

A Growth Mindset Year at Lenox Academy

By Joe Giamportone, Assistant Principal



Located in the heart of Brooklyn, New York, Lenox Academy offers an academically accelerated program for middle school students in grades 6 through 8. Yet, while the overwhelming majority of our students exceed New York State standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics, a deeper analysis reveals a disturbing trend. We discovered that as the curriculum became more challenging over the course of middle school, many of our high-achieving students retreated from putting forth effort. The result was that academic performance actually declined over the three years for a large number of our students.

Fixed Mindset

Reading about the work of Dr. Carol Dweck and her team at Mindset Works, we were able to more clearly understand the nature of our dilemma. Students who retreated from putting forth effort, we now realized, were exhibiting the characteristic fixed mindset. These were students who, for the better part of their young lives, had been praised for intelligence based on their performance in school and on NY State standardized exams. Acceptance into Lenox Academy brought more praise for intelligence—but when the accelerated curriculum began to present the kinds of challenges they had not previously encountered, they retreated.

Growth Mindset

To help inoculate our students against the consequences of fixed mindset thinking, we decided to pilot the [Brainology](#)® growth mindset curriculum with our incoming class in September. Over the summer, I worked with a lead teacher, Nicole Trubnikov, to prepare. We planned to embed the instructional component of the program in our 6th grade science curriculum map. (It is no coincidence that Nicole is our 6th grade science teacher!)

However, we wanted to go beyond just teaching the curriculum to our students. We knew that we needed to integrate the growth mindset throughout our school culture, and ensure ongoing support for our students as they met the challenges of our rigorous curriculum. We developed an action plan to achieve our short and long term objectives:

- Ensure that all 6th grade teachers were actively engaged and invested in the program
- Insinuate the skills and concepts learned in Brainology across subject domains
- Create activities, tasks, and learning experiences that spanned the entire year
- Present our work to the staff to ensure continuity into the 7th and 8th grade in subsequent years

Teacher Engagement

In order to engage teachers in implementing the program, we initiated an email campaign to introduce the program and the rationale behind piloting it with our incoming 6th grade class. We shared the monthly Growth Mindset Digest and forwarded articles as well as links to the teacher resources found on the Brainology website. We scheduled quarterly grade meetings where we brought teachers up to speed regarding instruction and the learning activities in which students were engaged. At these meetings, we discussed ways of infusing the ideas, concepts and skills learned in Brainology across subject domains. We also collaborated in developing strategies we could employ to ensure that all teachers were fully engaged and understood the shared responsibility of succeeding in creating a Growth Mindset school culture.

Brainology across Subject Domains

In order to develop a Growth Mindset school culture, we knew that all 6th grade teachers needed to be familiar with the skills, concepts, and language of the Brainology program. Together, we fashioned 10 essential questions that became a cornerstone of our interactions with 6th grade students:

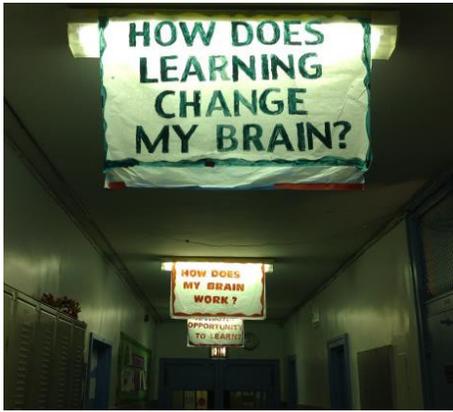
1. **Am I a learner?**
2. **How does my brain work?**
3. **How does learning change my brain?**
4. **Can I grow what I know?**
5. **Am I persistent in solving problems?**
6. **Do I seek or avoid challenges?**
7. **How do I know I am doing my best?**
8. **Is this an opportunity to learn?**
9. **Why are mistakes wonderful?**
10. **Do I have a growth mindset?**



We posted these questions as banners hanging in the corridors and teachers posted them in their classrooms.

We agreed that these questions would serve as entry points into conversations with students about performance on assessments, observable work habits, and general behavior. Each of the 10 essential questions was unpacked in our Character Development classroom where students discussed and reflected on each question in depth.

Building a Growth Mindset All Year



In order to hold each other accountable for following through on this commitment, we created a Growth Mindset bulletin board in the main office. Each time a teacher interacted with a student using one of the essential questions, the brief conversation was documented and then posted to the bulletin board. This Growth Mindset display grew during the year and was seen by teachers, students, administrators and visitors.

