

LEARNING TO GET ALONG: VitalVoices Pilot Results

AUGUST, 2024

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Introduction

Adolescents have been experiencing increasing rates of anxiety and despair for several decades.¹ Youth who are Black, immigrant, and people of color (BIPOC) have been especially vulnerable, along with students with disabilities.² The U.S. Surgeon General offers a solution to declining rates of adolescent mental health: social connection.³ Social connectedness indeed supports adolescent wellbeing,⁴ and that is not the only effect it has. Social connection with peers also promotes academic engagement⁵ and attainment.⁶

Schools are already important places for youth to meet their need for connection, both among peers and with adults. All schools seek to create a positive school culture, but this has been challenging post-Covid, as youth nationwide struggle increasingly with self-regulation and communication skills.⁷

VitalVoices offers a method for schools to foster and develop adolescent connections, wellbeing, and academic engagement. Following a pilot of nine 15-minute modules with two fifth-grade classrooms, students reported a statistically significant improvement in their ability to get along with one another, including those whom they perceive as different from themselves. These early results, based on a fraction of the total curriculum, are promising.

VitalVoices Curriculum

[VitalVoices](#) promotes the wellbeing of middle-grade (4th to 8th) students by helping them cultivate connection with one another and build self-awareness and communication skills. The culturally responsive program has three components: Connection with Self, Connection with Others, and Connection with Community. Connection with Self includes self-awareness and self-regulation activities, as well as modules that help students reflect on and share their values and strengths. Connection with Others supports student development of relational assets like generosity and strengthens student communication and conflict resolution skills. Connection with Community helps students explore and engage with their larger community. Throughout, students learn and apply a Listening Toolkit, techniques for listening and responding to their peers. As students become familiar with the curriculum, they can gradually adopt leadership roles in its delivery. The adaptable curriculum is designed to accommodate and promote understanding among students in classrooms, including students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and those with otherwise diverse skills and backgrounds.

School and Program Context

Two fifth-grade classrooms administered nine VitalVoices modules from March 25 to May 22 of 2024. The school’s population is economically and racially/ethnically diverse, and instructional practices are inclusive of students with disabilities in general education classrooms.

Modules included activities to build self-awareness, social awareness, and communication skills. Students learned active listening techniques that they then used when responding to prompts with peers.

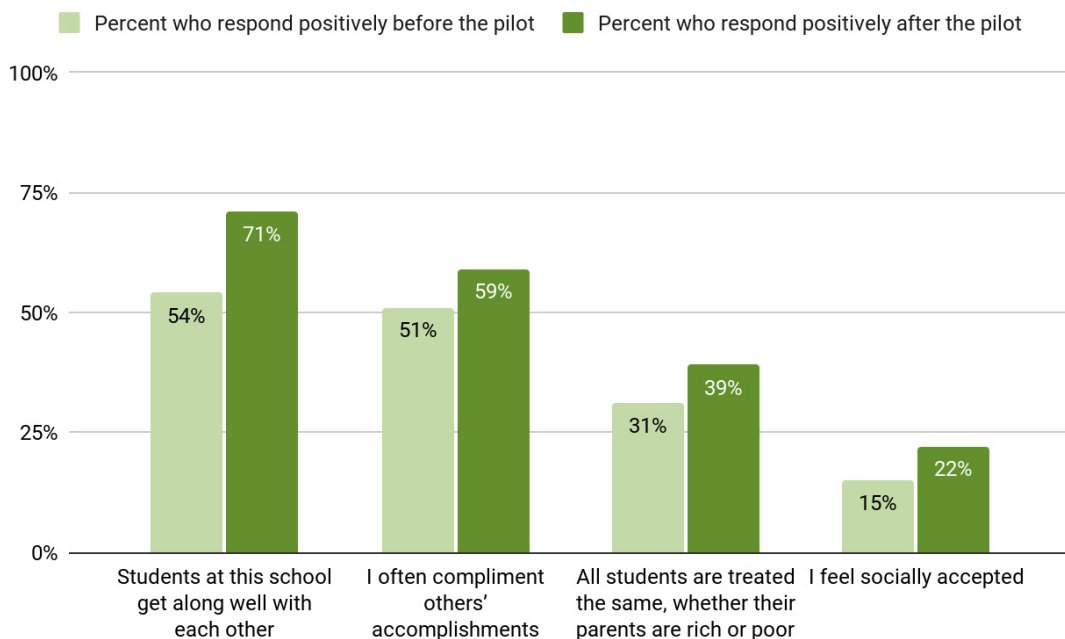
Student Survey Findings

Before and after the pilot, students completed a survey of validated items. After completing the program, more students agreed that school peers got along with each other, that students complimented each other, and that students were treated the same regardless of income. And while the overall percentage remained low, student reports of a sense of social acceptance increased by 47% following the pilot (figure 1).

