

Newsletter: November 08-03 November

Each time I receive my Alumni magazines I glance at the cover, look at the alumni notes for the time I was on campus, and then toss them in the recycling container. Last March however, the cover article of the Stanford Magazine: “The Trouble with Talent: How Knowing You’re Smart Can Hold You Back”, caught my attention. I carried it around for a couple of months then finally read it during the summer. My interest was piqued so that I ordered the book that precipitated the article and thought I would share some of it with you.

The article featured Stanford Psychology Professor Carol Dweck and her work on mindset. Her research has been focused on determining why some people achieve their potential while others who are equally talented do not. In her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Dr. Dweck describes two mindsets that shape us. An individual who has a “fixed” mindset views talent and ability as set in stone, either you have it or you don’t; a person with a “growth” mindset believes talent can be developed and built over time. Much of her research focused on students, but is applicable to teachers, parents, athletes, leaders and in relationships as well.

Briefly, Dr. Dweck finds that:

A person with a fixed mindset

- views intelligence as inherent
- has a desire to look smart
- has a tendency to avoid challenges
- tends to give up easily
- sees effort as fruitless
- ignores constructive criticism
- feels threatened by the success of others, and
- may plateau early and achieve less than their full potential.

A person with a growth mindset

- sees intelligence as something that can be developed
- has a desire to learn
- has a tendency to embrace challenges
- persists despite setbacks
- views effort as the path to mastery
- learns from criticism
- finds lessons and inspiration in the success of others, and
- may reach higher levels of achievement.

While your mindset affects the way you lead your life, Dr. Dweck fortunately describes ways in which we can work to change our mindset.

With MCAS results recently arriving, it seemed the thinking around mindset was appropriate. I think it is important to remember that MCAS, or any test, does not measure how smart a child is or what he/she will accomplish in the future. Tests are limited measures of performance at a point in time; tests do not measure effort. I worry we might interpret that high scores define a child as smart. Believing a child to be smart because of something he/she possesses not works for, may actually result in a belief that one doesn’t have to work quite as hard in the future or may cause an avoidance of increasing challenges for fear of disproving this or disappointing others. Likewise, a poorer result may be interpreted as the child just is not smart, doesn’t possess the

intelligence, so blame or excuses are often directed at him/her. How many times have you heard a parent say, “It’s okay, I was never good in math”, or “either you get math or you don’t.” When that next math challenge comes, if intelligence or ability is possessed or not, a child with a fixed mindset quickly knows he/she is not up to it.

One’s mindset does not just apply to students; it is a key variable within teachers as well. A teacher who believes a student “has it or doesn’t”, may subtly convey those expectations to the student, design instruction accordingly, and be satisfied with less than the student’s best work. Fortunately, this is not prevalent in Sudbury and the belief that all students can learn, that students are not inherently smart, but rather becoming smart, and that those who may struggle to learn have just not learned *yet*. Given time and effort, all children will continue to learn. Dr. Dweck makes clear the importance of praise for effort rather than ability.

Dr. Dweck’s work offers interesting insights as we all struggle to ensure that our children, especially in a community with high expectations, where competition is unfortunately a part of life, and where many students come with a strong aptitude, are able to be continual learners. What will be important in their future is not what is known at a given point in time, but what can be learned as the world around them constantly changes.