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Forging Student Connections & Growth Mindsets

Survey: Students Want More Opportunities to Connect With Teachers During the Pandemic

By Sarah Schwartz

Middle and high school students say that they're not doing as well in school as they were before the pandemic, and that they want more opportunities for connection with their teachers, according to new research from the National Education Association and the National PTA.

The survey, conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research in October 2020, asked 800 public school students ages 13-18 about the academic, emotional, and economic effects of COVID-19 for themselves and their families. Researchers also conducted focus groups with the teenagers.

On the whole, students said they weren't doing as well in school now as they were before the pandemic.

This change was especially pronounced for the younger students in the sample, ages 13-15, and for students whose parents or guardians didn't have college degrees.

When asked what would be most helpful to their learning right now, students emphasized student-teacher connections and individual support. The top four things that students said would be "very helpful" were:

- More interaction between teachers and students

- Additional tutoring to help them catch up and stay on track

- Faster grading and feedback from teachers

- More one-on-one time with teachers

On a call with reporters, NEA president Becky Pringle said it's incumbent on school leaders to create schedules that meet these needs."We're not talking about adding onto a teacher's day," Pringle said. "We're talking about collaborating with educators in the way that they restructure a day, so that they can provide those kinds of things that the students are asking for."

Research has shown that intensive tutoring is also one of the most effective ways to help

—DigitalVision Vectors/Getty

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>
> **BECKY PRINGLE**
> NEA PRESIDENT

Which of the following statements describes...	...how you were doing with your school work and academics before the coronavirus pandemic began last spring?	...how you are currently doing with your school work and academics?
Doing well	58%	32%
Doing OK	36	48
Struggling	6	20

students make up ground academically—and experts suggest that it's a promising strategy for combatting learning loss due to school shutdowns, as Education Week's Stephen Sawchuk reported earlier this year.

Fears and Disparate Impact

The majority of students also wanted some time in school buildings. When asked what mode of schooling they'd prefer assuming that "nothing changes with the coronavirus," 38 percent said they would want to be full-time in person and 27 percent preferred a hybrid model with some time in both environments. Still, 35 percent said they would want full-time online school.

In focus groups, many students connected hesitancy about in-person learning to fears about the virus, said Missy Egelsky, a senior vice president at Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, on a call with reporters. "The anxiety wasn't so much about fear of themselves getting it, but that they would bring it home and impact their family," she said.

Egelsky shared quotes from the students: "I want to keep my family safe and my parents are both higher risk, so it's not worth it to go to school," said one white student in a rural school system.

A Black student in an urban school system

said that online learning was safer: "My parents also support that [i.e., online learning] if it's still an option ... . Stuff changes when the virus ends," the student said.

About 1 in 10 teenagers surveyed said that someone in their household had gotten sick with COVID-19, and more reported that the virus had affected people they knew: 40 percent said they had a friend who got sick with COVID-19, and 36 percent said a family member who doesn't live with them had contracted the virus.

More than half of the students polled, 56 percent, said they were "doing OK" (as opposed to "well" or "struggling").

But the survey also found that Black students, in particular, were more likely to have experienced economic hardships as a result of the pandemic: 37 percent of Black students said that at least one of the adults in their household had lost their job due to the coronavirus, compared to 27 percent of Latino students, 23 percent of white students, and 16 percent of Asian American and Pacific Islander students. ■

— Getty + Laura Baker/Education Week

Published on September 2, 2020

How to Build Relationships With Students During COVID-19

By Arianna Prothero

This can't be emphasized enough: Strong relationships will be essential to students' academic success and well-being. It is a crucial time for developing the personal connections that students will need to sustain them through what is going to be an unpredictable school year, at best.

But with schools either operating remotely, alternating online instruction with in-person classes, or closing due to an outbreak, developing meaningful relationships between teachers and students—and even among staff, students, and families—will be a challenge.

District and school leaders are confronting difficult, high-stakes decisions as they plan for how to reopen schools amid a global pandemic. Through eight installments, Education Week journalists explore the big challenges education leaders must address, including running a socially distanced school, rethinking how to get students to and from school, and making up for learning losses. We present a broad spectrum of options endorsed by public health officials, explain strategies that some districts will adopt, and provide estimated costs.

Educators cannot take for granted or assume that relationships among students or between students and teachers will develop and thrive on their own in this new educational reality. Relationship-building is going to need an assist from educators and school leaders. But while that work should be prioritized and given time in the school week, the effort does not necessarily have to be labor intensive or even time consuming—so long as it's done intentionally and early.

It's a worthwhile investment, say experts in child and adolescent development.

Humans are social creatures and have a deep biological and neurological need for interaction, so it follows that research has found that positive relationships in children's lives play an important role in students' ability to learn and cope.

