

Building Bridges for Better Skills

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This White Paper is two-fold. We will explore what research says about why teachers must teach soft skills to their learners, for various reasons but first, we will delve into why it is imperative for teachers to develop soft skills themselves, so that they may build that bridge to create better skills for not just their learners, but themselves as well.

Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) [October, 2024] has found that “A good teacher can make a world of difference in a student’s life, impacting everything from their classroom learning to their long-term success.”

Research from the Economic Policy institute shows that good teachers are the single most crucial factor that contributes to student achievement in the classroom, more important than facilities, school resources and even school leadership.

So, What Makes a Good Teacher?

SNHU identifies 10 qualities that make effective teachers stand out. These qualities are ‘soft skills’ which is the premise of this White Paper.

1. Good Teachers are **Strong Communicators** – Clear and effective verbal and written communication
2. Good Teachers **Listen Well** – Paying full attention to students and their concerns
3. Good Teachers Focus on **Collaboration** – Working effectively with colleagues and students in teams
4. Good Teachers are **Adaptable** – Adjusting to changing situations and student needs
5. Good Teachers are **Engaging** – Actively capture their students’ attention and interest in the learning process through creative methods, relevant examples, and a dynamic classroom presence, making learning more enjoyable and impactful
6. Good Teachers Show **Empathy** – Understanding and responding to students’ emotions.
7. Good Teachers Have **Patience** – Staying calm, maintaining an optimistic and supportive demeanor.
8. Good Teachers Value **Real-World Learning** – Finding ways to relate the subject matter to students’ experiences and the world around them

9. Good Teachers Share **Their Contributions and Best Practices** – This helps to ensure teachers are collaborating and working together with others
10. Good Teachers are **Lifelong Learners** – This enhances one’s adaptability to a changing world, improves one’s career aspects by allowing one to acquire new skills, boost their confidence through continuous learning, and positively impacts one’s mental health by fostering a growth mindset and curiosity; essentially, it keeps one relevant and engaged in a dynamic environment

Soft skills are personal traits that enhance a person’s job performance, and career viewpoints. Soft skills are considered to boost competency and consequently upsurge one’s ability to subsidize communal progression and transformation. (Chondekar, 2019). Developing soft skills has become as necessary as hard skills for prospective 21st-century teachers.

In today’s rapidly evolving world, academic knowledge alone is insufficient for students to thrive in personal and professional life; therefore, teachers **must prioritize the development and explicit instruction of soft skills, which are essential for effective communication, collaboration, critical thinking, adaptability, and emotional intelligence**, ultimately preparing students for success beyond the classroom.

Introduction:

Shifting Landscape:

The modern workforce demands a blend of technical skills and soft skills, with employers increasingly valuing attributes like teamwork, problem-solving, and communication over mere subject matter expertise.

Impact on Student Success:

Students with strong skills are more likely to achieve academic success, build positive relationships, navigate complex situations, and demonstrate resilience in the face of challenges.

The Problem:

When teachers lack soft skills, it can lead to significant problems in the classroom, including difficulty managing student behavior, poor student engagement, ineffective communication, inability to build positive relationships with students, and a lack of adaptability to diverse learning needs, hindering student learning and overall classroom dynamics.

Challenges of developing soft skills in teachers:

Difficulties in measurement:

Unlike hard skills, soft skills can be challenging to objectively assess, making it difficult to track progress and demonstrate competency.

Subjectivity in evaluation:

Different people may interpret the quality of a soft skill differently, leading to inconsistent evaluation and feedback for teachers.

Training and development needs:

Developing soft skills often requires dedicated training programs and ongoing practice to achieve meaningful improvement.

Individual variations:

Teachers have different strengths and weaknesses when it comes to soft skills, requiring personalized approaches to development.

Classroom management complexities:

In a dynamic classroom environment, consistently applying soft skills to manage student behaviors and diverse needs can be challenging.

Key Issues arising from teachers lacking soft skills:

Poor classroom management:

Difficulty in handling disruptive behavior, resolving conflicts, and creating a positive learning environment due to a lack of conflict resolution skills and ability to build rapport with students.

Low student engagement:

Inability to motivate students, connect with them on a personal level, and tailor instruction to individual needs, resulting in disinterest and lack of participation in class.

Ineffective communication:

Difficulty in clearly explaining concepts, providing constructive feedback, actively listening to students, and addressing concerns, leading to confusion and frustration among leaders.

