

Shifting Adult Practice to foster Student Agency: A Program Evaluation Design



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Prepared for Partners in School Innovation

Mills College Public Policy Program

May 1, 2016

DISCLAIMER

This study has been prepared for Partners in School Innovation, San Francisco, California. The student author conducted this study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Public Policy at Mills College. The judgments and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Mills College Public Policy Program, the sponsoring Client organization, or any other organization or agency.

Redesigning a pilot evaluation optimizes outcomes

Refocusing the evaluation logic model and performance measurement methods of Partners in School Innovation’s Student Agency pilot program will provide increased leverage—through more meaningful data, which would have otherwise been missed—to achieve shifts in teacher practice. I recommend these changes to program evaluation design:

- Redesigning the structure of the Student Agency logic model to increase program effectiveness
- Utilizing benchmarks to achieve increased program efficiency
- Including qualitative interviews in the suite of data collection methods to provide more meaningful quantitative data

Measuring improvements in academic mindsets of students is valuable to Partners

Because long term outcomes of students are difficult for Partners to measure, reliably determining if any shift in the academic mindsets of students has occurred is valuable, since it can demonstrate to funders that Partners indirectly impacts the long term outcomes of students.

The problem

Despite 40 years of research demonstrating the importance of noncognitive skills for student academic and long term success in life, many teachers are not aware of this information and do not utilize it in their teacher practice, particularly in under resourced public schools. Currently too few teachers of African American, Latino and English learners in public schools from low income areas create classroom environments that are conducive to the cultivation of valuable academic mindsets in their students.

The client and the program

Partners, an educational nonprofit, works to eliminate the achievement gap so that all students, regardless of background, can thrive. Educators respect the organization because of its successful twenty year history working with under resourced schools. Recently, it expanded from California to the Midwest and capital regions, to serve approximately 58,500 students in the 2014-2015 school year. Partners' theory of change is to give school district leaders, principals, and instructors the necessary techniques—e.g., organizational tools, proven teaching strategies, and evaluations—to improve long term student achievement. The goal of the Partners' Student Agency pilot program is to foster student agency by developing four academic mindsets in students:

- Belonging (I belong in this academic community.)
- Growth Mindset (With effort my skills can grow.)
- Self-efficacy (I can do this.)
- Relevance (This work has value to me.)

The term “agency” in an educational context refers to a student’s self-awareness of their control, autonomy and power over their own learning.

What are noncognitive skills?

Researchers have identified an important set of factors required for optimal long term student outcomes that is difficult to define, so they originally identified them simply as the set of characteristics which are **not** measured by standardized tests. Since standardized tests measure cognitive skills, these other elements were grouped under the umbrella term: “noncognitive skills”, a confusing term which may have led to the lack of widespread awareness of the importance of noncognitive skills to long term success. This cluster of interrelated determinants of student success include: a sense of belonging in academic settings, belief in one’s own capabilities (growth mindset, self-efficacy), academic skills, perseverance, learning strategies and academic behaviors.

Academic mindsets are malleable

Researchers have asserted that the four academic mindsets are the foundational elements of noncognitive skills. These academic mindsets are the salient elements of noncognitive skills because they are so malleable that they can be altered through short term interventions. In contrast, perseverance is less malleable, but is influenced by the presence of the four academic mindsets (Farrington, 2012).

The benefit of implementing recommendations

Partners has already modified the evaluation design, demonstrating their characteristic responsiveness to emerging findings in the field. Continuing to implement these changes will provide more accurate feedback for program implementers and teachers at each site, thereby maximizing shifts in teacher practice and improvements in long term student outcomes.