



BY ALEXANDRIA CITY HIGH SCHOOL

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TOPIC

Developing Social and Emotional skills in high school freshmen

TOPIC DESCRIPTION

My issue explores the decline in social and emotional skill in high schoolers. After reflecting on the social aspects of my school and my personal school experience, I realized that a number of students experience social anxiety and fear talking to people. Essentially, Socioemotional abilities are at an all time low after the COVID-19 Pandemic. This stems from both a lack of peer-to-peer connection and perceived value. High schoolers often remark that they feel their school does not value them. This is a common complaint at Alexandria City High School, where 81% of students feel they are not valued by their educational system and 30% report feeling depressed, according to a 2023 study by ACPS. I propose that we create a program that would prioritize the strengthening of social and emotional skills to better connect teens / high school freshmen.

RESULT

The intended result of the program is to increase the social and emotional skills of high schoolers, specifically freshmen. 1 in 3 high schoolers lack self confidence and find it hard to make friends. This program would ideally decrease that metric.

1 in 3 teens struggle with self confidence.

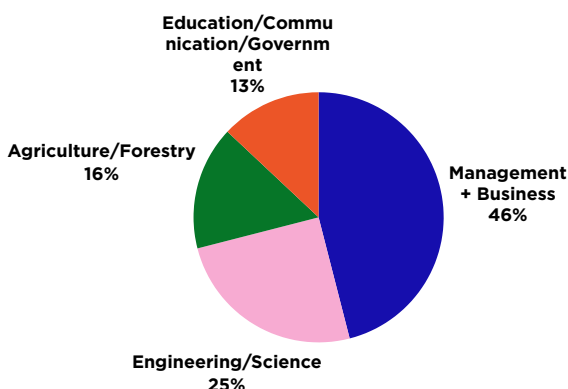
CYCP GOAL AND STRATEGIC AREA

This program most consistently aligns with goals one and two of the Children and Youth Master Plan: Youth will be physically safe and healthy, and every child will be academically successful and career ready. It specifically correlates with strategies fostering supportive learning environments and encouraging participation in childhood education and care.

SIGNIFICANCE

The results of this program matter because they directly feed into the quality of our future. The teenagers entering freshmen year of high school will be the pillars of society in the future. If their social and emotional skills are crippled, they will be less likely to enter careers that require extroverted traits like politics and education. Right now, only 13% of college grads enter careers involving communications or government (First the Seed). If teenagers continue to disconnect from one another and from school, apathy will take the place of a college education and the rate at which people pursue higher education will decrease, directly taking away power from the workforce. We would lose more than we would have gained from prioritizing other aspects of education.

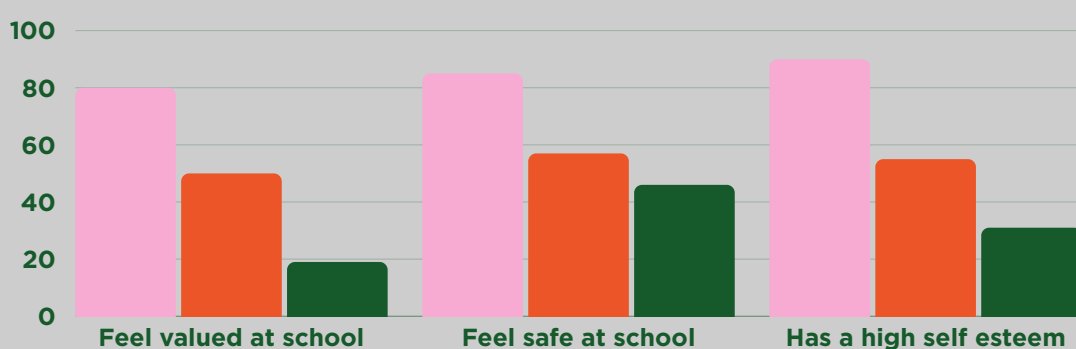
According to the University of Minnesota, programs training social skills in high schoolers would help teens experience “more success in school and...equip them for success in work and community life.”



HOW ARE WE DOING?

On a state level, Virginia has implemented policy prioritizing the training of socioemotional skills. Virginia has a law promoting Social Emotional Learning (SEL). The law, established under Virginia code § 22.1-17.7 and HB753 in 2020, requires the Virginia DOE to give SEL a uniform definition and outline specific SEL skills to practice from K-12. The law, which legally went into practice on November 1st, 2021, highlights 5 pillars of social-emotional learning: “self awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and decision-making” (VA Kids).

