

# Transforming Student Behavioral Challenges Through Mindfulness at the Webb School in the Valley

## BACKGROUND

The Webb School in the Valley, along with The Webb School at Cheshire, and The Grace S. Webb School in Hartford are part of the Institute of Living in Hartford, Connecticut. The focus of these schools is to help students with mental health challenges realize their potential and become self-regulated in a safe, supportive, and respectful environment.

In working through student challenges, The Webb School in the Valley recognized a need for a support system that could translate beyond the classroom. Rather than trying to change behavior through external factors, such as a point and level system, staff aimed to transition towards transforming behavior from the inside out through social-emotional learning and the development of coping strategies.

This new approach included integrating daily mindfulness practice in the classroom. While some of the school counselors were already using mindfulness in isolated instances, School Administrator Jill DeVane knew that implementing a consistent practice for all students was the key to maximizing the benefits mindfulness has to offer.

Inner Explorer programs offered the perfect solution – daily 5-10 minute audio-guided mindfulness practices that required no prep work from educators. Through the generosity of the [Aetna Foundation](#) and [LG Electronics](#), The Webb School in the Valley had the opportunity to pilot Inner Explorer programs at no cost.

## IMPACT

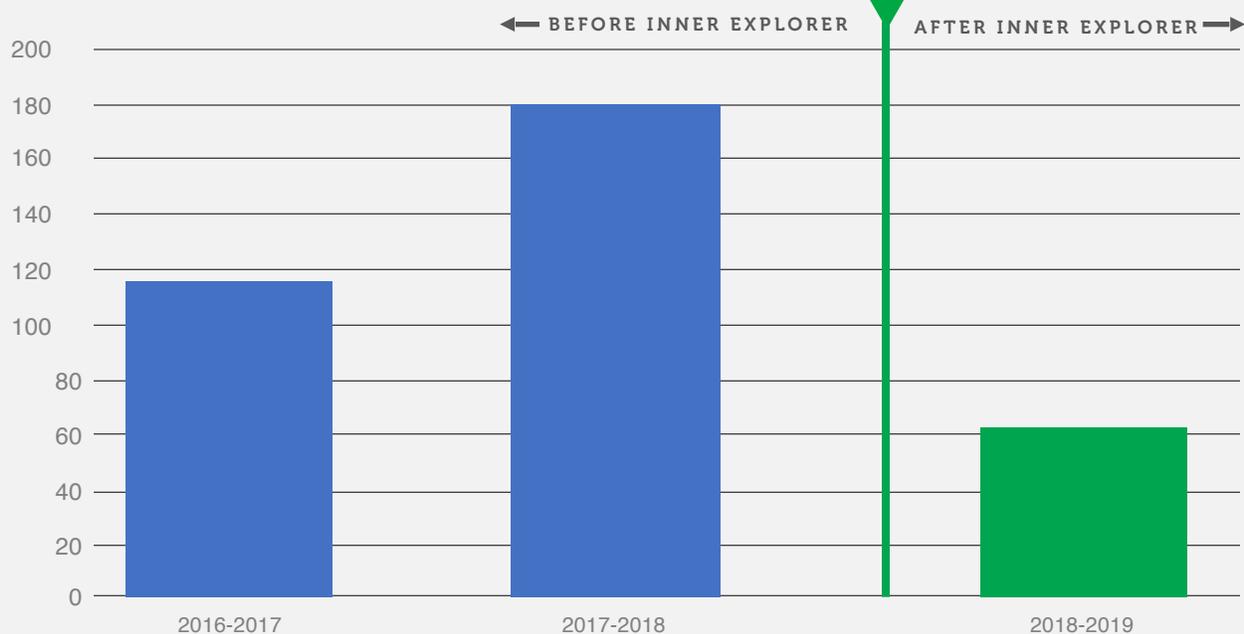
After using Inner Explorer, The Webb School in the Valley reported a **65% decrease in restraints and seclusions.**

Both The Webb School in the Valley and Inner Explorer recognize that oftentimes, it is not the curriculum that is a struggle for students, but rather, internal and external challenges that interfere with their ability to learn. By teaching Mindfulness-Based Social Emotional Learning (MBSEL) skills, students learn to process emotions, reduce chronic stress, and focus in school.