"We know that kids learn best when they feel safe and secure; when they feel anxious and aroused and uncomfortable, learning stops," said Laura Phillips, a neuropsychologist with the Child Mind Institute. "If we want to maximize the school year, we need to help kids start out feeling safe and connected to the people with whom they are interacting."

A common feature among children who show resilience in the face of adverse childhood experiences is the presence of close and supportive relationships with adults.

"A person who sees you, who knows you matter, who helps you work through difficult emotions—just the idea that there is a person who is invested in you and knows you goes a really long way to help kids to overcome difficulty," Phillips said.

Relationships also create a sense of belonging in school—and in times of remote learning, it may be the only tangible connection to schools that students will have. If students are struggling to stay engaged through distance learning or hybrid schedules, strong relationships with their teachers and classmates may be what keeps them logging in.

Downloadable Guide: Language for Forging Online Chats With Students

Finally, these connections will help anchor students as they are battered by difficult emo-

Forging Student Connections & Growth Mindsets

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Educators work hard to instill in their students an intrinsic motivation to succeed rather than relying on extrinsic motivators such as grades and awards. However, ten months into this pandemic, many teachers are inding it diicult to continue to inspire their students to stay motivated.

COVID-19 has changed a great deal about this academic year, but there is still an opportunity for students to thrive despite adversity. Here are some practical tips to cultivate a growth mindset and intrinsic motivation for your students this school year, both in the physical classroom and online.

Ideas for Teaching a Growth Mindset

Teachers who participated in the University of Texas at Austin's OnRamps growth mindset program at the beginning of the 2019–2020 school year noticed that students encouraged to embrace a growth mindset were able to adjust more quickly to the spring semester's abrupt switch to virtual learning. Educators can cultivate similar benefits by helping students develop the personal belief that they can learn and grow through challenging situations.

Here are three in-class and online lesson ideas for teaching a growth mindset:

Create a Vision Board
Ask students to gather pictures from magazines, the internet, or their own drawings and photos that show the future they're working toward. Some may look far down the road (going into a particular profession, buying a car, or purchasing a future home) while others focus on goals for the present year (finishing a project, learning a new skill, or strengthening their relationships).

In Class: Ask students to present their vision boards with the class or display the boards on the wall.

Online: Have students upload and post pictures of their boards, then compile the images into a class slideshow.

Keep a Journal

Students who write in a journal on a daily or weekly basis can look back at the progress they've made in terms of emotional learning and working toward their personal goals.

In Class: Set aside the beginning or end of each class period for journaling. Once a month, ask students to look back at their previous entries and reflect upon the changes they see.

Online: Begin each online session with a question such as "What is your greatest accomplishment?" or "What areas challenge you the most?" Repeating each question once a month will prompt students to look back at their previous answers and note their own development.

Make a Personal Timeline

Encourage students to think about how growth happens over time by having them write one sentence to summarize achievements in each year of their lives—for example, "In 2005, I learned to walk and talk" or "In 2012, I immigrated to the United States." Next, ask students to extend their personal timelines into the future. How do they predict they will grow within the next year? How about five or 10 years from now?

In Class: Have students form small groups, share their personal timelines, and brainstorm three action steps for reaching one of their goals.

Online: Before students post their timelines, remind them not to include dates of birth and other personal identifying information. Then, ask them to share the years in which they have experienced the most significant personal growth and to make one prediction about their future.

Strategies for Cultivating Intrinsic Motivation

As many districts have deferred assessments and increased use of pass/fail grading systems, grades are unlikely to motivate students until the pandemic ends and students are back in school full time.

Here are three strategies to cultivate key elements of intrinsic motivation:

Create Flexible, Choice-led Learning Menus

Whether their schools are operating virtually, in-person, or using a hybrid model, why not offer students a learning menu that provides flexibility

and autonomy in the form of multiple options? For example, students could select one of two novels to read or explain a concept using their choice of a written report, a comic book, or a short story.

In Class: Use classroom time for guided, self-paced work that allows students to complete their chosen tasks at their own pace. Offer reminders and review expectations to ensure everyone completes and submits assignments by the due date.

Online: Give students a variety of choices for submission, such as using text files, pictures, or written messages. To further personalize learning, consider recording lessons for students to access at any time.

Promote Self-assessment

Before students turn in an assignment, ask them to rate how much effort they put in, how well they managed their time, and how much they learned. Encouraging students to take pride in their work can build intrinsic motivation. Also, scheduling regular opportunities to talk about their learning experiences will prompt them to advocate for themselves.

In class: Include two rubrics with each graded assignment—one for the teacher and one for the student—and ask students to grade themselves on how well they fulfilled the requirements.

