

Changing the Mindset

By Chris Combass | Posted in June 2019



Are you in search of a word that is trending not only in academic settings but also within the sphere of school safety? Well, look no further because the word in which you are seeking is called “mindset.” The message is abundantly clear. If you change the mindset, then you can change the culture, and positive school culture can lead to safer schools and a tremendous amount of academic success. With the recent release of 3rd Grade FSA English Language Arts scores and the excitement of continued proficiency growth in Hamilton County, it is only appropriate that I write a blog highlighting the strong correlation between academic achievement and mindset. One thing is for sure. If you want a school system to improve, if you want educators to think outside of the box, and if you want stakeholders to promote safe learning environments, then you often have to change your thought process.

Transformational leadership is a key factor in the mindset revolution. Our school system like many others in the North East Florida Educational Consortium is driven by the vision and inspirational leadership of a devoted superintendent. It wasn’t that long ago that we were in the midst of a financial crisis and were, seemingly, in a fight against the clock to improve our high school grade and remove the turn-around status which had plagued us for quite some time. Now, our district’s proficiency rates and learning gains are at all-time highs, our students are engaged in standards-based instruction on a daily basis, our campuses are safer than ever through the implementation of best safety practices and mental health awareness, and we have a top-five Teacher of the Year Finalist for the State of Florida! Why the drastic change? The answer lies in the following story. Recently, I was working with a group of clinical educators, and I shared a video entitled “Leadership Lessons from the Dancing Guy.” In the video, you have what appears to be a large group of college-aged students sitting on a hill side when all of a sudden, a guy, for no apparent reason, just stands up and starts dancing. Now, he was alone at first, but he must have been somewhat persuasive because it didn’t take long before he had one follower, and then another, and then another until everyone stood up and started dancing. Through his determination and willingness to lead, he started a movement. Yes, there were some followers who were reluctant in the beginning, but in the end, everyone found their way onto the same exact page and no one wanted to be left behind.

Just as “Leadership Lessons from the Dancing Guy” suggests, a movement is often sparked by a common purpose and made possible through a change in mindset. What may have seemed to be impossible at one point is transformed into a reality, and once that threshold is crossed, we must never look back. In today’s world, school districts can never get complacent. Safety legislation will change over time, educational standards will grow, but school districts must never lose sight of their sole purpose and that is to make decisions centered around what is best for students. When suggesting a program or a policy, our superintendent often asks the question “Now, how does this benefit our students?” That is such an essential question to ask and a valuable point for all educators to share.

Yes, there are many mindsets in education today. Whether we are instilling a mindset of high expectations, promoting a growth mindset based on the importance of effort and hard work, or elevating the mindset of continuously keeping classroom doors locked, we must always remember that everything is connected. If we create an environment in which students feel safe, then students are more likely to learn. If we build strong relationships with stakeholders, greater communication will lead to a proactive approach in addressing issues before they occur. And, if we continue to set our goals high, only the sky is the limit. Through resilience and ongoing support from community partnerships, the mindset of the Hamilton County School District has evolved, and like other districts around us, we must continue to sustain our momentum and expectations moving forward.