



To raise student achievement, North Clackamas schools add lessons in perseverance

By [Laura Frazier | The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

Second-grade teacher Nadia Boria warned her students that their next science activity would be tough.

"There's going to be a lot of steps to try, and many of you are going to fail," she said.

Although the idea of failing a task might be disheartening to many 7- and 8-year-olds, Boria's students were excited. She's ingrained in them that failing is a crucial step in the learning process, not something negative.

Boria and other teachers at **Scouters Mountain Elementary School** in Happy Valley are teaching students that their academic success depends on attitude. By implementing a philosophy called growth mindset, which emphasizes that intelligence is malleable as opposed to a fixed trait, teachers hope to equip students to overcome challenges.

Growth mindset isn't a new or complicated theory but one that the **North Clackamas School District** is taking seriously. The district is in its second year of offering teacher training in equitable teaching practices, including growth mindset. Most district teachers will receive some training, though some district schools are implementing growth mindset more extensively than others. A few schools have also offered mindset sessions to parents.



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Stanford University psychology professor **Carol Dweck** developed the idea of growth mindset, which was published in her **2006 book "Mindset."** Growth mindset teaches that a person's intelligence can improve through perseverance and hard work, instead of viewing it as a static trait a person either does or does not have.

Meagan Sternberg, a district instructional equity coach, said some methods can be subtle, such as hanging posters in classrooms about perseverance and making mistakes. Teachers can lead lessons about the brain so students better understand what it means to learn, and give students tough puzzles they won't get right the first time.

Scouters Mountain Elementary Growth Mindset Teachers at Scouters Mountain Elementary in Happy Valley are working to implement growth mindset instructional practices. Nadia Boria taught a tough engineering lesson Feb. 10 so students could work through the process of trial and error.

But teachers also have to encourage students to practice positive self talk and be aware of what messages they are conveying while they teach. When a student gets a question correct, teachers praise the effort rather than simply telling the students that they are smart.

"This comes down to teachers believing that all students can learn," Sternberg said. "Everybody is going to struggle with something. We have to see everybody as being able to get better through practicing, being able to get better through effort."

In the classroom

Growth mindset has led to changes in teacher behavior, classroom environment and lessons.

During an engineering lesson earlier this month, Boria directed her students to build a tower that could hold up a tennis ball for 10 seconds when placed in front of a fan. She talked about forces, such as wind and gravity, that would try to knock the tennis ball off and gave students specific criteria for the towers.

When a student asked if she would help them, Boria said she wouldn't.



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"Let's think about this for a minute," she said. "Do you want my brain to grow or do you want to grow your brain today?"

Students got into groups and spent the first few minutes brainstorming and sketching a design for their towers. They gathered up recycled paper, straws, tape, paper plates and other supplies and were set loose to build.

"It makes my brain feel like it has to do more than it's used to," said Kylie Green, 8, as she stacked up paper bowls and plates on top of a pile of straws and taped everything together. "It might look a little bit funny, but when it happens it will be so cool."

Boria then helped students place projects in front of the fan, and like she predicted, many of the students' towers couldn't hold up the tennis ball. She then made a point to have her students reflect on their failed design and how their groups should move forward.

"We can't do this yet, but if we try hard we will make it," one student said in response.

Boria, a first-year teacher, said she's infused growth mindset into the daily routine of her classroom. A chart in the front of the room outlines growth mindset phrases for students. If a student says "I know this is wrong," the growth mindset response is "I'm not going to give up," it reads.

Sometimes her students will give up, Boria said, and she looks to classmates to encourage and support their peers. She says she's noticed how the technique has led to fewer students disengaging from class.

"I think most kids are up to the challenge," she said. "My biggest hope in teaching in general is that these kids will leave my room loving learning. I hope this is something they carry with them their whole life."

In a classroom adjacent to Boria's, second-grade teacher Kelley Thompson worked growth mindset practices into a reading activity. Thompson read aloud a book about



learning to ride a bike and asked students to talk about how having courage and overcoming challenges is related to their own lives.

Thompson said growth mindset now falls into every day conversation. She said it helps to have all of the school's staff on board and sharing an approach. Teachers are also able to provide continuity for their students as they get older, Sternberg said.

Boosting achievement

Teachers hope that the emphasis on growth mindset will lead to boosts in student achievement.

The district covers two instructional equity coach salaries with federal Title 2A funding for professional development. Instructional equity coaches are working closest with about 75 teachers who will receive five days of professional development in equitable practices and growth mindset, according to the district. About 150 new teachers received an hour of training on the topic in August, Sternberg said.

Sternberg spent a decade teaching and two years as a science coach before taking to the instructional position last year. She said the district has committed to three years of equity instruction coaching.

Last year Sternberg said one particular fourth grade teacher noticed significant gains in her students' scores on state math tests after using growth mindset instruction.

In the long run, Sternberg said, the approach could lead to some big picture changes. The methods require teachers to see all their students as capable of learning, so they can't give up on students who fall behind, she said. Students may be more likely to stick with tough subjects instead of giving up, and those that are behind will see themselves as capable learners.

Growth mindset can also counteract stereotypes students might face in the classroom, such as that girls aren't supposed to be good at math, Sternberg said.



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"Perhaps we can help that by teaching them explicitly and directly that they can get smarter, that intelligence is not based on race or gender," she said. "This is one of those ideas that is going to be powerful for students."

--Laura Frazier

