The Beginning of the School Year Messages

It’s that time of year again when my schedule often contains “opening day” presentations, end of summer professional development events or planning sessions for administrators and/or teachers. One of the discussions I try to facilitate explores what messages educators want to communicate to students and/or teachers concerning environment and relationships. I believe that consciously deciding a desired message to communicate assists in planning “what to do.”

As an example, I love opening day events that “wow” students. [See Wow! Adding Pizzazz to Teaching and Learning] When a teacher goes above and beyond to create excitement, fun, passion, interest, or curiosity the students get a message that the teacher believes they are special and learning with her will be engaging. A fourth-grade teacher has a large gift-wrapped box delivered to her room as math class begins. She reads the attached note that says it’s a gift for the class to be opened when students know the volume of the box. A mad search of their math texts begins as they hunt a process for finding volume. An English teacher invites students to sit around a campfire in back of the room (a simple light bulb under a stack of firewood will do.) In a darkened room she passes out a survival novel that will be their first reading. Her timing has the bell ring as students are engaged in a suspenseful section. Students exit class trying to finish a page as they head to their next class

Compare these to the message that students receive with the teacher who matter-of-factly begins with a presentation of the course syllabus. While the information there is important and valuable, the message may be that content trumps the learners.

I was drawn to consider messages while facilitating a summer PD session for teachers that focused on student expectations, engagement, effort, and achievement. Using my backwards planning approach, we explored the teacher behaviors most likely to generate these desired student behaviors. The high school classroom that we met in had this poster on the wall.

92- 100	A
83-91	B
73-83	C
Below 72	D

As I looked at the poster it almost took my breath away. What message does this communicate to students on opening day? I pondered what message I would walk away with if I scored 91 or 72 on an assignment. As an educator I wondered how comfortable the teacher is in sorting out the difference between a 72 and a 73. Two writers' messages connect on this thought for me:

Peter DeWitt writing in, Why a 'Growth Mindset' Won't Work,

sites John Hatti's research that schools implementing a focus on growth mindset show a low effect size (not a great impact on student achievement). DeWitt, an advocate for building growth mindsets, clarifies:

"….the reason why growth vs. fixed mindset has a low effect size is due to the fact that adults have a fixed mindset and keep treating students accordingly, so right now the effect size is low, and will continue to stay low unless we change our practices in the classroom. We put students in ability groups, they get scores on high stakes tests that help label them, and then we place them in Academic Intervention Services (AIS) which adds to their fixed mindset. Once students enter into AIS or Special Education, very few leave. Students are conditioned to have a fixed mindset, and it's due to us."

Dewitt stresses that talking about a growth mindset is insufficient. Teachers need actions that communicate their beliefs of growth mindset to their students. What actions will you take as a teacher or school leader to communicate your growth mindset belief as the year begins?

Barbara Blackburn raises a crucial question: Do We Really Have High Expectations for All? She stresses that our actions speak loudest:

"Of course we may believe in high expectations for all the

kids in our classroom but not translate those expectations into actions that support our beliefs. Instead, our actions may inadvertently undermine high expectations for all. When this happens, you can be sure students are quick to notice."

Pulling from the research of Marzano, Blackburn provides a list of specific teacher actions that communicate high expectation as well as a list that reflect low expectations. Great to review these as you decide purposeful, conscious actions and messages for the start of the year. Instructional coaches may want to share the lists and have teachers guide specific observations they would like you to conduct to increase the likelihood of carrying out the purposeful actions they have selected.

Christopher Robin to Winnie-the Pooh: **"Always remember: You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think."** How can school leaders communicate the same message?