

Strengths-Based Education and Student Engagement

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A strengths-based educational approach begins with the identification and development of student and faculty strengths. This focus on what is right with learners and educators creates classroom discussions and teaching and learning strategies that lead to academic success (see Lopez & Louis, 2009 and Louis, 2008 for reviews).

Beginning in 2010, the Gallup Student Poll included a core item that asked students about strengths-based education at their school. Specifically, students consider the following: “My school is committed to building the strengths of each student.” Gallup gauges student responses on a 5-point scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

In fall 2010, 259,310 students in grades 5 through 12 responded to this item. On average, students agreed with this item, giving it a 4 on the 5-point scale, suggesting that students believed that schools are committed to their strengths development. A review of responses by grade-level revealed that elementary students are more likely to experience strengths-based education than middle school and high school students. The lowest responses to this item were from high school juniors. This downward trend by grade-level mirrors the declining slope of engagement across grade levels.

Commitment to Student Strengths and Engagement

The Gallup Student Poll revealed that a school’s commitment to strengths is associated with higher student engagement. Around 84% of students who strongly agreed with “My school is committed to building the strengths of each student” were engaged at school, as measured by the 5-item Engagement Index. Only 3% of students who strongly agreed with this statement were deemed actively disengaged.

The implications of the finding that a school being committed to student strengths corresponds with engagement are significant as engagement promotes productivity and job retention (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). This research on employee engagement is clear and the latest research on student engagement (Gallup, 2009a; Gordon, 2006) and student achievement makes a strong case for building engaged schools.

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Commitment to building the strengths of each student is associated with several of the conditions necessary for student engagement. Correlational analyses suggested that there are moderate correlations between student responses to the strengths item and to feeling safe at school and that schoolwork is important, having the opportunity to do what you do best, and receiving recognition or praise for good schoolwork.

Gallup Student Poll Engagement Index

- I have a best friend at school.
- I feel safe in this school.
- My teachers make me feel my schoolwork is important.
- At this school, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
- In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good schoolwork.

Two Paths from Commitment to Strengths to Engagement?

Effective strengths-based educational practices and sound messaging about these practices seem to account for the link between the commitment to building student strengths and engagement. The first path from the commitment to strengths to engagement is quite direct — engagement is high when a school attends to and develops the strengths of each student. Schools that have all students complete the Clifton Youth StrengthsExplorer or StrengthsQuest and then dedicate time to developing those strengths through formal programs may realize the benefits of increased student engagement. The second path is indirect, involving a school's efforts to publicize its strengths-development efforts to students, faculty, staff, parents, and the local community. Examples of this positive messaging are disseminated through strengths development updates in newsletters (periodically by Birdville ISD), strengths signage (displayed on school walls and teacher and administrators' desks in Omaha Public Schools), and community outreach promoting strengths awareness (through messaging emblazoned on a student commuter bus at Texas Tech University). These messages, seen by students and the people who care about them, may create conversations and conditions that are conducive to student engagement.

Schools that create effective strengths-development programs and then publicize those programs may have the best chance at promoting engagement. Pursuing engagement via both means may be more effective than focusing on one or the other.

Building Strengths-Based Schools

School change, on any scale, requires commitment to meaningful goals by faculty, staff, and parents. One school improvement effort that may help students become more involved with and enthusiastic about school is development of the strengths of each student. Demonstrating a commitment to building the strengths of each student could create better conditions for teaching and learning. Educators having a one-on-one strengths conversation with each student and letting parents know that the school focuses on what is right with each student could achieve a fully strengths-based school.

References

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