

# **PRINCIPAL REFLECTIONS ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: USING THE GALLUP STUDENT POLL**

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JANUARY 2014

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To find out why some schools have higher engagement scores from the Gallup Student Poll than others, Gallup asked principals of five middle school in the Midwest why student engagement was important to them as principals. Three themes emerged from their responses:

- perceived relationship between student engagement and academic success
- insights into student social-emotional well-being development
- feedback for action provided by measuring student hope, engagement, and well-being

To obtain these responses Gallup surveyed principals at schools that had higher student engagement scores in the 2011 and 2012 administrations of the Gallup Student Poll. Although not representative of all U.S. students, the October 2013 administration of the Gallup Student Poll alone included responses from 616,000 students, representing more than 2,000 schools. Since 2009, more than 2.1 million students have responded to items assessing their engagement, hope, and well-being.

## *Academic Success*

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All principals in the survey expressed a belief in student engagement's connection to higher academic performance, which numerous studies support.<sup>1,2</sup> One principal expressed the connection this way: "In this district, we are always looking at ACT scores. I'm not worried about the academic scores. If students are engaged, they will improve academically." Another principal suggested the need to focus on initial engagement levels as a result of parent involvement, saying, "I absolutely know that a huge part of

that is brought to school. But we realized if we didn't have a high level of engagement, our academic efforts wouldn't be successful."

## *Student Development*

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Principals viewed meeting students' developmental needs as a contributor to student success. A principal summarized the emphasis the school district places on two goals, stating, "We probably place as much emphasis on goal two (personal growth of students) as goal one (academic success) because academics aren't enough if students aren't healthy otherwise." Another principal asserted, "I can't do the academic part until I have the social-emotional piece in place." Similarly, a third principal expressed the need for a connection between student and school, saying, "belonging for students was critical to learning."

## *Feedback From Students*

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Principals cited measuring student opinions as important feedback. Priority setting was an important goal, as a principal explained, "Nothing else matters unless you know how your students are in hope, engagement, and well-being. You need to know where you need to put your priorities." Another principal suggested the survey results were the beginning of a conversation: "When you look at your results, you can begin to talk with teachers about this is what our student are telling us."

## EXPLAINING HIGHER ENGAGEMENT SCORES

After principals received their students' engagement mean score in 2012, Gallup followed up by asking them why engagement at their school was at the level it was. The principals' responses fell into several categories, including student support, student-teacher relationships, the importance of teachers, and student and teacher recognition.

### Student Support

Principals cited academic support for students and creating a sense of belonging as areas that contributed to student engagement and academic success.

*Academic Support.* One principal cited the school's high academic standards combined with academic support for high levels of student success: "From 7:00 a.m. to 7:45 a.m. we have teacher or para-academic support. On Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, a late bus is provided by the parent organization for students who live too far to walk or have no transportation."

Principals provided three examples of academic support. The first principal cited using "hope language in helping students solve problems" and a teacher professional learning community (PLC) in the school that designs lessons all teachers used. The second principal cited book studies with the faculty as focusing on academic engagement. An outgrowth of this work was a schoolwide initiative in bell activities that focuses students on preparation for the lesson or reviewing prior learning before class formally begins. The third principal noted, "We share with students their academic information and set goals for where they want to be. We focus on the individual achievement piece, but we also focus on creating a connection."

Another principal noted that student academic support had to include all students, rather than focusing on remediation for a few to meet state test proficiency requirements. The principal asserted, "We have to address all the kids all the time," and concluded saying, "The assistance and relationship building promoting emotional and academic growth has to be across the board."

Research supports these principals' views of the importance of providing a supportive academic climate.

Studies suggest that academic support from school staff builds social environments that promote academics, feelings of competence, reduced behavioral disruptions, increased student engagement, and contribute to student academic performance.<sup>3</sup>

*A Sense of Belonging.* One principal summarized the collective view of all the principals that connecting with students in school-sponsored activities translated into positive student outcomes. Reversing the normal sequence of events, this principal said, "We asked students what clubs they wanted and used the list to then find teachers to sponsor the activity." Another principal pointed to data collected regarding bullying and safety in the school, saying the information "made us realize that we needed to find positive activities and things before and after school for kids to do. We've instituted new and different clubs and activities to involve students." The goal for another principal was to have "every student to be involved in at least one club or activity."

