

# The Efficacy of a Student Leadership Program Designed to End Social Isolation and Promote Social Emotional Learning in Middle School



Results of a research study conducted in partnership with the New York City Department of Education Division of School Culture and Climate

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Executive Summary

**BEYOND  
DIFFERENCES™**

Inspiring Youth to End Social Isolation



**“Our goal is to create a new generation of leaders, not a class of victims. Middle school students are smart, savvy and respond beautifully to leadership training focused on increasing their emotional intelligence when it comes to wiping out social isolation. We think of them as social isolation disruptors!”**

—Laura Talmus and Ace Smith, Co-founders

## BEYOND DIFFERENCES POSITIVE PREVENTION INITIATIVES



**Know Your Classmates™ (KYC)** builds school community by promoting understanding of others’ cultures, identities, and stereotypes



**No One Eats Alone® (NOEA)** encourages students to mingle, make new friends, and become more aware and proactive about social isolation especially at lunch



**Student-led Assembly (SLA)** shares relatable stories of social isolation, promotes awareness, and empowers students to be social isolation disruptors



**Be Kind Online™ (BKO)** encourages student awareness of how social media influences their own and others’ lives in order to reduce online incidents that distract from readiness to learn

## INTRODUCTION

This study evaluates the efficacy of Beyond Differences™ Positive Prevention Initiatives in 10 NYC middle schools during the 2018-19 school year. It asks to what extent Beyond Differences Positive Prevention Initiatives improved key indicators of change in the schools—including measures of social isolation, social and emotional learning, student leadership, and youth voice—within one school year.

## ABOUT BEYOND DIFFERENCES

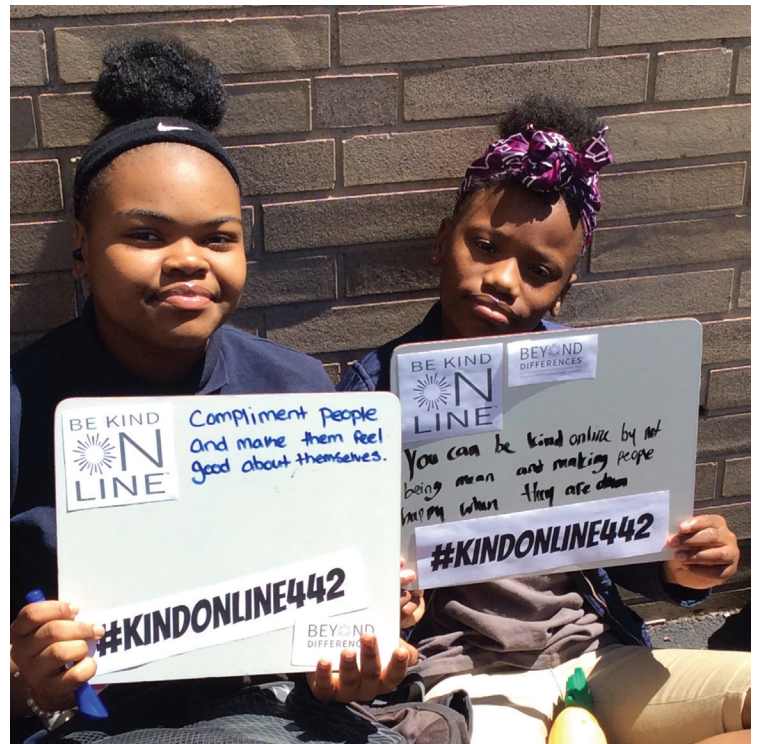
The mission of Beyond Differences, a non-profit organization founded in 2010 in the San Francisco Bay Area, is to inspire students in middle schools nationwide to end social isolation and create a culture of belonging.

Beyond Differences facilitates a student-led social justice movement and is the only organization dedicated to ending social isolation by empowering students to change the culture of middle school.

Founded in memory of Lili Rachel Smith (1994-2009), Beyond Differences believes that change will be effective and lasting if led by the students themselves.

