Growth mindset teaching helps students make the grade

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It's been more than 30 years since psychologist Carol Dweck introduced "growth mindset"—the psychological and motivational effects of believing that a person's ability in any domain is not fixed but can

develop through effort and coaching. The concept has been widely lauded in company mission statements, athletic locker rooms, and schools.

In practice, however, it's not always easy to keep the mindset going across an organization, says Christopher Bryan, associate professor of business, government, and society at Texas McCombs.

In recent research, Bryan offers a new approach to making such behaviors more pervasive—and to realizing their power to shape human potential in the classroom and in the workplace. He tested the approach on a group of high school teachers, predicting their adoption of growth mindset would have an impact on student performance.

The key, he found, was to connect the growth mindset with the teachers' existing priorities: an approach he calls "values alignment." It identified what values mattered most to teachers and then designed a training around those values.

The result: Teachers were more likely to adopt the mindset, and their students were more likely to succeed academically—particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

"By aligning the intervention to teachers' values, we found we can counter inequality without putting the onus on disadvantaged students themselves to overcome the barriers imposed on them," he says, adding the approach has implications for business culture, as well.

Finding the common value

With University of Texas at Austin colleagues Cameron Hecht and David Yeager, Bryan surveyed teachers to determine what trait they most admired in a fellow teacher. The overwhelming consensus was an

ability to inspire students' enthusiastic engagement without resorting to threats or bribes.

The researchers built a 45-minute self-administered online course around that value. It argued that consistently expressing a growth mindset toward students—communicating that every student can learn and improve—would boost a teacher's ability to inspire them.

They had 155 teachers take the course near the beginning of the school year, while a control group took a different module. Both groups taught dual high school/college credit courses with high failure rates, especially among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

A single training in growth mindset, the researchers found, produced significant improvements in academic achievement.

- Overall, students increased their pass rates by an average 3.59 percentage points and their grades by 0.10 grade point, compared with students whose teachers didn't take the training.
- Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds drove all that improvement, with a pass rate 6.31 percentage points higher. Says Bryan, "Many of these are students who would be thought of as 'not college material,' but this mindset shift among teachers had a significant impact on them."

In previous experiments, Bryan has found a values-alignment approach can change behaviors as well as grades. He helped teenagers adopt healthier eating habits by aligning an intervention around their core value: rebelling against adult manipulation and control. Students who learned how junk food companies were manipulating them were far more willing to shun the vending machines.

In follow-up research, Bryan is taking his approach beyond the

classroom. He and his colleagues are identifying a motivating value for front-line business leaders and designing a growth-mindset intervention for managers at a large corporation.

"We've found the key to motivating leaders to support a growth mindset culture is in articulating how such a culture advances a goal already near the top of a leader's priority list: inspiring followers to engage enthusiastically with work," Bryan says.

"We can induce teachers, managers, and coaches to invest their energy in encouraging a growth mindset. As a consequence, their students, employees, and players—particularly those with the greatest needs—perform better."

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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