

# School-Connect 2017 Essay Contest

Entry by Daniel McCutchen, Class of 2017

“Calm down!” – How many times have you heard someone tell you this? Our entire lives we have been told to “chill out” or “calm down,” but when have we been taught the skills to manage these emotions? Never.

Today’s youth face a complex and stressful academic and social environment. Mental health problems and suicide rates are rising among students as political and educational institutions increasingly emphasize quantitative academic measurements and endless testing. This disturbing trend will persist if students’ social and emotional learning (SEL) is neglected. Balancing academics can be difficult for teenagers because they are facing novel situations, peer pressures, and hormonal changes. However, offering high school students an SEL class on how to manage their emotions, develop relationships, and use effective study habits could reverse this trend.

Entering high school, I was labeled an at-risk student due to my severe OCD and anxiety issues. The transition from middle school to high school was scary; I became inundated with schoolwork and the social environment felt foreign. As a freshman, I was placed in an SEL class to help aid my transition into high school. Immediately, the class provided a small sense of community inside a large public high school, and I felt very fortunate to attend a school with such a class. The class taught me how to make good first impressions, collaborate effectively, prioritize goals, stay organized with a planner, and defuse anger. The unique part about my SEL class was that it wasn’t boring; it provided fun and engaging activities. For example, I vividly remember the “Mindfulness” lesson where we combined yoga and meditation to learn how to simply breathe and accept our feelings and emotions rather than acting on them. Since my freshman year, I still practice 10-15 minutes of mindfulness meditation everyday, and this meditation, combined with running every morning, has allowed me to overcome my OCD and taught me how to “calm down.”

I learned that social and emotional development is inextricably linked to academic and future success. I have become one of the top students in my class and will be attending Harvard University next year. I credit the SEL class for equipping me with the tools necessary to succeed. Understanding this connection is what prompted me to become an SEL advocate and mentor at-risk students during my sophomore and junior years. As a senior, I now help teach an SEL class at Austin High School under the leadership of R. Keeth Matheny, my former SEL teacher and co-author of the *School-Connect* SEL curriculum, which teaches freshman ways to manage relationships, emotions, and goals.

Because of my experience with SEL, I was invited as one of four students to speak on the Youth Commission Panel for the Aspen Institute, a distinguished national think tank. I spoke in Washington D.C. to political leaders, top scientists, and leading educators to inspire them and achieve my goal of implementing SEL classes in every high school in America. Many students are suffering today, but if given the opportunity to take SEL classes, they can become the skilled leaders of tomorrow.