

ASSESSING AND PROMOTING STUDENT SEL DURING A TIME OF INCREDIBLE CHANGE

Angela Delamar, Specialist (CCR – College, Career, and Life Readiness) | Norma O. McCormick, Director (CCR)

Region One Education Service Center, a long-time partner of ACT®, was midway through testing their students' SEL skills through ACT® Tessera® when COVID-19 hit. Now, the center is doing everything it can to connect with and assess their students on a virtual platform in a new world.

Serving 38 school districts and 10 charter school systems in South Texas, Region One Education Service Center is one of the longest-standing recipients of GEAR UP funding, a discretionary grant program designed to prepare low-income students for success in postsecondary education. As an extension of their grant funding, Region One partnered with ACT in 2011 for a 7-year cohort case study¹ that explored Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and equitable education, becoming ACT's biggest national online pilot to date.

"[ACT] has given us support from the beginning, with their researchers working with us to ensure that they reviewed and analyzed the data so that we could best support our students," shares Region One Director Norma McCormick. "As a service center, that's what we do. We ask: how do we support our community? How do we best serve our students?"

This partnership has continued to thrive, with Region One applying ACT Tessera's advanced, multimodal assessment methodology at the 7th grade level last spring to monitor the growth of a single cohort year-by-year. [GEAR UP facilitators used the resultant data to customize interventions](#)

for each of the 14,000 students across 55 middle schools, helping to ensure that the students have the social and emotional skills they need to achieve success. "The facilitators have worked with the students all year long based on the Tessera results," adds McCormick. "And working with them on areas that they need more development in. We will follow the same cohort for a total of seven years [and] we will see them evolve over time."



With the second Tessera assessment originally scheduled for later this year, Region One—like so many education agencies has had to pivot quickly in response to COVID-19. Region One Education Specialist Angela Delamar of the Office of College, Career, and Life Readiness shares the initial difficulties. "The 8th grade test was scheduled to be conducted any time in March or April. And we had a good number that did test the students before they dismissed for spring break but then the world fell apart. We came back from the break and we thought, well what do we do? You know we still want to test as many as possible."

In response, Region One has turned to ACT's online-friendly SEL resources, specifically curated to compliment the shifting academic landscape. "The facilitators have also just gotten creative," adds Delamar. "They're reaching out in classroom-type

settings virtually, but they're also reaching out one-on-one because they are able to do that. And they're really being very heroic right now to continue to reach out and serve the students."

Region One facilitators are also using a variety of online learning platforms to monitor student growth and provide essential resources. "The leadership team responded very quickly to it," shares McCormick. "We have to adjust and provide support and keep going." Despite these efforts, the Region One team does not anticipate meeting last year's percent completion, given the unmet needs of some of their students. "The population we serve is very low socioeconomically," says Delamar. "So, a lot of our students don't have devices. And even if they do, they live in very remote areas without Internet."

The number of students who have successfully completed their assessment continues to grow each week, thanks to the extended efforts of the Region One team. Staying connected to the students remains the center's top priority. "The facilitators are meeting with the kids via Zoom, via Microsoft Teams, via Google Classroom, via Facebook Live," says Delamar. "I know the facilitators are...helping the students find the silver lining in this time of tragedy. And the kids are rising to the challenge. And they're also there to provide support for kids who are struggling."

Region One is currently planning to deviate from their SEL assessment schedule by opening up an additional testing window in the fall, assuming school is back in session. Though this change will no doubt allow for more data, it will also give administration the opportunity to assess how the pandemic has influenced students' social and emotional skills. "We want to see the impact of all of this on the students," shares Delamar. "We want to see what interventions we need to include to support them."

Perhaps fittingly, as part of the current research collaboration, the team at Region One chose to crosswalk Grit and Resilience as its core SEL skills long before COVID-19 hit. Both McCormick and Delamar agree that students need these SEL skills now more than ever, particularly since so many are having to balance academic success with everyday responsibilities.

As virtual instruction continues, Region One has remained dedicated to providing its students with the social and emotional skills they need to achieve career and academic success. "Our ultimate goal is

“I was invited into a session about two weeks ago [and] I noticed...that during the videoconference, all the children...they all had a younger sibling on their knee,” recounts Delamar. “And I said, ‘You all are superheroes. Look at this. You’re doing your homework, and you’re helping your younger siblings.’”

Angela Delamar
*Education Specialist
Office of College, Career, and
Life Readiness*

to matriculate all of our students to a post-secondary education,” says McCormick. “We have to be sure that they’re not only academically ready, but ready socially as well.”

“One thing we do as well is we embed SEL in everything we do,” says Delamar. “So, for example, we get the data from Tessera and we have ACT’s SEL resources and we also have interventions that we design ourselves...We use the data to select students to participate in various events. And then we also customize based on the data that we’re getting... We’re evolving right now as we speak. Our services will continue to evolve.”

Though it is uncertain how COVID-19 will impact the educational climate in the long-term, Region One’s dedication to SEL is helping to prepare students both academically and emotionally for the future, no matter what that future looks like. As McCormick shares, “We had a very clear plan. We always use data we get to create interventions for the people we work for and that we serve...We are about serving our community and that’s what drives us.”

To learn more about ACT Social Emotional Learning offerings and research, visit act.org.