

## Improving Peer Group Culture and Socialization for Academic Success among Rural Early Adolescents

A team of researchers from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Pennsylvania State University created a multi-component professional development model, *SEALS* (Supporting Early Adolescent Learning and Social Success; see reverse), and tested its efficacy during a research study that included rural schools serving early adolescents. The intent of the study was to investigate the extent to which and ways in which teachers' participation in a year-long professional development program aimed to help them to develop strategies to create learning environments that supported students' social, behavioral, and academic adjustment would result in more favorable school adaptation for students. In total, 18 pairs of schools located across the United States participated in the study, matched on the basis of multiple characteristics (e.g., size, achievement level, location, etc.). One school in each pair was randomly assigned to receive the SEALS program; the other served as the matched control school.

As one aspect of this larger study, researchers examined the extent to which participation in the SEALS professional development program contributed to more favorable *peer cultures of effort and achievement* among students. Peer cultures reflect the shared norms, activities, values, and concerns of groups of students in the school. Peer cultures can exist among small peer groups of students, within classrooms, among grade-mates, and even school-wide. Peer cultures of academic effort and achievement convey the acceptability, desirability, and value of effort and achievement to adolescents and strongly influence students' academic achievement, behaviors, and values. The research focused on three aspects of students' peer cultures of effort and achievement.

- First, students' perceptions of the emotional riskiness of participating in classes were examined, given that early adolescents sometimes avoid participating because they fear their classmates will make fun of them or think they are not smart.
- Second, the social costs and benefits of academic success, school valuing, and effort were examined. Sometimes, doing well in school comes at a price to students' peer acceptance and popularity. Students, therefore, may avoid doing well and trying hard academically if it compromises popularity with peers.
- Finally, norms, or expectations of the peer group for how acceptable it is to work hard and do well in school, were examined, given that peer group norms for effort and achievement have a strong influence over students' achievement, school behaviors, and dispositions.

The research team investigated differences in these aspects of peer group culture between schools in which teachers had received the SEALS professional development program (SEALS schools) versus schools in which teachers had not (control schools). In addition, the team examined the extent to which the influence of the peer group norms on students' achievement was enhanced in SEALS schools, as compared to control schools.

### Key Findings

Overall, the SEALS intervention had a significant positive influence on multiple aspects of peer group cultures of effort and achievement.

- In both SEALS and control schools, there were social benefits to effort and achievement. Students who worked hard and did well received more nominations from their schoolmates for being popular, cool, and a leader. This was especially true in SEALS schools, where students experienced greater social benefit (i.e., greater status with peers) for working hard.
- In both SEALS and control schools, valuing schools came at a cost to social status, in that students who reported a strong valuing of school were rated as less cool, less popular, and less of a leader. However, in SEALS schools, valuing school posed much less of a social cost. In other words, according to peers, it was definitely not cool to value school in the control schools, but valuing school did not compromise social status nearly as much in the SEALS schools.
- In SEALS schools, compared to control schools, peer group norms were more supportive for effort and achievement.

Finally, the positive influence of aspects of the peer culture was also greater in SEALS schools, compared to control schools. Furthermore, compared to peer groups in control schools, peer group norms favoring effort and achievement had a more strongly positive influence over the peer group members' achievement in SEALS schools.

### **What This Tells Us**

For early adolescents, the peer culture can undermine students' academic success. The SEALS intervention helped teachers to create peer cultures more supportive of academic effort and achievement. Efforts to strengthen the peer group culture in favor of academic success benefit individual students, who are motivated to behave in ways that will bring them peer acceptance and status and that will help them maintain good standing in their peer groups. When teachers deepen their understanding of how to coordinate their students' academic, behavioral, and social adjustment, they are better able to create classroom environments that support student learning.

### **References**

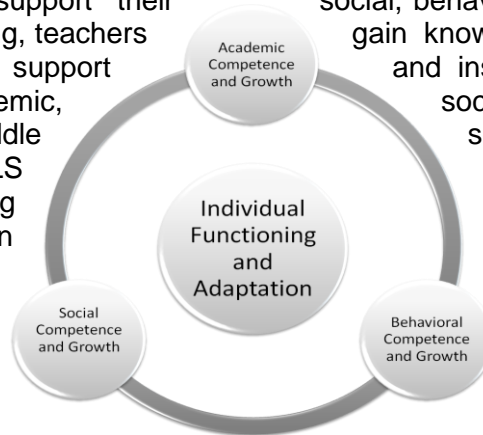
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# SEALS

## Supporting Early Adolescent Learning and Social Success

The **Supporting Early Adolescent Learning and Social Success (SEALS)** intervention seeks to cultivate successful middle school experiences for students through enhancing teachers' capacities. SEALS is a professional development and directed consultation model developed based on stage-environment fit and developmental science perspectives, which together emphasize the holistic nature of school adjustment and the need for students to experience learning environments that support their success. During SEALS training, teachers enable them to subsequently support appropriate and effective academic, social, behavioral, as well as academic gain knowledge and strategies that and instruct students to develop social, and behavioral skills needed as a successful middle school student. More generally, through SEALS training, teachers learn how to create a learning environment that enables students to experience in productive peer relationships and classroom behaviors, and to be fully engaged in the learning process.



### SEALS Intervention Components

<p><u>Academic Engagement Enhancement</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General strategies that promote an instructional context that is responsive to the need of a broad and diverse range of students.</li> <li>• Strategy development for students who typically struggle with traditional teaching techniques.</li> <li>• Promote at-risk student engagement with frequent constructive feedback and learning opportunities.</li> </ul>
<p><u>Competence Enhancement Behavior Management</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategies to create structure and consistency across classes.</li> <li>• Encouraging self-directed behavior.</li> <li>• Proactive approaches to prevent behavioral difficulties.</li> <li>• Create constructive consequences when problems arise.</li> </ul>
<p><u>Social Dynamics Training</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promoting awareness of the impact of peers on motivation and achievement.</li> <li>• Understanding the nature of, and how to use peer groups and social roles to foster learning.</li> <li>• Identifying and helping youth with social difficulties develop positive relationships.</li> </ul>

### Intervention Delivery Training Components (1-year)

- Site Visit
- Summer Institute
- On-line, Self-guided modules
- Directed Consultation through Video Conferencing