

Icebergs, The Titanic, and School Culture



By Mel Riddile, Ed.D.

Every time I see a History Channel promotion on the sinking of the Titanic, which was, at the time, the largest movable manmade object in the world, I am reminded of the power of icebergs. The scary thing about icebergs is not what you see above the surface of the water. Ninety percent of an iceberg is below the surface hidden from our view. Yet, it is that invisible part that can have the most impact. The world's greatest ship of its time was sunk by what it could not see below the surface.

School culture is like an iceberg. There are aspects of our culture that are visible above the surface. These visible parts of our school culture include the master schedule, handbooks, bell schedules, the physical appearance of our school, how we talk about students, how we label students, and how we make decisions. In fact, just about every thing we say and do is in some way a reflection of our school culture.

Improving student performance--placing all students on the pathway to college and career readiness--is a much different outcome than sending a select group of students to postsecondary education and training. Changing the outcome means changing our behavior.

School leaders who focus only on the visible aspects of culture do so to the detriment of their school. Focusing only on the visible aspects of school culture is like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic in hopes that somehow that will keep our ship from sinking. Lasting, sustainable change

can only be accomplished by addressing both the visible and invisible, but very real, aspects of school culture.

90% of what happens on the outside is a direct result of what happens on the inside. In a school, culture is what happens when the classroom door closes. Research continues to demonstrate that the best in school predictor of student achievement is the teacher-student relationship, which is hard to see and difficult to quantify.

What we do, our behavior, is an overt manifestation of what goes on below the surface--our thinking, values, beliefs, attitudes and mindsets. It is that invisible aspect that drives our behavior. It is our OS, our operating system.

Our mindset is our own individual operating system and the collective OS of our school. Our mindsets drive our behavior. If we believe that, through work and effort, all our students can reach high levels of achievement, that mindset focuses and directs what we do to ensure student success. Why would I invest in literacy programs and afterschool tutoring if I didn't believe that work and effort would improve student achievement?

Given the choice, I would choose a staff and a school with a staff who believed that student achievement is the result of what we teach, hard work, and effort, and practice--a growth mindset--over a school with a more experienced and knowledgeable staff. Why? Because the changes we face in readying each and every student for post secondary education and training and in implementing new, higher standards will require a complete retraining of our entire teaching staff as well as a new set of expectations and attitudes.

Today, it is not as much about what we know as about what we are willing to learn. In this rapidly changing environment, a school and a school leader with the right mindset will be unstoppable.

Do you have a growth mindset? Do you believe that the harder your students work, the smarter they get? What about your teachers?

Once you are tuned in to the importance of attitude and mindset, your reticular activating system (RAS) finds example after example of the importance of having the right frame of mind. Barbara Blackburn [reminded us](#) "how you view the potential of your students matters most." Blackburn continued:

"One of the most powerful lessons I learned from my students was the importance of my vision. I needed to see them as more than who they were at that moment."

"I found they needed me to believe they are butterflies when they were most acting like worms! What about your students? Any of them need you to not only believe in them, but to believe FOR them?"

[Education Daily](#) reported that a panel of experts at the recent ASCD Conference reminded school leaders that we need to help our teachers adjust their attitudes (mindsets) about "struggling learners" to help them succeed.

"The first step to changing how teachers view struggling learners is to stop talking about it "as if it's part of a student's identity." Struggling is situational; it's not a characteristic." Depending on the environment teachers create. Students can either struggle, or not struggle. said Doug Fisher, professor of language and literacy education at San Diego State University, San Diego."

The panelists said teachers' attitudes about students' potential for learning impacts how they make instructional decisions. Believing all students can excel and that the teacher can control the learning environment can "propel teachers to go the extra mile for students."

Caution

No school leader can wait until the mindsets of our staff changes before we begin the important work of improving student performance. We must pave the road as we walk on it. That means that we change behaviors while we are working on our mindsets. How are you impacting the mindset of your staff?