Online: Ask students to consider how the virtual setting affected their time management, skill-building, and personal effort. How did they fare outside the classroom environment? Do they need any additional support?

Emphasize Relevance and Interpersonal Connections

Education does not occur in a vacuum, even when classroom-based instruction is socially distanced or students are learning remotely. With this in mind, make time for paired and small-group discussion to facilitate connections among classmates.

In class: Invite students to share their thoughts on how current events have shaped the ways they are learning and the concepts they are studying. Ask them to draw their own connections to the material—their insights may surprise you!

Online: Guide students to connect via group chats and discussion boards. Ask them to respond to others' thoughts by relating these to their own observations, current events, or concepts discussed earlier in the semester.

> Looking for more student motivation and growth mindset strategies? Talk to a Lexia literacy expert today.

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The Bottom Line

COVID-19 has changed a great deal about teaching and learning in 2020-2021. By promoting a growth mindset and intrinsic motivation, educators help prepare students to succeed in any circumstances. Educators can still guide their students through skill building and growth mindset whether they are teaching remotely or in the classroom.

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tions stemming from not only the pandemic, but also the economic recession and ongoing civil rights protests and unrest over the police killings of Black Americans.

How can educators, then, build these all-important connections with students, especially over physical distances? Following are four tips for how to make that work.

1. Map out student relationships with adults

One low-cost approach is relationship mapping, a strategy that helps schools ensure that all students have a positive, stable relationship with at least one adult in school.

Whether it's with a classroom teacher, a coach, a school counselor, or another member of the school staff, every student should have someone who knows their interests and is looking out for them, said Karen VanAusdal, the senior director of practice at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL.

To map relationships, school staff members come together virtually or in person to brainstorm all the adult connections individual students have at the school with the aim of identifying those students who don't have any and then connecting them with a mentor within the school. Additionally, schools can flip the mapping exercise and ask students to identify which adults they feel closest to.

If school buildings are closed, mentors—in particular, those who are not teachers and aren't in regular contact with students, such as school counselors, coaches, or administrators—should be encouraged to maintain connections with students either through phone calls or good old-fashioned letter writing.
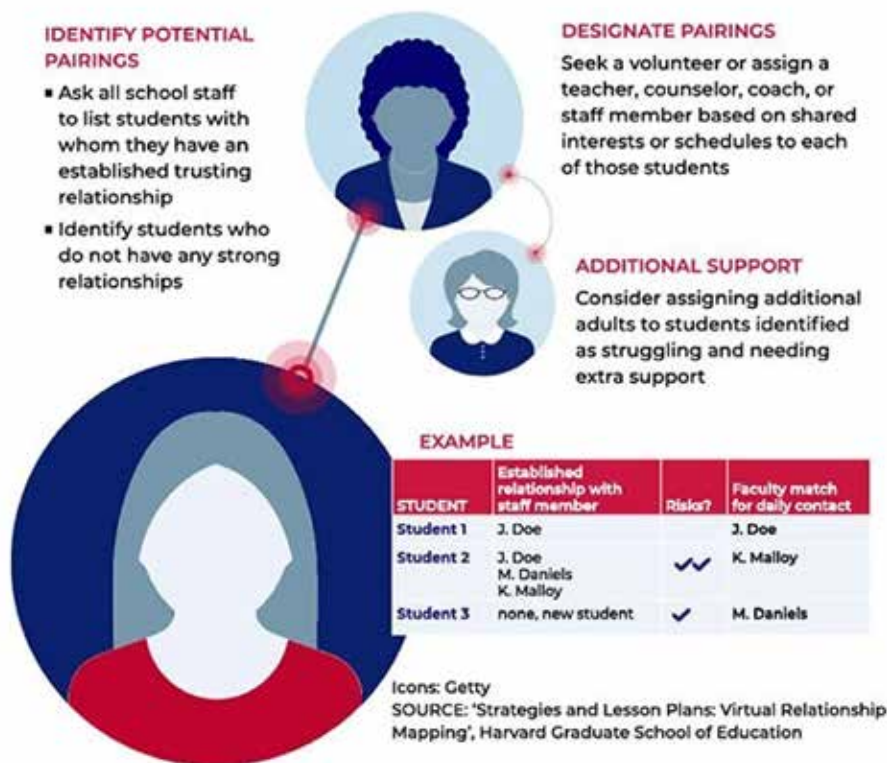
But it's not necessarily enough to put relationships within reach and expect students will know how to reach out and use them, cautions Mahnaz Charania of the Clayton Christensen Institute, a nonpartisan think tank. Knowing how to ask for help and activate those relationships are skills students may need to be taught.

