

**Assessing Obstacles for ‘Students Taking Action Together’ in Lower-Income School
Districts**

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This study was conducted remotely on behalf of the Social-Emotional and Character Development (SECD) Lab. The Lab overlooks several school-based social-emotional learning projects, including the program, ‘Students Taking Action Together’ (STAT), that assists educators with implementing classroom measures to build youth’s interpersonal and social action capabilities. The skills adopted by students from STAT include positive youth voice and stronger civic engagement; they are taught based on instructional practices that foster effective social-emotional learning (SEL). STAT is designed to use critical SEL skills, such as civil peer discourse, self-awareness, perspective-taking, and constructive resolution-building, to improve youth’s classroom behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and civic participation. Specific classroom instructional methods for STAT include “respectful empathetic debate, responsible listening, collaborative creativity... and reactive improvements” that engage students in social studies problem-solving exercises (Linksky et al., 2018).

STAT's ability to develop analytical skills and civic engagement assists marginalized youth (i.e., those from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds, lower-income status) in overcoming their experiences of disempowerment and becoming socially and politically active. The SECD Lab frequently evaluates programs’ adaptability to school circumstances and contributions towards solving equity-based challenges, which includes STAT’s ability to assist educators and students from varying racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds with their social-emotional civic engagement initiatives.

This report is a part of a larger study titled, “*Building Civic Engagement for Minority Youth: Assessing Obstacles for ‘Students Taking Action Together’ in Lower-Income School Districts,*” which examines STAT’s usefulness by uncovering how predominantly African-American, Latino, and lower-income schools specifically adopt the program’s tools, in

comparison to their white-affluent counterparts. This study investigates the role of socioeconomic status in program implementation, specifically the relationship between the challenges that educators face when using STAT and the community context of their schools. This study uses educators' feedback and overall acceptability as a key assessment of STAT's effectiveness, modeled after scholar Laura Nicols' (2002) research on the usefulness of participants' knowledge and engagement in modifying program design. Typically, the needs and goals of a program are defined by its creators and coordinators; however, Nichols explained that evaluations should consider participants' insight as fundamental for adapting programs to the intended purposes of particular groups (Nichols, 2002).

The current study considers communities' effects on youth development, classroom instruction, and school resources alongside Nichols' program acceptability models in an effort to understand schools' experience with STAT as a result of the systemic socioeconomic and racial challenges their student body faces. In particular, the contexts or circumstances of predominantly-minority, (i.e., African American, Latino, and Native American) and lower-income communities often includes a higher degree of poverty, poor infrastructure, disenfranchisement, and educational inequity, which can influence schools' instruction and environment and youth's self-perceptions, social awareness, and civic engagement (Dalton et al., 2007; Lutkus & Weiss, 2007; Tilton, 2010; Voight, et al., 2015; The United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2018). Consideration of schools' and educators' community contexts is important for evaluation in order to highlight the needs of marginalized and under-resourced program users. This study's objective is to make STAT an adaptable social-emotional education program that can withstand the influences of structural inequalities and effectively implement measures that expand historically disadvantaged youth's power.

Methods

Participants

The participants of this study were educators who used STAT in their classroom and/or small group instruction to some degree over the course of one academic marking period or more. The participants' responses were collected from feedback surveys included in an end-of-the-marking-period mass email to educators who have enrolled in the SECD Lab's bi-monthly STAT digital newsletter. The surveys were completed on a voluntary basis. The specific identity of the educators in the study is unbeknown to the researchers, as each participant's responses were encrypted with unidentifiable participant codes. Nonetheless, the participant's school, school district, and specific role were collected in addition to the academic marking period in which the survey response was provided. The majority of participants (57%) identified themselves as teachers, while others were social workers, school psychologists, and administrators, and department supervisors. Most survey responses were collected at the end of the second and third academic marking periods, roughly between February 2020 and May 2020. The teaching experiences and demographics (race, age, gender) of the participants were not known, though the STAT program was advertised and made available to an array of educators throughout the state of New Jersey and elsewhere.

