

WAYFINDER

PURPOSE CURRICULUM

Evaluation Report

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February 22, 2022

BACKGROUND

Wayfinder was founded in 2015 in response to a growing mental health crisis among adolescents and a gap in social-emotional learning (SEL) programs targeted to secondary school students. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, research showed that adolescent mental health was in decline. For example, anxiety among 6-to-17-year-olds increased 19% from 2003-2012 (Bitsko et al., 2018) and suicide among 10-to-24-year-olds increased by 54.7% between 2007 and 2018 (CDC, 2019; Curtin et al., 2020). Preliminary research indicates that generalized anxiety and depression are worsening among adolescents during the pandemic, and suicide attempts among 12-to-25-year-olds are on the rise (Hawes et al., 2021; Yard et al., 2021). The need for SEL programs that can address adolescent students' mental health challenges is greater than ever.

Along with troubling mental health statistics is evidence that many adolescents are disengaged from school, putting them at risk for dropping out of high school, substance abuse, and delinquency (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). Concerned about these patterns, Wayfinder founders interviewed hundreds of high school students and uncovered pervasive feelings of disengagement and meaninglessness. Through ongoing feedback from students and teachers, the Wayfinder team also learned that SEL programs are often not designed for secondary school students, but rather are adapted from elementary school SEL programs. As a result, these programs can perpetuate student disengagement because they are not relevant to adolescents' real-world experiences.

Wayfinder addresses these challenges by providing educators with tools and skills to attain fundamental SEL outcomes through a focus on purpose development. Purpose is defined as an intention to do something that is both personally meaningful and contributes to the world beyond the self (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). Adolescents who develop purpose demonstrate other positive social-emotional outcomes, including greater optimism about their future, more positive emotions, lower stress, better coping skills, and lower likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors such as binge drinking and unsafe sex.¹ Purpose is also an important contributor to healthy identity formation in adolescence and can be a link between identity commitment and well-being (Bronk, 2011; Burrow & Hill, 2011).

By focusing on purpose, Wayfinder targets social-emotional learning that is most relevant to adolescent students. The Wayfinder Purpose Curriculum engages students in deep reflection about self and community, and scaffolds students' as they take purposeful action to make a positive contribution in the world. High school students who participate in the Wayfinder Curriculum have the opportunity to discuss what matters most to them, explore their purpose, and map out possibilities for their life journey with classmates and teachers, right at the time when they face pressure to make daunting decisions about their future, and when student disengagement is reaching its peak (Gallup, 2017). In the Wayfinder Purpose class, students develop social-emotional skills by sharing their stories, examining their strengths, discussing the issues in the world they are concerned about, and planning real-world projects that connect to their emerging sense of purpose.

To support teachers in implementing the Purpose Curriculum, Wayfinder provides educator training and ongoing support. In training sessions, teachers learn about the research behind the curriculum and have the opportunity to explore their own sense of belonging, meaning, and purpose alongside their colleagues.

The Wayfinder theory of change is:

If educators help students find meaning and purpose, then those students will have a better relationship with themselves and their community and be equipped to make a positive contribution in the world.

¹ Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2011; Malin, Morton, Nadal, & Smith, 2019; Ryff, Singer, Dienberg Love, 2004; Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill, 2010

EVALUATION

This evaluation aimed to learn about the effect of the Wayfinder Curriculum on student outcomes in purpose and related social-emotional capacities. To do so, we assessed students' self-reported progress in the following outcome domains that align with CASEL's criteria for effective SEL programs: positive social behavior (social awareness behaviors), school connectedness (engagement and belonging), and identity (identity expression and purpose), as well as cultural awareness and emotional regulation.

Site of the Evaluation

This evaluation was conducted at an independent Catholic high school in San Francisco. The school serves approximately 1,300 students from around the California Bay Area with a program that strives to be rigorous, innovative, balanced, and service-oriented. Wayfinder was brought to the school to provide seniors with an opportunity to reflect on the purpose of life and how to live a full life as they approached the transition to college. The teachers used the Wayfinder Curriculum to create a class that aligned with the University of California's a-g requirements for a college preparatory elective.