**Beyond Differences’ approach is to provide middle schools with student-led social and emotional learning (SEL) to disrupt social isolation and foster a sense of community among students. Its key objectives are to:**

- End social isolation in middle schools
- Promote student leadership and youth voice in middle schools
- Foster social and emotional learning



## BEYOND DIFFERENCES IN 10 NYC MIDDLE SCHOOLS

With the support of a school-based Faculty Advisor, who also taught related SEL lessons, middle school student leaders facilitated climate-enhancing events and activities at their respective schools. The Beyond Differences Positive Prevention Initiative model implemented in the NYC schools included the following (with flexibility for customization to each school's unique context):

### A. Four (4) student-led events

**Know Your Classmates™ (KYC)** builds school community by promoting understanding of others' cultures, identities, and stereotypes.

**No One Eats Alone® (NOEA)** encourages students to mingle, make new friends, and become more aware and proactive about social isolation.

**Be Kind Online™ (BKO)** encourages student awareness of how social media influences their own and others' lives in order to reduce online incidents that distract from readiness to learn.

**Student-led Assembly (SLA)** shares relatable stories of social isolation, promotes awareness, and empowers students to be social isolation disruptors.

### B. Nine (9) Beyond Differences curricular lessons (selected by each school from 24 options) delivered grade-wide by teachers and/or student leaders.

### C. Regularly-scheduled Beyond Differences leadership planning meetings for student leaders facilitated by each school-based Faculty Advisor. Student leaders and Faculty Advisors also received PD/training from Beyond Differences staff.



## RESEARCH APPROACH

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the efficacy of Beyond Differences Positive Prevention Initiatives designed to improve measures of social isolation, social and emotional learning, student leadership, and youth voice. Data collected from five stakeholder groups across 10 participating NYC schools in 2018-19 provided both quantitative and qualitative survey responses. Students 7th-grade-wide were surveyed before and after the year of Beyond Differences' Initiatives, whereas other groups were surveyed throughout the school year after each student-led event (student leaders and Faculty Advisors) or at the end of the school year only (teachers and administrators).

The schools in the study were diverse in size, ethnic composition, and poverty rates.

## KEY RESULTS OF STUDY

### A. Greater exposure to Beyond Differences events yielded more school impact.

7th graders who attended three or more Beyond Differences student-led events had significantly higher mean scores for desired outcomes than those who attended no Beyond Differences events (exhibit 1).

Teachers/staff who attended two or more Beyond Differences events had significantly higher scores for how much they felt Beyond Differences Positive Prevention Initiatives contributed to measures of school change (exhibit 1).

### B. Statistical regressions found no significant differences in impact on 7th graders from beginning to end-of-year by ethnicity, gender or school; across all schools, ethnicities and genders, greater exposure to Beyond Differences programming yielded better results.

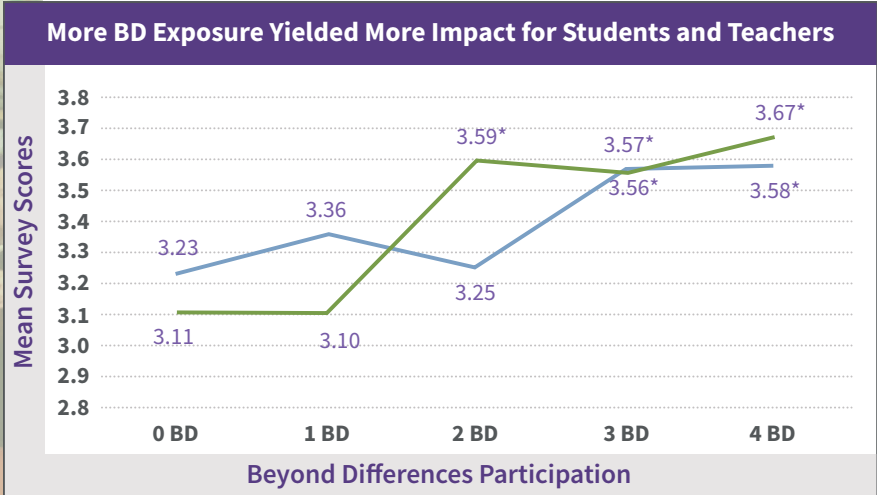
### C. Key indicators of change (i.e., awareness of social isolation, amount of social isolation seen by students, frequency students intervened when they saw social isolation, student leadership, youth voice, and social emotional learning) all increased significantly from beginning to end-of-year for 7th grade students who attended three or more Beyond Differences events (exhibit 2).

