

Ep #123: The Myth of “Behind”



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to Episode 123.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal Podcast*. A not-so-typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host, certified life coach, Angela Kelly Robeck.

Well hello, my empowered leaders. Happy Tuesday. Welcome to the podcast. And welcome to May 2020. We continue to lead schools during a time of constant turn. And I hope this podcast finds you healthy, both in mind and in body.

There are so many discussions surrounding education, as you already know, that I'm going to use the podcast this month to walk through some of the issues that are coming up in media and the conversations on social media and offer some more positive and hopefully some more productive means of thinking and approaching this new era of education.

So, let me start by telling you a story. I was reading a news article about all of the happenings in education. And you can just literally go through your phone and it's blowing up with conversation around teaching, learning, and the future of education, the future of students. So, you're not at a loss for conversation around this topic.

But I came across an article that was titled something to the effect of We Are Facing an Educational Catastrophe. And of course, the title lured me right in to read further. So, a really good title. And the gist of the article – it was quite long – and the gist of the article was that education basically is facing doom and gloom, that we're never going to recover, that a whole generation of students are being forced to try and catch up, that learning will never be the same, the kids will never be the same. Learning is going

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to be severely stunted and we're going to acknowledge and see historic academic regression.

And I was like, “Woah, that's super-dramatic. That is pretty depressing.” And if I believed that all of that were true, I might be changing my career. It just painted such a grim future for students, for learning, for teaching, for educators at large.

But because I have the STEAR Cycle, I could read that article and notice the difference between situations, which are facts, and thoughts. There are situations that they're talking about that are outside happening in the world. And then there are thoughts, which are just opinions about what's happening. And everything that we read is based on fact and opinion, fact and opinion. We have facts and then we have opinion about those facts.

And in this article, most of the article was grounded in speculation about what could happen in the future. Schools are not going to have money to recover. Summer slide is going to be greater than normal. Online learning will not make up for the lost time. All of these statements can sound like facts to the brain because they skim around things that might become facts.

It's really tricky, but watch this. It's possible that schools might have less money next year. It's very possible given the state of the economy right now. So, our brain immediately believes, “Oh my gosh, that's totally true. We're not going to have enough money. We're not going to have the resources we used to have.” Scarcity, lack, fear, panic, we kick into high gear thinking that must be true, that is going to be true, the numbers are facts, this has to be true, right?

Our brain automatically jumps into believing that it's true. So, they sound like facts. And it is really possible that schools will have less money next year. But when next year comes and we do the math, it might be true that

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we have less money and it could become a fact that we can prove. But the truth of today is that we don't know how much money schools are going to have, and we don't know if whatever money we do get will help us recover or not.

And what do we even mean by recover? What does that mean? How are we measuring recovering? What's a full recovery? Is it coming back to where we were? Is it having the same test scores but with different kids? What does recovery mean? We don't really know.

So, the statement sounds like a simple fact that we're reporting, like we're not going to be able to bounce back from this. But in reality, that's just an opinion of what could happen in the future. And what I will say is most of the article was speculation. But there was a fact that stood out to me that said one in four students have not ever logged into their online learning platforms.

So, that's 25% in the brain. That's pretty significant. We're like, “Wow, that's a lot of kids not logging in.” And when I think about that number, 25%, and I think about what's going on in the world right now, I'm not at all surprised.

I'm actually impressed that 75% of kids are logging in at some point. 75%, that's higher than some of our test scores. You know, when you look at the school's test scores, 75% of kids are logging in; some schools don't have 75% on their average test score.

So, when I think about that number, one in four, and I think about what's going on, we are at home because there is an actual life or death situation going on in the world. This two-month pause, or maybe longer, maybe two-to-three-month pause, it's so interesting to me because it's not summer break.

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We're in the middle of the school year, but it's about the length of a school break. So, our brains, because of the time of year that this is happening, we are freaking out because it's during the school year. But if this had happened during summer break and we were locked down from June 15th to August 15th, schools would not be freaking out in the same way because we don't provide services during the summer.

We don't provide instruction and academics during the summer, with the exception of summer school. But we wouldn't be panicking in the same way. We wouldn't have done online learning. We all would have been locked down. Everybody would have been super bummed because it was summer break and we missed out on our vacations and our summer camps and teachers missed out on getting together with their peers because they're not teaching, they're at home. But the reality of the impact on education would have been very different.

