



# STAT

## STUDENTS TAKING ACTION TOGETHER USING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES TO BUILD CIVILITY AND CIVIC DISCOURSE

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### HELPING PEOPLE GET ALONG BETTER.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? Yet, the polarization in our culture, the lack of civil discourse and willingness to truly listen to others' points of view, and the disenchantment with participating in civic life, tells us that we have a long way to go when it comes to helping people get along better.

Our schools can provide a forum for teaching students the skills to critically examine issues from multiple perspectives, empathize with people of diverse backgrounds, and effectively solve the problems that plague their communities and the wider world. However, the challenge of how to do this feasibly, effectively and in a scalable way persists.

Enter STAT: Students Taking Action Together, a project of Rutgers' Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab, with funding from

the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust's "Helping People Get Along Better Fund." STAT is an instructional strategy used with schools' existing content that builds students' social-emotional learning (SEL) skills in empathy, perspective-taking, emotion regulation, problem-solving, and respectful, effective communication.

STAT helps students analyze social issues—including historical and current events, and community and school issues, as well as those in literature—and formulate action plans in response to them.

### THE STAT INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Four primary instructional strategies comprise STAT: norms, yes-no-maybe, respectful debate and PLAN.

### Norms

Norms help establish foundational guidelines for appropriate classroom behavior and foster positive, trusting relationships and communication. To develop class norms, students work individually, in pairs or small groups, and as a classroom community.

The norms usually include behaviors such as listen with your ears and eyes, treat your classmates the way they would like to be treated, wait for others to finish speaking before you speak because what they have to say is as important as what you want to say, and work to understand other points of view. Students may encourage each other to ask themselves, "Why might someone have that opinion?"

### Yes-no-maybe

Yes-no-maybe, is an easy tool to help encourage perspective-taking and respectful listening. In a yes-no-maybe activity, educators provide a statement to students for which they must decide if they agree, disagree, or are not sure. They must explain their reasoning while their peers listen respectfully. This works best when students can move to parts of the room representing each of the three responses and discuss their views in triads or quartets.

