

The Opinion Pages

FIXES

Teaching Social Skills to Improve Grades and Lives

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Fixes looks at solutions to social problems and why they work.

In the early 1990s, about 50 kindergarten teachers were asked to rate the social and communication skills of 753 children in their classrooms. It was part of the Fast Track Project, an intervention and study administered in Durham, N.C., Nashville, Seattle and central Pennsylvania. The goals were to understand how children develop healthy social skills, and help them do so.

Using an assessment tool called the “Social Competence Scale,” the teachers were asked to assign each child a score based on qualities that included “cooperates with peers without prompting”; “is helpful to others”; “is very good at understanding feelings”; and “resolves problems on own.”

This month, researchers from Pennsylvania State University and Duke published a study that looked at what had happened to those students in the 13 to 19 years since they left kindergarten. Their findings warrant major attention because the teachers’ rankings were extremely prescient.

They predicted the likelihood of many outcomes: whether the children would graduate from high school on time, get college degrees, have stable or full-time employment as young adults; whether they would live in public housing or receive public assistance; whether they would be held in juvenile detention or be arrested as adults. The kindergarten teachers’ scores also correlated with the number of arrests a young adult would have for severe offenses by age 25.

The researchers had statistically controlled for the effects of poverty, race, having teenage parents, family stress and neighborhood crime, and for the children's aggression and reading levels in kindergarten.

One major result: Children who scored high on social skills were four times as likely to graduate from college than those who scored low.

These findings add to a growing body of evidence — including long-term studies drawn from data in New Zealand and Britain — that have profound implications for educators. These studies suggest that if we want many more children to lead fulfilling and productive lives, it's not enough for schools to focus exclusively on academics. Indeed, one of the most powerful and cost-effective interventions is to help children develop core social and emotional strengths like self-management, self-awareness and social awareness — strengths that are necessary for students to fully benefit from their education, and succeed in many other areas of life.

“These early abilities, especially the ability to get along with others, are the abilities that make other kids like you, and make teachers like kids,” said Mark T. Greenberg, a professor of Human Development and Psychology at Penn State and a co-author of the study. “And when kids feel liked, they're more likely to settle down and pay attention, and keep out of the principal's office, and reap the benefits of being in a classroom. And this builds over time; it's like a cascade. They become more bonded with peers and healthy adults and they become more bonded to school as an institution, and all those skills lead them, independent of their I.Q., to be less at risk for problems.”

This isn't a new insight. In a national survey, more than 90 percent of schoolteachers said it was important for schools to promote the development of students' social and emotional skills (sometimes called 21st century skills, noncognitive skills, or character education). But many struggle to integrate this kind of teaching in their classrooms.

One organization that is working to help them do so is the Chicago-based Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, also known as Casel, which has been working for three to four years to help school districts embed social and emotional learning throughout their systems in Anchorage; Austin, Tex.;

Chicago; Cleveland; Nashville; Oakland, Calif.; Sacramento; Washoe County, Nev.; and recently Atlanta.

“The goal is to take the learnings from these districts and share them with 15,000 other districts,” said Roger P. Weissberg, a professor of psychology and education who is Casel’s chief knowledge officer. “Each district has their model of scaling up the work,” he added. “The challenge is how to take evidence-based programs and integrate them with other priorities so it’s not an add-on, but a way to strengthen things they’re already doing.”

Evidence indicates that effective programs do just that. Casel has been tracking this work for years. In 2011, Weissberg co-authored a meta-analysis of studies of 213 school-based social and emotional learning programs, which in total reached 270,000 students. The review found that the programs produced significant gains in students’ social skills, attitudes, behavior and academics.

This year, researchers from Teachers College at Columbia University did some number crunching to estimate the economic value of six different social and emotional learning programs that had strong track records. They looked at the programs’ impact on things like future wages and social costs (pdf), and found that the programs yielded an average return of \$11 for each dollar invested.

The United States remains far behind other nations in ensuring that young children get the early support they need to thrive — whether it is through paid parental leave or investing in preschool programs. And one of the most troubling aspects of high-stakes testing in education is that it has led many schools to focus on reading and math instruction and test preparation at the expense of other educational goals.

Nevertheless, awareness of the need for early support is beginning to sink in across the United States. One major effort in this area is the California Office to Reform Education Districts initiative, or Core Districts initiative, a collaboration to improve school quality among 10 school districts that include Fresno, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento and San Francisco. These locales are currently field testing alternative methods to evaluate school success — measures that now take into account students’ social and emotional skills. (The districts have received a waiver from standard federal assessment guidelines to do so.)