In 2021-22, the Wayfinder class was in its third year at the school and approximately 45% of the senior class (140 students) took the elective that year. At this school, the Wayfinder Purpose class is offered as a semester-long class on a block schedule. Students participate in three 70-minute classes one week and two 70-minute classes the next week, alternating weeks through the semester. The two teachers who taught the Wayfinder Curriculum during the evaluation year implemented the curriculum as it was written. The school was 100% in-person during the 2021-22 school year and all Wayfinder classes that took place during this evaluation were conducted in-person.

Evaluation Plan

This evaluation used a quasi-experimental design to examine the effect of Wayfinder Curriculum participation on the following student-reported attitude and behavior outcomes: Purpose, identity expression, social awareness, cultural awareness, belonging, engagement, and emotional regulation. We conducted the evaluation by administering pre and post-test surveys to high school students who were participating in the Wayfinder Curriculum, and to a group of comparison students at the same school who were not participating in Wayfinder.

Participants were seniors at an independent Catholic high school in San Francisco. Of 137 respondents, 77 were in the Wayfinder intervention group and 60 were in the control group. Control group students were taking a Mindfulness class at the time that the intervention group was participating in the Wayfinder Curriculum. The full sample was 31.4% Asian/Asian

American, 1.5% Black/African American, 30.7% White, 13.1% Hispanic/Latinx, 23.4% Multi-ethnic/Other; and 61% female. Ethnicity was similarly distributed in the intervention and control groups. Girls were over-represented in the control group (girls made up 77% of the control group and 48% of the intervention group; $\chi^2 = 11.56, p = 0.001$).

Data Collection occurred in September 2021 (pre-test) and December 2021 (post-test). Wayfinder students received a link to the surveys through an online portal and control group students received a link to the online survey from their Mindfulness teacher. The pre and post surveys were administered at the beginning and end of a semester-long class.

Measures of social awareness, cultural awareness, belonging, engagement, and emotional regulation were adapted from Panorama Education's Social-Emotional Learning Survey (Panorama Education, 2020). Purpose was measured with the Claremont Purpose Scale (Bronk, Riches, & Mangan, 2018) and Identity Expression was measured with a two-item scale that was developed for this survey. All measures were scored on a 5-point scale.

Social Awareness was measured with an 8-item scale that asked students to report about their positive social behaviors during the past 30 days. Items include "how carefully did you listen to other people's points of view?" and "how often did you compliment others' accomplishments?"

Cultural Awareness was measured with a 6-item scale that asked students to report about their thoughts and behaviors related to racial awareness and how they perceive race-related interactions at their school. Items include "How often do you think about what someone of a different race, ethnicity, or culture experiences?"

Belonging was measured with a 5-item scale that asked students to report the extent to which they felt a sense of belonging at school. Items include "How much do you matter to others at this school?"

Engagement was measured with a 5-item scale that asked students to report how engaged they felt they were in their classes and school activities. Items included "In your classes, how eager are you to participate?"

Emotional Regulation was measured with a 6-item scale that asked students to report the extent to which they believed they could manage their emotions. Items included "How often are you able to pull yourself out of a bad mood?"

Purpose was measured using the 12-item Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS). The CPS comprises three subscales that combine to make up a comprehensive score. The subscales are sense of meaning (e.g., "How well do you understand what gives your life meaning?"), goal commitment (e.g., "How much effort are you putting into making your goals a reality?"), and beyond-the-self contribution (e.g., "How important is it for you to make the world a better place in some way?").

Identity Expression was measured with two items indicating respondents' feeling that they could express their identity in school. Items were "I feel safe to express my thoughts and opinions at school" and "I feel empowered at school to talk about who I am" (Post-test $\alpha = .78$).

Analysis was conducted using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to compare post-test scores between the Wayfinder group and the control group while controlling for the pre-test scores.

Baseline Equivalence was tested to determine whether the Wayfinder and control groups had equivalent scores on the pre-test in each construct. The Baseline Equivalence test determined that *Emotional Regulation* (Hedges' $g = .31$) was not equivalent at baseline, indicating that the scores could not be sufficiently adjusted using ANCOVA.

