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# Students taking action together: Social action in urban middle schools

*Arielle C. V. Linsky, Danielle R. Hatchimonji, Claudia L. Kruzik, Samantha Kifer, Nina Franza, Kellie McClain, Samuel J. Nayman, & Maurice J. Elias*

**Abstract:** Teaching character virtues and social-emotional skills in isolation of social-political context is incomplete at best. Further, racial and ethnic inequity in social action and political influence spans from youth to adults and must be addressed (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008b). Middle school is a crucial developmental time to cultivate students' social-emotional and character competencies alongside their social actions promoting positive change (Jones & Kahn, 2017). This article describes how our social-emotional and character development curriculum, called Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character (MOSAIC), inspired students to improve their school, community, and world. The lessons required students to engage in the kind of active learning that the Association for Middle Level Education champions through its statement, *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*, by applying the skills they learn in the classroom to relevant social issues (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). Our article brings this approach to life by illustrating its use in an under-resourced, highly stressed, urban school system.

**Keywords:** *character development, middle school development, social action, social-emotional learning, social justice education, urban schools*

## ***This We Believe* characteristics:**

- Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them.
- Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.
- A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision.
- Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.

- Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.

The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE, formerly the National Middle School Association; see [Table 1](#) for descriptions of all acronyms used) argued that all adults working with middle school youth “must possess a deep understanding of the young adolescents with whom they work and the society in which they live” (NMSA, 2010, p. 28). This statement suggests that middle school curricular content cannot exist in isolation from the socio-political context in which educators teach. In the current social climate in the United States, rooted in ideologies that threaten to further marginalize certain groups, it is more important than ever for all middle school students to participate in social justice education (Costello, 2016). Increasing polarization and proliferation of misinformation creates challenges for educators aiming to engage students in social and political life (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017).

To date, most research and programming in social justice education (including service-learning, social responsibility, and social action) have focused on White, middle-class youth, excluding low-income, youth of color (Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 2003; Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). In a study of California high school seniors, students identifying as African-American or Latino reported having less access to activities promoting social action as compared to their White peers, when controlling for academic performance and future educational goals (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008a). An analysis of high school students' civic engagement (e.g., community service, intention to vote, trust in government) from 1976 to 2005 found that students with 4-year college aspirations endorsed civic indicators at significantly higher rates than

**Table 1.** Acronyms defined.

Acronym	Meaning	Description
SECD	Social–Emotional and Character Development	SECD is the promotion of social and emotional skills as well as character virtues that help students recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, establish positive relationships with others, and act in accordance with their values.
MOSAIC	Mastering Our Skills And Inspiring Character	Rutgers University SECD Lab’s school-based intervention and approach to promoting SECD
STAT	Students Taking Action Together	STAT is a monthly component of the MOSAIC curriculum that enables students to develop and facilitate social action projects
AMLE	Association for Middle Level Education	(Formerly, NMSA)
NMSA	National Middle School Association	NMSA is the former name of the AMLE. NMSA was an education association comprised education stakeholders of the middle level grades. NMSA offered professional development training and materials to support its members
PAR/D/C	Preparation, Action, Reflection, Demonstration/Celebration	Four-phase service-learning approach that consists of (1) preparation (P), (2) action (A), (3) reflection (R), and (4) demonstration and celebration (D)/(C)
PLAN	Problem description List of options Action plan Notice successes	Social problem-solving framework that stands for (1) creating a problem description (P), (2) brainstorming a list of options (L), (3) developing and acting on an action plan to solve the problem (A), and (4) noticing successes as part of ongoing evaluation and refinement (N)

SECD: Social–Emotional and Character Development; NMSA: National Middle School Association; AMLE: Association for Middle Level Education.

students with 2-year college aspirations and no college aspirations, respectively. For example, students with 4-year college aspirations were two to three times more likely to engage, or intend to engage, in civic activities and four times more likely to vote, or intend to vote, than their peers with no college aspirations (Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Osgood, & Briddell, 2011). This inequity in social action opportunities may contribute to the documented inequity in adult involvement in politics between racial groups (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008b; Mitchel, 2010; Verba et al., 2003). To shift this imbalance, it is essential that educators provide youth with racially and/or ethnically marginalized identities, opportunities to gain skills and engage in social action projects.

