Alan Hu Foundation Mental Health Lecture Series

Strength-Based Pedagogy to Engage All Students

Sally M. Reis, PhD
Letitia Neag Morgan Chair, Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor,
and Teaching Fellow at the University of Connecticut
May 7, 2024

[00:00:00]
CHIH-CHING HU: Welcome, everyone, to Alan Hu Foundation Mental Health Lecture Series. I'm Chih-Ching Hu, cofounder of Alan Hu Foundation and host for your webinar. Today, Dr. Sally Reis will present "Using Strength-Based Pedagogy to Engage All Students".

[00:00:19]
We'd like to thank Three Valleys Community Foundation for their generous grant to fund this webinar. We'd also like to thank the Mental Health Association for Chinese Communities for providing simultaneous Chinese interpretation. Thank you to Ida Shaw for Chinese interpretation.

[00:00:38]
Alan Hu Foundation's mission is to promote mental health, raise awareness, and remove stigma surrounding psychiatric disorders, and support fundamental research for cures. Please consider making a gift to Alan Hu Foundation by using the donation link in the chat box. Thank you for supporting our programs.

[00:01:00]
Today, it is our great honor and privilege to introduce Dr. Sally Reis.

[00:01:07]
Dr. Reis was a classroom teacher and administrator in public education before beginning her work at the University of Connecticut over three decades ago, where she served as an Endowed Professor, as well as the Vice Provost of Academic Affairs. She was Principal Investigator of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.

[00:01:35]
Her research interests are related to talent development in all children, as well as special populations including talented students with disabilities, talented girls and women, and diverse groups of talented students who are often underserved. In today's presentation, Dr. Reis will share the cutting edge new research to address the academic, social, and emotional needs of high ability students with learning challenges by focusing on their strengths and interests. She will also share which strength-based strategies worked best and how these were implemented at school and at home.

[00:02:23]
This webinar is being recorded. The recordings will be available on the Alan Hu Foundation website and the Alan Hu Foundation YouTube channel in about 1-2 weeks. Please subscribe to Alan Hu Foundation YouTube channel.

[00:02:37]
Following the presentation, there will be a Q&A session. Please use the Zoom Q&A function to submit your questions. The presentation is for educational purposes only and is not intended

for medical diagnoses. If you have any persistent symptoms, please seek professional help.
With that, I'm turning to Dr. Reis. Welcome, Dr. Reis. Thank you for being here. Please take over the screen sharing.

[00:03:03]
DR. SALLY REIS: Thank you, it's my pleasure. It's also my pleasure to share some information about some studies we've been conducting over the last five years, where we've looked at very high potential students with autism and how they can be successful both in high school and in college.

[0:03:23]
So, over the last three or four decades, I've been doing work–as I said–for quite a long time now on students that have both strengths as well as deficits. In some cases, these are students that are very bright but are underachieving in school and getting poor grades. In other cases, these are students that are unmotivated, students that have had performance issues and also, in some cases, students that have disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, attention deficit, and autism that have not yet been identified–often times because they're very bright, and their abilities compensate for their disabilities. At the same time, their disabilities mask their strengths and talents.

[00:04:17]
So, I'm going to briefly, tonight, talk a little bit about how I began my work in this area, give you an overview of a few of the studies–not all–but a few of the studies that we've done. I'll talk a little bit about current work with the students with autism that we've been doing, and I'll show you the website that you can go to, and then talk a little bit about parenting advice, and then some advice for educators.

[00:04:44]
I began my interest in Journey in this area in the late 1980s. At that time, I became friends with a woman named Sue–Dr. Susan Baum–who has spent her entire career advocating for very high potential students who also have disabilities. In my field, this is called twice exceptional. You can be exceptionally bright but also have exceptional disabilities and challenges in learning.

[00:05:13]
I was friendly with her. She was a doctoral student after I had finished my doctoral work, and and that was one influence. The second is we kept getting calls to our center at UConn about students that were very bright but having very, very difficult struggles in school. I was a department head of educational psychology at UConn, and the program for students with learning disabilities was housed in our department, so I met many, many bright students at the University level that had disabilities.

[00:05:49]
Then I gave birth to a premature daughter. She was delivered seven weeks early, and she ended up having a series of very, very difficult disabilities–also struggled with depression probably most likely because of these disabilities. This is a picture of our daughter when she was about four years old, and she struggled in school right from the beginning. At home, she was very bright, she was extremely verbal, but in school she simply could not read. She couldn't decode letters. She couldn't decode numbers. She had processing issues, and we struggled with it for years. Even though my husband is a very well-known academic–we both have PhDs–we struggled with getting the school to identify that although she had challenges, she also had strong interests. She was also very bright. In our area, this is again known as masking: the masking that I talked about.

[00:06:56]
I, as a young adult, I asked Sarah what words look like for her. This is one of the first books that she ever memorized. She compensated by memorizing books when she couldn't read them. She said she never reversed letters,

but rather the letters jumped around. They made no sense. She would try to read one word– She essentially learned to read by memorization. Sight word memorization. So her early years in school were relatively okay until she got to about third or fourth grade, and then it became very, very obvious that she had a very, very strong learning disability.

