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Comet Highlights **Board Meeting Notes from November 14, 2016**

Consent Agenda

Recommendations to Hire

- Assistant Boy's Basketball Coach - Share one position between Steve Nemmers and Todd Felderman. They seem like good selections, and would like to share the position and the funds for the one position.
- Elementary Associate - Audrey Roling
- MS/HS Wrestling - Volunteer Assistant Ryan Kilburg

Recognize any Visitors

Some parents attended to see their students who participated in the Reader's Theatre Group presentation to the School Board (they also presented on Veteran's Day at the HS Student Council lunch).

Comet Curriculum Presentation

Our Literacy Coach (part of TLC Grant), Joannie Kilburg, was in attendance with some students from grades 1st through 5th for a short "Reader's Theatre" presentation on veterans, and their contributions. This was a presentation and a format that gained the engagement of students in their learning and excitement for their learning.

Phone System

The Board approved the following...Some information is the following:

The current phone system at the Bellevue Schools is becoming antiquated, and we are on our final working aspects of it currently. By making some changes we can alleviate some potential issues, and save fairly significant funds. Some specifics:

1. We currently have about 30 phone lines we pay for monthly, at a cost of over \$1000/month total. A new system can reduce these lines down to about

12 lines, with a savings of roughly \$7000/year. The system will cost the district about \$15,000 with all of the overall costs.

2. Phones will be in nearly all of the same locations, but we will only have about 8 active lines to phone out of. What this means is that we will save roughly \$35/line that is not used (20 lines X \$35 = \$7000). Staff will select a line to use that is available, instead of having their own line to call out from. Phones will still be in the same areas.
3. We can also utilize an automated system for some calls, and have options for people to connect directly with a staff member instead of having the secretary transfer the call. It will NOT be a system where people will be on the line "punching numbers" constantly to talk with someone, as they will only indicate the building they would like to transfer to OR the person directly they would like to speak to.

Brett Ernst and I have been working with a few different companies, but Dubuque Business Telephone Services seem like the best option currently (they also know our current system and our needs overall). Their cost is just under \$14,000 (could be paid for in about two years in savings, which would continue for us in the future).

Involvement in the system was gathered from the administrators, board secretary, building secretaries, and Jim Handke (technology aspect).

Facilities Update Discussion

The Board requested that Meyer discuss our overall plans and ideas with several architects/engineers to determine their price estimate for working collaboratively in developing a "facilities plan" for the district (examining both campuses). The group would then likely meet with the Board and others to "hear" their ideas and wants/needs. Information in regard to this includes the following that was shared prior to the meeting and/or at the meeting:

Meyer reviewed the Facilities Committee meeting that took place on October 26. The key components they discussed were:

- *Need for a new (or updated) elementary (unsure of location)*
- *Need to make improvements to the Music Room facilities*
- *Need a long-term plan for improvements overall*

The actual notes from the meeting are in italics later in this section.

There is not a "rush" on the facilities decisions overall, but we also need to make some long-term plans. I believe it may be beneficial to have an architectural firm come into the district to do some overviews of the facilities (specifically the elementary), provide some ideas and options/alternatives based on board discussions and the facilities committee discussions. Ultimately, I believe they can provide us their professional

thoughts with what we have for current facilities and resources, along with ideas and priorities we are discussing (and associated costs).

My suggestion would be to have the Superintendent visit with several architectural firms to discover the "costs" of this overview of facilities, while also allowing them to recognize we are unsure of potential projects overall.

FYI - The Bellevue CSD has the current "General Obligation Bond" funding capabilities currently (with a 60% +1 bond issue vote)...

- \$2.70 levy: \$9.5-\$10.0 million
- \$4.05 levy: \$14.5-15.0 million

Recognize, a completely new structure would take an estimated \$10-12 million (estimate...possibly more).

I also plan on having some people look at the music room overall, and consider the entire music room area (taking out the walls completely possibly and re-designing based on needs for now and the future). Our Tech Math class is actually working on this design right now as a project. We also need to examine the acoustics in the room, space for both vocal and band in the room, etc. IF we decide to keep the current music room, we will could work on it this summer (or make some temporary improvements until a potential new building could be approved and/or funded). Just some thoughts on the music room, but my initial thought is to have someone look at the current structure to give an analysis.