Educators' community and school settings were not explicitly shared in survey responses, though it was inferred based upon the available socioeconomic information and racial demographics of the student body and school/school district they serve. Specifically, responses were interpreted according to the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in their schools. The New Jersey Performance School Reports and National Center for Education

Statistics (for out-of-state schools) from the 2018-2019 academic year were used to collect information on students' socioeconomic status. Both assessments determine a school's rate of "economic disadvantage" by the amount of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. For the purposes of this study, educators' schools were ranked as mildly economically disadvantaged (0-30% of the student population), or economically disadvantaged (30% or more). This study determined a rate of 30% as the threshold for defining an educator's school as "economically disadvantaged" by using community psychology analyses on the effects of socioeconomic status on youth's development, educational success, and general life navigation.

This study asserts that one third or more of the population is a substantial number of students enduring the effects of poor economic conditions, because it strongly informs how a school must function in order to provide adequate educational environments. It is assumed that a school whose student population is 30% economically disadvantaged or more must tailor what is needed by its educational instruction to the experiences of low socioeconomic status to sustain students' learning. These schools are thus defined by the circumstances they must overcome and, consequently, are considered to be "economically disadvantaged." Following the parallels between race and class, the school's considered to be "economically disadvantaged" in this study were more likely to have one-third or more of their student population be African-American, Latino, and Native American combined. In total, using these measures, 38% of all educators in this study are from "economically disadvantaged" schools and have considerable populations of African American and Latino students. Native American students were a significantly small group of minority students in the schools used in this study, especially for those from New Jersey.

The data pool used in this study consists of fully completed short survey responses, totaling to 22 responses. While more than 22 respondents completed the survey, only this amount completed it in full/majority to effectively code. Participant's survey responses were filtered out of the data pool based on their thorough completion of the survey. Respondents who did not answer questions related to the feasibility of program implementation or indicated little use of STAT were not considered for the subsequent coding process.

Measures

This study used a mixture of close-ended and open-ended survey questions to uncover the usefulness of program strategies as well as the classroom environments that are challenging to implement. Educators' general acceptability of STAT was tested by selectively coding assessment questions to the themes of "Likeliness to Recommend", "Admirable Factors", "Dislikes", and "Recommendations."

The survey questions used for each coding theme are as follows:

- Likeliness to Recommend: *How likely would you be to recommend the STAT teaching strategies to a colleague?*
- Admirable Factors: *What did you like about the STAT teaching strategies?*
- Dislikes: *What did you not like about the STAT teaching strategies?*
- Recommendations: *What ideas would you have for us to improve STAT for you and for other educators?*

Coding schemes were created for these particular themes for measurements that give insight into the educator's specific experiences and highlight differences in implementation across

schools with different socioeconomic statuses. Coding focused on creating themes and response descriptions for likes, dislikes, and recommendations, allowing for more complex results that can be compared among educators from schools with varying degrees of economic disadvantage. For instance, instead of reporting “Educators from schools with X socioeconomic backgrounds disliked STAT more,” the current codes can communicate results such as “Schools with X socioeconomic backgrounds did not like STAT more than their counterparts, though a greater portion of these respondents indicated a strong approval for students’ classroom responsiveness than their counterparts.” (See Figure 1 below for detailed codes.) Subsequently, these measurements provide information for this study to more effectively tailor its final recommendations for program implementation in economically disadvantaged schools.

