

# UNLOCKING STUDENT POTENTIAL

*How do I identify and activate  
student strengths?*

Yvette  
**JACKSON**

Veronica  
**MCDERMOTT**

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## Starting from Strengths

Who among us wants to be reminded, yet again, of the negative, of our shortcomings, of long-standing and seemingly intractable failure? Education policy has long asked educators to mine for what is wrong with students, to search for their deficits, to pinpoint where they fall short of arbitrary standards devoid of context, and to find ways to *remediate* their performance.

Our orientation is totally opposite. We posit that if you (regardless of your role) start with strengths, you have the capacity to unlock the potential of every student—and teacher—in your school. The real achievement gap is not one that highlights the distance between the performance of students of different races and a set of normative achievement levels but between individual performance and individual potential (Jackson, 2011).

As lifelong educators serving students in the public schools of New York State and New York City, we have first-hand experience of the brilliance of our underachieving students and the systems that often fail them. Our work with the National Urban Alliance (NUA) has taken us to U.S. schools of every kind (urban, rural, suburban) where we have met educators like you who are eager to cultivate potential. And they love the idea that you can start with something simple:

identifying and activating student strengths. Although many of the examples provided are from middle schools, they can be modified for all grade levels and can be used by teachers; school, department, and district leaders; coaches; and school counselors.

This book draws upon our experiences working in schools repeatedly labeled as underachieving that are transforming themselves through the implementation of the *Pedagogy of Confidence*<sup>®</sup> (Jackson, 2011), an approach designed to help all students become self-directed learners rather than school-dependent ones. The foundation of the Pedagogy of Confidence is a set of seven interrelated High Operational Practices<sup>™</sup>:

- Identifying and activating student strengths
- Building relationships
- Eliciting high intellectual performance
- Providing enrichment
- Integrating prerequisites for academic learning
- Situating learning in the lives of students
- Amplifying student voice (Jackson, 2011, p. 89)

“Identifying and activating student strengths” is deliberately listed first, because it has been neglected for so long as a practice for reversing underachievement and increasing learning (Jackson, 2011). Additionally, starting from strengths kick-starts a new, positive, and powerful way of learning, teaching, and being; a way in which students and teachers are motivated by the affirmation of their strengths and their potential.

## Why Shine the Spotlight on Strengths?

Jettisoning the deficit model and replacing it with one that starts from student strengths is a no-cost, highly effective, nontraditional way of addressing persistent underachievement. Sadly, as a 2014 Gallup poll suggests, paying attention to strengths is not something U.S. schools do very well.

**What students say.** The 20-question Gallup student poll measures three elements—hope, engagement, and well-being—that predict student academic success and future employment. The survey is given to students in grades 5–12 whose buildings have opted to be part of the poll. As such, it is a selective sampling of how students think about hope, engagement, and well-being.

The engagement survey contains three questions that directly address strengths:

- At this school, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
- In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good schoolwork.
- My school is committed to building the strengths of each student.