Students Taking Action Together (STAT) provided a pathway for racial/ethnic minority students to engage in social action that mattered to them. Rather than prescribing content and topics, the STAT lesson series focused on guiding students to harness their social–emotional and character competencies and learn a problem-solving method useful in creating the changes in their school, community, and world that they cared about. Fostering student voice is particularly essential for students belonging to groups that have been systematically oppressed and continuously underrepresented in positions of political and social power. However, it is imperative that all youth feel empowered for active participation in citizenship and

civic processes, and middle school is a place where such social action trajectories are in a formative stage.

Education about social justice content is inadequate when it neglects to acknowledge that integration of students’ social–emotional skills and character virtues is the basis of students’ successful social action. For instance, for a student who recognizes (and experiences) disparities in power and privilege, the knowledge of these inequities will not be sufficient to engage in social action. Schools must equip the student with emotional regulation and communication skills, as well as diligence and optimism, to be able to effectively engage in advocacy. Therefore, effective social action learning is promoted by social–emotional and character development (SECD) pedagogies. These aim to develop students’ social-interactive, emotional, and moral competencies so that students might use these skills in service of a personally relevant positive purpose (Hatchimonji, Linsky, & Elias, 2017). Thus, SECD and social justice initiatives share the process goal of engaging students in action-focused projects to better their school, community, and world.

**Education about social justice content is inadequate when it neglects to acknowledge that integration of students’ social–emotional skills and character virtues is the basis of students’ successful social action.**

During the crucial developmental period of early adolescence, middle school education must include social action on topics meaningful to all students (Jones & Kahn, 2017). STAT uses SECD pedagogies as a foundation to accomplish this goal by engaging students and teachers from urban middle schools in a purposeful, hands-on, and socially relevant series of lessons about social justice and student advocacy. Through this series of lessons, STAT embodies AMLE's characteristic of active learning, put forth in their statement, *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* in which, "students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning" (National Middle School Association, 2010, p. x).

## Social action in urban middle schools

Middle school-based SECD and social action initiatives share the following challenges in meeting the AMLE principle of active learning (National Middle School Association, 2010): (a) A "jumbled schoolhouse" that consists of an array of positive youth development programming, (b) the need to attend to the developmental transition from preadolescence to adolescence, and (c) the need to balance curriculum content with the process of social action. Originally developed within a comprehensive middle school SECD approach (for more information, see project website at [www.secdlab.org/mosaic](http://www.secdlab.org/mosaic)), STAT integrates the shared goals and challenges of SECD and social action for middle school students and uses a service-learning paradigm to move students and teachers toward feasible social action projects relevant to the context in which they are taught.

### Addressing active learning: The jumbled schoolhouse

In urban middle schools, both SECD and social action curricula face the all-too-common phenomenon known as the "jumbled schoolhouse" (Elias et al., 2015), in which simultaneously deployed youth development initiatives in schools are uncoordinated with one another (Elias et al., 1997). Schools with multiple competing initiatives have difficulty implementing school-based programs with fidelity (Lendrum, Humphrey, & Wigelsworth, 2013). On the other hand, research has shown that schools with integrated health risk behavior prevention are more efficient than those with discrete interventions (Collaborative for

Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2015; Hale, Fitzgerald-Yau, & Viner, 2014).

In the case of SECD and social justice curricula, attempting to implement these programs separately weakens the strength of both curricula by putting them in competition for time and resources. Furthermore, implementing isolated social justice curricula neglects the reality that students must integrate academic knowledge, social-emotional skills, and character virtues to effectively engage in social action. Likewise, isolated SECD curricula do not offer students guided opportunities to generalize social-emotional and character competencies to academics, extracurricular, or social action initiatives (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Elias et al., 2015). Such a segmented approach leaves students to integrate their learning from academic, social-emotional, and social action experiences on their own (Elias, 2009). The alternative approach involves a synergistic coordination of school initiatives so that all school personnel support students in putting social-emotional, character, and social action competencies to use throughout the school day (Elias, 2014).

STAT, the social action module, is a recurring curriculum component embedded in a larger SECD curriculum. The SECD curriculum and accompanying school-wide approach to school improvement are intended to serve as the overarching framework that encompasses all positive youth development initiatives in the school. STAT, as the student voice element of the SECD curriculum, specifically fosters collaboration among disjointed elements of the schoolhouse by aligning with existing student structures, including student council, school clubs, and committees. Furthermore, through student-led social action, STAT focuses on existing school problems used to further "unjumble" the schoolhouse. Through STAT, students apply social-emotional and character lessons to problems that matter to them. As a result, students are better able to integrate the lessons they learn, apply learned skills collaboratively with peers and faculty, and engage in active learning (National Middle School Association, 2010).