Facilities Committee Meeting Notes

October 26, 2016

Meyer started the meeting by discussing the following handouts, and some basic information from the past:

- *Board Work Session Notes from September 28, 2016*
- *Bellevue CSD Facility Planning Thoughts (Ideas and Scenarios)*
- *Future anticipated needs and expenses*
- *Maps of both the MS/HS campus and the Elementary campus (aerial)*

(If you were not in attendance, but would like these handouts please let me know and I will mail them).

Meyer highlighted the aspect of the anticipated needs to make improvements with the music room and the elementary school building (parts of the building at a minimum).

At this point, Meyer asked for comments, thoughts, perspectives, etc. from those in attendance.

Some overall comments included the following:

- *If we are going to re-do the music room, make sure it is what we want and need...Is the plan to simply remodel inside the existing building enough? Ceiling height, acoustical foam adequacy and practice room elimination were some of the concerns.*
- *There is more to music than the traditional choir, band, show choir, jazz band, etc. We need to provide space for students to perform and learn in some potentially non-traditional learning manners.*
- *General agreement was present on the need to have a plan and do "something" with the use of the 1848 building.*
- *If we are going to either remodel or re-do some parts of the elementary we need to do it right and not take the "simple fix" approach that will not meet the needs in the future...It may work now, but in 10 years there may be other needs.*
- *Concerns/Comments with building an elementary on the current site were:*
 - *This would need to be done in phases, with a plan for all of the phases. This would allow students to have a place to be during the construction, and then move in after the new area is completed. This would allow some rotation after each phase for students.*
 - *Would a one-story elementary fit on the current space where the elementary is now? I said likely at the meeting (but this is quite possibly not accurate overall).*
 - *Is this the right site?*
 - *How many students actually walk to school? To say it is needed for this reason at its current location in the middle of town may no longer be a valid reason, as many students get rides with their parents, etc. instead of walking (Meyer is going to do observations of this in the near future).*
- *Concerns/Comments with building an elementary near the MS/HS campus site:*
 - *Busing for student to this area, and overall traffic flow. We would need to adjust this.*
 - *Would we be too "scrunched" in if we only use the current land at our site? Would buying approximately two acres assist with the space overall?*
 - *Where would it be built? To the east on land we do not currently own, and would need to purchase...or where the current bus parking building is and move it to the West end of the parking lot? On the west side of*

the parking lot? On the North side of the building, and move the "bus barn work area" and other buildings closer to the bus barn?

- What do we do with the current elementary?
 - Discuss with historical restoration people about restoring it for community needs (some discussions have occurred in the past with this)
 - Sell it
 - Tear it down
 - Meyer feels there needs to be some sort of plan, while others said we may want a plan before a bond issue, but there is no way to predict 100% accurately of its future use.
- Is it better to have everything on one campus?
- Having the elementary connected would allow for some joint space and staff use between the elementary and secondary buildings, and potentially enhance overall course offerings and learning opportunities for students. We would still need another gym, based on community use of the gym.

These were only some comments obviously, but gives a general perspective.

Therefore, the overall viewpoint was...don't settle for a temporary fix. Which means that we may need to seek a bond issue of some sort to meet needs and requests for a new building, based on the comments from this committee.

Bond Issue Perspectives - How do we move toward a bond issue and passing a bond issue? The group felt confident overall of the passing of a bond issue based on:

- The buildings we are talking about replacing need replacing...Music Room, Bus Barn, Ag Building (no longer utilized for classroom space), Industrial Tech building are steel structure buildings that were built as "temporary buildings" that have lasted well beyond their initial expectations. While some of these have not been a focus on updating, they will need to be updated in the fairly near future. Making the public aware of this would be important.
- Bellevue is a progressive and proactive community
- Bellevue citizens value the education of their students for the present and future generations.
- It assists in promoting the school even more, and promotion of the school is occurring currently in many ways.
- The school assists in promoting the community, and the quality of life in Bellevue for new families (and current families).
- We would need to "tell the story" of the school overall, and its needs for students.

- *Community members/Committee members would need to "lead" the bond issue drive...it needs to be outside of school employees, board members, etc.*

Overall Perspective:

- *Need a new elementary (unsure of location)*
- *Need to make improvements to the Music Room facilities*
- *Need a long-term plan for improvements overall*

In addition, below are some of the comments from the Community Survey that specifically focused on our facilities:

The Bellevue Schools are evaluating their facilities at both the Bellevue Elementary and Bellevue Middle/High School. What areas do you believe need to be improved for the future of our school? Please provide your thoughts/opinions below.