Extending the idea of students feeling belonging, three principals cited the importance of building a sense of community — among students, parents, and teachers — and what this means to them. "We are focused on these kids' learning," one principal stated, "but we are building a school community within the community." Another principal asked students to "dream the perfect middle school." "The No. 1 word from students was 'respect,'" the principal explained. "The kids wanted to feel safe — no bullying. Kids used words like 'kindness,' 'accepting,' 'involved,' and 'caring,'" the principal concluded. A third principal spoke of including parents as part of the community with students and teachers: "We want students to feel it is their school, not my school, by focusing on creating a connection."

Principals mentioned how academic support for students was necessary but insufficient in creating student success. These principals proactively promoted students' sense of belonging and an emotional connection with the school. While strategies to do these things included activities before and after school, these principals pressed for an emotional connection associated with a sense of community.

In a review of student engagement research, Jennifer Fredricks and her colleagues describe three generally accepted constructs of student engagement: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. Emotional engagement describes students' feelings about the school. Positive relationships, a sense of belonging, and identification with the school are examples of emotional engagement.<sup>4</sup> Studies have linked emotional engagement — and a sense of belonging in particular — to higher academic performance, fewer disruptions in class and the school, and lower absenteeism.<sup>5</sup>

### *Student-Teacher Relationships*

One principal cited “the teachers’ relationships with kids” as the reason for the school’s engagement scores. The principal continued, “We have always talked to staff members about listening to students and building relationships as the most important thing to getting kids to work for you.”

Principals saw student-teacher relationships as a normal result of time to interact outside of class. Another principal pointed out, “If an administrator can build in time for adults and students to interact more than in classrooms, relationships will grow. Staff members enjoy the time before and after school for the programs because of the relationships,” the principal added. “Once you provide the right culture, it is a natural thing for students and teachers to build relationships.”

Three principals spoke specifically to the importance they placed on students having a relationship with at least one adult in the school. One principal explained, “We want all students to have an adult they could go to and actually name.” Another principal said, “We looked at the item regarding having an adult that cares about the student. An advisory group was added as a result of working with the item.”

Another principal flatly stated, “Our success is due to the work we do with our staff and students in the ‘Teams’ [name changed to protect anonymity].” Similar to student advisory programs, the “Team” structure in this school overcomes some of the typical limitations of advisory programs. First,

the potential for deeper and stronger student-teacher relationships is created. Meeting 14 times a year on early dismissal days, each teacher has 15 students, five each from grades six, seven, and eight. Students stay with the same teacher throughout the time they attend this middle school, providing continuity and the opportunity to build deeper relationships.

Second, the additional time demand on teachers for planning in the typical advisory program is decreased. The principal explained, “We build leadership by asking eighth graders to lead and actively participate in sessions by demonstrating how they use hope, for example.” Each “Team” completes the same lesson prepared in advance by a PLC “Team.” The principal shared that an upcoming session focused on “Who are their [students] change agents, and how do they use the change agents to reach their goals.”

These principals expressed a belief in the power of relationships between teachers and students to enhance learning. The principals’ efforts, as described in the interviews, included stressing the importance of student relationships, creating structures for teachers and students to interact inside and outside the classroom, promoting a caring adult for every student, and creating sustained relationships in advisory, along with carefully planned advisory sessions. With these actions, the principals shaped the school culture, influenced how teachers and students did things in the school, and affected the school climate — how it “feels” in the school.

Studies point to relationships between students and teachers as one of two critical elements in the successful learning equation. While researchers found high expectations and challenging work as crucial to higher levels of engagement and student learning, they also discovered that the student-teacher relationship in the form of a sense of caring by teachers for students is vital.<sup>6</sup> All three elements are critical to a productive and welcoming place to learn. In some respects, student-teacher relationships may be the foundation on which engagement and learning are built.

## Importance of Teachers

Three principals spoke of the importance of having the right teachers in the school's engagement success. One principal said, "I can't teach teachers to like kids; I can teach math and classroom management." "If they don't love kids," another principal asserted, "they don't belong here." Building a staff of teachers is a bumpy road sometimes, and as the third principal pointed out, "We made some changes in the staff. You have to have a critical mass in a group where positive behaviors predominate."