### Addressing active learning: Developmental considerations

Middle school students are entering a unique developmental period that is well-suited for social action (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Richards et al., 2013). As they enter adolescence, students begin to explore and

formulate an identity (Brinthaup & Lipka, 2012; Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995), which can include the development of a civic identity and understanding of personal and moral values in relation to others (Richards et al., 2013; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). Emerging social cognitive abilities, including executive function, social cognition, and empathy, also allow adolescents to consider and identify a life purpose (Blakemore & Mills, 2014; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Hoffman, 2008). Furthermore, as middle school students develop cognitively, they move away from a morality that is concerned with maximizing personal outcomes and toward one centered around maintaining sociocultural norms with a focus on equality, human rights, and social welfare (Wendorf, Alexander, & Firestone, 1999; Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). The developmental transition associated with middle school-aged students also creates challenges for designing curricula and programming that fit the widespread developmental needs of students in grades six through eight.

To address these developmental needs and ensure an appropriately challenging curriculum, middle school social action must include a scaled experience of increasing complexity (Jones & Kahn, 2017). As middle school students develop increasingly sophisticated executive functioning (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Steinberg, 2005), they gain the ability to plan for larger projects with greater tolerance for completion delays. For this reason, sixth graders can be most comfortable and effective in engaging in short-term, concrete social action projects, whereas eighth graders might be more able to tackle larger, long-term projects that require the ability to tolerate increasing levels of delay, setbacks, and frustration before meeting their social action goals. Additionally, middle school students' increasing metacognitive skills allow them to engage in more sophisticated reflection processes over time (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Schneider & Lockl, 2002), resulting in students' continued learning with each successive, and more complex, experience of social action. Further, growing perspective-taking skills (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Clark & Delia, 1976; Steinberg, 2005) allows more cognitively developed middle school students to consider the needs of others outside of their immediate circle and think more deeply about why things might not work the way they originally expected.

Therefore, sixth graders may be more successful considering peers in their classroom, while eighth graders may

be ready to consider increasingly complex social justice issues affecting people on a community and global level. It is not common for SECD or social action instruction to make adaptations based on these developmental considerations in their curriculum. By scaling social action project expectations across grade levels, STAT allows for differential ability and skill levels and provides a growth trajectory. Students therefore can engage in projects that meet their developmental abilities, thereby increasing their chances of successfully being able to integrate their skills and knowledge toward practical solutions.

### **Addressing active learning: Putting the “action” in social action**

Both SECD and social action initiatives share the challenge of balancing knowledge of content with the action-oriented process of engaging in social change. Students who have more voice and ownership in service-learning projects have shown correspondingly higher degrees of self-concept and efficacy for making positive changes, higher degrees of political activism and attitudes, and higher tolerance toward difference and diversity (Gullan, Power, & Leff, 2013; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Wong, Lau, & Lee, 2012), all key parts of a youth activism framework (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). In addition to providing didactic information and training about character virtues, social-emotional skills, and consequences of power and privilege, STAT exposes middle school students to the long-term iterative processes required to enact social change. To accomplish this goal, STAT integrates pedagogical techniques from service-learning. Service-learning involves active and reflective learning experiences that occur in the context of a service project (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007). STAT incorporates the PARD/C framework, which guides students through preparation, action, reflection, demonstration, and celebration (Kaye, 1997; Roehlkepartain, 2009). PARD/C allows students to critically engage with an issue, attempt to make an impact, reflect on the process, demonstrate their results, and celebrate and share their experience with others (Kaye, 1997; Newman, Dantzer, & Coleman, 2015; Roehlkepartain, 2009). By integrating SECD and social action initiatives in a developmentally scaled, symbiotic way using a service-learning framework, STAT enables middle school students to actively engage their SECD skills toward social justice-oriented action.