Certain coding schemes are similar across themes (i.e., “use and implementation”, “curriculum applicability to settings”) but, they have different response descriptions based on the question they are meant to interpret. Educators’ responses were also categorized according to their schools’ socioeconomic status, note earlier as determined by data from New Jersey Performance School Reports and National Center for Education Statistics and this study’s ranking of economic disadvantage

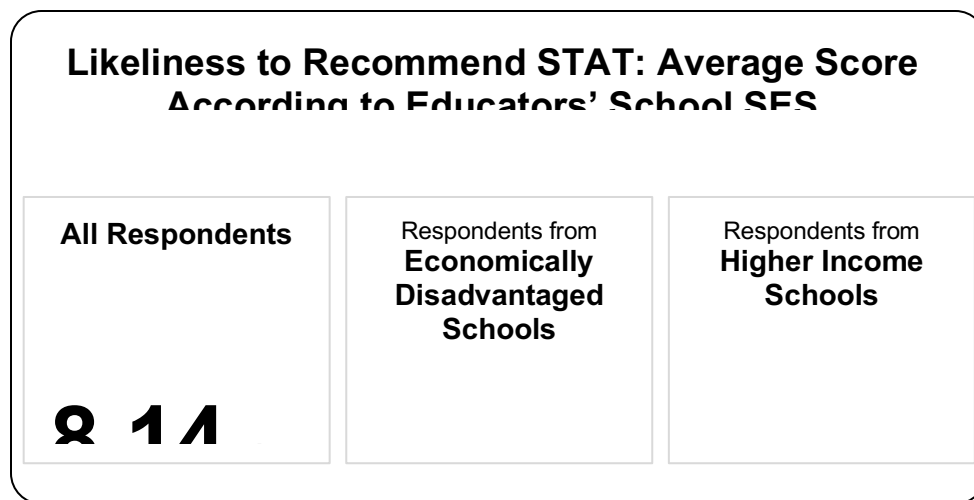
Acceptability Themes	Corresponding Survey Question	Applicable Coding Descriptions for Responses
Likeliness to Recommend	How likely would you be to recommend the STAT teaching strategies to a colleague? (1-10 rating scale)	0-3: not likely 4-7: somewhat likely 8+: likely
Admirable Factors	What did you like about the STAT teaching strategies?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum/Material • Student's Responsiveness • Use and Implementation • Student Peer Interactions & Communication • Student Conduct/Behavior • Classroom Management • Student's Social Action & Civic Engagement Conceptualization
Dislikes	What did you not like about the STAT teaching strategies?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies • Use and Implementation • Curriculum Applicability to Settings • Flexibility/Time • Student Engagement • Resources • Noticeable Improvement
Recommendations	What ideas would you have for us to improve STAT for you and for other educators?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies • Curriculum Applicability to Settings • Flexibility/Time • Guidance for Educators • Strategy/Curriculum Design • Contextual Adaptability • Student's Social Action & Civic Engagement Conceptualization

Figure 1: STAT Educator Acceptability Coding Worksheet

Results

Likeliness to Recommend: This section of the survey observes the respondents' eagerness to recommend STAT. 66% of all respondents were likely to recommend the program, meaning they ranked their willingness to share the program with a colleague as 8 or higher on a scale of 10. The average rating for all educators was an 8.14 (out of 10) likelihood to recommend STAT to a colleague. Based on the degree of economic disadvantage, 50% of economically

disadvantaged schools were likely to recommend, and the other half of respondents were only somewhat likely to, providing a rating of 7. Schools with higher economic status had a larger proportion of educators who were likely to recommend at 77%. Since respondents from economically disadvantaged schools were less likely to complete the short survey, this feedback category would benefit immensely from a larger data pool of educators from those schools to better understand their recommendation habits and program acceptability.

