

Project Resilience: Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Program

The Role of Social Emotional Learning in Schools

Acknowledge Alliance is dedicated to promoting lifelong resilience in youth by strengthening the caring capacity of the adults who influence their lives. Our work is based on resilience theory and strengths-based support: everyone can build their resilience, especially when focused on what is strong rather than what is wrong.

Students facing complex challenges and the teachers working with these students and their families have a greater number of potential barriers to learning that impact the ability to focus on learning. Some of these challenges include living in low-income communities, living with disabilities and emerging mental health issues, dysfunctional home environments, being system-involved (foster care and juvenile justice), and managing high expectations and high familial stress.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is the foundation of support needed to acquire the skills for lifelong effectiveness and academic success. Research has linked SEL to increased student protective factors and decreased risk factors, including lower levels of depression, higher view of self, and improved test scores. SEL incorporated into the school culture creates increased levels of social support where students can trust, feel safe, and be seen and heard. These factors are needed to mitigate emotional distress that can lead to crisis situations.

SEL programming is considered a Tier 1 intervention, a universal application of knowledge, practice, and reflection for all students in every classroom, no matter their risk status in school. Tier 1 interventions benefit all members of school communities, including students considered high risk or in counseling. These classroom-wide activities provide real-time learning opportunities to practice social and emotional skills that can enhance counseling and other program outcomes.

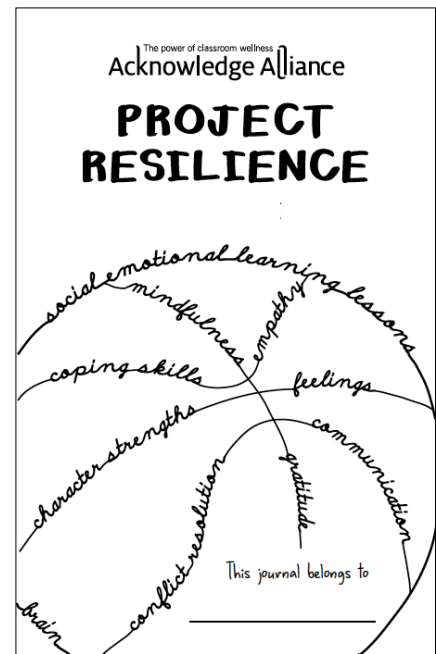
SEL Curriculum

Our original SEL curriculum, *Project Resilience*, provides direct services to students in grades 3-8 and is led by our mental health professionals whom we call *Resilience Consultants*. Our Resilience Consultants bring in the lens of experienced counselors, therapists, and social workers to bring more support to students struggling with social emotional issues in the classroom.

Acknowledge Alliance created our curriculum over the course of nearly a decade, after a tragic cluster of high school student suicides prompted concerned parents and teachers to ask us what we could do to support elementary school students at that early age. This specific focus on prevention would give young students the necessary skills and knowledge to support their resilience as they became older teens and young adults. Encouraged by its success with students, families, and educators, our program has expanded to include middle school. Our curriculum is refreshed every summer to reflect the latest research, emerging best practices in the field, and our clinical expertise in the classrooms.

Program Delivery

Lessons may begin at any point in the year, depending upon the school, and typically occur every week or every other week, ending in the early spring to avoid testing and other conflicts. The program begins with a **meeting between teachers and the Resilience Consultant**, to coordinate the schedule, introduce the topics, and gather any general information that will be helpful to delivery. The Resilience Consultant then spends time **observing the classroom** during a pre-lesson, providing the teacher positive feedback to build on teacher strengths and reinforce



their resilience, while introducing the program to students. **Students also receive their own journals** with materials and activities for each lesson, as well as opportunities to continue practicing skills when Resilience Consultants are not in the classroom.

As part of our model, **teachers participate actively during the lesson**, providing necessary classroom management, connections to other materials in class, and adding their own insights into conversations. In addition to learning about the latest social emotional strategies, teachers also observe how our SEL expert facilitators interact with their students. This modeling gives the teachers an opportunity to alter their own practices, resulting in a safer and balanced classroom that supports learning. As one teacher relayed, *“With Acknowledge Alliance, you have a professional that gives common ground of language for the whole classroom. Teachers learn along with them and they become part of the team. This is meaningful.”*

Program Structure

In **grades 3 – 5, there are 10 lessons**; in **grades 6 and 7, there are 7 lessons**; and there are **2 lessons for grade 8** delivered at the end of the school year to support transitioning to high school. The program includes journal activities (writing and drawing prompts) to be led by the teacher in between lessons as a way of reinforcing each topic. Some schools prefer for lessons to be delivered weekly, others every other week. We are flexible and work to meet each school’s needs.

At the beginning of lessons, Resilience Consultants set **ground rules** of confidentiality, mutual respect, and allowing any answer. Confidentiality in this program means students agree to not share personal information that their classmates may divulge outside of class, as well as agreeing to not read each other’s journals.

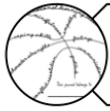
Lesson Framework

Our lessons are designed to support the **five areas of social and emotional development** as defined by CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning, as well as our own foundational philosophy addressing the importance of resilience, empathy, strengths-based support, and emotional intelligence.

