

## Demonstrating the belief that all kids can learn

Schools, school districts and classrooms throughout the country display signs proclaiming the belief that “All kids can learn.” The same assertion is made in speeches, on Web sites, and in many other places.

In spite of all of this advertising, community surveys and focus group sessions often find community members saying they don’t think their school district really believes in the premise that all kids can learn. Further probing shows that this opinion is based on what people have observed, or a variation in interpretation of what is meant when someone says “All kids can learn.”

Here are some tips for demonstrating your school district’s belief in the ability of all children to learn:

→ Identify what you mean by “All kids can learn.”

Misunderstandings about belief and expectations around learning often arise because those who use a phrase and those who hear a phrase identify it differently. When you say, “We believe all kids can learn,” do you mean all kids can learn at the same rate and each one meet the same level of expertise at exactly the same time in every subject? Maybe you mean all kids can progress in all subjects, or perhaps you agree that some kids progress more in some subjects than others, but all students can learn and are learning based on their development and abilities.

→ Explain what you mean by the phrase.

Tell others what you mean when you use this phrase. If your readers or listeners think you mean all 10-year-olds will be on the same page on a given day and they find that this isn’t happening, they may decide you didn’t mean what you said or you didn’t keep your promise. If your meaning was a different interpretation, you need to find ways to deliver that message and avoid having your credibility and performance rating suffer. One superintendent in a West Coast school district says, “Given enough time and the right instruction, every kid can learn.” He goes on to remind his audience that these are human beings, not a factory product, and each child enters school with different assets and abilities. He reiterates his belief and goal for each student in his district to be constantly learning and progressing.

→ Live the belief in every way.

Hire staff members who believe every student can learn and that they can make a profound difference in student learning. Establish the attitude that everyone in the district, no matter what his or her job or role, will have high expectations for every student. As they work with students and parents, encourage employees to emphasize the learning progress of each student and their beliefs for the potential of that student.

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→ Think beyond the “stars.”

When publicizing student activities or successes, it is always tempting to display the achievements of gifted and high-achieving students. That is a good thing to do, but there are many students who excel in their own way and those who overcome huge obstacles to reach high levels of learning. Your community may be surprised to learn of the success of these students.

To demonstrate your belief that every student can learn, write stories about the blind child who excels in music or the wheel-chair bound student who writes using a straw held in his mouth to type on a computer. Feature the average child who just keeps plugging away or a whole classroom of average kids who are growing and learning in unusual ways.

→ Publicize the efforts of staff members who demonstrate their belief that all kids can learn.

Showing how these staff members are getting results from their students will demonstrate your emphasis on continual progress. Emphasize how the work of those staff members and the results they obtain reflect the beliefs of everyone in the district.

→ Look for many types of achievement.

Some children excel in math and others excel in art, music, physical education or other areas. Some are model future citizens and give to their community through volunteer work and community service. You can point out how having students who are learning to serve others is important to the future of the community.

→ Publicize services you offer to help kids learn and the results of those services.

If you have added extra classes to help increase learning or built partnerships with other organizations to increase student learning, tell people about those programs and partnerships, the reasons for them and the results they are obtaining.

→ Think about special interests.

Some groups need to hear about how your belief translates into the education you provide for kids who fall into specific categories. Some groups of community members may be interested in English learners, those who have a special interest in achievement by gender or those from specific ethnic groups. If you know your audience is likely to have those interests, showcase programs and progress of the students in the group in which they are interested. That then opens the door for helping them think about the progress of all students.

And, if they still don't seem to believe you, engage your community in conversations to discover what they believe about all children learning. You may find some groups do not share your beliefs. Hopefully, that is not the case. However, if it is, you will need to work with your community to define the kind of future they want, what they want for each child in the community, and what that means for the education students are receiving.

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*Contributed by: Gay Campbell, APR, C&M Communications and  
communications consultant*