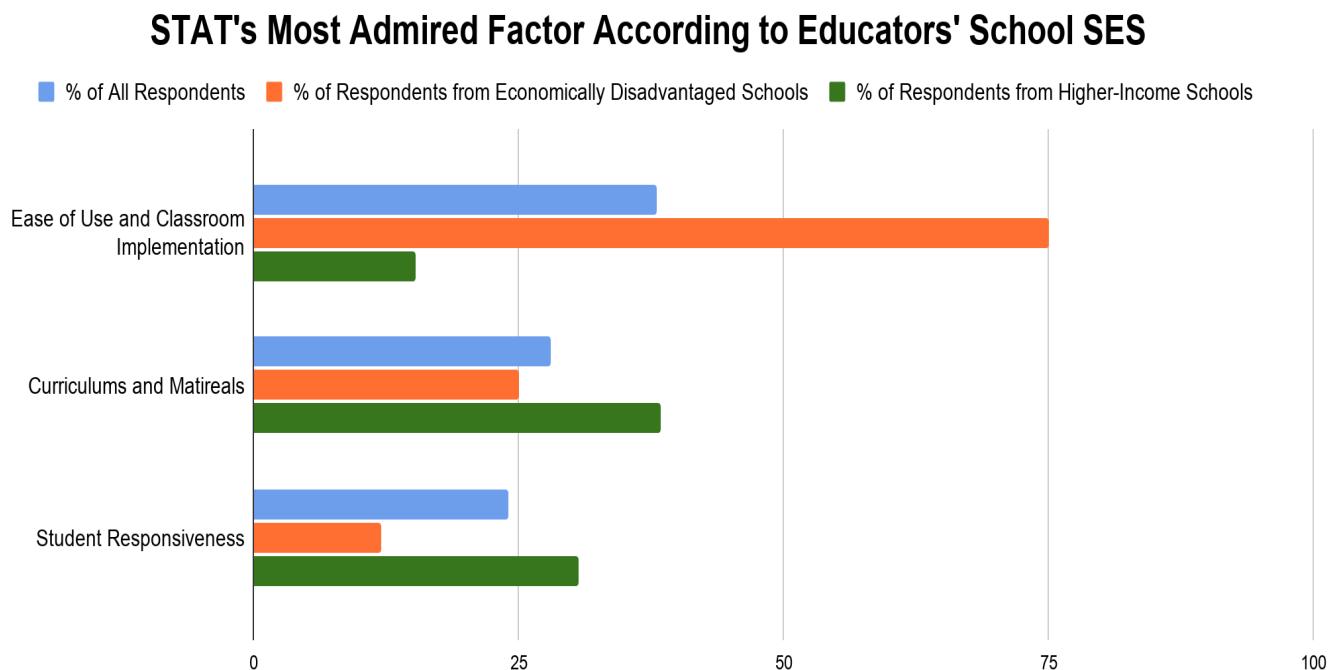


Admirable Factors: This section of the survey determines the most beneficial and reliable assets of STAT. Particular themes for participants' responses were made during the coding process (see Figure 1 above). The most common compliment for STAT was its ease of use and implementation, with 38% of all respondents indicating few difficulties and/or a sense of positive flexibility when integrating the STAT strategies into their school setting. Additionally,

28% of respondents mentioned liking the content of STAT curriculums and materials, and 24% enjoyed students' responsiveness to particular STAT strategies and/or indicated an improvement in overall responsiveness to the classroom setting. Respondents from economically disadvantaged schools enjoyed the program's ease of implementation most (75% selected this option). On the other hand, those of higher socioeconomic status seemed to favor the program's curriculum and student responsiveness more. (See Figure 2 below).