Gender was not balanced between the Wayfinder and control groups, so we conducted independent t -tests to compare pre-test means in each construct by gender. T -test results showed that there was a significant difference between girls and boys in one construct—*emotional regulation* ($t(135) = 3.04, p < .01$). Because emotional regulation did not demonstrate Baseline Equivalence, we then tested Baseline Equivalence for emotional regulation by gender. Both girls (Hedges' $g = .44$) and boys (Hedges' $g = .25$) failed to meet Baseline Equivalence for emotional regulation, indicating that the difference in gender means did not cause the baseline scores to be nonequivalent.

Missing Data. We analyzed effects for the subsample of students with nonmissing pre-test and post-test scores. Some students were retained who had two or fewer missing values, and it was determined on inspection that there was no pattern to these individual missing values. That is, no variable had more than 1.5% missing data (two missing values), and no case had more than 1.5% missing data.

RESULTS

Wayfinder students scored higher than the control group on all constructs, demonstrating statistically significant improvement on four of the seven constructs. The bar chart shows post-test comparisons between Wayfinder and control students. The constructs marked with an asterisk were significant, meaning that the difference in means between the Wayfinder group and the control group is not chance, but is a meaningful difference. The table shows pre-test means and adjusted post-test means for all constructs.

Purpose. Students who participated in Wayfinder had significantly higher post-test scores on *purpose* compared to students not participating in Wayfinder when controlling for pre-test purpose scores ($F = 51.69; df = 2/134; p < .001$).

Identity Expression. Students who participated in Wayfinder had significantly higher post-test scores on *identity expression* compared to students not participating in Wayfinder when controlling for pre-test identity expression scores ($F = 38.72; df = 2/134; p < .001$).

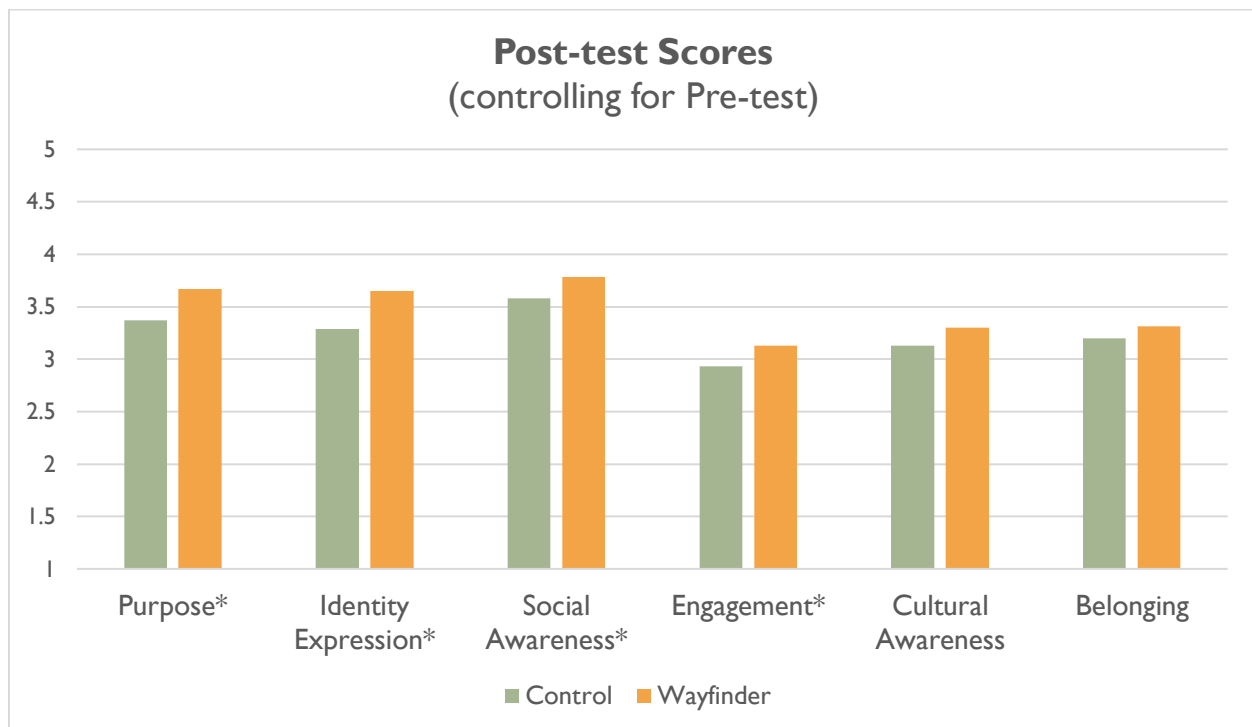
Social Awareness. Students who participated in Wayfinder had significantly higher post-test scores on *social awareness* compared to students not participating in Wayfinder, when controlling for pre-test social awareness scores ($F = 52.55$; $df = 2/134$; $p < .001$).

