

BREAK **X** **THE** **CYCLE**





INSPIRE Growth

A journey to improve professional culture and overcome the disadvantages of poverty with learning rooted in soft skills.

By Vanessa Stuart Illustrations By David Vogin

Two years ago, I was hired for my first principal position at an elementary school in North Texas. Although I was moving to a new, larger district, I felt my previous positions as a special education diagnostician, elementary curriculum coordinator, and assistant principal in two Title I schools more than equipped me for my new role. When I met with the superintendent, he informed me that student achievement, teacher morale, and parent-community relationships would all need to be addressed.

My confidence was a little shaken and I felt overwhelmed to think all of these elements would simultaneously need my utmost attention. However, as I reflected, the fact that these areas needed to be addressed together made perfect sense. If you don't have quality relationships with parents, you lose their support. If you lose parent support, teacher morale goes down. If teach-

ers have low morale, they don't have the passion or energy they need to continue to learn, grow, and do whatever it takes to ensure that students achieve. It reminded me of the circular narrative in Laura Numeroff's children's tale, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, where the mouse's needs are always met. But in my school's example, everything was taken rather than given. It was then that I realized that my students were the mice in this scenario, and that the losses were far more significant than these surface observations.

Increasing Struggles

I couldn't help but ask myself how my school had arrived at a place of such significant need. In 2003, Degan Elementary was a typical middle class school in Lewisville, Texas. Teachers reported that students were fairly easy to teach, discipline was not a significant issue, and parent support and involvement was high.

With deeper investigation, I found that in 10 years, the campus went from 8 percent of the student population qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch to just over 50 percent of students eligible when I arrived in 2013. While student achievement appeared stable with state assessment, it was obvious there were huge issues just beneath the surface, waiting to erupt as Texas transitioned to the new assessment and accountability system that demanded deeper skills in problem-solving and higher-level thinking.

In my initial meetings, teachers reported little opportunity for intentional professional learning and collaboration, little opportunity to interact with parents outside of scheduled parent conferences, and lots of frustration with student achievement given the amount of effort they felt they were putting forth. The good news: Despite the increasing struggles, the teachers' love and commitment to the students and community remained high, evidenced by little teacher turnover.

Grit & Growth Solutions

It was clear that we needed to address our understanding of what students needed to learn to improve performance on state assessments. I believed the best way to do this was through collaboration and intentional work on positive school culture. We scheduled time in professional learning communities and put in place structures to improve our school culture, such as dual leadership for each team, protected time—30 minutes, 4 days a week—to address student needs, weekly schoolwide celebrations we call Eagle Shuffle, and opportunities for parents to volunteer through our Watch D.O.G.S. and M.O.D. Squad programs.

While these interventions had some initial positive effects, it became clear that we were seeing the most success with our middle-income students and families. There were still significant academic and behavioral issues from some of our students. As we looked at the data, the common denominator became clear: poverty.

After my first year, I was reintroduced to Angela Duckworth's research on "grit" and Carol Dweck's

interpretation of "growth mindset." I had heard of these ideas before and they certainly seemed ideal, but I saw them as topics to address when academics were going so well that there was time left over. These concepts seemed to be the icing on the cake once the basics were mastered.

However, as I listened to the "what" and "why" of these soft learning skills, I began thinking about how often my most economically disadvantaged students exhibited grit as it related to survival in the real world, but not so much when it came to academic tasks. As I thought about the characteristics of fixed and growth mindsets, it seemed to me that those who were stuck in a cycle of generational poverty had characteristics of fixed mindsets, while those who were successful in breaking free tended to have a growth mindset philosophy. I began to wonder what the impact would be if we intentionally taught our students about the concepts of grit and growth mindset as they applied in an academic setting, and how it could benefit them in breaking cycles of poverty.