## STAT

One large urban middle school originally piloted STAT through an action-research process during the 2013–2015 academic years. Based on results of this pilot, six public urban middle schools in the Mid-Atlantic, with enrollment consisting primarily of low-income, racial/ethnic minority students (2446 students; 41% Latino, 31% African-American; 70% economically disadvantaged) are now implementing and evaluating STAT. The following section describes the current status of STAT after two additional years of implementation and refinement (2015–2017). We collected quantitative and qualitative feedback data from teachers and students to refine the STAT unit and lesson structure (for more information on the feedback and refinement process, see Hatchimonji, Linsky, et al., 2017a).

STAT was implemented monthly for every student as part of the Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character (MOSAIC) SECD curriculum taught school-wide in either 15-min advisory periods four times per week, or in Social Studies classes. STAT is a recurring four-lesson unit within the larger SECD curriculum that each require approximately 60 min of discussion. The STAT social action pedagogy combines the PARD/C service-learning framework (Kaye, 1997) with an empirically validated social problem-solving intervention that serves as the instructional vehicle for organizing issue analysis and planning (Elias & Tobias, 1996). The process—with the acronym, PLAN—includes four steps: (a) Creating a problem description (P) to define the issue, (b) brainstorming a list of options (L) to solve the problem, (c) developing and acting on an action plan to solve the problem (A), and (d) noticing successes as part of ongoing evaluation and refinement (N). Over a 4-month period, students engaged in two cycles of the PLAN model placed within the larger PARD/C framework (see Table 2) to develop actionable plans to address social issues in their school and community.

### STAT schedule

**STAT orientation: Teacher/staff readiness.** Prior to implementation, it was necessary to provide an orientation for teachers and staff prior to carrying out STAT. Professional development for teachers included an introduction to the STAT structure, opportunities to read example lessons, and a question and answer period. We did not find that extensive pedagogical training was needed because the instructional activities were associated with good teaching. Once teachers began implementing

STAT, it was extremely helpful if they received ongoing implementation support. During the 2015–2017 implementation, a consultant from the curriculum team visited the school once a week to support implementation of both the MOSAIC curriculum and the STAT lessons. The consultant conducted informal observations and provided feedback about strengths of the lesson and areas for improvement. To maximize sustainability, this implementation support role was gradually transferred to a teacher or group of teachers within the school. It was entirely possible for the instructional role to develop “in house,” from those who took a leadership role in implementing STAT in their school. In some schools, teachers used their professional learning communities or department meetings to model lessons, provided support to each other, and modified lesson structures.

**STAT month 1: Preparation.** In month 1 (typically November), students began the “preparation” stage of the PARD/C framework by selecting a classroom, school, or community issue that they felt deserved further consideration and was amenable to social action. Classrooms were encouraged to discuss topics of social justice and selected from topics suggested by the curriculum, school administration, or from topics generated by the students. For example, during the 2015–2017 implementation, a frequently cited concern for middle school students was bullying and cyber-bullying. Once the classroom chose a problem and defined it (“P” in PLAN), students collaboratively created a list of options (“L” in PLAN) to address it. In practice, we found that the list of options generated by students depended on how the students originally defined the problem. For example, some classrooms viewed the source of bullying as a lack of awareness of its harmful effects. To address bullying, these classrooms selected anti-bullying campaigns, such as posters, assemblies, or school-wide announcements. Other classrooms considered bullying to be a result of cultural insensitivity. These classrooms suggested multicultural awareness events, such as talent shows, game nights, and other interactive ways, to introduce students and staff to a diverse array of cultures and enhance cultural awareness. Finally, some classrooms saw bullying as an inevitable aspect of the middle school environment and therefore suggested establishing a peer mentoring program for sixth graders to help them adjust to middle school and avoid bullies. Through these discussions, students and teachers initiated the chain of active learning in which students begin to engage with relevant issues and develop a plan of action for overcoming these problems (National Middle School Association, 2010).

