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# Using Social Emotional Data for School Improvement: A Case Study of Goochland County's Use of the Gallup Student Poll

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# Using Social Emotional Data for School Improvement

a case study of Goochland County's Use  
of the Gallup Student Poll

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*The following case study shares the experience of Goochland County Public Schools in Virginia and their use of the Gallup Student Poll to influence and improve their work with students.*



In the midst of growing emphasis on standardized tests of academic achievement in K-12 education, a concurrent movement has launched for the use of measures to capture the social/emotional world of students. With this call for an increased focus on the development of the whole student comes recognition that there are additional important outcomes to school beyond mastering curriculum standards or performing on end-of-year tests. Efforts to explore this critical element of student growth has led many schools and school divisions to adopt measurement tools that offer information at the individual, school, and division-level.

However, one of the big challenges for school leaders is what to do with the data on students' social emotional development once it is collected. Having strong data that indicates that a student or group of students is not engaged is valuable only if there is a clear plan of action for addressing the need. In many cases, receiving information about student social emotional growth has not led to action at the school or system level.

This case study presents a profile of a school division, Goochland County Public Schools in Virginia, that has not only recognized the value of measuring student social emotional development, but has become a regional leader in the effective use of student social emotional measures for guiding practice as well as broader school improvement processes. The case study, which focuses on Goochland County's use of data from the Gallup Student Poll (GSP) over the past several years, is based on a series of interviews with principals and school leaders conducted during the spring of 2015. The case study includes an overview of the GSP, information about the initiation of the GSP in Goochland county, and then explores how this survey has impacted the county's work with students, how it has supported their 2014-2020 strategic plan, and what future directions they see for use of this data. The purpose of this case study is to share Goochland's story as a way of exploring how social emotional measures can be used in meaningful ways to impact educational processes and ultimately student learning and success.

### Bridging Richmond

This case study is supported by Bridging Richmond (BR), a regional partnership modeled after *StriveTogether*, a national network designed to promote regional, cross-sector collaborations around the cradle-to-career pipeline. Bridging Richmond's vision is that *'every person in our region will have the education and talent necessary to sustain productive lifestyles.'* To realize this vision, BR engages its regional partners from the education, business, government, civic, and philanthropic communities to (1) facilitate community vision and agenda for

college- and career-readiness, (2) establish shared measurement and advance evidence-based decision making, (3) align and coordinate strategic action, and (4) mobilize resources and community commitment for sustainable change. BR's region includes eight school divisions (Richmond City, Chesterfield County, Henrico County, Hanover County, Goochland County, Powhatan County, New Kent County, and Charles City County) serving over 160,000 students.

## What is the Gallup Student Poll?

Developed by the Gallup Organization, the Gallup Student Poll is designed to measure the social emotional development of students in grades 5 through 12. The poll was introduced nationally in the fall of 2009 and has been administered on an annual basis to an ever-growing sample of students across the country. According to Gallup, over 850,000 students completed the poll in fall of 2014. The poll – which was originally designed to measure student engagement, hope, and wellbeing with 20 individual items – has undergone a significant rewrite for the 2015 administration. The GSP has replaced the measure of wellbeing with two new constructs: entrepreneurial aspiration and financial/career literacy. The poll now has 24 items. Below is a chart that provides definitions of each construct and sample items. Since the Goochland case study involves school leaders’ reflections on the poll to date, a definition and example items for wellbeing are included as well.

For further information on hope, wellbeing, engagement and other social emotional measures see MERC’s recent technical report “Capturing the Social/Emotional World of Students.”

Construct	Definition	Sample Item
Hope	The ideas and energy we have for the future.	“I know I will graduate from high school.”
Engagement	The involvement in and enthusiasm for school	“I have a best friend at this school.”
* Wellbeing	How we think about and experience our lives.	“Were you treated with respect all day yesterday?”
** Entrepreneurial Aspiration	The talent and energy necessary to build businesses that survive, thrive and employ others.	“I will invent something that changes the world.”
** Financial/Career Literacy	The information, attitudes and behaviors that students need for healthy participation in the economy.	“I have a bank account with money in it.”