Figure 1: STAT's Most Admired Factor(s) According to Educators' School SES

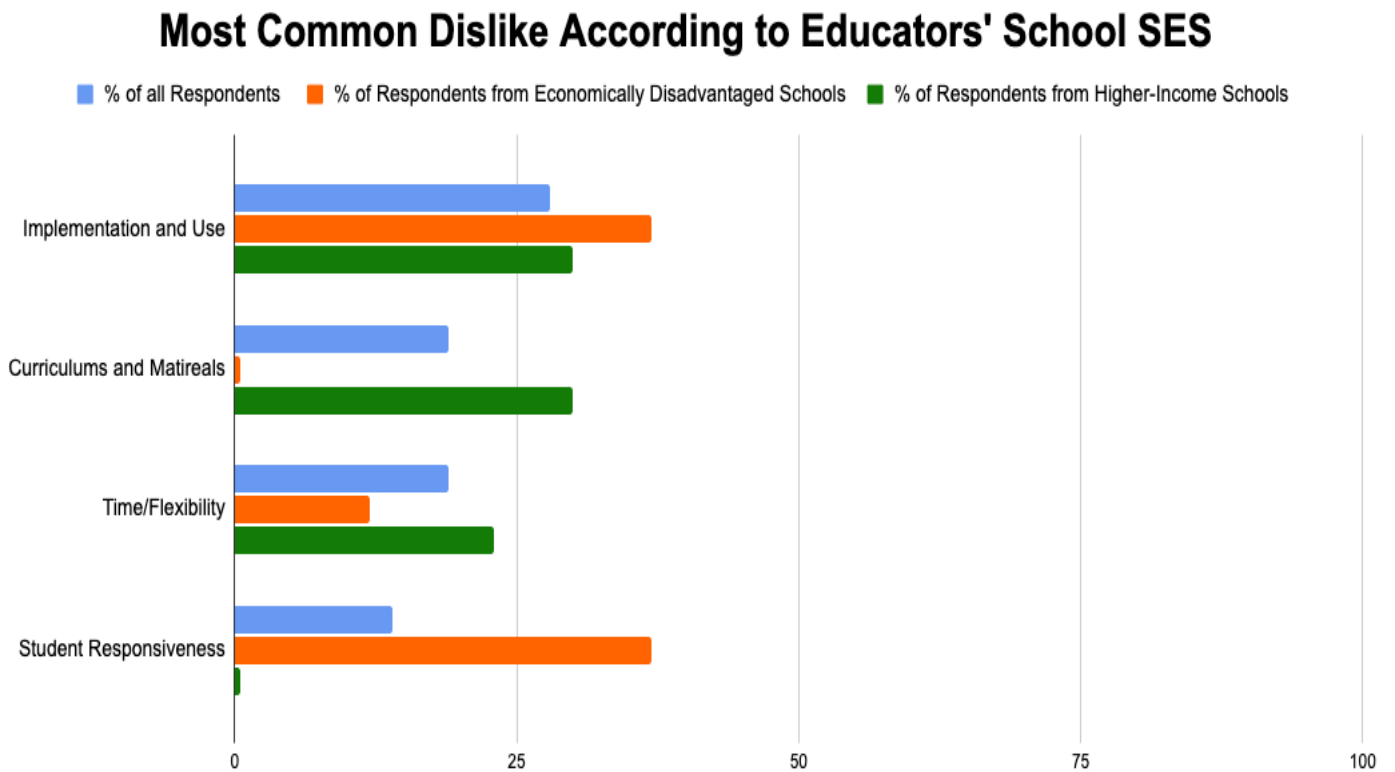
Dislikes: This section of the survey addresses specific areas of STAT that need further improvement, are challenging, and/or seem to be failing to the respondents. Response themes were also made for this question. When including all schools, the most common dislikes relate to ease/implementation (29%). A handful of concerns related to implementation during the fourth



marking period (roughly between March/April and June) were directed at STAT's ability to succeed in a remote online learning environment, likely due to changes in classroom settings

from the COVID-19 outbreak. Curriculum applicability to classroom needs (19%), and time requirements needed to implement the program (19%) were also areas of concern for educators, though most of these issues were highlighted by educators from higher-income school districts. Additionally, economically disadvantaged schools were more likely to provide a dislike (75%) for the program than schools with higher socioeconomic status (62%). The most popular dislikes amongst economically disadvantaged schools are related to implementation and student engagement with the program. In fact, when taking a deeper look at the socioeconomic status of participants it is observed that all respondents who identified students' engagement as a challenge were from economically disadvantaged schools.

Figure 2: Most Common Dislike According to Educators' School SES



Since ease and implementation are both the most common reasons for likes and dislikes, I conclude those are important aspects of STAT for educators that should be considered in further depth in the future. Note also that 14% of respondents mentioned inefficient resources provided for the educators to execute the program properly. This shortcoming may be considered alongside dislikes related to ease of use as a possible reason for difficulties with implementation, especially for economically disadvantaged schools.