**Table 2.** Students taking action together (STAT) lesson outline.

Lesson	Task	Procedure	PLAN step	PARD/C step
Month 1, Lesson 1	Introduce PLAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduce the problem-solving model</li> <li>Problem-solving</li> <li>List of options</li> <li>Action plan</li> <li>Notice successes</li> </ul>	PLAN	Preparation
Month 1, Lesson 2	Introduce STAT and select topic	Describe what "Students Taking Action Together" means and help students select a topic that matters to the class	Problem description	Preparation
Month 1, Lesson 3	Problem description and list of options	Put the problem into words and set a goal. Brainstorm solutions	Problem description List of options	Preparation
Month 1, Lesson 4	Select option	Choose the top three solutions Discuss pros and cons of each option Select one idea for next month's STAT	List of options	Preparation
Month 2, Lesson 1	Review Month 1 option	Review STAT and PLAN Assess class interest in the idea selected at end of Month 1	Action plan	Action
Month 2, Lesson 2	Develop action plan	Refine idea as needed Develop action plan based on idea Discuss common "dos" and "do nots" for presenting	Action plan	Action
Month 2, Lesson 3	Practice feedback presentations	Practice presenting action plan to classroom teacher in small groups	Action plan	Action
Month 2, Lesson 4	Present action plan	Present action plan to selected individual outside of class and receive feedback	Action plan	Action
(Outside of STAT)	Act on action plan	Carry out action plan outside of STAT lesson structure	Action plan	Action
Month 3, Lesson 1	Reflection and next steps (back to P or refinement of action plan)	Reflect on action plan and notice what has gone well Decide if classroom will continue working on this action plan or refine action plan	Notice successes	Reflection
Month 3, Lesson 2	Problem description and list of options	If classroom has identified a specific barrier to action plan, reengage in the PLAN problem-solving process by describing a new problem	Problem description	Preparation
Month 3, Lesson 3	Select option	List options and select a new idea for solving new problem.	List of Options	Preparation
Month 3, Lesson 4	Develop action plan	Develop action plan for selected option	Action plan	Action
(Outside of STAT)	Continue action plan	Carry out action plan	Action plan	Action
Month 4, Lesson 1	Reflection and refinement of action plan	Reflect on revised action plan	Notice successes	Reflection

(Continued)

**Table 2.** (Continued)

Lesson	Task	Procedure	PLAN step	PARD/C step
Month 4, Lesson 2	Solidify the action plan	Develop new action plan based on revised or new idea	Action plan	Action
Month 4, Lesson 3	Practice presentations	Notice successes from previous presentation, learn presentation skill “BEST,” and practice	Action plan	Action
Month 4, Lesson 4	Present action plan	Present revised or new action plan to selected individual outside of class and receive feedback	Action plan	Action
(Outside of STAT)	<i>Act on action plan</i>	<i>Carry out action plan</i>	<i>Action plan</i>	<i>Action</i>
Month 4 to end-of-year	Prepare for demonstration	Notice successes and prepare for demonstration and celebration	Notice successes	Demonstration/Celebration
(Outside of STAT)	<i>Demonstration</i>	<i>End-of-year showcase of all classroom projects</i>	<i>Notice successes</i>	<i>Demonstration/Celebration</i>

*Note.* Table depicts the lesson plans for the STAT series discussions, which uses the PLAN problem-solving model and the PARD/C service-learning framework. Each lesson represents a 15-min lesson. Italicized text denotes events that take place outside of the STAT lesson structure.

**STAT month 2: Action.** Students began the “action” phase of the PARD/C framework in the second month. During the four lessons in the second month, students reviewed the class topic selected in month 1, solidified an action plan (“A” of PLAN), and practiced presenting their ideas to an external entity of the teacher’s choosing (e.g., school administrators, a buddy classroom, an outside community member, or a guidance counselor). During the action planning phase, students considered the feasibility of their ideas. This step required scaling back the initial ideas so that the class could accomplish the action. For example, an action plan that emerged in one school was to hold a dedicated field day with games from around the world to expose students to a variety of cultures. As students planned this activity, it became clear that they would not be able to hold a separate field day. Instead, students were able to integrate their ideas into the existing field day at the end of the school year. Thus, STAT promoted realistic, active learning by giving students autonomy and agency in their learning process while adapting to existing resources and constraints. It is worth noting that in the field day example, students changed the process by which the school planned and carried out subsequent field days. Operating within current constraints does not preclude a fundamental change in conditions and, in fact, may be a powerful way to catalyze change.

Between the second and third month of STAT, students were expected to carry out their action plan, which varied in scope depending on developmental scaling. One classroom, concerned with the cleanliness of the school, created humorous bathroom signs to remind students to wash their hands and throw away paper towels. In another school, a classroom made a suggestion to the school principal about improving the cleanliness of the bathrooms. The principal not only accepted the proposal but also suggested that the students present their ideas to the school board. Larger scale projects, led by eighth graders, included a “listening conference” to build student communication skills and an anti-bullying assembly during which they asked all students to sign an anti-bullying contract.