- *It would be nice to see some changes at the elementary (gym, cafeteria, one way drop off/ pick-up area).
Bigger gym*
- *I know people like to see nice new school buildings when coming into a new district, however I think lower taxes are also a very important draw. I am not sure how to balance that.*
- *I don't know if I am knowledgeable about the issues. I know the elementary building is old, but if it's working stick with it. If it is not working than we need to re-evaluate the issue.*
- *Modern sinks and hand dryers would help to reduce spread of illnesses in bathrooms.*
- *I believe we need to continue to update the facilities as we go so we don't get behind and have to spend lots at one time.*
- *The elementary is in great shape for as old of a building it is. However this building could use some updating.*
- *Elementary could use a little updating*
- *The elementary's outside appearance is cold and unwelcoming. Trees, bushes, and some patches of grass would do a lot. The lunchroom is also institutional feeling. Maybe warmer colors? Inside and out? Of course an updated building would be ideal.*
- *Security priority. Maybe need to lock doors and have a push call button to get into the bldg. It is too open for anyone to walk in. Continue to update sports equipment, uniforms and overall continued plan to keep school looking fresh safe, and accessible.*
- *The music/art area at the high school is in great need of renovation.*
- *Students complain of mice in the building as well as mold. The rest of the ms/hs facility has been greatly improved, but this area is still lacking.*

- *Bellevue Elementary has outlived its lifespan. The gym and band facilities and restrooms are on the verge of embarrassing. Preserving history is great, but not at the expense of student learning.*
- *Need more gym space for all ages/grades/variety sports to be able to practice.*
- *In the old area of the elementary there is a strong odor from the bats. This is most likely not healthy for staff and students to be breathing in.*
- *The elementary school is so confusing when it comes to finding classrooms. I feel like that building needs the most work!*
- *The facilities are better than the average smaller school system, but again, the school needs to spend money on improving areas of education not athletics or entertainment.*
- *Maybe an expanded lunch area and more offerings for lunch - Dubuque schools did do a nice job with their meal program and that would be the only thing the kids say is VERY different in regard to quality and variety.*
- *I am just getting involved in the school setting, so it is a little early for me to comment on what needs to be worked on/changed.*
- *New elementary!*
- *The Elementary building needs improvement, music/art building needs updating*
- *Please update the high school music/art building and elementary school gym/lunch room. We have been increasing the facility but these areas are in dire need of upkeep.*
- *4th and 5th grade classrooms are decrepit.
Elementary is dated but unique. There are great things happening in the elementary despite not having a "state of the art" building but having the elementary facility with the high school facility would be beneficial.*
- *The elementary needs updated it's nice to have history but it seems dark.*
- *Some update to the older section of the elementary school would be my highest priority.*
- *Music room. Keep improving Mr. Marshall's building.*
- *Vocational buildings at High school removed and replaced.*
- *The building are okay.*
- *Bellevue Elementary school and playground area need updating--trees, wood chips, rugs, flooring, art work would be low-cost improvements.*

Staffing Update and Comet Finance Discussion

The Board decided to not offer an Early Retirement Incentive for this school year, but is strongly considering it for the end of the 2017-2018 school year. The information below was shared with the Board prior to the meeting and/or discussed at the meeting in regard to this topic:

Last month the Board discussed our staffing, including a potential early retirement incentive program. Three years ago we offered the following:

1. \$25,000 stipend for teachers 55+ years of age with 15+ years of seniority and/or Step 15 of the salary schedule;
2. An additional \$250 stipend based on years of seniority to reward longevity, enrollment due by...
3. An additional bonus, based on \$75/day buy-back of unused sick leave days would be available to those enrolling by...

Some information with this...

