

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thirty years after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the landmark report that concluded the country's schools were failing and touched off a series of massive reform efforts, fears that the U.S. education system is outdated remain widespread. A 2013 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll found that fewer than three in 10 Americans feel high school graduates are prepared for college, and that fewer than two in 10 say graduates are ready to enter the labor force.

Recent years have seen growing concern among U.S. employers that schools in America are not adequately equipping students with “21st-century skills” — real-world problem-solving, critical thinking, and skilled communication. Gallup's 2013 research with Microsoft Partners in Learning and the Pearson Foundation supports the importance of developing such skills in school, as young adults who say they had opportunities to develop such skills report higher-quality work lives.

This report presents results from Gallup's research on the conditions that lead to high-quality learning environments and promote student achievement. It features several data sources, including results from the 2013 Gallup Student Poll, administered to more than 600,000 students in grades 5 through 12, as well as larger-scale studies on the central role of emotional engagement in the learning process.

Through decades of research on the characteristics of high-performing teachers, principals, and schools, Gallup has gained unparalleled expertise on the “human” elements — including a focus on strengths development and engagement in the classroom — that drive student success. These elements are often overlooked in the effort to “fix” America's education system, but there is growing recognition that unless U.S. schools can better align learning strategies and objectives with fundamental aspects of human nature, they will always struggle to help students achieve their full potential.

SOME OF GALLUP'S MOST IMPORTANT FINDINGS INCLUDE:



Among more than 600,000 Gallup Student Poll participants in 2013, one-third were found to be “success-ready.”

- In 2013, 33% of the students in grades 5 through 12 who took the Gallup Student Poll (GSP) were classified as “success-ready.” These students scored highly on all three dimensions that the assessment measures: hope, engagement, and well-being.
- The GSP’s hope dimension addresses students’ belief that they can — and will — succeed at school and beyond, making them more likely to bring positive energy and creativity to the learning process. The 2013 results found that 54% of students surveyed are hopeful, while 32% are “stuck” and 14% feel discouraged about the future.
- Students’ emotional engagement at school is the noncognitive measure most directly related to academic achievement. The 2013 GSP results indicated that 55% of students are engaged in the learning process, while 28% are “not engaged” — i.e., mentally checked out — and 17% are “actively disengaged,” feeling negatively about school and likely to spread that negativity.
- The GSP’s well-being questions gauge how students evaluate their lives and the extent to which they report positive daily experiences. The 2013 GSP found that 66% of participants fall into the highest well-being category, “thriving,” while 32% are “struggling” and 2% are “suffering.”



Hope and engagement predict students’ academic achievement.

- A 2010 Gallup study of 148 schools in a large urban school district found that students’ average levels of hope and engagement were significant predictors of academic achievement.
- In 2009, Gallup conducted an in-depth study of more than 78,000 students in 160 schools across eight states and found that a one-percentage-point increase in a school’s average student engagement score was associated with a six-point increase in reading achievement and an eight-point increase in math achievement.



Student engagement is strongly related to strengths development and teacher performance.

- The 2013 GSP found that participants who strongly agree with these two statements are 30 times as likely to be engaged at school as those who strongly disagree:
 1. “My school is committed to building the strengths of each student.”
 2. “I have at least one teacher who makes me excited about the future.”
- A 2009 Gallup study also found that teachers’ engagement levels are directly related to those of their students — and thereby to student achievement outcomes.



Schools must improve their ability to attract and engage talented teachers.

- Gallup has studied the characteristics of exceptional teachers for four decades. These teachers’ most consistent common attributes include:
 - 1) having a strong achievement drive; 2) balancing classroom structure and planning; and 3) building strong relationships with students and parents.
- Retaining great teachers means ensuring they have a voice in school-level decisions that affect them, and that they are not subject to unrealistic expectations. Gallup’s 2012 Daily tracking research found that K-12 teachers are the least likely among 12 occupational groups studied to agree that, “At work, my opinions seem to count.” Further, 46% of K-12 teachers report high daily stress.
- Less than one-third of K-12 teachers (31%) are engaged in their jobs. Teachers’ average engagement level drops significantly in their first few years on the job, a likely factor in low retention rates among new teachers.



Talented principals are crucial to building engaging learning environments.

- A 2012 Gallup study involving principals who had taken Gallup’s PrincipalInsight, a talent assessment based on years of studying outstanding principals, found that schools that hired principals with high PrincipalInsight scores had teachers who were 2.6 times more likely to have above-average teacher engagement scores.
- The engagement item most clearly related to principal talent is “In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.”
- Gallup’s research on highly effective principals has identified a set of common attributes:
 - 1) a strong determination to overcome adversity in achieving performance outcomes; 2) an ability to maintain order and accountability in their schools; and 3) a talent for building great relationships with teachers, students and parents.

WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO TO SUPPORT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Measure the psychological factors affecting students' motivation. Understanding and measuring the emotional underpinnings of students' performance can open up new strategies for raising achievement levels. The three dimensions assessed by the Gallup Student Poll — hope, engagement, and well-being — offer important insights into factors that can fuel or detract from students' motivation.

Create a strengths-based strategy for personalizing students' education plans. Leaders of schools that focus on students' ability to discover and develop their strengths find ways to appeal to student interests during the school week. Some schools offer numerous after-school activities and clubs, while others provide work experience at school or in the community. School districts should expand on these efforts by ensuring that students and educators know their strengths and have plans to put them to use. Students should have strengths advisers, clear goals, and access to various online educational resources and experiences that complement their unique strengths.

Take three steps to improve teacher engagement. To boost the overall engagement level of teachers in their schools, principals are advised to: 1) Ask teachers important questions about curriculum, pedagogy, and schedules, and incorporate their feedback into the decision-making process; 2) Partner their most engaged administrators and teachers with new teachers; and 3) Remove the most disengaged teachers from the classroom for a brief period, help them invest in what they do best with continuing education, and eliminate major barriers to their engagement.

Recognize the importance of teachers' ability to connect with students to help them envision their futures. Young Americans who say they had teachers who “cared about my problems and feelings” and who “knew about my hopes and dreams” are much more likely to have experienced 21st-century skills development while in school, and therefore more likely to have higher-quality work lives.

Develop a talent-based leadership pipeline. Given the pivotal role of principals and other school leaders in engaging teachers and leading their schools to higher achievement levels, school districts should build leadership pipelines for recruiting and filling roles based on talent. Hiring decisions that are reactive rather than intentional leave schools vulnerable to the pitfalls that come with a poor leadership fit.

Help prepare the next generation of American entrepreneurs. To meet the country's need for job creation and economic growth, the nation's schools must build alternative pathways through the education system that identify and develop entrepreneurial talent in the same way they identify and develop talent in academic areas. **G**