Another principal directly acknowledged the school's staff contribution to students. "A lot of effort is being put out by the staff overall," the principal explained. "I have to credit the staff, every single person, with our success. They come in the morning, give everything they can, and come back the next day to do it all over again."

Because of staff members' importance to student engagement, a fourth principal saw a need for increased relationships among staff members. "I felt that we were becoming more like a mini-high school," the principal asserted, "in that eighth-grade teachers didn't know the sixth-grade teachers." Additionally, the principal asked, "If we feel things are good for students, shouldn't we do the same thing for adults?" As a result, "Teams" were created for teachers, consisting of mixed grade assignments and responsibilities. "The first 20 to 30 minutes of early release days are devoted to a fun, team-building activity," developed by one of the "Teams" on a rotating basis, the principal explained. "Staff members now know each other, and you can see how staff feel more positive about school and coming to school," the principal said as he shared an email about the positivity in the school from a staff member new to the school.

These principals recognized the pivotal role teachers play in engagement and learning. While the decision to hire a teacher happens only once, the hired teacher shapes the learning environment throughout the year and for years to come. Teachers do the work with students, and principals are successful when teachers are successful. But successful school climates depend on taking care of adults so that they can care for students. One principal's observation that adults

in the school should experience the good things students do is good advice. Student engagement depends on teacher engagement, and it is likely there will be a great learning place for students if there is a great workplace for teachers.<sup>7</sup>

## Student and Teacher Recognition

"Student recognition is another piece that contributed to student engagement," a principal asserted. The principal described the process as teachers recognizing students and notifying the office. These students would then become eligible for fast food coupons and random drawings for gifts. In another effort, the assistant principal received a certificate for each student nominated for recognition, and then the assistant principal read the certificate to a parent over the telephone in the student's presence. The certificate initiative came from staff discussions about recognition.

A second principal used a similar program: teachers provided the student written recognition and sent a copy home to the parent. In a separate program, teachers nominated students to receive certificates for acts of social responsibility in the school. The nominated student went to the office where the principal then read the certificate to a parent over the phone.

Another principal used time from PLC meetings for teachers to write "drops" to students and other teachers. The drop-writing process came from the book, *How Full Is Your Bucket?* This principal underscored the recognition dilemma in America's schools noting, "It is important that people feel they are recognized, but neither students nor teachers feel recognized."

At the first principal's school, teachers are encouraged to nominate other teachers that have assisted them in some way. The "winning" teacher receives a traveling trophy that is made out of a piece of construction debris.

On the student side, since 2009, Gallup's Student Poll survey has asked students to respond to the following item: "In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good schoolwork." Each year, only about three out of 10 students respond with "strongly agree," and slightly more than one out of 10 responds "strongly disagree." Similarly, Gallup's studies of the workplace

typically find fewer than one in four adults responding positively to a similar item, and one-fifth to one-third of respondents disagreeing.<sup>8</sup>

Recognition serves as a powerful motivator for students in the classroom as well as in athletic and music contests or at art fairs and debate tournaments. Ming-Te Wang and Rebecca Holcombe found that positive praise and highlighting effort increased identification with school and indirectly contributed to student achievement. Summarizing five main studies of student engagement, Fred Newmann, Gary Wehlage, and Susie Lamborn noted that students' engagement, and indirectly their achievement, was negatively affected when feedback was not clear and timely.<sup>9</sup>

In the adult world, employee engagement affects prominent business outcomes. Rodd Wagner and James K. Harter noted that unrecognized employees were twice as likely to leave their job. These same employees accounted for 10% to 20% lower productivity and revenue while negatively affecting customer satisfaction.<sup>10</sup>

## USING GALLUP STUDENT POLL RESULTS

While all principals shared their Gallup Student Poll results from their school's scorecard with their school's staff, ways of sharing results varied by school. In two schools, the school's leadership team received the scorecard. In two other schools, the principal, assistant principal, and counselors reviewed the data and presented them to the staff. In the fifth school, a standing teacher committee received the scorecard for review and action.

In two schools, the leadership team initially reviewed the Gallup Student Poll results, discussed implications, and moved the information to teacher teams. Leadership teams for these schools consisted of representatives from different grade levels and subject areas. Both schools moved from the leadership team to teacher team meetings to present the Gallup Student Poll results to staff members. Schoolwide action plans were developed in both schools, although one principal indicated that teams could use different implementation strategies to achieve the same goal.

