



# **SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE: TAPPING INTO THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS AND MENTORING**

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# INTRODUCTION

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Social and emotional skills go by many names — twenty-first-century skills, soft skills, non-cognitive skills, and character — just to list a few. Regardless of what we call these skills, or whether we engage with youth in classrooms, on the basketball court or on the school bus, research and best practices suggest that students' relationships with peers and caring adults are a key vehicle for learning critical life skills, such as teamwork, communication, and coping with and expressing feelings.<sup>1</sup> However, many social and emotional learning programs and initiatives focus more on instruction and curricula than they do on relationships and mentoring. Research tells us that an integrated, intentional approach to social and emotional learning is best,<sup>2</sup> but without specific information about the relationship-based strategies that best support students' development, our social and emotional learning initiatives may continue to miss critical opportunities for connection and growth. This guide shares specific information about the relationship-based strategies, including mentoring, that show promise for cultivating social and emotional learning for young adolescents, both in school and in out-of-school time settings.

What are relationship-based

approaches? They are practices that engage youth in caring relationships in order to provide opportunities for support, growth, and development. They include one-to-one mentoring programs that cultivate individual relationships between students and adult volunteers, and advisory groups that connect students with peers and a teacher or adviser to process experiences and practice new skills. They also include group and peer mentoring programs that connect youth with other students and caring adults, and can range from structured programs to more informal opportunities for youth and adults to connect. And they can take place during the school day, or in an after-school or community-based program.

This guide focuses specifically on relationship-based strategies for young adolescents in the middle grades. Young adolescence is a time of tremendous social and emotional growth,<sup>3</sup> yet research and interventions specific to this unique developmental stage are sparse compared to those focusing on the elementary grades.<sup>4</sup> In the words of Principal Michael Redmon of Thurston Middle School in Westwood, Massachusetts, “A lot of [social and emotional learning] work doesn't focus on this age group, and this can be the most challenging three years of a

child's life.” Identifying specific relationship-based strategies that promote social and emotional learning for students in the middle grades will ensure that students receive the necessary supports to maximize their social and emotional learning potential and lay the foundation for healthy development and relationships as they grow, increasing their chances of future academic, career, and life success.

This guide summarizes the existing research findings about how relationships can help foster social and emotional development for young adolescents. It provides examples from the field that illustrate relationship-based practices that can be applied and scaled in schools, after-school programs, and community-based settings to enhance opportunities for social and emotional learning. School and district practitioners, as well as youth development practitioners in after-school and community-based settings, can use this guide to identify practices that are best suited for their communities, as well as resources to help them apply research-based insights in their work with young adolescents. Researchers, funders, and policymakers can use this guide to identify promising practices, implementation challenges, and



research gaps that can inform their exploration of scalable solutions. At the end of this guide, you will find recommendations based on research and practice findings for these different audiences. Ultimately, our hope is that this guide will help youth development professionals across settings understand the power of relationships to support students socially and emotionally, identify promising practices that can be scaled, and increase access to these supports for young adolescents in communities across the United States.

## 1.1 WHAT IS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING?

Social and emotional learning is a complex and ongoing process of development, spanning childhood and adulthood, which influences our ability to understand ourselves, manage our emotions, form healthy relationships, and navigate the environments and communities where we learn, work, and play.<sup>5</sup> But what does this look like in our everyday lives? Here are some of the ways young people and practitioners have explained what social and emotional learning means to them:

*“It means learning and being kind to each other.” —Ingrid, age 12, Citizen Schools participant, Massachusetts.*

*“To show others how to be a good leader.” —Roodiana, age 12, Citizen Schools participant, Massachusetts.*

*“For me as a mental health professional, leader, and educator, social-emotional learning is essential for our youth to become productive, successful adults. Having the skills to be self-aware, having the ability to self-regulate, be socially aware, develop relationship and conflict management skills, ultimately leads to one’s ability to make responsible decisions and maintain effective, healthy relationships. Our youth need to be taught these skills by being in environments where these skills are modeled by adults and reinforced on a daily basis.” —Molly Ticknor, MA, ATR, LPC, Director of Behavioral Health, Kansas City Public Schools.*

*“To me social and emotional learning means another way of teaching individuals how to care, persevere, and to be aware of who they are and the strengths they possess.” —Darrin O. Person, Sr., MSW, Mentoring Manager, Fresno Unified School District.*

*“The great thing about [social and emotional learning] is that it oftentimes happens naturally during the time our mentors and students spend together. Since our mentors spend time outside*

*of school with our students, they are able to have intentional conversations that our program staff may not have the capacity to facilitate with the student. Our mentors are always asking for tools to engage with their student in a meaningful way and social and emotional learning provides such a great framework to provide our mentors with some tangible ways to help their students continue to grow in these areas in their life. I am also a mentor to a student and it’s great because I’m able to be aware of how I am doing with my own social and emotional learning and make sure that I am being a positive role model for my student in this area.” —Audrey Reyes, Manager of Volunteer Mentor Program, Denver Kids.*

Social and emotional learning is a complex domain of human development experienced differently by people in different cultural, social, and political contexts, and this has resulted in a complex landscape of definitions, frameworks, and language in the research and practice fields that surround it. For a summary of the existing research literature on social and emotional skills and competencies, and efforts to clarify the varied definitions used by researchers and practitioners, [see Annex 1](#).



However, interdisciplinary research has helped the education and youth development fields to establish some universal knowledge about social and emotional development.

**Learning involves many interconnected areas of the brain.**

The cognitive, social, emotional, linguistic, and academic domains of human development are all neurologically linked, so strengths and weaknesses in one area have implications for other areas.<sup>6</sup>

As such, skills and competencies that are commonly categorized as social and emotional also involve cognitive processes, and vice versa.<sup>7</sup>

**Social and emotional processes and skills are intertwined.**

Though many social and emotional learning initiatives emphasize a single social or emotional skill — such as grit or growth mindset — research suggests that social and emotional competencies are intertwined, and as a result, should be addressed in comprehensive and integrated ways rather than in isolation, alongside academic learning.<sup>8</sup>

**Social and emotional learning is progressive.** More complex skills build from more basic skills learned earlier in life, and different social

and emotional skills become more necessary at different developmental stages.<sup>9</sup>

**Social and emotional skills are integral to academic learning.**

They enable and enhance the learning process by helping students find meaning in course material and practice, and apply and reflect on their new learning through personal connection, emotional processing, and social interaction.<sup>10</sup>

**Social and emotional learning is cultural and contextual.**

The ways we define social and emotional skills, and the values we place on these skills, is bound by our culture — that of our families, racial, ethnic, and religious groups, and the other communities of which we are a part — as well as our contexts (the individual circumstances, environments, and relationships we encounter). This is especially true as young people explore and seek to define their identities, a critical and evolving social and emotional task throughout the lifespan.<sup>11</sup> During young adolescence, in particular, identity is highly contextual and relational, shifting as young people form bonds with peers, face rejection, and seek inclusion in groups. Understanding both the culture young people are brought up in, as well as the dominant

culture of the social, learning, and work environments they encounter as they grow, is critical to supporting them effectively.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, understanding and supporting young people’s development of social and emotional skills related to their cultural, ethnic, and racial experiences, including dealing with discrimination, coping with racial trauma, and ethnocultural empathy, is an essential component of social and emotional development that is often underemphasized in research and practice.<sup>13</sup>

**Social and emotional learning is correlated with positive long-term life outcomes.**

A strong body of evidence now demonstrates that social and emotional learning is correlated with academic achievement, college and career success, healthy relationships, and other positive life outcomes. Studies show that high-quality programming that fosters social and emotional learning in schools can improve students’ grades, standardized test scores, ability to get along with others and navigate challenges, and make healthy decisions.<sup>14</sup> Research also indicates that social and emotional skills are correlated with higher rates of college attendance and graduation, career success,



improved mental and physical health, civic engagement, and healthy relationships with family and colleagues.<sup>15</sup> In fact, while middle-school grades remain the strongest single indicator of college readiness, research indicates that success with two SEL indicators, motivation, and behavior may actually have a stronger impact on college readiness than grades alone.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, employers in diverse sectors are struggling to find qualified candidates who demonstrate social and emotional skills related to workplace success, such as problems-solving, critical thinking, and communication skills,<sup>17</sup> making these skills more in demand than ever in our current and future labor market.

This confluence of research may explain why support for integrated and collaborative approaches to social and emotional learning in local communities as well as at the federal level has been growing.<sup>18</sup> However, equitable access to social and emotional learning and supports is still far from a reality. For more on the growing interest and momentum around social and emotional learning, and persistent issues of inequitable access, [see Annex 2.](#)

**Social and emotional learning opportunities — and students’ experiences — are influenced dramatically by historical and societal factors.**<sup>19</sup> Much of the popular discourse about social and emotional learning focuses on the skills and competencies that youth have or do not have, creating the perception that youth — and their ability to develop these skills — determine their future prospects and outcomes. However, historical events and societal structures that influence the socioeconomic and life outcomes of individuals and communities, including the United States’ history of slavery, segregation and racial discrimination toward African-American peoples, exploitation and displacement of Native peoples, discrimination toward and isolation of immigrant and refugee groups, misogyny and homophobia, and capitalism and its resulting socioeconomic disparities — from unemployment to homelessness — shape developing youth’s lives in complex and intersecting ways, facilitating or limiting opportunities for advancement and access to resources based on a student’s race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other aspects of their identities.<sup>20</sup>

These systemic factors also influence damaging narratives that shape many social and emotional learning efforts. For examples, some social and emotional learning initiatives target low-income students and students of color labeled as “high risk”. Such initiatives reiterate damaging messages about which students do and do not have social and emotional assets from which to build, while overlooking the need for White students and socioeconomically privileged students to learn critical social and emotional skills related to power, privilege, and cultural humility.<sup>21</sup>

As we define and understand social and emotional skills and competencies and consider solutions and interventions, we must acknowledge the profound structural inequities that influence students’ living and learning environments, and ensure that long-standing systemic barriers are acknowledged and addressed as readily as students’ immediate, day-to-day social and emotional needs.<sup>22</sup> For more on partnering with youth to address systemic injustice while supporting them in navigating their everyday realities, [see Annex 3.](#)



**Social and emotional learning is profoundly influenced by the climate and culture of students' learning environments.** School climate and culture have substantial impacts on students' social and emotional learning outcomes.<sup>23</sup> These systemic factors, which are shaped by the availability of supportive relationships in schools, as well as the racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic relevance of students' coursework and learning experiences, can influence whether students feel a sense of belonging in school. Students who feel they belong in school tend to perform better academically and report better physical and mental wellness.<sup>24</sup> For more on climate, culture, and belonging, [see Annex 4.](#)

**Social and emotional learning is just as important for adults as it is for youth.** Because social and emotional learning continues throughout the lifespan, ongoing development opportunities for adults, particularly those positioned to model these skills for youth, are just as essential as programming for young people. Thought leaders in the field are beginning to consider integrated social and emotional learning approaches that include opportunities to build the capacity of adults in school and after-school

environments — including teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, cafeteria staff, and volunteer mentors — to practice and model the same skills they hope to cultivate in their students.<sup>25</sup> Because students' social and emotional development requires nurturing learning environments and relationships,<sup>26</sup> addressing adult needs and capacity has become a central intervention point for promoting positive student outcomes. Instead of asking, “What skills and competencies do students need to achieve social and emotional wellness?” leaders in this movement have begun asking, “How can adults in students' learning environments become the type of people youth come to process emotions, receive support, and take the risks required for their development?”

**Social and emotional learning occurs in relationship with others.** In order to grow socially and emotionally, young people need healthy, stable learning environments, complete with healthy relationships, both inside and outside of school.<sup>27</sup> As will be explored in the coming sections, young people who have supportive relationships with caring adults, and meaningful relationships with peers tend to

have more opportunities to develop socially and emotionally, provided that these relationships are developmentally targeted, empowering, and reliable.<sup>28</sup> Parents, caregivers, and families are a critical source of supportive relationships and opportunities for social and emotional learning, but relationships with caring adults in students' schools, recreational programs, and communities are essential for their ongoing development as well.

As referenced above, the past few years have seen an evolution in the research, practice, and policy fields surrounding social and emotional learning, which have become more precise in their understanding of human development and the intersecting, holistic approaches needed to nurture student growth. A growing body of research-to-practice insights and implementation recommendations are now available to practitioners looking to integrate social and emotional learning into their work in schools and out-of-school time programs (See Annex 5 for a summary of these best practices). However, more research and collaboration is needed to ensure that social and emotional learning opportunities build on the assets of youth and communities, are inclusive of youth





identity, context, and culture, address the needs of youth and adults alike, and provide access to nurturing relationships and learning environments for all students. For a summary of recommended next steps for these fields, see Section 4: Recommendations.

## **1.2 SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING DURING EARLY ADOLESCENCE**

### **A Time of Tremendous Change**

Adolescence is a time of tremendous social and emotional growth for young people, during which they experience some of the most significant brain changes since infancy.<sup>29</sup> Puberty launches adolescents into a period of dramatic physical, hormonal, and brain changes, which impact the ways they view themselves and one another. The development of emotional processing and reward structures in the brain renders adolescents increasingly sensitive to social feedback and social status, including cues about their social status and appearance.<sup>30</sup> The development of sexuality during puberty also complicates relationships with peers and makes adolescents acutely aware of their own physical qualities, with

implications for self-esteem.<sup>31</sup> For many adolescents, these changes can be accompanied by riskier behavior, mood changes, and vulnerability to anxiety and depression.<sup>32</sup>

Brain imaging studies substantiate that the connections between neurons in the brain increase rapidly during puberty, followed by a period of “pruning,” or a reduction in these connections during adolescence that allows for the honing of cognitive, emotional, and social skills.<sup>33</sup> During early adolescence, capacity for managing emotion and impulses, forward thinking, planning and decision-making, self-awareness and reflection, and understanding abstract concepts expands, as connections between brain structures involved in executive functioning and those involved in emotional processing grow stronger.<sup>34</sup> During this time, young people build on existing knowledge and self-regulation skills, become more cognitively flexible, and grow in their ability to process more complex information, think critically, reflect, and problem solve.<sup>35</sup>

How do young adolescents describe this time in their lives? Middle school students from a Citizen Schools after-school program in eastern

Massachusetts described being their age as “hard,” “fun,” “okay,” and “weird.” One student, Roodiana, noted that this is an age where she feels adults don’t really understand her, while Maria shared that this age is not fun because there’s so much drama in life. Ingrid indicated that being this age can be stressful sometimes, while Shylah added that it’s stressful because some people say, “She got so big!” while others say, “You’re still too young.” Others, like Victor, said that being his age is simply fun.

Amidst all of the cognitive, emotional, and social changes they are experiencing, young adolescents are striving to explore and define their identities. As they seek to differentiate from parents and families and secure more independence, peer groups become a critical source of support, acceptance, and belonging.<sup>36</sup> In the context of peer groups, young teens develop intimacy, loyalty, and empathy as they continue to learn to navigate social norms.<sup>37</sup> During this time, the avoidance of rejection and social isolation become paramount, so changes in dress and behavior to “fit in” may be common. Simultaneously, young people are experiencing greater day-to-day variations in their self-esteem, which is



influenced by peer and parent support as well as school success.<sup>38</sup> Having a positive view of one’s self and the value of one’s efforts to succeed academically and socially has implications for young adolescents’ development of a growth mindset, which can help them persist through adversity and try again when their initial efforts don’t work — a key factor for navigating the future challenges of late adolescence and adulthood.<sup>39</sup>

### Improving Learning Environments for Young Adolescents

To maximize the potential of young adolescents during this time of growth, experts recommend

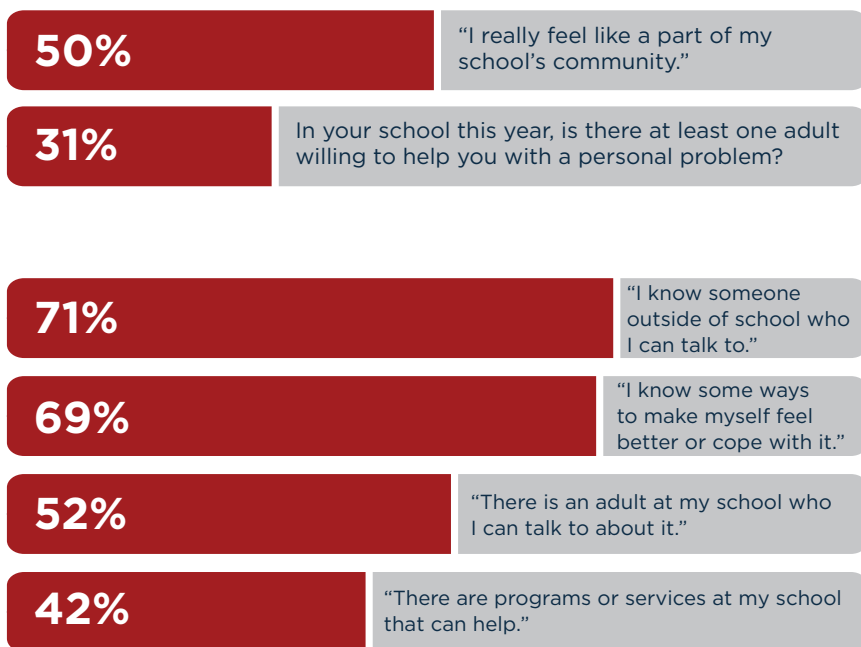
providing opportunities for youth to explore their interests, beliefs, and values in safe, supportive environments.<sup>40</sup> Relationships between youth and adults who take an interest in their strengths, interests, and beliefs provide an ideal foundation for the development of identity and self-confidence. Such relationships also support opportunities to engage in projects that challenge and engage youth personally and lay the groundwork for the development of agency, critical-thinking, and problem-solving.<sup>41</sup>

