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California School District Explores Strength-Based Learning

Positive psychology inspires a new trend in learning.

By The Hechinger Report ContributorFeb. 2, 2018, at 12:01 a.m.

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Is Strength-Based Learning a Magic Bullet?

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Audrianna Lesieur, age 11, smiles after demonstrating the strength of "Confidence" with encouragement from classmate William Maestas as her teacher Val Seamons moves on to assist Billy Sabo at Lake Canyon Elementary School. (Gail Cornwall for The Hechinger Report)

GALT, Calif. — Sixth-grader Audrianna Lesieur had just finished arranging 23 words on scraps of paper into five columns when Val Seamons appeared at her side. "Why is this over here?" the veteran teacher asked. Audrianna scooped up the word in question and anxiously scanned the columns for its proper home. "Where's your 'Confidence' strength?" Seamons asked. "Tell me why

it's here." As Audrianna lifted her bowed head, her classmate William Maestas chimed in, "You can do it!" With that, she defended her original choice, and Seamons went to the next student.

Terms like "Caring," "Competing" and "Confidence," are very familiar to students at Lake Canyon Elementary School. They're among the 10 "talent themes," or strengths, used to underpin learning in the school district here. Starting in preschool, teachers try to spot students' natural talents; by kindergarten, each child's top strengths appear on a "personalized learning plan," a new type of report card. Second-graders sing a rendition of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" that replaces "there was a cow" with "there was 'Dependability.'" And in fourth grade, students at all five of Galt's public elementary schools take an online quiz known as a "strengths assessment" in which their sense of how much they relate to certain statements – such as, "For me, everything has to be planned" – helps identify their strengths.

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At first glance, this strength-based approach seems like the educational equivalent of kitsch. But Karen Schauer, the superintendent of Galt Joint Union Elementary School District (who lists her top strengths in her email signature) says that in her nearly 40 years as an educator, "It's just one of the most powerful things I've ever been a part of." Jenifer Fox – who wrote the book "Your Child's Strengths" and in 2014 helped create The Delta School in Wilson, Arkansas, which uses the strengths approach – went further, calling it "the magic bullet."

But what is it, exactly?

Though grounded in complex positive psychology research, the strength-based approach boils down to a simple rule: Focus on what students do well. It feels natural to do the opposite, because pulling up areas of weakness can seem like the best way to help children grow, says Lea Waters, a psychology professor at the University of Melbourne, in Australia, and the author of a book called "The Strength Switch." Yet focusing on the traits and skills kids don't have can lead them to become disengaged, Waters says, while focusing on strengths produces greater levels of happiness and engagement at school and higher levels of academic achievement.

The first step, she says, is helping students learn what strengths are and figure out which ones they display most. Then teachers can provide opportunities to use those talents and, theoretically, even allow students' strengths to drive some choices of curricular content.

While it could be considered a form of personalized learning, most schools experimenting with the strengths approach don't yet allow students' passions to influence their academic subject matter

or learning pace. Instead, students' strengths tend to drive their choices for extracurricular activities or during more open-ended portions of the school day like "genius hour."

Students' lists of their top three strengths adorn the school walls.

(Gail Cornwall for The Hechinger Report)

Most teachers who try the approach start by giving a quiz. The one Galt's fourth-graders take comes from the CliftonStrengths Youth Explorer, a framework developed and sold by Gallup, the 82-year-old management consulting company best known for its public opinion polling. Waters uses a different list of strengths, called Values in Action, when working with educators in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the U.S. Others use strength systems designed by the British Centre of Applied Positive Psychology or by Thrively, a California-based startup.

While the number of schools using the method isn't tallied anywhere, the number of tests taken could serve as a loose proxy for interest in it. Jon Burt, who heads Gallup's K-12 education consulting arm, says that each year more than 1 million students in the U.S. take one of that company's quizzes. Jillian Coppley Darwish, president of Mayerson Academy, a Cincinnati-based nonprofit that advises educators, says that her organization has introduced the Values in Action

framework to nearly 70 schools in the U.S., and Thrively's president, Alex Cory, says that about 44,000 teachers across the 50 states have signed up for Thrively accounts.

Still, there's a difference between interest and implementation. "What people struggle with is how to make it come alive in schools," Fox says. Waters agrees, saying that most schools don't really move past the assessment.

Not so in Galt. There, Meghan McFadyen asks kids in her mixed fourth- and fifth-grade classroom who have "Presence" among their top strengths to help peers, because in theory no performance anxiety will block them from taking leadership positions. And Seamons weaves strengths into the sixth-grade curriculum. She teaches about Nancy Wake, a member of the French Resistance in World War II who evaded the Nazis, sometimes by parachute. Seamons says her students said, "Oh man, she definitely, definitely was an 'Achiever.' "

She also uses strengths language as a form of discipline. Instead of chastising a student doing group work for being "too bossy," for instance, she will suggest dialing back on "Achieving," the drive to accomplish. Undesirable behavior still gets corrected, but by pointing out a surplus of something good, not a deficiency.

The strength-based approach can be especially important for students with special needs, says Marian Hamrick, a teacher at Galt's Fairsite Preschool who treats her autistic students' physical lashing out as a laudable ambition to communicate.

Mayerson Academy's Darwish says it's not just semantics: "We know that people respond infinitely better – both in terms of their continued engagement and motivation, and ultimately their behavior change – when they are approached with a positive lens."

