

ExpandedED Schools: Developing Mindsets to Support Academic Success

Research Brief

The national demonstration of ExpandedED Schools, The After-School Corporation's (TASC) expanded learning model, was launched in 2011-12 in New York City, Baltimore, and New Orleans. The ExpandedED Schools demonstration is being evaluated by Policy Studies Associates (PSA) and is rolling out at a time when there is heightened awareness among educators, researchers, and youth development experts about the importance of cultivating certain attitudes and dispositions in students that are precursors to academic performance. Reflecting this interest, this brief examines the ways in which ExpandedED Schools contribute to the development of essential academic mindsets that support student learning and success. The findings in this brief draw on data collected by PSA researchers through observations, interviews, and a survey administered to students in each of the 11 national demonstration schools in spring 2013. The first section reviews research evidence of the relationship between academic mindsets and student performance as well as the potential for interventions to impact these mindsets. The second section describes how learning opportunities offered in ExpandedED Schools enhance mindsets and lay the foundation for success. The brief presents evidence that by working together strategically and collaboratively, schools and community partner organizations can create a positive environment that enables students to take control of their own learning and gain confidence in their ability to succeed.

Section 1: Research Base on Academic Mindsets

The ExpandedED Schools Partnership Approach

The ExpandedED Schools national demonstration led by TASC increases the amount of learning time in the school day by approximately 30 percent through strategic partnerships between schools and community-based organizations. The ExpandedED Schools model encourages schools and partner organizations to maximize longer school days by jointly planning and delivering a balanced curriculum that engages students in learning and helps them develop skills for academic, social, and emotional success. Community partner organizations and schools together develop activities that balance academic rigor with enrichment activities, such as art, music, and physical education, providing a holistic learning experience.

ExpandedED Schools aim to transform the learning environment through instruction that reflects students' interests, enhances their sense of belonging in school, and helps students to see the value of academic work to their life beyond school. Students participate in learning activities that are interesting, engaging, and tailored to their needs. Undergirding the ExpandedED Schools model is the belief that partnership with a community organization increases a school's capacity to

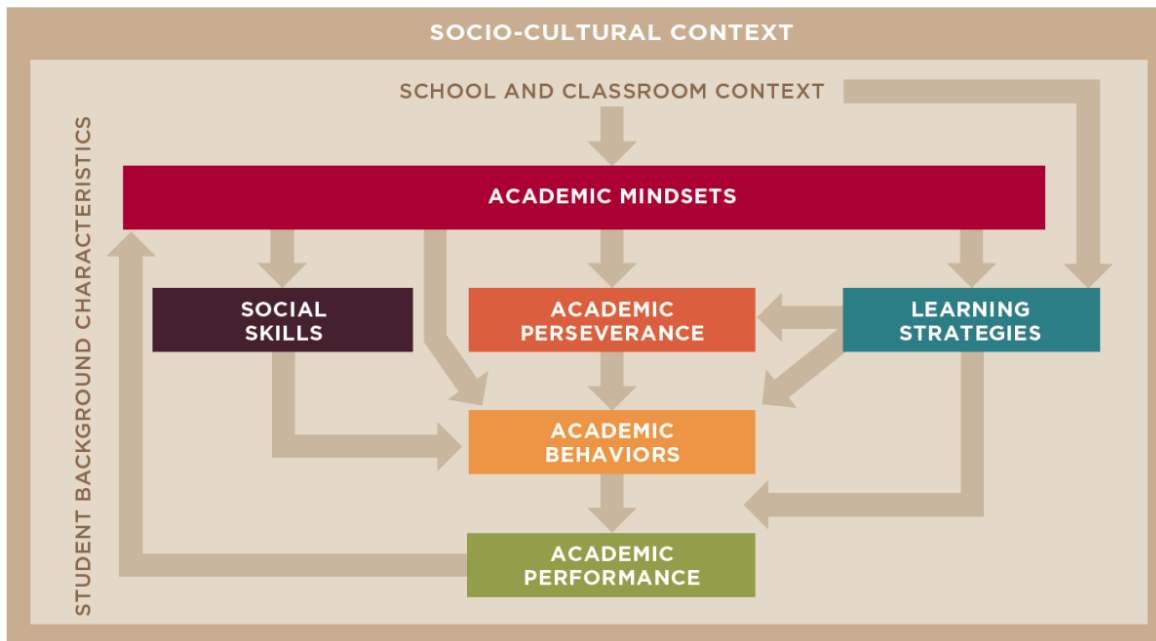
provide students with opportunities to hone skills as well as identify and develop personal strengths, attitudes, and behaviors.

