



## **School Connect 2004-2005 Pilot Study**

### **Abstract**

*School-Connect: Optimizing the High School Experience*, a classroom-based social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum, was piloted with 175 high school students (predominately ninth graders) as part of the program development process. The curriculum was implemented in varying dosages in English, health, and life skills classes that met daily and in advisory classes that met once or twice a week. Feedback from teachers, backed by classroom observations, indicated that the curriculum was positively received in classes that met daily and assigned homework and letter grades. In these classes, students were generally interested and engaged in lesson activities and discussions and reported using program skills in real life, and teachers reported positive changes in students' effort on academic assignments and involvement in class discussions. Program implementation in advisory classes was often interrupted by school-wide events, creating one to two week gaps between lessons, and did not include the assignment of homework or letter grades. Teachers in these classes had a more equivocal response to the lessons, strongly liking some and others less so. As a result of the pilot, the authors revised the curriculum by: reducing the number of lessons and reordering the lessons into four modules, creating guidelines for effective program implementation and links to academic content, and adding more active learning exercises and opportunities for students to share real life experiences.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this formative study was to pilot-test 40 classroom-based lessons from *School-Connect: Optimizing the High School Experience* (S-C), a curriculum designed to promote social and emotional learning and academic engagement, primarily in grade nine students upon entry to high school. Specifically, the study aimed to identify the following:

- Whether teachers found S-C lessons to be effective in engaging students and developing critical social and emotional concepts and skills
- Whether students found S-C lessons to be interesting, understandable, and applicable to real life
- Necessary improvements to the program prior to publication

- Best models for program implementation, including types of courses, background of teachers, and frequency of lessons
- Types of training and implementation support teachers need in order to feel competent in presenting S-C lessons

### **Description of the Pilot Curriculum**

The pilot edition of S-C was arranged into the following modules:

- Module 1: Social Awareness
- Module 2: Self-Awareness
- Module 3: Self-Management
- Module 4: Relationship Skills
- Module 5: Responsible Decision Making

These modules were organized around the core social and emotional competencies identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Each module contained 8-9 lessons and an optional culminating project. The pilot edition also included three Getting Started lessons designed to introduce the program, help students get acquainted with one another, and establish shared group norms for student behavior during the course.

### **Pilot Participants and Classrooms**

Pilot participants were 175 students and 14 teachers in three public high schools in the greater Washington, DC, metropolitan area. All but two of the students were in ninth grade. Eleven of the 14 pilot teachers were first or second year teachers.

The S-C program was implemented in a variety of settings:

- Two ninth grade English classes for below- and at-level students (48) that met in a daily 90-minute block and a health class for hearing impaired students (6) that met daily in a large, economically and racially diverse (approximately 75% minority), suburban high school
- Ten advisory classes for freshmen students (110) that met one to two times a week in an inner city charter school with an African American student body (approximately 100%)
- Two life skills classes for special education students with emotional or behavior disorders (11) that met daily in a suburban school for troubled teens

Teachers implemented the lessons at their own pace, with the exception of the advisory teachers, who taught lessons according to a schedule devised by the head teacher.

## Procedure

Pilot teachers received a one-day, six-hour training in program concepts and strategies prior to implementing the S-C curriculum over one semester. During the semester, S-C staff made two or more classroom observations of each teacher presenting S-C lessons and met with them afterwards to exchange feedback and provide implementation support. Teachers completed a one-page evaluation form for each lesson they presented and, at the end of the semester, completed a four-page questionnaire on their overall experience teaching the program. The lead author also conducted a one-hour exit interview with individual teachers at the end of the semester. In classrooms in which teachers were able to complete at least three of the four curriculum modules, students completed a questionnaire and participated in a group discussion with the lead author.

## Results

Lesson completion rates varied by implementation model. Teachers who implemented lessons on a daily basis as part of an English, health, or life skills course finished 30-40 lessons, while advisory teachers, who implemented only once or twice a week, completed 15 lessons on average. Two teachers also taught Module 4 lessons, and none had time to teach lessons from Module 5. The special education teacher supplemented S-C lessons with individual activities as her students had difficulty managing themselves in small group activities.

The feedback also varied by implementation model. Based on ratings and testimony from teacher questionnaires and in-person interviews, teachers who implemented S-C as part of a daily core class and assigned homework and grades had a very positive response to the lessons. Somewhat in contrast, teachers who implemented the curriculum during an advisory period that met once or twice a week and did not assign the homework or letter grades had an equivocal response, responding positively to some lessons and less so to others. These general responses also held true for the students in the respective models.

Following are teachers' averaged ratings (using a five-point Likert scale) for different aspects of the curriculum. Teachers found the To the Teacher section of the lessons, to be *helpful* (3.6) in preparing to present the lessons. Core class teachers spent on average 20-30 minutes preparing to teach a lesson and found the Lesson Script *very easy to use* (5.0), while advisory teachers spent on average 5-10 minutes in lesson preparation and found the script *easy to use* (4.4). One teacher's comment echoed a common refrain of the teachers: "Because I don't always have a lot of time to prepare in advance the script is very useful. Even when I get a chance to prepare there are times when I get stuck and don't know what to say and the script helps."

Core class teachers reported S-C provided *excellent coverage* (5.0) of issues and skills important to students, while advisory teachers reported it provided *good coverage* (3.8). The English teacher and the health teacher felt that their students were *very involved and interested* (4.5) in the lessons and that the lessons integrated well with their content curriculum. For example, the English teacher reported that students' response to *Romeo*

*and Juliet* was far greater than in previous years due to integration with S-C lessons, noting that students “flew through the play” and were much more involved and insightful in classroom discussions. The health teacher and her classroom aide spoke of positive changes in student behavior over the semester, citing times students used the skills in class or reported use outside of class.

