



A practical approach for teen-serving organizations to focus on building skills for success

By Louise Harland, Deputy Director, Boston After School & Beyond

Why skills matter

A skill can mean the difference between a struggle and a success. Skills are the tools we use to do things well. They give us the ability to solve problems and get tasks done, to connect with others and to take care of ourselves, even when difficulties arise. They enable us to take the steps that take us closer to our goals, be they academic, professional or personal.

Skills matter for success...

... in school

Children in Kindergarten need to know when to talk and when to listen, middle schoolers need to negotiate the intricacies of shifting friendships and their emerging identity development, and high school students in their first jobs need to be punctual and organized, and to interact appropriately with their colleagues and customers.

... in college

College students need to organize their time and prioritize their work to meet deadlines. They need the self-belief to see themselves as successful students, and the ability to find their own ways to cope and seek support when they encounter problems.

... in careers

People in the workplace need to be able to get to the heart of a problem, then to employ their knowledge and their creativity to come up with solutions. They need to communicate their ideas effectively, and to work collaboratively as part of a team.

... in life

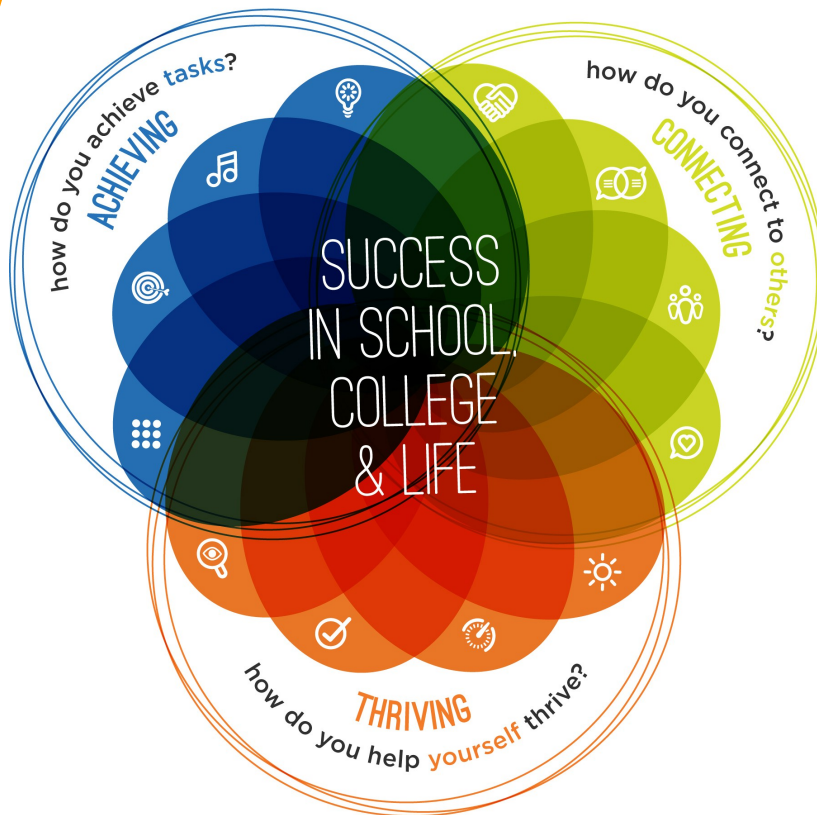
People need to feel empowered to advocate for the rights of themselves, their families and their communities, and to navigate the institutions in their lives. They need to be aware of the implications of their actions on their own health and on their community's wellbeing.

Just like academic knowledge, skills need to be nurtured and encouraged. We believe that students need knowledge, skills and experiences to achieve their full potential. In Boston, we are engaging communities as critical contributors to students' success. We are leveraging the strengths of community organizations to give students practical skill building opportunities and committed support as they pursue their goals in life.

Achieve, Connect, Thrive

The Achieve, Connect, Thrive framework unites stakeholders from across the youth-serving field in Boston around the skills young people need to succeed.

Derived from the best of the youth development field, and afterschool program providers themselves, the skills in the framework are those that research from a number of fields, including education and developmental psychology, suggests are important for success in school, college, and 21st Century careers.



