

[ascd.org](https://www.ascd.org)

## The Habits of Self-Directed Learners

15–19 minutes

When our public school system in Greenville, North Carolina, asked parents, teachers, students, business leaders, and other community partners to identify goals regarding what students should "know and be able to do," they overwhelmingly responded that students needed both academic *and* social skills. Based on the input from these groups over several months during the 2018–19 school year, Pitt County Schools created our Profile of a Learner (Pitt County Schools, 2020). This profile focused on developing the cognitive, personal, and interpersonal capacities of our students. In particular, the school system committed to graduating students who could solve problems effectively and think critically; create and innovate; take initiative and self-direct their actions; be personally responsible; communicate effectively; interact with others with empathy; and serve as effective team members.

Developing these skills in students is something that requires intentionality and planning; it will not happen just because the adults in the building (or the community at large) "willed" it to be. Within our district, we used the 16 Habits of Mind—thinking behaviors developed by Costa and Kallick (2008; 2009; 2014) that successful people utilize when confronted with complex problems—as the basis for bringing our Profile of a Learner to life. These habits include behaviors such as managing impulsivity, listening with empathy, and using all your senses to gather data. (See [www.habitsofmindinstitute.org](https://www.habitsofmindinstitute.org) for more information.) To date, 145 teachers in our system have been trained in the Habits of Mind with a goal to develop self-directed teachers and students. In this article, we share the experience of four of those teachers to paint a picture of what this effort looks like in different classrooms.

**Practices like critical thinking, creativity, personal responsibility, academic self-monitoring, student voice, and effective communication became living concepts within our classrooms.**





These teachers were first exposed to the habits in the district's Teacher Leadership Institute (Feller Jr., Brown, & Bowers, 2018) and applied the habits throughout and after their time in the program, including leading other teachers who were not in the program to implement the approach in their classrooms. The Habits of Mind provided a practical and concrete way to take the district's Profile of a Learner and apply it in a classroom with students. Practices like critical thinking, creativity, personal responsibility, academic self-monitoring, student voice, and effective communication became living concepts within our classrooms. Students are taking ownership of their learning by establishing their own learning goals, self-monitoring their progress, and amplifying their voice and agency. In a word, they are becoming self-directed in their learning.

## Narrowing the Focus

We interviewed the four teachers to explore how they implemented the Habits of Mind and the impact it had in their classrooms. They identified five common instructional strategies and foci that were most helpful:

**1. *Begin with teachers.*** The single most important piece of advice the teachers gave when it came to successfully implementing a focus on developing self-directedness in the classroom was to begin by supporting teachers in becoming self-directed learners themselves. In the words of high school teacher Jennifer Attardi, "It starts with me. Yeah, the whole classroom climate starts with me."

Our district provided intensive training and support for teachers in the habits, which included personal application and ongoing coaching through the Teacher Leadership Institute. We also explicitly challenged teachers to focus on themselves by implementing this approach first in their own lives as a teacher leader between the monthly trainings. This allowed them to practice the habits and identify stories and experiences to draw from when teaching them to students. As 8th-grade teacher Jennifer Sumerlin said:

Students are always more willing to do something if they see you doing it as well. They're certainly not going to be respectful to a teacher who's disrespectful to them, just [like] they're not going to persist through hard times if they see their teacher give up all the time. I just think that it's always a "practice what you preach" kind of thing.

**2. *Support Teacher Collaboration to Align Language and Expectations.*** A benefit of teachers applying and living the Habits of Mind themselves is that it provides a common language for teachers and students to understand and frame the dispositions of thinkers. Sumerlin and her fellow 8th grade teacher colleague Brittany O'Neal cited the power of teacher collaboration in contributing to increased student success. Working in the same school on the same grade-level team meant they could use common terminology across different classes, such as managing impulsivity and paraphrasing others to demonstrate listening with empathy and understanding, so students had a consistent language and set of expectations. They even worked to connect the specific habits they were teaching to the school's Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model, further reinforcing the connection between social skills and academic achievement.