Prior research has identified linkages between characteristics of the school environment, student motivation and engagement in learning, and ultimately student academic and outcomes (Eccles, Wigfield, Reuman, MacIver, & Feldlaufer, 1993; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). This brief explores the ways in which experiences provided through partnerships at ExpandedED Schools build and strengthen the foundation for students to be successful learners.

Research Evidence: Academic Mindsets Are Associated with Performance

A growing research base explores student competencies and dispositions that are associated with learning. While researchers vary in the terminology they use to describe and categorize such skills, a commonly used phrase, and the one this research brief employs, is "academic mindsets." This section of the brief provides an overview of the research to date on the relationship of these mindsets and dispositions to student performance and success.

Exhibit 1
A Hypothesized Model of How Five Noncognitive Factors Affect Academic Performance
within a Classroom/School and Larger Socio-Cultural Context*



*Figure 2.1 from *Teaching adolescents to become learners*, page 12, Farrington et al. (2012), University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.

A comprehensive review released by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (Farrington, Roderick, Allensworth, Nagaoka, Keyes, Johnson, & Beechum, 2012) offers a framework of mindsets and skills related to academic performance, replicated in Exhibit 1 above. In this review, the authors define academic mindsets as the “beliefs, attitudes, or ways of perceiving oneself in relation to learning and intellectual work that support academic performance.”

The authors categorize factors found to support student performance, paying special attention to whether these factors are “malleable” and can be developed through targeted interventions. These factors include (1) academic mindsets; (2) social skills; (3) academic perseverance; (4) learning strategies; and (5) academic behaviors. According to the authors, academic mindsets serve as “precursors to or motivators for participation in deeper learning experiences,” and, in this framework, academic mindsets are the foundation for the development of other skills, all of which ultimately affect academic performance. The resulting performance in turn reinforces the mindsets, forming a feedback loop.

This framework developed by Farrington et al. (2012) emphasizes that school and classroom context play an important role in the development of academic

mindsets. The framework also suggests that changes in school structures and practices—such as the addition of learning time and increased enrichment opportunities—can positively and directly affect student mindsets.

Other researchers have also highlighted the importance of context in the development of academic mindsets. A review for the U.S. Department of Education examined the role that school environments can play in the development of these mindsets and concluded that challenging experiences that resonate with student interests, offered within supportive environments that convey high expectations and emphasize effort over ability, can help students develop grit, tenacity, perseverance, and other traits that lead to success (Shechtman, DeBarger, Dornsife, Rosier, & Yarnall (2013). This review highlighted three competencies in particular: (1) academic mindsets, especially students’ ability to perceive themselves as successful learners; (2) effortful control, in which students learn to focus on the task at hand, and (3) actionable skills for students to deal with challenges. Dweck, Walton, and Cohen (2011) termed these mindsets and skills “academic tenacity,” describing academically tenacious students as those who see school as a “route to future goals,” engage in challenging tasks to learn new things, and are not dissuaded by difficulty.

Other research reviews have similarly identified competencies that are positively correlated with academic performance. For instance, research found that students who were successful in school were active participants in their own learning, were able to work well with other students, and communicated effectively and asked for help when needed (Salovey & Sluyter, 1997). In addition, research demonstrated that students' belief in their ability to learn and to perform well in school predicted their level of academic performance (Bandura, 1997). The Council of Chief State School Officers (2011) has also noted that the Common Core State Standards encourage "habits of mind," such as self-directed learning, communication skills, and perseverance, that enable students to succeed not just in the core academic areas but in other areas of life as well.

