

EVERYDAY STRENGTHS | LEADERSHIP SYSTEMS

The System Your Team Is Missing

*A Multi-Organization Study in Strengths-Based Leadership Development,
Staff Well-Being, and Organizational Retention*

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ABSTRACT

Most school-improvement efforts focus on students through curriculum, assessments, and programs, yet the success of those initiatives depends on the adults who deliver them. A teacher's own social and emotional competence predicts the quality of their student relationships and the success of any student-facing initiative (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), but the self-awareness and self-management skills that competence rests on are rarely developed in teacher education programs: a national scan of 304 colleges of education found self-management required in just one state and self-awareness in three (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017).

Districts inherit that gap on day one, where it surfaces later as communication breakdowns, unresolved conflict, and costly turnover. This paper introduces Everyday Strengths, a strengths-based leadership development system built on validated DISC assessments and organized around four steps: Assess, Align, Activate, and Sustain.

Between August 2023 and June 2026, Everyday Strengths collected 324 survey responses across more than 30 engagements spanning K–12 districts, charter networks, municipal teams, and nonprofits. Most participants began depleted or under moderate strain; by year end, 93.0% of the year long cohort reported improved well-being and 84.1% were confident they could sustain the change without ongoing support.

At the organizational level, Graduate Arkansas reduced involuntary turnover by 70.0% and improved its overall turnover rate by 59.4% over two years, saving an estimated \$83,020 in avoided hiring costs. Additionally, Native Renewables Initiative grew its team by 33% with zero involuntary exits. Because this is practitioner-collected data without a randomized control group, causation cannot be fully isolated; however, the consistency of the pattern across organizations points to a replicable link between adult development, staff well-being, and retention. The paper lays out the framework, the evidence, and a 30-day entry point for districts ready to begin.

1. The Problem: What Schools Are Missing

Schools ask a lot of their adults. Teachers are expected to manage classrooms, handle student trauma, run data cycles, communicate effectively with parents, collaborate with colleagues, and grow professionally. Principals, department heads, and central office leaders face similar pressures, often serving as the primary mediators for organizational friction.

Research from Jennings and Greenberg (2009) establishes what most experienced educators already know intuitively: a teacher's own social and emotional competence (SEC) directly predicts the quality of teacher-student relationships, the effectiveness of classroom management, and the overall impact of any student-facing program. Without strong self-awareness and self-management the stressors of administrative pressure and missing feedback loops inevitably turn into burnout and instability.

Despite this, these critical skills are rarely developed in teacher preparation. A national scan of 304 U.S. colleges of education found that self-management was required in teacher preparation coursework in just one state, and self-awareness in three (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). While teacher certification programs show modest improvement, every district is still inheriting a self-management deficit on day one of employment. This deficit surfaces months later in communication breakdowns, unresolved team conflict, and the quiet departures of experienced staff.

The financial impact of this gap is measurable. The Learning Policy Institute (2024) estimates that replacing a single teacher in a district costs between least \$11,860 - \$24,930 in separation, recruiting, and hiring costs. When adults are given the self-awareness and self-management skills their roles require, the difference shows up in both organizational effectiveness and the budget. In our primary case study, this approach supported a \$83,020 return on investment in avoided hiring costs alone for Graduate Arkansas.

This paper names the social emotional competence gap, describes the four-step leadership operating system designed to close it, presents three years of multi-organization evidence, and is candid about what that evidence can and cannot yet prove.

ROI is calculated by multiplying the 7 avoided involuntary separations (the difference between the 10-separation baseline and the 3-separation Year 2 result) by the industry-standard floor cost of \$11,860 per employee separation.

2. The Framework: How Everyday Strengths Works

The Everyday Strengths system is built on four steps. The order does not change. What changes is the data

Step 1 — Assess. Every engagement begins with validated DISC and Emotional Intelligence assessments. The DISC assessment provides a clear map of how each person communicates, leads, and contributes, so the team can build trust and move toward a shared vision. The Emotional Intelligence assessment reveals how people show up for themselves and each other, measuring four quotients: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social management. The assessments are not the program. They are the diagnostic that makes everything else accurate.

Step 2 — Align. The assessment data is used to identify where the team's communication patterns, role expectations, and behavioral dynamics are creating friction or leaving capacity on the table. This is where gaps between how people see themselves and how they show up for the team become visible and addressable. Additionally, the data highlights strengths, tendencies and preferences, so that leaders can communicate with the team in a way that produces win-win outcomes. Alignment is about giving the team a shared language for how they work.

Step 3 — Activate. Activation is the applied practice phase. Participants move from understanding their data to using it in real situations, difficult conversations, delegation decisions, conflict resolution, and

feedback. Sessions are structured around the team's actual dynamics, not generic scenarios. The goal is to increase the intentional use of strengths in daily work.

Step 4 — Sustain. Sustainability is built into the design. Advisory calls, structured check-ins, and quarterly data reviews keep the gains from fading between sessions. By end of year, the team owns the language and the system, not the facilitator. The goal is a leadership team that can run the framework without a partner in the room.

The assessment instrument underlying this system DISC Self is independently validated by the Assessment Standards Institute (ASI). Technical analysis (Report A247-240909) confirms a composite reliability mean of 0.84 (Cronbach's Alpha) and strong construct validity, evidenced by expected negative correlations between opposite behavioral styles (e.g., -0.57 for Influencing/Conscientious). These technical properties are certified by ASI through 2030, ensuring the system provides a stable and equitable foundation for organizational development.