Cultural Awareness. Students who participated in Wayfinder had higher but not significantly higher post-test scores on *cultural awareness* compared to students not participating in Wayfinder, when controlling for pre-test cultural awareness scores. Although the model was significant ($F = 19.17$; $df = 2/134$; $p < .001$), the difference between groups was not ($F = 3.46$; $df = 1/134$; $p = .07$).

Belonging. Students who participated in Wayfinder had higher but not significantly higher post-test scores on *belonging* compared to students not participating in Wayfinder, when controlling for pre-test belonging scores. Although the model was significant ($F = 58.21$; $df = 2/134$; $p < .001$), the difference between groups was not ($F = 2.17$; $df = 1/134$; $p = .14$).

Engagement. Students who participated in Wayfinder had significantly higher post-test scores on *engagement* compared to students not participating in Wayfinder, when controlling for pre-test engagement scores ($F = 42.08$; $df = 2/134$; $p < .001$).

Emotional Regulation. Students who participated in Wayfinder had higher post-test scores on *emotional regulation* compared to students not participating in Wayfinder. However, because pre-test scores were not equivalent, significance could not be determined.



Adjusted Post-test Scores of Wayfinder and Control Groups (*significant)

Pre-test and Adjusted Post-test Means for Wayfinder and Control Groups

		Pre-test	Post-test
Purpose	Wayfinder	3.35	3.67*
	Control	3.34	3.37
Social Awareness	Wayfinder	3.56	3.78*
	Control	3.48	3.58
Cultural Awareness	Wayfinder	3.12	3.30
	Control	2.98	3.13
Identity Expression	Wayfinder	3.40	3.65*
	Control	3.42	3.29
Belonging	Wayfinder	3.15	3.31
	Control	3.25	3.20
Engagement	Wayfinder	3.06	3.13*
	Control	2.90	2.93
Emotional Reg.	Wayfinder	3.14†	3.42
	Control	2.93	3.02

*Significant result. †Not equivalent at baseline

CONCLUSION

The Wayfinder Purpose Curriculum aims to provide teachers with SEL tools for supporting students to develop lives of purpose. The curriculum is designed to engage high school students in purpose exploration activities that develop self, social, and cultural awareness; sense of belonging in a community; goal directedness; sense of meaning; and desire and capacity to make a positive contribution to the world. This evaluation study found that the Wayfinder Curriculum had a significant, positive effect on some of these outcomes—social awareness behaviors, cultural awareness, identity expression, and purpose—and did not have a negative effect on any of the measured outcomes.

These findings provide promising evidence that the Wayfinder Curriculum is effective at developing fundamental SEL capacities that are believed to set students on a purposeful life path as they transition from high school to college and career. It is important to note the limitations of this study and the implications of those limitations. This evaluation was

conducted only with seniors in an independent Catholic school setting. Although the control group was made up of students in the same school and the same cohort, it is possible that the program will have different effects in different types of schools or at different grade levels. It is also important to note that the Wayfinder teachers at the evaluation school were careful to implement the full curriculum including all possible components offered by Wayfinder. The same effects might not be seen in situations where the program is not implemented with such fidelity.

Research shows that adolescents benefit when they are able to explore and develop purpose, especially purpose that reflects a desire to make a positive contribution in the world. High school is an ideal time for students to explore purpose in a structured and meaningful way, and in such a way that they can make connections between their emerging sense of purpose, their academic learning, and their future planning. Based on the findings of this evaluation, the Wayfinder Purpose Curriculum is an effective approach to supporting students' purpose development and improvement in key social-emotional domains.

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