

CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF GROWTH MINDSETS IN TEACHERS

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Torrington Teacher of the Year 2017 Speech

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Good morning and thank you for this prestigious honor. I am humbled to stand before you as Torrington's Teacher of the Year. I would like to thank those community members here today, including our board members, as well as administration and faculty for this honor. I would like to thank my friends at the Forman School, Wilson Elementary School in Waterbury, Litchfield Intermediate School, Colebrook Consolidated School, and the University of Bridgeport for shaping me into the teacher I am today. To my Torrington family, I share this honor with each of you. You have believed in me since day one, and for that, I am forever grateful. To my friends and family -- words can't express what I'd like to say to show my appreciation for everything you have done for me. And most importantly, to my students -- you are the reason I do what I do each day. You empower me to consistently improve my practice and to become the best teacher that I possibly could be.

Anyone who knows me well, knows that I am passionate about Lucy Calkins and her work around the reading and writing workshops. In fact, many of my peers, might say that I am a little obsessed with her. Recently, I heard her speak in New York. In that speech, Calkins said, "To teach well, we do not need more techniques and strategies as much as we need a vision of what is essential." I could certainly promote my beliefs about essential practices now, but instead, I want to shift our thinking towards building our capacities as educators. My belief about what is essential is that we, as teachers, must embody growth mindsets in order to move our teaching practices forward. We must see our practices as worthy of change.

Carol Dweck, author of Mindsets, has released a body of research that has the power of transforming our practices. In a fixed mindset people believe their abilities, their intelligence, their talents, are fixed traits. In a growth mindset people understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort and persistence. They don't necessarily think everyone's the same, but they believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it.

You may ask, how do I shift my mindset? Educator, Jackie Gerstein provides us with four belief statements that might help us get started with a mindset shift. Teachers who embody a growth mindset believe deeply in the following:

1. I believe that all students can learn and be successful.
2. I believe that all learners are smart in their own unique ways.
3. I believe that I should assist students in believing that they are good and powerful learners.
4. I believe that all student should be challenged and rewarded for taking risks and rising to challenges.

First and foremost, we must believe that all students can learn and be successful. The backdrop of our students' lives has exacerbated the work we set off to do each day. Our challenges have become far greater than ensuring student success and achievement. Their lives are marked by

division in the world's people. We can't escape that hatred exists in our world today. To combat this, we need to transform our classrooms into ones in which students display an understanding and appreciation of one another. It is evermore imperative that we devote time to foster classrooms that center around respect and kindness. We need to set our students up to be socially responsible citizens of the world. On the last day of school this past school year, I received a letter from a student in which she wrote, "In fifth grade, I will take all of your advice, lessons, and most of all, your dos and don'ts. Your rules have prepared us to have respect and kindness to others." I recently checked, and yes, she scored a 4 on the ELA section of the SBAC. But nonetheless, she points out that the best academic lesson may not come close to the one that focuses on character. Our classrooms can be the vehicle to transform our world out of the devastation it is currently enduring.

Gerstein wants teachers to believe that all learners are smart in their own unique ways. We need to embrace that every child has the right to learn despite potentially inhibiting factors like academic ability, race, or socio-economic status; and such factors should not limit any student from receiving an optimal educational experience. Students must enter safe learning environments where they can reach their full potential and feel empowered to be lifelong learners. I believe in engaging students in relevant, rigorous, and authentic learning experiences. A viable curriculum that is rigorous and relevant should be the heart of quality instruction and learning. When one steps into a Torrington classroom, that person needs to see students engaged in student-driven learning, collaborative project-based learning, and digital learning that connects them to the most current ideas and trends. Furthermore, there needs to be an intense focus on creativity and innovation in the district's curriculum. Ultimately, our goal is that students drive their own learning, and by doing so, they develop a sense of agency and purpose.

On another note, we need to ensure that we are talking to our students in powerful ways so that they believe they are strong learners. Growing up different in Northwestern Connecticut was no easy feat for me, and school was not always a happy place. One may ask why I would ever step foot inside a school again, having had a negative experience. Despite my challenges, my teachers made a notable impact on me. They accepted me for my being and reached out to me as an individual. Because of them, I became motivated to fulfill their shoes and be the type of role models they were. After all, it was the positive ways in which my teachers spoke to me that drove me to persevere in my education. Without their words of encouragement, I wouldn't be where I am today. Peter Johnston provides us with empowering ways to speak to students in his book, Choice Words. For example, the simple idea of referring to students as readers or writers can transform the way in which students view themselves. John Hattie's work in Visible Learning outlines for us the importance of the ways in which we talk to kids as well. Specifically, providing our students with rich feedback when conferring with students individually or in small or large groups has a large effect size. In doing this, we ameliorate students' self-concept and expectations of self which has the largest effect size of all high impact learning approaches. But furthermore, it is in those one on one conversations with children, that I believe we affect change in the world because they view themselves not as a number but as a person.

Finally, Gerstein tells us that we need to challenge students and reward them for their success. Fixed versus growth mindsets have a large impact on success and failure. Fixed mindset people dislike failure, feeling that it reflects badly upon themselves as individuals, while growth mindset people embrace failure as an opportunity to learn and improve their abilities. Calkins also once said, “If you aren’t failing, you aren’t aiming high enough.” How profound! Students need to feel encouraged to be inquisitive risk-takers who are self-discoverers of knowledge. The moments in which students make mistakes are those in which their greatest learning takes place. They persevere and know that their strong efforts will result in achievement. As teachers, we need to shift our mindsets in order to create a culture in which we make ourselves vulnerable, because if we do not, we will fall into a trap of not growing our practices, and therefore, not supporting student achievement. We need to believe that our greatest resources in the classroom are ourselves and our students.

Earlier this year, I received an award in which I am most proud. In May, the University of Bridgeport, and Professor Lori Noto, who is here today, presented me with the Lauren Rousseau Passionate Educator Award. If you don’t know, Lauren was a teacher who lost her life at Sandy Hook Elementary School on that tragic day during my first year of teaching elementary school. At the awards’ ceremony, I was lucky enough to meet Lauren’s father and stepmother. They came to share in my honor, but frankly, it was a time to reflect on Lauren’s amazing life. As I spoke to them, and as they shared Lauren’s story with me, I realized that Lauren upheld each of the four tenets of a teacher’s growth mindset during her short career in education. In her honor, I hope we strive to be the kind of educator Lauren was, filling our classrooms with the belief that our students are great.

So, colleagues, I ask you to think for a moment. How can you begin to uphold these principles in your classroom as you begin the new school year on Thursday? (pause)

We owe it to our students to create and foster classrooms in which we believe and uphold these four tenets. In order to make systemic change and to move our district towards increased student achievement, I believe it is essential that we, as teachers, start with shifting our own mindsets around teaching. Once we embody a growth mindset, a belief in which we view our teaching practices as worthy of growth, then I believe we will see the change that we are desperately seeking.

Torrington teachers, we are on an exciting journey this year. With the belief that we can think in far greater ways about our teaching, we will grow ourselves in profound ways. I am proud to represent you as Torrington’s Teacher of the Year, and I wish you much success this school year. Thank you.