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A Small Fix in Mind-Set Can Keep Students in School

New research finds that just a few brief online interventions significantly reduced suspension and dropout rates, especially for disadvantaged groups



The psychologist Carol Dweck has argued that both teachers and students have largely unconscious beliefs and expectations about themselves and others and that these can lead to a cascade of self-fulfilling prophecies. *ILLUSTRATION: EDMON DE HARO*



By

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Education is the engine of social mobility and equality. But that engine has been sputtering, especially for the children who need help the most. Minority and disadvantaged children are especially likely to be suspended from school and to drop out of college. Why? Is it something about the students or something about the schools? And what can we do about it?

Two recent studies published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences offer some hope. Just a few brief, inexpensive, online interventions significantly reduced suspension and dropout rates, especially for disadvantaged groups. That might seem surprising, but it reflects the insights of an important new psychological theory.

The psychologist Carol Dweck at Stanford has argued that both teachers and students have largely unconscious “mind-sets”—beliefs and expectations—about themselves and others and that these can lead to a cascade of self-fulfilling prophecies. A teacher may start out, for example, being just a little more likely to think that an African-American student will be a troublemaker. That makes her a bit more punitive in disciplining that student. The student, in turn, may start to think that he is being treated unfairly, so he reacts to discipline with more anger, thus confirming the teacher’s expectations. She reacts still more punitively, and so on. Without intending to, they can both end up stuck in a vicious cycle that greatly amplifies what were originally small biases.

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In the same way, a

student who is the first in her family to go to college may be convinced that she won’t be able to fit in socially or academically. When she comes up against the inevitable freshman hurdles, she interprets them as evidence that she is doomed to fail. And she won’t ask for help because she feels that would just make her weakness more obvious.

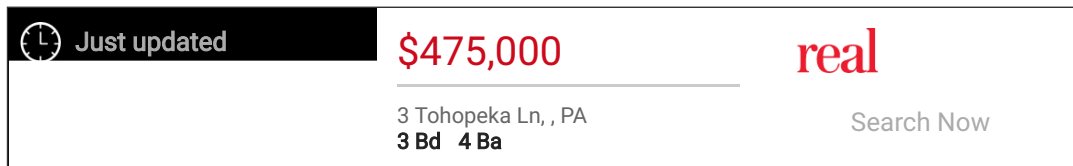
She too ends up stuck in a vicious cycle.

Changing mind-sets is hard—simply telling people that they should think differently often backfires. The two new studies used clever techniques to get them to take on different mind-sets more indirectly. The studies are also notable because they used the gold-standard method of randomized, controlled trials, with over a thousand participants total.

In the first study, by Jason Okonofua, David Paunesku and Greg Walton at Stanford, the experimenters asked a group of middle-school math teachers to fill out a set of online materials at the start of school. The materials described vivid examples of how you could discipline students in a respectful, rather than a punitive, way.

But the most important part was a section that asked the teachers to provide examples of how they themselves used discipline respectfully. The researchers told the participants that those examples could be used to train others—treating the teachers as experts with something to contribute. Another group of math teachers got a control questionnaire about using technology in the classroom.

At the end of the school year, the teachers who got the first package had only half as many suspensions as the control group—a rate of 4.6% compared with 9.8%.



A real estate listing card with a black header containing a clock icon and the text "Just updated". The main content area is white and features the price "\$475,000" in red, the word "real" in red, and the address "3 Tohopeka Ln, , PA" with "3 Bd 4 Ba" below it. A "Search Now" button is located in the bottom right corner.

In the other study, by Dr. Dweck and her colleagues, the experimenters gave an online package to disadvantaged students from a charter school who were about to enter college. One group got materials saying that all new students had a hard time feeling that they belonged but that those difficulties could be overcome. The package also asked the students to write an essay describing how those challenges could be met—an essay that could help other students. A control group answered similar questions about navigating buildings on the campus.

Only 32% of the control group were still enrolled in college by the end of the year, but 45% of the students who got the mind-set materials were enrolled.

The researchers didn't tell people to have a better attitude. They just encouraged students and teachers to articulate their own best impulses. That changed mind-sets—and changed lives.

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