



REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Second Step® High School

Introduction

Second Step® High School helps school leaders and classroom educators work with students to co-develop learning conditions that provide students with a positive school climate, adaptive experiences and mindsets, and skills and knowledge for navigating adolescence. It uses research-based approaches that support adolescents' social-emotional development.

Research indicates that for social-emotional learning programs for older students, strategies aimed at changing school climate and adolescents' perceptions of themselves and their world via new experiences are generally more effective than direct skill instruction (Yeager, 2017). So Second Step High School combines all three of the following to promote effective adolescent social-emotional development.

- **Schoolwide Practices:** School leaders facilitate these flexible, systemic practices in collaboration with educators and students to create a welcoming, caring school climate that places priority on high expectations, student choice, and adaptive mindsets.
- **Educator Practices:** Educators integrate these practices—designed to improve classroom experiences and support students' development of adaptive mindsets—into their existing academic lessons to help students feel a sense of belonging, build confidence, develop autonomy, and improve well-being.
- **Student Activities:** These grade-appropriate individual, small-group, and whole-group activities are designed for developing social-emotional skills outside regular subject-matter classes.

Together, these practices and activities call on all school community members to share actively in the school climate transformation, resulting in potential social-emotional benefits for everyone.

Pathway 1: Belonging & Connection

Feeling a sense of social belonging and connectedness is a fundamental human need (Walton et al., 2012) and an important contributor to students' school success (Allen et al., 2018). Students feel a sense of belonging at school when they're known, accepted, respected, and supported by those in their school community (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Slaten et al., 2016). Students who feel a strong sense of belonging at school generally have better psychological and physical well-being, (Arslan et al., 2020; Arslan & Allen, 2021; Li & Jiang, 2018), emotional health (Arslan et al., 2020; Arslan & Allen, 2021; Li & Jiang, 2018), school engagement and motivation (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Uslu & Gizir, 2017; Skinner et al., 2008), and academic performance (Allen et al., 2016) as well as lower absence and dropout rates (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2018). Belonging and connection at school can also act as a protective factor such that students with a strong sense of belonging are generally less likely to experience anxiety (Allen & Kern, 2017), victimization (Allen et al., 2018), emotional distress (Blum, 2002; McNeely et al., 2002), substance use (Blum, 2002; McNeely et al., 2002), delinquency (Allen et al., 2018), and depression (Allen & Kern, 2017). Belonging also benefits adults. Teachers who work at institutions where the school climate supports belonging and connection generally experience increased job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017) and professional commitment (Collie et al., 2011), better mental health (Gray et al., 2017) and relationships with students (Gray et al., 2017), and decreased burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017) and emotional exhaustion (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008).

The learning experiences in Pathway 1 help build belonging by supporting the creation of positive relationships and an inclusive school and classroom climate that students helped influence.

Schoolwide Practices in Pathway 1

The first schoolwide practice has school leaders and educators greet students as they arrive at school because it's one of the simplest, evidence-based ways to strengthen teacher-student relationships and increase student interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging (Sandstrom, 2023). Pathway 1 schoolwide practices also involve having leaders co-create schoolwide agreements with students and staff because soliciting and celebrating student voice can increase students' skills, confidence, sense of ownership, and school connectedness (Geurts et al., 2023). By supporting all educators in setting aside time to connect intentionally with students, Pathway 1 schoolwide practices are also designed to help schools build the positive student-teacher relationships that research shows can lead to higher student engagement, achievement, and attendance and decreased disruptive behaviors, suspensions, and dropout (Quin, 2017).

Educator Practices in Pathway 1

These practices build on research indicating that co-creating classroom agreements or rules with students can help increase students' sense of community (Vieno et al., 2005) and their appreciation for the course (Patallet et al., 2013). An educator practice focusing on learning students' names and how to pronounce them correctly is included because it can increase students' feelings of belonging in the classroom (Sandstrom, 2023; Van Manen et al., 2007), especially for students who experience exclusion, shame, or other threats to belonging simply because their names are perceived as nontraditional (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). And an educator practice encouraging open communication between students and their teachers is used in this pathway to increase student engagement, learning, achievement, interest, class attendance, involvement, and well-being (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021), as well as teacher well-being (Milatz et al., 2015).

