Promoting Student Social, Emotional, and Academic Support Through Teacher Training

Executive Summary

America's schools have been faced with many challenges that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] These challenges include teacher shortages,[2,3] student learning losses,[4,5,6] increased student classroom behavior issues and mental health struggles.[7,8] Equipping schools and teachers with solutions to address these challenges is critically important for the success of America's students.

This research brief provides results from a project conducted to evaluate a classroom management training program for teachers, *Well-Managed Schools*® (WMS).[9] Targeted outcomes included teacher use of praise, teacher-student relationships, and teacher self-efficacy[10,11] A secondary study, conducted focus groups and surveys to identify techniques that teachers were using to address classroom challenges since COVID-19, and views on school climate and social and emotional learning (SEL).[12]

WMS was effective at increasing teacher use of praise,[10] student-teacher relationships and teacher self-efficacy.[11] In the secondary study, teachers reported lack of time/support and poor student social skills were significant challenges, and relationship building and SEL techniques were techniques to address these challenges.[12] Implications for professional development for teachers, research, and policy are discussed.

Effectiveness of Well-Managed Schools®

- The primary focus of the project was a randomized controlled trial to evaluate the effectiveness of WMS. The study included 415, 1st – 5th grade teachers, in 49 schools in the United States. WMS uses preventative strategies that include teaching and reinforcing social skills within the classroom to help reduce discipline problems and increase prosocial behavior.
- WMS teachers, compared to teachers in the control group, significantly increased their use of praise and had a higher praise-to-correction ratios from pretest to posttest[10], replicating findings from a previous study.[13] Increased use of praise and positive attention by teachers are associated with increased student engagement, [14,15] and reductions in problematic student behavior.[16,17,18,19]
- Higher quality of student-teacher relationships were also observed in WMS teachers at posttest.[11] This effect is important because teacher relationships with students is a primary reason why teachers say they stay in the teaching profession.[20]
- Effects in teacher praise and student-teacher relationship were not as strong at follow-up, thus booster training sessions were recommended to help sustain effects.[10,11]
- Teacher self-efficacy ratings were similar between groups at posttest, but significantly higher at 1-year follow-up in WMS trained teachers.[11]

Educator Perspectives on Safe and Effective Classrooms for Students

For the secondary study, online focus groups were conducted with 3rd – 8th grade teachers from metropolitan and nonmetropolitan schools around the United States to identify techniques they were using to address classroom challenges during and after COVID-19. Ten online focus groups were conducted with 50 teachers, with 4-7 teachers in each group. Survey data, collected from 109 teachers, were used to compare views on SEL and school climate.[12]

Challenges. In the online focus groups, teachers shared challenges they were facing in the classroom since COVID-19. Teachers wrote the challenges on an electronic whiteboard and assigned votes to their top challenges. Thematic analysis identified the two highest ranked challenges were lack of time/support and poor student social skills.

- Teachers shared they were under strain to do more with less resources and support. For example, they had less time to catch students up academically and engage with students to address their individual needs. They were also seeing less involvement from parents than before the pandemic.
- Teachers reported their students were lacking age-appropriate social skills, engaged in more disruptive behavior, and were having more difficulty resolving conflicts. These challenges were similar to another study that reported the greatest sources of job-related stressors for teachers were lack of support and instructional time, along with managing student behavior.[20]

Techniques: For the second part of the online focus groups, teachers shared strategies they were using to address classroom challenges.

- Teachers ranked building relationships and SEL strategies as the most important techniques to address the increase in emotional and behavioral needs of students.[11]
- The ability to have a positive impact and relationships with students are reasons teachers stay in the profession.[20]
- Teaching social and emotional skills to students are vital to healthy child development.[21] Teachers who possess the skills to teach social and emotional skills can positively shape student academic outcomes,[21,22] as well as create positive and effective classroom environments.[22]
- Social and emotional skills teaching is most effective when the skills are targeted as protective factors against behavioral and emotional problems.[24,25] There is considerable research on the effectiveness of SEL with benefits that include improvements in student school functioning and academic performance, relationships, school climate and safety, and lower emotional distress and behavior problems.[26,27]
- Teachers discussed ways they were integrating SEL techniques into their academic lessons and classroom environments to maximize time, as suggested in other studies.[22]
- Teachers were having to find their own resources and materials to address the social and emotional needs of their students. This highlighted a greater need for consistency since SEL curriculums are more effective when implemented schoolwide with fidelity.[23,24,28.]

Teacher Survey Responses on SEL and School Climate

- Teachers agreed on the importance of SEL, but teachers also shared obstacles they were facing implementing SEL. Factors that prevent access to SEL include lack of time and resources,[12,28] political disagreements and parental concerns about what should and should not be taught in SEL curriculums,[29] and administrator and district support for consistent implementation of SEL.[28] In a 2017 study, only 35% of principals reported they had SEL plans for teaching SEL schoolwide, but they were more likely if the school district leadership placed an emphasis on SEL.[28]
- Ratings related to principal involvement in encouraging SEL culture in schools were higher in elementary teachers than middle school teachers.[12]
- Elementary teachers rated school climate higher than middle school teachers,[12] similar to another study conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.[30]
- Findings suggest there is a need for more training on effectiveness and application of SEL within the context of developmental differences between elementary and middle school students and climates. For example, the focus of SEL should shift from adult to peer relationships as students get older.[31] The results support prior recommendations to create state and district infrastructure for SEL to advance child development.[32]

Implications for Practice, Research, and Policy

- Overall, teachers viewed SEL favorably, but more resources and training are needed to implement support for students schoolwide. Increased resources for training are needed to support teachers so they can help students catch up academically, socially, and emotionally.
- Professional development for teachers should provide techniques to help integrate social skills teaching and other SEL techniques into their academic lessons and classroom routines. For example, a resource was developed called *Teaching Strategies for Supporting the Academic, Behavioral, and Emotional Needs of Students* based on ideas shared by the teachers of this project.[33]
- SEL curriculums should have demonstrated effectiveness, be implemented with fidelity, and focus on social and emotional skills that serve as protective factors against behavioral and emotional problems according to the developmental stages of students.
- Future research should evaluate if refresher trainings for teachers (e.g., online digital trainings) improve the magnitude and sustainability of outcomes such as teacher use of praise, student-teacher relationships, and teacher self-efficacy.

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