Engaging Students and Strengthening Social and Emotional Well-Being – A Case Study

Review of an EdTech pilot program between Uchi and Anne Arundel County Public Schools during Spring 2021.

Summary

In a pilot program conducted by Uchi and AACPS, featuring teacher and student participation utilizing the Uchi EdTech Social App, student engagement and emotional well-being noticeably improved within weeks of implementation.

Social and emotional well-being is critical for student success and can no longer be an after-thought or side-effect of the school environment and education, in general. The relationships students have with their teachers, peers, and family directly effects their mental and emotional health and must be nurtured regularly and often. The better students and teachers know and understand each other, through real, two-way conversations, the more connected they feel. Stronger connections lead to motivation to engage and complete school work and positive behaviors on and off school grounds.

Pilot Program Subject

Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS), located in Maryland, has a population of 85,000 students in 128 schools and includes a diverse population of White (51%), African American (21%), and Hispanic/Latino (17%) students. They are dedicated to serving the whole student and have programs for mental and emotional health, Social & Emotional Learning (SEL), Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI), and family engagement.

The Uchi-AACPS Pilot Program included an advisor and nearly 30 students who serve on the Chesapeake Regional Association of Student Councils and the Student Mental Health Advisory Board. The students were located throughout the county and at different high schools, so few knew each other prior to the pilot. Further, program participation was voluntary for students.

The Problem

Long before the Covid-19 pandemic and virtual learning, children and teenagers have been experiencing a decline in their mental and emotional health. These challenges often present as depression/suicide, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, bullying, gun violence, and more. In addition, grades, test scores, graduation rates, engagement, creativity, resilience, etc. have suffered. Common tactics to improve grades, test scores, and behaviors, such as more classes and homework, longer school days, year-round school, internet compatible devices and access, fitness challenges, and meditation have minimal impact and do not address students' basic need to connect and foster genuine relationships with their teachers and peers and feel like they "belong" at their school.

Social, emotional, and mental well-being of students is critical for their success. It is now understood that education can no longer focus solely on academics and extra-curricular activities. Educators often lack tangible tools which can be seamlessly incorporated into today's curriculum that provide social and relationship-building opportunities for educators and peers.

The Uchi Solution

Uchi, and specifically uchiEducation, is a social EdTech app whereby educators (e.g., teacher, counselor, advisor) create topics and questions and invite small groups of students to share their answers and discuss with each other and their teacher(s). Uchi does not replace current pedagogy but rather complements it by providing an asynchronous tool that facilitates and integrates deeper conversations and connections into learning.

Educators and staff serve as leaders and participants in every conversation, guided by their questions, which can include, but are not limited to, Subject Matter Topics, SEL, DEI, Parental Engagement, and Staff Team Building (via uchiPro). The more conversations had where true thoughts, feelings, and perspectives are shared, the greater our connections and relationships. Connection equals happiness (Harvard 2012).

In minutes, and without training, an uchiTribe Leader can login to the Uchi Web Portal and create uchiTribes consisting of 1) a topic of up to 10 questions and 2) a group of up to 10 people. uchiTribe invitations are automatically sent to members in-app and by email. Uchi data shows most conversations naturally end within 5-14 days and when they do, a leader can create a new uchiTribe by changing the questions and/or members. This cycle is repeated regularly and focused on the current needs of a given tribe. Uchi users can join multiple uchiTribes, simultaneously.

Uchi provides a familiar tech platform and a safe emotional space where every student has an opportunity to share their perspective, in their own words and time, and be heard, within a private group. This type of sharing, and specifically Uchi platform research, has been shown to strengthen relationships and mental and emotional health and improve behaviors including depression.

The Results

Uchi provided a convenient tool, using a familiar technology, where educators can engage and connect with their students in real conversations.

Pilot program outcomes included:

- 76% of invited students registered for a free Uchi account and with no technical difficulties.
- 95% of those registered joined at least one uchiTribe.
- 150+ unique answers were provided.
- 1130+ answers were read by their tribe members.
- *"Uchi may be the easiest EdTech I've ever reviewed and approved."* – AACPS Chief Information Officer, Greg Barlow.

As reported by the AACPS Advisor:
- Increased attendance by students on video calls for regular class activities.
- Increased engagement and participation of students, especially students who typically remain quiet, during video calls.
- *"Students say they feel more comfortable speaking up during video calls because they feel like they 'know' each other better because of Uchi."*

Discussion and Conclusion

Given there are no quick fixes to health and well-being, our physical, mental, and emotional health must be nurtured regularly or it will degrade. The pilot data shows students are willing to adopt a new EdTech platform and use it on their personal or school-issued devices. Furthermore, students will actively participate in written conversations, with their teachers and peers, when prompted with questions and given a chance to respond when they feel emotionally safe. The asynchronous conversations that occurred on Uchi directly translated into significantly increased engagement by those students while virtual learning. Students stated they felt "more comfortable" with their peers and improved relationships online are known to improve relationships, a sense of belonging, and behaviors offline.

Uchi provided a simply integrated EdTech for students and educators to use, at their own pace, to engage in educator-guided, online conversations, which strengthened connections and social, emotional, and mental well-being.

The Uchi Pilot Program at AACPS proved to have noticeable, successful short-term outcomes. These outcomes have the potential for long-term benefits, in time and with continued use, and should continue to be measured over time.

Future Opportunities

Social, emotional, and mental health are critical to a person's success in school and life and are rooted in our connections and relationships. Opportunities must exist to not only discuss the facets and importance of healthy relationships but to actually facilitate and cultivate them. The stronger our connections, the healthier and happier we are, and our behaviors follow. With prolonged use of the Uchi EdTech app, significant improvements from grades and graduation rates to addiction, bullying, depression, anxiety, and suicide can be monitored and evaluated.

To learn more, email connect@uchiconnection.com or visit https://uchiconnection.com.