ACHIEVING	critical thinking
	creativity
	goal focus
	organization
CONNECTING	relationships
	communication
	teamwork
	respect
THRIVING	wellbeing
	drive
	efficacy
	awareness of self & others

Skills in the framework meet three important criteria:

- ◆ They need to be **identifiable**.
Young people and the adults who work with them need to be able to identify evidence of a skill in their attitudes or behaviors.
- ◆ They need to be **measurable**.
Skills in the framework can all be described in relative terms.
- ◆ They can be **developed**.
Intentional steps can be taken to develop skills in the framework, through thoughts, activities and experiences.

Skill building in practice: a focus on teens

The framework serves as a practical guide for community organizations who are working to complement the knowledge students gain in school with skill and experiences that will prepare them to successfully make the next step in life, be that into the next grade, into post-secondary education, or into the work place.

This article offers insights into ways Achieve, Connect, Thrive is serving as the foundation for a practical and intentional skill building experience for teenagers.

This summer Boston After School & Beyond worked with the **Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI)**, a nonprofit community-based planning and organizing entity rooted in the Roxbury/ North Dorchester neighborhoods of Boston, to pilot practical steps to put a skill building agenda into practice.

“We see building skills as a key part of our work with young people in our community. Achieve, Connect, Thrive opens the door for us to discuss with youth an holistic approach to developing themselves as individuals.”

Denise Gonsalves, DSNI



The DSNI Teen Summer Staff

DSNI employs teens from surrounding neighborhoods to organize, then execute, community projects that help individuals and the broader the community.

The organization wanted to ensure that the 40 young people joining its staff for the summer of 2012 were able to use the working experience to develop the skills they needed to achieve their future goals.

Their ambition was that teens would finish the summer having taken tangible steps to develop a skill they had identified themselves as an area for focus, based upon their own strengths, challenges and future ambitions.

“We see building skills as key part of our work with young people in our community. Achieve, Connect, Thrive opens the door for us to discuss with youth an holistic approach to developing themselves as individuals,” said Denise Gonsalves, Director of Youth Leadership and Development at DSNI.

“We like how it is a basis for discussion, and then for action, leading to tangible steps that can make a real contribution to young people’s success.”

Achieve, Connect, Thrive Plans



Step one: Building understanding

Building young people’s familiarity with skill-building concepts and vocabulary proved to be an essential first step. Teens were introduced to the framework, and wanted to use it to create their own tool, using language and examples that resonated with them. They discussed each skill, considering for each what it looks like when a person demonstrates a skill and, conversely, what a person demonstrates when they lack a particular skill.

Respect

“You are open-minded and willing to understand where different people are coming from. You don’t have to agree with others, but you hear them out.”

“You always feel you’re right and you always shut people down.”

When a person **HAS** this skill

When a person **LACKS** this skill

Self-Awareness

“You can identify your feelings and put them into words.”

“You don’t always know what you are feeling, and can’t express yourself.”

Step two: Setting personal goals

Once participating teens were familiar with skill-building concepts, the next step involved working with them to develop a clear understanding of their personal strengths and challenges.

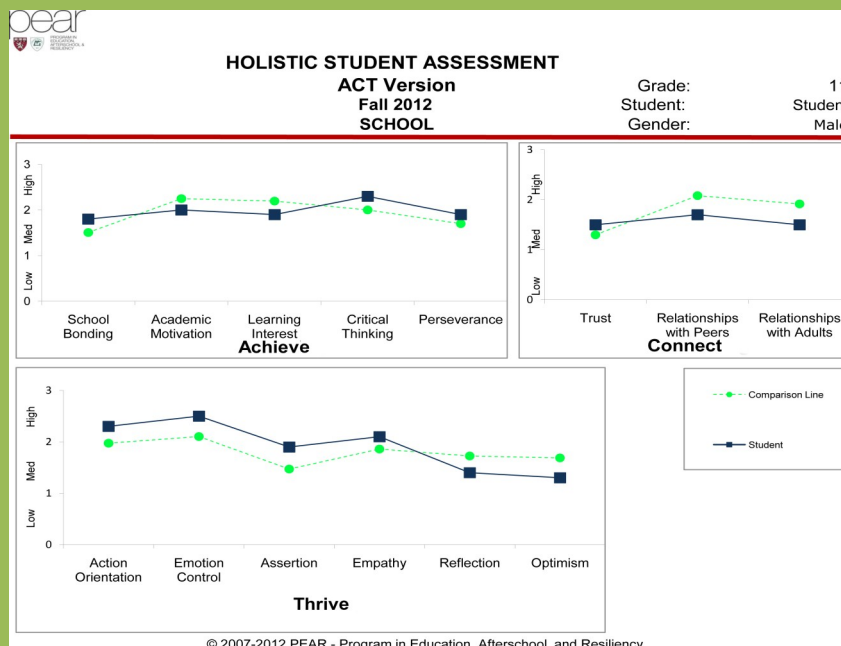
To facilitate this self-reflection, DSNI worked in partnership with the **Program in Education, After-School and Resiliency (PEAR)**, an organization based at McLean Hospital and Harvard Medical School that creates tools, trainings and interventions to build the capacity of schools and afterschool to respond to the social, emotional and developmental (SED) needs of youth.