Panorama Education and Youth-Truth are two organizations that support schools and districts in collecting student data related to

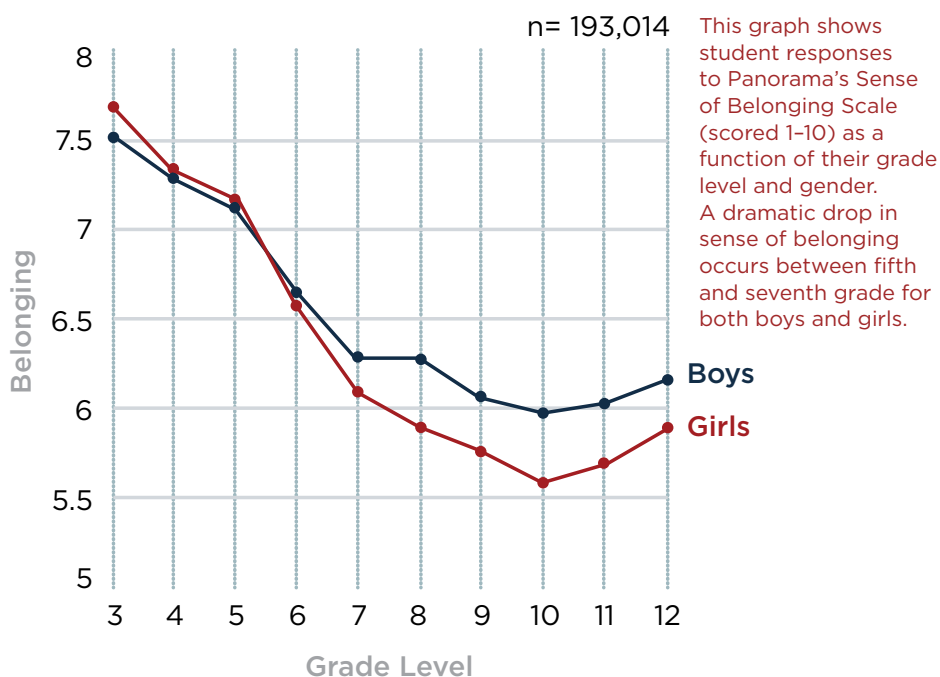
social and emotional learning and other indicators that can inform school improvement, by developing and implementing surveys that measure indicators of socioemotional learning and their connections to student outcomes. Both have collected compelling data that sheds light on the experiences of middle school students with regard to school climate, belonging, and relationships.

Youth Truth has surveyed over a million students across 39 states. From the 215,000 middle school students who responded to their surveys, about 50 percent reported that they felt like a part of their school’s community, but only 31 percent reported having at least one adult who would be willing to help them with a personal problem. Furthermore, in 32,000 middle school students who were asked about support and social connection in times of stress, a higher proportion of students reported seeking support from someone outside of school, while a smaller proportion of students found that support from an adult in school or from programs or services in school.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, Panorama has collected data from 3.2 million students across 4,800 schools, and 380 districts across the



Data provided by Youth Truth



United States,<sup>43</sup> including responses to questions such as “How well do people at your school understand you as a person?” and “If you walked out of class upset, how concerned would your teacher be?” which measure students’ experiences with teacher-student relationships and sense of belonging in school.<sup>44</sup>

The data collected from young adolescents in the middle grades reveals that social connection matters tremendously at this developmental stage, but may be harder for students to attain than at other stages. Young adolescents in middle school report having weaker relationships with their teachers as well as lower ratings of their sense of belonging in school

than both older and younger students.<sup>45</sup> Simultaneously, the correlation between these indicators and student outcomes, including attendance, behavior, and course performance, is much stronger at this developmental stage. Just as students are reporting more disconnection from school and adult relationships than ever before, they need them more than ever before.<sup>46</sup> Together, Panorama’s and YouthTruth’s data point to a critical gap in positive youth-adult relationships in schools, which intentional relationship-based interventions can help to close.

### 1.3 SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND RELATIONSHIPS

While relationships with parents and caregivers are generally considered the most important for young people’s social and emotional development, nonparental adults and peers also play a critical role, particularly as students grow and build relationships outside of the home. Research suggests that adults and peers model self-regulation skills and help young people understand social expectations in their communities.<sup>47</sup>

#### The Need for Developmental Experiences and Relationships

According to the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research’s Foundations for Youth Adult Success Framework, developmental experiences are opportunities for young people to process and practice new skills essential for their development. These experiences are most effective when they occur in the context of social interactions with adults and peers,<sup>48</sup> and can be especially important for young people’s development of agency, or the confidence and ability to take action to influence the outcomes of their own lives, as they experience their own impact



and value in social contexts.<sup>49</sup> Relationships with caring adults that support young people in reflecting upon, processing, and understanding their experiences in ways that influence identity development and connections to future opportunities are known as developmental relationships. The positive effects of such relationships are supported by a body of research pioneered by Search Institute.<sup>50</sup>

### **Developmental Assets and Mentors**

Search Institute identifies 40 developmental assets that young people need to thrive, and it identifies developmental relationships — empowering relationships with caring adults — as the gateway to young people’s development of these assets. According to Search Institute’s framework, all young people need external assets — including support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time — as well as internal assets, including a commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity.<sup>51</sup> Search Institute’s Attitudes and Behaviors Survey (administered between 2012 and 2015 to more than 120,000 students in grades 6–12) revealed

that young people who reported having more of these assets also reported experiencing more measures of thriving, including succeeding in school, valuing diversity, helping others, and overcoming adversity.<sup>52</sup> The survey also found that some young people find developmental relationships and build assets at home with their families, but may not find them as readily at school, in their communities, and in other spaces where they spend time.<sup>53</sup>

Nonparental adults, especially formal and informal mentors, are uniquely positioned to attend to students’ social, emotional, and academic needs. Research consistently shows that mentoring improves a host of academic and life outcomes for youth across behavioral, social, emotional, and academic domains,<sup>54</sup> and these gains are essential to achieving positive developmental outcomes. They are also essential to leading safe and happy lives, complete with healthy and positive relationships, which, in and of itself, is an outcome mentoring programs seek to support.

In addition to providing tailored programming that enables young adolescents to develop the competencies they need for healthy development, in school and out of school learning

environments must also provide the relationships and developmental experiences youth need to practice new skills, process emotions, reflect, and build community. The next part of this guide summarizes the current research on relationship-based social and emotional programming. It reviews the social and emotional outcomes that are affected by relationship-based programs such as mentoring, the specific activities mentors engage in to promote these outcomes, and factors that appear to influence program outcomes. This research summary, along with the practice examples that come after, illustrates a range of relationship-based practices and models that can support social and emotional development for young adolescents.

# LITERATURE REVIEW:

## RELATIONSHIPS, MENTORING, AND SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT AMONG YOUNG ADOLESCENTS.



### 2.1 OVERVIEW

To better understand the specific ways in which relationships facilitate social, emotional, and academic development for young adolescents, a review of the existing research literature was conducted. This literature review sought to answer the following questions:

**1 What social, emotional, and academic outcomes are affected by relationships and relationship-based programs?**

**2 What specific relationship-based activities promote these outcomes?**

**3 What other conditions determine whether these strategies are successful?**

To answer the above questions, a systematic search of research articles, evaluation reports, and studies was conducted. Studies included in the review evaluated programming or interventions that 1) engaged youth in intentional relationships with adults or peers as the focus or as a key component of the programming, 2) assessed social and emotional outcomes, 3) took place in the school environment, either during the school day or after school,

and 4) targeted the middle school years (sixth through eighth grade) or students aged 11 to 14 (or had an average age between 11 and 14 for the student sample studied).

Nineteen evaluations were found that met these criteria. Due to the structured relationship-based nature of mentoring programs and the research literature surrounding this field, all of the studies that met these criteria included some form of mentoring. Nine paired students with adults in one-to-one relationships, while four facilitated group mentoring, and seven used a mix of models, including combinations of one-to-one, group, and peer mentoring. Six addressed after-school programming, while 15 assessed programs facilitated during the school day. For more information on the settings, models, goals, and other descriptors of the programs whose evaluations were included in this review, see Section 2.5.

### 2.2 WHAT SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL OUTCOMES ARE AFFECTED BY RELATIONSHIPS AND RELATIONSHIP-BASED PROGRAMS?

Research on the role of mentoring programs and relationships has revealed that mentoring plays

#### READER TIP

In this section, you will find a summary of research evidence exploring the above questions. After each section, you will find an “Implications for Practice” annex summarizing potential recommendations and insights based on the research described.

a role in young adolescents’ attitudes toward themselves, others, and school. Additionally, mentoring appears to impact specific social and emotional skills, as well as broad domains of social and emotional development, including mental health, identity development, and relationships with others.

#### Attitudes toward the Self, Others, and School

Researchers have found that mentoring programs play a role in middle school students’ positive attitudes toward the self, school, and other individuals. In two studies of school-based Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS)



programs involving 1,130 youth (average age 11; 63 percent youth of color; 69 percent low income), mentoring influenced students' self-assessments\* of their **scholastic efficacy beliefs**, or their beliefs about their ability to do their schoolwork.<sup>55</sup> Specifically, participants who were randomly assigned to mentoring reported higher self-assessment ratings at the end of the school year compared to those without mentors in the program.<sup>56</sup> Herrera et al.'s 2011 work, though, did not find that there were statistically significant improvements for participants in the mentored group on other social and emotional outcomes, like classroom effort; global self-worth; relationships with parents, teachers, or peers; or rates of problem behavior compared to the control group.

A qualitative study of the Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP) — a combined one-on-one and group mentoring school-based program targeting low-income, racially, and ethnically diverse seventh grade girls who face academic, social, or emotional challenges — revealed that 66 percent of participants reported improvements in their **self-understanding**.<sup>57</sup> Self-

understanding referred to their self-concept, social roles, confidence, awareness, and expectations.

An evaluation of Higher Achievement, which included 952 students in middle school who were mostly African-American or Latino, revealed that in a variety of areas† there were surprising and negative effects on students' **self-perceptions**.<sup>58</sup> Students in the Higher Achievement program were less confident in these areas compared to students in the control group after their first year in the program, but the differences disappeared after the first follow-up. Authors speculated that perhaps the initial negative effects were due to being in a program with similarly motivated peers; Higher Achievement students may have realized that they could improve in these areas and then rated themselves lower after being in the program.

In an experimental evaluation of Across Ages — a unique school-based, multicomponent prevention program — researchers found changes in sixth grade students' attitudes toward school and older adults.<sup>59</sup> The 562 participants in this study were

enrolled in low-income, urban public schools and were racially and ethnically diverse (52 percent African-American, 16 percent White, 9 percent Asian-American, 9 percent Hispanic, and 14 percent Other). They were randomly assigned to one of three groups: 1) a control group; 2) a group that received a social and emotional curriculum, community service, and parent workshops; and 3) a group that received these services as well as mentoring from older adults. The evaluation revealed that those in the mentored condition had more positive **attitudes toward school, their future, and elders** compared to students in the control group or students in the condition that received the intervention without mentoring.

Research also shows that mentoring plays a role in middle school students' attitudes toward school and school behaviors — specifically by building a **sense of belonging and connectedness**. One such study examined the effects of a one-to-one mentoring program for students who had high numbers of unexcused absences and office disciplinary referrals.<sup>60</sup> Mentors (primarily White female staff members and teachers at the

\*I.e., students' ratings of the statement "I do very well at my classwork."

†Industry and persistence, creativity, academic abilities, enjoyment of learning, curiosity, belief that they could change the future through their own effort.



school) met once a week with mentees (primarily White or Latino male students) over an 18-week period during the second half of the school year. The authors found that students in the mentoring program reported more connectedness to peers, teachers, and other school adults, and received significantly fewer office referrals on average than students in the control group by the end of the school year.<sup>61</sup> A culturally relevant mentoring program, Uniting Our Nations, for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) seventh and eighth grade students in Ontario, Canada, also found that participating in the program was related to a greater sense of belonging.<sup>62</sup> Interviews with participating students indicated that the program provided a safe space and affirmed their cultural and individual identities. Further, students reported feeling more understood and welcomed in the mentoring program than they did in classrooms with their teachers.<sup>63</sup>

An evaluation of the Benjamin E. Mays Institute (BEMI) mentoring program, an Afrocentric program designed for African-American eighth grade boys, also showed that mentoring has a positive influence on students' attitudes

toward school.<sup>64</sup> Specifically, it was found that boys in the mentoring program reported higher scores on **academic identity**, or how closely their self-esteem is tied to their academic success, than those who did not receive the intervention. It should be noted that the intervention and comparison students differed in that those in the BEMI program were also in a single-sex cluster within a coed school whereas the comparison students were enrolled in coed classes; furthermore, the researchers did not control for baseline scores on participants' academic identity. Thus, it is unclear to what extent the classroom gender makeup may have also influenced participants' academic identity and whether boys in the BEMI program already strongly identified with academics before participating in the program.

In a week-long group mentoring program in which high school sophomores served as near peer mentors to eighth grade students in an urban setting, researchers found changes in mentees' **perceptions of academic difficulty and grit**, or a tendency toward persistence.<sup>65</sup> Predominately Latino/a mentors and mentees

were randomly assigned to the mentoring or control group. Each mentoring group consisted of one mentor and two to five mentees of the same gender. The mentoring program was a week-long, five-session identity-based curriculum in which mentors engaged in activities with mentees about how school is connected to their identities and futures, while those in the control group focused on tutoring mentees in their schoolwork. Students in the mentoring program reported higher scores on grit, were more likely to perceive difficult school tasks as important, and were less likely to perceive difficult school tasks as being impossible compared to students in the control group. While there were no differences between the groups on their grade point averages (GPA) at the end of the school year, perceptions of academic difficulty were correlated with grades, indicating that the mentoring program may have had a positive indirect effect on grades. Perceptions of academic difficulty are important because students' identities can influence whether they interpret school tasks as important or irrelevant to who they are and their goals.<sup>66</sup>

\*Examples of SRL strategies are goal setting, seeking information, self-monitoring, seeking assistance from others, and organizing.



## Specific Social and Emotional Skills

Research shows that school-based mentoring influences specific cognitive, affective, and social skills associated with middle school students' development. For example, two of the studies reviewed found that mentoring influences students' **self-regulation**. A 2013 study conducted by Nuñez, Rosario, Vallejo, and González-Pianda tested the effects of a school-based, group mentoring program in Portugal designed to help seventh grade students develop self-regulation learning (SRL) strategies. These strategies address the ways that students proactively control their learning and manage cognitive and motivational processes to help them work toward their goals.\* Students in the two control group classrooms received a weekly study skills class taught by their teachers, while those in the two mentoring condition classrooms met weekly for one hour after school with teachers who served as mentors. In the mentoring sessions, mentors taught their mentees SRL strategies, guided reflections and discussions about the strategies, provided feedback on students' applications of the

strategies, and taught students how to record their learning results over time. Six months after the start of the intervention, researchers found greater increases in students' use of SRL strategies and self-efficacy for SRL compared to the control group students who did not have mentors. They also found that mentored students reported higher perceived usefulness of SRL strategies at three months than non-mentored students. While mentored students did not experience any unique statistically significant outcomes at the end of the school year, analyses showed that the pattern of changes in student outcomes favored the mentored students. That is, mentored students' SRL strategies, self-efficacy for SRL, and perceived utility of SRL increased over time compared to non-mentored students.

In the qualitative study of Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP) targeting seventh grade girls, 66 percent of participants also reported changes in their self-regulation because of the mentoring program.<sup>68</sup> Girls reported improvements in their ability to better manage attitude, behavior, goal setting, and speech. They specifically talked about

“recognizing what is a big issue and what is not, avoidance of situations that could cause problems, recognizing and prioritizing the needs of others, embodied regulation,\* improved academic focus and classroom strategies,<sup>†</sup> and speech.<sup>1769</sup> Girls also discussed using self-regulation to decrease negative behaviors and increase positive ones.

Still other researchers found that mentoring plays a role in students' **problem-solving skills and cognitive problems**. In a quasi-experimental study of a mentored peer mediation program, there were increases in peer mediators' problem-solving strategies and empathy compared to non-mediators.<sup>70</sup> An evaluation was also conducted of the Village Model of Care program, a culturally sensitive, after-school group mentoring program designed for African-American youth entering an urban middle school. One school was assigned to the experimental group, in which African-American adults from the Village Model of Care program served as mentors to participants, while another school assigned to the control group did not receive the program.<sup>71</sup> The authors found that teacher-

\*E.g., stopping to take a breath when upset.

†E.g., “Do not talk; be nice to the teacher.”

