Author Paul Tough’s Agenda for Helping More Children Succeed

Paul Tough is the author of *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* and *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada’s Quest to Change Harlem and America*. He’s also a Bridgespan Fellow serving as an advisor to the Bridgespan education team.

*How Children Succeed* spent more than a year on the *New York Times* best-seller list. What accounts for its success?

I think the book came along at the right moment. The ideas I wrote about—the role of early environments in shaping children’s outcomes, the importance of noncognitive skills in children’s success, the need to help young people learn how to manage failure and struggle—were all kind of percolating up in the culture. And I think those ideas resonated with readers both on a personal level, in terms of how they thought about themselves and their children, and on a social level, in terms of how they thought about education and disadvantage.

Are you planning another book that touches on issues around improving the lives of poor kids?

I’m still trying to figure that out. I know I’m going to continue to write about these topics, but I’m trying to decide whether the next thing that I write will be another work of journalism—a book or a magazine article—or whether it will be a more practical, prescriptive report of the kind that Bridgespan writes. The report I’m contemplating would be aimed more specifically at leaders and practitioners in the education and child development fields, rather than at a broad public audience.
What kind of practical advice would you offer?

The strategies that I think are most valuable can’t always be conveyed as quick tips you can use tomorrow. They’re a little broader and more nuanced. For example, how do we help kids build appropriate mindsets? What sort of explicit and implicit messages get in the way of doing that? I’m very much persuaded by the psychological research that says hidden messages have a huge impact on how children learn.

Another thing that’s clear to me from the science that I wrote about in How Children Succeed is how much a child’s environment, especially during the first five years, affects the development of noncognitive skills. Those years are incredibly important in the formation of all kinds of skills, but especially character and noncognitive skills. Children who grow up in adverse environments often struggle in school in part because their environment adversely affects their neurochemistry in a way that is difficult, though by no means impossible, to counteract.

Right now we don’t have many good social or policy strategies to deal with that scientific fact. School systems, by their nature, have very little impact on what happens with children in the first five years of their life. And most leaders in education just take that situation as a given. That seems like a really bad approach because there is, in fact, a lot that we can do to intervene in early childhood. There’s a lot that parents, government, and nonprofits can do. Practitioners of all kinds can help, too. But right now, when we’re talking about third grade reading scores, we don’t see early childhood policy as connected to that conversation, though it absolutely is connected. And in no city or state that I know of is there a coherent strategy of how to tie all those things together.

I think we really need to rethink everything about the way we are delivering education, social services, support to parents, and family policy in this country. We shouldn’t be thinking about education as separate from those other realms.

What kind of changes in the educational landscape would you like to see over the next decade?

There are three policy shifts I’d like to see. First, there’s a huge obstacle to any broad acceptance of the ideas that I’m writing about, and that is our national superstructure of assessment and testing. Standardized assessments measure a narrow range of cognitive skills, but we now know that those skills are not in fact the best predictor of long-term success in kids.

The experience of most teachers or educators right now is that they don’t have the time or the freedom to focus on noncognitive skills. Maybe they’ll read my book and say, “Oh that’s a nice idea”—but then they go back to doing things the way they’ve been doing them. That’s because we have a system where all the incentives are toward a certain type of teaching, and that prevents teachers from experimenting. So one shift I’d like to see is that 10 years from now, we might have a system where the big national incentive mechanisms in education are more balanced between noncognitive and cognitive skills.
Another shift that I would like to see is for us to start thinking about the education of children as a public responsibility starting at birth. There's a great deal that we can do to influence how children, especially disadvantaged children, grow up, starting at birth and going all the way through college.

The third shift involves removing the barriers disadvantaged kids face in going to college. College used to be the great pathway to economic mobility in this country, and now it's a barrier to economic mobility for millions of kids. That's something that I think we could actually change relatively simply.

What would you change about college access?

I think it’s embarrassing that on elite college campuses, rich kids outnumber poor kids 25-1.

But right now, colleges don’t have much incentive to admit more low-income students, and they don’t have much incentive to expend resources to help those students persist and graduate. US News and World Report doesn’t give you many, if any, points for that in their college rankings. So the whole incentive system needs to change.

The other shift I favor is in the way that the government handles financial aid, which has shifted in this crazy way so that more government aid now is going to well-off kids than poor kids. This is true of many institutions of higher education, too. They’re giving more merit-based aid—which is just another way to persuade rich kids to come to your school—and less need-based aid.

You dropped out of college yourself—twice. How does that play into your views?

In How Children Succeed, I wrestled with that question, and I’m still wrestling with it today. I think my reasons for dropping out were somewhat different than many other students’—a lot of what I was looking for was a bigger challenge than I was able to find in college. But as I’ve spent more time recently reporting on college persistence, I’ve been reflecting on the fact that when I was trying to decide whether to leave Columbia University or to stay, no one from the college talked to me about my decision. There was no adviser or counselor or mentor who tried to persuade me to stay. I think that’s symptomatic of the fact that many colleges don’t feel particularly invested in their students’ persistence. They have a sink-or-swim mentality, and that attitude does a lot of unnecessary damage to struggling students.