Students completed PEAR's Holistic Student Assessment tool, a survey tool that requires young people to answer a series of self-reflective questions which provide insights into their relative strengths and vulnerabilities in different social, emotional and developmental domains. The tool is used to guide response strategies for individual students, and to assess overall needs within classrooms and schools.

Results were presented back to the teens, then used as a basis for them to reflect on the skill area they could most benefit from strengthening during their summer work experience.

"This step really uncovered the complexity of working with teens. It gave us a clear picture of all the things they could do well, and an insight into the numerous facets of their lives," said Gonsalves.

"It really helped us, as a program, to be more intentional about ensuring that we offer an experience that meets the true needs of these young people at this stage in their lives," she said.



Results of the Holistic Student Assessment are presented in graph form, grouped by the Achieve, Connect, Thrive domains. Adults working with students see two lines—an aggregate level for the cohort, and an individual line for the particular student in question, allowing them to focus program planning accordingly. When results are shared with students only their own individual results are visible, encouraging them to focus solely on their personal strengths and challenges.

Step three: Strengthening skills



Having considered their own skill profile, and consulted with their advisors, each young person picked a skill that they wanted to focus on strengthening during the summer. They then worked with their youth supervisors, and the program leaders, to create a clear set of actions they would take in order to focus on building that particular skill.

"I was kind of surprised when I got my results because I thought I would have had more empathy. Otherwise I thought the HSA was very accurate and it helped me figure out what to work on," said **Isaiah Wilkerson**, 17, who worked with DSNI this summer.

"I decided to work on my planning skills. As a Senior Youth Organizer, I was taking on more responsibilities than I had done in the past, and found that I needed to be well organized. I went to staff and asked for advice on ways to achieve this, then I applied the ideas and resources they gave me to my own responsibilities."

"Usually I don't ask for help, but I learned asking made things more efficient."

Isaiah's colleague, 17-year old **Nancy Baiza**, was initially skeptical that the HSA survey would accurately portray her:

"I was thinking it was going to be completely wrong and not tell me anything about myself. But when I saw it... it was me. I had never thought about a bunch of the things before, but when I saw it I thought: 'this is really how I am.'"

"I chose to work on my drive – on staying focused on what matters to me. I realized I needed to identify what my priorities were. I decided I needed to share these priorities with a positive person in my life, and to check in with them regularly on my progress. This step has helped me stay focused, and given me encouragement when challenges happen."

What we learned

- ◆ Students **lack exposure** to information on skills, and frequently **lack the vocabulary** and support in self-reflection to pinpoint areas for skill focus.
- ◆ Skill-building experiences can be **integrated** in a variety of youth-serving activities by programs serving teens.
- ◆ Some skills lend themselves well to practical action steps. Most students in the DSNI cohort picked **communication skills** as their focus, as they found them **tangible and easy to translate into concrete actions**. We need to develop this work to better support teens across the full Achieve, Connect, Thrive spectrum of skills, demonstrating positive steps teens can take to build their skills in each of the three domains.

Future directions

We continue to develop the Achieve, Connect, Thrive framework as a practical resource to support young people, their families and communities, their schools and youth-serving organizations in intentionally building skills for success. Some future directions include:

- ◆ Developing a directory of **skill-building ideas for teens**. This can be used by individual young people to inform their own planning and goal-setting, and by organizations looking for ideas to incorporate into their teen programming.
- ◆ Working with school districts and teachers to **raise awareness of skill building opportunities** linked to the academic curriculum.
- ◆ Expanding this approach to include students who are **in the process of gaining a post-secondary qualification**.

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Expanded Learning & Afterschool Project



Boston After School and Beyond is a citywide intermediary dedicated to increasing learning opportunities for Boston's youth by aligning school, afterschool, and summer efforts.



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