The advisory teachers and the special education teacher felt student involvement and interest depended on the lesson. Most noted that their students seemed more engaged in lessons involving activities and opportunities to discuss personal experiences than in lessons that emphasized discussion about a new concept or theory.

These ratings mirrored teachers’ ratings for *overall quality* of the pilot curriculum: English and health teachers—*excellent* (5.0), special education teacher—*good* (4.0), and advisory teachers (3.4)—*somewhat good*. Lesson observations confirmed teacher ratings and reports. Classroom activities and discussions were more lively and engaging and proceeded more smoothly in core classes than in advisory classes.

Students (55) who received the majority of the lessons completed a questionnaire about their experience and participated in a class-wide discussion with the lead author. On average, students reported that they enjoyed the lessons (4.0); found the lessons interesting (3.6), easy to understand (4.2), and helpful to them (4.0). Lessons that were clear standouts for students included ones on understanding and managing feelings, labeling and stereotyping, recognizing automatic thoughts and thinking patterns, recognizing the effects of media, and setting and achieving goals. Students expressed a clear interest in receiving further instruction in social and emotional learning in other high school courses, and several volunteered that they now considered psychology a potential career path.

## **Discussion**

The goals of any curriculum pilot are to find out what the program looks like in action, how it is received by end-users, and the conditions under which it works best. This information should enable the program developers to make any necessary revisions to the program and to formulate the best recommendations for program implementation and support. While the S-C authors caution the reader in drawing hard conclusions due to the small size of this study, the feedback and observations offer valuable information and insight into these questions.

The best way to implement *School-Connect* is in a daily course that assigns homework and a letter grade for the course. Teachers and students in these conditions viewed the curriculum very positively. The setting could be a freshmen transition course or a health, social skills, or English course. Meeting daily provides continuity, allowing teachers to link together lessons more effectively, follow up on homework assignments, and relate concepts and skills to students’ lives. This implementation model not only increases student engagement, it also encourages teachers to view social and emotional learning as an important aspect of their teaching goals and responsibilities. Block classes that

typically meet every other school day may also be effective if they assign homework and a letter grade.

If using an advisory model, teachers should assign homework and grades and proceed at their own pace, rather than keep in lockstep with other advisory teachers. Homework is important in a program like *School-Connect* because it provides students with opportunities to try out new skills with friends and family members and to reflect on these experiences. Assigning grades indicates that the knowledge and skills taught in class are important to student success. In proceeding at their own pace, teachers and students have the freedom to explore issues that are of greatest interest to them. What peaks student interest will vary from class to class.

School administrators, teachers, and students also need to view advisory as a substantive course if they are to implement any kind of structured program within it. Pilot teachers reported that they and their students thought advisory sessions were for airing student concerns and experiences, not for learning new concepts and skills. In addition, school administrators treated advisory as more expendable than core classes. Often during the course of the semester, the pilot school advisories were suspended for assemblies, impromptu school-wide meetings, shortened days, and other activities. At times, cancellations created gaps of 7-12 days between S-C lessons. Treating advisory as a priority might greatly improve program outcomes.

*School-Connect* shows promise in special education classes for emotionally and behaviorally disordered youth. The special education pilot teacher generally gave positive ratings to the program and plans to use the program again. She also reported that she did not always use the lessons as written and sometimes supplemented them with more individual activities when her students had difficulty reading the assignment or working in small groups. Based on her feedback and on conversations with other special education teachers, behaviorally disordered students need more activities that utilize active learning techniques than mainstream students.

There was indication that teacher skill, especially in facilitating discussions and managing student behavior, affects teacher and student response to the program. If teachers are new to the profession or lack experience in teaching social and emotional concepts and strategies to high school students, then having them mentored by a more experienced colleague and/or giving them opportunities to observe each other and discuss their experiences would be helpful. On the request of several advisory teachers, S-C staff modeled lessons in their classrooms; this type of mentoring was generally well received by teachers and students. A lead teacher, school counselor, or program coordinator could play this support role in schools with broad implementation of the program, especially where teachers from different academic disciplines teach the lessons.

### **Changes to the School-Connect Program**

Based on written and oral feedback from teachers and students and on classroom observations, the authors made the following changes to the S-C pilot edition:

- Reduced the number of lessons and reordered them into four modules:  
 Module 1: Creating a Supportive Learning Community  
 Module 2: Developing Self-Awareness and Self-Management  
 Module 3: Building Academic Strengths  
 Module 4: Resolving Conflicts and Making Decisions
- Integrated the Getting Started lessons into Module 1
- Added more activities involving movement for a change of pace and to address better the needs of bodily-kinesthetic learners
- Included more opportunities for students to discuss real life examples and experiences related to the lesson topic
- Simplified the presentation of several concepts and theories to make them easier to understand
- Added Literature Links and Writing Windows to every lesson in order to encourage academic integration with English literature and writing
- Added expanded guidelines and techniques for facilitating student discussion

### **Future Research**

Because this was a formative study designed to gather feedback on *School-Connect* lessons and inform the revision process, an outcome study that measures program effects on student attitudes, behavior, and academic performance is needed. Such a study should also measure the effects of *School-Connect* in varied settings, especially freshmen seminar\* and with student populations at different levels of risk.

### **Contact Information**

If you would like more information on *School-Connect: Optimizing the High School Experience*, please call us at (800) 597-6209 or (301) 493-2597, or visit us at [www.school-connect.net](http://www.school-connect.net)

\*Freshman seminar is a ninth grade course recommended by the U.S. Department of Education and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as part of the Smaller Learning Communities initiative for high schools.