[00:07:37]
From that point on, school was only about her disability. No one asked about her interests. No one looked at her strengths. No one talked to her in school about the things that she might like to do. She was known as a student who was disabled. She was in a special education classroom, she was sent to special education teachers who–again–never recognized her verbal strengths. Sarah has a very high IQ in in verbal areas, very, very low IQ in performance areas. She was–by the time she was in middle school–she was anxious, she was depressed. She was on medication by the time she was in high school, and she struggled for years and years and years.

[00:08:31]
Things began changing when I started acting differently. I am a person who has studied enrichment, enrichment programs, talent development. I realized that her anxiety and her unhappiness and her belief that she wasn't good at anything was going to be something that impacted her for the rest of her life. So we completely changed course. Every meeting that we had about her, we started saying: "Stop telling us what she can't do. Instead, let's talk about what she can do. Can you ask her occasionally what her interests are? Can you give her some projects in school, some things to do that will make her feel better about herself?"

[00:09:18]
Where is she now? Well, hard to believe she's a college grad. They told us she would never get to college. We completely changed course, as I mentioned, at the end of middle school. She went to a different high school than she was scheduled to go to, and she graduated from college as a history major. She was a debater, and a lot of her success is because we asked questions differently. "What does she like? What is she good at? Can you give her assignments that focus on what she can do instead of what she can't do?"

[00:09:58]
And where is she now? She completed her master's degree and her doctorate in counseling. She worked as an athletic counselor. She is a professional licensed counselor now, and she's a faculty member in a school counseling program. She wants to give back. She's a mom, she's married, she has a happy life. I don't think any of these things would have happened if we hadn't insisted on a different brand of pedagogy: doing things differently. This is based on some of our knowledge related to gifted education, talent development pedagogy.

[00:10:39]
So, in my life, in my career, I began being very, very interested in students that not only were very bright, but also had the potential for tremendous creative productivity to do great things if people would only stop focusing on their deficits. That's what school. School is generally about deficit reduction. It's not about talent development.

[00:11:06]
So, in the, some of the previous research that we have done, my colleague Susan Baum–who I mentioned earlier–and I came up with a definition that's very, very much cited now in the literature about who twice exceptional students are. These are again students that have both talents and strengths as well as school deficits, whether they be in reading, in social skills, in math, in writing, in processing, and verbal skills. Strong deficits but also strong strengths, and understanding those two things are really important.

[00:11:43]
In some previous research that I did, in which we studied case studies of students who attended universities

but also had disabilities, we learned that many of these young people had struggled in school. In studying this population over the years, we found many teachers were negative to students with disabilities–again, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, attention deficit disorder, social emotional struggles such as an anxiety. We found that there was peer challenges that these students were often presented with, because their peers would not understand why they couldn't do things that other kids could do that seemed to be similar to them. Many of these young people were retained. They were put into self-contained special education classes. Many of them had very inappropriate Special Ed programs, very remedial.

[00:12:42]
And in this previous research, what we found is that if it wasn't for a particular parent–a parent that was an advocate–oftentimes it was their mom sometimes it was their dad, but if it wasn't for them having a parent advocate that looked at their strengths, and insisted like my husband and I did, that we had to focus on strengths, that these young people would not have succeeded.

[00:13:06]
And that's led to my my whole research career, my most current work as well. So these students are often called neurodiverse, a title I like very much. I also like twice exceptional, because it can have exceptional strengths as well as exceptional deficits as we've mentioned, but I just want to say–summarize, really–20 years of research in four points.

[00:13:31]
One: neurodiverse students almost always receive education that focuses on remediation. So, content that's too easy, looking at, at deficits as opposed to strengths. Second, if you're going to be effective at teaching these students, we have to find a balance between their strengths and their interests, as well as teaching them how to compensate for their deficits. But we can, can do that in an area of interest. We can do that with a self-selected project. We can do that with a different kind of test or a different kind of assessment. We found that for many of these students extracurricular activities can be extremely beneficial and also how important it is to use strength-based strategies: what are your strengths? I could have told anybody had they asked me what a great debater our daughter was. She could talk circles around people, but she couldn't write, and she couldn't read. So why couldn't some of the work she did in school be related to her strong verbal skills?

[00:14:38]
The project that we've been working on for the last five years is called 2eASD/GT, so I'm proud of this, but if you put 2eASD into any website, you'll come to us at UConn. This is the website for our project. We've been working on trying to identify what were the educational practices that got students with autism–this is our research team at UConn–that got students that had autism but also had academic strengths through to competitive colleges. And so, we've been studying this now for five years. Our project is just about to end. We have maybe 15 publications. They're all on our website; you can get the abstracts and go to the articles by going to the website that I mentioned earlier, but essentially we were looking to see: how can we get more students with autism who are bright, to be able to successfully start college and finish college?

[00:15:39]
And the reason we were interested in that, is that students with autism currently enroll at much lower rates than all of their peers with all other types of disabilities in college. They leave college prior to completion at much higher rates than their peers with disabilities. And think about that. There's such a tremendous amount of personal costs and economic costs. Personally, these young people that can't make it feel like they failed economically. Millions and millions of dollars has spent every year trying to support students with autism that go to college or even in high school that could be spent differently. So we wanted to know what works, and this was the focus of a good bit of our research.