\* removed from the poll starting with the 2015 administration

\*\* added to the poll starting with the 2015 administration

*Gallup in Goochland County Public Schools*

Goochland County Public Schools, located in central Virginia, serves over 2500 students in four elementary/pre-K schools, one middle school, and one high school. The county includes areas that would be considered both suburban and rural. In the 2014-15 school year, the student body was 72% White, 18% Black, 6% Hispanic, and 1 % Asian and 4% mixed race or other. Approximately 28% of the students qualified for Free and Reduced Lunch.

In 2012, Goochland school leaders put forward a strategic plan that included goals related to student social emotional development. Among the goals of the plan, the first two included elements for increasing engagement among students, staff, and other stakeholders, with objectives focused on "enjoyment" and "personalization" to "inspire" learning.

Based on this social emotional focus within the strategic plan, the school division adopted the Gallup Student Poll as a way of measuring progress in this area. Additional support for the administration and use of the GSP came from a Ready-by-21 grant through the Forum for Youth Investment secured by Bridging Richmond. The GSP met the needs of the division because of the poll's focus on engagement – a priority area for Goochland, the poll's nationally-normed data, and the provision of reports for elementary, middle, and high school.

The initial administration of the GSP took place in Goochland in the fall of 2013. The division administered the poll again in the fall of 2014. For both administrations an attempt was made to poll all students in grades 5 through 12.

## Perspectives on the Gallup Student Poll

The focus of this case study is on Goochland's use of the Gallup student poll data in their division-wide school improvement work. To understand the ways the GSP has been used across the division, interviews and focus groups were conducted with the following Goochland county school leaders:

- Stephen Geyer, Ed.D, *Assistant Superintendent of Instruction*
- John Hendron, Ed.D, *Director of Innovation and Strategy*
- Sean Campbell, *Technical Services Specialist and Data Analyst*
- Dan Gardner, *Principal, Randolph Elementary School*
- James Hopkins, *Principal, Byrd Elementary School*
- Tina McCay, *Principal, Goochland Elementary School*
- Jennifer Rucker, *Principal, Goochland Middle School*

What follows are sections that explore the core themes that emerged from these discussions.

### *Praise for the Gallup Student Poll*

*It's a wonderful tool. It helps us ask questions that we don't typically ask, and it gives us an opportunity to pause a little bit and recognize some things that we are doing well and some things that can be done better.*

*Jennifer Rucker, Principal*

Overwhelmingly, the Goochland division leaders praised the use of the Gallup Student Poll and how it has enhanced their work with students. For the schools with high percentages of students who were hopeful, engaged, and thriving, the results were validating to the work that they were doing. For example James Hopkins, principal of Byrd Elementary stated,

When I look at this data with our 5th grade students, overall I am pretty pleased. We have had some good results where the kids are feeling positive about being here at school.

They are positive about the engagement level. They really feel good about the school ... it is a cause for celebration.

For these principals, the Gallup results helped reinforce that they have been "doing the right things" with students in schools.

However, an important purpose of measurements like this is to explore areas where things can improve. Other school leaders appreciated how the information from the poll helped them consider opportunities for growth.

Jennifer Rucker, principal at Goochland Middle, stated,

From our conversations, some of the teachers were kind of sad like I don't understand why they feel that way. Then we factored in some things like maybe we need to talk with them about what's going to take place and how we want them to be honest. Maybe we could do some more wayside teaching and let students know that we are there to support them. So from that came some concern but then we came with, ok this is what we are going to do. So it empowered us. It really has empowered us a lot.

Overall, both the division leaders and the principals advocated strongly for the utility of the GSP in the important work of their schools. For example, Sean Campbell, Goochland's Technical Services Specialist and Data Analyst, stated, "It was an eye opening piece for us that one survey could have such an impact on the student population and that we can see that when we do subsequent evaluation, we can see that reflected in such a positive manner."

### *Professional Development*

*When I'm looking at those results with my faculty...we kind of went line by line to see what does it actually mean, if a student doesn't feel safe or respected. What does it actually mean and what can we do to make sure that it doesn't take place again where they feel that way?*

*Jennifer Rucker, Principal*

A common practical use of GSP results in Goochland is as a springboard for the creation and facilitation of professional development with faculty and staff. By exploring this social/emotional data of the students, division leaders were able to gain a better understanding of how students' personal lives shaped their academic experience. There were a number of methods that these school leaders used for incorporating Gallup results into the continuing education of



their staffs. Often, it sparked productive conversations. For example Jennifer Rucker stated that based on the results of the Gallup Student Poll,

We had a conversation this year about finding the students who need us the most, and being able to identify those students and finding the resources to assist them... as we are talking about students academically we are also talking about them personally and socially. So that's huge.