3. The Evidence:

The following evidence represents a multi-phase data collection process involving 30 organizations. While the total onboarding pool includes 324 unique participants, the end-of-year results (N=90) represent the full staff cohorts from the specific organizations that completed the comprehensive annual leadership system. This ensures the data reflects the impact on entire organizational systems rather than isolated individuals.

The data tells a consistent story: Participants enter feeling competent but depleted. The Everyday Strengths system moves them from individual awareness to systemic application, closing the "knowing-doing" gap that often stalls district initiatives.

3A. The Baseline: Capable but Depleted

Across our 324 baseline responses, we found a significant gap between professional competence and personal well-being. While 75.5% of participants entered with high role satisfaction, nearly 60% described their well-being as moderate or low, reporting that work "often feels heavy" or involves "manageable stress."

This data reveals a critical insight: Feeling capable does not protect well-being. An educator can feel fully competent in their role and still be burning out. This is particularly true for veterans; educators with eight or more years of experience reported the highest role confidence but the lowest well-being

3B. The Transformation

By tracking participants through the full annual cycle, we see a clear Transformation Arc. The initial professional health (Role satisfaction/Well-Being of the staff is recalibrated through the training and sustained through the system's infrastructure.

Phase	Metric	Sample Size (N)	Result
Onboarding	Professional Health Role Satisfaction/Well-being	324	75.5%
Immediate	Reported Positive Impact on Well-being/Stress	167	83.9%
End of Year	Sustained Well-being Improvement	90	93.0%

3C. The 30-Day Check: Do the Gains Hold?

At 30 days post-training (167 responses), the data confirms that the initial impact does not fade. 83.9% of participants reported positive impact on stress and well-being, and 71.4% were actively using their strengths to navigate their roles. Unlike "one-and-done" professional development, the system’s ongoing cadence prevents the typical motivation decay.

3D. End of Year: Sustained Change

By the end of the year (N=90), the shift from individual awareness to systemic behavior change is complete. 93.0% of participants confirmed a measurable improvement in their personal well-being compared to their onboarding baseline. Furthermore, 84.1% reported high confidence in their ability to sustain these changes independently, demonstrating that the leadership operating system has become an internalized part of the culture.

3E Organizational Outcomes

The individual improvements documented above correlate with significant institutional gains. In our primary case study at Graduate Arkansas, the stabilization of the adult team created the conditions necessary for the consistent execution of academic interventions. This stability was associated with measurable progress in student enrollment and graduation numbers. Over this two-year period, Graduate Arkansas achieved a 59.4% improvement in its overall turnover rate. Most critically, the school saw a 70% reduction in involuntary separations (dropping from 10 to 3). This reduction represents a total cost savings of \$83,020 in avoided hiring and training costs.

Year	Total Staff	Voluntary	Involuntary	Resigned	Turnover Rate	Retention Rate
2023-24 (Before EDS)	39	2	10	12	30.8%	69.2%
2024-25 (Year 1)	44	2	9	11	25.0%	75.0%
2025-26 (Year 2)	48	3	3	6	12.5%	87.5%

ROI is calculated by multiplying the 7 avoided involuntary separations (the difference between the 10-separation baseline and the 3-separation Year 2 result) by the industry-standard floor cost of \$11,860 per employee separation.

4. What We Know — and What Comes Next

What the data supports

At onboarding, 75.5%of participants described their well-being in the moderate zone or below. By end of year, 93% confirmed it had improved.

The confidence number matters as much as the well-being number. At end of year, 84.1% of participants said they were confident or very confident they could sustain these changes without ongoing external support.

When adults gain awareness, confidence follows. When confidence is sustained, well-being improves. When well-being improves, people stay.

What the data cannot yet claim

This is practitioner-collected data, not a randomized controlled trial. There is no matched comparison group. The causal relationship between the adult development work and student outcome improvements is supported by timing, pattern, self reported information from staff, and students academic performance. But cannot be fully isolated from other organizational factors that changed across the same period.

5. Conclusion Acknowledgements & Peer Review

The fundamental stability of a school district rests not on its student-facing programs, but on the systematic development of the self-awareness and self-management skills of the adults who lead them.

While practitioner-collected data cannot isolate causation, the consistent patterns observed across more than 30 organizations suggest that developing individual awareness builds the confidence necessary to sustain personal well-being. This individual recalibration appears to be a critical precursor to organizational stability, as seen in the significant retention gains and cost savings documented in our primary case studies. By replacing reactive communication with a structured leadership operating system, districts can move away from a culture of "heroic" individual effort toward one of predictable, systemic reliability. This infrastructure allows leadership teams to remain effective under pressure, protecting both the district's budget and its culture from the costs of unresolved conflict and turnover.

While these findings suggest a strong correlation between adult development and organizational health, future analysis will incorporate within-person comparisons and subgroup dynamics to more precisely isolate these patterns. As this work scales, the focus remains on building the sustainable infrastructure districts need to execute with clarity and protect their most valuable asset: their people.

For districts ready to begin, the 30-day sprint provides an immediate, data-driven entry point to assess current team dynamics and map a clear path toward improved well-being and institutional outcomes.

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