

## Improving Teachers' Attunement to Student Peer Groups Benefits Students in Middle School Transition

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 for summary), 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 focused on teachers' attunement to, or knowledge about, the membership of student peer groups within the sixth grade. Both students and teachers were asked to individually identify the peer groups among sixth grade students. A computer program was used to "map" out the overall student and overall teacher perception of groups within the grade. Teachers' attunement was defined as their accuracy in identifying the peer groups identified by students. Researchers focused on teachers' attunement to the peer group affiliations of students identified as bullies and on the influence of teachers' attunement to peer group affiliations on students' experience of the school social-affective context at the end of the transition year. Overall, the goal was to determine if after participating in the *SEALS* program, teachers improved in their understanding of students' social dynamics and if these changes led to more positive student adjustment during the middle school transition year.

### Key Findings

Findings indicated that teachers who had participated in the *SEALS* program maintained greater attunement to, or knowledge of, students' peer group affiliations, as compared with teachers in control schools who did not receive the *SEALS* program. Moreover, teachers who had taken part in the *SEALS* program were better able to identify the peer group affiliations of bullies than teachers in control schools. Teachers in *SEALS* schools, compared to teachers in control schools, were also rated by trained observers to more effectively manage the social environment of the classroom. Students whose teachers were more attuned to peer group affiliations reported an improved school "bullying ecology". In other words, they were more likely to stand up for peers being bullied, expressed greater confidence that peers would stand up for them if they were bullied, and reported that they were more likely to not encourage bullying if they witnessed it, as compared to students in the control schools. Students in schools in which teachers received the *SEALS* program also reported a more favorable sense of school belonging at the end of sixth grade, as compared to students in matched control schools.

### What This Tells Us

The *SEALS* professional development program, focused on early adolescent social, behavioral, and academic adjustment, can help sixth-grade teachers facilitate an environment of positive student adaptation to middle school, through enhancing their understanding of students' peer group affiliations and by helping them manage student social dynamics more effectively. When teachers have a better understanding of student social dynamics, they are better able to identify and monitor problematic social behavior, such as bullying. Their greater attunement likely enables teachers to provide social support to students and to draw effectively on social dynamics for successful instructional efforts. A supportive and academically-focused school environment is foundational to students' sense of belonging and to their academic success. .

### References

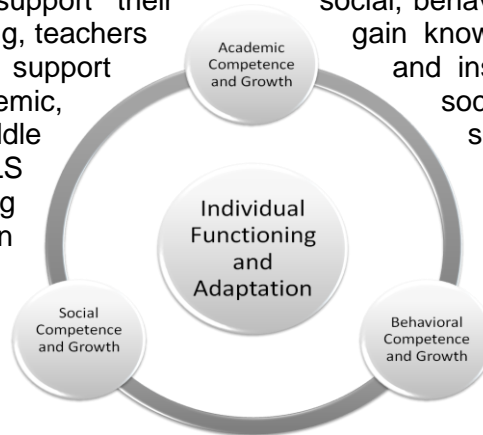
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# SEALS

## 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 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