

## BASALT MIDDLE SCHOOL

### Avoiding Common Errors in Applying Carol Dweck's Mindset Thinking

(Originally titled "Mindset 20/20")

In this article in Education Update, Laura Varlas takes stock of how Carol Dweck's 2006 book, *Mindset*, has been applied in schools. Three critical observations:

- **Effort.** Some educators think Dweck is saying they should reinforce effort, not outcomes. Not so! says Dweck: "Our work shows that you can praise the outcome as long as you also talk about the process that led to the outcome... Telling kids just to try hard is not helpful. It doesn't tell them all the strategies, resources, and input they'll need to get there." British educator Chris Hildrew agrees, "If our students fail a test, it's not helpful to say 'at least you tried hard,' because clearly it was the wrong kind of effort." Better to ask, "**What strategies did you use? What didn't work? What can you do differently next time?**" Another approach is giving students commentary on their classwork, saving grades for summative assessments, and working with students to see where they're at, what they don't understand, and what they should try next.

- **False mindsets.** Some teachers give lip service to the growth mindset but secretly hold fixed beliefs about some students' ability to succeed. Or they might frown on mistakes rather than treating them as integral to learning, or make the work easier so students won't have to struggle. Dweck talks about the confusion-clarity cycle: "You get confused when you face something new. Then it becomes clear, and then you are ready to face the next round of confusion and work through that... Often, when kids feel confused about something, they feel like they're back to square one." She suggests giving a pretest and using it later to show struggling students the progress they've made.

- **Triggers.** All of us, teachers and students, are a mix of fixed and growth mindsets, says Dweck. Acknowledge that. Fixed thinking is part of you but it's not you! She and her Stanford colleagues are searching for what activates fixed thinking – for example, encountering frustration about not having the knowledge or skill to do something well. Washington, D.C. principal Dawn Clemens and her colleagues urge students to train their brains to take a logical rather than an emotional stance toward learning problems: "I need to study these things for the next test" versus "The test was unfair and my teacher doesn't like me." And here's a strategy for working with a student with a negative mindset: give his or her "fixed side" a name (Dwayne) and then use it to convey a growth message: "Let's see if we can get Dwayne to really listen to this feedback and plan what to do next."

"Mindset 20/20" by Laura Varlas in Education Update, March 2016 (Vol. 58, #3, p. 1, 4-5), available for purchase at <http://bit.ly/1nJFGT5>; Varlas recommends Jo Boaler's website as a good resource for Mindset professional development: <https://www.youcubed.org>.