Research Evidence: Instructional Strategies Can Help Students Develop Academic Mindsets

There is emerging consensus that implementing instructional strategies designed to foster the development and strengthening of academic mindsets may be a route to improving academic performance. As reported by Devaney and Yohalem (2012), a range of organizations, from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), to Corporate Voices for Working Families, to the American Association of School Administrators, has called for increased opportunities to help students develop these mindsets.

Research has also found that programs that focused on building the social-emotional learning skills of students were effective in improving students' sense of connection to school and improving achievement (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Schechtman et al. (2013) identified characteristics of interventions that could transform students' experiences and achievement in school, finding that teachers and schools that fostered high levels of student performance: (1) made students feel connected and supported (promoting a sense of belonging); (2) created challenges and held students to high standards (promoting a growth mindset demonstrative of the value of effort); and (3) provided cognitive and motivational support (promoting effective self-regulation).

Section 2: Evidence of Practice: Academic Mindsets in ExpandedED Schools

The Role of ExpandedED Schools in Promoting Academic Mindsets

In the ExpandedED Schools model, partnering with community-based organizations with expertise in youth development enhances the capacity of schools to create challenging and engaging learning environments that address a range of student interests and needs. The partnerships are rooted in a philosophy of shared leadership, aligned contributions, and collective responsibility. Through joint and strategic planning, the school and its lead community partner offer complementary learning experiences that balance academics with enrichment and social-emotional learning opportunities that help students develop mindsets that will enable them to succeed. This balanced curriculum can foster interest in learning and motivate students to engage with core academic content (Devaney & Yohalem, 2012).

In spring 2013, PSA researchers conducted observations in ExpandedED Schools and asked school teams to describe efforts to help students develop academic mindsets, and administered a student survey. Based on these data, the next section of this describes program approaches that fostered positive mindsets in each of the three domains of competencies identified by the National Research Council (2012) as underlying the skills and behaviors needed for success:

- **Interpersonal**, including communication, collaboration, responsibility, and conflict resolution
- **Intrapersonal**, including flexibility, initiative, appreciation for diversity, and the ability to reflect on one's own learning
- **Cognitive**, including critical thinking, information literacy, reasoning and argumentation, and innovation

Interpersonal Development

The interpersonal domain of academic mindsets, as defined by the National Research Council (2012), includes competencies such as communication, collaboration, responsibility, and conflict resolution. The activities offered by community partners in ExpandedED Schools often provide opportunities for students to work together in ongoing, meaningful ways that foster a culture in which students develop strong and respectful relationships.

ExpandedED Schools create a welcoming environment characterized by positive relationships. On the survey administered by PSA, most students reported that they felt a strong sense of community in the school (Exhibit 2). More than 90 percent of students reported it was “very true” or “somewhat true” that they felt safe and comfortable at school, that the teachers cared about them, that they liked school, and that school was a fun place in which to be.

Strategies observed in ExpandedED Schools that may contribute to the development of these mindsets are discussed below.

ExpandedED Schools implement specific programs to improve the learning environment. As illustrated in the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research framework in Exhibit 1, the classroom and school context play an important role in setting the stage for learning. Some schools offered activities that explicitly focused on developing a positive interpersonal culture within the school. For example, one school used the Heartwood Ethics Curriculum for Children throughout the expanded day, taking a literature-based approach to teaching students positive character traits, such as loyalty and honesty. Another implemented the Competent Kids, Caring Communities (CKCC) curriculum developed by the Ackerman Institute for the Family and designed to promote life skills.

In these schools, teachers and community educators both used these curricula as part of a deliberate effort to help students develop strategies to interact productively and to build connections with each other. This joint implementation also promoted a continuous positive atmosphere throughout the longer school day.