2. Maintain weekly or daily check-ins

Regular emotional check-ins—weekly or even daily—where teachers get a read on how students are feeling and what is going on in their lives beyond their computer camera is an effective relationship-building strategy that can easily shift from in-person to remote classes or be done under a hybrid schedule.

Check-ins can be done through a short phone call with individual students, work-

Connecting Students To Caring Adults

IDENTIFY POTENTIAL PAIRINGS
- Ask all school staff to list students with whom they have an established trusting relationship
- Identify students who do not have any strong relationships

DESIGNATE PAIRINGS
Seek a volunteer or assign a teacher, counselor, coach, or staff member based on shared interests or schedules to each of those students

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT
Consider assigning additional adults to students identified as struggling and needing extra support

EXAMPLE

STUDENT	Established relationship with staff member	Risks?	Faculty match for daily contact
Student 1	J. Doe		J. Doe
Student 2	J. Doe M. Daniels K. Malloy	✔✔	K. Malloy
Student 3	none, new student	✔	M. Daniels

Icons: Getty
SOURCE: 'Strategies and Lesson Plans: Virtual Relationship Mapping', Harvard Graduate School of Education

sheets where students circle the emoji that best describes their current mood, a group exercise such as thorns and roses—where each students shares a negative and positive experience from their day or week—or a survey students can fill out on Google Forms.

Group check-ins can even be as informal as a teacher kicking off a class by asking students how they are doing and really listening to their responses, said Stephanie Jones, an SEL expert at Harvard.

The challenge, though, is making sure these routines don't become rote, she advises. Making the same request—'tell me about your family'—every day will start to sound canned. Questions don't necessarily have to be related to students' feelings all the time. Educators can get mileage out of asking students what shape they most often see when they look at clouds so long as it gets students sharing and the teacher listens and is responsive.

The point is not so much to lead a group therapy session but to show a genuine interest in students' lives and thoughts, which establishes trust and a connection that students can

> " We know that kids learn best when they feel safe and secure; when they feel anxious and aroused and uncomfortable, learning stops. "
>
> **SAID LAURA PHILLIPS**
> NEUROPSYCHOLOGIST WITH THE CHILD MIND INSTITUTE

reach to when they're struggling.

"For adults, I would think about weaving in some effective positive praise," added Jones. "Kids are going to need to be noticed for what they are doing well. Because I think there will be a lot of noticing of what's not going well. The transition is going to be rough."

As kids started school in the El Paso Independent School District in Texas, teachers distributed surveys asking students what they are apprehensive about, what they are looking forward to, and what they think their teachers should know about them.

The district, which is in a community hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic, has been working hard to figure out how it will meet students' social and emotional needs as they return to school in person, says Ray Lozano, who heads SEL initiatives for El Paso schools.

"One of the challenges this year is that in the spring teachers and counselors had established relationships with families," he said. "That will be different this year."

3. Build peer connections, buddy systems

While students will connect with one another on their own, schools should also take steps to facilitate connections among classmates. At the middle and high school levels, El Paso public schools uses advisories—a consistent group of students a teacher meets with weekly or daily—to create a sense of community and a space to develop social-emotional skills.

For students who are learning remotely, or in a hybrid schedule, creating a buddy system where students are paired up and asked

to check in with each other once a week—and shuffling the pairings every few weeks—can help students develop relationships with classmates, recommended Phillips of the Child Mind Institute. Teachers can assign conversation topics or prompts if they think students might need a little boost.

Even something as simple as opening up a Google classroom a little early so kids have a chance to talk with one another can go a long way, said CASEL's VanAusdal.

4. Don't forget about parents and teachers

Relationships with parents will also be crucial and should be established early.

Teachers in the El Paso schools reached out to parents in the final weeks of summer break to get them up to speed about what to expect for the coming year—in particular, they noted the fact that the district would be returning to its normal grading policies. But the phone calls also provided an opportunity to hear from parents about their virtual learning experiences last spring and to take the initial step in building trust and relationships.

Surveys are another powerful tool for connecting with parents, getting their input, and solidifying relationships with them.

Charania of the Christensen Institute recommended expanding relationship mapping to include the students' homes. This way, schools can identify who a particular student relies on the most—whether it's a parent, sibling, grandparent, or neighbor—so they know which adult at home the school should be connecting and building a relationship with. This is also helpful

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>
> **STEPHANIE JONES**
> SEL EXPERT AT HARVARD

in pinpointing which students are in most need of supportive adult relationships in school.

Finally, with all this discussion on how students are social creatures whose happiness and mental health depends greatly on feeling connected to a community, it's important to acknowledge that the same is true for educators. The pandemic is putting extreme pressure on teachers, and they need supportive relationships to be able to fully be there for their students. To this end, school leaders should consider ways to help staff stay connected as well. ■

Published on August 20, 2019

Brain Images Used to Tease Out How Top Teachers Connect With Students

By Sarah Sparks

Great teachers don't just know their content and pedagogy: They inspire in their students passion for their learning. Studies have shown the importance of this deep engagement, but it's been harder to show exactly how teachers make this kind of connection.