PILOT SCHOOL DETAIL	
SCHOOL TYPE Public K-8	STUDENT ENROLLMENT 485
LOW-INCOME 73%	STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES 16%
DEMOGRAPHICS	
ASIAN STUDENTS 4%	BLACK STUDENTS 8%
HISPANIC STUDENTS 17%	WHITE STUDENTS 60%
STUDENTS OF TWO OR MORE RACES 11%	

SOURCE: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2023-24

FIGURE 1. Student perceptions that peers get along with each other improved following nine modules of VitalVoices



Survey is on a 5-point likert scale, N = 41

Two survey items had statistically significant gains ($p < .05$). These items were: “I get along well with students who are different from me” and “Students at this school get along with each other.” (See the end of this report for more information about survey analysis.)

Student and Teacher Comments

In open response survey items, the majority of students said they liked that the program gave them the opportunity to **connect with classmates**. One student wrote, “[I liked] being able to learn more about my friends,” and another said they liked, “learning to talk to people and understand the situation further to make a stronger bond.”

Teachers completed open-response surveys and participated in a focus group. All three participating teachers were satisfied with the curriculum. Teachers said the curriculum was **easy to follow**: “It felt like the lessons were easily digestible while still delivering really important social-emotional skills for them.” Teachers also liked the experiential nature of the curriculum because it gave students plenty of time to practice new skills. Teachers reported that **students started applying the communication skills they learned**. One teacher said she liked, “hearing them start to use some of those strategies just subconsciously because it was something that they had practiced.”

Conclusion

With its emphasis on introspection and communication, VitalVoices significantly improved student perception of peer relationships. These results suggest that VitalVoices can help students cultivate a deeper appreciation of their peers and increase their perception that school is a place where they can be accepted and get along with each other.

SURVEY ANALYSIS

All survey items were on a 5-point likert scale. In our analysis, we only included the 41 students who took both a pre- and post-survey. The full survey with sources [is here](#).

Descriptively, we compared the percent of students who selected the top two responses (e.g., agree and strongly agree) before and after the pilot. The four items with the largest differences are presented in figure 1. The Shapiro-Wilk normality test found that survey data were not normally distributed. Therefore, we used the Wilcoxon signed rank test, a non-parametric alternative to the paired t-test. The p-value for “I get along well with students who are different from me” was 0.03, and it was 0.02 for “students at this school get along with each other.” No other survey results were statistically significant at $p < .05$.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory (2021). Protecting youth mental health. *The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>
2. Williams, E. & Drake, P. (2022). Headed back to school: A look at the ongoing effects of COVID-19 on children's health and well-being. KFF. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/headed-back-to-school-a-look-at-the-ongoing-effects-of-covid-19-on-childrens-health-and-well-being>
3. The U.S. Surgeon's General (2023) Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. *The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>
4. Jose, P., Ryan, N. & Pryor, J. (2012) Does social connectedness promote a greater sense of well-being in adolescence over time? *Journal of Research on Adolescence*(22), 2. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2012.00783.x>
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7. Shen-Berro, J. (March, 2023). Student behavior remains concerning amid COVID's impact, educators say. *Chalkbeat*. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2023/3/7/23628032/student-behavior-covid-school-classroom-survey/>



About Fig Education Lab

Fig Education Lab is the sponsoring organization for VitalVoices. We are committed to a more equitable education system, one that embraces students' diverse backgrounds and closes learning and income gaps. Our mission is to reimagine education by collaboratively designing, implementing, and researching innovative programs that help all learners lead lives that are personally fulfilling, socially connected, and economically secure. We believe the best and most enduring ideas in education come from combining practitioner wisdom, rigorous research, and community assets.