

All Kids Can Learn If...

Purpose: This activity starts a discussion on the extent and conditions teachers and administrators may have in believing all students can learn. The discussion is intended to help build a professional learning community by examining this foundational set of beliefs, and the actions associated with those beliefs. The ultimate focus is on creating a school-wide environment that can increase student learning.

Preparation:

- Plan for using the maximum time available, up to 2 hours.
- Copy "All Kids Can Learn If..." (below) for each participant (or transfer to computer to project)
- Prepare PowerPoint slides, white board or chart paper to post the questions (in bold below), and to record a summary.
- Read through the suggested agenda and make any changes necessary for your group. Potentially contentious groups may benefit from an agreement of confidentiality (what happens here stays here, not discussed outside convening the whole group.)
- You will not actively participate. Remember to continuously maintain your role as facilitator, which is neutral and supportive.

Suggested Agenda:

1. If your staff is large, divide into smaller working groups.
2. Provide a copy of the four statements and expanded information (below) to all participants.
3. Ask each person to
 - Individually read and **select the one statement that best describes your own beliefs.**
4. Then, still working alone, write down their thoughts in response to:
 - **Why did you select the statement you did? Why didn't you select others?**
 - **Which do you think is the prevailing choice across the school?**
5. Now, ask that volunteers discuss their thoughts within their small group.
 - Since this can be a sensitive subject, a person's right to "pass" should be ensured. You may want to use a round-robin protocol such as everyone having 1-2 minutes to say what their reactions to the statements are, while others listen and do not comment. Then open the discussion to overall statements, asking all to refrain from personal comments about others.
6. Then, launch a discussion to connect these beliefs to learning. Ask all participants to work in small groups to generate answers to the following:
 - **For each of the four statements, what would you expect to see or hear in the classroom or school?**
 - Note: A more speedy facilitation method would be to have 4 (or 8) small groups each work on doing so for one statement. Then have them present their work, and ask others to ask clarifying questions or suggest additions or deletions. Cycle through all four reports.
 - Collect the responses by having them recorded on chart paper or slides on laptops.
7. Finally, summarize this exercise by asking one or two questions such as those below, or your own reflective summary method.
 - **What did you notice?** (or similar open-ended prompt)
 - **Can you offer a summary statement about the relationship between our expectations of the students and our classroom or school environment?** (Accept all)

And if there seems to be an atmosphere conducive to productive consensus:

- **What may be some next steps, based on this exercise/information, which we could take to improve the culture of our school and improve student success?** (Accept all, ponder and prioritize later. Bring up at next meeting on this topic.)
8. Having broken the ice, this conversation should continue. At least ask teachers to reflect on what

happened, and when smaller groups have meetings ask them to talk about follow-up and report back to you. (Perhaps you can use one of the questions above.)

Brainstorm with the science leadership team what follow-up actions may be appropriate. Make a commitment as to when you will revisit the topic. Set some goals with the long-term aim of moving toward actions that support high expectations for student success.

All Kids Can Learn If¹

Read each statement and description, and reflect on your beliefs about student abilities. Choose the statement that best describes your beliefs.

1. All kids can learn based on their ability.

We believe that all students can learn, but the extent of their learning is determined by their innate ability or aptitude. This aptitude is relatively fixed and, as teachers, we have little influence over the extent of student learning. It is our job to create multiple programs or tracks that address the different abilities of students, and then guide students to the appropriate program. This ensures that students have access to the proper curriculum and an optimum opportunity to master material appropriate to their ability.

2. All kids can learn if they take advantage of the opportunity to learn.

We believe that all students can learn if they elect to put forth the necessary effort. It is our job to provide all students with this opportunity to learn, and we fulfill our responsibility when we attempt to present lessons that are both clear and engaging. In the final analysis, however, while it is our job to teach, it is the students' job to learn. We should invite students to learn, but honor their decision if they elect not to do so.

3. All kids can learn if we accept responsibility for ensuring their growth.

We believe that all students can learn and that it is our responsibility to help each student demonstrate some growth as a result of their experience with us. The extent of the growth will be determined by a combination of the student's innate ability and effort. It is our job to encourage all students to learn as much as possible, but the extent of their learning is dependent on factors over which we have little control.

4. All kids can learn if we establish high standards of learning that we expect all students to achieve.

We believe that all students can and must learn at relatively high levels of achievement. It is our job to create an environment in our classrooms that result in this high level of performance. We are confident that with our support and help, students can master challenging academic material, and we expect them to do so. We are prepared to work collaboratively with colleagues, students, and parents to achieve this shared educational purpose.

¹ Eaker, Dufour & DuFour. (2002) *Getting Started: Reculturing schools to become professional learning communities*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree, pp. 141-2. This book is highly recommended for its practical advice, how-to's, forms, and case studies.