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Almost 70% of teachers are not engaged. Here's why that matters so much

Wednesday [Gallup](#) released a major [report](#) on the State of American Schools. Their data paints a picture of schools performing as a complex ecosystem, with the wellbeing, engagement, and performance of teachers, students, and principals all intertwined.

The report combines decades of surveys of 5 million American teachers and principals with the results of the [Gallup Student Poll](#), now billed as the largest survey of American students with 600,000 5th through 12 grade participants, and several large follow-up studies. Gallup's also drawing on its background developing the Employee Engagement Survey, which has been administered to a total of almost 30 million people in all professions.

The Gallup polls ask students, teachers, principals, and other professionals about their levels of hope, emotional engagement, and wellbeing at work or school. While these qualities may seem like frills, they've been demonstrated over time to have powerful correlations with harder metrics, like a company's profits or a school's test scores. For example, in 2009, Gallup studied 78,000 students in 160 schools in eight states, finding that a one-percentage-point uptick in a school's average student engagement was connected to an average six-point increase in reading achievement and eight points in math. Similarly, Gallup researchers have found in peer-reviewed studies that their "hope" measure was a better predictor of grades in college than SATs, ACTs or high school GPA. In a third study, students' levels of hope accounted for almost half of the variation in math achievement and at least one-third of their variation in reading and science scores.

Brandon Busteded, the executive director of Gallup Education, says that in some ways, the point Gallup is making with this line of research is even more "provocative." "We definitely want to show that these quote unquote 'soft' measures move the quote unquote 'hard' measures, like grades and test scores," he said. "But we're also asking: is engagement more important or are grades more important? If you

ask a parent whether they'd rather have a kid who is getting mostly As and is only mildly interested in what they're learning or mostly Bs and is super engaged, I can tell you what most parents would pick."

So how are we doing on these soft measures? According to the survey, 55% of American students scored high on engagement, and just one in three score high on all three measures of hope, engagement and well-being.

Engagement measures have a lot to do with relationships and feeling valued. So it's not surprising that there's an intimate connection between the schoolroom engagement of students, and the workplace engagement of teachers. As the saying goes, "Our working conditions are our students' learning conditions."

Gallup found that students who agreed with the following two statements: 1. "My school is committed to building the strengths of each student" and 2. "I have at least one teacher who makes me excited about the future" were 30 times more likely to be engaged.

Unfortunately, most teachers are not in a position to share excitement with students. About 70% are classified as disengaged, which puts them on par with the workforce as a whole. This is surprising in some ways, because teachers score close to the top on measures that indicate that they find meaning in their life and see work as a calling. Unfortunately, the structures that teachers are working in—which may include high-stakes standardized testing and value-added formulas that evaluate their performance based on outside factors—seem to tug against their happiness. "The real bummer is they don't feel their opinions matter," Busted says. K-12 teachers scored dead last among 12 occupational groups in agreeing with the statement that their opinions count at work, and also dead last on "My supervisor creates an open and trusting environment."

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This takes the measure directly to the top. Gallup's study found that principal talent had a powerful impact on teacher engagement, which in turn affects student engagement. They recommend that principals adopt a more collaborative management style and help new teachers acclimate by putting them together to form partnerships with more experienced teachers.

Surveys and polls aren't perfect, of course. But overall, the message of this research is a powerful indicator that we need to do a better job at looking at the full range of factors that affect school performance. Gallup is promoting its student poll to districts as another means of making decisions about what really counts in school.