

Random Acts of Kindness Foundation

Final Report **Expanded Executive Summary:** School Pilot Study 2013-14 Evaluation of Grades K-8 Kindness Lessons and Activities

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Expanded Executive Summary

Overview. The Random Act of Kindness (RAK) Foundation contracted with SRI International (SRI) to advance RAK’s research agenda. The final report summarizes the findings of (1) the development of a theory of action framework for the RAK curriculum; and (2) a small-scale pilot study to assess outcomes in local schools implementing RAK lesson plans and activities.

RAK’s theory of action, articulating key assumptions about how the RAK program works and the theoretical connections linking activities to outcomes, was instrumental in developing the pilot study design. The study took place with 30 teachers and 76 students in six Denver-area K-12 schools during the 2013-14 school year. Participating teachers provided feedback on the quality of the RAK orientation training they received, and they also rated classroom and school climate and student social-emotional and academic competencies on standardized measures before and after implementing the RAK curriculum.

RAK Components. The RAK program includes a variety of free, online, easy-to-use, and adaptable materials to support the teaching of kindness and the professional development of teachers. Teachers interested in using the kindness curriculum in their classrooms can download all lesson plans from the RAK website (www.randomactsofkindness.org), including bilingual (Spanish) lessons, kindness graphics to use in the classroom (e.g., inspirational posters, quotes, calendars, and greeting cards), and activity suggestions for service-learning or acts of kindness outside of the classroom.

The website includes opportunities and resources to help schools to develop their own RAK student clubs and end-of-the-year “kindness symposia” to celebrate their kindness projects, and for teachers to become members of an online social and professional community, sharing activity ideas, lesson adaptations, and encouragement.

RAK school liaison staff have provided local educators with onsite orientation workshops on the kindness curriculum and resources; for teachers outside the Denver area, RAK has developed online training videos, demonstrating the curriculum in action in a model classroom.

With partners from the University of Colorado at Boulder, RAK has also developed a distance-learning course titled *The Kindness in the Classroom Program: A Model for Kindness-Centered Education*. Sessions include video lectures, live webinars, readings, documentary movie clips, and online discussion forums.

Design Principles. The RAK program includes a variety of online lessons and activities with intent to build SEL opportunities and student character, to create positive classroom and school environments, and to encourage service learning in the outside community. As such, it reflects an ecological framework—viewing the student from multiple contexts including as an individual as well as a member of a classroom, family, culture, and society.

The curriculum design concepts and learning objectives are based on the “kindness paradigm,” and this paradigm provides the basis for the scope and sequence of the grades K-8 lesson plans (Exhibit 1). Methods employed in the core activities are designed to inspire, empower,

Exhibit 1. The kindness paradigm.



promote action, and provide opportunities for sharing.

The lesson plans align to Colorado State Academic Standards, specifically the Comprehensive Health (Emotional and Social Wellness) standards and, where feasible, Reading, Writing, & Communicating and Social Studies academic standards. Lesson plans document an overarching alignment to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) operationalization of fundamental SEL skills (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships skills, and responsible decision making), *21st Century Skills* (e.g., problem solving, communication and collaboration), the *Character Counts!* approach to character education (e.g., trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, caring, and citizenship), and *Core Virtues* (e.g., respect and responsibility, gratitude, generosity, compassion, forgiveness, graciousness and courtesy, service).

The RAK program also offers materials that are customizable and flexible to different teaching and learning styles and environments. RAK encourages interested schools to use the curriculum to solve *local* priority problems and issues where kindness can help—from specific classroom SEL objectives to morale issues among the teaching staff.

Pilot Study Purpose. The multiple purposes of the RAK pilot study included the following:

- Develop a suite of instruments that could be used to measure RAK implementation and program impacts
- Quantify how RAK materials and resources are used across different teachers
- Assess the extent to which RAK implementation is associated with school and classroom climate change
- Document preliminary evidence of student outcomes, such as enhanced social-emotional and academic skills.

