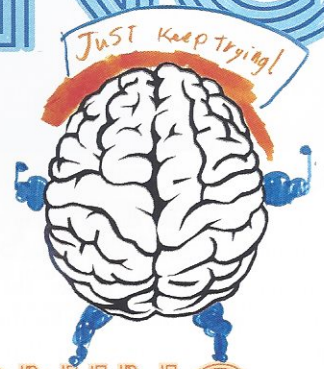


# IN THE LEARNING ZONE



## TEACHING AND LEARNING WITH A GROWTH MINDSET

Lorraine Loomis, a fourth-grade teacher in the lower school, spent a good portion of the year trying to get some of her students to slow down while they work. “For this age group, whether it’s explicit or implied, they believe speed equals knowledge,” said Loomis. Indeed, those with a fixed mindset, who think that abilities like talent and intelligence are fixed, would agree that those who are the fastest at an academic task are the smartest. However, the Latin School, always striving to be innovative, is taking a different approach and embracing growth mindset at all levels. Those who adhere to a growth mindset belief think that slow and steady is fine, and maybe even preferred. So Loomis was especially gratified when one of her formerly speedy students recently bragged, “I was the very last one to finish!” after completing an assignment.

For Loomis, the student’s exclamation is the result of a very deliberate effort to change the culture, language and thinking at Latin to one that favors growth mindset.



But just what is growth mindset? According to Dr. Carol S. Dweck, author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Ballantine Books, 2006) and professor of psychology at Stanford University, growth mindset is the belief that our human qualities and abilities can change and improve. While many teachers have been familiar with Dweck's theory for years, the work was embraced school-wide when Dweck protégé and business partner, Eduardo Briceño, visited Latin in January 2017. Briceño, who is co-founder and CEO of Mindset Works in San Jose, California, outlined the growth mindset philosophy, which is backed by years of quantitative research.

One of the hallmarks of growth mindset is trying and failing in what is often called productive struggling. According to Briceño, "Failure means that you are challenging yourself to go beyond what you normally can do." Of course, the challenging task has to be deep, engaging and just out of reach. "If it's something that's too hard, it won't be useful because it won't be the right level," he said. Growth mindset encourages schools to have their students spend most of their time in a learning zone where experimentation, trying new things and failure happens, versus a performance zone, where students are tested on what they know. "School should mostly be a learning zone with very brief periods of the performance zone," said Briceño. "If students spend too much time in the performance zone where they are being graded all the time, they will be afraid to make mistakes for fear that their fellow students will think less of them. If students are not making mistakes, they are not learning."

The benefits of growth mindset to students are many, according to Briceño. "Life becomes more fun because students learn to like learning. They are better able to achieve their goals. They have more positive relationships with people because they listen better. And they gain greater resiliency because they learn that struggling is part of the learning process." Teachers benefit too. "They see greater improvement and greater results for their instruction."

Briceño touched on several ways that schools can cultivate growth mindset. First, students need to know that the brain is malleable. The brain can actually be rewired through learning, and students who understand this know that challenges are an opportunity to grow. Second, teachers should focus on praising the process rather than the person. Praising students for being smart may lead some to think they are dumb when they struggle with a task or assignment. Briceño pointed out that praise sometimes creates unintended consequences when a child takes on a challenge only when she or he is being praised. "We don't want students to work hard to get praise. We want students to work hard because they care about getting better and improving their abilities," he said. More powerful than praise is asking questions such as, "What did you learn today?" and, "What mistakes did you make, and what did you learn from them?" Finally, teachers and parents need to celebrate mistakes. If students see that adults value the learning process over getting the right answer, students will take more risks. "If you don't give students permission to make mistakes, they will only raise their hand and contribute to a discussion if they have the right answer," said Briceño.

Brain artwork by Holden Dougherty '25.

## LOWER SCHOOL

Getting younger students to understand and value growth mindset can never start too early. In fact, students in the lower school react quite well to the philosophy. Julie Brooks, director of the lower school, said that one thing her staff in particular is focused on is making sure students know it is acceptable to make mistakes. "Brandi Lawrence, a third-grade teacher, actually asks her students, 'What mistakes did you make today?'" Another teacher, Anne Johnson, had her second graders remove all the erasers on the pencils in the classroom," said Brooks.

One of the challenges of having growth mindset accepted by the entire school community is changing the culture of the school to one where mistakes and productive struggling are valued because they lead to learning and growth. Brooks admits this is made all the more difficult because of Latin's prestigious reputation. Shortly after Briceño spoke, Brooks invited junior kindergarten parents to a coffee to discuss growth mindset, what it would mean for students and how parents could promote it at home. "The junior kindergarten parents were interested and curious about how this would begin at the early childhood level. This is a relatively unknown field, so we are still exploring what this means," said Brooks. "But there is a definite interest among lower school families."

Fourth-grade teacher Loomis thinks that changing the culture includes the students' willingness to change their language. "We are trying to minimize or eliminate negative self-speak," said Loomis. "Instead of students saying, 'I'm not good at this,' we encourage them to change that to, 'I'm not good at this yet.' Instead of 'This is too hard,' we want them to say 'This is hard, and it may take some time.'"