“We’re putting a flashlight on the social and emotional skills to help schools think about the role they play,” said Noah Bookman, chief accountability officer for the Core Districts initiative. “We think school quality is not only about academic success but also about developing the whole child. And it’s essential to give states and districts more flexibility about what to measure.”

Consider Cleveland’s experience. Eric Gordon, chief executive of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, recalled a tragedy in 2007 that became a wake-up call: a student with a history of emotional difficulties returned to his school after a suspension and shot two students and two teachers before killing himself. “We still talk about that today because we made a commitment that if we never stopped talking about it we would always be working to ensure that no child felt that desperate again,” Gordon said. “That was the catalytic moment for our now seven-year investment in social and emotional learning strategies in Cleveland.”

The district began by collaborating with the teachers union and then introducing instruction in 2008 in kindergarten through second grade, using a program called **Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies**. Later it expanded to higher grades. Through the program, children learn how to recognize, communicate and manage their emotions, read others’ emotions, solve problems and change patterns of negative thinking. School suspension rooms have been replaced with “planning centers,” where students work through problems or practice how to better handle conflicts. Schools have staff teams to lead social and emotional learning efforts and work with families.

Three times a year, the district administers an online survey to gauge progress among its 39,000 students, asking them about safety, school support, peer relationships and social skills. “We have years of data,” Gordon said. “Our current ninth graders have a 30 percent higher rating in their social and emotional skills than the 10th- to 12th-grade students,” who missed the programs. “Our senior leadership team spends time looking at this data just like they do with the reading and math and graduation data. That’s what makes it a priority.”

“Every year,” he adds, “we bring together a group called the who’s who of graduating seniors — 300 to 400 kids,” who then identify problems in the schools. “Three years ago,” he said, “the No. 1 problem was safety in school. Two years ago

it dropped to No. 2. And last year, it dropped to No. 3.”

Initially, the Collaborating Districts Initiative encompassed eight districts. A ninth was recently added after Meria Carstarphen, a former head of Austin’s public schools, took over as Atlanta’s school superintendent and lobbied Casel to include the Georgia city. In Austin, Carstarphen had led the integration of social and emotional learning into the school system, and saw improvements in discipline, attendance and graduation rates. “Having worked in large urban, challenging school systems, I’m convinced that if we don’t do this in schools, it’s likely that many kids won’t get these skills at home,” Carstarphen said.

Atlanta is recovering from a major cheating scandal, and the cultural challenges are significant. “We have to be very deliberate about teaching these skill sets to the adults so that they can master them and be able to manage their behaviors and their interactions with each other — so they can teach it to the children,” Carstarphen said. “We need the heart and the smarts to teach the kids to be better adults than we ever were.”

To date, researchers who are evaluating the collaborative have found that participating districts are implementing programs with fidelity and seeing improvements in attendance, discipline and, in some cases, academic performance. But successful implementations take years. “It’s difficult to implement this districtwide all at once,” said Melissa Schlinger, Casel’s vice president for programs and practice. “Austin rolled it out in a staggered fashion. You don’t want it to be a fad — in and out quickly.”

There is a looming question. What happens when the students, armed with social and reflective skills, leave the school and re-enter the real world — a place with implacable peers or police officers, who may not be interested in talking through problems? That happened to a group of high school students from New York City who were studying restorative justice. They had an unfortunate encounter with an undercover police officer on the subway, in which a bump and an exchange of words quickly escalated into the arrest of two students — an incident examined in an episode of the weekly public radio program “This American Life” (start listening at the 44 minute mark).

“Social and emotional learning has always been a critical foundation of

education,” observes Ed Graff, the superintendent of the Anchorage School District. “People are now at a point where they’re beginning to see the true value and benefits of it. It’s not something that’s a trend. It’s the fabric of what we do in education. Our next step is to take it beyond education out into our communities and throughout the state. That’s really where the need is.”

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David Bornstein is the author of “How to Change the World,” which has been published in 20 languages, and “The Price of a Dream: The Story of the Grameen Bank,” and is co-author of “Social Entrepreneurship: What Everyone Needs to Know.” He is a co-founder of the Solutions Journalism Network, which supports rigorous reporting about responses to social problems.