A new project by researchers from the University of Southern California and Bank Street College seeks to shed some light on those connections out with in-depth observations of teachers who are adept at steering students through adolescence, one of the most emotionally volatile periods of their academic career. Teachers were not chosen randomly, but recommended for the by their principals for being particularly effective at engaging their students.

"The teachers are being observed and interviewed about what they believe about learning, what they think about their students ... [and] the way in which their own emotional energy is being transmitted and modulated in the classroom," said Mary Helen Immordino-Yang of the University of Southern California, who leads the study.

"What we're really trying to do is characterize for the first time, in a much deeper way, the kind of integration between social emotional and cognitive work that effective teachers do ... and how this affects how students own their own thinking and engage deeply with material and become motivated," she said.

Before each class, teachers talk through what they hope to achieve in the lesson. Then,

during class, researchers monitor teachers' brain activity, emotional and stress responses, vocal patterns, and body language to try to understand how teachers' practices and physiological responses affect how well students connect with their lesson, according to Doug Knecht of Bank Street College, who developed the classroom observations.

For example, vocal recordings paired with sweat sensors can show minute-by-minute changes in teachers' stress levels. This, in turn can be compared to the video recordings of the class to identify how teachers respond to questions, problems, or individual responses from students.

"One of the most important things to walk away with is that teachers, especially great teachers, are making decisions that aren't out of a playbook necessarily—or not even that obvious to them consciously—but they're making decisions because of what they're getting from their kids as part of their relationship in the moment," Knecht said. "I think that is one of the harder things for novice teachers to figure out because they aren't secure enough yet in how they are relating with their students" even when they are secure in their content knowledge, he said.

Paul Burns, a science teacher at Intellectual Virtues Academy, a Long Beach, Calif., area charter school, was among the first 15 teachers observed. He said it took a while to adapt to teaching while wearing a wrist monitor to track his stress levels and a microphone

—Getty

recording him, but the experience has helped him reflect on his own practice.

"I teach science, so I loved the idea of being part of science," Burns said, but added he also hopes the study will be able to scientifically validate the importance of how teachers connect with students. "There are lots of people that don't really know what happens in the classroom until they actually come to the classroom and try to be a teacher for anywhere between 25 and 35 students. Right? And they don't really have a full respect for it. So it was intriguing to me to see what could potentially be going on inside of anyone's brain while that's happening," he said.

In addition to the class observations, teachers are asked to think through feedback for their students for an assignment while in a functional magnetic resonance imaging, or fMRI, ma-

chine, which measures their brain activity, such as in Burns's very own scan at left.

Burns recalled being asked to think about each of his students in turn, and then give feedback to them as though they were standing in front of him.

"It was really quite interesting. I was very moved in doing that part of the exercise," he said. Thinking through how he would give feedback to each of his students has made him more thoughtful about both his own and his students' emotions when planning to give them directions or feedback in class, he said.

The researchers are still collecting data on more than 40 teachers across multiple subject areas, to identify differences and similarities in how teachers engage with students in different disciplines. ■

Published November 27, 2019

Connecting With English-Learner Families: 5 Ideas to Help Schools

By Corey Mitchell

English-language-learner families are less likely than English-only families to attend parent-teacher conferences and other school-related events, according to a new U.S. Department of Education fact sheet.

The report from the department's office of English-language acquisition uses data from National Center for Education Statistics surveys to examine how schools connect with families who speak languages other than English.

Research shows that children whose parents are involved in supporting their learning do better in school. For English-learners, educators think that parent involvement can be especially important for supporting successful language development.

But the fact sheet shows that English-learner families—most of whom are Latino—are far less likely to volunteer or serve on school committees and attend school or class events, important opportunities to communicate about students' academic progress.

Maria Estela Zarate, a professor in the department of educational leadership at California State University, Fullerton, has found that schools and Latino families have differ-

ent perceptions of what constitutes good parental involvement.

In her research, Zarate found that teachers and school administrators felt that traditional back-to-school nights, open houses, and parent-teacher conferences were important venues to communicate about students' academic progress. The Latino families that took part in the study didn't; they viewed educators as the experts and deferred the educational decisionmaking to them.

With that in mind, here are five ideas to help schools better connect with English-learner families:

1. Home-School Connections Help ELLs and Their Parents

A veteran principal in San Jose, Calif., used baked goods, weekly chats, and an open library policy to forge relationships with English-learner families. The story, part of an Ed-

ucation Week special report on English-learn-ers, is available to read in English and Spanish.