Student Activities in Pathway 1

These activities are designed to support the development of belonging—boosting peer relationships by helping students connect meaningfully and learn about one another (Gowing, 2019). Student activities in Pathway 1 also teach students about perception biases, conflict-management skills, and in-person and online social skills to help them connect better with each other.

Pathway 2: Confidence & Capability

The term “confidence” refers to students' judgments of their own self-worth, and the term “capability” refers to their judgments about their abilities (Bandura, 2006). Both beliefs are instrumental in helping students achieve personal, social, and academic goals; stay resilient in the face of challenges; and develop adaptive approaches to learning, such as a growth mindset and a mastery-goal orientation (Morton & Montgomery, 2013; Schwarzer & Warner, 2013). That's because students' beliefs in their own capabilities do more than make them feel good about themselves; these beliefs influence their actions. Adolescents' capability beliefs are also positively associated with key social-emotional competencies, including prosocial behavior (Bandura & Locke, 2003), effective coping and problem-solving (Cicognani, 2011), current and later life satisfaction (Vecchio et al., 2007), and aspirations and career success (Bandura et al., 2001). Capable and confident students also have lower alcohol use (Epstein et al., 2002) and dropout intentions (Samuel & Burger, 2020) and are less likely to experience anxiety (Usher & Pajares, 2008) and stress (Hamill, 2003).

The learning experiences in Pathway 2 are designed to create conditions that build students' beliefs in their ability to achieve outcomes and succeed in school and life.

Schoolwide Practices in Pathway 2

These practices set high expectations for all students because research has shown doing so communicates educators' belief in students' abilities and generally results in students rising to meet those expectations and achieving greater school success (Weinstein, 2008; Johnston et al., 2019). The Staff Talent Showcase practice uses two of the most effective strategies for building students' confidence and capability beliefs: observing others modeling success and hearing encouragement from others (Maddux & Kleiman, 2016; Usher & Pajares, 2008). By implementing a schoolwide campaign to support development of students' and teachers' growth mindsets, leaders can create a school climate that frames today's circumstances not as hindrances to success but as a starting place for potential growth (Yeager et al., 2019; Von Bergen & Bressler, 2020).

Educator Practices in Pathway 2

The first educator practice in Pathway 2 focuses on supporting mastery learning experiences in academic coursework because when students persevere through learning challenges and succeed—that is, they experience mastery—they gain the experience, learning, and confidence to effectively tackle the next challenge (Bandura, 1977; Margolis & McCabe, 2006). Students and teachers then co-create assessment rubrics. Doing so helps students become more informed about what success looks like (Heritage, 2008; McManus, 2008) and more motivated to work toward their agreed-on definition of success (Deeley & Bovill, 2017), which builds their confidence and capability in any subject. Pathway 2 also includes an educator practice to help teachers provide specific and actionable feedback on student progress, which generally leads to increases in student motivation (Blackwell et al., 2007) and achievement (Paunesku et al., 2015).

Student Activities in Pathway 2

These activities guide students in setting and achieving goals by helping them monitor their progress, seek feedback, stay confident, and address challenges effectively to improve their capability at school (Schunk, 2003; Macklem, 2020). They also teach students how to create and expand their online social networks and challenge negative thoughts to help them feel resilient and enjoy better well-being and mental health outcomes when working toward goals (Chu et al., 2010; Webster et al., 2021).

Pathway 3: Agency & Opportunity

Agency, also called autonomy, is especially important during adolescence as youth become more independent and self-directed (Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2006). Research shows that when schools and learning experiences are structured in ways that honor adolescents' increasing needs for agency and independence, students generally have higher academic engagement and achievement (Reeve et al., 2004; Hafen et al., 2012; Cheon et al., 2020); increased self-regulated learning (Flunger et al., 2019), well-being, and vitality (Niemic & Muñoz, 2019); more prosocial behavior (Assor et al., 2018); and lower levels of bullying (Cheon et al., 2023) and problematic relationships

(Cheon et al., 2023). Teachers who support their students' autonomy in the classroom may increase their own sense of autonomy (Cheon et al., 2014), passion for teaching (Cheon et al., 2020), job satisfaction (Cheon et al., 2020), and student-teacher relationship satisfaction (Cheon et al., 2020).