ExpandedED Schools help students learn strategies to deal with social and personal issues. Staff at several schools noted that many students face hardships in their personal lives and that they had developed activities specifically designed to teach students skills to deal with these issues. These activities helped students learn to focus on academics without being distracted by personal concerns. For example, in one school, a social work intern led a discussion group for elementary students focused on issues such as bullying, respect, and friendship. The social worker also led a group for middle school girls in which they discussed social issues, wrote in journals, and gave each other feedback on problems they were facing.

In another school, students participated in daily circle time with a “feelings check-in.” During this time, students talked about things that were going well for them as well as things that were difficult. Community educators encouraged students to talk positively about things other students had done to build camaraderie and cooperation. A middle school teacher commented:

Sometimes we have a talk session, a rap session, if you will, to kind of clear up the air. And sometimes we just talk about how you’re feeling. What are you doing? How was your weekend? And those types of things. I try to keep it very, very comfortable, inviting because I want them to come back....

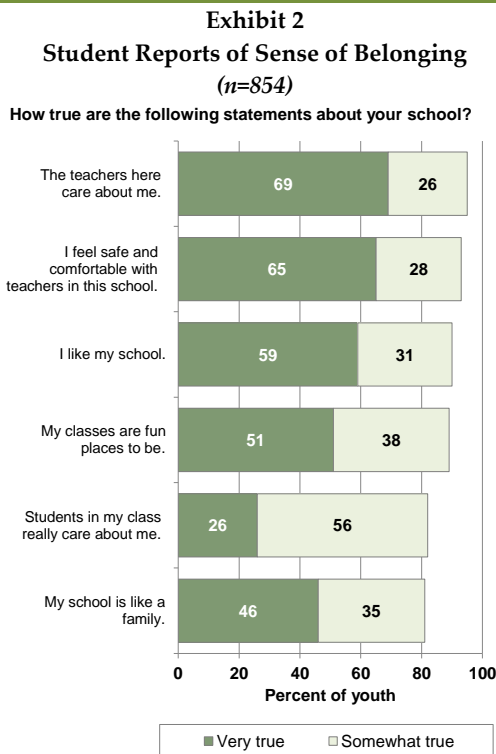


Exhibit reads: Sixty-nine percent of students in ExpandedED Schools said it was “very true” that the teachers at their school cared about them. Twenty-six percent said it was “somewhat true.”

By providing safe spaces for students to discuss concerns and by teaching strategies for dealing with personal issues, schools can reduce in-school conflicts, foster environments in which students can learn, and provide students with skills to equip them for interpersonal situations throughout their lives.

I want them to learn and we want them to get the skills and build up on their academics. We won't be able to do that if they don't want to come. So I want to make it inviting, comfortable.
 –Teacher

Intrapersonal Development

The intrapersonal domain of academic mindsets includes skills and competencies such as flexibility, initiative, appreciation for diversity, and the ability to reflect on one's learning (National Research Council, 2012). While the interpersonal domain includes skills that pertain primarily to relationships with others, the skills in the intrapersonal domain are related to perceptions of self.

ExpandedED Schools help students build confidence in their academic success and abilities. Analyses of survey data found that students had high levels of confidence in their ability to be successful in school (Exhibit 3). More than three-quarters of students in ExpandedED Schools reported that “always” or “most of the time” they felt that they could be successful in school on several measures, including finishing homework, reading, taking tests, and getting good grades.

ExpandedED Schools help students develop intrapersonal mindsets by exposing them to opportunities through which they identify and develop personal strengths and skills that can transfer to other areas of life and learning. For instance, when discussing the benefits of the drama enrichments offered through the community partner organization, one principal commented on the persistence that students learned through the arts:

All that working towards performance, whether it be in music, in dance, in theater, requires the exertion of a lot of self-discipline, sticking to it. Grit, if you will. That working together with other people, dealing with different kinds of feedback, not just feel-good feedback, and being held to a really high standard. So it's really like a dramatic play of everything you need to be able to do in your life every time you do one of those performances.

