



Summary of Research Evaluating the Sanford Harmony Program

Introduction

By Dr. Shaila Mulholland, March 2017

“Students are more likely to flourish and thrive academically when they are in educational settings that support their social and emotional needs.”

Educational leaders and policymakers are realizing the importance of promoting social emotional learning within schools and educational organizations. Students are more likely to flourish and thrive academically when they are in educational settings that support their social and emotional needs.

Sanford Harmony is one example of a social emotional learning program that has the potential to positively impact students and schools. In this *Summary of Research Evaluating the Sanford Harmony Program*, Dr. David Andrews provides an overview of both current research and past evaluations that have been conducted on the Harmony Program.

Highlighted in this summary are three important concepts to keep in mind in the area of social-emotional learning. The first concept is the idea of *relationship competency*, which describes how each individual comes to school with varying experiences and levels of relationship competency, such as social and emotional skills, and relationship-oriented cognitions and affect (i.e., the feelings a student may have about forming relationships with others). These feelings shape how comfortable students feel in classrooms, and may have an impact on school-related activities. When many students have high levels of relationship competency, social harmony is enhanced. Second, the students' *peer relationship experiences and contexts* are important considerations. Peer relationships are multifaceted and complex. Whereas some relationships exist in pairs, others exist in group settings. Some relationships are more positive than others and vary in strength of relational ties. Social harmony is most likely to occur when these relational ties are positive, and greater interconnectedness is experienced in healthier school environments. The concept of interconnectedness is important and implies that there is less likelihood that a student will experience isolation or loneliness.

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Summary of Research Evaluating the Sanford Harmony Program

Lastly, a third component that is critical for promoting social harmony is described as school support for peer relationships. The level of *school support for peer relationships*, including administrative support, can provide a foundation to support the development of relationship competence and of building relationships. School-level norms and policies can influence and support relationship competencies, and teachers' relationships with other staff members, parents, and students can serve as models for relationship building.



In this *Summary of Research Evaluating the Sanford Harmony Program*, Dr. Andrews reviews key research articles that provide important evidence to show social and emotional skills can be effectively taught in schools, which has a direct impact on improving school-related outcomes (i.e., self-esteem and academic performance), and decreasing disruptive behaviors. In other words, schools and key educational organizations can infuse everyday practices into their curriculum and school culture to provide students with more opportunities to develop and practice social and emotional learning skills.



Summary of Research Evaluating the Sanford Harmony Program

Summary of Research Evaluating the Sanford Harmony Program By Dr. David Andrews, President, National University

Sanford Harmony Program (SHP) is a social emotional learning (SEL) approach being used in more than 2,500 schools across the United States. The program was developed and initially evaluated at Arizona State University (ASU) prior to its migration to National University for the purposes of continued development, dissemination, and evaluation. In a recent book chapter (Martin et al., 2017) the initial ASU development team described the program as follows.

“The Sanford Harmony Program is a universal (meaning one that involves all children rather than targeting specific types of children), teacher-facilitated program designed to promote positive peer relations among boys and girls in preschool through sixth grade.”
(Martin et al., 2017)

The school-based program was developed with funding from the T. Denny Sanford Foundation with the intent of fulfilling Mr. Sanford’s desire to implement a program that would improve relationships between boys and girls, as well between children with differences beyond gender. The program is designed around two primary components. First is a set of teacher **facilitated relationship building activities**. Second, are **everyday activities** structured to put prosocial skills into practice through interactions with diverse peers. One such everyday activity is “Buddy Up” where peers from diverse backgrounds, with little in common, have an opportunity to interact through guided practice.

Three rigorous evaluations of SHP components have been conducted since the program’s inception in 2008. Two studies focused on fifth grade students participating in **relationship building activities** and the other study evaluated the impact of the “Buddy Up” **everyday activities** on preschool peer relations. All three studies utilized quasi-experimental design

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Summary of Research Evaluating the Sanford Harmony Program

and found the SHP components to have positive impact on children's peer relations when compared to control groups.

It should be noted that two recently published evaluations refer to the components being evaluated as being part of a "relationship based intervention" (Delay et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2017), but two published works (Hanish et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2017) and additional correspondence with the author's confirm that these are components of the Sanford Harmony Program (SHP). The authors indicate that journal editors preferred the more generic term "a relationship based intervention; RBI" over the Sanford Harmony Program (Fabes, personal correspondence February 2017). Nonetheless, all agree that the preschool and fifth grade components evaluated in these three studies were designed as the Sanford Harmony Program.

In an evaluation of 631 fifth graders from six different elementary schools, students participating in the Sanford Harmony Program relationship building activities reported significantly more diverse friends than did those from control groups. Furthermore, these peer influences were related to improved writing and math performance in classrooms using SHP activities, but not in control classrooms (DeLay, et al., 2016).

A second study compared the social and academic behaviors of 368 fifth-graders participating in the SHP relationship building activities to 259 fifth-graders in control classrooms. The findings indicate that children in participating classrooms:

"[L]iked school more, felt a greater sense of classroom identification and inclusion, were perceived by teachers to be less aggressive, and performed better academically than students who were in control classrooms. Further, implementation data showed that students and teachers responded positively to the activities." (Miller, et. al. 2017)



Summary of Research Evaluating the Sanford Harmony Program

These two studies of fifth graders participating in the **relationship building activities** of the Social Harmony Program reveal promising gains in both social emotional development and academic performance over those in control groups. More research is needed to understand the impact of other program components in other grades as the program is implemented in its entirety.

One study of preschool students participating in the “Buddy Up” **everyday activities** found that children who participated had more peer interactions and were more likely to engage in play with a wider array of peers than did children in the control classrooms (Martin et al., 2017, citing an unpublished manuscript by Hanish et al., 2016).

These initial findings suggest that students participating in both the relationship building activities and everyday activities of the Sanford Harmony program benefit both socially and academically. While each of these types of activities were evaluated separately, in different grades, other researchers have suggested that the combination of skill building (relationship building activities) and changing the classroom contexts and opportunities (everyday activities) will lead to even greater social and academic benefits (Meyer et al. 2014). This has yet to be tested with the Sanford Harmony program.

In addition to these empirical results, it is worth noting that the rapid adoption of the program across multiple states, in 163 districts, and 2,500 different schools provides anecdotal evidence of both perceived value and relevance of the approach as assessed by teachers and administrators. This wide scale adoption is complemented by anecdotal feedback on the popularity of the activities.



Summary of Research Evaluating the Sanford Harmony Program

ASU researcher Carol Martin (2017) summarizes the SHP early research stating,

“Using intergroup contact as a basis for integrating relationship skill training into everyday classroom environments, initial evaluations of parts of the Sanford Harmony Program have revealed some early success in improving relationships not only between boys and girls, but also among all children within class.” (Martin et al., 2017)

It should be noted that previous research on the model was conducted by ASU researchers affiliated with the development and implementation of the model. The Center for the Research and Reform at Johns Hopkins University is currently conducting independent evaluations of the program to assure validity and reduce bias.

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