It also became evident that my teachers had a clear disconnect in understanding students and families who live in poverty. I thought back to Ruby K. Payne's book, *A Framework: Understanding and Working with Students and Adults from Poverty*, and her assertion in it that school was created as a middle class system. Educators, however, are charged with teaching students living in poverty the hidden rules of school success. To truly have an impact, my teachers would not only have to understand how to teach grit and growth mindset, they also would need to understand how to teach it in meaningful ways to a population of students who were coming from backgrounds significantly different from their own. They incorporated strategies from Ruby Payne's 10 Action Steps, which include:

- Reading developmentally appropriate books on topics that help students understand how the



DO THIS

Want to implement the ideas in this article? Try these steps to get started.

- **Reflect** on what you and your staff know about the socioeconomic status of your school community.
- **Develop** professional learning on topics such as cultural competency, brain research, and soft skills such as grit and growth mindset.
- **Model** for teachers ways to understand and connect with students who live in poverty.



brain works and how it grows to create mental models of thought processes.

- Planning activities that allow students to develop a plan and practice scenarios where they demonstrate grit/growth mindset.
- Teaching students formal language of the brain and how the brain works.

A New Approach

Armed with these new understandings, our campus professional learning plan evolved to new levels. The goal continued to be to increase student achievement through the use of professional learning communities and positive school culture, but the professional learning would now incorporate focused learning on three key concepts in addition to academic instructional strategies: poverty, grit, and growth mindset.

All of our grade 3-5 students and our entire staff took a survey to assess growth mindset. While there were many areas of strength, there were certainly areas that needed to be addressed. Students showed surface knowledge of growth mindset and its importance, but demonstrated that it was still lacking as a developed skill. Staff showed understanding of the concept and many demonstrated that they had growth mindset, but were more at a loss at how to teach it to others.

As a part of that survey, all staff also selected to read either Dweck's *Mindset* or Paul Tough's *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* to deepen their understandings of these concepts.

Teachers spent time exploring "hidden rules" of different socioeconomic classes. For example, while stability and achievement is often a driving factor for middle class students, for under-resourced learners, a driving theme is maintaining relationships. When families from generational poverty have not experienced educational success, their children may not see the value in continued education. They may risk criticism from those with whom they share a close relationship for "trying to be better than their family."

While we, as educators, want to send a clear message of the benefits and potential of increased success from continued education for financial and career success, we must be sensitive in the delivery of this message so that it is not condescending and does not disrespect families that have not had the same

opportunity to see the value.

Additionally, many students who live in poverty function in a "physical, reactive, nonverbal" mode, because that is what is necessary to survive. As educators, we have to be intentional in respecting these perspectives while demonstrating and explaining other possibilities. We should teach that two sets of rules can coexist—rules that are acceptable for home, and rules that are acceptable in school.

As a principal, I saw that for this approach to work I had to learn as much as I could about grit, growth, mindset, and poverty as I could. I know I must model the types of conversations with my staff if I want them to implement the same types of conversations with our students. As a result, we discuss these concepts in our staff meetings, I share videos in my weekly communication, and they are a part of one-on-one conversations as I have evaluative conversations with each staff member about their

own applications of grit and growth mindset for themselves and in their classrooms.

We also brand this message throughout the building. Every spare space of hallway bulletin board has some message about the brain and how it grows or the importance of grit. In classrooms, teachers point out these concepts in the stories they read, or when a student demonstrates these characteristics as they approach assignments. Students are now beginning to indicate when they see examples of characters, themselves, or their peers showing grit and a willingness to learn from mistakes and improve.

I began to wonder what the impact would be if we intentionally taught our students about the concepts of grit and growth mindset as they applied in an academic setting, and how it could benefit them in breaking cycles of poverty.

A Call for Change

While many of the changes are focused on closing the achievement gap for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and limited experiences, we feel confident that the new approach will benefit all of our students as they learn how to face challenges, stick with difficulties, and learn from mistakes to grow and improve, both academically and in life.

We are seeing students effectively use growth mindset vocabulary and brain terminology, as well as increased student confidence and problem-solving abilities. With these new soft skills, educators at Degan Elementary are prepared to give our "mice" all the cookies they need for success. 🍪

Vanessa Stuart is principal of Degan Elementary School in Lewisville, Texas.