Developing Life Skills:

Communications Playbook Research Background
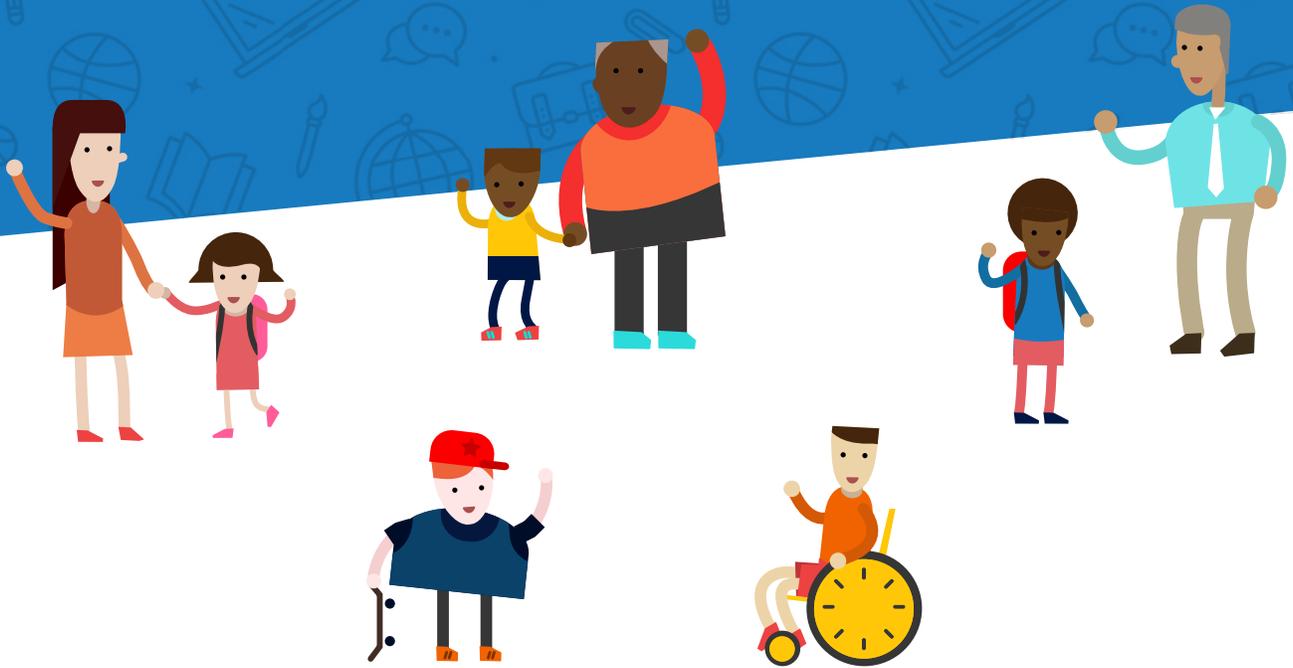
1   **In summary, what are the findings of the Developing Life Skills (DLS) report?**

Parents view social, emotional, cognitive, and academic skills—which most parents call "life skills"—as important for their children's success academically and for the long haul. They think of these skills as interconnected, a view backed by science. And they believe that home and school both have a role to play in life skills development—although parents are more likely to view home as the place where these skills are "taught" and schools as the place where they are "reinforced." Parents expect a dialogue with schools about these skills, if it's framed as helping their child succeed academically and in the larger world.

However, Learning Heroes found that as educators seek to inform and engage parents about a range of research-based practices that may look new and different from what they've experienced, there is both opportunity and risk that parents will become confused, frustrated, and feel that these new approaches push the limits of what is appropriate for schools. Learning Heroes research revealed that half of parents surveyed identify with both the potential benefits and risks of schools and after-school settings playing a role in their child's social, emotional, and academic development. Parents' understanding could fluctuate depending on how educators handle four key issues: how they partner with parents, without overstepping their role; how they provide parents with concrete examples to better understand how new school practices can benefit their child; how they use everyday language to translate key concepts for parents in ways that resonate; and how they communicate with parents about their child's progress without rating or grading individual children on life skills development, which most parents oppose.

2   **What questions did the Developing Life Skills research set out to answer?**

The research was designed to understand how parents feel and talk about their child's development of social, emotional, and academic skills and the role they see for schools and after-school settings. In particular, the research sought to understand:

Context: Where does social, emotional, and cognitive learning fit in parent priorities? Who do they feel is responsible for reinforcing these skills? What specific behaviors do parents tie to these skills? Who do parents trust and rely on for information about their child's development of social, emotional and cognitive skills?

Priorities & Language: How can the field communicate about this topic with parents most effectively? What skills and traits do parents value most? What is the most parent-friendly, authentic terminology, and why?

Increasing Parent Understanding: How do parents feel about what integrating social, emotional, and academic development in learning settings could look like in practice? How do they want to learn about their children's progress?

3   **The Developing Life Skills report focuses on research Learning Heroes conducted to help practitioners communicate with K-8 parents about the development of social, emotional, cognitive and academic skills in their children. Why is a focus on parents important?**

We're now entering a unique moment, where there is greater awareness and acceptance of the fact that learning has social, emotional, and academic dimensions. As a result, school systems and out-of-school programs are thinking in explicit, intentional ways about how to develop these skills at home, at school, and in after-school settings so that all children can succeed in school and in life. But if those efforts are to succeed, practitioners need to join forces with parents, who see themselves as primarily responsible for their children's education. In particular, practitioners need to help parents understand approaches that might be new or different from what they experienced years ago.

The study focused on the parents of elementary and middle school students because this is when parents are consistently likely to be introduced to concepts of social, emotional, and cognitive learning by schools.