‡This included limiting both what one says and speaking up/out.





reported cognitive problems reduced over time for the intervention students compared to those in the control group.<sup>72</sup>

## Mental Health

Another social and emotional domain influenced by mentoring is mental health, specifically internalizing symptoms and overall psychological well-being. An evaluation of Confidence and Courage through Mentoring Program (CCMP), a three-week mentoring intervention for middle school students identified as at risk for internalizing problems.<sup>73</sup> found that participants' self-reported subjective intensity of **disturbance or distress** decreased over time from baseline to intervention.<sup>74</sup> In this intervention, two school staff members were assigned as mentors to five students, and the mentors provided unconditional positive regard to students, met daily with mentees to monitor behavior, corrected problems, and provided performance-based feedback.

In the Uniting Our Nations mentoring program, researchers also found that participating in the program was related to better mental health.<sup>75</sup> The group mentoring program included First Nations young adults who served

as mentors to mentee groups (93 percent of mentees were First Nations) for one hour a week over an 18-week period. The curriculum was designed around the Medicine Wheel Life Cycle and addressed various topics, such as media, goal setting, positive decision-making skills, communication skills, personal strengths, and handling peer conflicts. The quasi-experimental evaluation of this program showed that students who received two years of mentoring reported higher **emotional, social, and psychological well-being** compared to participants who received one year or no mentoring program services.<sup>76</sup> Qualitative interviews of mentored students also showed that they reported improvements in **self-confidence**.<sup>77</sup>

## Identity Development

Only two studies examined the role of mentoring in ethnic and/or racial identity. Both investigations focused on culturally responsive mentoring programs. A 2009 study conducted by Gordon et al. found that participating in the BEMI\* program played a positive role in the internalization of **racial identity attitudes** for African-American boys compared

to boys in the control group. The Uniting Our Nations mentoring program targeting FNMI<sup>†</sup> students in Canada found that receiving two years of the program was associated with reporting a stronger **cultural identity** compared to one year or no mentoring.<sup>78</sup> Qualitative interviews of FNMI students also revealed that the program provided them with a space to connect their cultural teachings and current life experiences, and that they valued meeting with peers of a similar culture.<sup>79</sup> It should be noted that a limitation of the existing research literature is that there were no studies examining the role of school-based mentoring in other aspects of identity development (e.g., LGBTQ identity, gender) among middle school students.

## Improved Relationships

A final social and emotional domain influenced by relationship-based programming is improved interpersonal relationships. The majority (75 percent) of girls in the YWLP<sup>‡</sup> study reported enhanced **friendships, respect for others, and trust**. The program helped them make new friends and develop closer relationships with

\*Benjamin E. Mays Institute.

†First Nations, Métis, and Inuit

‡Young Women Leaders Program

§e.g., talking with adults about how to get into a good high school, going to college or future jobs



their existing friends. Participants also learned about the importance of respecting others by being polite, being kind and caring for others, and not gossiping. Finally, participants reported that they learned to trust their mentors and peers in the program, which resulted in closer relationships with peers and adults outside of YWLP.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, in the study of school-based BBBS programs, it was found that, compared to the control group, mentored youth were more likely to report having a “special adult” in their lives.<sup>81</sup>

The qualitative interviews of the students in the Uniting Our Nations mentoring program revealed that it enabled them to develop new friendships and maintain existing ones, develop more intimate peer relationships, and develop supportive relationships with adult mentors.<sup>82</sup>

Finally, participants in the Higher Achievement program evaluation were more likely to report that they engage in academic activities<sup>8</sup>with adults compared to control group students.<sup>83</sup> However, spending time with adults on academic activities did not necessarily translate to more perceived support from adults. Higher Achievement and control group adolescents reported about the same number of supportive adults in their lives.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The studies described above assessed programs that used a range of relationship-based models and strategies across diverse samples of young adolescents. The majority of these programs, and the relationships formed within them, appear to have supported young people in developing or honing positive attitudes and beliefs about themselves, others, and school; cultivated a sense of belonging and mental wellness; promoted identity exploration; and strengthened relationships with others. Mentored youth described in these studies appeared to have stronger belief in their ability to complete schoolwork, more positive attitudes about school and the future, greater self-awareness, and a stronger sense of belonging and connectedness in their learning environments. Others were more likely to perceive academics as integral to their identity, and to believe that academic achievement is both important and possible. Mentoring appeared to help students manage and regulate their own attitudes and behaviors and develop problem-solving skills. It also appeared to lessen psychological distress, promote mental well-being and self-confidence, strengthen racial and cultural identity, and help students develop trusting, respectful friendships with adults and peers inside and outside of the program context.

Taken together, these studies indicate the promise that relationships and mentoring programs have for supporting the social and emotional development of young adolescents across many domains. In these studies, the connection between supportive relationships and social and emotional wellness is clear, as is the importance of both for creating the conditions for academic learning. This research suggests that school and district leaders, educators, and practitioners looking to influence any number of social and emotional outcomes for middle school students should consider a variety of relationship-based approaches, from one-to-one and group mentoring to a combination of models, mentoring programming combined with other social and emotional curricula, and culturally relevant approaches.



### **2.3: WHAT RELATIONSHIP-BASED ACTIVITIES PROMOTE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL OUTCOMES?**

Few studies specifically examined what mentoring activities were linked to social and emotional outcomes. In a qualitative study of YWLP, participants were asked what components of the program influenced the positive changes that they experienced.<sup>84</sup>

Participating students partly attributed changes in self-understanding to their “mentors’ encouragement, tips, or modeling.”<sup>85</sup> They described how mentors’ encouragement helped them be more confident and less shy with others, and said that mentors’ advice helped them resist peer pressure. Students also reported that they learned self-regulation because mentors communicated with them in ways that helped them listen to their mentors. Finally, program participants described their mentors as relational models. Mentors showed mentees that they can open up to adults, including parents. Mentees also reported learning to trust their mentors through the shared activities in the group.<sup>86</sup>

In the United Our Nations mentoring program, participants reported that they felt a sense of belonging because their mentors shared their cultural background and understood where they were coming from more so than in their classrooms and with teachers, who did not share their cultural identity.<sup>87</sup>

Other studies specifically described what mentors were trained to do or the activities that they engaged in with mentees. In the self-regulation-focused mentoring program described above, mentors taught a series of self-regulation strategies to middle school students.<sup>88</sup> For each learning strategy, mentors helped students to reflect on their knowledge of the strategy across diverse learning contexts, guided group discussions, explained how students can expand their strategies, helped them to predict consequences, and helped them develop the skills. Mentors also provided feedback to students when they used a strategy, and trained students on how to record their learning results so students could gain a sense of control over their learning and performance.

In the mentoring program for students with high rates of unexcused absences and office disciplinary referrals,<sup>89</sup> mentors were asked to model appropriate, prosocial behaviors (e.g., honesty and ethical behavior) during mentoring interactions. Mentors were also trained to use verbal and nonverbal communication and trust-building techniques, such as involving mentees in determining session activities and communicating respect for mentee opinions.

In the Confidence and Courage through Mentoring Program (CCMP) for students with internalizing difficulties, the mentoring activities were: (a) the provision of unconditional positive regard; (b) morning meetings to positively interact with the student, pre-correct problems, and offer words of encouragement; (c) daily monitoring of performance; and (d) afternoon meetings to positively interact with the student and provide performance-based feedback.<sup>90</sup>

Some of the programs reviewed were unstructured in their activities. For example, in the school-based BBBS program, “mentors reported doing each of the following types of



activities ‘a lot’: talking casually (71 percent), talking about family or friends (43 percent and 44 percent, respectively), talking about the future (30 percent), playing indoor games (54 percent), doing creative activities (36 percent), playing sports (25 percent), helping with homework (27 percent), and talking about academic issues (31 percent).<sup>91</sup> The authors did not find that any of the specific types of mentoring activities played a role in the socioemotional outcome (i.e., scholastic efficacy beliefs). Meaning, mentoring programs that focused more on academic activities did not have significantly larger effects on outcomes compared to programs that focused on the relationship or social activities.<sup>92</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

While the available research on the relationship-based activities that promote social and emotional outcomes is limited, the studies described above provide many clues about the specific strategies caring adults can use to support youth. Mentors in these programs engaged with mentees in formal, structured ways, such as teaching specific skills and sharing feedback that helped their mentees improve over time, and less formal ways, such as talking about family and friends, doing creative activities, and playing sports. They led discussions that helped their mentees reflect and consider different approaches and consequences. They engaged in shared activities and found frequent opportunities to interact with mentees in positive ways.

Mentors in these programs modeled both social and emotional skills as well as healthy relationships characterized by trust and clear communication. They offered encouragement and unconditional positive regard. Some validated their mentees’ identities by engaging in shared cultural traditions and conversations.

This research validates the importance of cultivating strong, trusting relationships with youth over time by getting to know them, sharing experiences with them, encouraging them, and challenging them. It also validates the importance of providing mentors and caring adults in the lives of youth with opportunities to reflect on their own practice, to ensure that they are finding balance between intentionality and fun, and that they are reminded of the importance of authentic relationship-building as they engage in goal-oriented work with youth.



## 2.4: WHAT OTHER FACTORS DETERMINE WHETHER RELATIONSHIP-BASED STRATEGIES ARE SUCCESSFUL?

Researchers have examined the role of mentoring relationship quality in social and emotional outcomes, and how mentor or mentee characteristics influence the effects of mentoring on these outcomes.

### Mentoring Relationship Quality

A few studies found that relationship quality influences social and emotional outcomes. For example, developing at least a “somewhat close” relationship between BBBS mentors and mentees played a positive role in students’ enhanced scholastic efficacy beliefs.<sup>93</sup> A 2018 study conducted by Lyons and McQuillen also found that higher ratings of mentoring relationship quality between mentors and mentees in school-based mentoring programs for middle school students was associated with higher degrees of school bonding,\* while controlling for demographic characteristics,† grades, behavior, and baseline levels of relationship quality with peers, parents, schools, and other adults. Further, they found that “strengthening the mentoring

relationship was estimated to have a larger increase on behavioral outcomes (e.g., misconduct, school bonding) compared to academic outcomes (e.g., English, math, science, or social studies grades).<sup>94</sup> In another study using a BBBS sample, it was found that higher mentoring relationship quality significantly predicted better mentee relationships with teachers and parents, but it did not significantly predict other social and emotional outcomes, such as prosocial behaviors and school connectedness.<sup>95</sup> Another study using the same BBBS sample found a significant association between mentees’ trust in their mentors and lower teacher-reported rejection sensitivity,‡ but not for other social and emotional outcomes, like youth assertiveness, prosocial behavior, and global self-worth.<sup>96</sup>

In the Across Ages mentoring program, in which middle-school students were paired with older adult mentors, teachers were asked to rate mentors’ involvement with their mentees.<sup>97</sup> It was found that students whose mentors were rated as being most involved with their mentees had the most positive attitudes toward school, future, and older adults, compared to students whose

mentors were rated as having marginal or average involvement with their mentees.

Beyond the direct association between mentoring relationship quality and social and emotional outcomes, researchers have also found that mentoring relationship quality has an indirect effect on these outcomes. In the previous BBBS study, it was found that higher mentoring relationship quality was related to better relationships with teachers or parents, which then predicted better social and emotional outcomes, such as self-esteem, academic attitudes, and prosocial behavior.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, a 2016 study by Kanchewa and colleagues found that mentees’ trust in mentors had an indirect effect on youth outcomes, such as assertiveness and prosocial behavior, as reported by teachers.<sup>99</sup>

### Mentee Characteristics

Researchers have also found that some **mentee characteristics** influence the effects of mentoring on social and emotional outcomes. For example, youth who **lacked a special adult** at baseline and were randomly assigned to BBBS mentoring benefited more at the end of the school year in their perceptions of their academic

\*I.e., students’ degree of agreement with statements like, “I like school, I look forward to going to school.”

†E.g., race/ethnicity, age, free and reduced lunch status.

‡E.g., “This child takes things too personally,” “This child is unduly upset by negative feedback from me.”



abilities compared to youth who were also in the mentoring condition but had a special adult at baseline.<sup>100</sup> Researchers have also found that youth's relationship profiles influence the impact of mentoring. Specifically, mentees who had adequate but not particularly strong existing relationships prior to receiving mentoring benefited more from mentoring (on measures of prosocial behavior and academic performance) than did mentees who had existing relationships that were characterized as very positive or negative.<sup>101</sup>

The Village Model of Care program showed that gender moderated the influence of the mentoring program on African-American students' mental health.<sup>102</sup> Specifically, girls showed a greater reduction of internalized problems than boys did after participating in the intervention.

### **Mentor Characteristics**

Finally, research on the YWLP program for middle school girls of color found that mentor characteristics influence middle school students' social and emotional outcomes. College mentors' initial lower levels of depressive symptoms and higher levels of anxiety predicted mentee self-reported improvement in

feeling competent. The authors speculated that mentees' observation of their mentors' vulnerabilities around worrying and help-seeking might have made the mentees feel more competent in activities such as talking to teachers, serving in leadership roles at school, and completing homework.

Furthermore, being in a cross-race relationship influenced the effects of mentor characteristics on social and emotional outcomes. There was a significant association between higher mentor autonomy (i.e., confidence about decision-making and goal setting) and mentees' reported improvement in feeling competent among those in cross-race mentoring pairs compared to

those in same-race pairs.<sup>103</sup>

Researchers also found that mentors' ethnic identity played a role in mentees' ethnic identity. Studies on YWLP found that mentors' ethnic identity exploration predicted more ethnic identity exploration among girls of color. Furthermore, higher ethnocultural empathy among mentors predicted higher ethnic identity exploration among girls of color, regardless of mentor race. However, the researchers did not find that mentor ethnic identity or ethnocultural empathy predicted girls' commitment to and belonging with their ethnic identity.<sup>104</sup>





## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Studies about relationship quality raise critical questions about the types of relationships students are developing in schools and programs, and how we can ensure that they meet students' needs. After seeing the impact that relationship quality can have on student outcomes, practitioners will want to know how to cultivate quality relationships, and how to measure quality. [The OJJDP National Mentoring Resource Center](#), a comprehensive online resource hub for mentoring and youth development practitioners, has created a Measurement Guidance Toolkit to support practitioners in assessing key outcomes from mentoring programs. This toolkit offers scales specific to [mentoring relationship quality and characteristics](#), in addition to [social and emotional skills, interpersonal relationships, mental and emotional health](#), and [healthy and prosocial behavior](#). This can be a critical tool for practitioners to help them understand the quality of the relationships in their programs, and how to support mentors and mentees in forming strong bonds and overcoming relationship obstacles.

The studies that investigated mentee characteristics that mediated the impacts of mentoring also provide food for thought about which young people may benefit most from relationship-based interventions. Research indicates that youth who do not currently have a mentor, or those with mediocre existing relationships, may benefit most from the experience of connecting with a mentor. While certainly not surprising, this finding may validate practitioners' efforts to support youth who may be otherwise disconnected, and create urgency toward identifying such youth in schools and programs. Other findings about mentee characteristics indicate the importance of understanding how youth have been impacted by prior relationships, as well as the impacts of gender and other aspects of identity on their experience.

Finally, research on the mediating impacts of mentor characteristics have implications for the ways practitioners select, prepare, and support their mentors. The impacts of mentor mental health described in the YWLP study are complex, and while more research is needed to understand how this impacts mentee experiences, this finding indicates the importance of understanding mentors as whole people and supporting them in building awareness of the behaviors they model for mentees, consciously or unconsciously. Meanwhile, findings about the positive impacts of mentors' ethnic identity exploration and ethnocultural empathy for girls of color indicates a need for nuanced training and preparation for mentors in this area. These studies suggest that mentors who have a mature sense of racial, ethnic, or cultural identity, and the ability to relate to others who are different from them, may make stronger mentors for youth at this age. They also suggest that specific preparation for mentors who will be matched with youth of a different race may be important for ensuring a successful experience for youth.