[00:16:24]
I'll just mention a couple of our studies. We did an on online survey of competitive college disability services and said: "What do neurodiverse students need when they come to college?" Almost all of them talked about executive function, learning studies, strategies, time management, social adaptability. They all, when asked about students with disabilities–and remember, some of these disabilities are not identified, because the student's academic talent mask their disabilities–but when we ask about what these disabilities have found, what experiences do these young people with autism who go to college, what do they experience? So many mention the things that I've discussed. Anxiety, social isolation, loneliness, depression, and there is a way around that, and that's what we were looking for. We really wanted to know what can we do.

[00:17:27]
And then the third study and the one that I am really most excited about, is a study that we did where we interviewed 40 young people in college–competitive colleges–who were identified as having autism. We asked what was it in college that made such a difference, and that's what I'm going to focus the next 20 minutes or so on before we get into questions.

[00:17:54]
So when we look at young people who have a disability, have autism–which by the way, also we find strengths–there are many, many strengths in individuals with autism, and I'm going to mention some of them tonight. But we don't think about autism as being a strength-based program, we think about autism as being a deficit, and that's part of the problem that we have in the world we live in today. We're quick to cast judgments. But what we found is that these young people when given certain opportunities: when they're identified as having talents, when they're given permission to participate in advanced classes, when they are able to be involved in interest-based, strength-based extracurricular activities, when they're given strength-based enrichment pedagogy, projects, independent work, the ability to choose the way they are assessed, the ability to be able to provide enrichments, so, go to lectures, choose things that they want to learn about, learn in a way that's enjoyable to them that they can succeed.

[00:19:06]
When I talk about competitive colleges and universities, some of these young people were at places like Cornell, UC Berkeley, BC, BU, USC, UConn, NYU, Drexel, Rice. We found these young people by going to disability service providers and asking young people with autism if they would volunteer to be in our study. These are young people that are, again, in incredibly competitive universities, and they are succeeding. That's the point I'd like to make.

[00:19:41]
So I'm going to have you listen to a couple of the people in the study that participated.

[00:19:50]
VIDEO SPEAKER 1: I'm thinking about what enabled my success going into college. So I think, you know, sort of the resilience that was built up in me through professionals was very helpful. There were several teachers. I had one teacher, Miss Faye, who I hold very dear to my heart, who always made sure that I knew I was supported even if things didn't go well. She didn't put emphasis on, you know, you need to go to college and do great. She was like, "who are you? What do you want to do? What are your passions? I'm here to support you in that", you know. And that allowed me to feel like I sort of had not only a safety in the case of things going wrong, but also made me feel like, wow, like maybe I can do this. Like if a person is seeing this in me, like okay, I feel really bad about myself normally, but having that external recognition was really important.

[00:20:38]
VIDEO SPEAKER 2: A lot of school districts just aren't prepared for people with disabilities, because we're such

a minority, in some school districts, and especially because this was like the 2000s and people really hadn't understood, I don't think fully, autism. They would just shove anyone with a disability into a classroom and just separate them from everyone, and they would have like strict rules, and they would have different policies for dealing with misbehavior and everything like that. A lot of the problems I had were definitely due to the environment because being put in a setting with people who are emotionally disturbed and low functioning autism and then being high functioning autistic person that has a hard time understanding social cues, learning from people who have that kind of like, that's why I personally don't believe I'm personally emotionally disturbed, but I believe being around people who are emotionally disturbed, into like affected how I behave.

[00:21:43]
VIDEO SPEAKER 1: There is just really something to be said about, I guess finding people like you doesn't necessarily mean autistic people. It doesn't necessarily mean highly intelligent people, but it does mean people who see you for who you are, who understand your inherent worth, who see you as competent and want to cheer you on.

[00:22:01]
DR. SALLY REIS: So, these are two of the 40 participants that we had, and they mentioned a few important things, so let me highlight a few of the things that we learned about these 40 young people. Again, the largest study ever done of individuals who have been extremely successful in competitive colleges who also had autism.

[00:22:24]
So first of all, every one of these–almost everyone, all but maybe one–clearly knew they had a strength and a talent. Some teacher had told them. Somebody had said "you're really good at this. You can do this. You're strong in this area."

[00:22:40]
The second is that most receive some type of enrichment, so letting students pursue their independent study, do a group project, get involved in an extracurricular activity in their area of Interest, get involved in a debate program, a science fair, a history day competition, what we call a talent development opportunity. 90% of the sample that we studied participated in an interest-based extracurricular activity in high school, and they were really encouraged to do that by their teachers, and almost three quarters of them got to take some advanced levels of classes. When we look at the things that made a difference, these things led. So identification as talented, self-selected interest based, extracurricular activities… these things made a difference. Residential, some of them went to camps which prepared them very well for college. Enrichment pedagogy: the types of enrichment opportunities.

[00:23:45]
So, Molly was on robotics team, and she said "I loved robotics team. I struggled socially, but being in a team made me feel good about myself"–and by the way, her team won the state robotics competition–"I was a math tutor. I got interested in STEM. I was part of a girls club who coded(Girls Who Code). Dylan said "I tried tennis. I tried documentary film. I was a senator. I tried mock trial and band. I did filmmaking."

