

# Using Strengths to Increase Educator and Student Engagement

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Engaged educators create learning environments that promote student motivation, collaboration, learning, and performance and, are the number one predictor of student engagement (Lopez & Sidhu, 2013a4). In turn, student engagement is a predictor of student performance (Assor, Kaplan, Kanat-Maymon, & Roth, 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004). However, a recent Gallup survey on education and teacher engagement found that 7 out of 10 teachers rated themselves as “not engaged” or “actively disengaged” while at work (Lopez & Sidhu, 2013a). In addition, although teachers typically report a high level of emotional health and well-being, they also report very high levels of stress (Lopez and Sidhu, 2013a) in their work environment. Strengths use has been linked to lower levels of stress (Wood, Linley, Maltby & Hurling, 2011) and is a core predictor of workplace engagement (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Minhas, 2010). Harzer and Ruch (2012b) found that using one’s personal, or “signature” strengths in the workplace was a key factor in nurturing job satisfaction, pleasure, engagement, and meaning in one’s job.

While teachers search for a means to overcome disengagement and stress, students are faced with significant social and emotional challenges that interfere with their own success, both inside and outside of the classroom (Greenberg, Weissberg, O’Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, & Elias, 2003). A positive school environment, where students understand and utilize their personal strengths, is linked to well-being,

engagement at school, and academic performance, and is fundamental to building social and emotional learning (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Teachers and school administrators can consider engaging school or classroom activities such as those found in Thriving Learning Communities that include:

1. Have teachers “name and claim” their strengths during team meetings, encouraging them to use those strengths in their roles as teachers. Employees who use their character strengths at work report greater job satisfaction and engagement, and are more likely to see their work as a calling than those not using their strengths (Harzer and Ruch, 2012b). Teachers can explore how to use their unique constellation of strengths, exploring how those particular strengths can enhance teaching and learning each day in the classroom.

2. Try this same activity with your students. Ask students to look at the list of character strengths and select which five strengths best describe them. Encourage them to select strengths they think they use most often and that are most likely to make them feel energized and engaged. Have students focus throughout the week on using the strengths they selected. Programs that promote students’ use of strengths have been shown to improve student academic skills while increasing student enjoyment and engagement in school (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009).

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