## 2.5: CHARACTERISTICS OF RELATIONSHIP-BASED PROGRAMS INCLUDED IN LITERATURE REVIEW

Program Name	Authors	Mentoring Model	Goals of Program	Type of Mentor	Geographic Area	US vs. Int'l	SEL Specific Curriculum
<b>Across Ages</b>	LoSciuto, Rajala, Townsend, Taylor	One-to-one	Develop prosocial behavior, involve youth in service learning, drug prevention	Older adults (ages +55)	Urban	U.S.	Yes, Positive Youth Development
<b>Benjamin E. Mays Institute</b>	Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Potts, Boyd	One-to-one, Group	Develop a stronger racial identity; improve academic performance; impact the intellectual, spiritual, physical, and social needs of the students; improve self-esteem; increase youth responsibility; help youth develop a vision for success; become more self-disciplined	Community leaders, men from surrounding universities, local public and private sectors	No information provided	U.S.	Yes, Rites of Passage, Afrocentric curriculum
<b>Big Brothers Big Sisters of America</b>	Bayer, Grossman, and DuBois	One-to-one	“Provide children facing adversity with . . . one-to-one relationships that change their lives for the better” (BBBSA, 2013c).	Volunteers from business, high schools, or colleges	No information provided	U.S.	No
<b>Big Brothers Big Sisters of America</b>	Chan, Rhodes, Howard, Lowe, Schwartz, & Herrera	One-to-one	“Provide children facing adversity with . . . one-to-one relationships that change their lives for the better” (BBBSA, 2013c).	Volunteers from business, high schools, or colleges	No information provided	U.S.	No
<b>Big Brothers Big Sisters of America</b>	Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, McMaken	One-to-one	“Provide children facing adversity with . . . one-to-one relationships that change their lives for the better” (BBBSA, 2013c).	Volunteers from businesses, high schools, or colleges	No information provided	U.S.	No
<b>Big Brothers Big Sisters of America</b>	Kanchewa, Yoviene, Schwartz, Herrera, Rhodes	One-to-one	“Provide children facing adversity with . . . one-to-one relationships that change their lives for the better” (BBBSA, 2013c).	Volunteers from businesses, high schools, or colleges	No information provided	U.S.	No
<b>Big Brothers Big Sisters of America</b>	Schwartz, Rhodes, Chan, Herrera	One-to-one	“Provide children facing adversity with . . . one-to-one relationships that change their lives for the better” (BBBSA, 2013c).	Volunteers from businesses, high schools, or colleges	No information provided	U.S.	No
<b>Confidence and Courage through Mentoring Program</b>	Cook, Xie, Earl, Lyon, Dart, and Zhang	One-to-one	Targets children with internalizing problems and helps students with their self-efficacy and emotion management (i.e., emotional awareness and regulation).	School staff members	Urban	U.S.	Yes





Program Name	Authors	Mentoring Model	Goals of Program	Type of Mentor	Geographic Area	US vs. Int'l	SEL Specific Curriculum
<b>Higher Achievement</b>	Herrera, Grossman, Linden	Group	Improve academic performance; change academic attitudes and behavior; teach youth lessons about freedom, justice, solidarity and voice	No information provided	Urban	U.S.	Yes, Afterschool Academy
<b>No name</b>	Devoogd, Lane-Garon, Kralowec, Charles	Group: Mediators	Improve perceptions of school climate, teach youth conflict strategy choices, reduce bullying incidence and expulsion rates	College students	Urban	U.S.	Yes
<b>No name</b>	Destin, Castillo, Meissner	Group, Peer	Identity development, interpret experiences of difficulty in school as meaningful and important rather than meaningless and impossible, develop GRIT	High school	Urban	U.S.	Yes
<b>No name</b>	Converse, Lignugaris-Kraft	One-to-one	Prevent general misbehavior and social maladjustment at school	School teachers and staff	Urban	U.S.	No
<b>No name</b>	Núñez, Rosário, Vallejo, González-Pienda	Group	Teach students self-regulated learning strategies	Teachers	Urban	Portugal	Yes
<b>Student Mentoring Program</b>	Lyons, McQuillen	One-to-one	Improve academic and behavioral outcomes	Older adults	No information provided	U.S.	No
<b>Uniting Our Nations Peer Mentoring</b>	Crooks, Exner-Cortens, Burm, Lapointe, Chiodo	Group, Peer, One-to-one	Create positive attitudes; prevent bullying, improve healthy eating, strengthen ethnic/racial identity; help youth develop goal setting, positive decision-making, and communication skills; teach youth to handle peer conflicts and peer pressure	First Nations Young Adult from community; First Nations peers from high school	Urban	Canada	Yes
<b>Village Model of Care</b>	Hanlon, Simon, O'Grady, Carswell, Callaman	Group	Develop sense of ethnic identity and group affiliation, provide youth coping strategies for negative environmental influences, help youth cope with stress, provide youth problem-solving and conflict resolution skills, increase youth's social skills	African-American college students or recent college grads	Urban	U.S.	Yes



Program Name	Authors	Mentoring Model	Goals of Program	Type of Mentor	Geographic Area	US vs. Int'l	SEL Specific Curriculum
<b>Young Women Leaders Program</b>	Deutsch, Reitz-Krueger, Henneberger, Ehrlich, Lawrence	Group, One-to-one	Promote positive youth development, reduce developmental issues (e.g., relational aggression, dating, body image)	College women	Urban	U.S.	Yes
<b>Young Women Leaders Program</b>	Leyton-Armaka, Lawrence, Deutsch, Williams, Henneberger	Group, One-to-one	Promote positive youth development, reduce developmental issues (e.g., relational aggression, dating, body image)	College women	Urban	U.S.	Yes
<b>Young Women Leaders Program</b>	Peifer, Lawrence, Williams, Leyton-Armaka	Group, One-to-one	Promote positive youth development, reduce developmental issues (e.g., relational aggression, dating, body image)	College women	Urban	U.S.	Yes

As evidenced by the variety of practices and models explored in the above literature review, there are many ways to facilitate social and emotional development through intentional relationship-building and mentoring. The following case studies provide a deeper dive on four distinct approaches to integrating relationships with social and emotional learning for young adolescents in middle schools and after-school programs. They illustrate various relationship-based models, including advisory groups, group, peer, and one-to-one mentoring, as well as models that combine these approaches. They take place in various settings — from classrooms during the school day, to after-school programs in school settings, to workplace settings

where students gain exposure to career experiences. They also provide snapshots of different practices that programs can use to engage young adolescents in meaningful ways, such as culturally relevant activities, sharing circles, mindfulness exercises, and role-playing activities that facilitate skill-building.

The models and practices showcased in these case studies were selected due to their alignment with the research on the needs and assets of young adolescents in the middle grades. They emphasize group and peer connections, identity development, cultivating leadership, and supporting youth through the major transitions they face at this stage. The case studies are by no means

exhaustive; there are many more examples of effective relationship-based programming, and effective practices and models for young adolescents, that are not represented here. These descriptions are intended to provide a picture of what effective relationship-based programming that promotes social and emotional development can look like in various settings and communities.

These case studies were created through observations and interviews with practitioners, students, and researchers involved in several school-based and after-school programs that utilize these models and practices. As you review them, you may identify practices that hold promise for your own school, classroom, program, or community.

# CASE STUDIES: FOUR PROMISING MODELS



## 3.1 TALKING IN CIRCLES

### An In-School, Relationship-Centered Approach

“I have been feeling a lot of pressure lately,” admits Nicole, a sixth grader. “I play soccer and have to practice a lot and I have games,” she tells everyone in her classroom. “It’s been interfering with my classes and my grades have gone down. My family expects me to get good grades.”

Nicole and a group of 15 of her sixth grade peers are assembled in teacher Shari Vendrolini’s classroom for an advisory period shortly after the morning bell rings at A. P. Giannini Middle School in San Francisco. It is a diverse set of young people, nearly equal parts Caucasian, African-American, Hispanic, and Asian. Fittingly, Vendrolini, a California native, is a versatile, midcareer teacher with a master’s degree in cross-cultural education.

A.P. Giannini is the largest middle school in the San Francisco Unified School District, located in the Sunset District on the central west side of the city, just south of Golden Gate Park. The school has been around since the 1950s, named after Amadeo Pietro Giannini, the famous son of Italian immigrants who founded Bank of Italy, which later became Bank of America. Historically serving a heavily working-class Chinese-American population, the student demographics have been evolving as the community gentrifies.

“Giannini has had a strong reputation for academic achievement,” explains Tai Schoeman, the school’s principal. “My background was in elementary school, as a teacher and a principal before I got here, so the idea of nurturing the whole child is one I wanted to bring with me.” The practices teachers and

students engage in during the advisory period foster the kind of social and emotional skill-building Schoeman sees as clear indicators of long-term college and career readiness. “The research really bears that out.”

***“My background was in elementary school, as a teacher and a principal before I got here, so the idea of nurturing the whole child is one I wanted to bring here with me.”***

***—Tai Schoeman, Principal, A.P. Giannini Middle School***

### Making Big Connections Through Small Groups

Schoeman brought in advisers from Millennium — a San Francisco-based organization focused on relationship-based teaching and learning in the middle school years — to help build the capacity of A.P. Giannini’s teachers to deliver social and emotional learning effectively. “When we started Millennium, we really wanted to focus on the developmental needs unique to middle schoolers,” explains Jeff Snipes, who cofounded Millennium with his business partner, Chris Balme. An experienced social entrepreneur, Balme heads the Millennium School in San Francisco, located





in the Boys and Girls Club building in the Hayes Valley neighborhood. It's a small, private prototype or laboratory middle school for the Millennium approach. Meanwhile, Snipes spearheads the organization's professional learning and development programs designed to package and teach the best practices of Millennium School to educators across the country.

"When we did our research to develop Millennium," Snipes recounts, "we started with the question: what are the environmental factors that most contribute to the health and well-being of adolescents?" The research led Snipes and Balme to a student-centric, highly relational design, harkening back to the likes of Montessori, Dewey, and Rogers.

"The centerpiece of the Millennium approach is really small, intimate advisory groups we call 'Forums,'" Snipes says. "Young adolescents develop their identities from a social context. They define who they are based on social feedback: 'I feel safe, I feel trusted, I feel seen.' You have to create the environment to let them do that."

Small groups are not easy to implement in large schools like A.P. Giannini, which represented a problem for Snipes and his team,

who had presented the idea to a dozen middle school principals in San Francisco. Snipes recalls all of them saying: "This is a really cool, exciting innovation. I don't see how we can do any of it." Ultimately, A.P. Giannini did decide to pilot the model with four advisory groups of 30 students each. "It really changed the design," notes Snipes. "It was no longer a small group. We had lots of pair sharing. We had more lessons delivered by the teacher. We didn't get the power of small group dialogue."

To get the right effect, Snipes and his team learned, they needed to figure out a way to get the groups down to 15 students. So they worked with Schoeman and the A.P. Giannini teachers to come up with an alternating schedule, splitting the normal class of 30 into two groups of 15. Each week, one group meets in the Forum while the other visits the library. The next week, they switch. The time lag each group experiences does diminish the relationship building somewhat. But the educators believe the smaller group size more importantly creates a more powerful dynamic during the advisory session.

"If you can have a Forum group of roughly 15 kids, they connect in a way that they don't ordinarily in

a regular academic environment," says Kristy Lewis, one of the three teachers at A.P. Giannini who facilitate Forum sessions. "They can talk about what happens at home or on the playground. They share their experiences." Lewis believes this helps students connect with each other in more meaningful ways. "The barriers of difference can break down," she describes. "We try to recognize patterns in conversations and topics together. It's a great way for them to realize that they're not that different from one another."

***"If you can have a forum group of roughly 15 kids, they connect in a way that they don't ordinarily in a regular academic environment. They can talk about what happens at home or on the playground. They share their experiences. The barriers of difference can break down."***

***—Kristy Lewis, sixth grade teacher, A.P. Giannini Middle School***

### **Teachers Empower Students to Lead and Share Their Voice**

The Forum sessions create a structure for relationship building through group activities and dialogue in a tight 50 minutes. "We have a routine," Nicole says.



“In the beginning, people just get comfortable, mindful. And at the end, we get to observe what happened.”

Vendrolini, who teaches sixth grade math, facilitates the advisory session in which Nicole and her peers are taking part. She has students arrange chairs into a circle where they can all see each other and converse freely with each other in multiple directions. The students are still in the early goings of their middle school tenure and therefore on balance a touch shy as their time together begins. To get the students warmed up, Vendrolini sets up a mindfulness exercise. She calls for a volunteer to lead it. As quietly as possible, Lila, one of the students, offers her leadership.

As the room quiets and Vendrolini nods affirmatively to her student leader, Lila takes a few moments to ready herself before barely audibly asking her classmates to set down their notebooks or journals, sit up straight, and place their hands in their laps. “Breathe in,” she says softly once the room is settled. A couple of seconds later, “Breathe out.” The room remains still as Lila repeats these instructions and the group follows them for a half dozen rounds.

Vendrolini ultimately breaks a silent lull when Lila finishes. “How was it to lead that?” she

asks. Without hesitation, and louder than she has spoken to this point, Lila exclaims with a chortle, “Scary!” The quip sparks laughter, and it breaks the collective apprehension within the group as well as any intentional breathing could. In any case, the students now outwardly show a bit more ease and appear ready for greater sharing.

In the Millennium Forum approach, students like Lila take on leadership roles in the classroom. The teacher is present, but she’s there to set safe boundaries, facilitate, and model, not to micromanage or to be the sole keeper of knowledge. Snipes explains, “We say that the teacher is a mirror (they see the child for who they are) a model (they are an example of healthy adult behavior) and a mentor (they meet one-on-one with students and talk about how they’re doing along their own path).”

This recasting of the teacher role helps build the kind of bonds that research shows young adolescents need to learn and develop. “It feels like second semester already,” says teacher Lindsay Yellen, barely two months into the school year. Yellen leads Millennium Forum sessions at A.P. Giannini with her colleagues Lewis and Vendrolini. “That closeness you can have with the kids. You usually never have that this quickly, and not to this degree.”

## Setting the Environment for Authentic Dialogue

The structure of empowerment inherent in the Forum model creates an atmosphere of trust where young people are set up well to interact in authentic, and at times, vulnerable ways. And their teacher facilitators provide them with tools to do that effectively. First, in many traditional classrooms, students’ main interaction is with teachers or with media or workbooks. Here, they are instead positioned to talk with each other. The dialogue is peer-to-peer, focused on their interests and their experiences. Second, whereas much of student engagement with content in a typical school environment is observational — taking in, processing, and relaying content that is delivered to them through teachers, media, and workbooks — here it is instead internally reflective. Using affective dialogue, students are coached to say, “My experience is...” This keeps learning personal and truly student-centered.

Vendrolini’s Forum session showcases this with a highly individual and personal exercise called the “Clearing Model.” The activity is based on one by the same name, developed by author, speaker, and adviser Jim Dethmer, founder of the Chicago-based



Conscious Leadership Group, which advises executives in the business world on relationship management and problem-solving. “We’re going to identify a trouble or something we want to change or resolve,” Vendrolini says in set up. “You’re going to work to make sense of it for yourself. You may just clarify things for yourself, versus resolving them completely or getting what you really want. But, you’ll tackle it.”

The students pull out their journals as Vendrolini guides them on what to write. “What are the facts? What’s my story? How am I feeling? What do I want?” The room then falls silent save for the scattered scuffs of pencils on paper. For several minutes, a third of the group is heads down, vigorously pushing beyond a page of thoughts. Another third is more labored, with stops and starts, but capturing enough to satisfy. The remainder softly gaze more than focus and have pencils with teeth marks and a scribbled line or two to show for their efforts.

When Vendrolini calls them all back together, she has trouble getting someone to volunteer their thoughts. A few awkward moments pass before Nicole pipes up about her soccer obsession and its effects on her school performance and her image within her family. While everyone else

stays silent, Vendrolini follows, relaying some struggles she is having with her daughter. She models the protocol of stating the facts, then her story or perspective, then her feelings on the matter, and finally what she’d like to see happen. It inspires Keenan, the student sitting next to Vendrolini, to offer up reflections on his own struggles with a friend with whom he was quarreling.

“It feels good to talk and get stuff off your chest,” says Keenan afterward. “It’s hard to express your feelings in regular classes. Here, whatever happens in that circle stays there. People respect it. It’s a rule that we have.” In the Millennium Forum model, the group commits to a set of “shared agreements,” including confidentiality, mutual respect, authentic curiosity, equanimity, compassion, and honoring multiple perspectives. Another rule is listening without judgment. “Once you hear other people express their feelings and open up, you understand them better, and maybe you can do the same,” Nicole says. “You get closer to your classmates. You can connect to them.”

This particular session is somewhat light on actual peer-to-peer dialog, but at this point the sixth graders have only met in Forum a few times and are just starting.

Nevertheless, the value of participation is instilled early on. Each Forum session, one of the students stands as a recorder of participation, ideally to ensure equal time for voices in the group. “In Forum, we’re strict about participation,” Nicole confirms. Although she admits that it’s not easy for everybody. “She’s really kind, even if no one participates,” Nicole says of Vendrolini. “She’ll say, ‘Okay that’s fine, maybe next week.’” Keenan says Vendrolini often tries humor to get students to contribute. “If she asks a question and no one raises their hand, she says, ‘Not everyone, calm down now.’”

“It’s early,” says Snipes. “You should see them by eighth grade. The teacher is barely there. The students take over and run the Forum themselves.” Nicole agrees. “You get used to sharing with your class,” she says. “It gives people more confidence. I could tell after Forum a lot of people participate more in their regular classes too.”

### **Developing Social and Emotional Skills for Students, and for Teachers**

Indeed, research shows that building students’ social and emotional skills in venues like advisory groups and with approaches like Millennium Forum make them better equipped to do



well in school more broadly. Principal Schoeman notes this as a key driver in his teachers being willing to take on a new approach, despite the barriers. “We are torn in our traditional schedule just to fit all the state mandates in,” he explains. “So it’s pretty impressive that the sixth grade teachers have seen the power in this model. Like any change management process, it’s finding people who see the value in it. It gained faster momentum than I expected, frankly.”

Indeed, much of the appeal of the Forum approach is how well it supports teachers. According to Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, professor of Human Development at the University of British Columbia and a noted expert in social and emotional learning, “Teachers are the engine that drives social and emotional learning programs and practices in schools, and their own socioemotional competence and well-being strongly influences their students.” Advisers from Millennium have set up Forums for educators, akin to those the teachers ultimately facilitate for their students. The gatherings offer a combination of in-person and online professional learning for educators, typically in small groups of eight to ten that meet for 90-120 minutes every month. In addition to teachers at A.P. Giannini, Millennium advisers work

with teachers in a number of Forums across the country.

Meanwhile, Millennium is engaging a host of advisers to study the effects of its practices. Along with Schonert-Reichl, the organization has engaged scholars and experts from Stanford Graduate School of Education, University of California at Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center, University of San Francisco Neuroscape Lab, and Columbia University Teachers College.