[00:24:15]
These things made an enormous difference to these young people. Many of them said they developed the things that were so important to their success in college because of this (their self-awareness, their self advocacy, their time management). They learned how not to give up, so if they were faced with a difficult or adverse situation, they were able to figure out how to cope, how to deal with things, because of these opportunities.

[00:24:46]
So again, let's listen to Pamela for a minute.

[00:24:48]
PAMELA: Understanding myself as an autistic person definitely did occur in elementary school. I knew from a very early age–I was actually diagnosed with a bipolar disorder when I was 14– so all of my high school years were sort of marred by my experiences with my mood disorder, which made things very, very difficult. In high school I would say that I experienced a little bit more of the loneliness feelings because I felt so different from my peers.

[00:25:13]
Some advice that I would give to, you know, an incoming autistic student into high school: being yourself, being authentic, figuring out yourself–like taking the time to grow as a person, right–because eventually, you're going to go to high school. If you want to go to college, you kind of have to have a better, you know, developed self-concept, so getting to know yourself and your interests.

[00:25:34]
In terms of autistic students who are high-performing, you know, academically, the best advice that I can give for transitioning into college: time management, not taking the culture too seriously, not trying to fit neurotypical molds in terms of socialization because that will burn you out. It is important to access, you know, services in college. You don't really know what they can offer you until you go there. You know, I wouldn't have understood myself as an autistic person–

[00:26:05]
DR. SALLY REIS: So let me stop that for just a second. So many–I speak to hundreds and hundreds of parents a year–it seems like about having a very bright child with a disability, and so many of them are afraid of having their children labeled as having special education needs. But having understanding your special education needs and understanding what you need to be successful is an enormous tool in getting the help that you need in college and disclosing your disability and understanding what you need. So many of these young people that we studied said it was actually understanding their both special education needs as well as their talent development needs that made a difference. So many parents focus on the disabilities and don't focus on the talents.

[00:27:00]
I spoke to a mother for over an hour this week on the phone, and I asked everybody a simple question: "What does your child like to do? What are his or her interests?" and she said, "Well, she likes math, and she likes English."
I said: "No, no. Outside of academics, what does she like to do?" She just looked at me and said: "Well, she likes to knit, and she likes to draw, and she likes creative writing, but we don't do any of that. I don't focus on that at home. I'm trying to get her to finish her homework." and it's that's part of the challenge. Enrichment pedagogy–my field–is a field that takes great joy in identification of interests.

[00:27:42]
When you look at what most people that are successful have done in their life and the reasons they have done it, they have been exposed to new ideas. They've had opportunities to have training, and things like problem solving and time management, and the how-to of doing things, and then doing work and independent and small group studies, investigations, projects, that they do with other students–these are the things that make a difference. Hearing a speaker that motivates you, listening to someone that gives you the an excitement about a field–this is how people find the things that they want to do for the rest of their life.

[00:28:26]
So I encourage, when I talk about enrichment pedagogy, I encourage virtual field trips, online activities, DVDs, movies, things that are enjoyable for students to make learning enjoyable. When our daughter who had very,

very difficult time with dyslexia–she read at the ninth grade. When she was in ninth grade, she was still only reading at the third grade level. When she began struggling with dyslexia, one of the things that we did was, we got a movie of every book she had to read, so we watched the movie of To Kill a Mockingbird before she read the book. It gave her a context. We listened to the books as audiobooks online before she actually tried to read them. She had boost by that, and it made the whole process of doing these things enjoyable. Lots of students with disabilities love projects, and many of the students that we studied with autism, what we found is that they could focus for long periods of times on things that they had an interest in. So, how-to books, getting kids into projects, doing History Day, science fair, this is the kind of pedagogy that can make a difference, and getting them the opportunity to do some of this work at home–you know, learn research skills–and asking their teachers if they can substitute some of this type of pedagogy for other things can make a tremendous difference.

[00:29:54]
So, just take a look at one student that's I think a great illustration of what enrichment pedagogy is. This is a young man named Brooks McConnell who heard on television–an interview with Sam Berns, who unfortunately died. He had a very rare disease, rapid-aging. It is, "Progeria" is the name of the disease, and Sam's done a video. It's available on YouTube about his philosophy for a very happy life. He did it before he died, and one of the things when the young, young Brooks heard this video was: Sam said he didn't have a lot of regrets in life, but one of his regrets is that he would never be able to ride a roller coaster. So Brooks said, "Well, I bet I can design a simulated roller coaster ride."

[00:30:44]
And he spent the next several months in school working in both special-ed and his enrichment program to do this. He went on roller coaster rides. He videotaped. He learned roller coaster design. He got Brookstone to loan him a vibration chair. He put together an entire simulation after learning how roller coasters work, and here he is with the vibration chair. There's his model of the roller coaster here. Here he is thinking about how much pressure Sam could handle here. He is at the state science fair where he won a prize for the work that he did. He spent months on this, and this is what we've learned about so many individuals that have struggled themselves.