“There was one student in particular who suffered from extreme social anxiety – even being in a classroom of eight was a lot for him, but he did well with a small group or 1:1. In the year before using Inner Explorer, he had a significant number of outbursts (40+), resulting in restraint or seclusions. During the year we began practicing Inner Explorer, he only had ONE restraint and seclusion. The change in behavior was so significant that his mother asked why she wasn’t talking to us as much – the answer was that we had no behavior issues to review with her.”

JILL DEVANE | SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

## Number of Restraints and Seclusions by School Year



The number of behavioral issues at The Webb School in the Valley dropped significantly in the school year following the pilot of Inner Explorer.

### Mindfulness-Based Social Emotional Learning (MBSEL) as a Preventative Measure

The Webb School in the Valley recognized that behavioral issues in the classroom can often lead to lifelong challenges. Students who are suspended or expelled from school are shown to have higher dropout rates and feel disconnected from their school community; often contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline and the achievement gap.

Young students who are expelled or suspended are as much as 10 times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure and grade retention, hold negative school attitudes, and face incarceration than those who are not.<sup>1</sup>

Suspension and expulsion deny the fact that these students may be experiencing trauma and require support; this ultimately prevents students from receiving the help that they need to create lasting positive change in their lives and keep them stuck in a repetitive cycle.

“Children and young adults today are experiencing more stress, anxiety, and trauma than ever before. Trauma and stress negatively impact brain function and often lead to impulsive, behavioral outbursts; as a result, they may find themselves entangled in the juvenile justice system. Students need tools that will help them slow down, make better choices, and avoid acting out of anger. Mindfulness is a practice that teaches individuals to do just that. Through mindfulness, children learn skills such as self-awareness and self-control, which allows them to avoid the pitfalls of impulsive behavior. As a juvenile judge, I work with some of the most troubled youth in America – if we can teach them (and all students) to practice mindfulness, they will have a better chance to be successful, law-abiding citizens.”

**JUDGE FRANK SZYMANSKI, THIRD  
CIRCUIT COURT, JUVENILE DIVISION**

A single in-school suspension is predictive of a significant risk for academic failure (greater than 25% chance of failure) on a state-wide standardized test.<sup>2</sup>

Mindfulness-Based Social Emotional Learning (MBSEL) acts as a preventative measure by teaching the core competencies of self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship skills of cooperation and communication.

#### MBSEL PROGRAMS WORK TO:

Reduce the biological effects of stress, which decreases fight/flight/freeze reactivity.

De-escalate conflict through self-regulation.

Aid in executive functioning and higher-order thinking, which promotes mindful listening and speech.

Develop empathy, compassion, and resilience.

## MBSEL IMPLEMENTATION

Educators at The Webb Schools utilize the relational model, a strengths-based program, as well as trauma-informed teaching methods – which provided a strong foundation for introducing Inner Explorer MBSEL programs in the classroom. When implementing Inner Explorer, they came up with several helpful strategies that ensured the program was a success for their students.

### Structure

- Giving students a set routine and consistency with their practice was a priority. Inner Explorer was incorporated at the same time each day in every classroom. This allowed both students and teachers the opportunity to practice mindfulness together – setting the stage for a productive day of learning and improved academic outcomes.

### Adaptation:

- With a little creative thinking, The Webb School in the Valley adapted Inner Explorer for students who initially found it difficult to sit still with their thoughts. Educators were encouraged to work with students to find a strategy that allowed them to participate in the Inner Explorer practices. For example, a student may draw or color while they listen to the daily mindfulness practice.

