



Social-Emotional and Character Development to Improve Student Behaviour and Academic Achievement: Results from Two School-Based Randomized Trials

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Social-Emotional Learning and Character Development (SECD) [1] and related approaches [2] have been proposed to improve both student behavior and academic achievement; and a recent meta-analysis suggest their effectiveness [3]. Positive Action is a comprehensive SECD program that involves teacher/staff training, school-wide climate change, daily classroom curricula for every grade, and parent involvement [4]. The program's central philosophy is that positive thoughts lead to positive behaviors/actions that, in turn, lead to positive feelings about self, that can then recycle to further positive thoughts and behaviors. The teacher/staff training and the first of six units of the curricula teach adults and students how to recognize feelings and thoughts associated with their behaviors, and how to change negative thoughts and cycles of thoughts-actions-feelings into positive thoughts and cycles. The other five units cover physical and intellectual health, self-management, understanding and getting along with others, honesty, and continuous self-improvement.

We will present results from two school-based randomized trials in rural/mixed schools in Hawai'i and inner-city schools in Chicago. For each trial, higher-risk and lower-performing schools were selected and randomly assigned to conditions from strata/pairs matched on multiple indicators of demographics and achievement. The reported data consist of student self-reports and teacher ratings of multiple student behaviors and SECD skills, and school-level data on absenteeism, disciplinary referrals and academic achievement. By the end of grade 5 (after 3 or 4 years of the program) and grade 8 (Chicago only) after 6 years of the program, fewer students in program schools reported substance use (approximately 30% less for tobacco or alcohol and 50% for marijuana), violence (40%), sexual behavior (83%, Hawai'i only) than students in control schools [5, 6]. Program students also reported improvements in SECD-related behaviors/skills (23%) [7, 8], self-esteem (25%) [9] and positive health behaviors (food, exercise and hygiene – 15%). School-level data indicated that students in program schools had 43% lower rates of absenteeism, 50% fewer disciplinary referrals and 15% better standardized test scores [10, 11]. Hawai'i schools also collected their own data on school safety and quality – and these improved more in program schools than control schools (17%) [12]. All effect sizes were in the moderate to large range. Preliminary mediation analyses suggest that improvements in SECD skills mediated the effects of the program on negative behaviors [7, 13]. Additional results will be available for the conference presentation concerning other positive and negative attitudes and behaviors, together with further mediation analyses.

These findings demonstrate that a comprehensive approach to social-emotional and character development – that involves teacher training, curricula for every grade, school-wide climate change activities, parent involvement, and positive reinforcement – can increase positive behaviors, reduce negative behaviors, and improve school performance (attendance and academic achievement). Improved student behavior and motivation to learn allows teachers more time to focus on teaching and students more time to focus on learning, thus leading to improved school performance despite time being taken away from traditional instruction. These results suggest that schools, districts and governments should consider policies and funding to support social and character education.