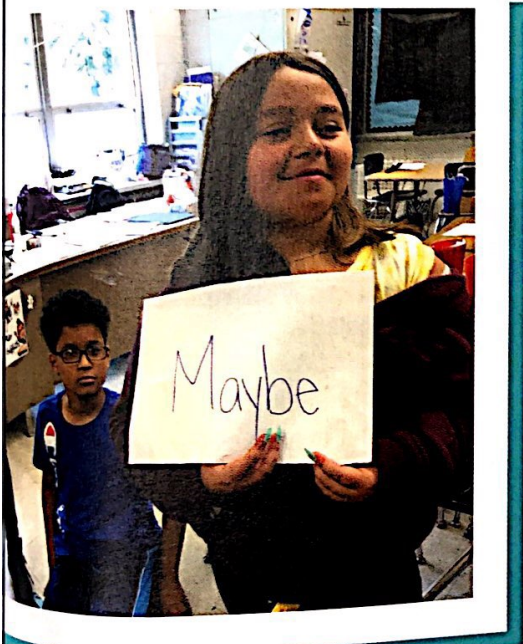
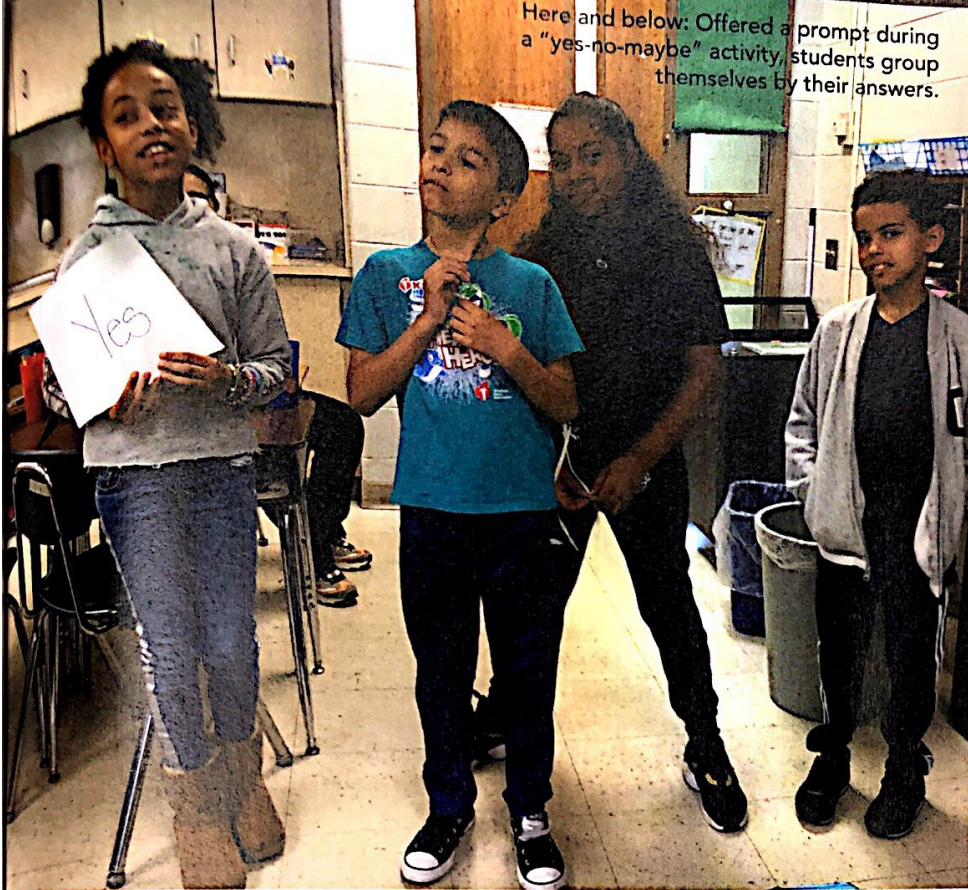
Examples of prompts that students would consider in a yes-no-maybe format include:

- Pat saw \$5 on floor, picked it up and kept it. It was not worth trying to return it. Do you agree?

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*Samuel Nayman is clinical psychology doctoral student in Dr. Maurice Elias's Social-Emotional and Character Development (SECD) Lab. Nayman is committed to creating greater opportunities for people to achieve their potential, by way of policies and interventions that target social-emotional and character skills.*

Here and below: Offered a prompt during a "yes-no-maybe" activity, students group themselves by their answers.



- All students should pass through metal detectors in school to ensure safety for everyone.
- I would have protested against what England did to the colonies.
- Leaders should rule with a strong hand. (In an eighth-grade curriculum, this may be in relation to ancient Rome)
- I would not have brought the U.S. into World War I.
- If no one knows who sent the messages, it's OK to say negative things about others on social media.

### Respectful debate

Respectful debate deepens students' perspective-taking by having students rotate and debate both sides of an issue.

Students work with their peers to research and persuasively argue for and against a position in a debate. They respectfully listen to their classmates, paraphrase opposing arguments, and check for understanding. This helps further students' perspective-taking, empathy, emotion regulation, communication and critical-thinking skills.

Students learn to entertain multiple perspectives by switching sides and reading nuanced articles. They are encouraged to consider using respectful debate skills in their personal lives.

Examples of debate topics that have been used in New Jersey classrooms include:

- The actions taken at the Boston Tea Party were the best way to respond to the situation faced by the colonists.
- A country should never go to war.
- When classmates act in ways that show unhealthy hygiene, you have an obligation to say something to them.

