Leadership Strategies for Building Mindset Around Student Growth

by Matthew Renwick

In 2006, Dr. Carol Dweck published the book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. She has studied people’s attitudes toward learning for some time. Her work revolves around comparing fixed mindset (mistakes are indicators of failure; intelligence is fixed) and growth mindset (mistakes are opportunities for learning; intelligence can be developed). Her research made an impact on the educational landscape. Many teachers and school leaders started proclaiming that they were “growth mindset oriented”. A fixed mindset was the enemy. If a student became discouraged, the objective was to praise their effort and encourage them to persist within the adverse situation.

Fast-forward 10 years to the present day. Growth mindset has become a part of education’s lexicon. However, this has not lead to widespread improvement in student dispositions toward learning. There are a few reasons. First, Dweck believes teachers and parents often misuse her research when interacting with kids (Barshay, 2015). Specifically, teachers praise effort but are not as effective in offering feedback to improve performance. Also, adults would claim they use a growth mindset, but their actions promoted a fixed mindset. In addition, Dweck has revisited her own work since it first came to the educational forefront. One area that has been revised is the strict dichotomy between fixed vs. growth mindset. “Maybe we talked too much about people having one mindset or the other, rather than portray-

As one school leader to another, I ask you: If Carol Dweck, a leading researcher in the area of psychology and learning, can revise her current thinking, what is stopping us and our teachers from the doing the same? Her example gives us permission to question our current strategies in how we empower students, engage parents, and enable educators in our respective buildings. This article will review practices in education that encourage student growth, challenges to expect in this instructional change, and indicators of success. We will focus on four areas of consideration for facilitating this change: Cultivating the conditions for success; Clarity above all; Feedback, feedback, feedback; Authentic work for a real audience. To be clear, this is not a prescription for success. Rather, it is one pathway your leadership team may take to promote a growth mindset in all of your learners—teachers and students.

Cultivating Conditions for Success

Before a school can move forward toward developing a collective growth mindset, educators have to assess the current reality. People need to understand everyone has room to grow and should strive to become better. I like the verb “cultivate” instead of create. It evokes imagery of a gardener, tending their soil in preparation for a growing season. Amendments such as fertilizer and compost are added to help ensure a healthy harvest. Weeds are removed so the garden can flourish. To follow the metaphor, the level of health of a school’s soil is largely comprised of the trust colleagues have for each other as well. Trust does not happen naturally; it too has to be cultivated with intentional leadership acts.

One activity I have facilitated with teachers is allowing them to share their concerns regarding the past. Teachers write a statement which articulates their issues on a small piece of paper. A sentence stem, such as “In the past, I felt...” helps get people started. The school leader can model this first, sharing out loud any grievance they may have kept well until that moment. Educators appreciate it when leaders demonstrate what is asked of them. It conveys honesty and makes us more transparent. Once teachers have an opportunity to verbally share their personal concerns, everyone puts their note in an empty suitcase. Then the principal closes it up and announces, “I appreciate your feedback. These concerns are mine now. I will do my best to address them in future conversations with everyone.” Staff will feel listened to, acknowledged, and more ready to move forward. Principals can take this one step further and categorize the concerns by themes. This will provide focus and allow school leaders to prioritize staff concerns and effectively address them. (Thank you to my superintendent Luke Francois for sharing this idea with me.)

Once major concerns have been heard, a second step toward cultivating the conditions for success is developing collective com-
commitments. These are like norms, created as a faculty that serve as guidelines for professional conversations. A difference between collective commitments and norms is the former is directly connected with the mission and vision of the school, more like principles. To get started, leaders provide different professional articles for faculty to read ahead of time. Each article should speak to one of the school’s or district’s initiatives for the school year. Encourage teachers to closely read the text of their choice with a pen in hand and be ready for a conversation with colleagues. Reading ahead of time will prepare everyone for more productive dialogue. Assumptions are not made about any educator’s background knowledge. Once teachers have read and discussed the content, the entire faculty can develop collective commitments. A consensus strategy such as “Fist to Five” can help ensure faculty buy-in. The alignment between mission, vision, and collective commitments ensures goal alignment.

