



# HIGHLANDS

---

## MICRO SCHOOL

### Why Teaching “Soft Skills” Matters

As the Director of Highlands Micro School, an independent elementary school, much of my work with parents involves helping them identify the short and long-term goals they have for their children. In one simple exercise, we can remove the conventional definition of success and find a definition that makes success possible for every child.

If you are a parent, I encourage you to do the exercise in your head as you read along.

When I sit with parents who are especially anxious about their school choices, I pass them a pencil and a blank sheet of paper and ask, “What words do you hope people will use to describe your adult child?” There is usually a pause. I remind them that there is no wrong answer. Their pencil begins moving slowly and with time picks up speed as they are inspired by their own words. When they finish, we look at the words together.

This can be a difficult exercise for parents because they are being asked to look forward into a timeframe they may no longer be alive to witness. But the answers discovered through this reflection are a gift that gives parents the opportunity to evaluate if what they are doing for their children today supports the people they hope their children become tomorrow.

First, let’s start with the words and phrases that never make it to the paper: Rich. Went to Harvard. Really good at math. Drives a Tesla. Famous. You can quickly fill a paper with words that match our commercially fueled interpretation of the word “success.”

Instead, the words and phrases that parents write are things like: Fulfilled. She is true to herself. He is a good husband. A lifelong learner. She follows her passions. Creative. Kind. Cares about others. Happy. Critical thinker. He lives fully. Makes the world a better place.

When parents say their handwritten words out loud, they immediately recognize the disconnect between our cultural, narrow evaluation of “success” in a school-aged child, and what they really want for their kids. Sometimes I ask a parent, “why did you write ‘Creative, kind and true to herself?’” And, usually, the answer is that as adults we know these attributes are central to our happiness. Without them, how much does the rest really matter?

After discovering what traits you hope your child grows up to represent, ask your if the environment in which your child is growing supports or stifles the development of these characteristics.

If “passionate” was on your list, ask yourself: Does my child’s environment allow him to delve deeply into things that interest him? Is there time and support for pursuing an idea?

If “critical thinker” on your list, ask yourself: Does my child’s environment empower her to find answers and make personal meaning of what she learns, or is having the “right” answer more important?

If “creative” on your list, ask yourself: Does my child’s environment value self-expression and creativity, or is conformity preferred?

If “life-long learner” was on your list, ask yourself, “Does my child’s environment believe that learning should be joyful and guided by my child’s interests?”

If “fulfilled” was on your list, ask yourself, “Is my child’s environment an emotionally and physically safe place that will allow her to become and enjoy her best self? Are her ideas treated as valuable? Are her contributions respected?”

At Highlands Micro School, we know that skills like creativity, critical thinking, passion and a life-long pursuit of learning are central to long-term success. We cultivate these skills as tools that allow our students to reach their true human potential. By thoughtfully prioritizing a broad spectrum of character traits in addition to academic skills, schools can maximize their contribution to a healthier community, country and world.

To learn more about our unbeatable class sizes, custom elementary education, and to download an application for your child, please visit [www.highlandsmicroschool.com](http://www.highlandsmicroschool.com).