Developing Positive Personal Mindsets

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Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) are not static; they are constantly evolving to meet the changing needs of students. They promote academic and behavioral skill development by organizing support services along a continuum, with varying levels of support depending on student needs. MTSS is a widespread service delivery framework for good reasons—it provides coordinated, evidence-based, prevention-oriented services that emphasize the importance of culturally responsive care designed to meet the needs of all students. Historically, MTSS approaches focused on developing essential academic and behavioral skills. With increased awareness of the students' complex mental health needs, MTSS schools increasingly incorporate strategies and services to address students' overall mental well-being.

As part of your efforts to support student well-being, we encourage you to consider how your MTSS contributes to developing positive personal mindsets essential for students' overall well-being (Perkins et al., 2021). Mindsets are powerful beliefs that shape how adolescents perceive themselves and the world around them, directly impacting their thoughts, emotions, and actions.

It is important to stop and think about the broader purpose of MTSS systems: promoting students' holistic development and well-being (Flook, 2019). This brief presents several ideas to encourage your MTSS team to explore practical strategies for promoting well-being.

Specifically, how does your MTSS consider perspectives that help students develop positive personal mindsets by:

(1) affirming their right to self-determination,
(2) promoting growth mindsets,
(3) nurturing their strengths and assets, and
(4) enhancing the school climate to support autonomy?

These four considerations provide a foundation to help all students thrive.

#1 | Affirm Students' Self-Determination Rights

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) acknowledges adolescents' fundamental human right to self-determination. Educators also affirm this right when considering the interests of students with special needs. For instance, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2015) acknowledges that **self-determined students understand themselves, interact effectively with others and can set and achieve goals purposefully.** They possess the skills, knowledge, and beliefs to pursue their goals autonomously.

Self-determination theory (SDT, Center for Self-Determination Theory, n.d.; Self-Determination Theory Conference, 2023) provides an essential framework for MTSS by addressing students' broader self-development needs. It is rooted in their pursuit to fulfill the fundamental psychological needs of **autonomy** (striving for independence, having the freedom to make choices, and feeling in control when making decisions); **competence** (the desire to feel capable in the pursuit of personal interests and mastering new skills); and **relatedness** (fostering positive social connections with family, peers, school, and community to satisfy the need to belong). Meeting these basic psychological needs during adolescence cultivates healthy academic and social development, enhances engagement, and increases life satisfaction, positive behaviors, and healthy psychological outcomes (La Guardia, 2009; Soenens et al., 2017).

Educators play a crucial role in fostering students' self-determination by offering them opportunities to:

(1) make choices, express opinions, and take on responsibilities;
(2) develop challenging skills and celebrate their accomplishments; and
(3) engage in positive social interactions that promote healthy relationships and a sense of connection with others.

SDT proposes that when students have autonomy and supportive social connections while learning and honing skills, they are more likely to feel internally driven (Ryan & Deci, 2020) to participate in school-related tasks, both academic and personal development.

#2 | Encourage Growth Mindsets

Self-determination involves understanding one's strengths and limitations and believing in one's capability and effectiveness, which requires continuous change, growth, and improvement. In education, research on growth mindset (Boys and Girls Club, 2023) has explored the advantages of encouraging students to envision their future selves as more capable and compassionate than their current selves.

Carol Dweck (2015) introduced the concept of a growth (incremental) mindset to describe students who believe they can improve their cognitive abilities through hard work, perseverance, and skill development. This mindset contrasts with a fixed (entity) mindset, in which students believe their learning capacity is unchangeable. Students with a growth mindset are more likely to:

(1) take on challenges,
(2) persist in the face of setbacks,
(3) view effort as a way to master skills,
(4) learn from feedback,
(5) find inspiration in others' success,
(6) develop a love for learning, and
(7) believe in personal development.

These characteristics contribute to achieving academic, personal, and life goals (Zhao et al., 2023).

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The initial focus on students' growth mindset emphasized that cognitive abilities and learning capacity are not fixed traits but can be developed and improved over time. The main goal for schools is to encourage students to become self-directed learners, not just to absorb information. Ideally, students will adopt mindsets that view themselves as self-motivated, lifelong learners.

The principles of incremental growth also apply to students' social-emotional learning and skills. Like cognitive growth mindsets, students develop mindsets about who they are and whether their behavior and character are open to growth and change. Students with a social-emotional growth mindset might believe "I am becoming a better person, or I am not the person I want to be—yet!" Encouraging a growth mindset and an orientation toward positive incremental behavioral and personal change can promote resilience, motivation, and students' belief in their capacity for personal development and improvement over time.