Ms. Rucker also used the data as an opportunity to discuss adolescent social/emotional development and its importance in understanding the sometimes-confusing behavior of middle school students. She asked,

Do my teachers understand the adolescent mind? ... The students are going through so many changes. Then as an adult and as an educator, what do we do to make sure they are still growing, still achieving? And so as an administrator I tried to provide support for teachers to understand students that we are servicing and always trying to figure out how we can meet our students where they are.

Another principal described using the results of the Gallup, along with another in-house measure of school climate, to create "stations" where teachers could visit during professional development to explore details of how students were experiencing school. In this exercise, teachers discuss the data to explore both what is going well and where they could improve as a school.

Strategies like the ones depicted here by Goochland school leaders demonstrate the practical use of social/emotional measures in the continuing education of faculty and staff.

### *Instructional Support*

*There has certainly been an emphasis on the instructional side for our teachers to design lessons in a project based approach and to give students the opportunity to collaborate and create. Both are clear strategies within our strategic plan.*

*Stephen Geyer, Assistant Superintendent*

Some school leaders discussed using GSP results in supporting new directions in instruction and curriculum delivery. The core connection here for Goochland school leaders was the issue of student engagement in learning. Stephen Geyer, the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, stated, "Overall there is a focus on designing lessons with an eye on engaging our students."

Jennifer Rucker suggested that at her school the GSP had refocused the traditional conversations around instruction on the issue of student engagement. She stated,

It is so important for us to constantly be talking about things outside of the content area ... We get pacing guides. We understand math results. We get that. But to understand a child takes that much more conversation, and understanding human relations. Because if a student walks in and they don't feel that you care about them, the learning is off. And I don't care if you are teacher of the year. It doesn't matter. And I think that's what the Gallup survey tells us.

The theme of increasing the emphasis on student engagement was a common theme across interviews. Dan Gardner, principal of Randolph Elementary School stated, "We believe that engagement not only is a predictor of academic success but it also helps with things like classroom management. If a student is engaged at their specific differentiated level, they are more likely to remain engaged."

### *School Improvement and Strategic Planning*

*I think this is a big part of our story. It is tied right into our division's strategic plan. And so it is a part of our division goal setting, school goal setting, and down to the individual teacher goal setting. To me that's so energizing. Alongside our traditional measures like student achievement and we now have a clear focus on individual student growth.*

*Stephen Geyer, Assistant Superintendent*

Throughout conversations with Goochland school leaders, there was a clear and persistent focus on using the Gallup results in school improvement and strategic planning for the division. It was evident that those interviewed were well

acquainted with the strategic goals of the division and were seeking ways to use the social/emotional measure to support their local school improvement efforts. Sean Campbell, gives an example from one of the schools:

The principal ... incorporated the results of the Gallup Student Poll into their school improvement plan and they made it an overarching theme for their school for the year. "Hey we want to engage our kids. We want to instill a sense of hope." And so when we looked at this year's poll, their scores increased on every level in terms of hope and engagement. It was absolutely amazing.

Others discussed how they used these results to establish goals for their school for the upcoming school year. James Hopkins, principal of Byrd Elementary stated, "I can see how this information is helpful for myself and my teachers in my leadership team to develop a school improvement plan. Whether it be a specific goal based on one of the strands of the Gallup Student Poll or a specific strategy implemented into a goal."

For Dan Gardner, principal of Randolph Elementary, the GSP was one way of evaluating the school's success as they worked with a changing student population. He stated, "our free and reduced lunch numbers have increased over the last few years. So I do think we need to monitor the hopefulness and the engagement to make sure that we are keeping students who maybe don't have as much support at home with us through the years."