Study Methods. Our primary research methods included teacher-completed surveys and assessments. In an effort to validate standardized tools for use as RAK evaluation instruments, we selected relevant measures from those deemed psychometrically sound in the field of social-emotional learning. These included classroom and school climate rating scales, and teacher ratings of student social-emotional and academic competencies (see Appendix for copies of all measurement tools). Specific measures included the following:

- ***RAK Training Survey.*** Teachers completed this online survey developed by SRI and RAK after attending the RAK orientation training to rate its quality, relevance, and utility.
- ***RAK Implementation Log.*** Teachers completed this online log developed by SRI and RAK on a regular (i.e., at least monthly) basis to report how they used or adapted the RAK materials (adherence), the amount of time dedicated to lesson plans or kindness activities (dosage), their confidence in its delivery (quality), and teacher and student engagement (participant responsiveness).
- ***Classroom and school climate survey.*** Teachers completed an online survey twice yearly (fall and spring) that integrated items from the Child Development Project's Classroom Supportiveness and Sense of School as a Community subscales (Developmental Studies Center, 2005).
- ***Student social-emotional and academic skills.*** Teachers completed twice yearly (fall and spring) for 3 randomly selected students: (1) the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA; LeBuffe, Shapiro, & Naglieri, 2009), a 72-item, standardized, norm-referenced rating scale of social-emotional competencies; and (2) the *Academic Competency* subscale from the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS; Gresham & Elliott, 2008), a standardized rating scale to assess students' academic performance.

Pilot Study Findings. Findings concerning implementation fidelity and student-, classroom-, and school-level outcomes from the pilot study are summarized below.

RAK Training

- The orientation trainings provided by RAK staff motivated participants to teach kindness, provided clear instructions about how to implement the RAK lesson plans, and increased teachers' understanding about how teaching kindness addresses the Colorado State learning standards (Exhibit 2).
- Teacher participants overwhelmingly agreed that they have clearer understanding about how teaching kindness addresses the State learning standards after attending the training.
- However, only about half of the participants felt that they had sufficient time to plan and prepare for implementing RAK in their classrooms.

Exhibit 2. Quality indicators from RAK training survey



RAK Implementation

- On average, teachers spent about 18 minutes preparing RAK lesson plans and 34 minutes delivering RAK lesson per month. Teachers rated the lessons as engaging and adaptable to students' academic and cultural needs.
- In delivery of most of the lesson plans (87%), teachers rated their **adherence** to RAK instructions and scripts as *moderate* or *very high*.
 - For a sizeable portion of the lesson plans, teachers adapted the instructions and activities by accommodating to the needs of their students (e.g., academic or cultural differentiations).
- Teachers reported that most lessons (91%) were **engaging**, and that their overall level of success in implementing a complete cycle of the **kindness paradigm** was *very high* or *moderately high*.

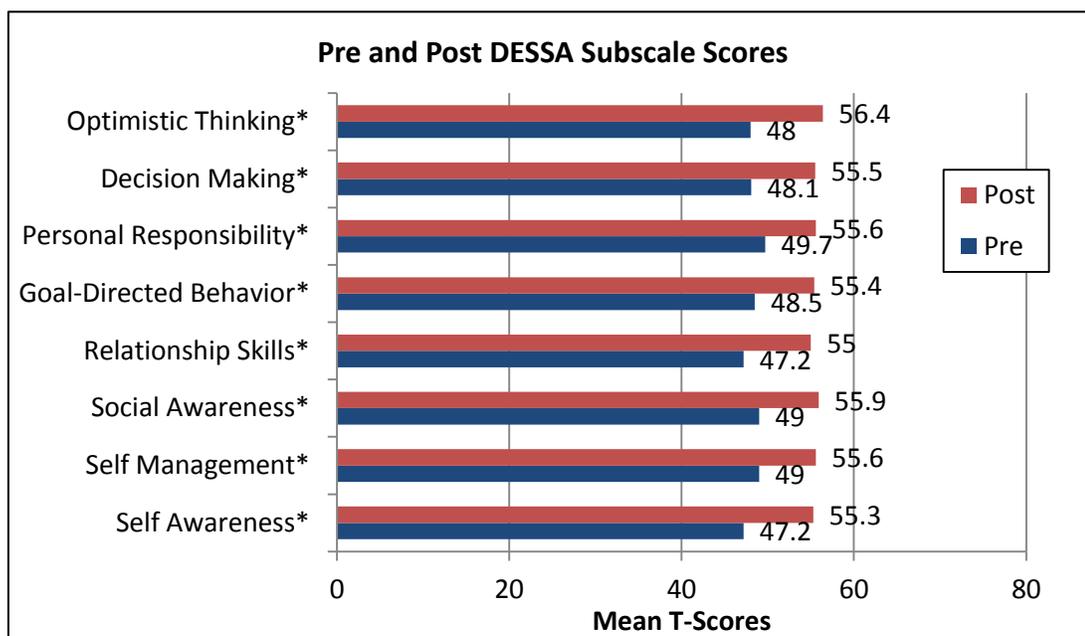
RAK Outcomes: Classroom and School Climate