Exhibit 3
Student Reports of Academic Effort and Success
 (n=896)

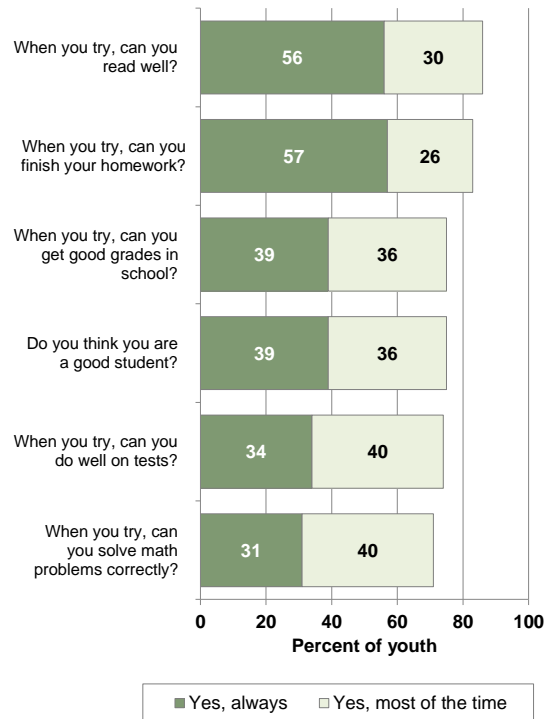


Exhibit reads: Fifty-six percent of students in ExpandedED Schools said “Yes, always” in response to the question, “When you try, can you read well?” Thirty percent said “Yes, most of the time.”

In addition, enrichment activities can teach students to focus in ways that can be transferred to other areas of learning. For example, one school promoted movement and mindfulness by offering tai chi sessions during lunch. Tai chi became integrated throughout the learning day. School staff called upon students to use tai chi to both calm themselves when they were getting antsy and loud, and to wake themselves up when they were sleepy or lethargic. The principal commented, “That to me is success right there. This is something where you tap into that inner person, then he or she is able to focus.”

ExpandedED Schools offer opportunities for students to develop personal responsibility for learning. In one school, both the school staff and community educators intentionally worked to develop students’ self-regulation skills, or the ability to recognize and manage their feelings, by using the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility 4Rs program, complemented by a Communication, Accountability, Respect, and Effort (CARE) initiative.

We're very big on social-emotional responsibility. Self-regulation, behavior management, and teaching them to take that a step further and think about their own academics. Think about their own learning processes: how they learn best; what they think they'll be doing in the future...and having them have a hand in kind of building that for themselves.

–ExpandED Director

In another school, staff used enrichment activities as explicit opportunities to teach students to manage their own learning. For example, during an observed chess activity, the instructor consistently emphasized that students were engaged in a learning process, reminding them that “it’s not about right and wrong, we’re learning to play chess.” The instructor responded to a student who was upset over a game by stating, “We don’t get upset and bent out of shape over everything; we have to be disciplined.” In this same school, middle school girls wrote books about how to handle frustrations and problems and learned ways to manage their stress; there was a stress ball in the room for their use and the teacher worked with them to develop and use strategies to avoid immediately reacting negatively to difficult situations.

ExpandED Schools give students control over their learning experiences. Most of the schools allowed students to exercise choice in their selection of enrichment activities at one or more times during the school year. Choice helps students to see that they are active participants in their learning, but also that with choice comes responsibility. In an effort to teach students about the importance of honoring commitments and sticking with something, one school encouraged students to complete the activity they selected even if they decide that they don’t like it. The school principal explained:

We try to keep them in their choice because one of the emotional things they need to learn is, “I make a choice, and then I make it work,” otherwise there are kids [who] would bounce to a different choice every week. And that’s a piece of learning. Some people get it and other people, it takes a lot of work to get them to see well, maybe you should be a little more thoughtful about your choices. You chose it for a reason, and you’re going to be there. Not forever, but you’re going to be here, and why don’t you see what’s in here that you find valuable.