#3 | Nurture Student Strengths and Assets

Self-determination involves understanding one's strengths and limitations and believing in oneself as capable and effective. However, SDT and growth mindset do not specify which psychological and social mindsets support students' social-emotional development. While many MTSS teams embrace the Center for Social Emotional Learning competencies (self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making), other comprehensive models might offer nuanced ways for your MTSS to consider related student mindsets. One example is covitality in the California Healthy Kids Survey Social Emotional Health Module.


The covitality advantage is that the combined additive effects of different social and psychological skills and assets positively impact mental health more than they do individually. Like the cumulative risk principle in resilience research, having multiple skills and assets can enhance positive mental health and well-being. This concept aligns with SDT, which emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities for young people to take control of their personal and social development.

Figure 1 depicts the multidimensional covitality model, which includes the domains (and subdomains) of belief in self (self-efficacy, self-awareness, persistence), belief in others (family support, school support, peer support), emotional competence (emotional regulation, self-control, empathy), and engaged living (gratitude, zest, optimism). These domains are measured using the 36-item Social Emotional Health Survey-Secondary (Furlong et al., 2020). Research utilizing this framework has demonstrated that higher covitality scores correlate with health-promoting behaviors and positive mental well-being (Lenzi et al., 2015).

Figure 1. *Covitality Model Domains and Subdomains*

COVITALITY MODEL

Emotional Competence
- Empathy
- Self-Control
- Emotion Regulation

Engaged Living
- Gratitude
- Zest
- Optimism

Belief-in-Self
- Self-Efficacy
- Self-Awareness
- Persistence

Belief-in-Others
- Family Support
- Peer Support
- School Support
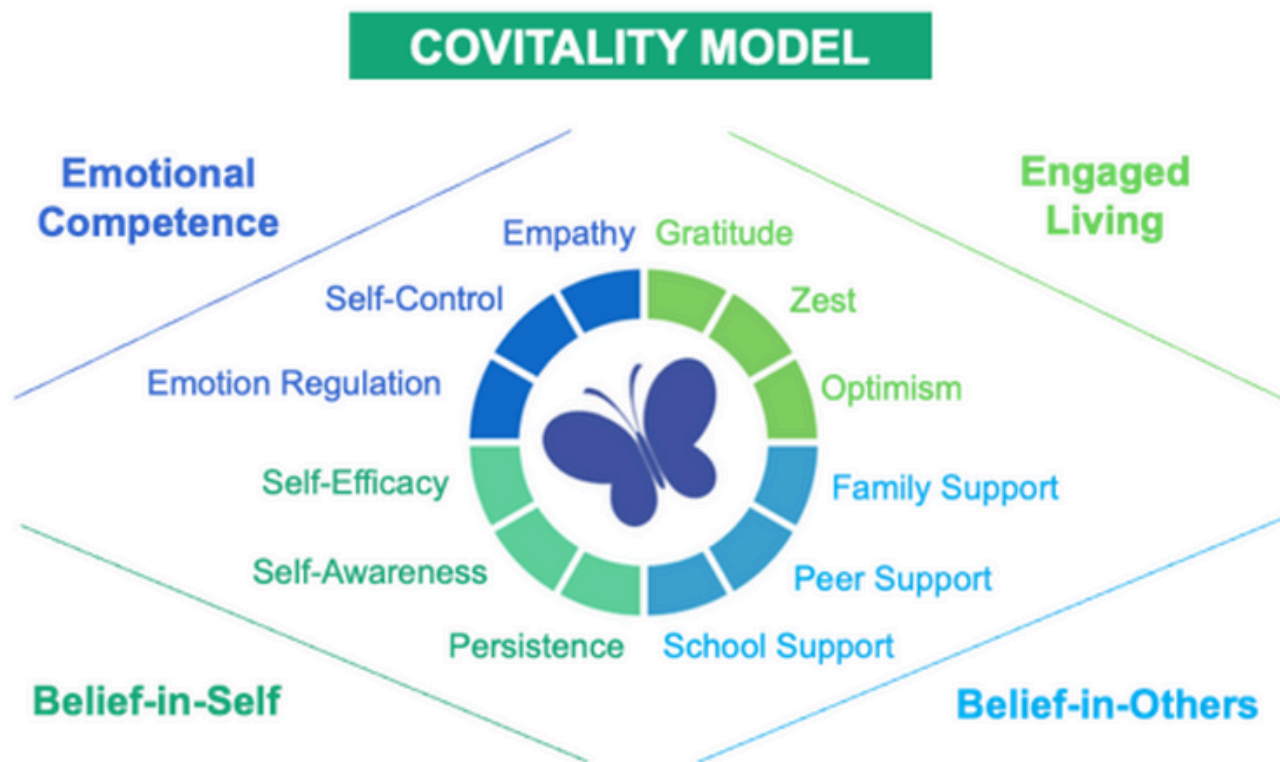
#4 | Enhance School Climate to Support Student Autonomy

