



## 474: Back to School

Sep 14, 2012

As kids and teachers head back to school, we wanted to turn away from questions about politics and unions and money and all the regular school stuff people argue about, and turn to something more optimistic — an emerging theory about what to teach kids, from Paul Tough's new book [How Children Succeed](#). Photo: Theo [takes the marshmallow test](#).

□ Host Ira Glass talks about his experiences reporting on education and the unending question of how we can make schools better. He discusses the Chicago Teachers strike and an essay by writer Alex Kotlowitz that talks about how the strike raises questions about the severity of this challenge. (4 1/2 minutes)

□ [Act One](#)

### [No These Things Will Not Be on the Final Exam](#)

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Ira talks with Paul Tough, author of the new book [How Children Succeed](#), about the traditional ways we measure ability and intelligence in American schools. They talk about the focus on cognitive abilities, conventional "book smarts." They discuss the current emphasis on these kinds of skills in American education, and the emphasis standardized testing, and then turn our attention to a growing body of research that suggests we may be on the verge of a new approach to some of the biggest challenges facing American schools today. Paul Tough discusses how "non-cognitive skills" — qualities like tenacity, resilience, impulse control — are being viewed as increasingly vital in education, and Ira speaks with economist James Heckman, who's been at the center of this research and this shift.

Doctor Nadine Burke Harris weighs in to discuss studies that show how poverty-related stress can affect brain development, and inhibit the development of non-cognitive skills. We also hear from a teenager named Kewauna Lerma, who talks about her struggles with some of the skills discussed, like restraint and impulse control.

We then turn to the question of what can schools offer to kids like Kewauna, and whether non-cognitive skills are something that can be taught. Paul discusses research that suggests these kinds of skills can indeed be learned in a classroom, even with young people, like Kewauna, facing especially adverse situations, and also the success of various programs that revolve around early interventions. Ira reports on a mother and daughter in Chicago, Barbara and Aniya McDonald, who have been working with a program designed to help them improve their relationship — and ultimately to put Aniyah in a strong position to learn non-cognitive skills. (38 1/2 minutes)

□ [Act Two](#)

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Our story picks back up with the question of how non-cognitive skills can be taught to older kids — who have gone much longer without learning things like self-control, conscientiousness and resilience. Ira returns to the story of Kewauna, the Chicago teenager, who talks

about the dramatic ways in which she changed her life. They discuss an intervention by Kewauna's family, and the programs that have helped her thrive. Economist James Heckman then discusses the ways in which this shift in emphasis could change the way we practice education and the way we think about learning. (11 minutes)

SONG: "YOU DON'T LEARN THAT IN SCHOOL", LOUIS ARMSTRONG

SONG: "BACK TO SCHOOL AGAIN", MOROCCO MUZIK MAKERS