

Margaret Searle
Marilyn Swartz

Solving Academic and Behavior Problems

A **Strengths-Based**
Guide for Teachers
and Teams



Hawker Brownlow
Education a Solution Tree company

Solving Academic and Behavior Problems

Foreword	ix
Introduction: A Support System That Works	xi
1. A New Lens for Solving Old Problems	1
Activity 1. How to Use the Strength Charts	10
Activity 2. Using the Five Whys: Celina's Case.....	13
2. Strengths-Based Team Conversations	15
Activity 3. Meeting Protocol Reflection	18
Activity 4. Organization Meeting: Tier 1 Concerns	22
Activity 5. Organization Meeting: Clarifying Concerns	25
Activity 6. Clarifying Concerns: Your Turn	26
Activity 7. Team Planning Meeting: Connect	30
Activity 8. Team Planning Meeting: Focus and Success Stories	34
Activity 9. Accommodations and Interventions Sorting Activity	38
Activity 10. Team Planning Meeting: Design	38
Activity 11. Team Planning Meeting: Commit	41
Activity 12. Determining Strengths and Needs: Calvin's Case	43
3. Nothing About Us Without Us: Student and Parent Conversations	45
Activity 13. Student Interview: Cassie's Case	49
Activity 14. Student Interview: McKinley's Case	52
Activity 15. Parent Interview: FaceTiming with Cassie's Mother	56
Activity 16. Parent Interview	58

4. The First Meeting with a Coach	60
Activity 17. Student Watch List	61
Activity 18. Success Stories: Parker's Case	66
Activity 19. Connect and Focus: Max's Case	68
Activity 20. Success Stories: Max's Case	69
Activity 21. DATA Goal Practice.....	71
Activity 22. DATA Goal: Max's Case	74
Activity 23. Matching Goals and Strategies: Trenton's Case	75
Activity 24. Design Home and School Action Plans: Max's Case	78
Activity 25. Design the Student Action Plan: Max's Case	79
Activity 26. Commit: Max's Case	81
5. Getting to the Hidden Cause with Five Whys	83
Activity 27. Five Whys: Cassie's Case.....	89
Activity 28. Five Whys: Max's Case	95
Activity 29. Spotting Key Points in a Five Whys Conversation	95
Activity 30. New DATA Goal: Max's Case	97
Activity 31. The Five Whys Session: Where Did the Coach Go Wrong?	98
6. The Student Support Team Meeting	105
Activity 32. Student Support Team Overview	105
Activity 33. Preparing the Parent: Cassie's Case	114
Activity 34. Preparing the Parent for the Student Support Team Meeting.....	116
Activity 35. Preparing the Student: Cassie's Case.....	117
Activity 36. Preparing the Student: Maddie's Case	119
Activity 37. Student Support Team Meeting: Maddie's Case.....	130
7. Questions Asked—And Answered	135
Activity 38. How to Get Started	137
Activity 39. How to Find Time	138
Activity 40. Making Better Use of Time	138
Activity 41. Involving Parents	140
Activity 42. Giving Students Voice and Choice	141
Activity 43. Sustaining the Work	143
Activity 44. Selecting Coaches	144
Acknowledgments	149
Answer Key	150

Appendix A: Strength Charts	154
Appendix B: List of Videos	171
References	174
Index	177
About the Authors	181

@Hawker Brownlow Education



Introduction: A Support System That Works

Has your classroom ever resembled this? Lamar is trying hard but cannot remember what we did yesterday. Sonia is out of her seat again, vying for attention by bothering Zach. Omaldo just snapped his pencil in two and called Tony a jerk.

These students didn't get their work completed, and no wonder. They are having a hard time feeling successful at school. Each one has a unique way of learning, very different background knowledge, and a distinct way of demonstrating the frustrations they feel.