Essential to the success of this work is having the time, resources and training to engage in it. To capture more time, a number of schools and districts have gone to early student release once a week. This time is then allocated for teacher teams to look at student work and results, and adjust their instruction to better meet students’ needs. Educators’ mindsets start to bend toward student learning results instead of only instruction. Professional resources and training should be a school priority. Within these conditions, teachers can start to emerge as leaders. The autonomy provided within the commitments and goals of the school treats teachers like the professionals they are. This type of environment can lead to a necessary level of trust that allows all school members to start taking risks in their personal learning endeavors.

**Clarity Above All**

The work educators engage in to develop their mission, vision statements, collective commitments, and building goals are not worth the paper they are printed on if they do not translate into action. Clarity about our work is achieved when there is complete alignment between the more abstract artifacts previously mentioned and the concrete actions of teachers and leaders in classrooms. We know we are on the right pathway when assessment results reveal student growth over time and achievement of essential learning objectives.

One of the best ways to achieve clarity in our work is by looking at the types of assessments and the priority placed on each. Assessments in school generally fall into three areas: formative, interim and summative. Formative assessments include helping students understand the criteria for success, offering and receiving feedback, and providing students with opportunities to improve on their work through reflection and self-assessment. Interim, or benchmark, assessments are more summative in nature. They serve as checkpoints in a student’s learning progression toward essential understandings and skills. Summative assessments, such as exams, quizzes, and projects, help teachers and students gauge what was learned and at what level of understanding.

If a school directs the majority of their focus on summative assessments, then teachers’ mindsets become more concerned about the results of student learning versus the process students took to get there. Summative assessments are fixed; once you take the test or place a score on student work, learning stops. In an educational world hyper focused on end results and ensuring all students succeed, it is little surprise that a growth mindset can be so fleeting in classrooms. Teachers and students are clear about the purpose, but the purpose may not lead to deeper learning in these situations.

To address this situation, school leaders have to shift their mindsets by placing a greater priority on students and teachers capturing, reflecting on, and sharing formative assessment results. In my former school, we did this by selecting six weeklong windows during the school year in which each student would upload a writing artifact into their digital portfolios. We used FreshGrade (www.freshgrade.com) to house and share our students’ best work. Before each window, teachers would identify the learning targets to be addressed and then prepare instruction to guide students to achieve them. The fruits of their labor—informative texts generated by the students independently—was showcased within FreshGrade’s web-based portfolio system. In addition, families and colleagues could see growth over time in each student’s writing from fall to spring. To ensure this process remained formative, teachers were expected to confer with each student while they uploaded their work, asking questions such as,

- “Why did you select this piece?”
- “What did you do well in your writing?” and
- “What do you think you need to work on for next time?”

Within a portfolio system, students start to see learning as a dynamic process instead of a static event. Clarity is evident in what the students produce and how they grow.
Feedback, Feedback, Feedback
I list this element of formative assessment three times because it

“...where we can glean all types of information and adjust our instruction to meet their needs...”

is so important for developing a collective mindset around student growth. Feedback is any information that helps to guide or confirm student work and offers pathways for improving upon it. Feedback is also the information a teacher receives from a student in response to their instruction. Examples include written and verbal comments and reflective questions that focus a student’s attention to their process. Non-Examples of feedback include grades and test scores (summative assessments). To be sure, not all feedback is created equal. If students are unable to use the comments and questions to further their learning, it renders the teacher’s efforts as ineffective. “The most important things about feedback is what the students do with it” (Wiliam, 2016). Therefore, it is critical that teachers receive training on how to best provide and use feedback in the classroom.

