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# Portfolio Artifact: Helping Children Succeed

## Introduction

Paul Tough's *Helping Children Succeed* examines how poverty affects child development and argues we need to focus on stress reduction, self-regulation, and supportive relationships rather than just academic rigor. As Texas refines its accountability system, Tough's work raises questions about what we measure and whether it matters for our most vulnerable students.

## Key Points from Helping Children Succeed

Tough's central argument is that chronic stress from poverty and trauma changes brain architecture, particularly the prefrontal cortex that handles planning, focus, and impulse control (Tough, 2016). When we push rigorous content at kids dealing with toxic stress, we ignore that their brains are not ready to handle it.

The book identifies three essentials for success: executive functions (working memory and self-control), stress management, and character strengths like grit. Tough (2016) argues these are foundational, not extras. A child who cannot regulate emotions or maintain attention will struggle academically regardless of curriculum quality. The Center on the Developing Child provides additional resources on how brain architecture develops in response to early experiences.

Tough examines interventions across developmental stages. For young children, programs like the Nurse-Family Partnership focus on helping parents create stable environments rather than academic instruction (Tough, 2016). In elementary school, effective interventions focus on building executive function skills through structured activities and supportive relationships. The book challenges deficit thinking about

poverty, showing that with proper support, children demonstrate remarkable resilience. The problem is not the children but unaddressed environmental stressors. Paul Tough's discussion on helping children succeed offers additional insights into these concepts.

## Analysis: Implications for Texas TEA Accountability

Texas accountability emphasizes STAAR scores in its rating system (Texas Education Agency, 2026) but ignores the developmental foundations enabling those outcomes. We hold schools accountable for results without measuring whether they build the capacities Tough identifies as necessary.

### *Current Accountability Problems*

Texas rates schools primarily on STAAR achievement and growth, as detailed in the TEA accountability manual. The overall rating weighs Student Achievement or School Progress at 70% and Closing the Gaps at 30% (Texas Education Agency, 2026). A school serving high-poverty students might implement evidence-based practices to support self-regulation and cognitive development, yet receive low ratings because test scores lag. Meanwhile, affluent schools earn top ratings, though students arrive with developmental advantages already built at home.

When schools get low ratings, pressure pushes them toward test prep and faster pacing (Berliner, 2011). This pattern plays out across Texas districts. When STAAR math scores drop, the typical response is to tighten pacing guides and add intervention blocks focused on test-taking strategies. Districts push more content faster. However, many struggling students are not failing because they lack exposure to the content. They may be failing because they cannot sit still long enough to work through problems, give up the moment something gets hard, or hold multiple steps in working memory. We treat

it as a content problem when it is really a developmental one. This is precisely the opposite of what Tough's research suggests. Kids dealing with stress and underdeveloped self-regulation need time to build those capacities, not faster pacing and more drills.

### *Expanding Accountability Measures*

If Texas took Tough's framework seriously, accountability would be measured beyond test scores. Within the Closing the Gaps domain, there is a "School Quality or Student Success" component focused on STAAR performance for elementary and middle schools, and college readiness for high schools. This represents only one component among several within a domain that itself accounts for 30% of overall ratings (Texas Education Agency, 2026). We could expand accountability to include validated measures of school climate, student-teacher relationship quality, social-emotional learning implementation, and trauma-informed practices as more substantial components. Research shows school climate correlates with achievement, especially for disadvantaged students (Thapa et al., 2013).

During walkthroughs, I see apparent differences. At higher-performing campuses, teachers embed support for self-regulation naturally through think-alouds, visual organizers, and productive struggle. At struggling campuses, accountability pressure leads to rushed, procedure-focused instruction. Teachers feel they cannot afford time for problem-solving or building self-regulation skills. If accountability measured these developmental supports, it would legitimize the time needed to build them.

### *Redefining Growth*

Texas measures academic growth by comparing students statewide (Texas Education Agency, 2026), but we could also track growth in self-regulation, grit, or self-

efficacy. These measures exist and show reliability (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Tough argues that non-cognitive development often precedes academic gains. A kindergarten teacher building executive function might not see immediate test-score jumps, but is creating a foundation for later success. Current accountability fails to recognize this developmental progression, potentially penalizing schools for investing in foundational capacities rather than pursuing short-term test-score gains.

### *The Equity Issue*

Texas holds all schools to identical standards regardless of the developmental challenges students face. Tough (2016) clarifies that poverty's impact requires intentional intervention. Schools with middle-class students benefit from developmental support happening at home. Schools with high-poverty students are held accountable for the same outcomes despite lacking those supports. True equity would recognize schools successfully building executive function and reducing stress, even if absolute test scores remain lower.

At campuses serving middle-class families, students typically arrive able to sit still, follow directions, and regulate emotions. At high-poverty campuses, many students arrive without these capacities. Some have experienced trauma that altered their stress systems. Yet, both groups take the same STAAR assessment, and both schools get rated identically. This is not equity.

### *Implementation Challenges*

Even if Texas adopted these measures, implementation would be difficult. Tough emphasizes that effective interventions center on quality adult-child relationships.

Teachers would need more than workshops. They would need coaching, collaborative planning time, and support in rethinking what teaching means.

This connects to my dissertation research on why professional development (PD) rarely produces sustained instructional change. I have led and coordinated numerous PD sessions for teachers on research-based practices, yet sustained classroom change remains challenging. Adding accountability measures for executive function would hit the same implementation gap. Any reform must include sustained, job-embedded support for teachers.

**Conclusion**

Tough's *Helping Children Succeed* argues we measure the wrong things in education. Texas accountability focuses on test scores but ignores the developmental foundations that enable learning. By adding measures of school climate, executive function development, and social-emotional support alongside academic standards, Texas could incentivize what disadvantaged children actually need. After coordinating math instruction across diverse campuses, I know we cannot keep expecting identical results from students with vastly different starting points. Real equity requires measuring and valuing the developmental supports that enable academic learning.

## References


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