Recommendations: Lastly, respondents were asked to recommend improvements to the program. One-third of all respondents did not provide a recommendation. Respondents from schools with higher socioeconomic status were more likely to make suggestions for improvements than those from economically disadvantaged schools, which makes it difficult to gauge the changes that would make STAT a better resource for marginalized schools. Nonetheless, out of the respondents who did answer this question, 38% recommended changes to the program that provided educators with more guidance and/or resources, and 23% gave suggestions for STAT to be more applicable to specific curriculum topics. Examples of these proposals include “I would like to see some more resources for other types of social sciences”; “assign accountability partners (i.e., another teacher) to give examples...”; “offer more PD (professional development) opportunities”; “[STAT] offered suggestions for sample history topics... I’d appreciate more suggestions for that content”. These recommendations, along with the data observations mentioned above, provide insight into the specific benefits and areas of improvement for STAT for particular educator and school demographics.

Discussion

Results from this study instruct program coordinators, educators, and communities using STAT to adapt different implementation experiences for predominantly African American, Latino, and Native American school districts, and to address the impact of structural inequalities on educators' and students' challenges. I argue that although social-emotional learning programs, such as STAT, serve as equal opportunities for all students to acquire civic engagement skills, they will not inherently be equally resourceful or effective across school demographics. Structural inequalities within communities and schools, such as a lack of school funding, poverty, and systemic disempowerment, will inform both the capacity to which STAT can assist the community and teachers' experiences of implementation.

Therefore, in order for STAT to be an equal opportunity that provides historically disempowered African American and Latino students with the same civic engagement resources/skills as other peers, the effects of their contextual settings must be addressed, as they were in this study. Uncovering such challenges, especially during the earliest stages of implementation, reduces the number of teachers who discontinue the program's use and ensures that civic engagement interventions in predominantly-minority communities effectively improve youth's experiences in American political and cultural systems.

By observing the relationship between community context, social-emotional learning, and civic engagement programs like STAT, narratives that hinder program adaptability can be challenged. For one, limited perspectives for program implementation consider interventions as "separate" entities to the settings they serve. In this way, the instruction, behaviors, and decisions promoted by a "separate" program are considered influential *attachments* to the pre-existing conditions of an environment. However, a well-executed intervention is a well-integrated one, in which it is not a "separate" addition to the lives and systems it wishes to improve, but instead

becomes vulnerable to them — requiring the intervention to consider contextual settings more thoroughly. Otherwise, the “separate” perspective relates a program’s instruction as inherently useful to the group due to its assets and preliminary research, regardless of whether or not the program consistently addresses the specific needs and experiences of the population it serves. Here lies a presumption that successful school-based programs are those that continuously avoid the challenges faced by the populations they facilitate. Instead, interventions that admit and adapt to community circumstances are more likely to be useful. This “separate” perspective personifies interventions with inherent and immutable saviorship when, in fact, all well-executed interventions must be inclined to the experiences of individuals enduring the context that the program is implemented in, especially when working with vulnerable populations (such as the predominantly African American and Latino schools in this study).

Furthermore, this study highlights the misinterpretation that granting equal opportunity results in equal resources and improvement. An equal opportunity is granted to all members of a group or society, such as the case with STAT being made available to an array of educators; however, an opportunity that is equally provided does not necessarily result in equal outcomes or access. Particular groups may not be able to receive the same privileges from an opportunity because of their pre-contextual circumstances and structural inequalities. Therefore, implementing programs as actual “equal opportunities” would require one to recognize that equal resources do not exist and that, in order for the opportunity to indeed benefit vast populations, specific contextual settings and individuals' life navigation must be continuously addressed. In the case of this study and the STAT program, these settings include youth and schools’ socially- and economically- disempowered communities.