Snipes hopes the researchers see the same thing he sees: great power and flexibility in the methodology to foster strong relationships with a variety of young adolescent populations and in diverse settings. “Whether you feel disconnected because of your socioeconomic position, or you are bullied or unfairly treated, or reeling from a shooting, or ambivalent or embarrassed by your white privilege or angry about inequity, or the innumerable things young adolescents contend with as they work to understand themselves, you can drop anything like that into the Forum circle. The environment enables educators and young people to authentically address what’s critical to them and their own development on their own terms and on their own time.”

## QUICK REFERENCE: AN IN-SCHOOL, RELATIONSHIP- CENTERED APPROACH

### Relationship-Based Model

Group mentoring

### Youth focus

Young adolescents

### Major Practices

Small groups  
Sharing circles  
Mindfulness  
Role-playing

### Socioemotional skills and success assets

Self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, peer identity, agency

### Mentors

School teaching faculty

### Reach

Mostly local, some regional affiliates

### Community

Urban

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## 3.2 LEADERS, BIG AND LITTLE

### A Combined Group and One-to-One Mentoring Approach

“I am really shy and really nervous,” says Claire, a 13-year-old student. Claire, who was born in Kenya and moved to the United States when she was 6, is an American-adolescent-as-you-can-get eighth grader at Jackson P. Burley Middle School in Charlottesville, Virginia. “In school, they just want you to keep going with your day. Here I get special attention.”

By “here,” Claire means the mentoring program she takes part in after school along with a dozen or so female peers at Burley. She

was specifically sought out for the opportunity. “We do a needs assessment to see what’s getting in the way of being successful in school and life in general,” says Leslie Fendley, school counselor. Fendley administers what she calls a “Trust Survey” with all the students at the beginning of the year. “We basically ask two questions. ‘Do you have another student you might identify with whom you could talk to?’ And I list all the teachers and administrators and custodians — all the adults in the building. And then I ask, ‘Can you identify an adult in the building you could talk to?’”

Most students respond positively to the first and offer multiple names for the second. Then there are those who either say no to having peer confidants or select just one or even none of the adults. That’s an indication a student may be feeling disconnected. “We use this as a jumping off point,” says Fendley. “The key is to find students who are not already receiving a lot of outside support for some social and emotional needs. Students who are marginalized, but you can tell there’s a lot there.” In addition, Fendley consults with faculty to solicit nominations to the program.

### Budding Women Leaders Guide Their Younger Peers Toward Leadership of Their Own

For the girls fitting this profile, she talks with them about the Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP). The model was founded in 1997 by Edith “Winx” Lawrence, now Professor Emeritus, Curry Programs in Clinical and School Psychology at the University of Virginia Curry School of Education and Human Development. “I had done some research locally on the needs of high school girls and found that they actually had ample services for them, but that middle school was the place that needed more support,” Lawrence says. “Given the literature on this age group, we were quickly drawn to a mentoring approach.”

YWLP is offered in four Charlottesville area public middle schools as well as half a dozen or so “sister” sites around the country. While located in the city limits of Charlottesville, Burley Middle School is actually a part of Albemarle County Public Schools, serving students in the central Virginia county adjacent to Shenandoah National Park. It was built in 1951 as an all-black high school before desegregation. It





went through a number of iterations as the process of desegregation unfolded, before landing as a grades six-to-eight building in the mid-1970s. Today, it draws nearly 600 students from around Albemarle County to its city-based campus, making for a diverse student body.

This is one of the reasons why belongingness and connectedness are such a big focus at Burley. “That’s really the foundation for how students feel successful in school,” says Fendley. “To find a connection with somebody, to learn from somebody outside their friendship group and their parents. That whole ‘it takes a village’ concept is important to us in this context with such a broad school community.”

YWLP pairs female young adult University of Virginia (UVA) students with female seventh and eighth graders. (YWLP’s sister sites draw from local universities. One of the most robust chapters is based out of the University of Central Florida.) The women and girls meet once a week at the school for 20 weeks, each session involving a blend of group and one-to-one mentoring and centering on an element of the program’s sequenced leadership curriculum.

“There is a format to most of the meetings,” Lawrence explains. “The youth and the mentors share highs and lows and do a skill-building activity as a group, then they meet one on one in the mentor-mentee pairs to have that time together.” The students, mentors, school educators, and program developers universally see this combination of group and one-to-one mentoring as one of the most impactful aspects of the YWLP approach.

### **Starting Out by Getting Out: The Highs and Lows**

“I got to miss school for a field trip!” says one of the girls during an opening discussion of “highs and lows” of the week during a late Wednesday afternoon YWLP session at Burley. The women and girls sit in a circle in a cozy section of the school library on some cushions. “There is a break coming up!” says another, referencing the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday weekend. On balance, though, the girls were a touch sour. “I have a ton of homework and lots of tests coming up.” “My friends left me [for the field trip] so I was all alone in my classes.” “A rooster woke me up this morning.” A bit of laughter briefly cuts through the glumness.

Interestingly, the university students share some similar marks on the week, including lots of classwork and exams balanced with an eagerness for a break to go home to see family and friends for the holiday. The near-peer nature of the mentor-mentee matches can be especially beneficial in this regard. There is a built-in connection not only as young women but also as students whose lives are consumed by studying, youth activities, and peer relationships.

The women and girls engage in this warm-up for about ten minutes before a quick mindfulness activity. One of the girls — or “Littles” as they are called, a la Big Brothers Big Sisters parlance — leads the group in a breathing-focused calming and centering exercise. All of them participate, except for Claire, who is sitting on one of the cushions just outside the circle. Something had upset her just prior to the session and she is gradually bringing herself back into the fold.

The mentors, or “Bigs,” talk about issues and challenges like this at a weekly prep session prior to each mentoring visit with the Littles. They meet together during Monday class time at UVA to plan



out the upcoming mentoring session and to problem-solve. “One week I had trouble making sure that all the Littles were talking, and not just the outgoing ones,” says Christie, a senior at UVA and the designated facilitator of the mentors. “I mentioned it in my blog post before our Monday meeting so we could talk about it.”

While the mentors pursue majors across the university, all are enrolled in the course *Issues Facing Adolescent Girls* as part of their commitment to YWLP. The course offers them the opportunity to combine their academic knowledge with the experiential education they receive as mentors. They attend class on Mondays and plan their curriculum for the Wednesday or Thursday sessions with the Little Sisters. For class, students read relevant articles, book chapters, and other materials that they then apply to their mentoring experience.

Facilitators like Christie are UVA students who have previously served as Big Sisters and return to provide structure, support, and guidance to the mentoring groups. They take part in the course *Fostering Leadership in Girls and Women* where they post weekly

on a discussion board to reflect on their experiences in the group meetings and assigned reading materials. Through class time and the discussion boards, the facilitators support each other as they learn to navigate their leadership positions.

### **Working Together to Develop Skills for Middle School Life and Beyond**

This week’s activity is called the “Circle of Care.” After their mindfulness moment, Christie tees up the exercise about practicing kindness and respecting everyone’s differences. “In society we tend to focus on the negative things and ignore a lot of the positive stuff that happens every day,” she says to a group of young adolescents who, research suggests, tend to be hypercritical of themselves and others. It’s a part of their identity-formation. They are sorting themselves into groups, constantly making judgments about people and events in doing so.

The Bigs and Littles find an open space in the library large enough to form two concentric circles facing one another. Those in the inner circle say some gratitude about the person they are paired

with, and the receiver has to remain silent, just taking in the compliment. Then, the outer circle rotates to create another pair and another delivery of gratitude. And so it goes for a few minutes until the Littles become sufficiently blushed from the wealth of positive comments. There are a lot of awkward giggles. Christie tries to wrap things up before the tittering escalates. “Appreciating similarities and accepting differences — thinking positively about other people — is a trait we should all have,” she says in summary.

The program uses a number of these group activities to address some key developmental and relationship needs for young adolescent girls. “We get the girls discussing and doing activities around specific skills,” Lawrence explains. “We do this one we call ‘Gossip Guard.’ It’s designed to help the girls slow down, not engage in drama, and be a leader within their friend group.”

The YWLP mentor guide talks about giving the girls tools to practice empathy and kindness, both toward themselves as well as others. To be a gossip guard, when she hears friends gossiping about someone, a girl can say some-



thing positive about the person. “Research shows that if the first remark after a negative remark is positive, others are likely to make more positive remarks and less negative ones next,” the guide says. A girl can also be a gossip guard to herself by “thinking twice” once they catch themselves gossiping. “Research shows that one way we deal with difficult feelings is by trying to cover them up,” which can lead to gossiping as one looks to assign blame on others or to deflect in some way. Instead, the guide teaches that girls should do the ABCs of problem solving: “Acknowledge the uncomfortable feeling without judgment, take some deep Breaths, and Choose not to let the feeling be quite so big or painful.”

The curriculum outlines numerous group activities like these across the 20 weeks of the program, most often involving the teaching of skills, explaining the reasons for them, and engaging girls in some role-playing. There are activities around how to tackle issues with school, how to create a team of supporters, how to honor differences, and how to “keep your cool.” And YWLP isn’t shy about some of the more

complex dynamics girls face in this developmental period: how to value themselves, how to navigate romantic relationships, and how to appreciate their bodies. “Mentors have lots of freedom and flexibility in how the curriculum concepts are conveyed to the girls,” says Lawrence. “They are encouraged to do it in whatever way works best, tailored to the needs of their Littles.”

***“She’s fun. She’s really pretty. She’s caring. She has a nice voice. She’s not scary. And she listens to me.”***

***—Claire, eighth grader, Jackson P. Burley Middle School***

“We started doing ‘hot topics,’” says Christie. “We have a Little and a Big lead a topic that they choose and we have a discussion. It gives the girls a leadership role within the group. And it creates a space for them to talk about things they care about. In school they may not have as much of an opportunity to talk about those kinds of things. We give them that space. And it’s amazing how much they love to contribute!”

### **“Sister Time” Allows for Building Trusting Relationships**

After the Circle of Care, the group disbands in favor of the one-to-

one pairs. This is where the deep mentoring relationships shine. “The girls really enjoy the connection with their big sisters,” says Fendley. “They develop a sense of trust.” There is no hard and fast formula for putting a Big and a Little together. Instead, Fendley, along with Sarah Jenkins, YWLP’s mentoring coordinator, invest a lot of time in getting to know as much as they can about all of them to make good matches. “We’ve gotten good at assessing interests and personality types to put them together,” says Fendley.

Perhaps as testament to this diligence, the women and girls grow quite fond of each other as they engage in “sister time” throughout the year. “She’s fun,” Claire says of Ciana, her mentor. “She’s really pretty. She’s caring. She has a nice voice. She’s not scary. And she listens to me.” Claire then hints, matter-of-factly, at her troubles earlier in the session. “She helps me a lot. Today I was crying and she calmed me down.”

Like Claire, Ciana also had the experience of moving to a new place when she was young — from Florida to northern Virginia when she was nine, in her case. She is a 21-year-old fourth-year psychology major at UVA and



aspires to be a psychiatrist. “Claire is a ball of energy,” Ciana says. “Being around her brings my mood up after going to class all day. Getting her young energy is really nice.”

The Bigs and Littles keep the contents of their talks close, revealing only general categories of subjects on offer. “We’ve talked about school, outside activities . . . family sometimes,” says Margarita, also a 13-year-old eighth grader at Burley. “We even talk about the discussions during group and my opinions on that.” Wesley, a 20-year-old third-year student at UVA from Fairfax, Virginia, is her mentor. “She has helped me with my thinking,” Margarita goes on. “She’s been there for me. I can tell her anything. She listens to me. Like my soccer!”

The Fendley and Jenkins matchmaking approach appears on full display with this pair. “I play soccer and run,” Wesley says. It’s her second year with the program, and with Margarita. “She is one of the smartest middle schoolers I’ve met. She’s very socially aware and incredibly caring. And she’s very passionate.”

Wesley studies Youth and Social Innovation, a major at UVA’s Curry School of Education and Human Development that provides

students with knowledge and skills to design, implement, and evaluate programs for youth. This makes her especially attuned to developmental milestones and what could be expected of young people at various stages. “It’s interesting to see Margarita at this weird age for one’s development being able to say ‘I’m passionate about this’ and ‘I’m aware of what’s going on’ and being able to talk about it.”

### **Young Adolescent Girls Coming into Their Own with a Little Help**

Evidence has shown that this self-awareness that Margarita has developed is among a handful of positive effects schools like Burley are experiencing using the combined group and one-to-one mentoring approach that YWLP uses in a developmentally focused way for young adolescent girls. Nancy Deutsch, professor at UVA Curry School of Education and Human Development, leads a group of researchers from Curry, Indiana University, University of Maryland, and the Center for Creative Leadership to study the program. To date, they have found that the young people participating in YWLP not only boost their self-understanding (“being yourself”) but also their self-regulation (“thinking before acting”) and relationship

development (“trusting people”). Participants have also shown signs of greater study habits, which are a leading indicator of improved academic outcomes.

And it’s not just about the young girls. It’s about the older ones as well. “I think it’s very important to empower young girls, and young women,” says Christie, reflecting on the benefits of the experience for her and her UVA peers. “Within the program I myself felt empowered by my fellow Bigs. They had the power to effect change in other people, these girls. And I wanted to be a part of that. I wanted to show girls that they are capable and can be leaders in a bunch of ways. We all can.”

***“To find a connection with somebody, to learn from somebody outside their friendship group and their parents. That whole ‘it takes a village’ concept is important to us in this context with such a broad school community.”***

***—Leslie Feldley, School Counselor,  
Jackson P. Burley Middle School***



## QUICK REFERENCE: A COMBINED GROUP AND ONE-TO-ONE MENTORING APPROACH

### **Relationship-Based Model**

Group mentoring  
One-to-one mentoring

### **Youth focus**

Young adolescent girls

### **Major Practices**

Small groups  
Sharing circles  
Mindfulness  
Role-playing

### **Socioemotional skills and success assets**

Self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, peer identity, agency

### **Mentors**

Female college/university student volunteers

### **Reach**

Mostly local, some regional affiliates

### **Community**

Small Urban

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### 3.3 UNITING NATIONS

#### A Culture-Focused Mentoring Approach

Mentoring programs have been increasingly intentional about incorporating or deepening cultural awareness and responsiveness in program activities and among mentors themselves. For mentor Mike Cywink, culture is in his bones, and he gets to impart it to some of the First Nation young people he engages. For others, he draws it out of them.

Mike is Anishinaabe, a member of the Whitefish River First Nation. He hails from Manitoulin Island in Ontario, Canada, nestled in the upper part of Lake Huron. The Anishinaabe are among hundreds

of Indigenous nations in Canada. Nearly half of the country's more than 600,000 First Nation population live on reserves — land designated for Indigenous peoples through a compact between the First Nations and the government of Canada.

Many reserves are in lightly populated and rural areas. Mike moved from his native reserve to London, Ontario nearly a decade ago. Situated between Toronto and Detroit, London is a rapidly diversifying population center in southwestern Ontario with a mix of European descendants, Indigenous people, and newer Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants. Moving to the big city was a big shift for Mike. As he puts it: "I came from a community of 4,000 and moved to a place with 400,000!" He also admitted to being a Detroit Redwings hockey fan, which he quips may have played some part in moving to nearby London.

#### From Small Community Learning to Big-City Schools

Such a transition experience is common among the First Nation youth Mike now mentors. Among the First Nation reserve communities surrounding the city of London, Chippewa of the Thames and Oneida Nation of the

Thames operate their own elementary schools separate from the Thames Valley District School Board, which runs public schools in London proper. Some of these First Nation schools stop at sixth grade and others at grade eight, at which time students are shifted to the London city education system in the middle grades or to high school. The result is that students used to a small, tight-knit, culturally homogeneous learning environment find themselves amid a mix of young people they don't know in a bigger school a good bus ride away from home.

"One of the things that is most disheartening is that they do not see themselves reflected in this school," says Anne Elliott about the First Nation students. Anne is vice principal of Lambeth Public School, a building of 800 students in Lambeth, a neighborhood in the southwest outskirts of London. The school serves young people from the Oneida Reserve, about 20 minutes away. "The students are being bused from a community that is different," Anne elaborates. "The homes are different, the landscape is different. And when they arrive here the teachers are different. The students come from a small school in a small community and now they are separated from each other."



For young adolescents, who developmentally are consumed with introspection about who they are and their place in the world, this fish-out-of-water experience can be jarring. There are some activities with sixth graders still at school in the reserve to create a bridge. But, once in seventh grade, the First Nation students are in an entirely new environment than the one in which they've grown up.

That's where Mike Cywink comes in. Mike meets with six to ten First Nation youth at each of four London area elementary schools that serve seventh and eighth graders — Aberdeen, Lambeth, Woodland Heights, and Delaware Central Public Schools. He is a school liaison for Uniting Our Nations, a set of programs focused on Indigenous peoples in Ontario run by a group of educators and researchers from the Centre for School Mental Health at Western University. Claire Crooks, professor at the university and the Centre's director, spearheaded the development of the program to address the transition First Nation youth face in a targeted way.

"We recognized that there is a group of kids who are getting missed," Claire says, describing the origins of the program. "We

needed to do something more intentional." She and her colleagues put together a committee of educators and community partners to examine the needs of First Nation youth as they make transitions in between the early elementary years and the later high school years. The group felt that mentoring was a positive, strengths-based approach, and a good way for the importance of culture to be incorporated.