Pathway 3 helps students build a sense of agency and ownership over their learning and development by giving them choice and voice, opportunities to influence their school experiences, and freedom to explore their personal interests and optimal learning styles.

Schoolwide Practices in Pathway 3

Pathway 3 begins with a practice to recognize students' diverse contributions since high school students generally receive less praise than their younger counterparts (Beaman & Wheldall, 2010; Flores et al., 2023), even though research shows praise can increase student engagement and decrease disruptive behavior when used authentically with high schoolers (O'Handley et al., 2020). The next schoolwide activity aims to increase participation in extracurricular activities because involvement in school-based extracurricular activities is associated with higher academic performance and attainment, better well-being, and reduced rates of substance abuse, dropout, antisocial, and delinquent behavior (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Pathway 3 also includes a schoolwide practice to solicit and act on student feedback to increase students' feelings of agency as they become more active participants in their school community (Reeve, 2012; Patallet et al., 2008).

Educator Practices in Pathway 3

These practices focus on making learning more personally relevant and autonomous for students. Educator practices in Pathway 3 provide students with choices and solicit feedback from students, both of which can cultivate a sense of agency, increase engagement, decrease power struggles (Reeve et al., 2004; Reeve, 2012), and help improve student-teacher relationships (Geurts et al., 2023). Another educator practice, Academic Discussions, uses learning scaffolding to help students communicate and collaborate about what they're learning more effectively.

Student Activities in Pathway 3

This pathway's activities focus on helping students discover and harness their personal character strengths, determine how to identify strengths in others, and learn how to apply collective strengths to group goals. Cultivating character strengths in school can lead to benefits related to positive emotions, engagement, relationships, accomplishments, and increased life satisfaction (Gillham et al., 2011; Linkins et al., 2014). Activities in this pathway also help students explore purposeful interests because research indicates educators can have a positive impact on students' healthy identity development by providing meaningful opportunities for exploration in supportive classroom environments (Verhoeven et al., 2019).

Pathway 4: Well-Being & Community

Strong well-being and mental health may be especially important during high school, when the adolescent brain is particularly malleable and foundations for future functioning are established (Fuhrmann et al., 2015). Adolescents who have better well-being and a strong sense of community at school generally enjoy benefits in high school, such as better mental health, resilience, and stress management (Hull et al., 2008) and fewer absences, failed classes, and disciplinary referrals, as well as benefits later in life, including lower levels of depression and anxiety, more career success, and more citizenship behaviors in adulthood (Kansky et al., 2016). Teachers who work in institutions that support well-being and strong community connection also benefit because they're more likely to experience increased job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017) and better mental health (Gray et al., 2017).

Schoolwide Practices in Pathway 4

Pathway 4 is designed to create a supportive, connected school climate by generating humor and shared positive

feelings with an Underground Spirit Week schoolwide practice (Tsukawaki et al., 2020) and then cultivate a culture of appreciation and gratitude via a kudos schoolwide practice (Algoe, 2012). An additional schoolwide practice, just for teachers, helps educators share their strengths with their colleagues. Collaborating to recognize each other's strengths can improve morale and communication among colleagues (Vangrieken et al., 2015).

Educator Practices in Pathway 4

These practices help increase students' psychosocial well-being by introducing research-based coping and stress-management skills. Specifically, educator practices in this pathway teach students about brain breaks, which can positively influence high schoolers' attention (Infantes-Paniagua et al., 2021) and well-being (Fred et al., 2023), and quick gratitude practices, which can help lower students' stress levels (Froh et al., 2008), increase well-being (Baumsteiger et al., 2019), and enhance student-teacher relationships (Howells, 2014). Modeling positive self-talk with students is another educator practice that can help students regulate social anxiety and distress (Kross et al., 2014) and improve performance (Tod et al., 2011), attention (Hatzigeorgiadis & Galanis, 2017), and motivation (Wolters, 1999).

Student Activities in Pathway 4

Pathway 4 student activities center on identifying and managing emotions, practicing self-compassion, and focusing on students' present-moment experience. Student activities in this pathway also explore how digital spaces can influence students' emotions and actions (O'Reilly et al., 2019; Kreski et al., 2021) and how gratitude (Froh et al., 2008) and social awareness (Klingbeil et al., 2017; Roeser & Pinela, 2014) can be tools to better understand and manage stress.

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