# THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE IN HIGH EXPECTATIONS TEACHING

A pathway toward closing the achievement gap among diverse learners.

**By Jon Saphier**

How can principals get teachers to motivate underperforming, low-confidence students to believe they can succeed academically? As the school's head leader and cheerleader, the principal is responsible for promoting the "growth mindset" (the idea that ability can be nurtured) over the "fixed mindset" (the idea that intellect is unchangeable) and ensuring that all children believe they can become smarter, too.

Four decades ago, social psychologist Jeff Howard hit the ground running in Massachusetts with the message, "Smart is not something you *are*; smart is something you *can get*." Convincing teachers they can help their students to develop their ability—the idea that ability is malleable and that achievement is grounded in effort—has always been a hard sell. Education theorists Alfred Bandura, Madeline Hunter, and Jerome Weiner made the case for malleable ability for decades. But belief in the bell curve of ability and inherited "intelligence" gripped this country far more strongly, to the point where it shaped our education system, influencing everything from tracking to special education.

Combating belief in what we now refer to as the "fixed mindset" did not go mainstream until Carol S. Dweck published *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2007), which argues for the "growth mindset," or the flexibility of intellect. But in a few short years, figuring out how to organize our schools and our teaching around the growth mindset has become a hinge point for successful principals.

Teachers who are willing to confront their own beliefs and guide their daily actions using the growth mindset can make stunning progress in narrowing the achievement gap. They can offer avenues to success to students who have given up on academic achievement. But promoting the growth mindset is not just a matter of teaching students about brain malleability and putting up posters and signs with encouraging messages. We have to change our language, our behavior, and our instructional decision-making as we handle daily instructional events. To do this, we must provide our children with an environment that sends these messages at every turn:

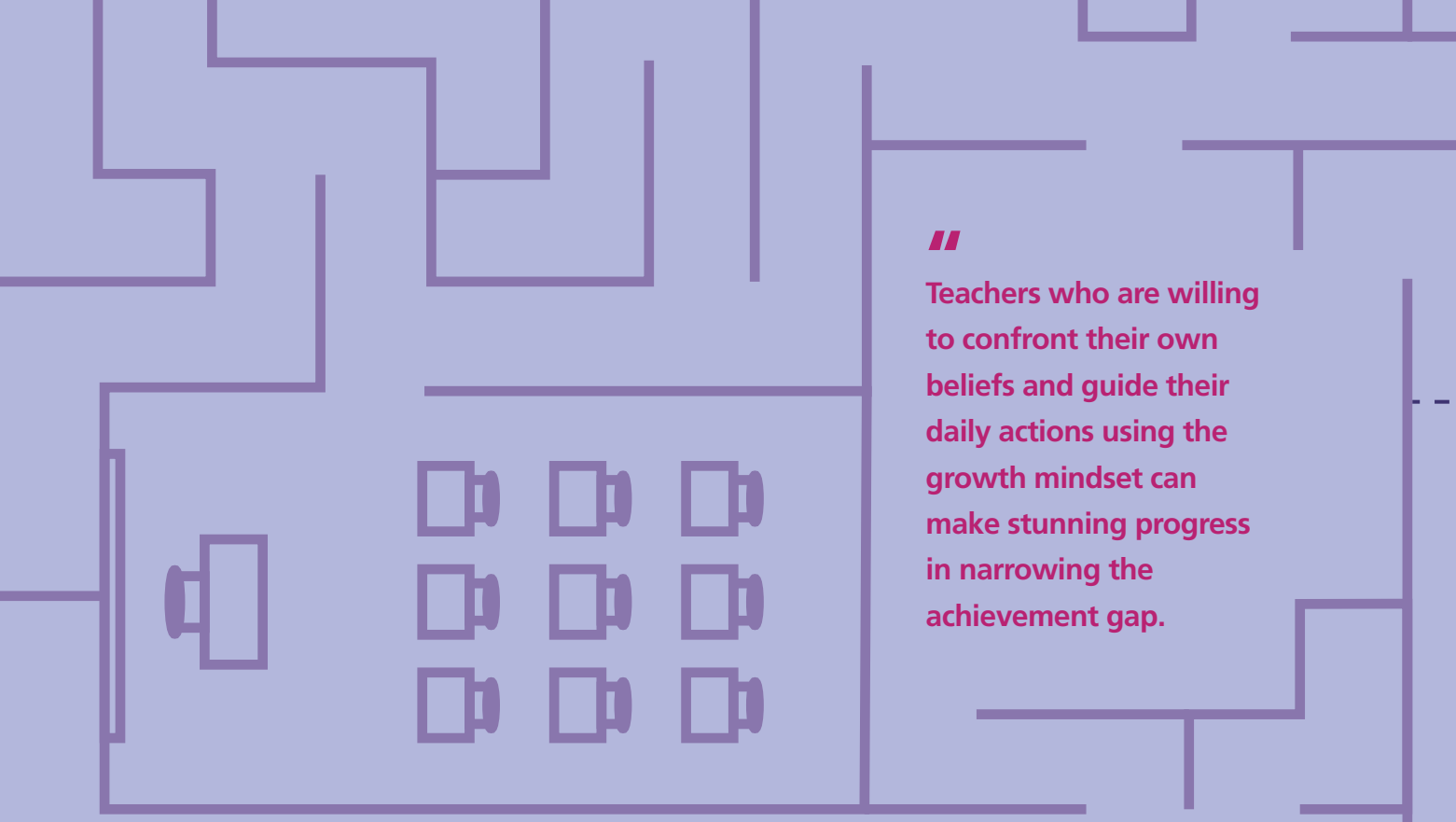
- What we're doing is important;
- You can do it; and
- I'm not going to give up on you.