Each student created a Brainology binder consisting of all assessments, tasks, and reflective pieces associated with their work in Brainology during the year. We decided to supplement the activities and assessments embedded in the Brainology curriculum with [reflective writing assignments](#) that we administered three times during the year. These reflective pieces presented students with an opportunity to revisit the various ideas, concepts and skills associated with the Brainology program. They also proved valuable to teachers and administrators, serving as evidence of student learning.

In reviewing student responses, we were pleased to see that all students were using the language of the Brainology curriculum. While almost all students saw growth in their quest to develop a growth mindset, many recognized that there was still much work to be done.

Sharing with Staff

At our end-of-year grade conference for 6th and 7th grade teachers, Nicole read several excerpts from the final reflections submitted by our 6th grade students. We noted several ways that they showed deepening understanding and integration of growth mindset concepts:

1. **Teacher praise for effort:** Many of the students were able to articulate that they had come to understand the difference between praise for intelligence and/or talent, and praise for effort, persistence and perseverance.
2. **Using the language / changing the culture:** All students used the language, ideas, skills, and concepts of Brainology in response to our prompts.
3. **Gaps:** Students identified and acknowledged personal gaps and work yet to be accomplished in order to fully develop a growth mindset.
4. **Transition to Middle School:** Many students mentioned the transition from elementary to middle school and how difficult it was at the beginning of the year

becoming accustomed to the rigorous curriculum. They acknowledged that they had acquired a fixed mindset in elementary school and how the knowledge and skills learned in the Brainology program helped them to begin making the transition to a growth mindset.

A brief discussion ensued with 6th grade teachers sharing their personal experiences and conversations with students around the Growth Mindset ideas and essential questions. Teachers themselves were very candid in self-reflection, admitting that they, too, had moved toward developing a growth mindset this year.

We then summarized what we believed to be the three enduring understandings underlying the program:

1. **Growth Mindset:** Redefining what it means to be smart as possessing and demonstrating a growth mindset: persistence, perseverance, learning from mistakes, embracing challenges, and putting forth effort in achieving goals.
2. **All About My Brain:** Learning about how the human brain works based on current advances and discoveries in neuroscience. Each and every student was genuinely interested in learning about his/her brain.
3. **Growth for Life:** Internalizing the skills and knowledge acquired in this program to become industrious, productive, life-long learners.

Looking Back—and Forward

In *Principle-Centered Leadership*, Stephen Covey says: “If you want to make small improvements in an organization then you focus on changing attitudes and behaviors. If on the other hand you want to make quantum improvements then focus on changing paradigms. Attitudes and behavior will follow.”

As we begin a new school year, we can look back at our work and know with confidence that we have begun to transform the teaching and learning paradigm at Lenox Academy—and we know that we are poised to move forward by making improvements where necessary while building on our successes.

About the Author

Joe Giamportone has been Assistant Principal of Lenox Academy for 7 years, and a science teacher for 11 years. In his previous career, he spent 15 years as a restaurateur.

Leader Reflection

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At Lenox Academy, the staff identified high-achieving students who were declining in performance when work became more challenging. Where do you see a similar pattern in your school?

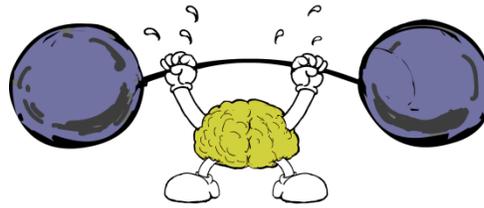
To create momentum and interest, Mr. Giamportone and his lead teacher began an email campaign to communicate a growth mindset and a need for these lessons for students. What first moves could you make to create awareness and then interest in this work?

Mr. Giamportone shares these [reflective writing assignments](#) that Lenox Academy used school-wide. Do you see an opportunity to use this or a similar strategy in your school?

The 10 Essential Questions that Lenox identifies would help students develop academic learning mindsets. Which of your staff members have expertise in teaching these competencies? How could you support them so that their expertise can be shared?

About Mindset Works

Mindset Works was co-founded by one of the world's leading researchers in the field of motivation, Stanford University professor Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D. and K-12 mindset expert Lisa S. Blackwell, Ph.D. The team translates psychological research into practical programs and services to help students and educators increase their motivation and achievement.



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