***"The best part of the mentoring experience for me is to see young people self-identify as a First Nation person and seeing them grow within that."***

***—Mike Cywink, School Liaison, Uniting Our Nations, Center for School Mental Health, Western University***

#### **Time-Honored Traditions as Tools for Present-Day Youth**

But the cultural emphasis required thoughtful implementation. "We needed to avoid a pan-Indigenous approach," Claire cautions. "There are hundreds of different cultures within First Nations. While there are universal beliefs and practices, if you want to speak to First Nation youth in an authentic way, it needs to be highly relationship-based, getting to know who they are in their specific cultural context."

One way Uniting Our Nations gets to this specificity is by emphasizing the importance of language and terminology. Words like Indigenous, Aboriginal, First Nations, and Metis, often need to be discussed and selected or changed depending on the individual cultural context. School educators collaborate with community leaders and elders to make these important determinations.

This effort toward cultural specificity is essential for building relationships with First Nation youth. "He's not from where we're from," jokes Jorja about Mike. Jorja is a 13-year-old seventh grader at Lambeth who takes part in the program. "We are Haudenosaunee and he is Ojibwe. He has different stories and we often correct him!"

The stories and traditional practices of First Nation peoples are infused throughout the Uniting Our Nations mentoring approach. The program runs 16 weeks, eight in the fall-to-winter months and another eight in the winter-to-spring timeframe. In that time, Mike meets with a small group of young people in each school once a week for one hour during the school day.



The first handful of sessions involves getting-to-know-you activities centered on some foundational Indigenous beliefs, including a particular First Nation creation story. The young people gather in a small circle at the beginning of each session to kick things off each week. “The first thing we do when we meet is a cultural practice called the smudge,” Mike describes. “It stems from our creation story.”

Mike lights a bowl of sage — the smudge — which relates to the Ojibwe teachings surrounding the Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel is common across Indigenous peoples. While elements of the wheel vary by nation, they are generally divided into quadrants, each representing different aspects of existence that humans progress through: life stage (child, youth, adult, elder), season (winter, spring, summer, fall), direction (north, south, east, west), being (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual), attributes (generosity, wisdom, bravery, fortitude). A different sacred animal (deer, buffalo, bear, eagle) and herb (sage, cedar, tobacco, sweetgrass) correspond to each quadrant as well, which is where the burning sage of the smudge comes in.

“It’s like a spiritual cleanse,” Mike explains. “It’s like a shower, but for the spirit. You smudge your eyes, your mouth, and your heart.” It has a calming and centering effect, much like meditation. It’s a way for the young people to bond with one another through ritual. It readies them to open up, share, and take in lessons Mike has for them. And the young people become very respectful of the practice. “It’s so, so important,” Mike says. “If I forget it, the kids are on me. They need to do it. It’s like brushing your teeth.”

Following the smudge, Mike engages the young people in a topic of the week. The lessons are especially relevant to young people in the early adolescent period. They are broached through a cultural story, practice, or belief, addressing the present needs and concerns and interests of youth using traditional context.

“We compare what’s happening to us now with what happened to our people back then,” says Gracie, also a seventh grader at Lambeth. “Like fighting and violence. We learn about the tree of peace. When there were wars going on between our nations, one person realized we needed to stick together to save our culture. They buried the weapons underneath a

tree. So, we talk about bullying and how to make good friendships.”

Another topic is healthy eating. The young people learn about the First Nation legend of the three sisters — the crop triumvirate of corn, beans, and squash. The lesson here is harmony and balance in the diet, much like the three sisters support and depend on each other. As the *Uniting Our Nations* program manual explains: “The beans help create nitrogen for the corn, which needs a lot to produce a good crop. The corn provides a structure for the trailing beans to grow upon. The squash reduces the weeds and shades the soil to maximize water usage, as well as deterring hungry intruders with the prickly hairs on their vines.”

These and other lessons that cut across youth experience — developing self-esteem, avoiding substance abuse, building communication skills, making future choices, having positive attitudes — are all conveyed through traditional stories and customs.

### **Forming Cultural Identities for Landings and Jumping-Off Points**

The cultural context of *Uniting Our Nations* is tailor-made for young adolescents going through





a process of identity formation, particularly peer identity. Research shows that the associations young people form at this age are highly formative and will be long lasting. This is true for young people who are strongly attuned to their First Nation culture, and those who are distant from it.

“The students from Aberdeen are very different from those at Lambeth,” says Mike, speaking of his mentees from the two London city schools with seventh and eighth graders in the program. “There are ‘urban First Nation’ students at Aberdeen. They did not grow up on the reserves. They are from local city neighborhoods. They live here in London.”

For them, he says much of the effect of the Uniting Our Nations program is to get young people more in touch with their cultural heritage, to understand it, embrace it, and make it a part of their identity in a positive way. For students at Lambeth, who are immersed in their culture living on the Oneida Reserve, Uniting Our Nations leverages that cultural identity to help navigate the challenging school and developmental transitions of early adolescence.

“I can’t stress enough how important the cultural piece is

to students,” Mike implores. Also important is getting the cultural piece from someone who is part of that culture himself.

“One of the biggest things is having a facilitator who can relate to any of these kids,” explains Charlene Camillo. Charlene was Mike’s predecessor at Uniting Our Nations, a school liaison/mentor in the early goings of the model. She is now a learning coordinator for the Thames Valley District School Board, working to support First Nation students across all London city and area schools. She is a member of the Moose Cree First Nation.

***“These are the years when connectivity is so vital — connecting to caring adults. Feeling a sense of belonging, that someone has your back. We need more of this in our schools.”***

***—Paul McKenzie, Assistant Superintendent for Student Achievement, Thames Valley District School Board***

“I see a lot of kids who might not want to identify as Indigenous for a variety of reasons — dealing with the backlash sometimes,” she says. “But having opportunities for kids to learn about their own identity builds their estimate of themselves, their self-confidence. Having

mentors who have the same background helps.” She believes that has helped Mike and her connect with First Nation youth. “Mike and I actually went to the same high school. We’re both outgoing. We’ll find kids’ interests.”

Broadly, this role that mentors like Charlene and Mike play is vital in schools, according to Paul McKenzie, superintendent for Student Achievement for Thames Valley. “For the early adolescent period, when so many things are going on, the mentoring space is a safe and welcoming space for students,” he says. “Let’s face it: the classroom may be fifth on the list of importance to them. These are the years when connectivity is so vital — connecting to caring adults. Feeling a sense of belonging, that someone has your back. We need more of this in our schools.”

McKenzie feels that this is especially the case for First Nation students transitioning into the public school system. “We have to make sure that their first year here has a safe landing point.” The cultural focus of Uniting Our Nations builds the capacity of schools to create that safe landing point, while also speaking to the holistic learning and development needs of young adolescents.



“Uniting Our Nations is something I would have loved to have had myself,” says Charlene Camillo. “Those opportunities just weren’t in place when I was in school. When you are living in a diverse urban setting, there are so many stereotypes. You need a place where you can be comfortable with who you are and carve your path from there.”

### **Being in Touch with Cultural Identity Can Lead to Being in Touch with School**

Claire Crooks and her colleagues at Western University have studied the effects of Uniting Our Nations over time. They have been specifically interested in how cultural connectedness — which they define as the extent to which an individual feels connected to their culture — is a “protective factor” for First Nation youth. Does it bolster their resiliency against the many adversities they face as Indigenous peoples?

Researchers did in fact find increases in cultural identity formation and cultural connectedness among the program’s participants. A qualitative study showed that youth felt they had more opportunity to explore their identity and, importantly, felt they didn’t have to compromise that

identity in order to succeed in school. The researchers gleaned that these assets boosted resilience, countering negative effects of shame and experiences with racism. The program has also seen effects more broadly important to young people in early adolescence. Participants were more engaged in school generally — beyond the program — and they began to see themselves as leaders.

“Uniting First Nations has given these students the opportunity to really celebrate authentically what makes them, how they define themselves as individuals,” says Anne Elliott. “They have a sense of pride about it. They don’t feel like they need to keep it hidden.”

This ultimate outcome is especially satisfying for Mike Cywink. “The best part of the mentoring experience for me is to see young people self-identify as a First Nation person and seeing them grow within that,” he says. “Seeing them talk about their issues in the context of their heritage. Seeing that cultural growth. I know that means they are learning who they truly are.”

## **QUICK REFERENCE: A HERITAGE-FOCUSED MENTORING APPROACH**

**Relationship-Based Model**  
Group mentoring

**Youth focus**  
Indigenous persons

**Major Practices**  
Infusion of cultural traditions  
Small groups  
Sharing circles

**Socioemotional skills and success assets**  
Self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, peer identity, agency

**Mentors**  
Professional staff

**Reach**  
Regional

**Community**  
Urban

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### 3.4 CONNECTING THE DOTS

#### Mentoring Approaches that Show a Success Path from School to Career

“What do you know about Tyson Foods?” asks Kanchan Garg, Brand Manager for the global food company, as she addresses a group of eager seventh graders. “Chicken!” a couple students shout out at once. There is an acknowledging laughter among the adults in the room, mostly Tyson Foods employees, as if they’ve heard that association before.

Roughly 20 students from National Teachers Academy (NTA), a Chicago public K-8 elementary school, are assembled

in a large, two-story common area at Tyson Foods’ Chicago office building, which sits between the city’s Downtown “Loop” and West Loop neighborhoods. Garg stands in front of a test kitchen as she talks to the group, while some of her colleagues pass out snacks and drinks.

“We’re going to get going with our first activity,” she says, trying to amplify her voice enough to overcome the collective rustle of a couple dozen snack bar wrappers being opened. “We’re going to talk about social capital. Let’s break it down. Who can tell me what ‘social’ means?”

The students jump quickly at the question. “Lots of people.” “People collaborating.” Garg nods. “Very good,” she says. “Now, what about ‘capital’?” This part is a little

harder, prompting Garg to offer up a definition herself after a few moments of quiet. “Capital is something that has value, like money. So, social capital is like relationship money. You can build relationships in order to get something or to help you out. For example, you have a relationship with your teacher and she can help you with a problem. When you use social capital, you use some of that relationship money to do something. Today, you’re expanding your social capital.”

#### Connecting What You Are Today to What You Will Become Tomorrow

The students almost immediately cash in some of that capital by exploring the world of Tyson Foods with the help of the volunteers. Igor German, associate brand manager, whisks a handful of them up the elevator to a cubicle-laden floor, which houses his own workspace. There, the young professional and former English teacher talks about his job, which is presently fixed on developing new packaging for some frozen food items. “That one kinda looks too cutsie,” one of the students offers, examining the imagery.

German fields more feedback from the group while explaining the



process he and his associates work through to develop compelling packaging — how it has to reflect the food as well as connect to what consumers want. “It looks healthy,” another one observes as German shows them a mock-up of products with natural ingredients.

This workplace exploration, dubbed Spark Lab, is a group mentoring component of the Spark Program. Spark is a national nonprofit founded in 2004 in Redwood City, California, that serves middle school-age students in the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Chicago. The program facilitates career exploration experiences and self-discovery opportunities through group and one-to-one mentoring in workplace settings. Tyson Foods has been a longtime partner with Spark in Chicago since 2013, hosting more than 140 mentorships and numerous Spark Labs.

“When you sit down with 11-, 12-, or 13-year-olds, you find they have a lot to say about what they want to be when they grow up,” explains Jim Schroder, Spark’s Head of Program. “From their perspective, they are thinking long term: how are they going to make money, what will they do as an

adult, what will an independent life look like for them. Through these experiences with professionals in workplaces, we try and make a concrete link between the future they are imagining and today. Our goal is not to have them find the career they are going to stick with. It’s too early for that. It’s to build excitement and motivation for career, and helping them see more clearly the path to get there.”

***“What we invest in most is that relationship. The first few sessions are all relationship building. And then the mentors and scholars stay together for a couple years, sometimes longer. So they have that time to develop that bond, that trust.”***

***—Chris Perkins, Manager of Volunteer Recruitment and Development, Higher Achievement***

Spark is among a number of national and local programs that partner with schools to harness the resources of volunteer mentors and out-of-school time to provide young adolescents with academic, social, and emotional supports at a critical inflection point developmentally. In a high-stakes education environment, with the many

accountability demands schools have on them, bringing on a quality, results-focused out-of-school time program partner that can integrate with the overall educational experience being offered to students can be a great asset.

For relationship-focused programs that use mentors as a key ingredient, part of this integration involves shaping how students think about their mentors. “Our end game is to see student engagement and achievement go up, which in young people’s world means engaging and achieving in school,” Schroder elaborates. “We want students to experience Spark as part of their education, to finish Spark thinking not “that was cool, but now I have to go to school” but rather “this kind of exploration and growth is what I can experience throughout my education”. We want to make education full of possibility.”

### **Long-term Success Starts with Success in School**

Connecting mentors to the day-to-day needs and experiences students have in school can be hard to do at this age. “It’s challenging for middle school kids. They’re not always so focused,” says Jeneva, an information science major at the University of Maryland-College



Park, and a mentor involved with the nonprofit Higher Achievement based in Washington, DC. “It’s hard for them to navigate all the factors that are top of mind for them, being with their friends and having fun, and doing well in school. Getting their attention is the biggest part of what I’m doing.”

Jeneva volunteers at Kelly Miller Middle School in the Lincoln Heights neighborhood of Washington, DC’s Ward 7, which sits on the far eastern corner of the city along the Maryland border. Higher Achievement has been operating at the school for the last 10 years. The Lincoln Heights Housing Project, an array of public housing apartments and townhouses, surrounds the school.

“East of the Anacostia River is probably the most under-resourced area in all of DC,” says Chris Perkins, manager of

Volunteer Recruitment and Development for Higher Achievement’s DC metro office. “There are 10 or 15 elementary schools in this area that feed into Kelly Miller, so these are all kids from this community. And many of our mentors come from the community as well. It’s pretty grass roots.”

Jeneva works with Tristan, an eighth grader at Kelly Miller. They sit at two combination desks facing each other in a windowless interior classroom awash in fluorescent lighting. A half dozen other student-mentor pairs inhabit the space along with them. Jeneva hands Tristan a small note card with a graph of black dots in a pattern and asks him to take a minute to examine it and then explain to her the correlation of the data.

They go through ten or so rounds of this, with Jeneva giving Tristan

feedback on his answers. “Right now I’m learning scatter plots,” he says. “Jeneva is really helpful. If I don’t know something or don’t understand, she breaks it down in the easiest way possible.” He hastens to add: “But the best part is her personality. She’s a lot of fun.”

“We call our students ‘scholars’ and our mentors ‘academic mentors,’ but almost all of them are not academic tutors or teachers,” explains Perkins. “We provide them with the curriculum. They do one evening a week on math and one on English language arts, always together with the same scholar. What we invest in most is that relationship. The first few sessions are all relationship building. And then the mentors and scholars stay together for a couple years, sometimes longer. So they have that time to develop that bond, that trust.”

Higher Achievement was founded in Washington, DC, in 1975, and now runs programming at school sites in the nation’s capital as well as in Baltimore, Richmond, and Pittsburgh. Students engage in the program three days per week when school is in session, plus six weeks over the summer. The organization has built a robust curriculum that structures and guides volunteer mentors in their



work with students to boost academic achievement. A recent randomized trial study showed Higher Achievement programming equates to 48 extra school days in math and 30 extra in reading per year.

But academics are not the sole input for school success. Higher Achievement has been drawing from the increasing evidence that shows integrating academic, social, and emotional development boost student performance in school. Higher Achievement scholars are set up to connect and dialogue with their mentors, and also with near peers and each other around topics of concern to them. They touch upon weighty concepts like freedom, justice, solidarity, and voice. They also talk about their visions for their own futures, and what they are doing now in school to get there.

### **The Weighty and Consequential Transition into High School**

In this particular Higher Achievement session, staff gathers the students in a wide hallway with blue lockers and has them assemble into five groups. They play a game of sorts, as staff read off a few statements and ask the students to identify whether the statements are true or false about the high school application

process in DC. If a team gets the answer right, the team gets a point. A team can get bonus points by explaining the answer.

“Grades are most important in getting into the high school you want.” False. A combination of factors is used, and some schools value grades more than others. “Private schools are better than public schools.” False. There are good school options, both public and private. “You don’t need to apply to a different high school.” True. Students can automatically enroll in their boundary school if they choose.

Like many big city school districts, the District of Columbia Public

Schools (DCPS) has created a system to allow students to choose their high school, instead of automatically transferring into the one in their neighborhood. These opportunities have been made possible by the great many more options created by charter schools, magnet schools, selective enrollment schools, and the like. DCPS has 30 traditional and charter public high schools, and students are allowed to apply to up to 12 of them.

This is true in Chicago as well, at an even bigger scale. There are more than 150 high schools in Chicago Public Schools, the third largest school district in the country. Like DCPS, CPS has





evolved toward a “portfolio” approach to schooling, not only with traditional, charter, magnet, and selective enrollment options, but also thematic ones. There are schools that focus on math, science, and technology, or ones that are centered on performing arts, and others that have “schools within schools” where students can apply to a specific track, like International Baccalaureate or a career and technical education for architecture or pre-engineering.

“You’re going to spend about 4,000 hours in high school,” says Phil Masters as he roams a room of mostly attentive eighth graders back at National Teachers Academy (NTA) in Chicago. “It’s important that you’ll like being there.”

