



## GENESEE INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL DISTRICT

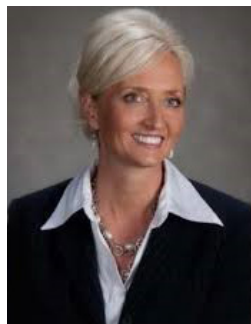
### **FLINT STRONG:**

# How One School District is Moving Its Staff, Students and Community from **Hardship to Happiness**

By Shawn Achor

### **EXTREME CRISIS**

“As I entered the lobby, a gentleman was leaving. As we passed, he looked at me and said, “Is something wrong with you people? You’re so nice. Everybody here is happy.’ ” These are the words of Dr. Lisa Hagel, Superintendent of Genesee Intermediate School District (GISD) recalling someone asking about her schools in Flint, Michigan. I was shocked, too. Whenever someone would find out Dr. Hagel is from Flint, people would lower their voices and put on a sympathetic tone as if they were at a wake. But Flint and Dr. Hagel are incredible reminders that our expectations can be limitations, and there is extraordinary power in a positive response to a seemingly overwhelming challenge.



***Dr. Lisa Hagel,  
Superintendent of  
GISD***

Unfortunately, skepticism is an all-too-common response to happy people in difficult situations. However, Dr. Hagel and her district are far from common. They have committed to being what I call “positive outliers” — people that choose to think and act in positive, productive ways that make them stand out from the norm. By choosing optimism and leveraging its benefits, GISD staff and students are creating a bigger potential for everyone around them, one greater than what “normal people” might seek or even believe is possible, especially amid extreme difficulties like a devastating city-wide health crisis coupled with a significant up-spike in situational poverty. Indeed, Dr. Hagel’s district has seen more than their share of hardships.

General Motors originated in Flint more than 100 years ago. For decades, GM gave the good people of Flint well-paying jobs with benefits to boot. The city was Flint Strong with much to be proud of. However, in recent years, GM has been closing plants, consolidating operations in Michigan and shipping

jobs overseas. To compound this problem, in 2014 the city of Flint was hit with a severe water crisis when the city's drinking water source was switched to the highly-polluted Flint River. Dangerous levels of lead in the water resulted serious health-related problems, especially with the city's children.



These crises have led to chronic illness and situational poverty for middle income families that find themselves jobless or with homes that had drastically dropped in value. The Flint City school district (adjacent to GISD) at one time had 31,000 students. It's now down to some 4,200 students. "Unless you're here and you can live and fight for the city and for those children in these communities, you can't understand how difficult it is," says Dr. Hagel.

## A SPARK OF HOPE

So, amid epic health and economic concerns in Flint, why are Dr. Hagel and her district talking about the importance of happiness while leading by example? Should they not just focus on solving the urgent problems facing their community? Well, Dr. Hagel doesn't seem to think that focusing on the positive and solving problems are mutually exclusive.



*Picture taken at a Flint elementary school on March 6, 2018 four years after the water crisis began.*

## OUR BIG POTENTIAL

In the face of great hardships, we often see people come together with resolve to tackle the challenges in front of them. When something monumental happens, it breaks the natural hold of social scripts (i.e., the "unwritten rules" of behavior) that typically govern our world. In the "normal" world, these social scripts give us predictability in social interactions and protect us from awkwardness. However, social scripts also put pressure on people to conform to the script, leading us to socially ostracize those that don't conform.

After a tragedy, we see again and again the immense social connection that occurs as people chip in to help one another. Notably, they are unhindered by social convention; this shows us what we can do — it's a glimpse of our Big Potential — and it shows us just how limited we are by social scripts in our "normal" world.

Unfortunately, once the shock of the event is over, we have a way of moving back into the old, normal way of interacting; the positive connection fades. What we need to sustain and make "normal" are those uninhibited positive feelings and shared responsibility for one another. What if this was the "new normal"?