- After one year of RAK implementation:
 - Teachers rated their classroom climate as significantly more positive, especially related to students' involvement in community service, respect for one another, and feelings of classroom cohesion.
 - Teachers rated their school climate as significantly more positive, especially related to the school's willingness to help one another and the community, and adults' reinforcing and modeling of kindness with colleagues and students.

RAK Outcomes: Student SEL and Academic Skills

- After engaging in one year of RAK lessons and activities:
 - Teachers rated students' social-emotional skills significantly higher, with the typical student's total SEL skill score increasing from the 44th percentile to the 66th percentile.
 - Statistically significant improvements were made, particularly in the areas of Optimistic Thinking ($t = 7.39, p = .00, d = 0.85$) and Self Awareness ($t = 7.57, p = .00, d = 0.87$; Exhibit 3)
 - Male students showed particular improvement in the areas of decision making skills and self-awareness; female students showed particular improvement in the areas of optimistic thinking and social awareness.
 - Improvements in social skills were documented across all K-8 grade levels, with the largest differences noted for students in early elementary (K-3) grades.

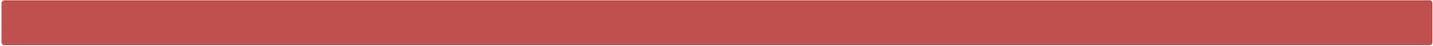
Exhibit 3. DESSA subscale scores.



- Teachers rated students' academic competence as generally improved (from the 55th percentile to the 59th percentile).
 - Male students showed a statistically significant improvement, with academic competence ratings increasing from the 55th percentile to the 61st percentile.

Relationship Between RAK Implementation and Outcomes

- Teachers who spent more time delivering RAK lessons and activities throughout the year perceived their students' gains in *social-emotional skills* as significantly greater than teachers who spent less time on RAK.
 - There were no dosage effects related to *academic competence* ratings.



Study Limitations and Future Recommendations. These findings are indeed promising, but it is important to emphasize that because there was no comparison group in the RAK pilot study (i.e., a set of teachers and their students who did *not* participate in RAK undergoing similar assessments), we cannot make definitive conclusions that the RAK curriculum was the only contributor to these outcomes.

Based on our understanding of the iterative process in developing RAK's lesson plans, inferences documented in the RAK theory of action, the findings of the pilot study, and the limitations of the pilot study design, SRI recommends the following:

1. Update the RAK theory of action framework with each iteration of curriculum development and revise evaluation methods as necessary.
2. Work with school leadership to promote protected time for RAK planning and problem-solving, so that teachers have opportunities to learn from colleagues and to maximize RAK implementation over time.
3. Build on pilot study instrumentation and findings, using the same measures of implementation and outcomes in future studies with larger and more diverse participant samples.
4. Suggest minimum dosage levels to teachers (i.e., about 30 minutes or more per month) over the course of the academic year. Furthermore, for the longest-term and greatest impact, encourage schools to implement RAK across multiple years.
5. Invest in additional research and evaluation using larger samples and comparison groups, being mindful of research design challenges and opportunities.
6. Explore possible federal funding opportunities to enlarge the fiscal investment in RAK research, such as the Department of Education's i3 Grants (from the Office of Innovation and Improvement), and the Institute of Education Sciences' Education Research Grants program.