1. Would it save the district money? Yes. It would save approximately \$30,000/teacher (new teacher entering the district with little or no experience) vs a teacher who is earning approximately \$60,000. Some financial information with this:
 - a. Retiree Salary - \$60,000
 - b. New Teacher Salary @ Step 1 on salary schedule - \$36,000
 - i. Potential Savings on salary - \$24,000
 - c. Family Insurance/Year - \$13,600
 - d. Single Insurance/Year - \$5800
 - i. Potential Savings on insurance - \$7800
 - e. FICA/IPERS savings on salaries of new teacher - \$4000
 - f. Overall Savings estimate - \$24,000 + \$7800 + 4000 = \$35,800
2. Would we for sure hire a new teacher with no experience? No. We would want to get the best teacher for our needs, but they would not receive all of their years of experience either. Even with this, we would save about \$25,000 roughly.
3. How many staff are eligible at this time based on meeting the age requirement and years of seniority requirement? 10.
4. How many would take the incentive? I have no idea.
5. Do we need to offer it this year? No; We are not in financial need. Yet, offering it could allow us to save additional funds as well for our future drop in enrollment and less funding for our district.
6. Could we wait until next year? Yes. Do we ever have to offer it? No, it is not a mandatory action we need to do as a district. It can assist us with cost savings, but it also takes away valuable experience at the same time. Can new teachers offer services to students? Yes, obviously (but lack some of the experience).

Our enrollment went up by 13 in the Certified Enrollment, which determines our state funding overall. This is good news, but some lower classes are obvious in our lower grades. One way to gain funds is to actually offer an Early Retirement Incentive. As I said earlier, it is not vital at this time...but, something which we must at least examine and consider in my opinion. I do not know how many would take the incentive, but...it is likely that some would. I also do not want to make this an every year event, but we can offer it when it will assist our district overall.

The Board discussed that more people may take it in later years, which may also then impact our staffing and needs for staffing overall in the future.

District Survey Information

Below are some results from our recent community survey from 70 total respondents (down from last year's 90 respondents). Any thoughts?

Meyer asked for community input from our community and parents on Facebook, Twitter, and through our school email system (which the email connects with nearly all parents with children enrolled in school). Below is the information from this year, in addition to the previous two years (I will share specific comments for your review at the Board meeting).

Bellevue Community School District Survey Information - October 2016

2.The District provides a high quality education to all students

	<u>2014</u>	<u>2015</u>	<u>2016</u>	<u>Trends 2014-2015-2016</u>
Strongly Agree	39%	40%	51%	
Agree	52%	57%	46%	(Agree - 91% - 97% - 97%)
Disagree	8%	3%	1%	(Disagree - 9% - 3% - 2%)
Strongly Disagree	1%	0%	1%	

3. When students graduate they are prepared for college and the workforce.

Strongly Agree	25%	16%	32%	
Agree	60%	77%	60%	(Agree - 85% - 93% - 92%)
Disagree	14%	6%	7%	(Disagree - 15% - 7% - 7%)
Strongly Disagree	1%	1%	0%	

4. The schools have high expectations for students.

Strongly Agree	32%	29%	48%	
Agree	60%	66%	49%	(Agree - 92% - 95% - 97%)
Disagree	7%	4%	3%	(Disagree - 8% - 5% - 3%)
Strongly Disagree	1%	1%	0%	

5. When students are struggling, they are offered support and parents are notified.

Strongly Agree	27%	19%	26%	
Agree	45%	64%	62f%	(Agree - 72% - 83% - 88%)
Disagree	20%	11%	10%	(Disagree - 28% - 17% - 11%)
Strongly Disagree	8%	6%	1%	

6. I feel aware of what is going on in the school and the district.

Strongly Agree	28%	21%	37%	
Agree	52%	70%	50%	(Agree - 81% - 91% - 87%)
Disagree	19%	7%	10%	(Disagree - 19% - 9% - 13%)
Strongly Disagree	1%	2%	3%	

7. There is strong communication between the teachers/principals and the parents.

Strongly Agree	22%	21%	25%	
Agree	45%	64%	62%	(Agree - 67% - 85% - 87%)
Disagree	27%	12%	9%	(Disagree - 33% - 15% - 13%)
Strongly Disagree	6%	3%	4%	

8. There is strong communication between the Superintendent and the community.

Strongly Agree	39%	33%	51%	
Agree	47%	56%	39%	(Agree - 86% - 89% - 90%)
Disagree	12%	8%	9%	(Disagree - 14% - 11% - 10%)
Strongly Disagree	2%	3%	1%	

