Academic Mindset: Students and Teachers

While reading an article by David Dockterman and Chris Weber, **Does stressing performance goals lead to too much, well, stress,**[1] I was struck by the need to address educator mindsets in order to build students' necessary non-cognitive skills for success in school and life. Citing the work of Camille Farrington , the authors connect student positive academic mindset with these statements:

- I belong in this academic community
- My ability and competence grow with my effort
- I can succeed at this
- This work has value for me

As I read through and pondered positive academic mindset for students, I considered the important leadership behaviors to build positive academic mindsets for teachers and administrators.

I belong in this academic community:

Farrington notes Mazlow's identification of belongingness as a basic human need. What connectedness do students have with their peers and adults? Feeling part of a community of learners is a powerful motivator.***"Students with a strong sense of academic belonging see themselves as members of not only a social community, but an intellectual community. Conversely, students who do not feel a sense of belonging in school tend to withdraw from interaction with their peers; to the extent that they associate academic work with their sense of alienation from the school community, they are likely to put forth little effort to learn."***

Consider the degree to which your teachers belong to the PLCs, teaching teams, departments and to the whole school community.

To what extent do the principals in your district see themselves as belonging to an intellectual community of district administrators, where they are learning how to lead adult and student learning throughout the system? Have you ever observed a PLC where a member sits silently throughout the session? Who is responsible for examining teachers' sense of belonging? What are purposeful leadership actions that you take to promote belonging?

Common goals and celebrations are ways to build belonging. When educators share accountability for students reaching learning goals and celebrate successful progress, belonging is increased.

My ability and competence grow with my effort:

Farrington notes that teachers providing feedback on students' prior performance and ability along with goal setting and skills training, can increase students' expectations of success and their performance. ***"Students who anticipate failure or believe they cannot do something well will likely refrain from investing effort or devalue the importance of the task in order to maintain a sense of their own competence. Research suggests that students who believe they will succeed at an academic task are more likely to persist longer in the task and use cognitive and metacognitive strategies that improve their performance."***

This is critical as school leaders coach their staffs. Does your leadership team have a read on teachers' current levels of belief in their efficacy? How do you communicate your belief that teachers can learn the skills and knowledge needed to create continued student success? I often suggest that when leaders are hiring staff, they place greater attention on the individual's interest and ability to learn what students need over what the person already "knows". I have written in an earlier blog regarding how PLCs can help build collective teacher efficacy.

I can succeed at this:

With a growth-mindset, students are more likely to interpret academic challenges or mistakes as opportunities to learn and develop. ***"… researchers found that "retraining" students to attribute poor academic performance to a lack of effort or to the use of an ineffective strategy (rather than a lack of ability) has been shown to produce sizeable changes in persistence in the face of failure; changes that persist over time and generalize across tasks."***

Working as a coach, school leaders can assist teachers in understanding that "unsuccessful instruction" signals the need for continued teacher persistence to find an alternative learning path for those students. Just as formative assessments can show students an indication of progress for their efforts, teachers working in PLCs can use those same assessment results to encourage continued teacher effort.

This work has value for me:

"Students value academic tasks and topics that connect in some way to their lives, their future educational pursuits/careers, or their current interests. When students value their coursework, they are much more likely to expend effort on completing it. The value a student places on a given academic task is strongly associated with both persistence and

performance on that task. When a task is not valued, students have to expend significantly more energy to focus their attention on it."

Students and teachers need "Compelling Whys" to motivate effort and persistence. School leaders need to know teachers' personal "reasons to teach." Standardized scores are seldom the 'compelling why' for most educators. Listen to teachers describe the indicators of student success that produce the teacher's satisfactions. Then connect how the teacher's engagement with your school's goals aligns with her increased satisfactions from student success.

More resources: [This Podcast illustrates how teachers who are warm demanders generate a learner mindset]

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1. Dockterman,David and Weber, Chris. **Does stressing performance goals lead to too much, well, stress?** Kappan (March 2017) V98 N6, p.31↩