### PLAN

PLAN is the most integrative and comprehensive of the STAT instructional strategies. The goal of PLAN is to help students internalize a problem-analysis and action-planning strategy they can use in response to a wide range of situations. Classes can use PLAN with a historical issue,

social injustice or current event, or an in-school or out-of-school problem, such as bullying, gangs, substance use, cheating on tests, and exclusion. PLAN stands for:

- **P:** Create a **problem description** that defines the issue being discussed.
- **L:** Brainstorm a **list of options and pros/cons** to solve the problem.
- **A:** Develop and act on an **action plan** to solve the problem.
- **N:** **Notice successes** as part of ongoing feedback and refinement.

Students internalize the PLAN strategy through the repetition of a wide range of examples. PLAN has been developed and piloted most extensively in middle school for use with social studies curricula—where it is strongly aligned with standards—and for school and community issues, such as including other students, clean water, constructive student social action versus ineffective complaining. Applications have been made for high schools and elementary schools, as well as for use in language arts. These applications are standards-aligned.

Fourth-grade teacher Melissa Nestor uses PLAN during her class's morning meetings at Washington Elementary School in Summit. She takes real problems, such as loud noise levels and frequent illnesses, and works through the issues using the framework. The idea of using a framework is to help students learn to take a problem-solving approach to issues of concern. That includes improving health habits and determining ways to reduce the spread of germs among students.

"I use PLAN as an anchor and refer back to it at other points during the school day," Nestor says. "PLAN helps students feel more invested in the changes they have made in the classroom."

Washington Elementary School Counselor Andrea Sadow uses STAT principles in the classroom and in individual counseling with third-through fifth-graders. She encourages teachers to try STAT approaches and finds that while they are not dramatically different from what they are already doing, the consistent skill-building strategy is having an impact on students.

"In a classroom, unprompted, I have started to hear students using the phrase, 'I respectfully disagree,'" Sadow reports.

Grace Rivetti, formerly a school counselor at Parsons Elementary School in North Brunswick, also serves as a STAT ambassador to many teachers in her school. She finds ways to bring STAT instructional strategies into every grade level and encourages teachers to embed STAT into various subject areas, such as social studies and language arts, where students can take the perspective of various characters as they read about problems and conflicts in stories. Rivetti also uses PLAN as a format for peer mediation conversations. Rivetti is now a school counselor in Cranford.

"In the classroom, I notice students really listening and starting to grasp the concept of perspective-taking," Rivetti notes. "Students can understand other points of view even if they don't agree and show mutual respect. They take it seriously." 🗨️

## Try STAT for yourself

Materials providing guidance and lesson plans for all STAT strategies can be downloaded at [secdlab.org/STAT](https://secdlab.org/STAT). The materials also include a detailed document showing STAT alignment with social studies standards.

## Attend STAT workshop at NJEA Convention

Want to learn more? Attend the NJEA Convention workshop titled, "Build Citizenship, Civility, Perspective, Purpose and EQ in Social Studies," on Thursday, Nov. 7, 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m. in Room 301 of the Atlantic City Convention Center. See Page 33 of your NJEA Convention Program for details.

You may also visit the STAT booth located on the Exhibit Hall floor at Booth 918.

Those downloading will be asked to agree to provide periodic feedback on their use of STAT to the Lab and to support refinements and gathering of specific application examples to share with others. Those working with STAT materials who have questions can contact the Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab at [stat.secdlab@gmail.com](mailto:stat.secdlab@gmail.com).

The STAT Team at Rutgers consists of Sam Nayman, who is the project director; Crystal Molyneaux, Alicia LaRose, William Maier and Molly Stern, who are STAT school consultants; and Maurice Elias, Arielle Linsky, and Sara Taylor, who are the SECD Lab's director, associate director, and research coordinator, respectively.

