their passion for lifelong learning and contribution. Excessive stress deadens ambition, motivation, passion, and curiosity — all the things we want our students to have. We also know the kids who are the most stressed out are more likely to engage in self-injurious and risky behavior, and often lose their way in college or in life beyond.

Contrary to conventional beliefs about the primacy of IQ, GPA, and ambitious academic accomplishment in predicting life success, research tells us that social and emotional intelligence (SEI) and some particular qualities of character most highly correlate with life success. By “success” I mean that your life feels purposeful and efficacious, that you experience the satisfaction that derives from working hard for a dream, that you are able to sustain your vision to attain it, and that, along the way, you experience the happiness that comes from feeling connected to good people in meaningful ways.

The traits for success, identified more than a decade ago by psychologist Martin Seligman, founder of the field of Positive Psychology, include grit (or a sturdy perseverance), self-control, optimism, zest, curiosity, social and emotional intelligence, gratitude, joy, and resilience. Some of us come by these traits more naturally than others, but we also know now that they can be cultivated and developed — especially in school.

Seligman, in his most recent book *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*, and journalist Paul Tough, in *How Children Succeed*, write extensively about the ways in which cultivating these qualities in children is transformative for students at every age. In my own work with children, parents, teachers, and schools over the past 25 years, I’ve seen how attention to these qualities has moved from the periphery of schools — that is to say, from the counseling office — to permeate the school culture and curriculum. This transformation is powerful, changing the psychological climate at each school for the better.

Such a shift is especially urgent because today’s children are growing up in, among other things, a free-for-all online culture where cheating, lying, and manipulation are too often the norm and fame has replaced success as the number one value. Of increasing concern to me as a psychologist is this troubling side of technology: the negative impact of social networking and entertainment that glorifies mean-spirited behavior, dishonesty, and violence, puts sadistic porn in the hands of young teens, and reduces interpersonal communication to texting or online banter and, too often, to bullying. For all the valuable aspects of digital technology, it is also creating a deep disconnect in the lives of too many children, eroding the opportunities for meaningful conversation and the relationships children need for healthy psychological development. Helping students develop the nine traits for success — along with a good dose of media literacy — will not only help them resist antisocial cultural norms, but also develop the character and humanity to change these norms for the better.

**FINDING THE CENTER OF LEARNING**

At the 2012 NAIS Annual Conference, I was part of a panel with Bill Christ, head of Hathaway Brown School (Ohio), in which we talked about the challenges of educating children in the 21st century. Christ was on the panel because his school has transformed its core curriculum to make social and emotional learning, character development, and intellectual exploration and self-discovery defining elements of every student’s education at every age. For a school that was already considered to be excellent, it took immense courage, commitment, and creativ-
collection of opportunities" to help students shape their own learning. Essentially, it is an assortment of centers where students can develop and explore specific interests. Each center is related to one of nine disciplines the students study in their core classes. Engaging with one or more of the centers for a few hours a week offers students an opportunity to participate more directly in real-world, problem-solving experiences.

The centers focus on global citizenship, science research and engineering, girls' and women's leadership, business and finance, multicultural affairs, sustainability, and civic engagement, in addition to the Osborne Writing Center and the Aspire Program. The latter is a tuition-free program for high-achieving girls with limited opportunity to be mentored and supported by a group of high school and college students "whose teaching talent is being cultivated to bring new ideas and change to our schools."

The challenge, Christ told me, was, for every age and developmental stage, to open "a channel for them to bring their passion forward in areas they care about, things that are meaningful to them, driven by their own interests and their own vision of what they want to do, with a lot of support."

In the preschool years, the institute focuses on the joy of discovery and love of learning. In the primary years, along with core subjects, the institute encourages students to identify and engage in their passions and talents. In the middle years, students are offered a wide spectrum of electives that tap into their personal interests and connect them with the broader community. By the time the students reach ninth grade, institute opportunities can take them into the community for a significant portion of the after-school day. That level of involvement is optional, but no one is opting out.

Student feedback from all ages has been clear: they are thrilled at the opportunities to explore and pursue their interests and to take ownership of their education. The freedom students have to choose their focus and to design and manage their involvement is key, Christ says. "It flips a switch in terms of their aspirations."

Students at Hathaway Brown work hard, but they work knowing that, on any day, they can visit a center and dive into something they are curious about. Just knowing that every day they have the freedom and the power to create their own academic discovery program in the afternoon, can mitigate the feeling that schoolwork holds no relevance in their lives. When students find an area of absorption in a center, the traits of success kick in. Hard work — grit — carries personal meaning. The spirit is lifted, thrilled, frustrated, exhausted in a meaningful way.