9. I can freely express my opinions and concerns to the school.

Strongly Agree	26%	31%	37%	
Agree	57%	53%	59%	(Agree - 83% - 84% - 96%)
Disagree	12%	15%	4%	(Disagree - 17% - 16% - 4%)
Strongly Disagree	5%	1%	0%	

Legislative Update

Meyer reviewed some information he received last week at a meeting with representatives/lobbyists for ISEA, IASB, SAI, and the State AEA. Some things that were apparent to them were the following:

- Educate Legislators!!! Be Positive!
 - Tell about personal stories in your school
 - Don't only show them the best places in school when giving them a tour, but show what you have done with the 1-cent money, etc. in the past and the areas that still need improvement
 - Talk with legislators; Have parents talk with legislators; Go to where they are
- Big Items to Watch: SSA, Collective Bargaining, Taxes, Water Quality, Assessment funding and/or assessment in general
- State Supplemental Aid: Not going to get 4%, face it.; Think governor will be at 2%; Think it will be in first 30 days
 - State has 10% in surplus
 - Revenue - Growth is still at 4%
 - 10% of state budget is in savings (700+million)
 - Part of low SSA is to make districts spend down their balances...pure and simple!
- Educational Savings Accounts
 - Will make out of subcommittee for more support for private and homeschooling; Some legislators (especially Republicans) believe it is better to have competition

Meyer will continue to update the Board, and will invite legislators to an upcoming meeting.

Comet Reading and Reflection

See the article at the end of the notes from another article on Growth Mindset.

Information Items

River Valley Conference

There has been some talk recently about some other schools wishing to be in the River Valley Conference (RVC) in the future. One of these, Anamosa, has officially applied for entrance and I am posting some information from the Anamosa newspaper in this week's update. Dyersville Beckman is also considering this.

The RVC Board of Control will meet in late November about this, and then bring back ideas to each of their school boards. I will be attending this meeting. Adding ONE school would be beneficial in some ways for scheduling and evening out the North and South Divisions in the conference, but adding two would not be as advantageous overall. The more conference games you have, the less flexibility you have for non-conference games, where we typically schedule Easton Valley and Marquette specifically for local interests and proximity for travel).

What I have heard to a point so far is that a likely majority of conference schools would be in favor of adding Anamosa, but not traveling as far north as Dyersville to include Beckman (just some thoughts). I would tend to agree with this overall. Are we smaller than Anamosa? Yes, but they would not be as large as West Liberty and not much bigger than a few other schools already in our conference. While some schools are bigger than us, it provides our program with opportunities for games at all levels (separate middle school teams, freshmen, JV, etc.) that other conferences with smaller teams do NOT provide us (this was the problem with our involvement in the past with the Big East Conference.

Any thoughts initially? This would eventually have to be approved by our Board of Education.

Enrollment Currently for grades 9-11 (how classification is determined)

- West Liberty 303
- Mid Prairie 259
- Monticello 245
- Camanche 231
- Northeast 229
- Cascade 204
- Tipton 202
- North Cedar 197
- Regina, Iowa City 188
- West Branch 188
- Wilton 180
- Bellevue 161

(Anamosa is at 290)

One of the main reasons we went to this conference is to provide multiple opportunities for our students at all levels of competition (MS and HS), as many of the schools around here not in the RVC do NOT have full teams for both grades in middle school or JV teams (let alone freshmen teams). This is important for our students who are involved, and is a key benefit of this conference for us...It does not harm us like other conference affiliations could overall. We still play non-conference games vs Easton Valley, Calamus-Wheatland, Midland, Marquette, etc, but we do not have to rely on them. I think this is important...we are in a strong conference with schools that are of our classification size (unlike the non-conference teams I mentioned in most cases in most years).

Reminder: Football is not based on conferences. The sports that schedules are arranged based on the conference are: Volleyball, Basketball (B/G), Softball and Baseball. Wrestling, Track, Cross Country and Golf (B/G) have conference meets but not a conference schedule to adhere to. Bowling is not conference related.

River Valley: Here comes Anamosa

BY LARA NETOLICKY
Staff Writer

ANAMOSA

Anamosa may be entering into the River Valley Conference for athletics for the 2018-2019 school year.

The school board voted to leave the WaMaC conference at its meeting Monday, Oct. 17, and will petition to enter the River Valley Conference. The issue was approved by a 6-0 vote.