Masters is Spark’s Chicago program director and leads the organization’s partnership with NTA, a public K-8 elementary school sitting on the edge of Chicago’s Chinatown neighborhood, just south of the city’s center “Loop.” Just after eight o’clock on a chilly fall morning he’s working hard to engage a group of nearly thirty students gathered in a second-floor classroom. The students look as though they haven’t yet fully accepted the morning, but are helped along by the sunlight

shining brightly from the windows, as if to comment on the nature of their futures.

***“Students at this age are greatly influenced by their peers. We want them to come away saying, ‘I’m the type of person who is a part of a group that works really hard in school and this will get me someplace in life.’”***

***—Jim Schroder, Head of Program, Spark Program, Inc.***

Most of these NTA students had already participated in Spark’s group and one-to-one mentoring programming in seventh grade with volunteers at companies like Tyson Foods. They got the idea for pursuing a career, and now they’re focused on the next step in getting there — successfully landing in a high school that fits their interests and goals.

The transition into ninth grade is one of the most challenging for students. The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago found that students upon entering high school lose a half grade point in GPA on average and their unexcused absences triple. And of those students who drop out of high school, most do so in ninth grade. Many other students are

held back in ninth grade only to ultimately decide to leave school later.

This situation is commonplace in many big-city school districts. “In DC, the graduation rate right now is 68 percent citywide,” describes Chris Perkins. “But for low-income students, it’s about 60 percent. And in this neighborhood, it’s about 40 percent,” he says, speaking of Lincoln Heights where Higher Achievement runs its programming at Kelly Miller Middle School. “Meanwhile, students have access to top-tier and specialty high schools where 95 percent graduate on time and college ready. That’s probably the biggest part of what we’re trying to do here.” Steering students toward a high school that is the right fit can go a long way to ensuring they enter a place in which they are most likely to be successful.

On the other hand, this process does place an added pressure on middle school-age students to make a choice that could have lasting effects, given the differences in quality, programs, and outcomes among high schools. Consequently, educating middle schoolers about their high school options has become a bigger part of both Higher



Achievement and Spark Program. Spark even developed an online platform, [sparkpathfinder.org](http://sparkpathfinder.org), which uses sophisticated algorithms to combine students' interests with high school programs that are a good match for them.

Ultimately, these tools do not matter if young people aren't invested and engaged. Therefore, the real value add for both of these programs is leveraging mentoring, relationships, and out-of-school time to excite, guide, and support young adolescents as they navigate the high school selection process, and then prepare for the transition itself.

"At the end of the day, I would say what we're really doing is fostering students' identity," explains Jim Schroder. "Students at this age are greatly influenced by their peers. We want them to come away saying, 'I'm the type of person who is a part of a group that works really hard in school because a good education will get me someplace in life.'"

## QUICK REFERENCE: MENTORING APPROACHES THAT SHOW A SUCCESS PATH FROM SCHOOL TO CAREER

### Relationship-Based Model

Group, near-peer, and one-to-one mentoring

### Youth focus

Young adolescents

### Highlighted Practices

Academic and school transition support  
Career exploration

### Socioemotional skills and success assets

Self-awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, peer identity, agency

### Mentors

Volunteers, staff, program alumni

### Reach

Regional

### Community

Big and midsize urban

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# RECOMMENDATIONS



How do we move forward from here? Based on the review of the research, policy, and practice fields dedicated to social and emotional learning and relationships, some key next steps have emerged. The below recommendations — for researchers; school, district, and youth development practitioners; policymakers, and funders — highlight gaps and needs in the work that has been done to date, and ways that these fields can partner to find solutions.

## 4.1 RESEARCHERS

Researchers can take the following next steps to advance more comprehensive and inclusive understandings of the social and emotional needs of young adolescents, and the supports that best meet their needs.

- **Conduct targeted research on relationship-based social and emotional learning in early adolescence:** Researchers should further study the social and emotional competencies most relevant to early adolescence and the types of lessons and experiences uniquely tailored for building these competencies among young adolescents. Nuanced research on which relationship-based activities and experiences can help build specific skills — as well as what works for students in different contexts and phases

of development — is needed. Researchers can also do more to understand the impacts of webs of support created by multiple, complimentary relationships young people build with family members, peers, teachers, program staff, and others, and best practices for supporting youth in building these webs.<sup>105</sup>

- **Address the intersections of social and emotional skill-building and mentoring:**

Researchers can more specifically study the impact of pairing strong, intentional mentoring with structured social and emotional skill-building opportunities. The strong effect sizes seen for social and emotional learning programming that follows the SAFE framework described by Durlak et al.<sup>106</sup> (See Annex 5) and research about the greater impacts of active skill-building approaches over passive approaches for students' social and emotional learning<sup>107</sup> make a compelling argument for structured skills-based approaches. Meanwhile, Jean Rhodes of the Chronicle for Evidence-Based Mentoring argues that mentors can make a powerful addition to these programs by providing students with opportunities to practice new skills in a supported or supervised fashion,<sup>108</sup> a component that is often missing

from evidence-based skill-building programs.<sup>109</sup> Partnering with programs that are delivering services that pair mentoring with structured skill-building can help assess the effectiveness of these combined approaches, and further study can uncover promising models while shedding light on the nuances of these strategies.

- **Address racial, ethnic, and cultural identity, as well as power and privilege:**

Researchers should expand traditional research definitions of social and emotional learning to emphasize the impact of culture, power, privilege, and discrimination on identity development and social and emotional development. Study the impacts of culturally relevant mentoring programs and relationships on students' racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, as well as skills and competencies such as coping with discrimination, cultural competence, ethnocultural empathy, identity development, and dealing with racial trauma.

- **Address youth identity holistically:** A clear limitation of the existing research literature is the lack of studies examining the role of school-based and relationship-based models in several aspects of identity development, including LGBTQI-



GNC identity, among middle school students. Researchers can help address this gap by including research measures related to these aspects of identity in their studies on the effectiveness of mentoring and social and emotional learning programs.

- **Address the specific application of social and emotional programming for students with special needs:**

How can social and emotional programs, including relationship-based approaches, best be implemented for students with a variety of special needs, from learning needs to mental health conditions? Further research is needed to explore this question, as well as the application of this programming in nontraditional school settings, such as alternative schools.

- **Explore the connections between relationship quality and social and emotional development:** Multiple studies conclude that mentoring relationship quality is critical to students' ability to benefit from relationship-based programs in a variety of ways.<sup>110</sup> However, more research is needed to understand the specific activities and practices that mentors can engage in to build high-quality relationships for diverse groups of young adolescents.

Researchers can develop specific and nuanced studies that identify the relationship between mentors' qualities, activities, and practices, students' ratings of relationship quality, and students' social and emotional outcomes.

- **Help mentors and practitioners apply research:** Develop targeted research-to-practice materials to help educate mentors of young adolescents about what is going on at this developmental stage, by interpreting research for practitioner and mentor audiences.

- **Collaborate to promote high-quality data on culture, climate, and relationships:** Many schools and districts are interested in assessing their school culture and climate, but access to resources to conduct these assessments varies regionally, as do the specific metrics assessed. Researchers can partner with schools, programs, funders, and policymakers to engage in collaborative research projects that enable schools, districts, and programs to utilize consistent, high-quality measurement tools to assess and compare students' own perspectives on their experiences in these settings, and ensure that the availability and quality of supportive relationships is included in

these assessments.

- **Convene to share best practices:** Hold a research symposium about relationship-based social and emotional learning, convening researchers in the fields of mentoring, youth development, and education to identify opportunities for more specific, targeted research studies that can address the gaps discussed above, and share best practices in research methodology in these areas.

## 4.2 SCHOOL, DISTRICT, AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS

The literature review and case studies in this guide hold a myriad of insights relevant to practitioners working in diverse settings and capacities, from school and district administrators to classroom educators, to youth development program leaders, managers, and coordinators. The following recommendations summarize some of the key insights from this research as they relate to the daily practice of professionals across these settings.

- **Learn more about student experiences:** Start by getting to know your students and their specific needs and assets — either through a structured survey, such as those performed



by Panorama Education and YouthTruth, or through less formal means, such as a focus group or student interviews. Design and/or align programming that addresses students' expressed challenges and builds on their assets, and include students in the planning process.

- **Engage parents, caregivers, families, and other members of students' webs of support:**

Families are primary and critical sources of support for their children, and play fundamental roles in students' social and emotional development. As young adolescence is often a time of significant transition for family relationships, it is more important than ever that parents, caregivers, and families are engaged in social and emotional programming in nuanced ways.<sup>111</sup> As you design relationship-based social and emotional programming, communicate inclusively with parents and families about their children's development and include their perspectives as you set goals and learn about student needs. Additionally, recognizing and tapping into the other caring relationships youth have with family members, coaches, teachers, and community members can amplify and align the work you do in school and program contexts, creating more

cohesive and meaningful developmental experiences for them.<sup>112</sup>

- **Strengthen connections between students and both adults and peers:** Due to importance of both peer and adult relationships during young adolescence, and the ways in which identity development occurs in the context of social relationships, consider the importance of relationship-based programs that cultivate positive relationships with both adults and peers. Consider group models that harness the power of groups and peer identity for this developmental stage, as demonstrated by both the Young Women Leaders Program and the Millennium Forum Advisory Groups. Or, consider matching older students with younger students in a structured group peer mentoring program heavily supported and facilitated by adults, who can guide mentors, design activities with youth feedback, and troubleshoot challenges. As much as is feasible, provide opportunity for small group interaction, and offer activities that foster understanding, belonging and connectedness.

- **Consider programming focused on leadership development:** Youth in the middle grades have tremendous insight about what it means to be a leader,<sup>113</sup> so finding

opportunities for student leadership and ownership over programming, and creating opportunities for peer-to-peer dialogue about real issues and challenges students face, can have transformative results, as evidenced by the Millennium Forum Advisory Group model.

- **Reach students in need of connection:**

Research suggests that mentoring can be most impactful for students who do not have strong existing relationships in their lives.<sup>114</sup> Consider tailored programming that can help build a sense of belonging for students who may be vulnerable to isolation in school settings — for example, students with high numbers of absences, or students from a nondominant cultural group.<sup>115</sup> Surveying students to find out who they feel most connected to in school and program environments, as demonstrated by the Young Women's Leadership Program, can yield surprising information about which students are most in need of support, and can help inform intentional programming that can increase a sense of belonging.

- **Build identity-based community, and let youth drive:** Research on the Uniting Our Nations program showed that students engaged in culturally relevant programming



felt they had more opportunity to explore their identities, which impacted their comfort level in school. Programming that supports students' cultural, ethnic, racial, and gender identities can help counteract the negative impacts of discrimination and bias that students experience, while strengthening youth's sense of belonging and community. Consider pairing students with mentors or peer groups whose identities affirm their own, to help normalize and validate students' cultural experiences and provide role models they can relate to. Involve youth and their communities in decisions around culturally relevant and specific programming and activities. Provide tailored programming that affirms the identities and experiences of LGBTQI-GNC students. Finally, seek professional development to increase your cultural awareness as it relates to the identities of your students, and learn strategies for building inclusive programs.

- **Choose the right program facilitators and mentors for students, and build opportunities for their continual skill-building and reflection:** Screening, training, and supporting mentors in relationship-based programs is essential. Not every adult is well

suited to develop and cultivate young people in empowering ways. When recruiting, screening, training, and supporting mentors and group facilitators, consider the importance of adult mental health, cultural competence, and ethnic identity, all of which may have an impact on the quality of the relationships adults build with youth.<sup>116,117</sup> When training mentors and facilitators, provide specific coaching on how to offer unconditional positive regard, encouragement, attunement, consistent positive interactions, and meaningful feedback about students' progress,<sup>118</sup> as well as how to build trust.<sup>119</sup> Additionally, build in regular opportunities for adults to reflect, share best practices, and troubleshoot challenges, as exemplified by the community of mentors and facilitators in the Young Women Leaders Program.

- **Provide opportunities for youth voice and choice:** Opportunities to inform and select their own supports, activities, and relationships can promote agency, self-confidence, and identity development for young people. Consider ways to center the perspectives of young people as you design relationship-based social and emotional programs for your community.<sup>120</sup> One such strategy is youth-initiated mentoring,<sup>121</sup> which equips young

people to nominate their own mentors (who can then receive screening, training, and support from formal program facilitators).

- **Partner to build pathways:**

As demonstrated by Higher Achievement and Spark, opportunities for students to build social capital, and engage in projects of their own creation tied to their own interests, can lay the groundwork for future career and college pathways. Consider collaborating with local corporations and employers to build your school, district, or program's capacity in these areas.

**These additional recommendations may be relevant to school and district leaders specifically:**

- **Support educators in building relationships and integrating social and emotional experiences into in the classroom:**

Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, professor of human development at the University of British Columbia and a noted expert in social and emotional learning, put it well: "Teachers are the engine that drives social and emotional learning programs and practices in schools, and their own socioemotional competence and well-being strongly influences their students." School and district administrators can ensure that educators and other



school staff have adequate training to support them in understanding and modeling social and emotional skills in the classroom, and on how to facilitate student reflection and action through developmental relationships.<sup>122</sup> Cultivating a school culture that embraces social and emotional development and relationships can take time, but finding and elevating champions in your school environment, as exemplified by A. P. Giannini Middle School and Millennium Forum, can help provide others with a model and inspiration that can reinforce the value of these efforts.

- **Work to build a school culture where relationships are prioritized, and a sense of belonging for students is cultivated:** We know from student survey data that young adolescence are particularly vulnerable to disconnection and isolation,<sup>123</sup> just as they begin to need strong relationships more than ever.<sup>124</sup> Intentional efforts to support students in building relationships — such as those described in the above case studies — can help close this gap. For example, consider creating dedicated time in student and staff schedules for relationship-building and connection. As seen in the

partnership described between Millennium Forum and A.P. Giannini School, making time for students to engage in relationship-building is possible with creative problem-solving and collaboration.

- **Engage out-of-school time partners:** Youth development program providers, including after-school providers and community-based programs in your area, are eager to collaborate with you on shared goals and metrics around social and emotional learning for the students you both serve. Convene these partners in a discussion about the ways they can increase your students' access to supportive relationships after the school day ends, and how to connect school-day lessons with out-of-school time programming for more cohesive, seamless, and meaningful experiences.
- **Garner support by communicating inclusively:** Research shows that most members of the public support social and emotional learning programming, but that this support can diminish due to the confusion caused by the inaccessible or confusing terms often used to describe it.<sup>125</sup> For example, most people are relatively unresponsive to the concept of “socioemotional

learning” but show overwhelming support for the same programming called by other names, particularly “social, emotional, and academic development” and “life skills.”<sup>126</sup> Additionally, as they communicate about their plans for social and emotional programming, school and district leaders should pay close attention to the power of community groups. Research shows that the public responds more to community or parent groups than to school, district, or state officials.<sup>127</sup>

- **Plan for sustainable funding:** There are numerous local, state, and federal funding resources available to schools and districts looking to promote social and emotional learning, build a positive school culture, and provide opportunities for relationship-building.<sup>128</sup> Access resources such as CASEL’s Road Map for Financial Sustainability and Edutopia’s Tips and Resources for Funding an SEL Program to find out about your eligibility for government and private funding sources, and examples of how other schools and districts have financed sustainable programs.



### 4.3 POLICYMAKERS AND FUNDERS

Policyholders and funders can support and initiate systemic changes that can promote positive social and emotional outcomes for young adolescents, by considering the following recommendations:

- **Support holistic initiatives that center relationships:** Recent research shows that education-focused grantmakers are increasingly aware of the importance of social and emotional learning programming, paired with academic reforms, to achieving equitable learning environments for America's students, and that they are directing their grant dollars toward more holistic solutions.<sup>129</sup> Such grantmakers should consider relationship-based approaches to the programming they fund to ensure that students are receiving the comprehensive social and emotional supports they need to succeed. One way to do so is by providing funding to schools and districts and their community partners to develop and implement a customized relationship strategy, or an approach to building and maximizing opportunities for relationship-building based on a school or district's individual needs and assets, to address targeted student outcomes such as social and emotional learning,

attendance, and college readiness.

- **Promote funding for targeted relationship-based social and emotional programming for adolescents:** Policyholders and funders can provide more dedicated attention and funds to the relationship-based programming that promotes the social and emotional development of middle school students. Though early adolescence is a critical time of social and emotional growth, more research and programming specific to this developmental stage is needed.<sup>130</sup> Policyholders can support local, state, and federal policy changes that can generate and protect funding for programming and research that supports relationship-based interventions for youth in the middle grades, while funders can allocate resources for national and state initiatives and local programming. For example, on the federal level, members of Congress have introduced legislation like the Transition to Success Mentoring Act, which pairs middle school students facing risk factors with trained mentors, and the Chronic Absenteeism Reduction Act, which focuses on decreasing chronic absenteeism through data-driven mentoring models. Policyholders can also support

and expand funding for Title IV: 21st Century Schools within the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants, and 21st Century Community Learning Centers that deliver academic, social, and emotional supports before, during, and after school.

- **Align ESSA planning and implementation with relationship-based social and emotional learning programming:** State education and policy officials can partner with schools and districts to harness the opportunities offered by ESSA to do this important work. Through collaborative planning and support propelled by ESSA, schools and districts can implement evidence-based social and emotional learning initiatives that utilize relationships and mentoring and improve students' experiences in school. Learn more about ESSA plans by state on the U.S. Department of Education's webpage about ESSA Consolidated State Plans.
- **Invest in consistent state and national research about student and adult needs:** Data about student needs and experiences — such as surveys measuring their experiences with relationships, bullying, and discrimination — is limited and varies significantly by state and locale, as does survey



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data about educators' licensures and professional development in areas such as adolescent development and social and emotional learning.<sup>131</sup> National surveys about these needs that enable comparison across states and regions can support funders and policymakers in making more informed decisions about where investments in the above areas are most needed.