Administrators in Galt say recent test results support that notion. From 2014-15 to 2016-17, the percentage of the district's students meeting or exceeding standards rose from 37 to 43.1 in English language arts and from 25 to 35.9 in math. Schauer notes that in the last two years, course failures and suspensions have decreased while attendance and self-reported engagement levels have increased. That said, introducing the strength-based approach is only one of several changes the district has made in recent years.

Is Strength-Based Instruction Feasible in Most Schools?

Private schools such as Wilson, Arkansas' Delta School and New York City's Riverdale Country School (which has a phone app students can use to access a strengths list) are likely to have the resources to explore trends like this. How did Galt end up at the forefront of strength-based instruction?

The Galt district in Sacramento County serves 3,600 elementary-age students, approximately 60 percent of whom are Hispanic or Latino. More than 20 percent aren't fluent in English, and about half qualify for the federal free or reduced-price meal program. An area joke calls Galt "the lowest place in California," referring to its 47 feet of elevation above sea level while also taking a jab at its people's hardship. After the Great Recession that began in December 2007, the community's unemployment rate skyrocketed. Folks moved away, and the district had to close an elementary school. Schauer says her team began strengths work with a small group of adults as they frantically looked for grants. When the district won federal Race to the Top funding in 2012, Schauer expanded the strengths program. But she says it isn't expensive.

Gianna Gomez, age 7, pauses to reconsider after claiming "Achieving" as her top strength at Greer Elementary School. (Gail Cornwall for The Hechinger Report)

That depends. Thrively offers a free version for individual teachers that includes access to its test, but charges $10,000 for its District Pro package, which covers more students and adds more video content. Gallup works on a similar model, Burt says, charging different amounts for different levels of hand-holding and access. Mayerson Academy does too, but its work is frequently supported by grants.

Jennifer Collier, who champions strength-based learning in Galt as the district's extended learning supervisor, says ideally there would be a Gallup-trained strengths coach like her at each school.

Expense is not the only hurdle. "You have to actually have a culture of strengths built into the school," Waters says, claiming that her research shows that you can't just teach strengths to students; the adults in the schools must also learn the method and model it. In Galt, strength terms are printed on flags and on signs pinned to bulletin boards. Most teachers rattle off their top strengths in conversation, having taken the adult version of the quiz either during a 2013 districtwide training or in one of the seminars provided for parents, bus drivers, custodians, food services staff and others.

Not everyone in Galt has fully embraced the approach, however. Some educators pushed back, viewing it as one more fad sucking time away from their core mission. Others try to implement it, but fall short. Recently, one teacher told a student, "Your strength is impulsiveness."

Full implementation has been elusive in other ways as well. Substitute teachers haven't been trained in the approach. And Lori Biser, the middle school's counselor, says that while she'd like to incorporate strengths into conversations about course choices and career paths (a best practice highlighted in a case study published in The Journal of Positive Psychology), she can't remember them for 900 students and is loath to consult her computer during a counseling session.

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And there are reasons to question the method's effectiveness. The studies Waters cites as evidence of the approach's ability to increase happiness and engagement involved several positive psychology interventions, not just strengths work, and the support for claims of heightened academic achievement largely involve more traditional character education, not the strength-based approach used in Galt. Gallup's marketing materials offer statistics linking positivity to increased engagement by students, but the company's numbers don't offer evidence that the strength-based approach itself – and not just upbeat and encouraging teachers – makes the difference.

There's another concern: that a strengths lens, implemented poorly, could end up pigeonholing kids by leaving adults thinking, "This one's the kind one; this one's the brave one," as Waters says.

Then there's the fear that students who are taught they have natural strengths and weaknesses won't internalize the idea that they can improve and develop new talents with hard work.

To prevent that, Waters says educators must make sure to convey that some strengths may "be more prominent in one child than another," but that all children have all the strengths.

When Val Seamons asked students to indicate which strength best represents them by moving to stand near posted signs, Maria Warda looked uncertain. "Sometimes I'm not, but sometimes I am," the sixth-grader explained. Nodding, Seamons replied: "So maybe you have the ability, but you don't always practice it? Well, that's the case with everybody." After a pause she added, "And just because you have a weakness in something doesn't mean you don't have the ability to overcome that."

This story was written by Gail Cornwall and produced by [The Hechinger Report](), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for [our newsletter]().

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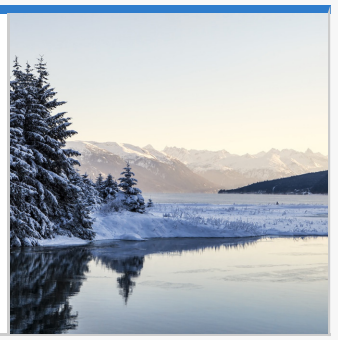

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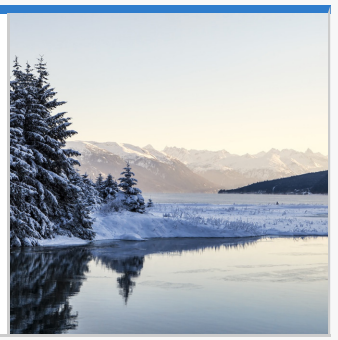

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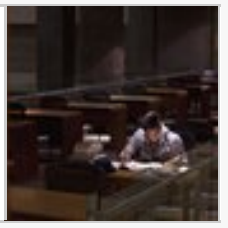

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