Before voting on the issue, the school board discussed the coaches' survey results and talked about the changing number of students in the school district.

Overall, the coaches' survey results show that a majority of coaches think the school's athletics would benefit more from moving into the River Valley Conference rather than remaining in the WaMaC Conference. The survey was anonymous and didn't pro-

vide room for comments, according to Anamosa Athletic Director Bret Jones.

Jones said the Anamosa school district isn't as big as it once was, and conferences are not what they used to be as the state has been moving from conferences to districts for sports like football.

Kris Kilburg, the vice president of the school board, said she spoke with many people in the community about the issue, and

overall the feeling is that it would be good for Anamosa to change conferences.

Board member Anna Mary Riniker felt differently though about changing conferences, stating that she had "problem with it" because she hears from other people in the community that they don't want to set up kids for failure.

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WAMAC/CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

Board member Rob Sayre moved to vote saying that it makes sense to change conferences now based on the number of students. If the school were to change in size then the board could re-evaluate the conferences later on.

Currently, Anamosa is the second to smallest school district in the WaMaC Conference based on the number of students. The 2A school has a total of 290 students who participate in the conference, compared to the Beckman Catholic High School in Dyersville, which has 216 students,

and is also considering changing conferences. If Anamosa were to switch to the River Valley Conference, it would rank as the second largest school behind West Liberty, which has 303 students.

Both conferences offer wrestling, soccer, cross country, golf, volleyball, track, softball and baseball. Football teams compete in districts and are not aligned in the traditional conferences.

With Anamosa in the WaMaC Conference, some argue that it puts Anamosa at a disadvantage competing with 15 other 3A and 4A schools.

Extracurricular Events Updates

A couple of items in this area...

1. Winter sports have started; The musical is completed.
2. Food at events. Recently at a middle school game played at the elementary we had some "peanut/nut" products sold as a fundraiser for the Junior class. Bellevue Elementary is attempting to be "peanut aware", and this went against the basis of this. A parent was upset about this, along with the worker at the game. The parent then bought all 61 candy bars that were left, although the workers said they would not sell them anymore. The parent was not going to allow the chance of them being sold again at the event. An offer was also made to buy back the candy bars later that evening as well.

I met with the parent the next day. While she said she may have over-reacted about the situation, she was upset that our staff members would knowingly sell these. Our district needs to do a better job of letting people know about what can be sold at the elementary for events like this, along with monitoring it.

I ended up buying the candy bars myself from her for the price of \$1 each that she paid.

This brings up a larger question of not only what needs to happen at events at the elementary, but also events in the future at Bellevue MS/HS. We have had this discussion as a administrative team, school nurse, activities director, parents, etc...but have not come to a conclusion. To say we are "peanut free" is extremely difficult, and to some extent impossible. But, to say we are "peanut aware" is certainly possible. In the latter example of "peanut aware" it could/would mean that we would not sell items with peanuts in them. It would still allow us to sell chocolate candy bars without nuts (even if they are made in the same factory)...it would not mean not selling any chocolate candy at all. It would eliminate Snickers, Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, Reese's Pieces, Butterfinger, and a few others...But would allow for several candy bars to still be sold.

For the health and safety of OUR students, and others visiting, this would seem necessary at the minimum. Kelley Humphrey (school nurse) and I are planning a Wellness Committee meeting in the next few weeks to address this, and will be inviting several people for their input, thoughts, concerns, etc.

District Newsletter & Brochure

My plan currently is to send out an electronic newsletter to those connected with the school as a parent, staff member, etc via our Student Management System (JMC). In addition, we will place this on our website, and on social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Students have the first one completed with input from the three administrators.

We are also working on a new school district brochure. Some of Tracy Weber's middle school students created brochures, and now they are being refined through the Buzz Creative Group in St. Donatus. The plan is to have these out before the holidays. I will keep you posted.

Comments from Building Principals, Superintendent & Board Members

Adjourn

Next meeting is Tuesday, December 13 2016 (We discussed this at our September Board meeting according to my notes).

Redefining Growth Mindset

Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck has become something of a cult figure in education and parenting circles. Her research into boosting student motivation has spawned a mini industry of consultants, sold more than a million books and changed the way that many adults praise children.