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**"IF STUDENTS ARE NOT MAKING MISTAKES, THEY ARE NOT LEARNING."**

— Eduardo Briceño, co-founder and CEO of Mindset Works

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Loomis also thinks it's important to minimize praise. "As a teacher, I want our students to focus on the journey and the process. I have to refrain from telling students 'You're right,' because when you say that, students think 'Oh I've got it!' and they stop thinking. Instead I try to say 'What makes you think that?' or 'Can you explain how you arrived at that answer?'"

Brooks also thinks it's important that teachers model lifelong learning. "When I go into a classroom to observe a teacher, sometimes the students ask why I am there. I love it when the teacher tells the kids, 'Miss Brooks is helping me be a better teacher.'"



# MIDDLE SCHOOL

American culture tends to exalt those who “make it look easy.” However, the reality is that many who are leaders in their field – whether it be sports, business or the arts – have spent considerable time honing their craft. Think of the 10,000 hours rule associated with author Malcolm Gladwell that says one needs to spend 10,000 hours to be considered world class in any given field. “We want to break down this misperception that things are effortless,” said Deb Sampey, director of the middle school. “It’s an important message for middle schoolers. People who make it look easy have actually put in a lot of work.”

For middle school students, growth mindset can be very empowering. For example, at Latin, the students run their own parent-teacher conferences in the fall and the spring. They are given growth mindset prompts to reflect on such as, “Explain a lesson that you found tricky or challenging and the strategies you used to get through it,” and “Talk about a time you accomplished something really challenging.” Sampey thinks growth mindset positions students to succeed in high school. “Students learn to advocate for themselves and become more independent,” she said.

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– Deb Sampey, middle school director

Mary Jo Houck, a sixth-grade English teacher, agrees. “We try to find strategies for students to make them more self-reliant.” For example, if students ask her the definition of a word they do not know, she asks them what they have done before coming to her and what they will do next to figure out the meaning. “The majority of kids learn not to come to me right away,” she said. Houck is pleased when she hears students modeling this language with each other. “My favorite moment is when a peer asks another student, ‘Did you try this first?’”

## Fixed Mindset



## Growth Mindset





## Learning Zone

## Performance Zone

GOAL	IMPROVE	DO AS BEST AS WE CAN
ACTIVITIES	IMPROVEMENT	EXECUTION
CONCENTRATE ON	HAVEN'T MASTERED YET	HAVE MASTERED
MISTAKES TO BE	EXPECTED	MINIMIZED
BENEFIT	GROWTH AND FUTURE PERFORMANCE	CURRENT PERFORMANCE

Source: [www.mindsetworks.com](http://www.mindsetworks.com)

## UPPER SCHOOL

The upper school, too, has embraced growth mindset. The school launched an e-portfolio pilot project this year with seniors who are taking Honors Comparative and Global Politics. The way it works is this: After a student completes a writing project in this class, she or he does a self-assessment. The teacher, Kirk Greer, then performs his rubric. Next students do an online reflection, using a series of prompts. Students focus on the biggest difference between Greer's assessment and their assessment, set priorities for their next piece of writing, create challenges for their next writing assignment and identify what they were happiest with in their paper. "I recently gave my students 15 minutes to work on these prompts," said Greer. "They were particularly focused and seemed very invested." Greer points out that the e-portfolios focus on each student's development and evaluate from a student's own benchmarks instead of comparing students with each other. Ninth graders did the same sort of e-portfolio in the fourth quarter in their English and history classes. "In the future, this will help faculty as they will have access to the e-portfolios. Teachers will be in a much better position to see student growth," said Greer.

Monica Pickett Rodriguez, director of the upper school, points to the Global Online Academy (GOA) courses as an additional way that growth mindset manifests itself at Latin. GOA offers courses not available at Latin – like bioethics, entrepreneurship or architecture – that any upper school student can take on their own time, just for the fun of learning. "Our goal is for our students to want to love learning," said Rodriguez.

The faculty and staff who attended Briceño's talk in January were asked to fill out an exit survey that asked them to identify one change they would make to help build growth mindset in their students or with themselves. One teacher said, "In our mini-lesson at Writers' Workshop I can talk about the stages it takes to make a book, the many drafts/illustrations." Another said, "I would like to continue to encourage my students to make mistakes and work in groups to help them understand there is more than one way to solve/answer a problem/question." Still another said, "I could be more explicit with students about discussions being in the learning zone rather than a performing zone."

**"OUR GOAL IS FOR OUR STUDENTS TO WANT TO LOVE LEARNING."**

– Monica Pickett Rodriguez, upper school director

Each of the divisions will continue with growth mindset next year. Directors, teachers and faculty are in full swing working on professional development activities – including readings, software and continuing education – that will strengthen their knowledge. Lower school director Julie Brooks said, "Growth mindset is a work in progress and it will probably always be." ●