

## INTEGRATING SEL INTO INSTRUCTION

Schools serving high concentrations of poor students often view socioemotional learning (SEL), which is instruction that teaches self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making as an “extra” that can be considered once academic competencies have improved. However, research clearly shows that students with low socioemotional skills are limited in their ability to benefit from academic instruction.

SEL can help students from disadvantaged backgrounds overcome the cognitive and psychological traumas associated with growing up in stressful, unstable, and unsafe environments. SEL improves concentration, responding to directions, stress management, and many other factors that enables school success.

Because many teachers and schools have limited time and must navigate instruction first accountability climates, these research-to-practice briefs are dedicated to fostering the integration of SEL into academic instruction.

### Mindfulness in the Classroom

Across the country, the practice of mindfulness is making its way into public schools. Mindfulness draws from meditative concepts and practices that aim to cultivate greater self-awareness and reflection on one’s thoughts, actions, and surroundings. Research has shown that it can help to improve a student’s ability to handle stress and alleviate depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and eating disorders. In schools, mindfulness has been found to reduce conflict, disciplinary referrals, anxiety, and classroom management issues. It has also been associated with increased academic engagement and achievement as well as improved social and emotional health of students and teachers.

#### How is Mindfulness Learned?

Most often, a student’s mind is, rightfully, consumed with what’s happening in their own world. However, sometimes students lose touch of their bodies and become obsessively engrossed in thoughts about past hurtful experiences or perceived future threats that might generate anxieties that mirror behavior disruptions.

For students facing these realities, mindfulness can sharpen their awareness of negative thoughts and actions and lessen their chances to be overly reactive to their contexts. Mindfulness begins with a focus on internal processes, but is cultivated through certain exercises, such as

meditation, inserting short pauses throughout the day, and merging meditation with other activities like sports.

Educators can teach students mindfulness through repeated and structured practice paired with discussions to build understanding of the philosophy and science behind those practices. For example, classroom teachers can dedicate a short period of time each class or day, or a school can dedicate a specific time period each day to mindfulness exercises, such as counting breaths, focusing on the sensations of breathing, and/or visualizing thoughts and feelings. Along with the exercises, students should engage in discussions to understand the impact of mindfulness on their cognitive, social, and emotional abilities.

### **Mindfulness in Practice**

In the Bronx, Argos Gonzalez brings out a Tibetan meditation bowl in his English classroom.

“Today we’re going to talk about mindfulness of emotion,” Gonzalez says. “You guys remember what mindfulness is?” Met with quiet stares, Gonzalez gestures to one of the posters in the back of the classroom where the students a few weeks earlier had brainstormed terms describing the meaning of “mindfulness.” There were some tentative mumbblings from the teacher such as “being focused,” and “being aware of our surroundings.”

Gonzalez nods. “Right. But, it’s also being aware of our feelings, our emotions, and how they impact us.”

Arturo A. Schomburg Satellite Academy is a small high school designed to re-engage students who have dropped out or fallen behind. It occupies two floors of a large, grey building that is also shared by two other public schools. Students who

attend Schomburg genuinely want to graduate, but face many barriers to success.

On this particular day, one of Gonzalez’s students had just been released from jail; one recently had an abortion and one watched a friend bleed to death from a gunshot wound the previous year. Between finding money to put food on the table and dealing with unstable family members, these students’ minds were often crowded with concerns more pressing than schoolwork.

Still holding the bowl, Gonzalez continued with the day’s lesson. “I’m going to say a couple of words to you. You’re not literally going to feel that emotion, but the word is going to trigger something, it’s going to make you think of something or feel something. Try to explore it.”

“First, sit up straight, put your feet flat on the ground. Let your eyes close.” Gonzalez demonstrates as he instructs. Most of the 15 or so students follow suit—though a few scribbled covertly to finish overdue assignments. Gonzalez taps the bowl and a rich, metallic sound rings out. The class falls quiet as the note reverberates.

“Take a deep breath into your belly. As you breathe in and breathe out, notice that your breath is going to be stronger in a certain part of your body. Maybe it’s your belly, your chest, or your nose. We’ll begin with trying to count to 10 breaths.”

A silence falls amongst the students in the room. Only the hiss of a train pulling into a nearby station, the clunk of garbage cans, and the faint siren of a police car can be heard.

“If you get lost in thought, it’s okay. Just come back and count again. Whether you get up to 10 or not doesn’t really matter. It’s just a way to focus [your] mind.”

“[Mindfulness] improves attention, reduces stress, and results in better emotional regulation and an improved capacity for compassion and empathy...” Davis, 2015

It may not be the typical way to start an English class, but Gonzalez's students are familiar with these five-minute mindfulness exercises. From counting breaths and focusing on the sensations of breathing, to visualizing thoughts and feelings, he uses meditation to help train their attention, quiet their thoughts, and regulate their emotions.

### **Research on Mindfulness**

School-based mindfulness programs have been found to benefit students and educators in many ways. Research on these programs find that it reduces classroom management issues, disciplinary referrals, conflicts, and anxieties. At the same time, it has been associated with increased engagement in learning and social-emotional health for students.

In one study, conducted by the Goldie Hawn Institute (previously known as the Bright Lights Foundation), participation in mindfulness activities was found to have a positive impact on

students. In six Vancouver public schools, fourth through seventh graders were instructed in mindful awareness techniques and positive thinking skills, then tested for changes in their behavior, social and emotional competence, moral development, and mood. The school saw an immediate decline in behavioral problems (as measured by number of visits to the principal's office) after only two to three weeks of instruction. The organization found students were less aggressive, less oppositional toward teachers, and more attentive in class. Those who received the mindfulness training also reported feeling more positive emotion and optimism, and seemed more introspective than children who were on a waitlist for the training. The leading researchers on the project noted that such training for students is likely to improve social and emotional health later down the road as well.

*To integrate mindfulness in your classroom, try this guide for facilitating a [5-minute meditation session](#).*

### **Adapted from:**

Davis, L. C. (2015, August 31). When Mindfulness Meets the Classroom. *The Atlantic*.

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<http://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/>