So, the reason that it's happening right now is because there's an actual pandemic. There is a life or death situation. And it's no wonder that 25% of kids aren't able to log in. Because much to the chagrin of some top educational leaders, academics is not the priority for all families right now.

The priorities are life and death. There are families in our schools who have COVID-19, who are struggling to breathe, who are struggling to survive. Or they have grandparents or great grandparents or aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, family members who are sick.

There are many millions of people out of work who live paycheck to paycheck. So, earning money, supporting their families, helping around the house, taking care of younger siblings, taking care of the sick, the elderly, just living and getting by. It's no wonder that kids aren't able to all log in and do school.

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So, the stats are used to alarm us and be like, “Oh my gosh, online learning isn’t working, education isn’t working, we’re not doing enough.” No, the stats are in there to kind of put fear in us to believe that kids are just blowing off school or online learning isn’t working and that maybe kids are just blowing off school and enjoying the time off.

But when you think about what’s really going on, it’s the fact that there are other priorities right now. And I’m going to step out on a limb and say the other priorities should be priorities. They should matter more.

And furthermore, if you think about the stats of kids in learning beforehand, isn’t it also true that not 100% of kids were tuning into education before online learning happened? I mean, if we’re really honest with ourselves, I don’t know if it’s as high as 25%, but I can guess that it probably was close to.

There probably were 25% of kids tuning out. And I just heard some amazing news today. I was doing a Facebook live and somebody posted in the comments, “I have students who weren’t engaged in school who are participating more online.”

So, just because 25% of kids haven’t logged in one time, doesn’t mean that we’re behind schedule and that we are not doing our jobs and that kids are blowing off school. We have to be careful about what we’re making those statistics mean.

So many things struck me about this article. And one of the recurring themes was how behind we’re all going to be. Students will be behind. Teachers will need time to catch them up. Schools need a recovery plan to make up for lost time.

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There’s just so much behindedness in the conversations around education, “This is going to be a disaster. It’s a catastrophe, we’ll never recover. This is the worst regression of learning ever.” We’re making it so big and so dramatic, and the problem with those conversations is that when we buy into those stories and we believe that this is a big tragedy, we’re going to focus on the tragedy.

We’re not going to focus on the successes and the wins. And this is why I titled this episode The Myth of Behind. Because I believe that behind is a myth. It’s a concept that we’ve created in our brains and in the entire educational system.

We created grade levels and we created standards and curriculums and tests all so that we could say who’s ahead and who’s behind. All of our systems that we have, have been designed in order to categorize people into behind and ahead.

But if you stripped that all away, what does being behind even mean? Behind what? Behind whom? When you take all of that away, all of its structures, its systems, its measurements, its requirements, when you take all of that human-created measurements and structures away, what you’re going to find is that education is a group of young humans learning to navigate life and a group of older veteran humans helping them figure it out. That’s it.

There is no ahead or behind. There is no wrong place to be on the spectrum of learning and growth. There just is. There is no behind. But what the human brain likes to do is it likes to add layers and layers of meaning and measurements to prove the thoughts we believe are true. We like to find a way to prove that they’re true.

We like to say, “See, I told you so. It is true. 25% of kids aren’t logging in online.” And I will say, “Okay, so what? What does that mean, 25% of kids?”

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What are you making that mean? What are you making it mean about the kids who are versus the kids who aren't? What are you making it mean about your teachers, about you as a leader, about education at large, about online learning? What does that number even mean?"

And we do this with data all the time in schools. We make it mean something's so big and so bad and so terrible. Or we make it mean something amazing and good. We rely on this data to tell ourselves that we're doing a great job or we're behind; we're either ahead or behind.

And we use the information around us to create meaning for our brains so that we can kind of rest assured knowing that, yep, it's true, we either are ahead or that we're behind. So, when we believe we are behind, we generate these systems to prove that, yes indeed, we're behind. Kids are behind.

And our brains are constantly looking to confirm this belief. And when we believe that we're behind and we believe we shouldn't be behind – so here's the double layer here – we have a thought, "I'm behind." Okay, what you're making it mean is, "But I shouldn't be. I shouldn't be behind. I should be ahead. Or I should be on track."