Two other schools approached the review and discussion of Gallup Student Poll results first in a smaller group

consisting of the principal, assistant principal, and counselors. In these schools, both of the smaller groups reviewed the data, but then took different approaches for the next step. In one school, the assistant principal presented the results in an in-service session with the staff discussing the results and arriving at consensus on an action plan. The other school's principal shared results with teacher teams after the principal, assistant principal, and counselor reviewed the school's results.

In the fifth school, a standing teacher committee received the school's scorecard. This committee reviewed the data and identified areas for action planning. This team was charged with writing lesson plans for all of the staff to use with their advisement groups. Additionally, the entire staff reviewed each lesson plan's objectives, activities, and materials prior to advisory sessions.

## FINDINGS FROM THE PRINCIPAL INTERVIEWS

While the students in the five schools who completed the Gallup Student Poll do not represent all schools in America, or all students in schools that complete the poll, the broad strategies the principals described as a result of the Gallup Student Poll results may be useful for other schools. For instance, a school could emphasize and expand on an existing strategy other schools use. If a school does not have a strategy, an approach could be structured for that school's situation. The principals interviewed perceived the following items as contributors to student engagement:

- These principals strongly believed that student engagement is critical to student achievement and success. The relationship between student engagement and achievement served as a foundation for subsequent strategies in the schools. Numerous studies that find a relationship between student engagement and student achievement support these principals' belief.
- A district's emphasis on academic success and student personal growth helped to encourage the school's principals and staff to pursue both goals simultaneously. Consequently, principals promoted efforts to support students in academics



and school-supported activities. Academic support focused directly on student achievement. But principals fostered student support in the form of clubs and activities to create a sense of belonging, involvement, and identification with the school. Research supports positive outcomes for these efforts in strengthening emotional engagement.

- These principals understood that the right teachers matter to learning and student engagement. Focusing on student-teacher relationships and academic background, principals stressed the importance of selecting teachers who have the right attitudes and beliefs about students and know their subjects. The importance of student-teacher relationships included wanting each student to have an adult to go to in the school and wanting students to feel safe in the school. These efforts stemmed from two poll questions that asked about an adult in the student's life that cares about his or her future and the feeling of safety in the school. Positive student-teacher relationships are hallmarks of emotional engagement, which research supports.
- Student and teacher recognition is important, and these principals mentioned various strategies to increase recognition for students and teachers in their schools. William James, psychologist and philosopher, underscored the importance of recognition more than 100 years ago, saying, "The deepest principle of human nature is the craving to be appreciated." Yet, students and adults report low levels of recognition as previously described. Moreover, recognition for students or adults is often an issue chosen for action planning because of the typically low score for the item.

Unfortunately, many efforts to improve recognition result in small, incremental improvements because of the approaches taken. Most efforts to improve recognition reach too few students or adults and are too late because they occur at the school or district level. While these programs have merit and should be continued, they do not have the frequency and personalization to affect recognition as measured in the Gallup Student Poll or Gallup's Q<sup>12</sup> workplace survey. When devising recognition programs for students or adults, recognition needs to be:

1. Specific — general statements of good work are not enough; be very specific about the good work completed that is being recognized.
2. Genuine — students and adults see quickly that recognition is not deserved; explain why the person's actions are noteworthy.
3. Fitting to the person — the recognition must match how the person wants to be recognized to be effective; recognizing some students or adults in a large group may be counter-productive.
4. Immediate — recognition needs to be timed as closely as possible to completion of the good work.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following paragraphs offer some best practices for sharing, reviewing, and using the Gallup Student Poll data.

### *Use the Gallup Student Poll Resources*

There are several helpful resources and information for principals and any school leaders to better understand, communicate, and act on the survey administration and Gallup Student Poll data. The **Learning and Development** section of the **Resources** area on the Gallup Student Poll website provides a list of webinars. The **Gallup Student Poll: Understanding the Data and the Scorecard** webinar develops awareness and knowledge to navigate the school's scorecard and interpret it for others. The **Gallup Student Poll Impact: 101** is two 90-minute webinar settings.