At a local level, ACPS/ACHS has just surveyed students on their general happiness/connectedness/self confidence without putting much effort into actually improving reported value ratings. Of the things they have done, Alexandria has created youth development programs like Peer Advocates, YIP, and similar things. If Alexandria, ACHS, and ACPS as a whole continue to create programs that emphasize the health and voices of their students, they will be able to naturally encourage socioemotional growth in high school freshmen. Despite these programs, a number of students feel disconnected from their school and peers. **Most of these students are from groups commonly discriminated against such as Hispanic, Black, female, bi, gay, or nonbinary students.** The graph below depicts % values of surveys at elementary, middle, and high school levels.



IMPLEMENTATION

What's the baseline plan? Essentially, I want to insert social and emotional learning programs into the regular high school day for freshmen in high school or for all grades. I want to create a dedicated class period every day for the act of growing social and emotional skills, maybe 5th period. Another option would be to fit SEL principles into regular classes at a deeper level. For example, each class' teaching structure could be reorganized to better emphasize the ingenuity each student holds, listening to their voice, rather than trying to fit them into a cookie cutter mold.

To make a lasting difference, a change to policy is necessary, whether it be state or local. At a local level, every Alexandrian should be rallying at Alexandria's school board meetings, asking to implement changes. Ideally, SEL gets enough attention to get legislation passed in its favor. At a state level, Virginia laws that require social and emotional skills training would be created, and employed at a local level. If that were to happen, social and emotional strengthening would be implemented in the aforementioned way.

PARTNERSHIPS

The partners playing a role in the betterment of high school freshman's social and emotional skills are: ACPS, YIP, Peer Advocates, and ACHS. Each Alexandrian has a role to play in the matter as well.



ACPS
Alexandria City Public Schools



PERFORMANCE EFFORT

Are we getting the results?
Right now, evidently, we are not getting the results necessary to insure future success. Alexandria has done a good job implementing social-emotional skill development programs at an elementary level (as proven by data), but that does not reflect at a secondary level. We (ACPS/ACHS) still employ learning practices that have not changed (mostly) since before segregation. We have also not put any special emphasis on helping minority groups grow in a way that befits them, instead sticking to "the norm."

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PERFORMANCE EFFECT

Consequences, barriers, factors both positive & negative:

I think the primary factor that has contributed to this issue is a lack of focus, attention, and emphasis. A lack of emphasis leaves issues such as these to sit unattended.

Additionally, the rate of depression and lack of perceived value in high schoolers is "too" high and getting worse. This is for a multitude of reasons, specifically, the educative model most schools employ involve cookie-cutter programs that focus on test scores and efficiency, rather than the ingenuity/character of each student.

At the baseline, this is a hard topic to cover. A lot of groups have their own interests in the matters that create these issues, like social media companies. As negative trends continue as a result of a lack of social or emotional growth, so do our future prospects. An issue which stemmed from the disconnection of the COVID19 pandemic has spread worldwide and invested itself in tech companies. Now, so much of our culture emphasizes online connection over real-life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

12th- Explain your policy recommendations. This will likely be your longest section.

Ultimately, the emphasis/aggregation for change needs to occur inside the classroom. Changing teaching protocols and blueprints is an immensely powerful and necessary way to do that.

To counter the distinct lack of social and emotional skill, we can look to the local, state, and federal government for help. The government gives us the ability to fight back against this new epidemic. Emphasis on the issue also falls on the people. Without the people to agitate for change, we will not be able to get social and emotional learning on the map. I propose that we make a mandatory class in freshman year of high school for the development of social and emotional skills! Because we have used the same symmetric teaching programs for so long, education has stagnated. Countries like the Netherlands that employ visionary teaching tactics oriented toward the needs and background of the pupil often see higher rates of success, happiness, and social skills in high schoolers (Nuffic). They cater education programs to best fit 1-1 with the students interests and abilities.

ONLINE

To learn more about this topic, interested parties can look at:

1. **Students' Socio-Emotional Skills and Academic Outcomes After the PROMEHS Program**
2. **Seize the Awkward**

The first link provides data on the results of an SEL strengthening program while the second link is an online resource explaining the importance of honest emotional conversation amongst teenage friends

IN PERSON

To learn more about this topic, interested parties can visit:

1. **The Alexandria Teen Wellness Center**
2. **The Department of Community & Human Services @ Mark Center Drive**

The first program helps teenagers with all manners of things, most importantly providing teens with social and emotional resources, training, and therapy when necessary. The second location helps teens within the community with behavioral services on a case by case basis.

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