

Academic Mindsets and Behaviors, Prior Achievement, and the Transition to Middle School

Students often experience a decline in academic achievement as they transition to middle school. This is true particularly for Black and Latinx students. Academic mindsets, such as a belief in the malleability of ability (growth mindset) or a reluctance to engage academically because of embarrassment or a fear of failure (performance avoidance), can support or undermine student success during this transition. Mindsets affect academic outcomes through their effect on academic behaviors, such as completing homework and participating in class.¹ Positive academic mindsets and behaviors include high levels of growth mindset and of academic behaviors along with low levels of performance avoidance. This study examined the relationship between grade 5 student reports on levels of academic mindsets and behaviors and the predicted probability of having a grade point average (GPA) below 2.0 in the first semester of grade 6 (low GPA) in Nevada’s Clark County School District, for all students and for student groups based on achievement and sociodemographic characteristics.

Key findings

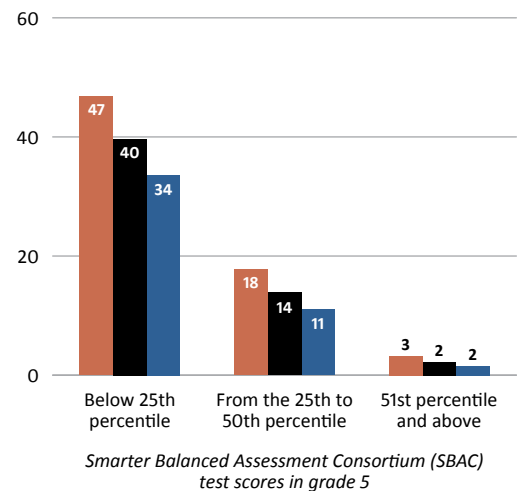
- **Among students with lower grade 5 prior academic achievement, academic mindsets and behaviors in grade 5 predicted substantial differences in the probability of a low grade 6 GPA.** Among 2016/17 grade 5 students in the bottom quartile of prior academic achievement, reporting high rather than low levels of positive academic mindsets and behaviors predicted a 13 percentage point difference in the probability of having a low GPA in the first semester of grade 6 (34 percent versus 47 percent). This pattern was consistent for every racial/ethnic group and for students by English learner status.
- **Among students with higher grade 5 prior academic achievement, there was no meaningful relationship between grade 5 academic mindsets and grade 6 GPA.** Among students with above-average grade 5 achievement, reporting high rather than low levels of positive academic mindsets and behaviors predicted a difference in the probability of having a low first-semester grade 6 GPA of only 1 percentage point.

These findings suggest that stakeholders should continue to investigate the extent to which supports that target these factors can help students transition successfully to middle school.

The relationship between grade 5 academic mindsets and grade 6 grade point average (GPA) was meaningful only among students with low grade 5 prior academic achievement

Predicted probability of a low GPA in the first semester of grade 6 (percent)

Level of positive academic mindsets and behaviors in grade 5:
■ Low ■ Median ■ High



Note: Predicted mean matching method was used to impute missing values.

Source: Authors’ analysis of 2016/17 and 2017/18 Clark County School District student records data.

1. Farrington, C. A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Keyes, T. S., Johnson, D. W., & Beechum, N. O. (2012). *Teaching adolescents to become learners. The role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance: A critical literature review*. University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.