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Make a Difference: Show Students You Care

By **Brandon H. Busted**

Over the past two decades, our country's leaders have done a great job building a massive accountability system around schools. What they've failed to do, in the meantime, is build an engagement system within them.

Accountability can be healthy if we hold schools accountable for the right outcomes. If not, it can be problematic. And **if we put so much emphasis on accountability that we lose sight of the most basic elements of human development, it can be a catastrophe. This is what we have done in our K-12 schools**—and teachers and students are suffering because of it.

Among all the professions our organization, Gallup, has studied, teachers are last in agreeing that their "opinions count" at work and their "supervisors create an open and trusting environment." These are two crucial elements of teacher engagement, which is the single greatest predictor of student engagement. But how can we expect teachers to engage students in this kind of negative workplace?

Gallup surveyed more than 600,000 5th through 12th grade students in 2013 through the **Gallup Student Poll**, an annual survey that measures hope for the future, engagement with school, and well-being—factors that have been shown to drive grades, achievement scores, retention, and future employment. We learned that student engagement drops precipitously from 5th through 12th grades. If our education system were working well, this finding would be the absolute opposite because students should be more engaged in school over time, not less.

Gallup has learned how important it is for all human beings—regardless of age—to have the opportunity to do what they do best every day. Rather than trying to fix weaknesses, the most successful people focus primarily on building on what they're naturally good at and turning those talents into strengths. This fundamental insight about strengths-based development is derived from some of the most comprehensive

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Pollsters found evidence that teachers had an impact on whether students reported being hopeful. When students are "actively disengaged," their attitudes and behavior can disrupt classes for others. Gallup asked students to rate their current lives and their hopes for the future. Those who gave low ratings in both categories were deemed to be "suffering."



SOURCE: "State of America's Schools: The Path to Winning Again in Education," Gallup Inc.

research Gallup has ever done.

But instead of using a strengths-based approach in education, we have created a system that approaches everything through a deficit-based lens: what's wrong with students, what they don't know, and how ineffective teachers are, for example. We even use phrases like "education reform" and "remedial classes" to describe how we hope to fix schools and students. Fewer than half of all students strongly agree they have an opportunity to do what they do best every day at school, and this is one of the key components of school engagement.

If you were to ask Gallup what the most important elements are for students to be successful in school, our research would tell you it's having someone who cares about your development and having an opportunity to do what you do best every day. These are the same exact elements that are required for anyone to be successful in work and in life—regardless of age, race, sex, or the country one lives in, whether the respondent is employed or retired. Decades of Gallup research around the world on workplace engagement and well-being point to this as the formula for success. It's especially true in schools, for teachers and students alike.

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Instead of allowing everyone in our schools—students, teachers, and other staff members—to focus on these fundamentals, we have insisted on setting up an accountability system on a narrow set of measures: grades and test scores. And we have gone insane over it.

Texas, one of the first states to go running into the high-stakes-testing frenzy, is now one of the first to back away from it by passing recent legislation to **reduce the number of required tests** between the 9th and 12th grades from 15 to five. While I would agree that a modest level of testing is helpful to measure student growth and learning, right now testing has become our end-all-be-all strategy to improve educational outcomes, and it's failing our students.

Perhaps the most important education news story of last year was **Google's announcement** that it found no correlation between the grades and test scores of its employees and their success on the job, so the company no longer asks applicants about them. This was a shocking statement coming from a company that receives more than 2 million job applications a year. Yet it seems as though Google simply discovered what superintendents around the country already know.

In Gallup's survey of more than 2,500 superintendents, conducted in partnership with *Education Week*, we found that only 5 percent strongly agreed that a high GPA is the best predictor of success in college, and only 6 percent strongly agreed that high SAT and ACT scores are the best predictor. This doesn't mean that we should throw out grades and testing entirely. But it does emphasize the need to greatly reduce the weight we put on these measures. Certainly there is more to success in work and life than grades and test scores.

We're making matters worse by handing our most talented and engaged teachers manuals on how and what they should teach. Yes, we need more rigorous standards, but what we don't need is more standardized rigor. Teachers aren't failing us; instead, the system they're forced to work within is failing us and them. And if we want to build engaged schools, we need to put ownership of the teaching and learning process back in the hands of teachers and students. We need to

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thrive when someone cares about their development

and when they have opportunities to do what they do best each day. We need to create an environment that gives them ideas and energy for the future—that gives students hope.

Caring and hope sound like things that are *nice* to have, rather than things we *need* to have for success in life. But, as Gallup research shows, hope is a stronger predictor of college success than GPA or SAT and ACT scores, and caring or "emotional support" elements are crucial to success in life after college. Not surprisingly, when Gallup polled Americans and asked them to describe the best teacher they ever had, the most common word they used was "caring."

Gallup's recent study of more than 30,000 college graduates shows how important emotional-support elements are, and how few young people are receiving them. Graduates who strongly agreed that they received emotional support during college doubled their odds of being engaged in their work and of thriving overall. Emotional support includes three crucial elements: feeling that they had a professor who made them excited about learning, that the professors at their alma mater cared about them as people, and that they had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams. Yet as profoundly important as these emotional-support elements are to long-term success in work and life, a mere 14 percent of all college graduates strongly agreed they received all three.

When it comes to being engaged at work and feeling fulfilled after college, what you studied and where you went to college hardly mattered. What mattered is *how you did* college—having a meaningful internship or job, working on a long-term project, and being actively involved in extracurricular activities—and being emotionally supported by others during college.

What students need at their core is caring. If we can create a system that allows caring to flourish and become a common experience that all students receive, America will once again have the best school system in the world.

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