Dweck believes too many students are hobbled by the belief that intelligence is a fixed trait. She says kids with what she calls "fixed mindsets" stop trying when when confronted with a challenge because they've convinced themselves that they're not good at math or writing or whatever the subject is. She argues that adults can, instead, help foster a "growth mindset" - the belief that the brain is like a muscle that can grow stronger through hard work.

Dweck theorizes that parents' well-intentioned praise contributes to the formation of unproductive fixed-mindset thoughts. According to the theory, it's harmful to tell your kids that they're smart because when they eventually do struggle in school, they might think they're not so smart after all. Ultimately, they become afraid of challenges and less resilient when faced with obstacles. Dweck's theory is so popular that I've had Brooklyn mommies at the playground reprimand me for incorrectly praising my daughter.

But how to praise your kids properly is, apparently, quite complicated. Earlier this month, Dweck delivered a speech at Stanford, where she highlighted three ways that parents and teachers are going astray.

"As the growth mindset has become more popular and taken hold, we are beginning to find that there are pitfalls," said Dweck. "Many educators misunderstand or

misapply the concepts."

Praising effort alone

Many parents and teachers have interpreted Dweck's work to mean that they should praise a child's effort, such as "I'm proud that you tried really hard," or "I see how much effort you put into this." Or teachers sometimes give A's on assignments if a child has attempted all of the questions, regardless of whether the answers are good or not.

"It's like the consolation prize. 'Oh, at least you worked hard,'" said Dweck. "What if they didn't make progress or they didn't learn?"

Praising effort alone, she says, is useless when the child is getting everything wrong and not making progress. Either students will feel misled when they are eventually confronted with the reality of their low achievement, or the hollow praise will convey adults' low expectations for them.

Instead, she advises teachers and parents to praise a child's process and strategies, and tie those to the outcome.

For example, Dweck suggests these phrases: "Wow, you really practiced that, and look how you've improved." "See, you studied more and your grade on this test is higher." "You tried different strategies and you figured out how to solve the problem." "You stuck to this and now you really understand it."

Telling kids to try harder

Similar to hollow praises of effort, many teachers incorrectly equate "growth mindset" with effort alone. Dweck often hears reports of teachers telling students, for example, "You would have done better if you tried harder," or "Keep trying and you'll get it."

Effort, Dweck says, is only one route for a student to make learning improvements. If a student doesn't have strategies for solving a problem, or the necessarily skills, or the steps for completing an assignment at his fingertips, all the effort in the world might not help.

Instead of "nagging" the student to keep trying, Dweck says teachers need to sit down with a student and say, "Let's look at what you've done," "Let's look at what your understanding is," or "Let's look at what strategies you've used, and let's figure out together what we should try next."

Repeating mindset jargon

Growth mindset theories are becoming so popular that some classrooms are festooned with growth mindset motivational posters exhorting, "Don't give up until you are PROUD" and "Every mistake you make is PROGRESS."

"You can't just declare that you have a growth mindset," said Dweck. "Growth mindset is hard. Many educators are trying to skip the journey."

To do it right, Dweck says that many teachers have to change how they teach, offering more critical feedback and giving students opportunities to revise their work. Dweck cited a recent Stanford Ph.D. thesis by Kathy Liu Sun, now a professor at Santa Clara University, which found that students continued to have fixed-mindset thoughts in math class when their teachers mouthed growth mindset phrases but didn't change their teaching practices.

Dweck says she's found the same results with parents in her research. "We're finding that many parents endorse a growth mindset, but they still respond to their children's errors, setbacks or failures as though they're damaging and harmful," she said. "If they show anxiety or overconcern, those kids are going toward a more fixed mindset."

Still, Dweck is finding uneven results even when parents and teachers implement her growth mindset strategies properly. She's seeing much bigger gains for low-achieving students than for high-achieving ones. In other words, D students often jump an entire letter grade or more after a growth-mindset intervention just by reengaging with their work, but B+ students don't suddenly move up to A's.

However, it's possible that high-achieving kids are profiting in other ways. Dweck noticed that high-achieving students were more likely to tackle harder math problems after an intervention, compared to similar kids in a control group. Perhaps, over the long term a "growth mindset" will serve them well in college and in life, even if it doesn't boost grades.

This column was written by Jill Barshay and produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news website focused on inequality and innovation in education.