

**Teaching Assertiveness in Middle School Changed Our Pandemic Experience**

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### Teaching Assertiveness in Middle School Changed Our Pandemic Experience

While much of the world seemed to pause during the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools approached the challenge by empowering students through social-emotional learning. Through state-sponsored professional development initiatives, educators across Arizona, Kansas, and Missouri analyzed their students' social-emotional needs; taught a series of lessons designed to develop assertive behaviors; and incorporated ongoing, authentic practice across remote, hybrid, and in-person learning environments. Results showed that students learned and effectively applied skills, boosting their engagement in school, increasing their ownership over learning, and improving their interactions with peers and teachers.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a broad construct encompassing many intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Many SEL curricula provide knowledge-building content with superficial application of numerous skills; conversely, the [College and Career Competency Framework](#) (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2013; see also Noonan & Gaumer Erickson, 2018) guides educators to begin by focusing on a foundational skill based on their students' most pressing needs, teach that skill schoolwide with authentic practice, and provide ongoing feedback. By focusing on a single skill, educators create a shared vision, develop collective efficacy through their collaborative efforts, and promote generalization of the skill across settings.

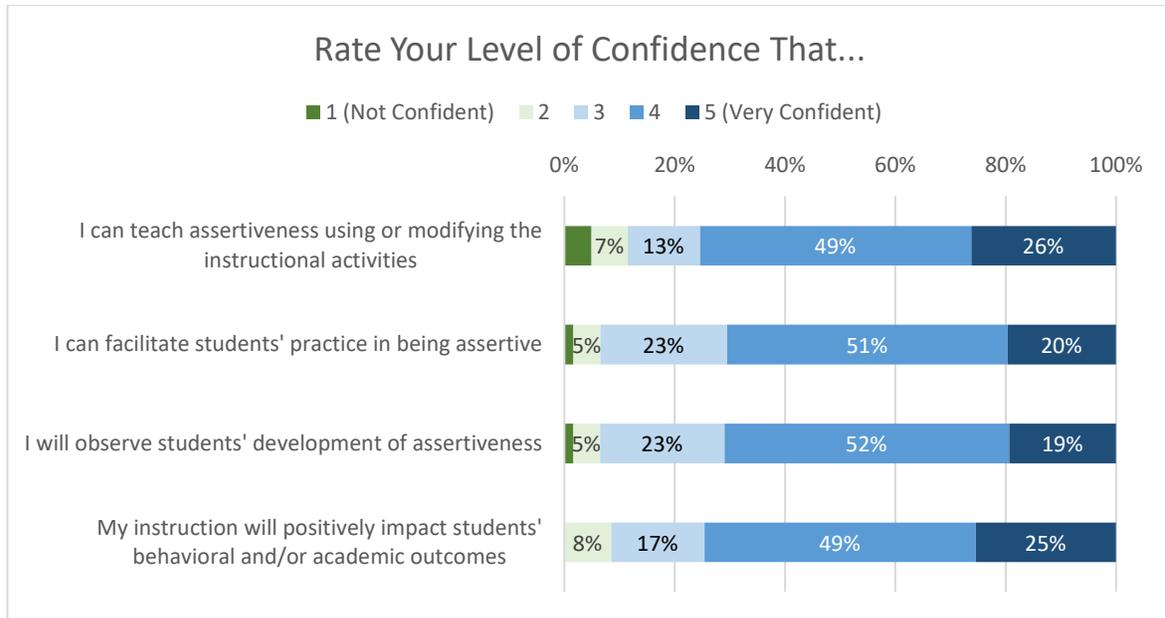
Despite being greatly impacted by the pandemic, three middle schools still found a way to begin teaching all seventh and eighth grade students assertiveness concepts. These diverse schools included, on average, 557 students (21–74% White, 10–71% Hispanic, and 3–5% Black) with an average of 78% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch rates. Based on a needs assessment, school leaders felt that assertiveness (i.e., even when it's difficult, expressing your wants, needs, and thoughts while respecting others) would empower students to ask for help when needed, empathize with others,

respectfully communicate emotions, and address depression and anxiety (see [middle school students define assertiveness](#)).