- **Support improved professional development standards:** State education and policy officials can also incorporate more licensure or endorsement requirements around understanding young adolescent learning and development for teachers and administrators in the middle grades, to provide pathways for school and district professionals to engage in continuing education around relationship-building and social and emotional learning.

\* **Invest in cross-sector**

**collaboration:** Funders and policymakers can support the recommendations put forth by the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development — including greater collaboration between youth development organizations, schools, and districts, and social and emotional learning providers to increase access to high-quality relationship-centered programming for youth — by building in expectations around cross-sector partnerships into legislation and grants.

# APPENDIX

## ANNEX 1: Social and Emotional Skills and Competencies: A Summary of the Existing Research Literature

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What do we mean when we say “social and emotional skills”? The broad nature of the social and emotional domains of human development means that an array of skills and competencies — called by many names in different sectors and communities — are captured by these terms. Social and emotional development is complex and multifaceted, as is the field of research and practice that surrounds it.<sup>132</sup> This is why schools and youth programs focus on everything from character development, civic engagement, and kindness, to self-management, goal-setting, and social navigation. Diverse interpretations of social and emotional learning, and the varied priorities and value placed on them in different contexts, has created challenges for educators, school and district practitioners, and youth development professionals in choosing the right curricula, programming, and supports for their students. Additionally, due to the many and varying definitions of social and emotional skills and competencies, misalignments in the research-to-practice cycle plague researchers and practitioners as they struggle to define different aspects of social and emotional development, and to implement and accurately evaluate the interventions intended to support them, leading to poor results and a misunderstanding of the concepts being explored.<sup>133</sup> Multiple organizations and thinkers have attempted to categorize and compare social and emotional constructs, but these efforts have fallen short due to the complexity of the field.<sup>134</sup> To address this issue, the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory has launched the [Taxonomy Project](#), which will create an interactive dashboard to assist educators, youth development practitioners, funders, policymakers and other stakeholders in making sense of social and emotional frameworks and constructs, and the nuances of their evidence base.

In the meantime, most experts agree that social and emotional competencies can be grouped into three major domains, all of which are linked to one another: cognitive regulation, emotional processes, and social and interpersonal competencies.<sup>135</sup> The **cognitive domain** includes abilities such as paying attention and flexible thinking, managing one’s impulses, planning, and working memory. The **emotional domain** includes processes such as identifying, expressing, and regulating emotions and behaviors, coping with frustration, and understanding others’ perspectives. Finally, the social and **interpersonal domain** encompasses skills such as identifying and understanding social cues, resolving conflicts with others, teamwork and cooperation, and expressing empathy toward others.<sup>136</sup> Several frameworks also identify the additional domains of **character** (the values and habits that contribute to ethical, responsible behavior and citizenship) and **mindsets** (beliefs about one’s self, others, and the world) as distinct areas of social and emotional development.<sup>137</sup>

Importantly, Jenny Nagaoka and her research team at the University of Chicago’s Consortium on Chicago School Research identify additional key factors and foundational components that surround and undergird the competencies described above, in service of one’s transition to young adulthood. Alongside the development of social and emotional competencies is **agency**, or the ability to take action in shaping one’s own path even in the midst of difficult external circumstances, and **integrated identity**, or a coherent sense of who one is across different contexts and social identities, including race, ethnicity, gender, and religion.<sup>138</sup> Though the development of these factors is a lifelong endeavor, the building blocks are laid through formative experiences in childhood and adolescence. Nagaoka et al.’s review of research literature and practice approaches also revealed the importance of four foundational components that contribute to young adults’ development of competencies, agency, and integrated identity: **self-regulation, knowledge and skills, mindsets, and values**. These components, they argue, can each be influenced and cultivated by young people’s experiences as they grow, making them an important target for social and emotional learning work.

Nagaoka et al. emphasize the interconnected nature of these components and factors, as well as the importance of understanding students’ individual cultures and the dominant cultures that influence their learning environments, as they endeavor to develop a sense of integrated identity.<sup>139</sup> Bernadette Sanchez, professor of Community Psychology at DePaul University and author of this guide’s literature review, builds upon this assertion, noting the importance of supporting youth in cultivating social and emotional skills related to navigating cultural, racial, and ethnic experiences, such as **dealing with discrimination, coping with racial trauma, and ethnocultural empathy**. All of these areas represent current gaps in the existing research about social and emotional development, which require further study to inform holistic practice efforts that are inclusive of culture and identity.<sup>140</sup>



## ANNEX 2: A Growing Movement in Support of Social and Emotional Learning, and Persistent Issues of Inequitable Access

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Compelling research about the long-term positive impacts of social and emotional learning has generated great interest in and momentum toward a more well-rounded, “whole child” education that supports academic development as well as development in the social and emotional spheres. Federally, the **Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** has provided more flexibility for schools and districts to dedicate funds to initiatives that support a well-rounded education, providing they are grounded in empirical evidence. Though social and emotional learning is not explicitly mentioned in ESSA policy language, the law does emphasize the improvement of school conditions that can enhance student learning, facilitate peer interaction, create opportunities for volunteerism and involvement in the school community, and support students in building relationships.<sup>141</sup> Locally, educators are increasingly aware of the importance of providing opportunities for social and emotional learning into their classrooms, and school and district leaders are searching for the right programming and curricula to address their students’ needs from a growing field of partners and curriculum developers, from CASEL, to Second Step, to Open Circle, to Responsive Classroom, to Developmental Design, to Conscious Discipline, and many more. At the same time, out-of-school time partners, including after-school programs and mentoring programs, which have always been relationship-based and grounded in providing social and emotional support to students outside of school, are looking for ways to provide more intentional, measurable support consistent with in-school offerings.

Meanwhile, the past few years have seen the emergence of several national players contributing to field-building efforts dedicated to sharing research about the importance of social and emotional development, as well as best practices for implementation at scale. The Aspen Institute’s Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (SEAD), launched in 2016, convened several cross-disciplinary councils and working groups whose efforts culminated in a Report to the Nation, detailing a change agenda to advance a whole child education for America’s youth. Among the groups organized by this coalition are a Council of Distinguished Educators, Council of Distinguished Scientists, a parent advisory panel, youth commission, funders collaborative, and partners collaborative.<sup>142</sup> Together, these groups have coalesced research, practice, and policy recommendations that can unite educators, school and district leaders, youth development organizations, funders, policymakers, and researchers and create a unified movement to increase the quality of our educational spaces as well as students’ access to the assets they need to learn and develop fully. Additionally, in partnership with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Pure Edge, Inc., the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) launched its Collaborating States Initiative in 2016. This unique initiative engages 25 diverse states across the nation collectively serving 11,500 school districts and 30 million students in customized planning and a community of practice to deepen statewide implementation of social and emotional development programming, while documenting and sharing findings that can be scaled in other states and regions.<sup>143</sup> Finally, the Chan Zuckerberg Foundation is currently teaming up with the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Lab to provide guidance to educators on “kernels” of practice, or strategies that can be easily integrated into classroom activities to advance social and emotional development for students in specific ways. The project’s highly anticipated report is expected to further build the interest of schools, districts, and their partners in investing in social and emotional learning, while offering educators concrete and flexible approaches that make an impact.<sup>144</sup>

Despite these promising developments, and the clear evidence supporting the need for social and emotional learning for all youth, issues of inequitable access to these supports persist. The availability of opportunities to develop holistically varies dramatically across youth of different races and socioeconomic classes.<sup>145</sup> Systemic inequalities in our education systems have reduced access to arts, cultural, physical education, and recreational activities for low-income students across the United States, making these students less likely to benefit in their school environments.<sup>146</sup> Meanwhile, many social and emotional learning curricula implemented in schools and out-of-school time programs struggle to address the cultural and linguistic diversity of students and communities, making them less relevant, accessible, and meaningful to many students and families.<sup>147</sup>

Finally, many students of color face discrimination in their schools and other educational environments, in the form of severe disciplinary practices, lower expectations, violence, and macroaggressions, which reduce or eliminate the sense of physical and emotional safety necessary for learning, and amplify the need for strong social and emotional supports.<sup>148</sup> LGBTQI-GNC students, students with disabilities, and English-language learners also face tremendous barriers in attaining the basic resources and physical and emotional safety that enable them to successfully engage in school and after-school or community-based programming.

For these reasons, continued collaboration and organizing is needed to ensure that high-quality opportunities for social and emotional learning are accessible to all students, and that programming is culturally relevant; trauma-informed; implemented with an awareness of historical oppression, racism, white privilege, and implicit bias;<sup>149</sup> and focused on the safety of all students.

## ANNEX 3: Critical Mentoring

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**Critical Mentoring**, a framework developed by researcher and educator Torie Weiston-Serdan, is an essential strategy for mentors to promote the short- and long-term wellness and advancement of the youth they seek to serve. Critical Mentoring is mentoring focused on the development of a critical consciousness in mentors and mentees; critical consciousness is the awareness and understanding of social, political, and economic oppression and the ability to acknowledge and take action against oppressive elements in society.<sup>150</sup> Grounded in Critical Race Theory and an understanding of youth context, Critical Mentoring seeks to provide youth with opportunities to reflect on, discuss, and challenge systems of inequity, resulting in transformational conversations about race, gender, class, sexuality, ableism, etc., and opportunities for both mentors and mentees to address how these issues permeate our society and adversely affect marginalized communities, including students of color, LGBTQI-GNC students, and other groups.<sup>151</sup> Additionally, critical mentoring attends to the complexity and intersectionality of youth identity, and the ways in which different aspects of one's identity may be marginalized or privileged based on societal bias and discrimination.<sup>152</sup>

All young people, from those who experience significant marginalization to those who experience significant privilege, benefit from developing a critical consciousness as potential changemakers who can promote more equitable education systems, and a more equitable society, in partnership with their mentors, mentoring programs, schools, and the capacity-building organizations that support them. The field of education is in need of concrete strategies that leverage social and emotional learning to dismantle systems of oppression<sup>153</sup> — Critical Mentoring represents a guiding framework that can be used by school, district, and youth development practitioners to tap into the power of relationships to enable transformative reflection and change.

## ANNEX 4: Climate, Culture, and Belonging

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It is well-known that all students require the right supports and conditions to enable their social, emotional, and academic development. However, conversations about social and emotional learning often overlook systemic program, school, district and community-level factors that influence students' ability to learn.<sup>154</sup> Among these factors are **school culture and climate**, which have pervasive impact on individual and collective school experiences for both students and staff.<sup>155</sup> A standout finding across a number of research studies is that changes in classroom climate and culture, including instructional and behavior management strategies, can have substantial effects on social and emotional learning outcomes.<sup>156</sup>

Research suggests that cultivating a **sense of belonging** in schools and programs can transform student outcomes. Students who report feeling that they belong in school tend to demonstrate greater academic achievement, as well as psychological and physical health.<sup>157</sup> Teacher support strongly predicts whether a student feels they belong in school, and the emotional support teachers provide is connected to students' social and emotional development.<sup>158</sup> Unfortunately, at least a fourth of students report a low sense of belonging in school.<sup>159</sup> As a result, this is a domain of school culture that many schools and districts have zeroed in on to support students' social, emotional, and academic development, by using school climate surveys to identify the connections between social and emotional learning, student outcomes such as attendance, behavior, and course performance, and students' sense of belonging. One example is Ogden School District in Utah, which has a high chronic absence rate of 24.4 percent. Student surveys implemented by Panorama Education, an organization that supports schools and districts in collecting student data related to social and emotional learning, revealed that only 29 percent of students in grades 6–12 in the district felt connected to adults in school. In response, Ogden launched a campaign to monitor student attendance and SEL data as it relates to students' self-efficacy and sense of belonging in school, using an early warning system that allowed them to proactively respond to student concerns.<sup>160</sup>

In addition to strong, supportive relationships, a sense of belonging hinges on one's ability to connect meaningfully with course material and learning experiences that are inclusive of one's culture. America's public school students, over half of whom are students of color, are being educated by a workforce that is predominantly White,<sup>161</sup> through academic and social and emotional curricula that largely reflect White, middle-class values.<sup>162</sup> The racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of American students is growing,<sup>163</sup> making it even more essential that curricula and programming affirm students' cultural experiences and values. Dena Simmons, director of Education at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, suggests that in order to build learning environments that facilitate social and emotional learning for all students, we can start by inviting students to inform and critique social and emotional programming and curricula.

## ANNEX 5: Best Practices for the Implementation of Social and Emotional Learning Initiatives



Across the increasingly vast and varied field of research on social and emotional learning, the below frameworks and concepts have been recognized as broadly applicable best practices for the implementation of social and emotional learning, and are frequently cited by researchers and practitioners interested in implementing effective social and emotional learning initiatives in their schools, districts, and programs. Each of these concepts and frameworks has contributed to an evolving body of best practices for the implementation of social and emotional learning programs.

- The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, (CASEL) has created “[competencies wheel](#)” which identifies **five core competencies** that contribute to social and emotional learning. These include self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness. CASEL recommends that these competencies be addressed within the classroom, the whole school, and within youths’ home/community life.<sup>165</sup> Although the schema and nomenclature of social and emotional development is constantly evolving, this model remains a popular reference for school and youth development practitioners.
- **Intentionality\*** has been repeatedly identified by researchers and practitioners as one of the most critical practices that an SEL program can adopt. The groundbreaking 2010 and 2011 meta-analyses of social and emotional learning program efficacy completed by Joseph Durlak and his team at Loyola University Chicago both affirmed the effectiveness of the SAFE (Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit) methodology. Durlak hypothesized that programs that implemented such methodologies would fare notably better than programs that did not, and indeed, both studies recorded statistically significantly greater effect sizes across a variety of domains for programs which used methodologies which met all SAFE criteria. This outcome illustrated the necessity for intentionality within social and emotional learning practice; the programs Durlak surveyed were different in many ways, from demographics to locale or even national setting, but this diversity was nowhere near as great a moderator on effect as their adherence to practices that were intentionally structured around a SAFE methodology.<sup>166</sup> While one of the most oft-cited, Durlak is not alone in this recognition, and many other researchers have reported similar findings regarding the critical role of intentionality within SEL practice.<sup>167</sup>
- **“Kernels of practice”** are an emergent methodology in the SEL field. First proposed in 2017 by Harvard University’s EASEL Lab, this method recommends that teachers implement individual “kernels” of social and emotional learning best practice into their classrooms. Supplanting traditional comprehensive SEL programs, kernels of practice may prove useful for school districts that, due to staffing, funding, or demographic reasons, are unable to implement full-scale programs. While the utility of kernels is still under investigation, they may also prove to be a promising approach for youth development programs, including mentoring programs and out-of-school time (OST) programs, looking to support or reinforce social and emotional learning alongside their existing services and programming.<sup>168</sup>
- **Social and emotional learning in out-of-school time (OST) contexts** is a growing area of practice in and of itself. Researchers had previously acknowledged that social and emotional learning does not occur solely in the classroom;<sup>169</sup> and out-of-school time and community-based programs have long seen students’ social and emotional development as a primary focus of their services, albeit, at times, described in other terms. However, recent years have seen a growing recognition and advocacy for explicit OST social and emotional learning programs.<sup>170</sup> Research on intentionality and kernels of practice both hold promise for OST programs, many of which are looking for opportunities to directly address social and emotional skill-building as a more central focus of their programming. Because many social and emotional curricula are not designed for OST contexts,<sup>171</sup> kernels of practice offer a flexible solution that does not add significant burden on OST programs’ human or financial resources.
- Another emergent front within the larger social and emotional learning movement relates to **mentoring**. Mentoring has long been considered a viable intervention for juvenile-justice outcomes. However it was not until relatively recently that researchers began exploring it from a social and emotional perspective. This research, which is explored in this guide, indicates that mentoring is a promising tool for achieving a wide variety of social and emotional outcomes.<sup>172</sup> Consistently, research has shown that the strength of a students’ mentoring relationships affects their ability to achieve positive social and emotional outcomes. These findings suggest that existing mentoring programs would benefit from the incorporation of social and emotional learning practices into their work, and that schools and other youth-serving organizations can benefit from incorporating mentoring into their social and emotional learning curricula.
- It has also been observed that due to its crucial role in childhood development, social and emotional learning may be a useful tool for the **promotion of equity** in school settings. It has been observed that social and emotional programming is a useful tool for teachers working with historically marginalized populations, as an effective means of promoting a supportive classroom culture and acknowledging and respecting cultural differences.<sup>173</sup> Furthermore, meta-analysis reveals a significant positive effect by social and emotional learning programs and practices on general classroom atmosphere.<sup>174</sup> More recently, CASEL has proposed that social and emotional programming be used as “a viable lever for justice-oriented civic/sociopolitical development trajectories,” and proposed the use of supplementary “equity elaborations” when using its five-part framework in the classroom.<sup>175</sup> Likewise, the ASPEN Institute in May 2018 released a white paper detailing the utility of social and emotional programming in accomplishing equity-related goals.<sup>176</sup>

\*Understood here as “the intentional implementation of programs and systems which explicitly support the social and emotional growth of youth.”

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