Another school gave students choices and leadership in planning a field trip, which empowered them to feel ownership over their learning experience. The students

spent time researching activities to do and sights to see in a part of the city that they had not experienced before. The ExpandED Director commented that:

When they decided to go there, it was a really good choice and they loved it. And they felt the control, they exemplified the control, and their behavior was superb. I did not have one incident and that’s a great, great experience to go on a trip with middle schoolers and not have one incident.... It was wonderful. But that’s because they felt their power, they felt like “this is our trip, we planned it, we did it.”

ExpandED Schools set high expectations for students as members of the school community. One school piloted the use of a tool developed by TASC (and adapted from Angela Duckworth’s KIPP Character Growth Cards and Devereux Center for Resilient Children’s Student Strengths Assessment) as part of student assessment within the school. Both teachers and community educators completed a character report card for each student, which were then shared during parent-teacher conferences along with traditional report card grades. This approach reinforced the expectation that the school values character traits, such as self-control, curiosity, and grit, as an important part of learning.

Cognitive Development

We’re building lifelong learners and not just learners for today, but learners [who] will be able to take what they’ve learned in that classroom and apply it to other things. And that’s the kind of kids we want to build, having them be prepared for the real world and all the good things that are going on.

–Teacher

The cognitive domain of academic mindsets, as defined by the National Research Council (2012), includes skills such as critical thinking, information literacy, reasoning and argumentation, and innovation. Much of the enrichment programming offered in ExpandED Schools targets these processes by engaging students’ minds in different ways to help them develop skills to be effective learners. These opportunities allow students to be successful outside the classroom, demonstrating that they can achieve.

ExpandED Schools create an atmosphere where education is valued. The survey asked students about future academic plans and the extent to which they saw a connection between what they were learning in school

and their futures (Exhibit 4). Nearly all students responded “very true” to statements about the importance of school and about their motivation to succeed academically.

Exhibit 4
Student Reports of Educational Motivation (n=855)

How true are the following statements?

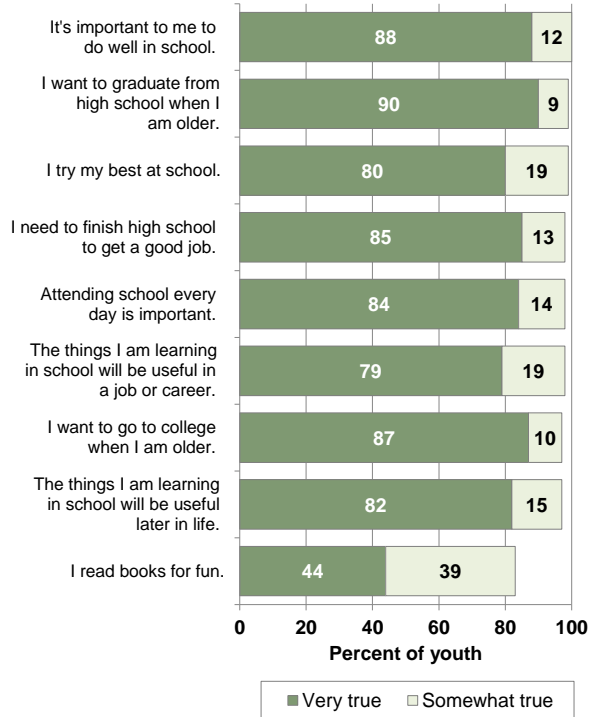


Exhibit reads: Eighty-eight percent of students in Expanded Schools said it was “very true” that it is important they do well in school. An additional 12 percent said this statement was “somewhat true.”

Expanded Schools offer students opportunities to engage in activities in which they can develop, master, and showcase their skills and talents. According to one principal, the learning opportunities offered through the community partner organization were “things where kids can feel that they’re excelling.... Maybe they [the students] are not the best academically, but there are other ways to showcase their talents.... We’re seeing kids with broader interests, and we’re excited.” Other staff in this school described how participation in musical theater programming allowed students to shine, even when they struggled with traditional school-day instruction. This was particularly the case with English language learners and shy students who surprised the staff with their ability to perform in front of an audience. School staff also reported that arts-based learning

opportunities such as drumming sometimes brought out students who were introverted during class time, and empowered them to become more engaged in core academic areas.