All the middle school educators participated in a virtual professional learning process during the 2020–2021 school year. This process included two leadership planning and analysis meetings; four 3-hour virtual in-services attended by all staff; coaching within each professional learning community; and continuous, on-site support through the development of school-based SEL coaches. Performance-based assessments, application planning, and reflection were incorporated within each professional learning event. The events were also observed for inclusion of methods that promote adult learning using the [High Quality Professional Development Checklist—Version 3](#) (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2020; Gaumer Erickson et al., 2016). Across the professional learning sessions for all three schools, educators' self-rated knowledge increased an average of 1.6 points on a 5-point scale, and evaluation surveys indicated high agreement that the training helped identify ways for students to learn and practice assertiveness (4.1 on a 5-point scale), contained examples of the content/practice in use (4.3), and provided tools and functional methods to transfer the learning to practice (4.2).

After each professional learning event, educators planned their assertiveness instruction, determined content-related opportunities for students to practice assertiveness concepts, and reflected on their own efficacy in providing assertiveness instruction. These results were used to identify follow-up supports provided during professional learning community meetings. A snapshot of the educators' confidence ratings is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Educators' confidence ratings



Following the process outlined in the lessons, instruction began with each student completing and analyzing their results on the Assertiveness Formative Questionnaire and the Assertiveness Knowledge Test. Females rated their behaviors lower in expressing themselves than in respecting others while males were the opposite. Both groups rated their current behaviors relatively low (54% out of the total) and, on averaged, answered 45% of the knowledge items correctly. Items rated the lowest on the questionnaire included “I’m usually able to tell people how I feel;” “If I disagree with my teacher, I talk to him or her about it;” and “When an argument is over, I often wish I would have said what was really on my mind” (reverse scored).

From September to April, all students were provided instruction twice a week for 30 minutes during schoolwide advisory time to address the following learning targets:

1. Define assertiveness; give examples of why it is important; and differentiate between passive, assertive, and aggressive behaviors.
2. Identify strengths and challenges related to being assertive.
3. Use the Feelings Word Wheel to better understand and express feelings.
4. Express empathy for others and understand why that is an important skill.

5. Demonstrate understanding by listening to and paraphrasing someone else's perspective.
6. Develop assertive statements for a difficult situation.
7. Identify ways to change passive and aggressive behavior into assertive responses.
8. Demonstrate assertiveness through a short skit.

In addition to the lessons taught during advisory time, teachers, counselors, administrators, and other school staff purposefully made direct connections to specific assertiveness concepts in numerous school settings and applied those concepts to students' lives. For example, collaborative learning activities in social studies and biology included students self-assessing if collaborative group behaviors were more assertive, passive, or aggressive/dominant based on the goal of equal participation. English and social studies teachers guided students to analyze fictional characters and historical figures by recognizing aggressive or passive behaviors and determining assertive behaviors that may have led to better outcomes. As one teacher described, "In ancient world history, students analyzed the behaviors of Roman leaders and how negotiations could have been different if they were more assertive instead of moving toward aggression right away." Counselors and administrators incorporated [three-part assertive statements](#) into counseling and discipline structures, prompting students to rephrase aggressive communication or initiate respectful communication.

The educators provided students with specific feedback as they practiced assertiveness concepts, and students began demonstrating assertive behaviors with peers and teachers. When a student was demanding or rude, instead of escalating the situation, teachers simply asked the student to restate in an assertive way. As one principal said,

Recently I've received emails from two frequently passive students who were frustrated with their teachers. The students respectfully explained the situations, made great empathetic statements showing that they understood that there is a lot going on in the teachers' lives right now, and outlined their requests to resolve the situation. My email

back to them was, “Wow, what a great assertive email! Thank you for being so mature and handling this the right way.” Then I outlined the steps that I would take to help resolve the issue.

Educators also began to see student correcting each other, saying things like, “That sounded like you were pointing the finger too much at them. Try bringing the tone down to a cooler level and showing empathy.” Many educators provided feedback to students during group work, prompting students who were exhibiting passive or dominating behaviors to shift to assertive behaviors. Additionally, students prompted other group members towards assertiveness with a goal of equal student participation and respectful communication throughout collaborative work activities.