Our "Happiness Advantage" has helped us stay the course, look deeper at solutions, and work together to share our strengths in the most effective manner possible.

It is my dream that society re-write these social scripts to allow us to collectively embrace positive emotion in social environments and harness the Big Potential that exists when people share an interconnected sense of happiness.

“It’s not like we’re asking people to run around and throw confetti and laugh and giggle all the time, denying that problems exist,” Dr. Hagel stressed. “On the contrary, we’re asking people to acknowledge that there will always be challenges, but to focus on what is going right — not getting stuck on what’s going wrong with the efforts that people are doing for the families and the children. We’re asking for people to filter for the effort and the good things, not just focus on the bad — that makes them stronger.”

It’s so natural, unfortunately, for us to focus on all the negatives, but it really doesn’t do any good long term. It solves no problems that need sustainable solutions and it gives no hope. In fact, it does just the opposite! So how does being positive help us solve problems?

“To help families deal with the lead crisis, we’re in about 1,000 homes, working with children and their families from birth to three years old,” Dr. Hagel said. “Remembering to also look for the positive has helped our staff become more resilient and be better prepared to cope with the problems that we’re seeing. We still have some challenges to overcome, but most definitely we are making an impact in Flint and in the greater Genesee County area.”

Dr. Lisa Hagel has become one of the most powerful champions of positive psychology and happiness that I know. Her focus is not only within her school district, but on something that goes well beyond the school to the entire community, state, and even to the entire nation.

“I have the honor of serving as the superintendent of the Genesee Intermediate School District, which is a service school district that supports the 21 school districts in Genesee County – about 70,000 students,” Dr. Hagel said. “I’ve lived in the areas near Flint my entire life, so I am a product of Genesee County. I am committed to this area and to its success. And if we can be a role model to others, I am all in,” says Hagel.

## GRIT AND GRATITUDE AT A GLANCE:

### The Genesee Intermediate School District Story

- The city of Flint, Michigan was facing enormous challenges with the closing of several GM manufacturing plants and a water crisis stemming from lead contamination, which was followed by serious health problems and generational poverty.
- Despite these overwhelming challenges, Dr. Lisa Hagel (Superintendent of Genesee Intermediate School District) led her district in harnessing the power of positivity after experiencing the Happiness Advantage | Orange Frog workshop, based on the best-selling book **The Happiness Advantage** by Harvard happiness researcher Shawn Achor.
- Through Dr. Hagel’s leadership and a strategic use of **The Happiness Advantage**, GISD have made an indelible positive impact on their community through helping families in about 1,000 homes, including a monumental day of performing over 3,500 conscious acts of kindness for the people of Flint.
- GISD has also made significant improvements in its own employee engagement; recent survey results include a 42% greater connection to GISD, a 81% increase in employee perception that they receive recognition for their team and individual efforts, and a 59% increase in employee perception that their organization encourages feedback from them. They believe that what they think and do matters!
- GISD has found positive education to be a critical foundation on which to equip students with the core competencies of Social and Emotional Learning and to execute their plans for the Every Student Succeeds Act – which focuses on students as whole children who are best able to learn when their social and emotional needs are met.
- Flint continues to face serious obstacles, but Dr. Hagel’s use of **The Happiness Advantage** has paved the way for long-term success in her district and achieving its Big Potential.

## THE CASE FOR POSITIVITY AND RATIONAL OPTIMISM

People tend to have problems with being hopeful or optimistic because they think that feeling this way requires us to turn a blind eye to all the negative that's going on within a community or a society. Of course, if we turn a blind eye to problems, they don't get fixed. However, being overly pessimistic doesn't fix any of those problems either. Pessimism is based upon the belief that it doesn't matter what we do or think. And if we believe that what we think or do doesn't matter, whatever cycles of negativity or poverty we're seeing continue because we're not making any behavioral changes or mindset changes about them.