In theater programming at another school, students developed concepts and wrote scripts. This allowed them to express themselves, build their vocabularies and writing skills, and connect with their emotions. These activities were led by a teacher in partnership with community educators and served as a creative outlet for engaging a group of diverse students.

For some of our kids [who] struggle academically, I think that also helps to build their confidence level up and helps them to work a little harder academically because of the non-academic things that they do excel in. I've seen a lot of our students because of the opportunities that they've had with the non-academic activities, it's kind of like the academic piece is easier. They're a little more like, "Oh, okay, I can do this" because they're having a lot of success with the non-academic portion.

—Community Educator

Expanded Schools help students discover interests they may want to pursue in the future. In one school, students selected “majors” and “minors” for enrichment programming, encouraging them to begin thinking about the path they envision for themselves. According to the ExpandedED Director, through this approach the school helped students hone “their thinking about what they’re going to choose going forward.... If we put a child on a major track, then it’s helping to promote their skills and their confidence in these things while giving them a higher expectation of their own skills to be able to push forward in these content areas.”

Another ExpandedED Director commented that enrichment opportunities helped students identify and develop talents that they could follow into a career. For example, some students were talented performers “but didn’t want to participate [in performances] because they were ridiculed in the neighborhood. No one ever nurtured that gift. [But they] could be in broadcasting, a news reporter.” To help these students identify how these talents could help them succeed, the community partner reached out to a local singer, who came to the school to perform and tell her story: “It’s not only telling them that they can do it, but also showing them a real-life example.”

ExpandedED Schools offer engaging learning opportunities that can increase students' academic motivation and confidence. Enrichment activities are ways for schools to “hook the students in; they want to come because of those extra activities” that interest and motivate them, such as karate or basketball. According to one principal:

It taps into some of the outside motivators for coming to school other than the academics. So you will have kids that may come [to school] because they get a chance to be a part of the basketball team or they get to be a part of the violin instruction or something like that. It does serve as a motivator.

Several schools also helped students make connections between the school-day curriculum and the enrichment activities that stimulate them. In one of these schools, a teacher commented that the robotics activities offered through the community partner helped students develop a thought process that could be applied to successful performance on the state test:

I know that makes a connection for them, understanding the process of doing something.... You've got to be able to do certain things and a certain process, a certain way following a certain sequence of things to do. The question [on the test] might ask [students to] explain how you've done something similar to what you've read in the story in terms of sequencing. The students are able to say, "Well, in robotics, I was able to first do this, then do this, next do that" and to explain the process of doing a certain thing.

Reflections

The partnership between a school and a community partner organization is a core component of TASC's ExpandedED Schools model. The lessons learned through the evaluation of the national demonstration of ExpandedED Schools provide an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which partnerships can help deliver a comprehensive and balanced learning experience for students. In turn, research indicates that holistic experiences that help students develop positive mindsets and dispositions towards learning can contribute to their academic engagement and success.

The review of research and analysis of data collected about the ExpandedED Schools approach, summarized in this brief, suggests that a school and a community partner organization can together encourage the growth of academic mindsets when they:

- Collaboratively identify and implement strategies that build on the school's and community partner organization's strengths to explicitly promote a **positive learning environment** throughout the expanded school day
- Help students access tools and build **self-regulation skills** to address personal challenges and distractions that may be barriers to learning
- Offer opportunities for students to engage in ongoing **project-based experiences** that demonstrate the process of committing to, practicing, and persevering through tasks
- Set high expectations and encourages students to practice **taking control of their own learning**
- Plan arts-based or other enrichment activities through which students can learn, practice, and showcase their skills **while becoming confident that they can succeed academically**

With these elements in place, a community partner organization can enhance the capacity of a school to ensure that students are ready to learn, engaged in the educational process, and successful in school and life.

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