

Grading and the Growth Mindset: Establishing a 'Not Yet' Culture

My kids are young – I have a second grader, a kindergartner, and a preschooler. They love school. I come home each day to papers and projects, puppets and letter tracings, and a host of things they want to tell me all about in regards to their day at school. It's exciting to see their enthusiasm for learning. Over the course of my career, I've wondered where that excitement goes between those early grades and middle school. Some of it, of course, is maturity and the fact that school is no longer a 'cool' thing in the mindset of a teenager. I also believe that another factor might be grades and the fact that grading can actually de-motivate students as well. In a more traditional grading system, grades are used as extrinsic motivators – carrots and sticks. If you comply and play the game of school well, you get a good grade – the carrot. If you don't comply, you get a poor grade – the stick. Assigning points to everything and making that letter grade be the end goal can overwhelm and stress students out, thereby decreasing their achievement. In an article entitled "Grading to Communicate" in *Educational Leadership*, Tony Winger wrote something worth considering: "As they begin their schooling, young learners are quite inquisitive, eager to read their first chapter book and excited to discover their place in the world. But many students' innate curiosity is stifled by an education system that too often values compliance over creativity, taking tests over testing theories, memorizing over understanding, and high grades over learning" (EL 65). There are lots of reasons why this is the case, but one of the biggest has to do with the mindset fostered by a grading system that focuses too much on the grade and not enough on the learning.

In her book *Mindset*, Carol Dweck identified two mindsets that exist in everyone. She said, "For twenty years, my research has shown that the *view you adopt for yourself* profoundly affects the way you lead your life. It can determine whether you become the person you want to be and whether you accomplish the things you value" (Dweck 6; emphasis included). According to Dweck, those that tend more towards a fixed mindset believe that they have a set level of ability and intelligence and, once people hit that level, they can no longer progress in their learning. They will say things like, "I'm not good at math. I can't do that," or "Everyone else can do it but me." They try to hide their failings so that they can still appear smart. They work desperately to prove to others that they are better than they really think they are, even to the point of cheating or covering up. For students with a fixed mindset, when they make a mistake or fail at something, they believe that's all they are capable of and stop trying. In other words, *they believe the grade on that test or project is a symbol of who they are as a person*. The traditional grading system supports this kind of mindset.

On the other hand, those with the growth mindset believe that their abilities and intelligence are the *starting point*, not the end point (Dweck 7). They look at their mistakes critically, learn from them, and grow from the experience. In fact, they recognize that people often learn more from their mistakes than from their successes. Those with the growth mindset analyze their weaknesses, set goals, identify effective strategies and people that will help them reach those goals, and work hard to improve and grow. A standards-based grading system fosters and supports a growth mindset.

For more than a year now, the South Hills faculty has worked to learn more about the two mindsets and how we might establish a growth mindset culture in our school. We've come to recognize that we need to change our own mindsets about how we learn and grow as

professionals as well as how we view all of our students collectively. Secondly, we realized that we were sometimes our own worst enemies. Our own language inadvertently got in the way of fostering a growth mindset atmosphere in our classrooms. Here are some of the ways in which we have changed our language (and encourage you to do the same with yourself and your student!):

Fixed Mindset Language	Growth Mindset Language
You are really smart.	You work hard in school and it shows.
You always get good grades. That makes me happy.	When you put forth effort, your grades really show it. You should be proud of yourself. I'm proud of you.
You are so good at math.	Keep practicing. I can't wait to see your progress!
This is not correct. Here's the answer.	This is a good start, but you're not there <i>yet</i> . Here's something that will help you.
Not everyone is good at sports. It's OK.	We can do hard things. Let's keep working!
I wasn't very good at Spanish either.	Our brains can learn new things. It's hard work but worth the effort!

Besides our own mindset and the language we use with our students, we began to focus on explicitly teaching the mindsets and allowing students to think and reflect upon their own mindset. We decided to reward effort and process while not punishing the mistakes. In fact, we want to celebrate mistakes because our brains grow from them! Finally, we have embraced the idea of 'not yet'. There is such power in that two-word phrase because it recognizes that the learner isn't where they want to be *yet*, but the possibility still exists that they will reach their goal. 'Not yet' leaves the door wide open for more growth and learning and makes the learning process far more approachable and less stressful for students.

So how does a growth mindset fit into standards-based grading? Remember that standards-based grading focuses on the learning, recognizes that learning happens for each student on its own timeline and through multiple opportunities to show mastery, and rewards the moments of 'not yet' because the grade is fixable. Simply put, the letter grade is a communication tool that tells us where each student is in their learning. And it can be improved because students can always grow and learn from their mistakes through hard work, effective learning strategies, and support from their teachers. Students, parents, and teachers with the growth mindset embrace and rely on the very premise of 'not yet' in standards-based grading. Grades then, become as Winger puts it, "The communication tool rather than the goal" (*EL 65*) in the pathway of learning.

For more about standards-based grading and the growth mindset, including links to videos of Carol Dweck discussing the mindsets, please see the school's website at www.southhills.jordandistrict.org under the 'Community' and 'Standards-Based Grading' tabs.

Ben Jameson
Principal, South Hills Middle School