4 **What unexpected findings did the DLS research uncover about the way that parents view Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and its place in school and community-based settings?**

Parents overwhelmingly think the development of "life skills," as most parents call these skills and traits, are important for their child's overall development. But Learning Heroes' survey of more than 2,000 parents who have children in K-8 public schools revealed that half of parents identify with both the potential benefits and risks of schools and after-school settings playing a role in the development of these skills, so how we engage parents in these discussions really matters. For example, parents do not understand some of the "edu-jargon" used to describe different skills and traits, even though they support many of the concepts. Even words that practitioners may think of as innocuous, such as "curiosity" or "resilience," can have negative connotations for parents. For example, middle school parents, in particular, worry about their children being curious about the wrong things, especially because of peer pressure. And many parents want to shield their children from the types of adverse experiences that might require resilience. So how we talk about social, emotional, and cognitive learning in ways that translate for parents became a big focus of the *Developing Life Skills* report.

5 **Why did you broaden the scope from Social Emotional Learning (SEL) to include a wider range of "social, emotional, cognitive and academic" skills or traits?**

Research has found that the social, emotional, cognitive, and academic dimensions of learning are deeply connected. Moreover, in focus groups, parents prioritized a wide range of skills across these dimensions and that was confirmed in the nationally representative survey of parents. Learning Heroes wanted to be true to both the range of skills reflected in various frameworks and to what parents want for their children.

6 **What did you learn about the language parents use to describe Social Emotional Learning (SEL) skills? What does this mean for communication with parents?**

"Life skills" is the term parents prefer to describe the skills and traits that they identify as most important for their children to develop. They prefer this term (31%) over "social, emotional, and academic development," "character development," and "social and emotional learning," by at least 2-to-1. Some of the reasons they give are that it's "simple," "all encompassing," and describes the skills people use "every day in life, schools, jobs and family." Our general advice is to start with where parents are and use language they understand to build bridges to more technical terms and language. We also found that parents respond very positively to videos that provide real-life examples of what integrating social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development looks like in practice.

7 **What did you learn about parents' preferred modes of communication about how and why SEL is reinforced at school or in community programs?**

Parents are not education experts. They need real-life examples of what integrating social, emotional, and academic development looks like in instructional practice. Video clips showing students engaged in such learning can be a powerful way to make these concepts concrete. Parents also responded favorably when social, emotional, and cognitive development is integrated into the teaching of academic subjects like reading, writing, and math. This allays parents' concerns that these skills will be taught at the expense of academic progress. For example, 84 percent of parents, including 88 percent of American-American parents and 86 percent of Hispanic parents, are "very" or "somewhat interested" in having their school use strategies and activities to reinforce these skills and traits throughout the school day.

8 **How should schools, districts and others talk to parents about rating or assessing their children on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) skills development?**

While parents are very interested in partnering with schools, they don't want schools to overstep their role. The line in the sand is assessments. More than a third of parents worry about their child being labeled for life (35%) or graded (34%) on skills that they view as too subjective or personal to measure. Only 16% indicate it would be helpful to get a separate grade on their child's report card to understand progress on these skills. Schools, districts, and others should tread cautiously in this area. Instead, parents want to hear from teachers about how their child is doing in the form of parent-teacher conferences, folder notes, emails, and more regular communications, particularly if there's a problem.

9 **Who is Learning Heroes? What other parent mindset research have they conducted?**

Learning Heroes' mission is to inspire, inform, and equip parents to best support their children's educational and developmental success. Learning Heroes believes that to partner with parents we first must understand their mindset, beliefs, priorities, and concerns as they work to raise their children. Since 2015, the organization has conducted more 8 national surveys and more than 100 focus groups with parents of public school children around the country. Learning Heroes uses the insights gleaned from this research to help state education agencies, school districts, and nonprofit partners better communicate with parents. And it provides parents with research-based information, resources, and simple actions they can take to support their child's academic and social-emotional success. Working with a range of trusted organizations, state education agencies, and school districts, Learning Heroes reaches over 4 million parents annually. Learn more about Learning Heroes at www.bealearninghero.org.

10 **How was the parent research conducted?**

In 2017, Learning Heroes secured funding from the Raikes Foundation, Bezos Family Foundation, and Einhorn Family Charitable Trust to get a deeper understanding of how parents approached the intersection of social, emotional, and cognitive development. Learning Heroes partnered with Edge Research to conduct the national research. In the spring of 2017, the project began with a review of existing opinion research and media coverage (traditional and digital) focused on how parents think about social, emotional, and academic development. In May-June 2017, six focus groups of parents of K-8 public school students were conducted in Dayton, OH; Wilmington, NC; and Oakland, CA, and included parents from mixed racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. One focus group was conducted in Spanish. The sites were selected to include communities whose school systems already have a strong focus on social, emotional, and cognitive development and those that do not. They also were selected to include a mix of political ideologies. The focus groups were used to understand how parents naturally talk about the skills they believe are most important for their children's success to inform design of a larger, national survey.

The national, online survey of 2,026 parents with children in public school, grades K-8, with oversamples of African-American parents (500), Hispanic parents (500), and low-income parents (100) was fielded between August 25-September 12, 2017, in both English and Spanish. In the final phase of the research, four additional parent groups were held in November 2017 in Philadelphia, PA, and Colorado Springs, CO, to pressure-test the survey findings and delve deeper into how parents interpret key word and concepts. One group was conducted in Spanish.

Throughout the process, Learning Heroes and Edge Research worked with more than a dozen collaborating and partner organizations, and with expert advisers, to design the focus group guides and the survey instrument and to review interim findings that helped shape the final report and communications road map. For the purpose of the survey and the report, "parents" includes guardians, caregivers, and any other adult primarily responsible for a child.