The COVID-19 pandemic led to social distancing restrictions, which reduced adolescents' interactions with peers and adults at school and in their communities. Decreased social interaction may have made adolescents feel less engaged, and their participation in school and community activities was not recognized and valued. One study found that about one-third of secondary students reported significantly decreased social well-being (Furlong et al., 2024) between 2019 (pre-COVID-19) and 2022. Another study discovered that higher levels of school social support (Rodríguez-Rivas et al., 2023) helped mitigate the negative impacts on students' well-being during the pandemic.

A different way to think about building and maintaining school climate comes from studying the concept of mattering (Flett, 2022), which consists of three essential emotional and cognitive components. Students who feel they matter believe that they:

(1) are seen and noticed by their peers and adults in their community,
(2) make meaningful, acknowledged contributions, and
(3) are valued as human beings.

On the other hand, students who feel they do not matter may feel unnoticed or invisible in the school and social environments. For example, when a student returns to school after being absent for a few days, no teachers inquire if the student is well.

Educators and mental health professionals are aware of and concerned about how adolescents experience life. They aim to support accurate positive thoughts that foster higher social well-being. Encouraging young people's social well-being and school engagement (Lerner et al., 2003) is crucial as it helps them become fully engaged and contributing members of their communities. Research on youth development and resilience also emphasizes student engagement and meaningful community contributions (Cress et al., 2023) as essential elements.

Many schools incorporate service learning or community service activities into their curriculum and graduation requirements, recognizing the benefits of positively engaging young people as contributing community members. Adolescents receive positive feedback from community members, acknowledging them as consequential, valued citizens. Pedagogical practices such as purposeful project-based learning (Virtue & Hinnant-Crawford, 2019) can enhance students' sense of meaningful engagement and valued contributions.

Summary

The primary goal of this practice brief was to encourage educators to pause and reconsider the rationale behind implementing MTSS support services. It addressed balancing students' academic and behavioral goals while supporting their broader lifelong development. The brief emphasized cultivating positive personal mindsets to help students become better learners, citizens, and individuals. It also explored the idea of students being the primary agents of their own development and how educators can support self-determined students in shaping their own growth. MTSS provides a framework for schools to address these issues and create an environment where students' positive personal mindsets can flourish.

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Related Resources

Growth Mindset

- Burnette, J. L., Knouse, L. E., Billingsley, J., Earl, S., Pollack, J. M., & Hoyt, C. L. (2023). A systematic review of growth mindset intervention implementation strategies. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 17*(2), e12723. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12723

- Healthy Minds is a 45–minute, single-session, self-paced online intervention presented via the Qualtrics platform. It emphasizes that people and emotions can change, supporting this message with scientific evidence. The program includes relatable stories of role model adolescents explaining the reasons behind such transformations they experienced. See the following papers for more information and contact information. (video overview)

- Lipsey, N. P., Burnette, J. L., Becker, W., Baker, L. R., McCrimmon, J., & Billingsley, J. (2023). A growth mindset intervention to improve mental health in adolescents during COVID-19. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 17*(12), e12894. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12894

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- Yeager, D. S., Johnson, R., Spitzer, B. J., Trzesniewski, K. H., Powers, J., & Dweck, C. S. (2014). The far-reaching effects of believing people can change: Implicit theories of personality shape stress, health, and achievement during adolescence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 106*(6), 867–884. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036335

Student Strengths

- Paz, J. L., & Kim, E. K. (2022). Cultivating psychosocial strengths and well-being. In K-A. Allen, M. J. Furlong, D. Vella-Broderick, & S. M. Suldo (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology in schools: Supporting process and practice* (pp. 38–55). Taylor & Francis.

- Covitality Counseling and Classroom Resources Supporting Thriving Well-Being

- Covitality Related Research

School Climate

- Flett, G. L. (2022). An introduction, review, and conceptual analysis of mattering as an essential construct and an essential way of life. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment, 40*(1), 3–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/07342829211057640

- Every Student Matters: Cultivating Belonging in the Classroom

- Dr. Kelly-Ann Allen, Editor of the Journal of Belonging and Human Connection, provides access to practical information related to school belonging resources, how to create a district school belonging policy, and numerous school belonging measures.

- The Mattering Movement, a New York City nonprofit, advocates that what kids need from the adults in their lives is not more pressure but to feel like they matter. Open-access teacher and student Wellness Curriculum That Matters Toolkits are available.

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