This book is about discovering the keys that open doors to student success, as well as finding ways to engage school personnel, families, and students in taking advantage of new academic and social-emotional learning opportunities. We know that the best results happen when home and school work together to establish the right conditions for success. Success is more likely when we all start with the belief that people are knowledgeable, capable, and willing to learn, even when their outward behavior seems to indicate they are not. Thinking that a given teacher will never change or that a specific student doesn't care can result in feelings of helplessness and hopelessness—and *that* results in lack of action. Believing that there is a hot button that will turn failures into successes is fundamental to being successful. The tricky part is finding those hot buttons.

Some people think that testing, labeling, and dispatching a student to someone else's roster is the hot button. We have all heard adults ask, "Why are we wasting time doing all these interventions and holding all these meetings when we know this kid needs to be tested?" The belief underlying this statement is that testing and placement are interventions. They're not.

Testing provides data but not answers. Labeling only gives the problem a name; it doesn't provide support. And placement often only moves the challenge to a new location or person. Although many people believe that intensive one-to-one assistance occurs in special education classrooms, that is typically a myth. Yes, special education teachers have fewer students than general education teachers do, but the complexity of those students' needs is far more intense. The paperwork, scheduling, and class structures for special education teachers can be insane. Too often the tasks of reading tests aloud, helping with homework, and getting students to fix or complete missed class assignments eat up most of the intervention time, making the kind of support students really need difficult to deliver. This outdated model often results in widening the achievement gap rather than providing a successful tailor-made learning experience that is continuously monitored and adjusted. We need a new model for solving these problems.

A Quick Walk Through the Book

In each of the chapters that follow, we describe a system of support that helps general education teachers partner with specialists and parents to learn new ways to enrich academic, social-emotional, and behavioral growth. This model is designed to fit into and enhance the existing structures of teacher meetings. It also provides ongoing support to help teachers apply an ounce of prevention in the classroom before the pound of cure is necessary.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of how the positive psychology of *appreciative inquiry* changes the way we look at student problems. Instead of using the deficit model of fixing what's wrong, our method builds on what is currently working to address what is not. This approach is successfully being used worldwide in industry and medicine to cultivate optimism, build capacity, and unleash creative thinking that brings about positive change. It's time to apply this approach to education.

Chapter 2 suggests a technique for rolling out this new strengths-based model in a way that makes teacher team meetings proactive and productive. By using a basic set of positive questions, teams quickly address their top Tier 1 concerns by implementing action plans put together in a single meeting. This builds a database of intervention strategies that people have confidence in.

Chapter 3 addresses the problem of how to strengthen parent and student involvement in a way that benefits the students you worry about most. A quick and easy interview process will turn tedious intervention planning into a shorter and more effective experience. These

15-minute conversations with parents and students improve motivation and follow-through, as well as provide insights to teachers about the whole child.

Chapter 4 discusses how to reduce paperwork and jumping through hoops as teachers seek help from a coach to better address the needs of struggling students in Tiers 2 and 3. The process is about changing student lives through quick and specific support sessions for teachers. Each session results in an action plan. If evidence from that plan does not show positive movement, the plan is quickly adjusted or replaced with a better one. This process goes on until the student succeeds or graduates, whichever comes first. We never give up or settle.

Chapter 5 discusses what to do when the procedures we have described don't show satisfactory results. In these cases, we add a step called *five whys*. Five whys is a Toyota quality tool for drilling down to a root cause; we use it to pinpoint what missing skill the student needs. This process uncovers hidden barriers that need to be addressed so students can move forward.

Chapter 6 gives specific steps and models for holding student support team meetings in 25 minutes and walking out with an action plan every time. Parents and students are included in this conversation, so all students have voice and choice, which keeps their motivation high. The goal is to surround students with support from the significant people in their lives.

Chapter 7 addresses frequently asked questions, such as how to structure and roll out the process in your school and how to get teacher, student, and parent buy-in. Each chapter in the book contains activities, video examples, scenarios, and tips from practitioners in the field to help you develop your skills as a potential coach and problem solver. The forms that appear throughout this book are also available at www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/books/searleswartz2020.pdf.