# STAT SAMPLE LESSON

## The Vietnam War and the right of students to protest

(This example helps teachers meet NJ state social studies standards, including 6.1.12.D.12.d and 6.1.12.D.12.e)

*This lesson uses PLAN, which stands for problem description, list of options, action plan, and notice successes, a problem solving and social action framework that students can apply to any problem they encounter, including a historical issue they would like to analyze (or re-analyze) and consider alternative solutions for a social injustice or current event they would like to address, or a current school-related problem or issue they want to help solve (e.g., bullying, gangs, substance use, cheating, lack of inclusion). The PLAN framework builds students' problem solving, empathy, perspective taking, emotion regulation, and communication skills. It helps students become more engaged and develop strategies to think about and act on a wide range of historical, social, civic, and school issues.*

*Below is an example of a STAT lesson applied to an issue whose importance was amplified by the Vietnam War, namely, the right of students to protest.*

### Topic: Students and Speech (*Tinker v. Des Moines, 1969*)

#### Background<sup>1</sup> :

*Tinker v. Des Moines* is a historic Supreme Court ruling from 1969 that cemented students' rights to free speech in public schools.

Mary Beth Tinker was a 13-year-old junior high school student in December 1965 when she and a group of students decided to wear black armbands to school to protest the war in Vietnam. The school board got wind of the protest and passed a preemptive ban. When Mary Beth arrived at school on Dec. 16, she was asked to remove the armband and was then suspended.

Four other students were suspended as well, including her brother John Tinker and Chris Eckhardt. The students were told they could not return to school until they agreed to remove their armbands. The students returned after the Christmas break and filed a First Amendment lawsuit.

Represented by the ACLU, the students and their families embarked on a four-year court battle that culminated in the landmark Supreme Court decision.

On Feb. 24, 1969, the court ruled 7-2 that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate."

The court found that the First Amendment applied to public schools, and school officials could not censor student speech unless it disrupted the educational process. Because wearing a black armband was not disruptive, the court held that the First Amendment protected the right of students to wear them.

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<sup>1</sup>Background description taken from: <https://www.aclu.org/other/tinker-v-des-moines-landmark-supreme-court-ruling-behalf-student-expression>

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## Young people's freedoms

The court's majority opinion, written by Justice Abe Fortas, went on to affirm the freedom that young people have under the Constitution:

In our system, state-operated schools may not be enclaves of totalitarianism. School officials do not possess absolute authority over their students. Students... are possessed of fundamental rights which the State must respect, just as they themselves must respect their obligations to the State... In the absence of a specific showing of constitutionally valid reasons to regulate their speech, students are entitled to freedom of expression of their views.

There are still limits on what students can do in public schools. Under the ruling, students can't violate rules that aren't targeted at expression—like attendance policies—as long as their school is applying the rules equally, regardless of whether students have broken them to protest or for other reasons. And students can't "materially disrupt" the functioning of their school, though what's considered disruptive can depend on the situation."

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## Consider the problem from different perspectives, using the PLAN framework:

**Problem Description:** Identify and think about the problem from multiple perspectives.

- Compare and contrast the different perspectives of the school and students about the Vietnam war and about the nature of protest. What are some of the events of the time or in the media that may have helped inform the perspective of the school and students?
- What were the issues, from each perspective?
- Who were the key participants in this controversy?

**List Options:** Create and analyze the possible solutions to the historical perspective.

- What would have been some other possible ways for the school to solve the issues from their perspective? What about the students?
- What were the ultimate choices that the school and students made?
- What options did they consider to be acceptable ways to resolve the problem? What did they ultimately decide? What might you have done had you been in the students' place?

**Action Plan:** Create your own action plan.

- How did the students carry out their plans? How did the school carry out their plans?
- What obstacles did they encounter? What might they have done differently?

**Notice Successes:** Evaluate the effectiveness of your solution and the historical solution.

- How did the issue work out for the students and the school? Were there any consequences for students then?
- What can be learned from their experience that would be relevant to the present?
- What might encourage you to engage in activism in your community or at school? Are there issues about which you would consider engaging in protest? What might discourage you from protesting like the students in the above case? What might encourage you?