

Skills for Success: High Leverage Strategies to Promote Self-Regulation Among Cleveland Middle Grade Students

Schools and districts are increasingly recognizing the value of student’s noncognitive development—both as an important goal in its own right and also because improving students’ noncognitive skills can also improve their academic performance. There is a range of promising and effective noncognitive interventions that vary in intensity from the minimalistic social psychological interventions (that aim to improve academic mindsets, increase belonging, or reduce stereotype threat) to extensive, kit-based social and emotional learning programs. In this application, we propose a hybrid strategy that may potentially provide an important new option in the delivery of noncognitive supports for students. We propose a strategy-based approach that distills from multiple evidence-based social and emotional interventions those practices that are common across multiple programs and offer an active ingredient in its simplest form. We call these *kernel strategies*. Dissemination of effective practice has been a persistent challenge in education, yet implementation and diffusion science tell us that since these strategies are concrete, simple, and easily tried out, that they will be more attractive to busy teachers than more complex interventions, and therefore may be more readily disseminated and scaled up.

Our proposed project capitalizes on the already-planned rollout of a comprehensive SEL curriculum (Second Step) in the middle grades in Cleveland. Careful project design by our evaluation partners at the American Institutes for Research (AIR) will allow us to learn how the kernel strategies work on its own to improve the academic and noncognitive skills of Cleveland students (using a randomized trial at the teacher level), how the comprehensive intervention works alone (using a quasi-experimental time series design at the school level), as well as how these two approaches work together. The research questions are as follows:

1. What is the effect of kernel strategy training on Grade 7 and 8 students’ achievement, attendance, discipline, self-reported conditions for learning and self-regulation?
2. How do Grade 6–8 student outcomes change over time in schools that have or have not introduced Second Step?
3. How does the overlap of kernel strategy training and Second Step relate to outcomes? Is being in a Second Step school associated with different kernel strategy effects?
4. How is implementation quality related to outcomes across the study conditions? Is there a dosage or exposure effect for the kernel strategy training (years in program)?
5. Do effects vary for different subgroups of students (e.g., grade, gender, ethnicity)? For different types of schools?

In Year 1 of the project, we will adapt kernel strategies that focus on self-regulation and which have shown evidence of effectiveness in prior use (and were developed by our partner, Dr. Stephanie Jones). Strategies will likely include deep breathing for calming down, “I messages” when communicating with others, and “Stop and Stay Cool” self-talk to regulate intense emotions. We will train teachers in the summer of 2016, and then provide ongoing support through an online community of practice site that will include teacher guides, interactive discussion boards, and videos to support the use of these strategies. We will use this site to collect implementation data, including teacher logs, and open-ended reflections on their practice over the past month. We will use the implementation data to support continuous improvement, though regular review of logs by the evaluation team that will feed back into ongoing improvement of the kernel strategies and their supporting materials.

In Years 2 and 3, we will implement and evaluate the kernel strategies in Grades 7 and 8. Our work will include all 8,600 Grade 6, 7, and 8 students in the district each year.