Overall, it was evident through these conversations that Goochland student leaders believe that the social/emotional measures like the Gallup Student Poll play a critical role in the work of advancing the efficacy of their schools. Stephen Geyer stated, "I think without it we wouldn't have a complete picture. We would be missing some pieces." Jennifer Rucker, principal of Goochland Middle, reinforced this point:

One of the things that we have found in middle school is that even if we have rigorous coursework and the best teachers, we still need to make sure that our students feel safe, secure, hopeful, and engaged. And so student engagement is the focal point for our division and definitely one that I focus on as we have conversations about our services.

## Future Directions and Recommendations

*We know generally how a student might be coping with school and coping with home life, but when you get that test score that says he didn't master the material, it may have less to do with the material and more with how that student is doing on an individual day. And so I think weaving these types of measures in more frequently is a direction we need to go.*

*John Hendron, Director of Innovation and Strategy*

Ultimately, conversations with Goochland division leaders suggested that Goochland will continue using the social emotional data from the GSP – or similar measures – as a critical part of their division planning. Along with this commitment came a number of ideas and recommendations for future use of the data. These ideas include:

- **Expanding its role in the development of professional development.** Division leaders emphasized the benefit of learning more about programs and resources around the Gallup Student Poll that could inform future professional development.
- **As a measure of school climate.** Ideas emerged about using these scores in conjunction with other measures to get a more robust picture of the overall climate of the student body.
- **Identifying best practice.** The GSP allows the division leaders to look at schools with stronger results for hope, wellbeing, and engagement and providing these schools the opportunity to share best practices for enhancing the social/emotional wellness of students.
- **As part of an individual student report.** One elementary principal indicated a potential plan to use these results as an element of a character report card for students.
- **Creating conversations with parents and community members.** The division leaders recognized that the social emotional development of students is not just the work of schools. As one principal indicated, there could be great value in sharing GSP results with parents at the individual and school level with genuine care and transparency.

There were also recommendations for ways in which the collection of social emotional data could be expanded. These included:

- **Developing an early elementary engagement measure.** A number of the division leaders were interested in developing ways to measure engagement among K-4 students, a group that is currently excluded from the GSP.
- **Finding a measure that has a broader definition of engagement.** Some suggested that the division might want to collect additional data beyond the GSP, because of the narrowness in the way the GSP defines engagement. For example Tina McCay, principal of Goochland Elementary School, stated, "When I look at specific questions under engagement, I'm not sure if we are using the same definition"
- **Finding a measure that can be used for continuous monitoring.** The GSP is only administered in the fall. Some division leaders thought it would be useful to have measure that could be administered at multiple points through the schools year to monitor growth. For example, Jennifer Rucker stated that the GSP, while good, "is a snapshot in time. They are taking the test early in the school year when it is difficult for those relationships to build. So the timing of the test concerns me a little."

## Resources

### **Bridging Richmond**

Bridging Richmond aligns business, government, and civic stakeholders to promote college and career readiness in students for the betterment of the future Richmond community.

[www.bridgingrva.org](http://www.bridgingrva.org)

### **Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning**

The nation's leading organization focused on academic, social, and emotional development in students, CASEL works to make evidenced-based development of these competencies an integrated component of student learning throughout school.

[www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org)

### **Forum for Youth Investment**

The Forum for Youth Investment (FYI) collaborates with local and state leadership to deliver programming designed to strengthen learning opportunities for students, making them "ready by 21" to be productive members of the community. FYI supplied the grant to Goochland county for their use of the Gallup.

[www.forumfyi.org](http://www.forumfyi.org)

### **Gallup Student Poll**

The Gallup Student Poll seeks to capture hope, wellbeing, and engagement in students across the country in grades 5-12. Over 2,900 schools have administered the survey nationwide to more than 875,000 students.

[www.gallupstudentpoll.com](http://www.gallupstudentpoll.com)

### **Goochland County Public Schools**

GCPS serves 2,400 students grades pre-K through 12 in central Virginia and were gracious enough to share their story for this case study.

[www.glnk12.va.us](http://www.glnk12.va.us)

### **Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium**

The Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium at Virginia Commonwealth University provides research-based information that helps solve educational-problems identified by practitioners in local, partnering school divisions. MERC conducted research for this project and produced this case study.

[www.merc.soe.vcu.edu](http://www.merc.soe.vcu.edu)