All these projects, regardless of size or scope, required students to engage with issues directly relevant to their lives and put their learned social-emotional skills to practice as they collaborated with peers and faculty, again reinforcing an active learning environment.



Naturally, some STAT suggestions, as with any school project, hit roadblocks. For example, the classroom that aimed to develop a peer mentoring program to help sixth graders adjust to middle school developed their suggestion too late in the year to implement it. These students were in eighth grade and thus would not be at the school the following year. They instead aimed to pass their idea into the hands of the rising eighth grade class. However, they were unable to guarantee the continuation of their plan the following year. For this classroom, this obstacle served as a hard lesson in the importance of timing in social action.

**STAT month 3: Reflection.** At the start of month 3, students reflected on the action they took. As part of their reflection, students were tasked with noticing successes (“N” of PLAN) to guide their selection of a next step. In most classrooms, the reflection process led to further refinement and continuation of the previous action plan. For example, for one classroom, the reflection process led to continued work on their identified issue by developing an anti-bullying manual. However, for some classrooms, a successful completion or an unexpected roadblock may lead to a new action plan. For instance, in one school, educators told students who had hoped to hold a talent show that their school did not permit them, so they reinitiated the “PLAN” process to develop another project that would be in line with the school’s policies. The iterative reflection and refinement process was a critical element of the STAT model because it engaged students in realistic problem-solving and enhances active learning.

**STAT month 4 to end-of-year: Demonstration/celebration.** In month 4 of STAT, classrooms were expected to complete their refined action plan. After students completed the social action project, an essential component of the PARD/C framework was sharing learning and recognizing effort and successes. STAT provided a variety of options for a demonstration/celebration, such as a STAT Project Fair in which all participating classrooms present to each other or present to younger students. Another demonstration/celebration option involved selecting student representatives from individual classrooms to present to a wider audience, such as parents or community members. In 2016–2017, selected students from six implementing middle schools were able to come together at a local public university. Students gave short presentations on stage explaining their project, shared visual displays at project booths, and answered questions from other students and adults at these booths. When asked about their projects, students employed skills

in communication, emotion regulation, empathy, and problem-solving gained during their STAT experience. Students effectively discussed the importance of service to others and of being an agent of change for school and community issues that matter to them. The program concluded with an awards ceremony recognizing the work of each school team. The process was filmed so all students in each of the participating schools, as well as parents, could see the proceedings, share in the accomplishments, and feel inspiration to participate in the future. Through such demonstration/celebrations, school leaders not only recognized the successes of their students but also had the chance to learn from and about the students they serve, which AMLE notes is crucial for any successful middle school learning environment (National Middle School Association, 2010).

## Innovations of STAT

STAT is specifically tailored to help middle school students engage in feasible and personally meaningful social action. This goal is accomplished by incorporating several unique features: a focus on small-scale projects, the developmental scaling of expectations across grade levels, and the inclusion of a feedback loop among students, teachers, and administrators.

**Small-scale projects.** To maximize opportunities for meaningful action, STAT focuses classrooms on small-scale issues in the classroom, school, and community that middle school students find relevant and important, such as adjusting to the new middle school environment, school cleanliness, respect for multicultural differences, mentoring new students, or sitting with isolated students during lunch periods. Limiting the scope of these social action projects optimizes project success, ensuring that students participate in active learning.

**Developmentally scaled structure.** STAT is developmentally scaled so that the issues reflect the changes in experience and complexity of circumstances befalling students across the middle grades. In the first year (typically sixth grade), students are tasked with discussing issues specific to their status as being new to middle school, such as stressors related to adjusting to middle school, showing respect, or including others. Appropriate projects are intended to be small in scope and may include developing ways to cope with stress, improving support for keeping track of assignments and using one’s lockers, a system for keeping their classroom

clean, or a method to build a culture of inclusivity within their classroom.

In their second year (typically seventh grade), students continue to work on issues their classroom can address, so the range of projects is expected to be similar to the sixth-grade projects. However, seventh graders are also beginning to apply for admission to high schools and to broaden their horizons to look at community groups concerned about similar matters. For example, classrooms addressing multicultural sensitivity can be tasked with identifying community organizations working on the same issue. Students are then expected to engage in more comprehensive research, resulting in more nuanced problem descriptions. Students who are concerned about the healthiness of food served in the cafeteria also learn about groups in the community concerned about nutrition and accessibility of healthy food options. These students thereby engage in more complex action planning than sixth graders. They also begin to grapple with barriers to social action, including gaining support of additional school personnel and reaching out to the community.