When a group of people become rationally optimistic together, it suddenly becomes normal to think and behave positively. Then we stop asking what's wrong with happy people that are in the trenches of serious community problems. Instead, we see people who believe that they can participate in a movement of positivity and come up with organic ideas themselves.

What we're finding is that the greatest amount of positive change can happen in places where we thought change couldn't happen! Over and over again, I've been stunned by the fact that school districts facing huge problems such as shootings, poverty, or high rates of illiteracy seem to embrace positive thinking and behavior while also taking ownership over the challenges they face.

Dr. Hagel's story is clear; her district is setting the standard for positivity amidst hardship. She is also a strong believer in viewing students as whole, real people, which has been a defining shift in the focus of her district. "I think Michigan is like other economically challenged states. We've been through a tough economic time," Dr. Hagel said. "This has had an impact on school districts, because they've lost resources, and personnel, and that takes a toll on teachers. Legislative mandates

have caused the pendulum to swing towards so much accountability, that we lost a significant amount of joy in the classroom. We weren't focusing on the whole child for a long time. Instead we were only focusing on subjects like math, reading, and science, which are, of course, very important. But for students to learn these subjects, they need to understand what happiness is and how to cope with difficult situations. This is bringing us back to focusing on what's important in the child's life and getting that in place, and then letting the children learn. All the research shows you cannot teach a child until you have dealt with the other issues and hardships they're dealing with. Until we can really address that, we're not making a difference."

## THE HAPPINESS ADVANTAGE IN EDUCATION

Most of us grow up thinking that happiness is totally dependent on how successful we are. For example, when I was a student, I believed that if I got good grades, then I'd be happy. And that turned into believing that when I got into a good college, then I'd be happy. And on and on it went.

As I began writing **The Happiness Advantage**, that all changed for me as I got deeper into the research. Decades of studies in psychology, neuroscience, and in organizations around the world tell us that happiness leads to success – not the other way around. These studies show that we can begin to choose happiness by creating positive changes in our daily lives, such as practicing gratitude or doing conscious acts of kindness for other people. In fact, these sorts of activities not only help us to choose happiness, but they also make it more likely for the people around us to be happier, which causes a "ripple effect" of positivity that can spread throughout classrooms, schools, districts, and even entire communities.

Our research shows that when you choose

happiness, performance and many other important educational outcomes improve. For example, the Gallup Student Poll, which has surveyed nearly 5 million students since 2009, reported that happy, engaged students are 2.5 times more likely to say that they get excellent grades, compared to their disengaged peers. A 2009 study by Martin Seligman (one of the founders of positive psychology) and his colleagues found that a “positive education” intervention for 9th grade students increased reports of student enjoyment and engagement in school, while also improving social and learning skills. It turns out that happiness is an incredible advantage in our lives.

## THE ORANGE FROG WORKSHOP... NOT JUST ANOTHER TRAINING PROGRAM



*A group of GISD employees graduate from the HA|OF workshop. The identity of the person in the Orange Frog suit remains unknown.*

Dr. Hagel and her district have embraced the Happiness Advantage by utilizing hope, positivity, and rational optimism, despite the huge challenges they face. If you were to ask Dr. Hagel how this has happened, she would tell you a story about an orange frog.

In **The Orange Frog**, my parable based on **The Happiness Advantage**, Spark starts frog life as an outcast. Unlike all the other green frogs, he transitioned from tadpole to frog with a few orange

spots, which made him feel awkward. Others treated him differently – and not in a good way. Like many people in organizations we have researched, the more positive Spark acted, the more he stood out with even more orange spots. Spark found that being orange made him happy and better able to deal with the challenges he and his fellow frogs faced as they moved to the Heron-infested Pond 4. So, he made a difficult choice amongst substantial negative peer pressure. He chose to be orange. Indeed, during all the challenges and frustrations that the frogs were dealing with, Spark had the audacity to be positive and look for options and solutions! When the other frogs notice that Spark is the best at catching flies and that the herons don't like to eat orange frogs, the orange begins to spread, and everything starts to change.