Children of color and children living in poverty make up the majority of students on the far side of the achievement gap. We are all well aware that these children are typically affected by a multitude of pernicious forces that limit their opportunity to learn and tell them they are "less than." These forces range from racism to restrictive housing policies that trap minorities in environments of poverty to low-opportunity, single-parent family units with inadequate extended-family support. Poor nutrition, inadequate healthcare, gang violence, and mass incarceration are other factors that affect far too many children. But the one area we can control is the messaging and positive support, both emotionally and instructionally, within the environments we do control—the classroom and the school. And the power of those environments has been demonstrated again and again, as we can see from the list of schools identified each year on the Education Trust's website for continuing to get high-gain results despite their demographics and socioeconomic status.

## CHANGING STUDENTS' MINDS

The point here is that students on the far side of the achievement gap have been getting messages about their "ability" all their lives, and have experienced being behind academically so long that they have bought into the story of the fixed mindset. How could they not? So, if we are to eliminate the achievement gap, we have to change these students' belief in their supposed low ability and convince them of the benefits of becoming high-achieving students. Taking on that mission will bring us face to face with our *own* beliefs about our children's capacity, and our own inevitable doubts about how malleable ability is.

> "The role of district central office personnel is key to making any school's progress sustainable.



> **Teachers who are willing to confront their own beliefs and guide their daily actions using the growth mindset can make stunning progress in narrowing the achievement gap.**

Here's what principals can do with their staff. Become a co-learner with them as you:

1. Trace the history of how fixed intelligence and measurable IQ got established so soundly in the United States.

2. Present evidence that ability can be developed and that the bell curve of innate ability is false.

3. Look in detail at the subtle but powerful ways in which we consistently communicate our own views about our students' abilities with the language we choose, such as how we respond to their requests for help.

4. Create classroom routines and structures like frequent quizzes and student error analysis that help students see their progress and take responsibility for their learning. These routines give real horsepower and constant reminders to students about their role in doing well academically and embed, by their very nature, the message that they *can* do well. This is agency.

5. Employ instructional strategies that give low-confidence students clarity on what proficiency looks like, such as co-developing criteria for success.