2. To Help Language-Learners, Extend Aid to Their Families Too

A Center for American Progress report highlights how the Oakland, Calif., schools prioritized family engagement at school to help parents become better advocates for their children.

3. Report Offers State Leaders, Feds Advice to Improve ELL Education

States and districts should provide mate-rials in the native languages of students and parents and offer adult ELL community edu-cation classes to help bridge language gaps, according to recommendations from the Ed-ucation Commission of the States.

4. Ed. Dept. Toolkit Offers Guidance for English-Learner, Immigrant Parents

This resource from the U.S. Department of Education's office of English-language acqui-sition offers guidance on how to enroll chil-

Percentage of K-12 Students Whose Parents Participated in School-Sponsored Activities by Language Category: SY 2015–16

dren in school and a look at how schools in the United States may differ from those in other countries. Here's a link to the toolkit.

5. A Parent's Campaign to Break Down Language Barriers for ELL Families

When Teresa Garcia moved to suburban Seattle, she struggled to communicate with her children's teachers, to help her children with homework assignments, and to under-stand the notes that came home in their back-packs. Garcia, who was still learning English, felt like she was failing her daughter, who needed specialized services. She set out on a campaign to ensure that other English-as-sec-ond-language families in the Federal Way, Wash., schools did not feel as hopeless as she once did. ■
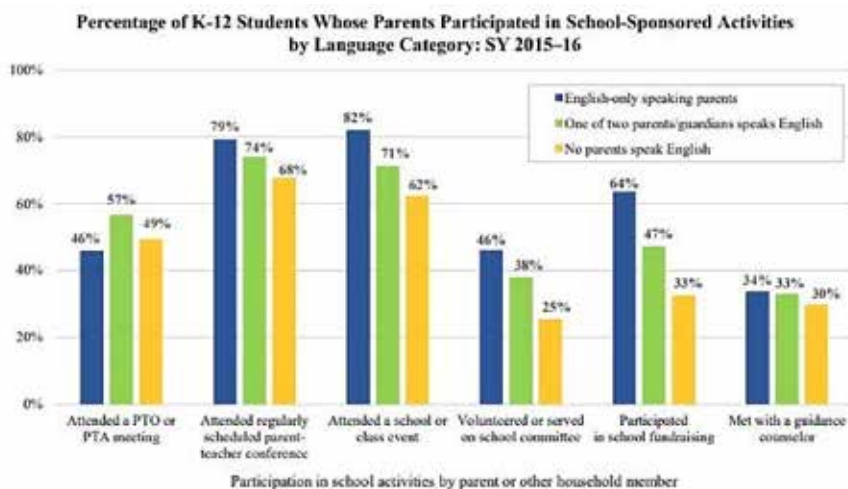
OPINION

Published on March 15, 2019

Let's Focus on What Learners CAN Do, and Plan From There

By Starr Sackstein

Deficit models don't work, yet we are traditionally trained to see learning through that lens. "What don't students know?"

"How can we help students know what they don't know?"

"Let's focus on the bottom third."

The trouble is that the students in this group are used to being unsuccessful. We fo-cus too heavily on what they can't do and not heavily enough on what they can.

If we want students or adult learners to be successful, we must start from what they are successful at and build from there.

Creating dynamic strength models allows all learners to be successful. It sets up a system where they are accustomed to being capable and confident and therefore more readily like-ly to take bigger risks in deficit areas.

Let's face it, if we don't feel good at some-thing, we may try to avoid it. This isn't only true of students. Learning new things that we don't think we are going to be good at, we are almost trained to find reasons for why we can't do it.

Something I have noticed and, upon re-flection, have seen it throughout my career, is as teachers we blame students for a lot of the challenges we ourselves face. It's ironic that we are easily able to point out these deficits in our students' learning but somehow miss that we are acting the same way.

This is true of relationships as well ... the older I get, the more I realize how much like my mom I am in so many ways and also in that

I have the opportunity to both recognize and adjust and continue to grow in areas so that I can be a better version of me.

Students deserve us to see the whole pic-ture. When we make assumptions about what they can't do and what they can do and then only provide opportunities that fit in that small context, we rob them of the chance to stretch and prove to themselves and to us that they CAN do it.

Every learner has incredible potential and what's funny is a good deal of it usually not yet recognized. So until we try, we simply don't know what we will be able to do and what we won't. Add to that paradigm the chance for continued practice in a variety of ways, and now we increase our ability to be successful exponentially.

Granted, not every learner is starting at the

same place and not every learner will end in the same place. It's going to take some longer than others and it will look different for yet others more.

So how can we increase opportunity in our classrooms?

- Build learning experiences that allow students to choose how and what they are learning. Regardless of their age, allow them to be a part of the process.