### D. Administrators and Faculty Advisors (as well as teachers to a lesser extent) reported large Positive Prevention Initiative impacts (exhibit 3).

### E. Student leaders benefited greatly from their involvement in the Initiatives (exhibit 4).



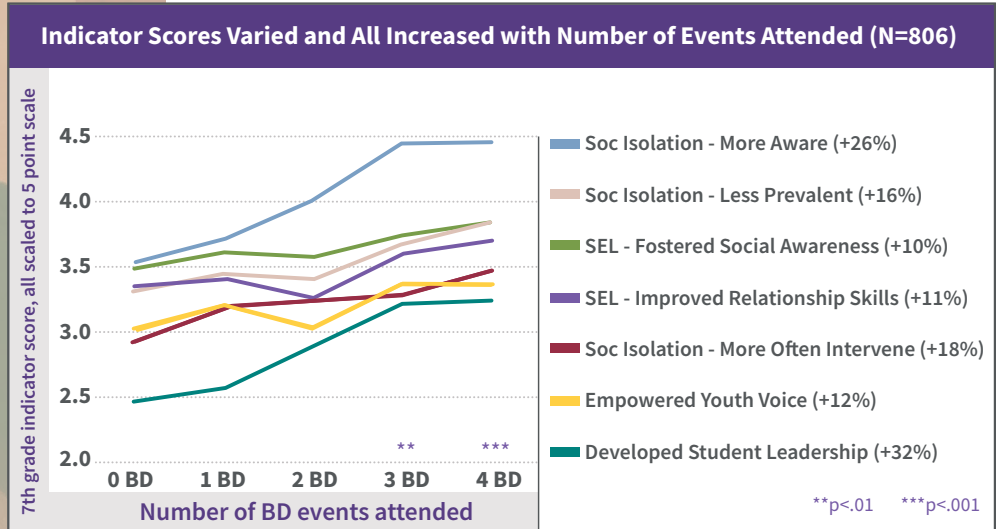
**EXHIBIT 1.** 7th grade-wide effects significantly improved when students attended three or more Beyond Differences events, and teacher/staff perspectives on Beyond Differences' (BD) contributions improved significantly after attending two or more Beyond Differences events.



7th grade-wide (N=806) Staff-wide (N=320) \*p<.001

**87% of school principals reported that Beyond Differences contributed “substantially” or “hugely” to (1) empowering youth voice, (2) developing student leadership, and (3) raising awareness about social isolation.**

**EXHIBIT 2.** Key indicators of change all increased significantly when 7th graders attended three or more Beyond Differences events.



**EXHIBIT 3.** Staff perspectives varied by extent to which Beyond Differences activities, curricula and events collectively contributed to desired outcomes, with administrators most favorable. (Survey respondents included 15 administrators, 11 Faculty Advisors and 305 teachers; response options ranged from 1-5, with 1 = no contribution and 5 = huge contribution.)

**On average, 84% of student leaders felt their roles were a meaningful way to contribute to school.**



**EXHIBIT 4.** From 80 to 85% of student leaders (N=90) attributed the following personal effects to their involvement with Beyond Differences. They:

- were more likely to take action to disrupt social isolation at their schools
- had become more of a leader
- felt more empathy and compassion for socially isolated peers
- reported improved social and emotional learning
- were better at working on a team
- were more confident voicing their opinions
- were more observant of social isolation or bullying while online
- felt like a better person
- felt they had become a better student at school
- were more self-empowered to make a difference



**7th grader said:** “Beyond Differences is a great program that I feel has really made a difference in my own life. I feel that I am able to notice more when people are lonely or being bullied, I know the actions I can take to make someone feel comfortable and not experience these feelings, and it has made me realize that I should think before I post anything or speak. This has made me a better person and it also changed the community of my school.”

# IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY



**REPEATED EXPOSURE PRODUCED A SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN IMPACT,** therefore, schools should consider implementing three or more Beyond Differences events and having teachers attend two or more of them.

**ALLOWING SCHOOLS FLEXIBILITY IN THEIR IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES DID NOT AFFECT RESULTS,** therefore, schools may customize their Beyond Differences Positive Prevention Initiatives to suit unique contexts and needs.

1.

2.