6. Deliberately and specifically teach students the strategies of successful studying and how to exert effective effort.

7. Give students choice and voice to legitimately influence classroom life and make choices about how they learn.

8. Shape school policies and programs that embed the tacit assumption that ability can be grown. Examples include rationales for how teachers are assigned and the reward structures within the school.

## A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

Let's take the area of language (No. 3) as an example.

Say a student asks for help. A teacher who communicates belief in students' ability to grow might respond as follows:

### SCRIPT 1

**Student:** I can't do number four.
**Teacher:** What part don't you understand? [*"Part" implies there are parts the student does understand.*]
**Student:** I just can't do it.
**Teacher:** Well, I know you can do part of it, because you've done the first three problems correctly. [*Explicit expression of confidence.*] The fourth problem is similar but just a little harder. [*Acknowledges difficulty.*] You start out the same, but then you have to do one extra step. [*Gives a cue.*] Review the first three problems, and then start number four again and see if you can figure it out. [*Provides a strategy.*] I'll come by your desk in a few minutes to see how you're doing. [*I'll be back and follow through to make sure you succeed.*]

A teacher who doesn't really care, or who cares but doesn't believe the student has the ability, might respond as follows:

### SCRIPT 2

**Student:** I can't do number four.
**Teacher:** You can't? Why not? [*A vapid question. If the student knew why he couldn't do it, he wouldn't be stuck.*]
**Student:** I just can't do it.
**Teacher:** Don't say you can't do it. We never say we can't do it. [*The teacher may want to urge perseverance, but instead moralizes about the student's difficulty with the problem.*] Did you try hard? [*That's a no-win question. What if he did? Must be dumb. What if he didn't? Then he's a slug.*]
**Student:** Yes, but I can't do it.
**Teacher:** Well, you did the first three problems. Maybe if you went back and worked a little longer you could do the fourth problem, too. [*So, working longer and harder with the same inadequate strategies might somehow magically work?*] Why don't you work at it a little more and see what happens? [*So maybe there will be a miracle. Not likely. I'm out of here.*]

None of the parenthetical messages in the scripts are communicated explicitly, but they are embedded in the teacher's choice of language. We should be aware of a dozen other recurring scenarios in classroom life in which we have the opportunity to convey belief in our students' abilities and build their confidence and success.

## KEEPING IT RELEVANT

It is common wisdom that respectful personal relationships between students and teachers play a large role in student motivation. Less acknowledged is the need to make student home culture and ethnic roots show up in lessons that acknowledge those roots and their people. Culturally proficient instruction is a prime vehicle for making students from diverse backgrounds feel they have a place in school. This sort of instruction is necessary for reducing the achievement gap.

On another note, families value our desire to know their children and see them succeed. So, establishing direct contact through home visits with our children's families goes a long way toward gaining their confidence and toward our understanding their culture and circumstances.

The role of district central office personnel is key to making any school's progress sustainable. We hope to see hiring practices that seek to identify teachers who persevere and believe in effort-based ability. Staff development offices will focus on how teachers convey the following messages through behavior: "This is important"; "you can do it"; and "I won't give up on you." Both teacher and administrator evaluation systems will be based on detailed, drill-down concrete images of the behaviors that clarify that enigmatic box in every evaluation rubric: "Conveys high expectations to all students." And induction programs for new teachers will make sure that teachers' beliefs about the growth mindset have been planted and well nourished.

When teacher prep programs and certification regulations require that teachers demonstrate the skills inherent in high expectations teaching, we will know that a necessary sea change has occurred in our profession. In the meantime, we can make our own schools a site of profound and constant learning about the missing element of school reform: teaching students to believe in themselves and to act upon that belief. P

**Jon Saphier** is the founder of Research for Better Teaching in Acton, Massachusetts, and author of *High Expectations Teaching: How We Persuade Students to Believe and Act on "Smart Is Something You Can Get."*