The best feedback for developing a growth mindset can be categorized into two areas: descriptive and prescriptive (Kroog, Hess, & Ruiz-Primo, 2016). Descriptive feedback is objective commentary about the student’s work. The language should be specific and revolve around the attributes of the content, skill or strategy. Descriptive feedback should acknowledge the student as the learner, allowing him or her to own their learning by connecting what they accomplished with their efforts.

An example of feedback on a piece of writing might be, “Kyle, when you used sensory details in this story, I could visualize the scene.” This type of feedback gives students a window into their current reality. It is also offers an opportunity to celebrate what’s going well. Conversely, prescriptive feedback provides students with a pathway for improvement. It can be a direct suggestion or a thoughtful question. Following the same example, a teacher might want Kyle to expand on his descriptions by asking, “What other senses might you include in this description of the forest?” Of course, all of this feedback is only as effective as the level of clarity conveyed to understand the criteria for success (Hattie, Fisher, & Frey, 2016).

As school leaders, we can promote these better practices during professional learning days and in the classroom. For all staff training, teachers can watch examples of other teachers using feedback in effective ways. The Teaching Channel (www.teachingchannel.org) offers hundreds of videos of real teachers in action, with dozens depicting effective feedback and formative assessment strategies. Teachers can also read related articles together, such as the ones cited in this section, and have professional conversations about the information. Once teachers have enough background knowledge about the nature of effective feedback, school leaders can model this skill when conducting instructional walks in classrooms. These walks are 15-20 minute classroom visits documented with descriptive and prescriptive feedback. Instructional walks are formative in nature, and should not be considered part of the evaluation process. With instructional walks, we are “looking first for the teacher’s strengths, noticing where support is needed, and also discerning instructional patterns across the school” (Routman, 2014, p. 198). I use a paper notebook and a pen, write what I observe, and then have a brief conversation with the teacher about what I observed. Before I leave the classroom, I offer positive affirmation of the day’s instruction to build and maintain teacher-principal trust. This process models for teachers how they might interact with their students, as well as how students might interact with each other in the form of peer feedback.

While what we say and do not say is critical for student growth, the best type of feedback comes from the students. It is in our interactions with kids where we can glean all types of information and adjust our instruction to meet their needs. This student-teacher interaction is dependent on the quality of the relationships in the classroom. That leads us into our last section on the importance of authenticity and audience in our daily work in schools.

Real Work for an Authentic Audience
If the only person who regularly sees student work is their teacher, we deprive our kids of opportunities to make their voices be heard. Bringing in an authentic audience for student learning increases motivation, raises the stakes in a positive way, and facilitates celebration of everyone’s efforts and accom-
Preparing students to accomplish real work for an authentic audience does not necessarily mean teachers have to develop elaborate projects that take weeks at a time to accomplish. One of the easiest ways to facilitate this is by utilizing a digital portfolio to publish student work (mentioned previously). This is what many professionals do in their own occupations: Maintaining a professional website that highlights their skills and abilities. The audience for student portfolios—families and other teachers—can respond to what students publish in the form of comments. Teachers can educate parents about how to offer better feedback by modeling it within the digital portfolio ecosystem. School leaders can offer after school sessions for families to learn the technology and how to comment on student work.

While celebrating student work is an essential component of building trust, we also need to honor the process students took to get to a point of proficiency. That is why I advocate students and teachers maintain growth portfolios in addition to best work portfolios previously described. Growth portfolios document the progress students are making as learners as well as the processes they used in order to make the progress. These types of portfolios are generally more teacher-directed, especially when monitoring progress with digital tools. However, there is no reason students should not be an integral part of this assessment process. One possibility is for every student to have a blog. Suggested blogging tools include Kidblog, Edublogs, and Wordpress. Students can use these online journaling forums to post first drafts on topics of choice and expressing their thinking regarding interests or content areas. Teachers can show students how to effectively comment on each other’s blogs. This practice promotes a growth mindset because it says, “We are all learners here.” Competition is reduced and making is recognized because of the visible and collaborative nature of growth portfolios.