At Hathaway Brown, as at most schools where academic rigor is central to the mission, some initial friction accompanied the introduction of comprehensive SEI education and the shift to a hybrid curriculum that merges traditional school structure and core courses with the out-of-school experience. But parents and teachers soon saw that the new opportunities only stimulated students' interest in learning and took nothing away from core academics. In fact, the students' academic experience has only deepened as students bring their own passions and motivations for learning into every aspect of their school experience. Now, a decade into this new curriculum, Christ says, "There is reciprocity between the two ways of learning and synergy that flows. It's become a vehicle for opportunity and creativity."

**SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE DIGITAL EDUCATION**

In my work with Hathaway Brown and other innovative schools and educators, I have found that educating for social and emotional intelligence and those related traits for success merges seamlessly with objectives in
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An intellectually rigorous educational environment. They do so because they represent the psychological scaffolding necessary for a child to make the most of educational opportunity. One of the things that distinguishes independent schools from public schools is the relationship students have with teachers. Historically, supporting those relationships with affective education or responsive classrooms or other “whole child” approaches was as far as many schools went. But today’s world requires much more — primarily because of technology’s impact on the culture.

As wonderful as technology is, it brings with it new kinds of psychological fallout. Good kids are getting into bad trouble; troubled kids are getting into more serious trouble. The ubiquity of personal technology, and the hours of nonacademic learning that take place online bombard kids with popular messages and images that leave them vulnerable to making psychologically risky and unhealthy choices.

The digital world we share requires a paradigm shift in education. We need to think about how to educate kids at every age and developmental stage to be physically and psychologically healthy, socially and emotionally intelligent, and equipped with the intellectual tools to not only take care of themselves, but also have healthy relationships. They need to know how to deconstruct harmful cultural values and norms so they can thrive in a highly competitive, interactive, and interconnected world, especially as they head off to college. If we are really going to educate our kids to be prepared to lead and collaborate in this cultural moment, then cultural literacy and character education are just as important as, say, a foreign language. Cultural literacy in today’s world includes cultural awareness, global perspective, media literacy, diversity training, and digital citizenship — all necessary skills to be street savvy, to be worldly aware, and to be wise leaders and contributors.

Relationships skills and self-awareness are also crucial. We need to teach students how to listen actively, read social cues, read their own inner cues, talk and communicate interpersonally, create, and co-create. The capacity for empathy and responsible leadership requires individuals who have the self-control to manage their own reactivity, to be attuned to their own feelings so they can understand those of somebody else.

Exciting approaches like those at Hathaway Brown and other schools making this paradigm shift create a profound counterculture to a world that puts too much digital technology in the hands of children, with little to no guidance. They keep students focused and on an educational path that is wide enough to embrace who they are and who they hope to be. In focus groups around the country, I hear high school students complain about pressure to “have a passion and be a leader.” What students need is an education that provides the opportunities for them to explore in order to discover precisely who they are, what matters to them, and why — and then develop the skills to act on this knowledge. Students are hungry for a school experience that is personally meaningful.

Our challenge is this: to intentionally and comprehensively teach social and emotional skills, and create educational opportunities that foster the development of character traits that generate the psychological strength and resilience necessary for success. We need this to be an integral part of educational opportunities that are personally meaningful, self-generated, and creative. When students have the time and place to dabble and dive into self-initiated learning, to explore their creative imaginations and curiosity, schools then have the potential to be places of learning where each student can cultivate authentic passion through meaningful educational connections to the real world. This, in turn, will nurture their capacity to lead tomorrow.

Because I’ve had the opportunity to work with an increasingly wide range of schools, I’ve seen how schools can make this essential shift in their own unique ways. At Hathaway Brown, the Institute for 21st Century Education provides a context for hardworking students to also discover who they are, what matters to them, and how they want to matter in the world. What will be yours?

Catherine Steiner-Adair is a clinical psychologist, school consultant, and author. Her forthcoming book, about the impact of media and technology on children’s psychological well-being and how to nourish meaningful connection in the digital age, is available now. She has consulted to more than 350 independent and public schools, parents, and students on a wide range of topics related to strengthening children’s social and emotional development, shaping school culture, and deepening parents’ connections to their children. She can be reached through her website, catherinesteineradair.com.