Recommendations

Program coordinators must hone in on students' current capacity to engage in the skillsets they wish to improve and work alongside educators to adapt to school needs. The feedback from respondents in economically disadvantaged schools supports this study's claims that there are different implementation experiences for schools based on their students' socioeconomic status and merits further research. In order to understand how discrepancies arise, STAT leadership can begin by researching the relationship between social-economic traumas and the development of the youth civic behaviors they wish to promote.

Practice More In-Lab Youth and Community-Based Research. This can happen through the following mechanisms:

- Conduct community psychology research that investigates the effects of socioeconomic status, racial/ethnic identity, and community living conditions on youth's social-emotional development with respect to civic engagement. These examinations can consider a vast number of influential factors, such as: communities' historical understanding of and engagement with civic participation; and youth's self-perceptions in American political and cultural systems as constructed by their experiences with class and race. Similar areas of inquiry can relate the impacts of racial/ethnic composition and socioeconomic status with school's climate and basic functions, such as: educators' and administrators' biased discipline measures and the limitations it may impose on fostering enthusiastic classroom environments; and demands for exceptional standardized tests scores driven by funding needs challenging school's consideration of students' social-emotional development.

Modify User-Outreach Practices for Economically Disadvantaged Schools. As mentioned earlier, educators from lower-income schools consisted of only 38% of all respondents and were less likely to provide in-depth recommendations for program reform. Additionally, schools with significant Native American student populations were not present in the study's applicable data pool. Disparities within response rates may be informed by limited use of STAT and/or minimal interactions with promotional materials and feedback services (ie. surveys, newsletters) by educators in predominantly-minority, lower-income school districts. Ultimately, this sets an incredible limitation for adapting STAT to predominantly-minority school's needs and experiences. In order to expand The Lab's evaluation process, this report suggests:

- Coding survey data on educators' reference to the program to uncover where educators from economically disadvantaged schools are more likely to hear about and interact with STAT information. Then, modify the promotion of surveys and other feedback systems to those findings.
- Actively seeking feedback from educators in economically disadvantaged schools, aside from The Lab's general bi-monthly newsletters, to carefully engage them with reform processes. These measures may include more lab researchers directly emailing educators as well as engaging school leadership in more professional development projects hosted by STAT.
- Creating assessments that specifically target students and inquire about their interpretations of program activities as a method of further research. Questions can include how students feel as a result of engaging with STAT; their likes and dislikes of the program's classroom instruction; their previous experiences with

peer-to-peer and student-to-educator relationships; and how positive community awareness and communications skills are fostered alongside their personal reflections of success and school environment. Student focus groups can be created from a variety of schools to determine their needs and assess whether coordinator's adjustments are indeed working effectively.

Collaborate with Educators on Classroom and School-Based Needs. Among the intervention implications of this study, the following stand out:

- Provide more professional development opportunities for educators who already use the program, rather than those interested in becoming users. Here, the SECD Lab can collect the specific needs of educators and communicate the practices and principles of STAT that can help them. In this way, educators can navigate the benefits of the program more.
- Conduct school-based focus groups that collect more thorough suggestions to recognize when changes or enhancements to the program are necessary for educators' specific needs.
- Avoid receiving the majority of program feedback *after* changes have been made by gathering educators' suggestions as developments are being done. Keep them up to date in real-time about the research and leadership decisions that are informing program modifications. This way, accommodations can be better suited to the needs of schools.

Conclusion

All students deserve environments that foster their growth as responsible, fulfilled, and active citizens. Similarly, people whose access to civic participation has been limited deserve a voice at the table. Social-emotional learning programs, such as Students Taking Action Together, are incredibly useful measures for promoting the necessary civic engagement for youth from disenfranchised communities. However, there cannot be a “one-size-fits-all” approach to implementation and evaluation. Programs, community socioeconomic and cultural contexts, and the relationship between the two, must be consistently revisited to create adaptable programs. This study encourages research to be conducted on the vast number of programs in communities of color that are geared towards improving youth’s lived experiences and expanding their political and civic power in America.

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