**ANY SCHOOL CONTEXT CAN BENEFIT FROM BEYOND DIFFERENCES EXPOSURE**  
as impact was unrelated to student ethnicity, gender or school.



3.

## THE PROMISING POSSIBILITIES OF BEYOND DIFFERENCES IN SCHOOLS: STUDENT-LED SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

According to CASEL\*, schools nationwide want more social emotional learning curriculum:

**K-12 school principals believe social and emotional learning is essential, and they want more guidance, training, and support to teach these skills effectively** (per CASEL-commissioned nationally representative survey of 900 principals in 2017)<sup>1</sup>

- 99% of principals believe social and emotional skills are teachable in a school setting (74% definitely teachable; 25% probably teachable).
- 95% of principals are committed to developing students' social and emotional skills at their school (69% very committed, 26% fairly committed).

**PreK-12 teachers understand that social and emotional learning (SEL) is critical to student success in school, work, and life** (per CASEL-commissioned nationally representative survey of 605 teachers in 2013)<sup>1</sup>

- 93% of teachers believe SEL is very or fairly important for the in-school student experience, and 97% report that SEL will benefit students from all backgrounds, rich or poor.
- 95% of teachers believe social and emotional skills are teachable.
- More than three-quarters of teachers believe a larger focus on SEL will be a major benefit to students because of the positive effect on workforce readiness (87%), school attendance and graduation (80%), life success (87%), college preparation (78%), and academic success (75%).
- 88% of teachers report SEL occurs in their schools on some level, although less than half (44%) of teachers say social and emotional skills are being taught on a schoolwide, programmatic basis.
- Four in five teachers (82%) report interest in receiving further training on SEL.
- 85% of teachers believe the development of social and emotional skills should be explicitly stated in their state's education standards.

\*Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

<sup>1</sup> Source: [www.casel.org/impact](http://www.casel.org/impact)



## BRING BEYOND DIFFERENCES TO YOUR COMMUNITY

Beyond Differences teacher guides and student leadership activities (with swag and art installation materials) can be shipped to your school free of charge by signing up at [beyonddifferences.org](http://beyonddifferences.org). Alternatively, PDFs of our teacher guides are also downloadable from our website. For professional development, student leadership training or parent education workshops, please contact us. We would be honored to customize a training program or implementation strategy for you.

## CELEBRATE OUR NATIONAL AWARENESS DAY EVENTS!

KNOW  
YOUR  
CLASSMATES™

NO  
ONE  
EATS ALONE®

BE KIND  
ON  
LINE™

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## SPECIAL THANKS

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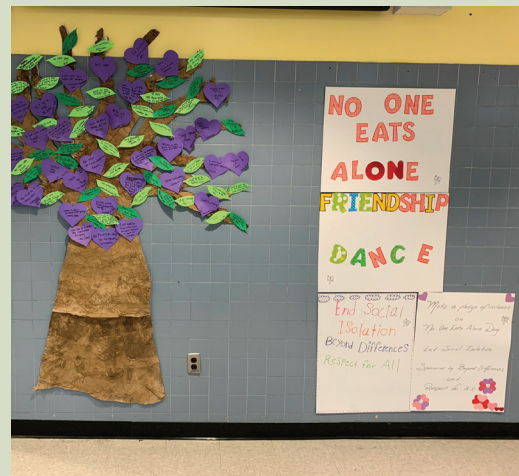
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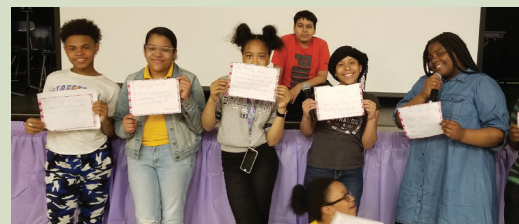
Laura Talmus, Executive Director and Co-founder



**Principal said:** “Beyond Differences has made an impact on our school community and fostered more student voice. Students are more aware that they can intervene when bullying issues come up in the school, and they are also more careful about using technology in a positive manner.”



**Teacher said:** “The impact it has made in our school is noticeably quite positive. Most of all, it has helped students to be seen in a productive and positive manner.”



**Faculty Advisor said:** “It was extremely rewarding seeing my students take the leadership roles and to feel empowered by the process.”