In the third year (typically eighth grade), STAT pushes students to discuss concerns at the community, state, regional, or even global level. For example, students focus on the global problem of access to adequate amounts of safe drinking water. In some locations, this is also a national, state, and/or local level problem, but we expect eighth graders to understand that this is a global issue, even if they direct their action steps locally. Examples of projects that would be best suited for eighth graders include advocating for school-wide changes, such as greater inclusiveness or environmental responsibility, community issues such as improving relationships between local police forces and other first responders and the school, or thinking about civil rights, social justice, and access to resources such as food and sanitation from a global perspective.

**Responding to feedback.** In line with the “action” domain of the PARD/C service-learning model, a crucial part of STAT is seeking and responding to feedback provided by an individual outside of the classroom, which elevates STAT from a one-dimensional classroom discussion to an impactful school-level conversation. Over the 2 years of STAT refinement from 2015 to 2017, we have significantly reduced the number of PLAN cycles from six monthly cycles to two cycles spread out over 4 months. This change resulted from student, teacher, and administrative comments. Teachers and students indicated that coming up with new ideas every month overloaded them. Administrators

reported difficulty supporting so many classroom suggestions at the same time. To address this problem, the current iteration of STAT does not prescribe that feedback comes from an administrator. This change has also meant that students consider the scope of their ideas so that administrator approval is not required. The curriculum does not prescribe the feedback process; schools develop their own personalized system. For example, in one school, selected students held regular meetings with school administration to review STAT suggestions and discuss action steps. In another school, the student council reviewed the suggestions from STAT. A third option is to have buddy classrooms that present their ideas to each other.

Additionally, we found great benefit in a school designating one staff member as the STAT point person. This individual is responsible for coordinating the STAT efforts throughout the school, reducing potential “traffic jams.” The STAT point person can meet regularly with the students from each class who will be presenting their class’ ideas to ensure their readiness for this responsibility and to foster their learning from one-another in a supportive manner. In addition, this individual can help to coordinate efforts between classrooms and triage ideas that require administrative approval. Once a classroom presents a STAT suggestion and receives feedback, the classroom teacher is the main person responsible for helping their students carry out their suggestion.

**Fostering student voice is particularly important for students whose voices have been, and continue to be, systematically silenced, and the STAT component of MOSAIC aims to do just this.**

The STAT feedback process addresses two characteristics noted by AMLE: Organizational structure and collaborative leaders (National Middle School Association, 2010). First, it addresses organizational structure by creating conversations across diverse groups of students and school personnel, which helps to “unjumble” the schoolhouse. In addition, the feedback process gives school administrators the chance to act as collaborative leaders by providing them structured opportunities to engage and work with their students throughout the school year, with the effect of increasing transparency and efficiency in the building. Furthermore, reviewing STAT suggestions gives school personnel unique access to student concerns in a way that can

deepen their understanding of the students they serve and allow them to create both synergy and continuity across students' efforts. This, in turn, reinforces students' social action and sense of empowerment and contribution. The STAT feedback process creates a social justice-oriented school climate by demonstrating that others have heard and seriously considered students' suggestions.

## Conclusion

In the current political climate in the United States, which is fraught with increasing division along moral, economic, and social lines, promoting thoughtful and responsible social action among youth, particularly racial/ethnic minority youth, is more important than ever. Fostering student voice is particularly important for students whose voices have been, and continue to be, systematically silenced, and the STAT component of MOSAIC aims to do just this.

In their influential book, *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, Au, Bigelow, and Karp (2007) wrote, "classrooms can be places of hope, where students and teachers gain glimpses of the kind of society we could live in and where students learn the academic and critical skills needed to make it a reality" (p. x). Implementing a social action-oriented program in a meaningful way can be challenging in any school, owing to the many competing needs and limited resources available. By using STAT to integrate SECD and social justice considerations as systematic and ongoing social action, the civic consciousness and competencies of students can be awakened and nurtured in a way that is meaningful, practically useful, and relevant to middle school students, faculty, and communities (Berman, 1997).

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