Introduction to Self-Efficacy

**Overview**

Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability to succeed in achieving an outcome or reaching a goal. An internal belief, self-efficacy is related to whether a student believes that s/he has sufficient control over his/her environment in order to succeed. High self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one’s own motivation, behavior, and environment and allows students to become advocates for their own needs and supports. Decades of research show that self-efficacy is a valid predictor of students’ motivation and learning. 

Students with high levels of self-efficacy participate more in class, work harder, persist longer, and have fewer adverse emotional reactions when encountering difficulties than students with lower self-efficacy. High self-efficacy can also motivate students to use specific learning strategies and to engage in self-directed learning.

**Why This Matters:** Self-efficacy is an important skill that can boost student achievement and emotional health and wellbeing.

**Better Goals:** Students who are confident that they have sufficient control over their environments that allow them to accomplish certain tasks are more likely to set challenging goals and commit themselves to achieving them. Perceived self-efficacy toward a particular task is a better predictor of success than actual ability. In a study of math effort, regardless of ability level, students with high self-efficacy completed more problems correctly and reworked more of the ones they missed.

**Motivation to Succeed:** Self-efficacy affects how much effort students put forth and how long they preserve when tasks are challenging because students with high self-efficacy understand that they, more than other people or circumstances, determine outcomes and future results. For 9th and 10th grade students, academic self-efficacy predicted final course grades and the types of goals that students set for themselves.

**Openness to Risk:** Strong self-efficacy leads students to take chances in their work, exploring topics and subjects that are new to them since students who are confident in their abilities to perform and to react to challenges are less worried about failure. This extends beyond class, as students with high self-efficacy are more likely to consider a variety of career options as worth pursuing. Once a path is chosen, they also tend to prepare more and show persistence in pursuing their goals.

**Sample questions we asked students in the Spring 2014 SEL Pilot:** How confident are you about the following at school:

- I can earn an A in my classes
- I can do well on all my tests, even when they’re difficult
- I can master the hardest topics in my classes
- I can meet all the learning goals my teachers set

Figure 1. Bandura’s model of Self-Efficacy
# How is Self-Efficacy Related to Growth Mindset?

**Self-Efficacy**  
“Ultimately, I am responsible for how successful I am, not my teacher, my parents, or what class I end up in. I affect my future and the decisions I make impact how successful I am”

Related to the growth mindset, self-efficacy is the belief that one can succeed (Bandura, 1986). Students must believe that they can achieve their goals, however they define those goals. If students think they need help or resources, they should be able to identify the resources or people who can help them work towards their goals.

**Growth Mindset**  
“My intelligence is something that grows with effort. Even if something is hard, I believe that if I work at it, I am likely to improve”

Students with a growth mindset see effort as what makes people smart, they are motivated to focus on continued growth, and they persist in the face of setbacks. On the other hand, when students see intelligence or abilities as fixed, they shy away from challenge, and they disengage when things get hard (Mueller & Dweck, 1998).

Growth Mindset and Self Efficacy are closely related, but distinct ideas that can be developed in different ways:

- If you gave a student control over environmental factors (e.g. "you don't have to sit at your desk; you can sit anywhere you want in the classroom that helps you get your work done"), that might help increase their sense of self-efficacy, but it would be unlikely to increase their growth mindset.
- A student with high growth mindset, but low self-efficacy might believe that it is possible to get smarter with effort but that it is not worth expending that effort since “my teacher doesn’t like me anyway” or “kids like me don’t go to college no matter how smart they are.”

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