Acknowledge Alliance curriculum focus	CASEL framework alignment
<i>Character strengths</i>	Self-awareness - the ability to reflect on one’s own feelings and thoughts and understand how those feelings and thoughts affect behavior.
<i>Brain development</i>	
<i>Identifying emotions and empathy</i>	Self-management - the ability to control one’s own emotions, actions and thoughts.
<i>Coping with and regulating emotions</i>	
<i>Communication skills</i>	Social awareness - the ability to empathize with other people, understand and adhere to social cues and adapt behaviors so they are appropriate to a given social situation.
<i>Positive friendships and relationship skills</i>	Relationship skills - the ability to communicate with peers, make friends, manage disagreements, manage appropriate and inappropriate peer pressures and cooperate with a diverse range of people.
<i>Teamwork, problem solving, and decision making skills</i>	Responsible decision making - the ability to make healthy choices about one’s own behavior while weighing consequences, safety, ethics, and the well-being of the group.

Curriculum for each grade follows the same framework around these key topics, though content varies according to **developmental levels and includes age-appropriate activities**. The lessons are flexible enough to allow Resilience Consultants the option to vary activities according to the general developmental levels in each classroom or to respond to what may be happening in the classroom that day.

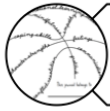
We work closely with each school and classroom teacher to ensure all students are able to participate and comprehend the lessons, to the best of their ability. Our facilitators incorporate **education best practices in terms of engaging the classroom**, allowing the students to also learn from each other, and can gear discussions or the focus of the lesson toward specific needs in the classroom.



Mindfulness Practice



SEL Competency Activity



Gratitude Practice

Lesson Format

Resilience Consultants begin each lesson with a **check-in with students** to build trust and relationships, and then introduce a **mindfulness practice**. These practices vary according to each lesson and developmental level, and are designed to introduce students to the concept of bringing awareness to each moment. **SEL competency activities** are led next, followed by a **gratitude practice**. Gratitude has been found to also increase protective factors and reduce negative risk factors, especially when practiced regularly.

Each student receives one of our journals to keep at school. We provide journals as a way of teaching that writing or drawing about thoughts and feelings is one way of developing insight and helps in making good decisions about how to act on thoughts and feelings. The journal is a private place for each student to reflect. Students may request that their teacher or Resilience Consultant read and comment on their notebooks, but it is not required. Students can take their journal home at the conclusion of lessons.

At every school that receives SEL lessons, our staff offers an **information session to other staff and parents/guardians**, to provide more context to the lessons and to offer suggestions for supporting the development of these skills at home. Additionally, parents/guardians receive letters with descriptions of the topics and a recommended booklist for both their children and themselves.

SEL Curriculum Evaluation

To better understand the impact of Acknowledge Alliance's *Project Resilience* on both teachers and students, we use the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment – Mini (DESSA-Mini) for its focus on specific social-emotional competencies that align best with our curriculum and for its promising value as a validated and reliable tool. The DESSA-MINI is an 8-item behavior rating scale that is completed by teachers online. We work with our independent evaluator to easily collect the data from teachers both at the beginning of the lessons and at the end of the year. Teachers can download reports from the DESSA site that can assist them in assessing their students on SEL competencies over the course of the year.

The DESSA-MINI allows us to provide one score, the Social-Emotional Total, which summarizes a student's overall social-emotional competence as measured by the teacher. The DESSA measures eight key social-emotional competencies identified in the research literature as essential to a child's success in school and life (and in alignment with our SEL curriculum):

- **Self-awareness**
- **Social awareness**
- **Self-management**
- **Relationship skills**
- **Goal-directed behavior**
- **Personal responsibility**
- **Decision making**
- **Optimistic thinking**

We also survey students at the end of the program about their favorite topics, if the program helped them understand themselves better, and if they are using the skills inside and outside the classroom.

Evaluation Results

Over the last four years, scores from the DESSA-mini indicate positive changes in students displaying and integrating SEL competencies, as evaluated by their teachers. For our pilot year with two schools (n=109), there was a 13% increase in average educator scores; after this pilot year, scores have shown a 6% increase

(n=1,033), an 11% increase (n=1,642), and a 5% increase (n=1,448). Since beginning our student surveys, about 65% of students, on average, agree that *Project Resilience* helped them understand themselves better and about half say they use these skills in other contexts. Across all grade levels, favorite topics have been mindfulness, building character strengths, and identifying and coping with feelings.

Program Results

Here's what some of the students have to say:

"The most useful thing I learned was coping with my feelings. Especially, when I was stressed I would: Stop, Take a breath, Observe, Proceed."

"I think that Project Resilience taught me how to better understand people's feelings."

"The most useful was communication because it is something we use every day and even though we do it every day we still forget the proper way to listen and talk."

"I learned to have empathy for others. Before I didn't care too much about others' feelings, but now before I speak or do, I think about what impact it would make on a certain person."

Teachers have been enthusiastic, too!

"The topics that relate to all of the lessons are very important. From 'What makes you a good friend?' to understanding the difference of an introvert vs. an extrovert all have a huge impact on the way students understand the social world around them. These components are simply missing from the state-driven elementary curriculum."

"I have used social emotional learning concepts for several years. Therefore, I did not learn new concepts. However, the benefit was not in what I learned but from what I learned about my students. Each lesson I learned new social-emotional information about my students and provided me opportunities to learn more about them individually and helped me better determine helpful ways of teaching them to be more social and emotionally intelligent children."

Ready for *Project Resilience*?

Incorporated effectively, social emotional learning for students may help decrease bullying, negative peer pressures, and depression while increasing protective factors needed for emotional wellness. It allows students to feel safer in the classroom setting and to trust in their teachers and speak freely about issues they may be facing. The life-long effects of social emotional learning incorporated into the culture of the classroom will be experienced not only at the school level, but also in the community, higher education, family and career.

When teachers acquire social emotional learning skills, the result is improved teacher to student relationships, classroom management and instruction and an overall positive classroom culture.

**Please contact us with questions or to schedule
Project Resilience in your school today!**