**As students feel more responsible, they believe they can be more responsible, which leads to them acting more responsibly.**





Third grade teacher Kara Snyder explained, "I think we're identifying things that teachers are always trying to teach their kids, but we just never had a name for it." Teachers' consistent use of the habits gives students the ability to name dispositions of an efficacious learner like "persisting" and "managing impulsivity," which makes them feel more responsible for their learning. As they *feel* more responsible, they believe they can *be* more responsible, which leads to them acting more responsibly. As they experience success, they feel even more responsible, and the cycle repeats.

**3. Narrow the Focus for Students.** Costa and Kallick identified 16 distinct Habits of Mind, but trying to teach all of them at once was overwhelming to both students and teachers. Once teachers began applying the habits in their own classrooms and collaborating to develop a common language, they realized they needed to narrow the focus and intentionally teach four or five of the habits that were most relevant for their students. Through their shared conversations, teachers reviewed anecdotal observations of students' needs and discussed contributing factors to concerns around student performance. They then identified specific habits they believed were most aligned with those needs to address the gaps. These lists differed between the teachers we interviewed based on their personal experience in applying the habits, as well as the needs of their individual students, though all were drawn from the work of Costa and Kallick.

**4. Create and Teach Mini-Lessons.** Once teachers identified the desired habits to teach, they created "mini-lessons," spending between 10–30 minutes daily teaching the habits and connecting them to academic standards. For example, Snyder taught her 3rd grade students a mini-lesson that focused on managing impulsivity. Her intent was to practice the skills her students needed to read longer passages and increase reading comprehension. The lesson included a humorous book, *Sit Still Seth*, about a young student who struggles in school because he cannot sit still. Her students learned about managing impulsivity and then practiced simply sitting still and becoming aware of their actions and thinking while reading. As they practiced, they realized how often they moved and how much it negatively impacted their reading. According to Snyder, their experience and subsequent reflection empowered them to recognize the importance of "sitting still and not getting up just to get a tissue or things like that" while reading. Students were then challenged to manage their impulsivity in new situations like working at learning centers. They eventually could describe what their impulses were, how they were managing them, and how it helped them learn. As they became more successful at managing their impulsivity, they learned to persist when learning was difficult, which resulted in them becoming better readers.

**5. Model Continuous Learning by Co-Reflecting.** In one lesson, Sumerlin and O'Neal focused on the concept of persistence with their 8th graders. The lesson involved creating a tower out of playing cards within twelve minutes, something which students often became frustrated with, as the towers often fell down. After finishing the activity, students reflected on how they felt about the tower and the processes they used to create it. They engaged in both self-reflection and dialogue around questions such as, *What enabled you to stay on task when you felt like giving up?* and *What can be learned from this activity as it relates to your schoolwork?*

Similarly, Snyder shared how she often watches students' demeanors to look for evidence of frustration. When this happens, she can "talk with the student about some things they can do to give themselves a personal

break so that they can keep persisting. Maybe they need to stare at the ceiling for a little bit, or practice some breathing techniques so they don't give up on themselves. ... There's a hidden lesson with the habits." Reflection was something the class did together, especially at first, and through these guided co-reflections between teachers and students, students learned to better self-monitor, self-diagnose, and identify strategies for success in the future.

Fourth grade students in Kara Snyder's class at G.R. Whitfield School in Grimesland, North Carolina, explore the habit of persistence through an activity using a rubber band to stack cups.

## Students Owning It

As students learned and applied the Habits of Mind, they were willing to hold themselves and each other accountable, ultimately taking ownership of their own learning. Snyder saw a clear example of this during a review for a unit test. She shared with her students the proficiency goal she'd set for them: to miss no more than three questions on a classroom assessment. Her students, however, responded that that goal was not acceptable. One student said, "I'm setting a goal, and I want to get no more than one wrong."

