

BOOSTING STUDENTS' SEL SKILLS ON A VIRTUAL PLATFORM

McPherson Middle School | Jeff Allmon, *Guidance Counselor*

As schools across the nation adapt to the effects of COVID-19, individuals like Jeff Allmon, a guidance counselor at McPherson Middle School in Kansas, are imploring educators to tend to their students' social and emotional needs as well as their academic competencies.

McPherson Middle School's history with Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) through ACT® Tessera® and, most recently, ACT® Mawi Learning® gives them a unique insight into the models and tools that today's students need to excel in a changing world.

Jeff Allmon first encountered SEL assessment and curriculum 15 years ago, before the concept had become a mainstay in the field of education. With more and more educational leaders now appreciating the value of SEL skills in academia, guidance counselors like Allmon are now on the hunt for resources capable of developing the noncognitive skills their students need. "It's what I had been preaching for years. Now, [SEL] has become the mainstay, and it has a label and a real drive behind it," he says.

Allmon was a fast proponent of Tessera's assessment methodology, which he claims yields more reliable results than traditional self-reporting. "There aren't a lot of hills in counseling that I would die on, but I would die on the Tessera hill," shares Allmon. "Because I don't know what I'd do. I don't know how I'd work with my kids. I would have no idea where to start. And there isn't, in my opinion, a better assessment out there. There are lots of assessments out there, but this one...really nails it."

He also appreciates that Tessera assesses students based on a total of five SEL strengths: grit,

teamwork, resilience, curiosity, and leadership. These strengths make it easier for educators to manage the assessment, while at the same time encouraging them to reevaluate their own expectations. "I have this idea of what grit is, but when you look at the ACT descriptors of what grit is, it's much broader. I love it. And we've had no parents go, 'I can't agree with that' or 'My kid doesn't need that.' So, those broad definitions, I think, are huge and manageable."

The valuable data that McPherson Middle School has gained through Tessera's online assessment tool in the last several years has opened the doors for Mawi Learning's evidence-based social and emotional learning curriculum. The school, which currently has

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a population of 585 students, initiated a pilot study of the curriculum this year to sixth and seventh graders according to a Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) framework, which is used by many schools to provide targeted support to struggling students. Using Tessera data, the school is able to cater to those Tier Two and Tier Three students who need more hands-on assistance.

"If I was starting off [as a] year one counselor, I would be thanking my lucky stars for Mawi Learning. I still

am because it's easy to implement, and it's got a lot of data and research behind it. But...if you were a newbie, this would be a gift from heaven because it would give you direction. And if you pair that with Tessa, you've got the assessment part and then you've got the curriculum."

Though McPherson's application of Mawi Learning has shifted temporarily to the virtual platform in response to COVID-19, Allmon is excited about the progress they've made so far. In the months preceding the pandemic, Allmon was able to implement the curriculum through what he calls hands-on, direct instruction. "We were doing it face-to-face because...I wanted to feel it and see it. My goal is to implement [it] school-wide, to the classroom teachers who teach those lessons. And then that would allow that Tier One coverage, and then everybody has the same language, everybody's doing the same thing."

These face-to-face interventions also gave the students at McPherson Middle School the opportunity to build relationships with those they might not encounter anywhere else.



“When you work at a middle school...[the students are] like magnets. They kind of repel each other. And now, suddenly, they are in the same room, and we're talking and communicating. And to watch those barriers kind of just dissolve—that's cool for me.”

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Allmon believes that the intuitive nature of Mawi Learning also reinforces how quickly the students—and teachers—are able to adapt to the curriculum. "The first time, because I'm kind of old-school elementary, I thought, 'I need my objective, I want my lesson plan.' [But] I got in there and I'm going, 'I can do this. I can run through it cold because it's so scripted and it's so well done.'"

Mawi Learning's blended and online SEL curriculum, Allmon says, has made the transition to online learning much smoother. While the curriculum builds upon academic knowledge through exercises and lessons, it also invites the students to participate by applying their



knowledge to activities they can do at home. In one exercise, Allmon encouraged his students to safely record themselves doing something; as students uploaded videos of themselves jumping on pogo sticks or engaging in jump rope competitions, Allmon crosswalked the activities back to key SEL concepts. "I think we can teach a lot of those things subliminally through the lessons...because we're talking about growth mindset right now," he says. "Kids are trying new things, and it's a perfect time to talk about that [concept]."

Looking forward, Allmon hopes to see Mawi Learning further implemented at McPherson, particularly for those in sixth through eighth grade. "I think SEL assessment and intervention is critical at the middle school level. Middle school kids are just the right age for looking inward at themselves."

Though Allmon does not yet know how COVID-19 will impact assessment scores in the long run, he has no doubt that pairing Tessa with Mawi Learning's research-based SEL curriculum will positively influence student outcomes. "It's amazing to me how many schools do an assessment of some kind, but then they don't do anything with the data," shares Allmon. "Why waste your time and money if you're not going to do something with it? I'm not doing any test unless I have some intervention to implement to go along with it. And so, this is a perfect pairing."

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