But when we believe we're behind and we shouldn't be behind, we generate emotions of fear, worry, panic, stress, urgency. It feels really scary when you think about it. It feels scary to be behind because our brain makes being behind something bad.

What does it mean to be behind? How do you feel when you believe you are behind? I know, for me, I feel anxious. I feel pressure. If I personally feel behind in my work, I feel a lot anxiety. I feel a lot of pressure to work harder and more and spend more of my time, my day, focused on working versus focused on my personal or my family.

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And when I think about kids being behind, I feel like a greater sense of urgency and responsibility that it's my job to get them ahead, that there's something I've missed or I haven't done to get them ahead. And then, I pressure myself into working harder and harder and exhaust myself trying to figure out the solutions and try to get out of being behind, which makes me have to work very quickly make hasty decisions. I get really scattered in my approach to getting my tasks and projects done because I'm trying to multitask, I'm trying to do many things at once.

Then I feel dazed and confused because everything's starting to blur together, and even when I do get something accomplished, it doesn't feel great because I'm so focused on that I'm behind and I'm focused on being behind and trying to catch up that the stuff I do get done doesn't get acknowledged because I'm looking at what's not getting done versus what is getting done.

None of that work gets recognized, which eventually fatigues me from trying to get more ahead. And in the end, I create the result of falling behind. It's a full circle.

And because behind is a myth, we're always chasing it. We're working to get ahead and we don't know where the finish line is. And that's because there is no finish line. When we do believe that we are behind, we're always going to feel behind. There will always be more to do and the focus will always be on what isn't done versus what is done.

The way we approach education with this behind mentality is also causing harm, in my opinion. Because when we believe that we're behind or that kids are behind or that education is somehow behind, we're teaching the children that they are behind.

From a very young age, we talk about children in terms of being above grade level, on grade level, below grade level, behind their peers, ahead of

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their peers, on task with their peers. They're behind in their homework. They're behind in their reading level. And these systems we've created are proving our theory true.

And this is why the majority of kids who start out behind at a young age are typically the ones who continually stay behind because they've learned from us and from our systems and our data, what we make our data mean, that they're behind. And eventually, their brain decides to agree with us.

And once they believe they're behind, they might initially work really hard to try and get ahead. But if we continue to believe that they're behind in some way, shape, or form, their own actions are going to prove that result true. They are going to start believing they're behind, that they're not as good, that they're maybe not as worthy, that they're maybe not ahead for some reason, that they haven't earned it or don't deserve it or whatever their brain is making behind mean for them.

And they will end up taking action, end up feeling bad about themselves, and they take action that will prove they are behind. They'll give up, which is the worst-case scenario. The only kind of failure is quitting, and that's what we're seeing happening for some kids.

So, think about this. Think about how it feels when your boss or a mentor or a teacher that you've had in your past told you that you were behind. How does it feel to be told that you're behind and that you need to catch up? Do you feel motivated by that thought?

“I'm behind...” you might feel like, “Okay, well what do I do? It doesn't feel good to be behind, so I'm going to try and feel better by catching up. I want to catch up.” And you might try to catch up in the beginning. But if you continue to believe that you're always behind, and if that thought is what prevails over success and accomplishment, then you're going to find yourself approaching the job day after day, year after year as if you were

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always behind. That is not motivating and it doesn't serve students to believe this is true.

My husband works in a company that is designing a test for COVID-19. And they are working endlessly. He's working nights and weekends, really long days, long weekends, to get this test out to save as many lives as possible.

The company, of course, is saying, “We're behind. We're behind. We're behind. You need to get more done faster. We need to get this product to market.” And they are pushing their employees.

Now, there's nothing wrong for the short stint of time that they're working to rally and get this job done for the people who are suffering and who need it. But a chronic mentality that we're always behind is not motivating.

There have been times where my husband comes home and he's discouraged, I would say, and that no matter how much work he puts in, the message is that he's always behind. And I think about that for kids.

We need to recalibrate and rethink about what it means to be behind and the message behind “behind”. But I want you to really think about what message we're sending when we buy into the story that kids are behind, education's behind, and all of that behindness is true.