[00:31:29]
They want to help others. They want to give back. They want to make a positive difference, and so much of what schools are doing now–and, by the way, we have a a very robust set of research if you're interested on research on our approach for enrichment pedagogy–I can send a 40 decade summary of research on this model and how it can turn around underachievement. Many places are using this in schools now. They're calling it "genius hour". They're calling it, you know, opportunities again for student projects. A lot of places are giving kids time on Fridays for being able to pursue their interest.

[00:32:13]
We call it enrichment and strength-based pedagogy, and it's what I want for every single child that is struggling in school. Some time to look at their strengths. Some time to think about about their creativity. Some time to do an art project, a music project, a science project, in an area that they like. Some time to feel good about who they are, to feel good about the kinds of things that they're doing in school. I believe if we added one strength base, one strength based opportunity for strength-based pedagogy, one to every IEP in America, that there would be tremendous differences in special education. There'd be many more students that were engaged and enjoying their education, and many more kids like the ones we studied, that are going on to college.

[00:33:10]
When we do interviews with high school counselors and high school teachers and special-ed teachers, very few of them know how to work with kids that have strengths. This is what we experienced with our own daughter. Everything was about what she couldn't do. There was very little about what she could do. If somebody had just said: "What do you like? What are your interests?", she would have said: "Well, I like debate. I like history. I

like studying castles. I like studying." There were many, many things she wanted to learn about, but everybody focused on the fact that she couldn't read–and you know what–she still struggles with reading.

[00:33:47]
But if we had at least one strength-based goal on every IEP or every 504 plan, this could change.

[00:33:57]
So in many ways, we needed–with our own daughter–to do the same thing. We initially focused on trying to get her to read, and you know what, we put her in every reading program. She got more and more depressed, more and more turned off to school. She was more discouraged. She was more unhappy, and then we started thinking to ourselves: "What could make her happy and what are some things that we can do for students that have special needs to make them like school more?"

[00:34:28]
Well, they can participate in at least one advanced class in an area of interest. We can substitute a test for a project. We can encourage participation in one interest-based extracurricular activity. We can find one teacher in the school that can serve as a mentor or a person that can support them. We can encourage that child to take a leadership role in something, and this is the the pedagogy model that we believe in. We want time to participate in healthy social and emotional support, and again, a lot of that might be robotics. It might be working with a team on History Day or Science Fair Day. These are the kinds of pedagogical experiences that we want.

[00:35:18]
And so, when we think about strength-based pedagogy and students that have been identified as having disabilities–you know, you think a little bit about people like Richard Branson, who was one of the most famous individuals with dyslexia, or Temple Grandin, excuse me, one of the most famous persons with autism in the world. They had somebody that helped them identify an area of interest, and these are not individuals that were in the top one to two percent of their classes. These are individuals that struggled in school.

[00:35:54]
I don't know how many of you know that Thomas Edison didn't speak until he was four, didn't really write or read until he was seven. Maya Angelou was a selective mute for a number of years due to a trauma in her life. Richard Branson couldn't read. Temple Grandin has autism. Steven Spielberg, classic underachiever in school.

[00:36:17]
And so, if you're a parent of a student that's struggling, you know, focus on strengths. Focus on strengths. Look at interests. Find support. Find a teacher. Find one extracurricular activity. Let home be a safe space.

[0036:36]
You know, I talk to parents who the minute kids come home–when they've been in an environment where they don't do well all day–the parents immediately want them to start their homework without a little time just to to be themselves and to feel safe. Finding teachers that understand these kids, not comparing kids with disabilities to other kids with disabilities, these are critically important areas. Again, understanding the isolation of of social issues, feeling alone, etc.

[00:37:14]
One of the things I want to tell you a little bit that we learned about these 40 interviews we did over a period of three to four years with very, very high potential young people with autism that had made it into competitive of colleges, is that they were not always sad about having time by themselves. Everybody worried, they said, about them eating alone, and many times for example, they said, "I needed to be alone for a while just to recharge my social battery. I needed to have time to think a little bit about what I needed to do. I didn't feel isolated. I didn't

feel different. I have a couple of friends. I don't feel lonely. I don't want other people to use their barometer to measure me. I'm who I am." I think in so many cases, this is such, such good advice.

[00:38:06]
So, in terms of enrichment, there are so many things that are in the model that we have developed–Joe Renzulli and I–that can help strength-based pedagogy in many schools that use the schoolwide enrichment model, the model–that strength-based model that we've developed–they have one day a week where every child goes to an enrichment cluster of their choice. It might be something on the environment. It might be puppetry. It might be poetry. It might be recycling. It might be crime scene detectives. Children create projects. They create portfolios. They do a service. They do something, but the focus on these things is what enrichment pedagogy is to us, and let me go over the focus.

[00:38:57]
Focus. The focus on these areas is that they should enjoy it. They should be engaged in the work that they're doing, and they should have some enthusiasm. So, my colleagues Susan Baum and I do a lot of teacher training.

[00:39:13]
The summer–we're running a summer program at the University of Connecticut–and we'll be talking a lot about this. We hope that more teachers will come this year to learn this pedagogy, but we talk about looking at profiles of strengths. We talk about having teachers shift their teaching practices from deficit to strength-based. You could have–our daughter could have been instructed in reading–by doing something that she loved, by focusing on an area that she loved. She could have had opportunities in her strengths as opposed to always focusing on her deficits, and when that happens, the talent development happens, and students start to think about what they like. School becomes so much better.