Throughout the year, the focus on assertiveness resulted in improved student engagement and self-advocacy, as demonstrated through increased, respectful, email communication from students to teachers; active, as opposed to passive, participation in virtual instruction; and an increased willingness to ask for assistance when needed. The following is a selection of quotes from educators’ reflections on their students’ demonstration of assertiveness:

- “Students feel more confident and understand their own emotions better.”
- “My more aggressive students have found new ways to address issues that they would usually turn to aggressive. The relationships within the classroom are becoming more assertive and less confrontational.”
- “Students more consistently assert themselves. They are more specific in describing their needs.”
- “Our classroom is becoming a community. Students talk with all of the other students in class instead of just their friends because we have assertive conversations.”
- “Now my students are able to communicate with their teachers about missing assignments or work, either in person or by email, to advocate for their own educational wants and needs. Most of my students were scared to advocate for themselves until we went through this training.”

- “Students are better able to engage in conversation about their physical, psychological, and emotional needs.”
- “Students are developing a more in-depth knowledge of their feelings using the Feelings Word Wheel. Students are able to assertively talk to teachers and their peers.”
- “Students are saying things like ‘that was a little too aggressive’ and reminding each other to be assertive. They are recognizing when they see assertiveness in other settings.”
- “During class discussions, students are able to talk in a more civilized way to each other.”
- “In emails, instead of saying, ‘Why is my grade this way?’ students are taking responsibility and asking ‘What can I do to fix my grade?’”
- “The assertiveness concepts transfer to academics as well. We remind each other that active listening is active learning. Now I prompt students to paraphrase with partners since they learned these concepts as part of the assertiveness instruction.”
- “Assertiveness has given students the power to express themselves. They are even also showing empathy for me as a teacher.”
- “Boys who have never said a word in my class are asking me questions. Maybe they were afraid to speak up before.”
- “Students are expressing themselves assertively in conflicts and during mediation. I find myself wanting to stop them and say, ‘Wow, that was an awesome assertive statement!’”
- “When I ask a question in class, I usually get the same three students that will always answer. Now I’ve started to see other students speak up without me having to call on them.”
- “When giving each other advice about interpersonal conflicts, I’m hearing students use phrases like, ‘Don’t forget, you need to show empathy for their side first.’”

Both student assessment data and an educator reflection survey identified positive impacts of assertiveness instruction. Posttest knowledge and self-assessment questionnaires were administered in

April 2021. Students demonstrated an average increase of 11.2% in knowledge of assertiveness concepts. They better understood what assertiveness is; the differences between passive, assertive, and aggressive behaviors; what constitutes an assertive statement; and the concept of personal boundaries. Self-report items showing the most growth included, “I speak up when someone is not respecting my personal boundaries like ‘no cheating off my homework’ or ‘I don’t let friends borrow money’” and “I sometimes avoid asking questions for fear of sounding stupid” (reverse scored). Educator survey results indicate that an average of 92.5% of teachers observed positive student impacts as a result of assertiveness instruction. The top five student impacts reported were

1. improved communication,
2. increased ability to express themselves,
3. increased ability to seek assistance and supports,
4. improved confidence in their own abilities, and
5. improved teamwork/group work.

These results align with research showing that, when students learn assertiveness, they are more likely to resist peer pressure, manage conflicts, advocate for themselves, and pursue future educational and career opportunities (Grove et al., 2011; Wolfe et al., 2012). Assertive adolescents are less likely to bully, be bullied, or be sexually victimized (Hall, 2006; Rowe et al., 2015).

Even with the challenges of providing virtual and hybrid academic instruction throughout the 2020–21 school year, educators in these middle schools were able to provide explicit instruction to all students in assertiveness concepts. Throughout the year, they worked to incorporate opportunities for students to practice and make connections to assertive behaviors within numerous classrooms and education settings and through a variety of instructional content. Because of their instructional efforts and the prioritizing of SEL as critical during this time, they supported students to express themselves respectfully. This empowered students to voice concerns, ask for help, negotiate conflict, and

communicate emotions meaningfully, impacting their pandemic experience in a positive way. To better understand how educators and students were impacted by this work, watch one school's [SELebration video](#).

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