### Support

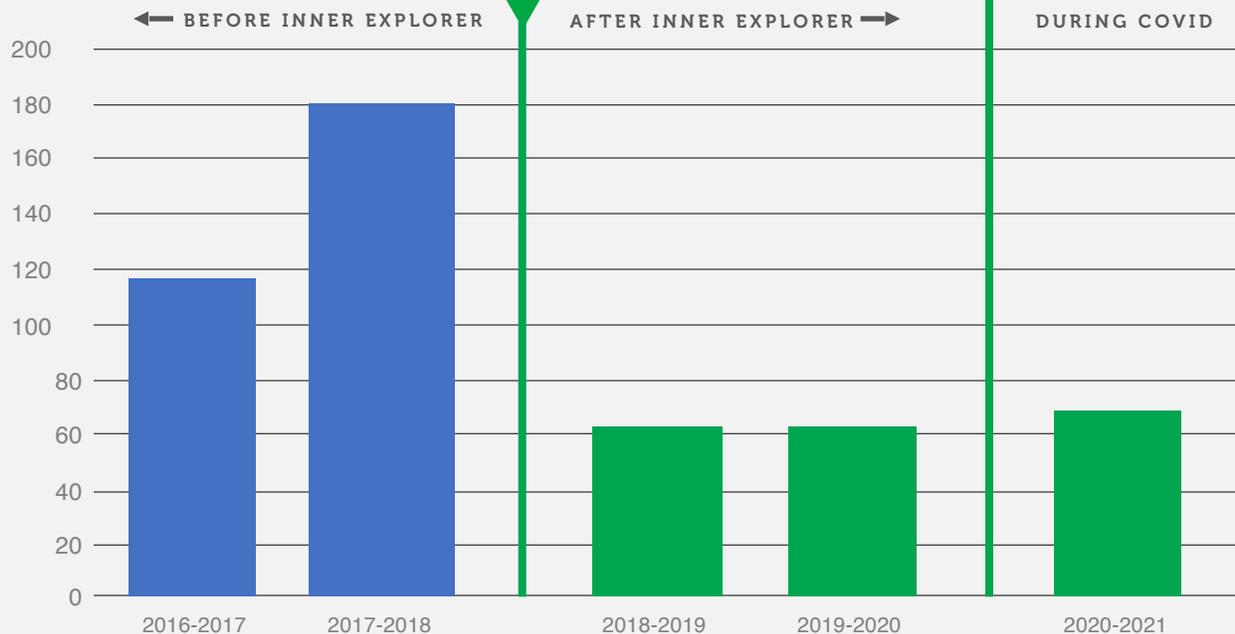
- When a student is resistant to participate in mindfulness practice, educators work with them to understand the underlying reason. They also work to establish the “why” for students to help them make sense of the exercises they learn in class.

### Application

- The Webb School Programs remind students to utilize the mindfulness techniques they are learning throughout the day, whether that be during the school day or otherwise. This encourages success both in and out of the classroom. One example teachers use to instill this ‘best practice’ is by writing the mindfulness technique that they are practicing with Inner Explorer on the board each day, such as belly breathing or a body scan exercise; then, if a student is having a difficult moment during the day, the teacher can refer back to the mindfulness technique written on the board as a way to help the student cope. For older students who may have access to technology such as smartphones and headphones, teachers encourage students to listen to a mindfulness practice through their devices during moments where they feel anxious, stressed, or overwhelmed.

By setting up a strong foundation for daily mindfulness practice with Inner Explorer, The Webb School in the Valley continued using the program throughout remote learning during COVID-19. When they returned to in-person learning, restraint and seclusion numbers remained low; daily mindfulness helped students cope with the unprecedented challenges and stress of the pandemic.

## Number of Restraints and Seclusions by School Year



The Webb School in the Valley maintained a lower number of behavioral issues throughout COVID-19, after the initial decrease in the school year following the Inner Explorer pilot program.

**Interested in bringing MBSEL to  
your school or district?**

[Learn More](#)

### SOURCES

1. U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Human Services. Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension in Early Childhood Settings. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/policy-statement-ecce-expulsions-suspensions.pdf>
2. Smith, D., Ortiz, N.A., Blake, J.J. Tipping Point: Effect of the Number of In-school Suspensions on Academic Failure. Contemporary School Psychology (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-020-00289-7>