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### The Untapped Riches of Poor Students

- Americans label what is *wrong* with students not in the top 20% of class ("The Bottom 80") e.g., learning disabilities, motivation...
- Spend time and money (\$3.5 Billion\* tutoring/test industry) trying to get teens to perform better in school



- Instead of asking, "What's wrong with these kids?" I asked, "What's right with them?"
- The surprising results: many things are right with these students ...what's wrong is the way we view and structure education.

\*http://www.msnbc.msn.com  
\*\* Inspired by Dewitt Jones "What's Right with the World?"

### Conclusion

We will increase the happiness of parents, teachers, and all students by

#### Appreciating\* Beauty in The Bottom 80™:

- Valuing what they have already and
- Increasing the value of their inherent strengths and gifts.

To do so, requires *refuting three myths* of education:

- Myth #1:** Not being a "top student" means not: intelligent, hardworking, or gifted.  
✓ *The Bottom 80 includes motivated, brilliant, and gifted children perfectly-suited to world leadership and economic growth.*



- Myth #2:** Being a "top student" leads to a great life.  
✓ *"Best Grades" are not the "best" route to life satisfaction.*

- Myth #3:** Our approach to education is good for adolescents.  
✓ *Our approach leads to anxiety and depression.*

Students repeatedly: face defeat and failure in situations they cannot control; learn to maximize; have their strengths squelched; and hear a pessimistic explanatory style. We need to learn— from kids, talented teachers and innovative schools— the practices that let all children fully appreciate their capacities.

\*Two meanings of Appreciate from David Coopender, 2007.

### The Project

- Identified strengths and gifts in bottom-80%-students through interviews; *representative parent, teacher, and expert sample:*

School Level	Middle School			High School			Medical Expert	Total
	Boy	Girl	Teacher	Boy	Girl	Teacher		
Standout in Activity?								
No- Sport	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
No- Art/Music	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Yes- Sport	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Yes- Art/Music				✓				
Work with Top Students?			✓			✓		
Formal Learning Disability Students?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Total Students	5			6			0	11
Experts/Teachers	2			1			2	5
Total Interviews	7			7			2	16

- Combined with Literature Review in Positive Psychology, Education, Leadership, Economic Growth, Learned Optimism, Human Development and Adaptation, Dyslexia, ADHD, Asperger's.

### Education Does Not Capitalize on the Capacities of The Bottom 80™ Students...

... In fact, some of their very gifts and strengths prevent them from fitting into the mold

#### Top Virtues\* in The Bottom 80™ Students Studied:



- Justice** (Fairness, Citizenship)
- Humanity** (Kindness, Love)
- Courage** (Honesty, Bravery)
- Wisdom** (Judgment, Creativity)

**Note:** According to Aristotle, *Doing Well in School is Not a Virtue:*

"...actions undertaken solely for external reasons cannot be considered virtuous, precisely because they are coaxed or coerced, carroted or sticked..." – Aristotle\*

\*(Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

#### Gifts in The Bottom 80™ that School is Not Well-Suited to Develop:

##### Visioning

Thinking in pictures: too fast for words  
3-Dimensional ability



##### Strong Sense of Self

Comfortable with their strengths and weaknesses  
Unwilling to give up essential parts of self



##### Determined to Learn On Their Own

Prefer to explore  
Resist being "taught"  
Seek meaning and context

##### Self-Motivation

Invest great time and energy in activities that interest them  
Do not respond well to external motivators

##### Oratory

Gift with spoken language  
Different from written language intelligence

##### Grace

Slowing down, unruffled  
Ease of motion and emotion in physical activities and tense situations



##### Manual Dexterity

Learn and explore actively through touch and movement

### The Bottom 80 Have Precisely the Strengths and Gifts Needed for Leadership, Strong Organizations, and the Future Economy:

- Honesty, Strong Sense of Self → Best Leaders are Honest and Not Afraid of Others' Strengths (Drucker: From Forbes.com)
- Kindness/Compassion → Complex Coordination Gives Strong Organization Performance (Cameron, Dutton et AL., 2003)
- Creativity, Visioning, Self-motivation → Creative Class is fastest-growing segment of Economy (Florida, 2002)

#### Former Bottom 80 Students:



Sir Winston Churchill



Sir Richard Branson



John Chambers, CEO of \$35 Billion Cisco



Albert Einstein



Vernon Smith Nobel Prize Winner



Bill Dreyer Human Genome Revolutionary

### Teaching Depression

The equation learned by every student, top and bottom ...

#### Learned Helplessness\*

- Defeat and Failure** Grades, awards, tryouts, competition, stress, homework fatigue, and excessive close work
- Lack of Control** How, Where, When, and What to learn

#### Educating in a Pessimistic Explanatory Style:



"Blew yesterday's test  
Forgot my homework  
Missed Honor Roll  
Can't get into the best college"



"Cut from Baseball  
Didn't make Select Choir  
Can't memorize the History dates"

Something Is *Always* Going Wrong ...

School activities consume teens' attention for much of their waking hours  
(~70% to 98% of weekdays, ~14% to 64% of weekends)

It's with them **EVERYWHERE** they go....

#### Learned Helplessness + Pessimistic Explanations = Depression\*

\*(Seligman, 1990)

### How to Appreciate Beauty

What Works? Lessons from Research, Leaders, & Teachers

- Optimize student-directed learning that uses visual, hands-on, and oral means, as well as context, stories, and the written word
- Increase student control: a few significant choices on what/when/where/how to learn
- Minimize opportunities for defeat: class rank, honor roll, grades, homework
- Diversify the classroom to create hives of active learning
- Embed positive emotion, engagement, and meaning\* in curriculum and administration
- Increase opportunities for sports and arts\*\*
- Engage every teen in meaningfully serving both the school and external communities



\*(Seligman, 2002). \*\* (Csikszentmihalyi, Larsen, 1986).

### More Information

Special Thanks to George Vaillant, Katherine Olaksen, and Lola Rokni For their time and advice

To see the **presentation, paper, and references** go to:  
<http://www.positiveleaders.com>

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