[00:40:01]
So, we advocate for developing student portfolios, for having students think about a talent portfolio. We advocate for sometime in school to develop non-academic areas, hobbies, extracurricular activities. We advocate for a safe haven, a place in school to do work that's in an area of interest, and more than anything, to focus on developing interests.

[00:40:31]
We have specific suggestions for high school. Understanding the planning that goes into college, understanding the kinds of classes one should take, and of course–based on the work that we've done–we have specific recommendations for college as well. Thinking about colleges that have different kinds of programs for students that are identified with disabilities but also majors that are based on students interests, that have flexibility in the kinds of assignments that students are given, and that have really, really strong disability services.

[00:41:08]
So, I'm going to stop there. How do we develop talents in young people? We develop talents in young people by giving them opportunities, resources, and encouragement, but always in students' areas of interest. If students don't have areas of interest, then we want to work to create these. This is probably the most important piece of advice that I can give any parent listening. Look at strengths, look at interest, develop interests. Take time to try to make school interesting. I have a five-year-old granddaughter. She doesn't like to read, I mean she doesn't–she's not really interested at all in learning how to read. I do worry sometimes about whether or not she has dyslexia like her mom does, but you know, what I focus on is finding books in areas that she loves, and so when it's an interest area she will sit with me and read a book. Her interest patterns are so clear to me at five years old.

[00:42:07]

We want some of the work that we are doing with these young people to be talent-focused, giving them opportunities to explore their talents, but also, once we start exploring them, we want some of the work we do to in school to be about Talent Development. We want teachers and parents to provide to be opportunity providers to look at how we develop talents in young people.

[00:42:34]
And with that, I'm going to stop sharing my screen and also just give everybody a chance to ask some questions if you have them. Thank you.

[00:42:45]
CHIH-CHING HU: Thank you so much, Dr. Reis, for the wonderful presentation. Now we open up to Q&A, so here's the first question: "My kid has a very high IQ, but is not interested in learning. Seems to only enjoy computer game, online chat forum, and does not like any extracurricular activity, very socially awkward. What should I do?"

[00:43:12]
DR. SALLY REIS: Well, first of all, you know if they're not interested in learning, I would say that if they're doing computer games, they're probably learning doing computer games. But if you're interested, really, in having that focus be a little bit more on academics, think about potentially asking who's the most enthusiastic teacher at the school. Is there a technology club that he could join, so that he can work with other kids that are Tech-able? Most schools now have groups of kids that are technology helpers to teacher. If he could be in a position where he's helping his teacher with technology, since it sounds like he is obviously good at it, that would help. I would think about a summer program that takes him away from computer games and gets him into something with technology that he can focus on. Maybe coding program. I would think about also a summer program with other bright kids. There are many, many, many great summer programs where he is, again, away from the gaming and more involved in something to use technology as a tool–which is, of course, what it is. I would also spend time asking the school who is the most enthusiastic outgoing teacher that would understand a child like mine and trying to get him one teacher with who he can have a connection. I think that's critical. Over and over again, what we find is students look back, it's one teacher, and you saw that, on, on the interview, we always asked what teacher had the biggest impact. Almost always, elementary, secondary teacher. They always remember the experience they have. So, you want to try to find one person that can start to have a kind of a nice relationship with your son, and encourage your son to go on and do more work and and get involved in a subject, so it doesn't take a lot. It takes the right person, though.

[00:45:08]
CHIH-CHING HU: Right, okay. The next question: "If a student struggling, struggles with a particular subject such as writing, should we let it go, or how do we shore up this difficulty with a strength-based pedagogy?"

[00:45:23]
DR. SALLY REIS: So if a student struggles with writing, I would let the strength-based content that they do not focus on writing. But, I will tell you that inevitably, almost every project will involve some type of writing. If they're writing in an area of interest, if they're studying something they love and it's in an area of interest, the writing will be easier. There's a lot of young people that don't like to write, and a lot of it has to do with the fact that they can't write as quickly as they can think. And so there's a disconnect between their thoughts and what they write.

[00:45:59]
So, another area is, of course, you making sure that that student has access to a keyboard. Being able to write by hand for a very bright student is extraordinarily challenging. It slows them down. It takes so much joy and pleasure away from it, but if they can learn to keyboard or if somebody can write for them, that can make an

enormous difference. Writing is a skill that they will pick up as time goes on, but if they're doing something in a strength area, I would focus less on writing initially, more on giving them time to be able to focus on the strength and have somebody to write with. Maybe they'll be in a team where somebody else likes to write, but the focus you want is what's going to make them enjoy learning, and enjoyment of learning is the key. Once you've enjoyed doing something, you're more likely to be able later on learn those skills.

[00:46:56]
CHIH-CHING HU: Okay, so next question: "How to balance the interest, and responsibility and the even discipline?"