So let's get started. The Lamars, Sonias, and Omaldos of our world are counting on us!

Team Meetings—Transformed

Do teachers in your building say things like, “I get more done when I figure out how to avoid our team meetings” or “We sit around and admire data and problems for hours. When are we going to do something important that changes our results?” One teacher I met quipped that he hoped when he died it would be during a staff meeting—because it would make the transition so subtle. If meetings at your school are coma-inducing and unmotivating, perhaps it’s time to change your approach.

Meetings should be compelling, creative, and intense, not boring and unproductive. They must address pressing issues the team cares about, as well as energize people to achieve worthwhile things. Support and commitment don’t just happen, even when you work with competent and caring people. They take intentional plans, constructive conversations, and good meeting protocols.

Most well-intended school improvement plans focus on what needs to be fixed. This makes sense because that is how we have done business for hundreds of years: Tell me what’s wrong, then we’ll figure out why that is happening and look at options for fixing it. This can work, but it often generates pushback from the people who are required to implement a plan in which they have had limited input. Sometimes they don’t even think that what you are fixing is a real problem.

Appreciative inquiry is built on the premise that every system and person has things that already work for them. When we focus on what works and what is going right, we can use those ideas to develop ways to improve. This strengths-based approach engages the primary stakeholders in asking questions, analyzing what is currently working, setting new goals, and developing action plans for achieving those goals.

What we focus on gets stronger. Alternatively, when we choose to focus on uncooperative students and daily stresses, they loom even larger. Have you ever gone into the teachers’ lounge feeling OK, only to hear one person after another complain about how intolerable the kids and conditions are? If other people join in and add to that poisonous conversation, you leave feeling drained.

The team meetings we describe in this book start by asking the teachers to identify three key concerns that stand in the way of many students’ success. Teachers have no problem making lists of things they wish they could change: students’ lack of organization, poor motivation, inability to comprehend text, or failure to complete homework, to name a few. Addressing these teacher-identified issues becomes the content of the agendas for two teacher meetings each month. Because the teachers have a voice in setting the agendas, it creates a sense of ownership in the meetings and more motivation to get things done.

Scheduling topics that teachers want to discuss is half the task. The other half is making sure the conversation about concerns doesn't become a griping and blaming session. Again, it's all about crafting the right questions. Appreciative inquiry questions empower people by eliciting success stories that are described in enough detail to clarify the vision and switch perspectives to enable new possibilities. A key person in this process is the coach.

The Role of the Coach

The coaching role can be filled by anyone on the staff who is a good listener with a positive outlook when solving problems. This can be an administrator, a counselor, a specialist, or a classroom teacher. When starting off, choose a set of people who show interest in coaching and who are seen by the faculty as trustworthy and helpful.

To foster successful, strengths-based conversations, every coach needs to be skilled at the following:

1. Be a good listener and observer so you can reflect people's strengths, best practices, and fresh solutions back to them. You will need to be able to capture both their thoughts and feelings as you paraphrase what you hear them say so you can reframe their thinking in a larger vision.
2. Ask questions that focus on assets and opportunities instead of on weaknesses and problems.
3. Help people feel safe, valued, and welcome to release their creative thinking. An environment of trust is essential.
4. Invite people to commit to excellence instead of business as usual.
5. Use the five whys questioning technique (more on this shortly) to identify hidden skill needs.
6. Be familiar with the strength charts we provide in this book to help teachers articulate specific areas of strength and what students need more of.

You can start to develop these skills by using the practice videos and activities we provide here. However, reading about the process, watching demonstrations, and discussing only take you part of the way. It's like learning to swim; you have to jump into the pool and do the hard work if you want to become proficient. This will take consistent practice over time, but it's worth every minute spent. That is why we offer such a wide variety of activities to guide you through the steps.

Let's look at a tool called *strength charts* now; these will make the process much easier.