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Feedback: Cultivating a mindset of continuous improvement in learners

By Dr. Susan Salcido, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

It's official: all public schools in Santa Barbara County are now in session, and we're off to a dynamic start.

Along with the excitement that comes as school begins, the most significant parts of the school year also take shape: the teaching and learning that occurs in classrooms from every corner of our county. At the very core of learning—learning from mistakes, making connections, actualizing and achieving—comes the ever-important exchange of information and feedback between student and teacher. The mindset is of growth and continuous improvement, not perfection.

Providing feedback, an intentional process teachers have long performed, is critical to successful learning. Educational researcher John Hattie confirms that feedback is the most powerful factor that enhances learning and subsequent achievement. Hattie adds, however, that in order to be effective, feedback must be of the right type, timed correctly, and framed properly.

What's more, there are certain aspects of positive feedback that, when effectively implemented, can increase motivation, build on existing knowledge, and help young people reflect on what they've learned.

First, researchers recommend that feedback should be as specific as possible. Teachers, parents, and guardians who provide learners with information on what exactly they did well, as well as what may still need improvement, offer children key tools for making measurable progress.

Being prompt with feedback is another key component of effectiveness. Numerous studies indicate that feedback is most successful when it is given immediately, rather than a few days, weeks, or months down the line.

Another way to improve the chances that feedback gets the desired results is to ensure that it is carefully presented. A full explanation of the purpose of the feedback increases the likelihood that children understand the way it is designed to help them learn and improve. University of Rochester

Professor of Psychology Edward Deci observed that sometimes even the most well-meaning feedback can come across the wrong way, reducing a learner's motivation.

A powerful example of effective feedback was recently on display during a master class at the Music Academy of the West.

In this master class, students of specific musical disciplines were paired with an expert in that field. The audience watched and listened with admiration as each student delivered what to our ears was a stellar performance.

Throughout the performance, however, each master teacher pointed out ways the students could improve their pieces. They encouraged their students to focus on the finer details of tone or phrasing. The critiques were precise, engaging, and evidence both of the teacher's passion for the subject and their desire to help the students improve.

One master teacher said to a student: "As you repeat this phrase, think about what you are trying to convey. When you sing, think about being doubtful, hopeful, then confident; the audience will notice the distinction with each repetition. Let's do that part again." At another point, the teacher highlighted one word, its Latin root, and explained why it was the most important part of the phrase. The student sang again, this time adding depth to the performance by emphasizing the phrase.

With those kinds of specific, prompt, and careful feedback fresh in mind, the students performed their pieces again. In every case, the differences were remarkable.

This master class was a powerful illustration of the importance of feedback. When young people are presented with information that makes it clear how they can improve, whether from teachers or parents or guardians, they can then develop strategies for building on their strengths, as well as addressing their areas for growth.

We in education believe in developing mindsets that are focused on continuous improvement and growth. Specific, prompt, and careful feedback are significant contributors to that process of improvement. Through personal interactions between teachers and students, and exchanges that are mindful of our youth and their absolute ability to grow, our students will hone a mindset of continuous learning and improvement that will carry them forward in school and most importantly, their future.

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