Snyder realized that by teaching the habits, she was giving her students voice and agency and "building within them something that I never really thought about, because I'm the teacher, [and] I [always] set their goals and gave them grades." Snyder also used student planners to support students in identifying goals and tracking progress. As they became more specific with their goals, they learned to strive for accuracy in their work, and they became more responsible about meeting deadlines. Finally, she amplified student voice and agency by specifically teaching the Habits of Mind her students would need to be successful in school and in life.

Students in both Sumerlin's and O'Neal's classes were also positively impacted by studying and applying the habits on a regular basis. Sumerlin explained that students were more responsible "with their classwork and being reacclimated to due dates" after returning to school. Being responsible for deadlines was a shift for her middle school students because while learning virtually, "deadlines weren't really a thing." Additionally, students demonstrated their desire to be accurate by regularly asking for opportunities to create "the best version of [their] classwork."

## Self-Directed Teachers

Beyond the student impact, teachers also reported that they benefited as professionals by implementing the habits. In particular, they increased their ability to be flexible in their thinking by seeing and understanding students' perspectives, which allowed them to more clearly communicate with students. As teachers became clearer in their communication and interaction with students, students were more confident to speak up for themselves. High school teacher Attardi shared how her students asked questions and made specific requests regarding how she presented information and gave instructions. As she practiced listening to students, she was able to intentionally "think flexibly" to better understand their perspective and then communicate her understanding back to them to check for accuracy. This ultimately led to her changing some of her instructional practices to better meet the needs of her students, like giving all the steps in the editing process for a project at one time rather than one step at a time. Her intention was to guide her students carefully. However, her students wanted to manage their own learning and advocated for that change to her in a respectful manner. She learned to appreciate and reward those requests, because students were communicating effectively what they needed from her so that they could be more successful.

When the pandemic closed school buildings, Snyder was able to draw on the habits as her students transitioned to the online learning environment. She had to think flexibly; create, imagine, and develop solutions to new problems; and listen to both parents and students with empathy. Ultimately, she successfully supported her 3rd grade students with differentiated learning opportunities. Although other teachers across the district

(and nation) had similar struggles, Snyder attributes her success to the use of the habits, especially in using a shared language to effectively describe to students and other teachers what, why, and how she was modifying things, such as her goal-setting and grading practices.

A final impact on teachers we'd like to highlight was shared by O'Neal, who reported that the habits allowed her to take responsible risks, so students learned how to deal with both success and failures:

One thing I've noticed myself naturally do ... is stepping away from being the main teacher and really just being the facilitator. ... Letting the students work in small groups and seeing their metacognition within those groups. Sometimes you do an activity, and sometimes I set up groups and it is a total flop. And that's okay because I learn from that.

Her comment beautifully illustrates the concept that as teachers know and apply the habits, they become more self-directed in their practice, which empowers them to support their students in becoming more autonomous and taking greater ownership of their own learning.

We found that leaders follow leaders, and based on what we learned from the interviews, our teacher leaders value the habits when leading their classes and interacting with other adults. In striving to apply the habits to our own work to support teachers, we are planning on offering the training to more teachers in the future. Given this increase in the number of cohorts, we are certifying more trainers in the Habits of Mind to sustain the work over time.

### **Time Well-Spent**

In response to our district's Profile of a Learner, these teachers have taken responsibility to teach students the skills they need to self-monitor their work, take ownership of their learning, amplify their voice, and be self-directed. These educators serve as models to demonstrate that these skills do not happen without intentional planning, instruction, and application in the classroom. While making the change takes time—something which is at a premium in today's classrooms—it is time well-spent. "I just think that people need to understand that it's not fluff," said Attardi. "This stuff works. And it's worth the time and investment."

### **Reflect & Discuss**

- When thinking about cultivating self-directed students, does your school also help develop self-directed teachers? How might training teachers in these methods improve students' confidence and experiences?
- Which of the 16 Habits of Mind do you find most valuable for your students to focus on?