

## Case Study

# How CliftonStrengths® and Engagement Set the Tone for School Culture

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### Situation

Gallup has partnered with Pasco County Schools (PCS) for more than 20 years to select talented teachers and principals. Because employee talent dramatically influences student and school outcomes — including student engagement and school performance — PCS leaders prioritize analytics-based hiring and hire employees based on talent.

Gallup and PCS leaders also manage teacher engagement and focus on employees' CliftonStrengths. Gallup analytics show that the most effective leaders are always investing in employees' strengths — leveraging those natural abilities to position, develop and empower their people. Employees who use their CliftonStrengths are 6 times as likely to be engaged in their jobs and are 3 times as likely to say they have an excellent quality of life. Further, high teacher engagement has been proven to drive teacher performance and to diminish teacher absenteeism and attrition — factors that are of crucial importance during an ongoing teacher shortage.

Student engagement is also a powerful predictor of school outcomes: Compared with actively disengaged students, engaged students are 2.5 times more likely to say they get excellent grades, 2.5 times more likely to strongly agree they do well in school and 4.5 times more likely to be hopeful.

Since partnering with Gallup, PCS leaders used CliftonStrengths and staff and student engagement to set the culture for two new schools: Bexley Elementary School and Cypress Creek Middle High School. Bexley and Cypress are set apart because they have integrated analytics-based hiring, CliftonStrengths and engagement since they were established. This document captures Bexley's and Cypress' unique journeys in building cultures centered around CliftonStrengths and staff and student engagement.

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### Approach

#### Bexley Elementary Best Practices

Bexley leaders strive to consistently recognize employees by encouraging private, personalized recognition, as well as by providing a platform for recognition through the school's newsletter. Offering multiple avenues for celebrating successes helps Bexley

create a culture of recognition — that is, one in which employees feel comfortable highlighting one another's accomplishments and make a habit out of doing so.

One area of difficulty for Bexley has been aligning employees with job expectations, as employees transferring from other district schools tend to have different expectations based on their former schools and principals. However, constant communication about the "Bexley way" helps Bexley leaders boost employees' alignment with this basic employee need.

In fact, Bexley's principal notes that seemingly over-communicating about Bexley's culture and expectations through open, honest conversations has helped the school build an atmosphere in which employees are highly aligned and committed to Bexley's mission. With consistent communication, Bexley has built a culture that "is less about what you've done wrong, and more centered on what we are going to do to make the right things happen."

With all new employees, Bexley holds "mission meetings" to discuss CliftonStrengths, align employees with Bexley's mission and assign employee mentors and monthly teacher meetings. During these meetings, leaders explain what CliftonStrengths mean and how to apply them to positively impact student achievement. Further, new employees are hired with the expectation that maintaining student engagement and personal growth are crucial success measures. Proactively setting baseline expectations with new employees contributes to Bexley's minimal turnover and exceptional engagement levels. It also helps Bexley leaders foster a culture based on engagement and CliftonStrengths.

Emphasizing teacher engagement helps Bexley consistently deepen classroom engagement, with a majority of Bexley students being engaged at school as measured by the Gallup Student Poll. The Gallup Student Poll — which measures student engagement, hope, entrepreneurial aspiration and financial/career literacy — links to desirable learning outcomes in the 5th through 12th grades, including self-reported grades, perception of school success and self-reported absenteeism. Bexley's principal has found that teacher engagement is contagious: "If the adults are excited and engaged then the students are automatically engaged."

For Bexley, CliftonStrengths is more than a tool — it's a way of working that permeates the school culture. From day-to-day conversations to highly technical data discussions, CliftonStrengths is infused in how work gets done, how teams are formed and how tasks are assigned. Even in minor tasks, CliftonStrengths is part of Bexley's language. For example, Bexley's principal shares the following anecdote: "We were trying to get together for a staff photo the other day and we asked someone with 'Arranger' in their top 5 to help organize everyone."

Bexley's principal also appreciates the sense of collegiality that CliftonStrengths lends: "When you identify others' strengths ... we tend to understand one another better. This leads to a more productive work environment ... ."

Bexley's principal states, "Gallup cemented for me that you can be an effective principal by knowing people better instead of always focusing on how to change someone. That is really freeing as an administrator when you look at what strengths people already possess to help accomplish goals. I absolutely believe that you can accomplish this at an existing

school; it might take longer but it can absolutely be accomplished at any building at any point.”

### **Cypress Creek Best Practices**

Employee engagement and student engagement is infused in Cypress’ culture in myriad ways. From staff and student shout-outs to academic advising to a parent newsletter, employee and student engagement is interwoven in day-to-day happenings and in Cypress’ academic mission.

Consistently seeking out the opinions of staff and students has helped Cypress’ principal achieve engagement success at the school. Engagement sets the stage for Cypress’ culture — with student and employee engagement constantly interacting and affecting day-to-day goals and processes.

As a middle high school, Cypress faces challenges with significant age differences among students. However, Cypress has built a culture of unity through a shared focus on teacher and student engagement. Further, Cypress’ PACK Leader Program — a mentorship program that assigns high school students to serve as mentors in middle school classrooms — has fostered connections between teachers and students. The program encourages older students to consistently contribute in positive ways to student outcomes and school success. Cypress’ principal also finds that balancing individualized student attention with purposeful time together has also contributed to Cypress’ unified school culture.

As Cypress’ principal strives to boost staff engagement each day, she notes, “It is not enough to open your door and say you have an open-door policy. You need to get out and walk around and talk to people. You have to meet people where they are on their turf. When I have meetings, I like to meet in their classrooms. Employees and kids have expectations; they want to know where they stand and where you stand.”

Always striving to keep engagement top-of-mind, Cypress’ principal says, “We talk a lot about engagement and all the things we can do in the classroom to impact student engagement at our school.”

CliftonStrengths is also an instrumental component of Cypress’ unified culture. Cypress’ principal finds that CliftonStrengths positively affects “team dynamics” and that, “Using strengths to talk through issues that may arise has helped us immensely.”

She also incorporates CliftonStrengths into her management style — being aware of her own strengths as well as the strengths of the staff and students. Further, she uses CliftonStrengths to “coach [administrators] as they work with teachers,” and consistently refers to CliftonStrengths to “help myself and others understand the why behind behaviors.”

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## Outcome

Any new school faces incredible challenges as leaders seek to create a strong culture and encourage student success. However, the additive effects of analytics-based hiring, staff engagement, student engagement and CliftonStrengths have helped Cypress and Bexley meet these challenges with success.

Contrary to the norm, majorities of the staff and students are engaged at Bexley and approximately half of the staff and half of the students are engaged at Cypress.

As Cypress and Bexley continue to focus on creating cultures that celebrate individuals' strengths and deepen classroom engagement each day, leaders can expect continued growth in school and student outcomes, with both schools contributing to their communities in positive ways.

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