When Dr. Hagel started talking about the Happiness Advantage | Orange Frog workshop (HA|OF), some of her faculty and staff thought it was just one more training — one more thing everyone had to do, on top of grading papers, being available for students, and preparing their classrooms for standardized tests.

However, here's the difference that we've seen with HA|OF: It's for the teachers and staff. It's meant to raise their levels of happiness, which ripples out to the students and, eventually, to the entire community.

The research shows that positivity unlocks the potential of students' performance, which makes teachers' jobs easier — they know what a challenge it is to teach students who are feeling negative. Rather than pushing the students up a hill, teachers begin to realize that they can walk up the hill together on an exciting journey.

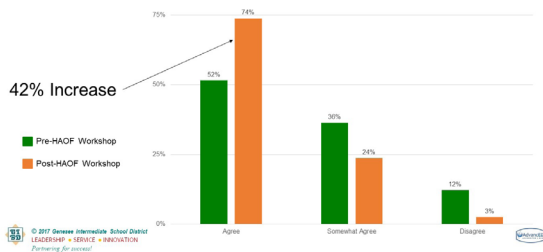
# MAKING THE GRADES

Stories like the ones we hear from Dr. Hagel about GISD are amazing to hear, but they get even better when they are backed up with hard data. Sure enough, GISD has the data showing that happiness gets serious results.

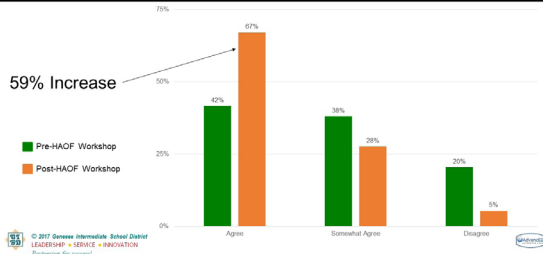
“We had done an employee engagement survey before HA|OF,” Dr. Hagel attests. “That was about two and a half years ago, so we did the same employee engagement survey again. Our data shows that, by far, we have a statistically significant improvement in employee engagement. There have been improvements in their work, trust levels, overall happiness at work, and having a sense of purpose and deeper meaning in their work. There’s no question in our mind that HA|OF really is making a difference.”

Indeed, the numbers speak for themselves:

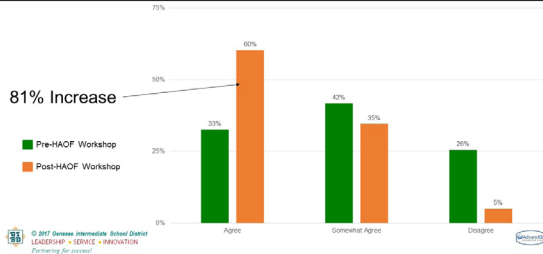
## I feel connected and committed to, and proud to be part of, my organization.



## My organization encourages feedback, suggestions, and opinions.



## We receive recognition for our individual and team efforts.



*I was thrilled to have the opportunity to sit down with Dr. Hagel and hear her district’s story.*

## MY CHAT WITH DR. HAGEL

You’ve already heard some of the GISD story from Dr. Hagel, but I’d like to share what I heard when I sat down with her for an extended conversation:

**Shawn:** How did you get started with the Happiness Advantage?

**Lisa:** The Happiness Advantage really started when I saw **The Orange Frog** and the energy of the workshop. I have always been interested in positive psychology, but I was not aware of the Happiness Advantage. I saw **The Orange Frog** and then I started to read the book. I thought, “This is something that we not only need in Flint, but we need in education.” I learned more about the program and decided to start the Happiness Advantage with a core group of people with leadership qualities. These people were not necessarily in leadership roles, but they represented nearly every role of our organization. We brought them to HA|OF and the reaction that I saw really affirmed what I felt people need and what we’ve lost in education.”