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blogging. An audience that consists of peers and families might be all that is needed for shining a broader light on the real work students do in school.

Conclusion
After almost a decade in school administration, I have come to believe our actions as leaders make the biggest difference in the learning lives of students and teachers. We model the learning process by being learners ourselves. This includes co-creating an environment that sets everyone up for success, being clear about our goals and what excellence looks like, offering feedback in a productive manner, and providing an authentic audience for our work. A growth mindset is more about what we do rather than anything we might say. We develop this mindset by living out our beliefs in our everyday actions. When a faculty’s collective disposition moves from “We have a growth mindset” to “This is how we do things here,” a school can become a true learning community.

Don’t miss the December 7 Lunch & Learn webinar! Matthew Renwick and other educators will share how they’ve successfully implemented digital portfolios for student growth. Visit the eLearning section at www.tepsa.org to learn more!

Author
Matthew Renwick, whose career in education spans 20 years, has been an elementary school principal in Wisconsin for five years. He writes for a number of educational publications including ASCD, and is the author of 5 Myths About Classroom Technology and Digital Student Portfolios: A Whole School Approach to Connected Learning and Continuous Assessment.
A growth mindset is a powerful learning tool that can shape your future. Here are some simple ways to develop this mindset and unlock your potential. Students who demonstrate a growth mindset believe their abilities develop over time, tend to seek out opportunities to gain new knowledge and broaden their skills, and do not typically shy away from challenges. To best understand what a growth mindset is, it’s important to know another mindset. When people talk about it, they often compare a growth mindset to a fixed mindset. Questions are the building blocks of learning when you think about them. Going back to what I mentioned above, when we push ourselves to just try harder next time, we’re not learning anything. Instead, whenever you fail, reword your questions. Facilitating a growth mindset helps students overcome difficulties, see success in math, and work through their math anxiety. One of the ways to alleviate math anxiety can be to take away the expectation that students will only be graded if they solve the problem. For many students of the arts, practice is the key to sustained growth and development. Musicians and dancers with a growth mindset, for instance, believe that their skills are developed through devotion to routine training whereas those with a fixed mindset believe those skills are due to innate talent. Educators should strive to create a supportive environment that emphasizes effort, practice, and determination over talent. Leaders with a growth mindset have a deep desire to do this and lead inclusion and embrace individuality as their primary growth strategy. They understand that if you’re not inclusive enough, then reputation management gets in the way of progress. Do you have an enterprise-wide growth mindset, click here and find out. My organization, GLLG, helps companies build high-performance leaders, teams and cultures focused on inclusion and the power of individuality. I am the author of the books: Leadership in the Age of Personalization, The Innovation Mentality and Earning Serendipity. Read Less. Here are five strategies to help struggling students develop a growth mindset. Encouraging Optimism About Learning. This outlook helps struggling students become more motivated, alert, and ready to learn, so that neurotransmitters that enable learning can be released. When struggling students learn how to drive their brains through the use of cognitive strategies, they’re more likely to be able to learn and think at higher levels. Teachers often tell us they need strategies for helping students learn how to increase their attention. Our post Strategies for Getting and Keeping the Brain’s Attention offers tried-and-true strategies to support teachers with this common classroom issue. Growth mindset: A belief system that suggests one’s intelligence can be grown or developed with persistence, effort and a focus on learning. Learn more about the differences between a fixed and growth mindset in this rubric from Mindset Works. Mary Cay Ricci’s book is a good resource and includes many tools and resources to weave growth mindset exercises into your school and classroom. Some examples include mindset observation forms, lists of additional helpful books and samples of critical thinking strategy write-ups. Share This Page. Related Resources. Article. The Leading Change PLC offers educators opportunities to share strategies for advancing change as they work to build sustainable systems. Published: April 6, 2021 Topics: Building Capacity. Article.