[00:47:06]
DR. SALLY REIS: That's a very good question. We had a simple rule in our house. I was a strict parent, especially my husband and I–especially for the first maybe 10 years of our girls lives, and then I didn't have to be because they learned self-regulation. But we had a system of must-dos and can-dos. So must-dos, where they had to get their room picked up, they had to brush their teeth, they had to do a few household chores, they had to do their homework, they had to do their must-dos before they could do their can-dos, and this was a rule. Must-dos, can-dos. If must-dos were done and they were done well, then they got to do can-dos. I limited screen time to an hour a day, which is interesting because it's very, very difficult to do that, but I did do a limit to screen time when they were younger. That's very difficult to maintain even as an adult. I mean, so many adults are addicted to their telephones and addicted to their computers and addicted to Netflix today, but I think–to whatever extent that you can–more active learning opportunities–and again, enforce the must-do can-do rule (must-do, can-do. Get your must-do done and then you can earn time for your can-do).

[00:48:17]
I really strongly advocate, you know, less screen time–especially for younger kids. It's becoming very, very, very difficult to move kids away from their phones and their computers. So, you know, a limit–healthy understanding of what that is I think going to be critical for success. Academic success later on. That's probably a most important piece of advice I can give you.

[00:48:45]
CHIH-CHING HU: Okay, great. "How to work with a school and the learning specialist to implement this approach?"

[00:48:52]
DR. SALLY REIS: I might send them to our website. I feel so confident because of the research that we've done over a long time, but our website has many, many different articles. We talk a lot about a strength-based approach, just the things that I've discussed tonight. This is not just something that we're, you know, we're making up. When we ask successful students–again, that have some disabilities–what made a difference, they were very clear. These themes emerge from so many of these young people, so there is research on this. When we tried to identify the things that led to successful enrollment and completion in competitive colleges, it was science fairs. It was History Day. It was projects. It was lectures. It was teachers giving time to explore interests, so these are critical areas in order to be able to continue moving in the direction.

[00:49:53]
And so many of these things made a difference in reducing anxiety, reducing depression, reducing some of the challenges that students had. If you find something you enjoy, you're happier, so a less emphasis on getting all A's, and a little bit more emphasis on "what do you like" and "what academic opportunities can give you something that you like". Again, I think enrichment programs, summer programs that focus on strength interests are critically important. If you have the financial resources, sometimes there are scholarships to these things, but also asking teachers you know "What can we do at home? What are the kinds of things that will make a differ-

ence and making learning fun, too?" It should be fun, especially for younger kids. It should be fun. We should make this enjoyable, so making learning enjoyable, doing projects with them, you know, taking them to to do things in their areas of interest–these things have long lasting positive effects on kids.

[00:51:03]
CHIH-CHING HU: Okay, so next question: "Daughter turning 13 has a high functioning autism ADHD and anxiety. Enroll in a magnet middle school. Wants to do well and spend a lot of time on homework, but the parent would rather her relax and let her curiosity drive her. They found the only interest seems to be interested in food, however she wants to do well academically, so how do I guide her?"

[00:51:41]
DR. SALLY REIS: Well, if there's an interest in food, that's kind of a fun thing, I think. You could check to see if anybody might print reviews that your daughter writes of restaurants that you take her to, so if you go out to a restaurant she could review it for other teenagers. I think the fact she wants to do well at school and wants to be motivated to do her homework at home is a good thing, but I also think it's important that she have some enjoyment. So I think balance. I mean, balance and harmony are the things that are important in life, and if she can do her homework for a couple of hours and then maybe you watch a documentary with her about–or you watch Top Chef. You watch a few episodes of Top Chef if she's interested in food. You know, you can make that enjoyable, and you can make it fun–and again, there are projects she can do with food. She can help you cook dinner. She could make a dessert she likes. She could do a review of a restaurant. I mean, I think it's a blend. It's a combination. The fact she wants to do well in school should be applauded, but at the same time, I think you are very, very wise to encourage some enjoyment as well and and have it not all be work, because that's what stresses kids out eventually. When there's no time for downtime, no time for enjoyment, no time for relaxation. So I think you ask a really important and very, very special question. Thank you for that.

[00:53:12]
CHIH-CHING HU: Wonderful. Next question: "This is so helpful. Thank you for doing this webinar. I'm a secretary at high school. How do I promote this concept to our admin and teachers, and perhaps those at the district level?"

[00:53:27]
DR. SALLY REIS: So the the work that we've done in enrichment is called the Schoolwide Enrichment Model. It's a model for providing enrichment for all students, talent development for all students. If you look up "Sally Reis Schoolwide Enrichment Model", you'll come to our website at the University of Connecticut. I believe in strength-based enrichment pedagogy for all kids as you've heard, and the research shows how helpful it is for students with disabilities. You've got to have some kind of a champion in a school, though. There has to be a teacher that wants to do it there. Oftentimes in high schools, there has to be an administrator or there has to be a parent. Sometimes parents are the most powerful motivators of enrichment, so I would suggest, you know, trying to get an administrator interested in this. Maybe be very concrete and talk about starting a series of enrichment opportunities. Maybe a summer enrichment program that the high school offers–two or three opportunities for students in the summers. Think about this: instead of summer school, if you do science fairs and you focus on math and reading and science, that's–for some kids–that could be the whole beginning of a whole new world with enrichment. So that would be my advice. Try to find some champion in the school that will start this work. Try to be very specific about things that you're asking for. Some strength-based pedagogy. You could also start with the special-ed students. If you're close to somebody who's a special-ed teacher, one strength-based IEP goal can make a tremendous difference in the lives of a student. So those are just a few suggestions. Thank you for the question.