**Shawn:** I’ve heard rumors of “Orange Ninjas” in your district. Can you confirm or deny that they exist?

**Lisa (laughing):** These are people who are doing unsolicited kind acts for their colleagues or parents as they come in to our offices. The amount of joy and satisfaction people are getting is amazing. This team of Orange Ninjas, whose identities are still a

mystery, can strike at any moment! They just make things happen around the organization. No one knows who they are, and they don't ask for anything. It keeps going. It's that whole cycle of giving back that creates a desire to give back more.



*The Orange Ninjas strike again!*

**Shawn:** I've also heard about a project you did on February 12th called 1,800 Acts of Kindness. This is a great choice of a **Happiness Advantage** activity to engage your district employees because research has shown that kind acts are very effective in boosting happiness not just for the recipients of the kind acts, but also for the people doing the kind acts as well! Not to mention, a huge community project like this gives everyone a glimpse of how happiness enables us to reach our **Big Potential**, setting an example of how being kind to one another could be our new normal.

**Lisa:** Because of HA|OF and us being able to observe the great joy that we, and others, feel when we do something kind for others, we decided to go to some businesses and ask for some donations. We had \$14,000 that we were given just as a start. We used these donations to do 1,800 acts of kindness for the community in 18 hours.

**Shawn:** In 18 hours. 1,800 acts of kindness?!

**Lisa:** It turned out to be nearly 3,500. We had 90 people, who I called the Navigators. They brainstormed about 20 projects that allowed us to touch infants, preschoolers, senior citizens, veterans, or just



*The uniform of GISD district members as they performed nearly 3,500 acts of kindness in just 18 hours.*

people who needed new appliances.

**Shawn:** So, pretty much everyone in the community.

**Lisa:** Yes! We started by delivering coffee to the road commission at four o'clock in the morning when they were out to plow the roads. Then we treated people to free laundry service at the laundromat for four hours. We also went to hospitals and gave gift bags to cancer patients. And it's not just teachers that were involved. We had bus drivers, secretaries, custodians, administrators — people all across the organization were involved in this. For example, there was the Veterans Appreciation Breakfast put on by the Genesee Career Institute's JROTC program.

**Shawn:** And I'm sure that these kind acts made these folks so grateful for the presence of your district in Flint, which may lead to even more kindness and positivity spreading beyond your day of kindness.

**Lisa:** Yes, and I think we were feeling grateful too for the opportunity to help others in need and for the generous donations we received to make our kind acts possible. There really does seem to be an ongoing loop between kindness, gratitude, and happiness.

**Shawn:** More and more superintendents, administrators, and teachers want to know about the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and how these frameworks connect with HA|OF.

**Lisa:** With ESSA, there is a focus on the whole child. To this end, HAI OF weaves very nicely into the classrooms and into the focus on making sure that the five SEL competencies are met; the core principles of positive psychology address these needs very well. The beauty is that often when we add a new initiative into a classroom, teachers feel like it's one more thing on their plate. With HAI OF, it enriches what is already going on in the classroom. It's not one more thing; it layers so nicely into everything that they do. It fits beautifully with ESSA.



## THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

Hearing Dr. Hagel's story about her district truly inspires me. In the midst of the challenges they are experiencing, they continue to believe that what they think and do matters. They feel grateful for the things that they still have, and they are creating the social support network they need so that nobody feels that they are on their own.

They have spread Orange well beyond the walls of their schools, involving the business community to engage the future generation of workers going out into the workplace.

I hope that this emerging, beautiful story out of Flint is an inspiration to you to create positive changes within your own community, school, and family. As more and more people choose happiness, we see that positive changes are not isolated events, but part of an interconnected tapestry of change occurring within this community, our nation and the entire world.

Join Lisa, myself, and our partners at International Thought Leader Network on this journey and experience the Happiness Advantage for yourself!

**To get started, join us for our next public workshop!**



For more information, including on-site training and additional resources available, please contact our office:

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**[www.OrangeFrogExperience.com](http://www.OrangeFrogExperience.com)**



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