Limited cultural sensitivity:

Inability to understand and respect diverse backgrounds and perspectives, creating a potentially hostile learning environment for students from diverse cultures.

Lack of empathy and emotional intelligence:

Difficulty in recognizing and responding to students' emotional needs, potentially leading to negative impacts on their mental well-being.

Poor collaboration:

Challenges in working effectively with colleagues, parents, and administrators due to poor communication and teamwork skills.

The Benefits:**Why Soft Skills Matter for Teachers****Positive student-teacher relationships:**

Building trust and rapport with students is crucial for creating a supportive learning environment.

Effective conflict resolution:

The ability to identify and address conflicts constructively, through active listening and open communication, can prevent issues from escalating and maintain a productive learning environment. Skills to address disagreements constructively, finding common ground and working towards mutually beneficial solutions.

Empathy:

The ability to understand and share the feelings of others, crucial for recognizing different perspectives and building trust.

Engaging Learners:

Effective communication and active listening skills enable teachers to connect with students on a deeper level, fostering a positive learning environment and maximizing engagement.

Active listening:

Paying full attention to what someone is saying, reflecting their concerns, and avoiding interruptions to truly grasp their viewpoint.

Adaptability to diverse needs:

Teachers with strong soft skills can readily adapt their teaching methods to diverse learning styles and cater to individual student needs. Being able to do this is essential for effective teaching. Soft skills like flexibility and empathy allow teachers to tailor their teaching methods to cater to different learning styles and student needs.

Cultural awareness:

Understanding and appreciating cultural differences to navigate interactions with people from diverse backgrounds.

Open-mindedness:

Willingness to consider different viewpoints and be receptive to innovative ideas even if they differ from our own.

Promoting critical thinking and problem-solving:

Encouraging students to think critically and work through challenges requires a teacher who can facilitate discussions and provide constructive feedback.

Classroom Management:

The ability to manage conflict, build rapport, and set clear expectations relies heavily on soft skills, leading to a more productive classroom. Teachers with strong interpersonal skills can manage classroom dynamics effectively, promoting collaboration, respect, and a sense of community among students.

Strong leadership:

Teachers with leadership qualities can guide and motivate students, set clear expectations, and foster a sense of responsibility within the classroom.

Effective communication:

Clearly expressing your thoughts and ideas while also actively listening to others, using language that is respectful and inclusive.

Improved parent communication:

Effective communication skills enable teachers to build strong relationships with parents from diverse backgrounds, providing clear updates on student progress and addressing concerns effectively.

The solution:

Professional Development opportunities:

Providing ongoing training for teachers to enhance their soft skills throughout their careers.

Leadership support:

School leaders should prioritize creating a positive school culture that values and supports the development of soft skills among teachers.

In Order to Teach Necessary Soft Skills to Students, With Teachers, Professional Development Must Focus On:

- **Communication Skills:**
 - Active listening
 - Clear and concise expression
 - Non-verbal cues
 - Effective presentation skills
- **Collaboration Skills:**
 - Teamwork
 - Conflict resolution
 - Leadership
 - Shared decision-making
- **Critical Thinking Skills:**
 - Problem-solving
 - Analysis
 - Evaluation
 - Creative Thinking
- **Emotional Intelligence:**
 - Self-awareness
 - Cultural competence
 - Empathy
 - Emotion regulation

Recommendations/Conclusion

School districts are moving in the right direction when they are willing to provide additional training to teachers on how to build bridges with better skills. This refers to the idea of improving relationships and fostering understanding between different people or groups by actively developing skills like **empathy, active listening, communication, and perspective-taking**, acting as a “bridge” to connect individuals who might otherwise have difficulty relating to each other.

Teachers equipped with strong soft skills benefit from improved student engagement, a positive classroom environment, better conflict resolutions and effective leadership, while the challenges include the difficulty of measuring and developing these skills, as well as ensuring consistent application across diverse student needs.

How to apply “building bridges” in different situations:

Workplace: [Source: LinkedIn “How to Build Bridges That Last for Decades”]

Fostering collaboration between teams with different expertise by encouraging open communication and valuing diverse perspectives.

Community building:

Organizing events or initiatives that bring people from diverse backgrounds together to promote understanding and unity.

Personal relationships: [Source: Center for Creative Leadership, “What is Active Listening?”]

Actively listening to friends and family members, trying to see things from their point of view and being willing to compromise.

Sources

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