[00:55:13]
CHIH-CHING HU: Wonderful, thank you. So next question: "How to balance connection versus discipline with

teenagers. Seems that their interest may go wild."

[00:55:24]
DR. SALLY REIS: You know, I think that again, if the work that you do when they're younger is is good, there's already a connection. I think the must-dos and can-dos go all the way through the teenage years. Most parents want their kids to enjoy high school. Most parents want their kids to to do well. I think a lot of students that are high achieving, very talented students, put tremendous pressure on themselves, and one thing is real– that's really important–is to let your child know their love for who they are as opposed to the grades they get, as opposed to the scores they bring home. You know, that their love for who they are and not compare them to other children, so I think a focus of trying to do something fun with your teenager. I know– I know it's hard–I know how difficult these years are. I had a extremely difficult teenage years with our oldest daughter, but I always tried to do something fun. Take her to the movies. Go to a museum. I think even if it was just something that we did that she wanted to do, go and look at horses, you know. Go out for a ride. Doing something to continue the connection–you'll have much less of a problem with discipline if you can keep that connection and making sure that they know most importantly, that they're loved and supported. Understanding that the pressure that so many of these young people have now is just unbearable, and if the pressure continues at home, there's no, there's very few safe spots. So you want home to be a refuge and also a place that they enjoy, but also where they realize they've got to spend some time doing their job, so it's that balance that I think you have to achieve right.

[00:57:18]
CHIH-CHING HU: So, next question: "How to sustain the interest for the two-E children who may find it hard to put in a sustained efforts?"

[00:57:27]
DR. SALLY REIS: Yeah, I think interests are–it's often times the capacity to have an interest that's sustained. A lot of times, students will have a curiosity, and their curiosity is answered fairly quickly by doing some research on. So they can be interested in dinosaurs, you know, as young kids, and then you know–you read 10 books about dinosaurs, and you've satisfied your curiosity, but you're no longer really interested in that. I think there's a difference between kind of initial interest and long-term interests. A lot of times, what you want is the capacity to have an interest. I love kids that are interested in lots of different things. It's a point of which that you want to try to get them to focus on something, so at some point, the interest in many things has to come down to choosing something that you're going to pursue, and that's when you start to develop task commitment. That's when you start to develop motivation, and oftentimes, it's when kids get to choose the kind of product that they want to do. It's not just having an interest, but I don't want to write a paper. I don't want to write a 20-page paper, you know, I want to write a short column, or I want to build something, or I want to do a webinar, or I want to create a mobile, or I want to do a podcast. So understanding that we can't put our own beliefs about what's important into the types of outcomes that come from interest. Lots of interest will be transitory. They'll be over quickly, but the long-term passionate interest comes when kids really want to do something with it, and I think doing something with it is something that parents can support and teachers can support, but let the kids pick their products. Don't have it be something you choose, so product selection by students, I think, is very, very important.

[00:59:30]
CHIH-CHING HU: Alright. Dr. Reis, I think it's about time, but I'd like to end this session with one comment from the audience. The audience said, "I don't necessarily have a question, but someone who has a couple of learning disabilities would like to thank you for sharing your story and this presentation. This person was misdiagnosed for many years because of a high–has a high grades but something similar to your daughter.

[01:00:02]

DR. SALLY REIS: Right.

[01:00:02]
CHIH-CHING HU: –was not able to memorize very quickly but struggle with exam, etc, but had to cope by themselves, and it's very difficult–very difficult–and because this person's family was not always there to support. Yeah, not always there to be available.

[01:00:32]
DR. SALLY REIS: Lots of twice exceptional students are never identified, because again, their abilities mask their disabilities, and their disabilities mask their abilities, so it's a masking issue. Many, many young people are never identified as having a disability, so thank you for that comment.

[01:00:51]
CHIH-CHING HU: Yeah, thank you so much.

[01:00:53]
DR. SALLY REIS: Thank you. Thank you for being–thank you for inviting me and best wishes.

[01:00:57]
CHIH-CHING HU: Yeah, thank you for sharing the knowledge with us today, Dr. Reis.

[01:01:02]
DR. SALLY REIS: Thank you.

[01:01:03]
CHIH-CHING HU: And thank you to everyone for joining our webinar today. We hope to see you soon again in the next webinar, and this webinar is being recorded, and we will leave this recordings on our website Alanhu-foundation.org, and you may also check out Alan Hu Foundation YouTube channel in about one to two weeks, and please subscribe to Alan Hu Foundation YouTube channel. Please take a few moment to fill out a short survey. Your input is critical for us to improve the program. I will leave the donation QR code for a few more minutes, and thank you for donating to support our programs. With that, I'm closing the webinar. Thank you, Dr. Reis.

[01:01:51]
DR. SALLY REIS: Thank you, my pleasure. Thanks so much.

[01:01:54]
CHIH-CHING HU: Thanks, everyone, and take care. Goodbye.