Reiterating that we are chronically behind invokes emotions of fear, panic, scarcity. It's a lack mindset that feels very threatening. Because if we believe we're behind somebody else, that there's an ahead and a behind, then we might be motivated to work in the beginning because we're scrapping to catch up.

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We want to be with the crowd. We want to fit in and belong. We want to feel like we're worthy and we're enough and that we want to be recognized for all of our growth and all of our hard work and our progress. We want to believe that we're going to get what we deserve.

And it's kind of this, like, you know, “I've got to get my piece of the pie,” kind of mentality. Very scarcity mindset, that there's not enough to go around. We have to be ahead of somebody. We can't be behind. We believe that behind is bad.

So, think about when you have, at some point in your life, believed that you were behind. Either it may be in your current job or in school or whenever. How did it feel? What emotion came up for you? So, when you believe the thought, “I'm behind,” how did it feel to you? And based on how you felt, how did you act? What did you say or do or not do? And at what point did you ever feel ahead?

How did you measure the difference between being behind and being ahead? And if you did catch up and you felt ahead, did it last? Or did you go back to feeling behind? Do you see that? It's just very nebulous. There is no true definition. It's only what we make it in our mind.

Because there were days as a principal that I would go in, felt on top of it, I would go home and I'd be like, “I'm totally caught up. I love this. Checked all my emails today. I'm accomplished. I'm ahead of the game. I'm on point.” But I'd go right back to feeling behind the next day. I woke up feeling behind. I never felt ahead. And that's because I was thinking I was behind.

Measuring and focusing on being behind is not serving anyone. It isn't serving you as a leader. It's not serving your teachers to tell them they're behind or to push them, encourage them to teach faster. It isn't serving them.

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They're stressed out. Have you seen all of the memes? We're stressing ourselves out by believing that we're behind. And when we show up in that energy, it's no-bueno. And it's certainly not good for kids.

When kids believe they're behind and they're trying to get ahead but they continue to be behind, they lose their stamina; their stamina for learning, their stamina for trying. Because they believe that they're just going to end up behind, and that behind is a bad place to be.

Students who are behind and catch up – like, I know some brains are thinking, “But I've had students who I told they were behind and I showed them the data and kind of scared them or convinced them into working harder.”

And I'll tell you what – that student didn't go behind and then catch up because they believed they were behind. That student chose to make that data mean, “I have more work to do. I need to think and act differently. I need to show up in a different way.”

They believed that there was a possibility of being more, of learning more, of accomplishing more. They focused on what was possible and continued growth and learning. They didn't focus on being behind. They didn't sit there with the mindset of, “Oh, I'm behind so I better catch up.” They didn't do that.

They told themselves in their brains, “I need to think, feel, and act a different way in order to get a different result.” That's why kids who were behind and then caught up do that. That's how they make progress. It's not coming from the belief of, “I'm behind.” To me, “I'm behind” doesn't generate a positive healthy emotion. It might be this short-term spring until you realize you're just still behind.

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And here’s the message. There is no behind. There is only right here, right now, in this present moment. We’re not looking at the past. We don’t know what’s happening in the future. We are here in education today. It doesn’t serve us to think that we’re behind, to look back at last month where we were and to try and measure then from now, or to speculate where we might be in months or years from now.

It doesn’t help us to tell kids that they are a generation that is forever going to be behind and struggling. What kind of mindset will that create for them for the rest of their lives? It serves no useful purpose. It doesn’t help to lead our schools from the belief that we’re all behind. There is no behind. We’re simply here at home. We are all learning how to live and navigate life today.

So, I invite you to clean up your thoughts around the myth of behind. You are not behind. Kids are not behind. Education is not behind. And your ability to step into your empowerment is not behind. Start today. Have an empowered week, my friends. I’ll talk to you next week.

Hey, principals, listen up. I’ve created a professional learning program for you and your team to build your capacity and lead your staff through the empowerment process. I’ve designed personalized growth experience for you and your school. You’ll learn how to apply the leadership triad to empower your staff and students.

This is the moment where the perfect time and opportunity meet. Education will never be the same and I have the tools to help you navigate the change. To learn more, sign up for a free consultation at angelakellycoaching.com/programs. I’ll see you on the inside.

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learn more about the tools that will help you become an emotionally fit school leader.