- Elicit student feedback throughout the learning process and listen to it. It's not enough to ask; we must listen and then do something about what we learn.

- Plan lessons and projects with the attitude that your kids can be successful at whatever you are asking them to learn. Try to predict where they may struggle and why and put some scaffolds in place to pre-empt any unproductive frustration.

- Accept that there will be productive struggle, and that's OK. We can't keep giving students all of the answers. This doesn't help them learn, it hurts them.

- Celebrate growth wherever and when-

"Every learner has incredible potential and what's funny is a good deal of it usually not yet recognized. So until we try, we simply don't know what we will be able to do and what we won't. "

—pablo.com

ever it happens in the process. You don't have to wait for kids to be finished to recognize what they are doing.

- Put structures in place that allow students to see their own growth. Whether reflecting regularly, collecting portfolio pieces, and/or peer reviewing, students should be able to recognize their growing efficacy.

- Learning is messy. Keep the feedback you provide in the positive and help students see possibilities instead of their

own deficits. Areas of need are more opportunities for them to grow. If we reframe how we look at these areas, challenges, if you will, then we can challenge up and keep on growing.

- See things as students do. Don't diminish their struggle, but also don't let them wallow in it. We need to help build student confidence so that they feel good about making mistakes and seeing that as a chance to improve.

- Always make sure students know what the success criteria is first, so they know what they are shooting for. Wherever possible, involve them in creating the success criteria. This should align with learning targets on a regular basis. Success should never be a surprise.

Learning isn't easy, and we all have our challenges. Rather than assume our learners can't, giving them boring learning opportunities or watered-down versions of the learning, provide rigorous, engaging experiences and watch to see how much all students will grow. ■

Starr Sackstein is a secondary educator and school leader in New York. She is the author of several books on education, on topics such as going gradeless, peer feedback, and blogging.

OPINION

Published on July 8, 2020

How Teachers Can Build a Growth-Mindset Classroom, Even at a Distance

By Jamie M. Carroll & David Yeager

During distance learning, I think I've been teaching my students to use a growth mindset. But how do I know when it's working—and when it's not?

In the classroom, teachers can usually tell when a student is feeling discouraged. Maybe they put their head down. Maybe they throw their hands up in defeat. Or start copying answers. If you've been establishing a growth-mindset culture, you can emphasize everyone's potential to learn, even when the work is hard.

But it's harder to see the early-warning signs of disengagement—and sustain a culture of learning—in remote or blended learning contexts.

We asked Dana Stiles, an OnRamps statistics teacher at Bowie High School in Austin, Texas, about how she handled this challenge during COVID-19.

First, the good news: Dana thinks that distance learning might have improved some students' growth-mindset behaviors, such as help-seeking, because it removes a lot of the social comparisons that teens are especially apt to make. In a regular classroom, some stu-

dents are afraid to ask for help because they don't want to look dumb in front of their peers or they think they are bothering you.

But distance made it harder for her to know who needed more support. "In the classroom, I was able to take their temperature [metaphorically] by standing at the door as they walked in—knowing where their head is at and any personal battles they're facing and challenges they're dealing with," she explained. But during COVID-19, she had to reach out to students proactively to see how they were doing.

She started by sending personal, physical letters in the mail to students she knew had

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challenging home lives or other factors that might get in the way of learning. She used Calendly to give students the opportunity to sign up for one-on-one video meetings. Using the Remind app, she sent personal messages to students who were not engaging in material with specific questions they had to respond to.

In the video meetings, she could keep the discussion personal and brief, covering just two questions: How are you doing and feeling? And how can I support you as you meet the ambitious learning goals in this class? These two questions let students know that you care about them as people and that your priority is their learning—not evaluating or judging them. Students can then feel free to challenge themselves and reach out for help when they're stuck.

Contacting students individually is time-consuming and challenging, but Dana
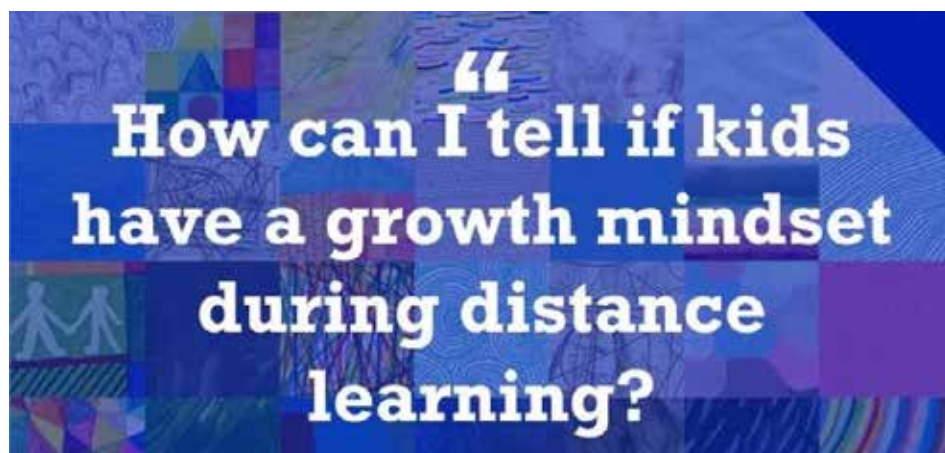
says it's well worth the effort you put in: "The kids actually thank you for it because you're personalizing what they need to do based on their results and their reflections." ■

