

What Would Happen If We Study What Is Right with Students?

by Shane J. Lopez, Ph.D.

The graduating students marched proudly into the auditorium to the applause of their friends and family. After acknowledging the teachers and giving a quick speech, the school's head honcho, Dr. Reckmeyer, invited each student to join her on stage -- one by one. She then shared a bit about what each student did best; she recognized their talents, their skills, and their hard work.

Dr. Reckmeyer described Eva as a creative visionary. "You have great artistic talent. You have an incredible ability to see things in a new and unique way. I hope you continue to enjoy and nourish your love of art throughout your life." Anna was described as strong student with a warm personality. "You show great determination with each task you do. You work hard to complete each and every project to the best of your ability and love being praised for a job well done." In parting, Dr. Reckmeyer said, "[Anna] I will miss -- your kindness -- and your -- smile. You have had an incredible journey, and I feel blessed to have shared it with you." These students and the rest of their peers were truly known by those who taught them. And, what was right with them was celebrated.

I learned from some of the parents that all of the students in the graduating class were going to the Happiest Place on Earth. Now, you may be thinking, why would these students plan a group trip to Disneyland? Well, their destination was not Disney. They were going to a place where they could learn new things from smart people who care about them, laugh with their friends, and dream about their future. These 17 preschoolers were headed to kindergarten, the Happiest Place on Earth.

Now, kindergarten has a big advantage over Disney. I know what you are thinking -- much shorter lines. Yes, but, more importantly, the advantage is a good kindergarten program with teachers who encourage students to do what they do best. Good teachers study what is right with each child and propel each toward the future. *Our* students deserve nothing less.

We all know that the world is a scary place, and modern society undermines our health, but I am more concerned about subtleties of the current educational system that can rob us of our enthusiasm as we transition from one grade or school to another, the small behaviors that make us less engaged and less energetic year by year -- from fifth grade to senior year -- and the shabby practices that take a thriving adolescent, full of vim and vigor, and turn him/her into a struggling, young adult. Nothing short of psychological reform of the educational system and intentional development of strengths, hope, engagement, and well-being will make schools, colleges, and universities what they all *should* be -- some of the happiest places on earth.

Studying what is right with people, and more specifically the strengths of people young and old, was the bread and butter of one of my professional heroes, the Nebraska educational psychologist Don Clifton, whose family bought Gallup in 1988. Don would ask me questions like, "Wouldn't it be great if every student could do what they do best every day?" or, "Why not list a student's strengths on the report card, right alongside his/her grades?"

The online tools are now available to reliably measure talents and strengths in all of our students, 10 years and older. So why don't we buck the status quo and train teachers and counselors to be strengths spotters and developers? Well, we are doing that right now. Through partnerships with school districts, colleges, and universities, including numerous HBCUs, we are training strengths-based educators and working toward the goal of identifying the strengths of one million students by the end of 2010.

As education becomes more strengths-based, hope will rise. It needs to since Gallup Student Poll data suggest that only 50% of American students are hopeful. Hope, the ideas and energy for the future, drives our academic success. Rick Snyder, my research

mentor and close friend, found that hope trumped High School GPA, ACT, and SAT scores when predicting college GPAs. Graduate student Matt Gallagher and I replicated these findings, *and* we have demonstrated that academic hope predicts academic retention. So, then, why should we care about our old GPA and ACT/SAT scores when a score from a brief hope scale accounts for more variance in academic success? To some of us, these scores, along with our IQs, are like old friends that keep our self-esteem buoyant. For others, the passage of time has endowed old test scores with a certain mystique and power. Hope also has a mystique -- and *much* more power. And, hope can be enhanced -- without the need for a 4.0 semester or a six-month test-prep stint.

Let's recap here. Capitalizing on strengths creates hope. Hope fuels academic success. And all of this happens within the emotional climates in schools and homes. These climates are determined by how much students feel safe, respected, and cared for. The quality of this climate also reflects the level of student engagement. In the March 2009 Gallup Student Poll of over 70,000 students (grades 5 through 12), we found that 50% of students are engaged; 30% are not engaged; and 20% of American students are actively disengaged or disrupting the teaching and learning processes. The level of engagement peaks in fifth grade, and then slowly and steadily deteriorates year by year. The Happiest Place on Earth banners may provide truth in advertising for primary schools, but not for middle or high schools. As engagement drops, what also declines is a student's ability to be at his/her best and be excited about shaping his/her future. The conditions for engagement in our schools *can* be improved, and some believe that it can be done in 30 days -- the first 30 days of the school year. *Imagine* faculty, staff, and administrators working together to welcome students and make them feel like they matter.

Now, while you have your imagination warmed up, imagine a ladder. The bottom rung -- zero -- represents the worst possible version of your life. The top rung -- 10 -- is your best possible life. Bottom rung, worst life, is zero. Top rung, best life, is 10. On which rung of the life ladder do you stand today? And, on which rung will you stand five years from now? Your responses to these two questions provide a snapshot of your well-being. In this snapshot of thousands of adults, we have found that about 50% are thriving, and 50% are struggling and worse yet, suffering. Through the Gallup Student Poll, we measured the well-being of students and found that 63% are thriving, whereas the rest are struggling or suffering. Those students who are thriving earn more credits in high school and do so with a higher GPA.

What would happen if we study what is right with students? For starters, with the data we have today, we could bring psychological reform to our schools. By capitalizing on strengths, doubling hope, building engaged schools, and boosting well-being, we could turn *every* school into a magic kingdom.

Note: Ladder scale based on the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale.

References

Cantril, H. (1965). *The pattern of human concerns*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.