Two other sections in the **Resources** area are valuable. The **Gallup Student Poll Library** offers various reports on Gallup Student Poll findings. The **In the News** section provides helpful links to news articles that support creating hope, building engagement, and boosting well-being in schools.

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### *Share the Results*

Distribute the Gallup Student Poll scorecard to all staff members. Every adult can have an effect on how students perceive engagement, hope, and some of the well-being items measured by the Gallup Student Poll. Principals in the schools Gallup interviewed chose to distribute the results in different ways, and there is no right way to distribute the results. But the school principal should create opportunities to share the scorecard and begin a dialogue about the results with the school's staff and other stakeholders. While finding a time to share results may be difficult, it is best to share the results soon after their release.

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### *Have a Dialogue*

While numerous factors are critical to gathering student data for schools, none is more important than what is done with the information after the data are collected. This is not to say that the survey questions do not matter; if the questions do not relate to important measures, nothing afterward is worthwhile. Gallup based the survey items on research, demonstrating their ability to measure various important outcomes. Similarly, an easy system for administering the items is critical to minimizing disruptions in a school. A quick return of the results is mandatory if schools are to act on the results in a meaningful way. But then what?

"Dialogue" means a discussion and exchange of ideas among the school's staff members and parent representatives about what students have said through their answers to the Gallup Student Poll items. This dialogue is important because it provides different perspectives of what students are saying and increases the likelihood of commitment by staff members for any subsequent action plan.

The Gallup Student Poll scorecard provides three suggested questions to help get a dialogue started. The questions include the "biggest highlight," a "concern," and a "finding" to share with the broader community. The "biggest highlight" question is asking stakeholders to identify the result that is the high point for them on the survey. It may be a standout as one of the items the students scored the highest, or it may be an item that increased from the previous administration. This question asks: "What do you want to celebrate?" The "concerns" question is straightforward: "Which result do you not feel very good about?" The "finding" question is an important takeaway for stakeholders outside the school to understand. Examples of a finding could include a summary of the year's results, a description of interventions and successes, or the actions the school or district will take.

### *Remember That It Is 'All Local'*

In working with a school's Gallup Student Poll results, keep in mind Tip O'Neill's quote: "all politics is local." Gallup Student Poll results are local. That is, school districts, schools, and groups of students are different, so their scores tell different stories. In middle schools and high schools, the grade-level results can differ. While the school-level results are one level of analysis and action planning, the level closest to the student — a grade-level team in a middle school, for example — may be the most appropriate place for discussion and action planning.

### *Listen to Your Students*

After receiving a scorecard, principals and school leaders may be curious as to what students were thinking when they responded to different items. In this situation, leaders should just ask them. Teachers in grade-level teams can gain understandings of individual grade-level differences, and elective teachers can access information from cross grade-level groups they serve. The insights received from students may reinforce previous interpretations of causes for some student responses or they may provide principals and teachers with new understandings of students' perspective.

## Take Action

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The dialogue among staff members may raise numerous issues or help them focus on a few items. The suggested discussion and reflection questions are designed so that staff members focus on items that are important to them, not just the highest or lowest numbers on the scorecard. Action planning need not be new initiatives; an action plan may be to continue initiatives that are currently in place, to emphasize the initiative more, or to refine what has been done previously. In other cases, the action plan may focus on new efforts. Regardless of the actions staff members decide on, use a SMART goal format: Make it Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely.

## BOTTOM LINE

It is important to recognize the efforts of the five schools where Gallup interviewed the principals mentioned in this paper to improve student engagement, hope, and well-being. Principals' top-of-mind responses to the importance of engagement and the reasons for the engagement levels in the Gallup Student Poll revealed broad strategies that previous research supports and that other schools could implement. The strategies included:

- a belief in a relationship between student engagement and academic success
- student support in academics and activities and clubs to help build involvement in and identification with the school
- recognition that engagement depends on the right teachers
- positive student-teacher relationships
- recognition of students and teachers

Principals cited a focus on three Gallup Student Poll items in their schools and a broader importance for the poll. The three questions focused on an adult caring about the student's future, recognition for good schoolwork, and feeling safe at school. The principals saw the Gallup Student Poll as providing feedback from students that affected priorities and goal setting within the school. More broadly, the principals found that the Gallup Student Poll provided students a voice and a tool for the entire school community to fashion a more supportive climate for students that leads to greater student success.

## Notes

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