Jamie M. Carroll is an associate project director for the National Mindset Innovation Network. David Yeager is a psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin.

OPINION

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A Back-to-School Plan Built Around Student Connection

By Jill Gurtner

How connection can empower learners

We know that there is much we won't be able to control during the school year. We also know that this is the world we are being called to help prepare our young people to enter. We should be equipping them to build a more sustainable future, one where the decisions we make now recognize the value of living beings for many generations to come. To do so, we must give our students the safety to connect with each other and their learning communities—even if they must do so online.

At my community school, we have chosen to ground our back-to-school approach in deep, meaningful connections between students and staff and root our learning partnerships in the things that matter most to our learners in their communities. Our experiences with a learner-centered, community-grounded approach have demonstrated that when students develop a strong sense of identity and agency in one area, they are able to transfer the strategies they develop to oth-

—Taylor Callory for Education Week

er contexts. This strategy has proven effective even as the pandemic has challenged it.

In Fall 2020, students connected through a small and stable advisory group that serves a purpose well beyond simply providing a "home base" and a space for announcements. This structure gives students a sense of belonging, validation, and a deeper understanding of themselves as learners. It is the place where each individual develops their sense of self, their strengths, their natural talents within a group, and their ability to collaborate.

Only by accessing the support of others can students master the skills to thrive within a di-

verse community. Maintaining this advisory space through our emergency was a lifeline for many of our learners—students and adults.

Each student will also join a learning cohort based in one of two interdisciplinary learning strands that will integrate English/language arts, math, science, social studies, wellness, and the arts. One cohort (Growing Our Futures) will utilize our school garden and a study of philosophy; the other (Coming of Age) will be grounded in a study of human relationships and youth agency.

Each strand will have an online course to foster the predictability and flexibility necessary to learn, while ensuring that students can successfully navigate an online learning environment. Additionally, each strand will offer students the opportunity and support to connect—either synchronously online or face to face as we are able—to their own identity, the experiences of others, and to a learning community. Together, our students become better readers, thinkers, designers, communicators, and problem-solvers.

In the summer of 2020, I joined a few of my colleagues for a "weeding party" in our school garden. It was the first time I had seen and interacted with some of them in a nondigital format in months. What a joy it was to connect, even at a distance.

As we each worked to cultivate the soil in our part of the garden, I learned of the extraordinary planning they were doing. Each educator had considered the likely constraints and challenges we all would face. But they had found purpose in

what mattered most—preparing our students for the real issues they are facing—and had connected with others to realize this purpose.

All around the country, school leaders like me are creating and updating plans to prepare for an uncertain school year. Incredible passion, care, and dedication are going into this work. And there is also fear—a lot of fear.

Schools all over the country are being put in truly untenable situations with an unimaginable amount of responsibility. Because we all tend to turn to what we know best in times of uncertainty, we leaders are often relying on a set of tools that are not well designed for the current context, and the stakes are high. I have been a part of plenty of planning meetings with well-intended leaders driven by fear and limitation as well, lately.

What a contrast I experienced in that school garden. Both groups were dealing

> ❝
> As humans, we have both an incredible capacity for fear and an incredible capacity for creativity."

with enormous uncertainty and legitimate fear. Both are made up of intelligent, dedicated, passionate people who care deeply about young people. It seems the difference lies in what is driving the decisions. As humans, we have both an incredible capacity for fear and an incredible capacity for creativity. As educa-

tors charged with preparing our young people for what will surely be a future of continued uncertainty, we must choose wisely.

By focusing on connections to make the learning environment "safe enough" for every learner to engage in the productive struggle of learning, we are honoring that the deepest learning is rooted in real-world challenges. But we must also remember that it is joy and a sense of belonging that fuel that productive struggle. Every school community must foster that safety to allow for the risk of learning and growth. I am not sure there is anything more valuable that we can model for our young people. ■

Jill Gurtner is the principal of Clark Street Community School in Middleton, Wis. She has been a high school administrator for more than 25 years. Previously, she taught high school science.