

We at Agile Mind and the Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin, the authors of our programs for Grades 6-8 mathematics, are gratified that *Ed Reports* has evaluated our middle school programs—like our high school programs—as meeting expectations in all three gateways. We have valued our discussions with *Ed Reports* as the organization’s review process and methodologies have matured in response to the field.

From the inception of the Dana Center/Agile Mind collaboration, we have had a single goal: to blend the Dana Center’s valuable experience in research, study of high-yield practice, and implementation with instructional design methodologies and technology-enabled tools to build a system for teaching and learning that supports each educator, every day, in meeting the needs of every student. Unlike digital curricula designed to replace the teacher, our materials build from the fundamental idea that a teacher is not an “add-on” to high-quality instruction but central to the learning process and thus deserving of greater support.

As collaborators dedicated to continuous improvement, we regularly gather information from schools and teachers to inform our work to enhance our programs. We thank the tens of thousands of educators who have shaped our work and helped us “go green” in each of the gateways—placing our middle school programs among the best in the nation.

While we are honored and humbled by the *Ed Reports* evaluations and our partners’ positive experiences with our work, we will continue to press ourselves and the field on two issues that are fundamental to students’ equitable access to best-quality mathematics instruction. First, while alignment to standards is necessary, it is far from sufficient for deep student learning. Second, if we are to ensure students are well prepared for college or career, we must attend to both their academic growth and also their social-emotional development (SED).

A myopic focus on individual, grade-level standards serves to atomize content and prevents students from accessing and learning powerful mathematical concepts. Additionally, failing to expose students to content identified as above-grade-level is a fundamental threat to equity. In schools serving significant percentages of low-income students, it is especially important to introduce students to concepts that they will study in subsequent courses and how those concepts link to what they’re learning today.

Why? Advantaged students learn the layout of the math curriculum at home and in their schools. High-quality schools provide many “acculturative” activities and lessons, such as learning about the colleges students can attend and learning about the courses they will take in high school and college. Doing so is strongly supported by a deep body of authoritative research going back to the late 1940s work of Robert King Merton, and by the contemporary work on academic belonging of Dr. Catherine Good and her colleagues. If students are to pay attention to these ideas about their future lives, they need to be introduced to the basic vocabulary of them.

Academic belonging, like growth mindset, is crucial; however, these are only two aspects of the so-called “noncognitive/SEL” domain to which we must attend. An established and expanding body of research makes clear that integration of social-emotional and academic development (SEAD) is a key component to student success, particularly for historically underserved populations in mathematics.^{1 2} And, as shown in a number of recent studies, attending to adolescents’ social-emotional development is a complex and nuanced task: some interventions designed with the best of intentions but without current knowledge of adolescent research may actually cause harm.³ Our programs are grounded in the conviction—informed by over a decade of delivering authentic tools and strategies that enable students to develop positive learning mindsets and strategies—that all learning resources, and evaluations of those resources, should reflect SEAD’s cornerstone role for students.

At a time when the many challenges faced by educators across the nation are coming to the fore, Agile Mind and the Dana Center are truly excited to continue our work with all organizations concerned with improving student achievement and reducing gaps in opportunity to learn. Our teachers, our students, and our country deserve no less from us.

¹ Mangels JA, Good C, Whiteman RC, Maniscalco B, Dweck CS. (2012). Emotion blocks the path to learning under stereotype threat. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 7(2), pp 230-41.

² West, M. R., Kraft, M. A., Finn, A. S., Martin, R., Duckworth, A. L., Gabrieli, C. F. O., & Gabrieli, J. D. E. (2014). *Promise and paradox: Measuring students' non-cognitive skills and the impact of schooling*. Cambridge, MA: National Center for Teacher Effectiveness, Harvard University.

³ Sparks, SD. (2018, March). For Teenagers, Praising 'Effort' May Not Promote a Growth Mindset.' *Education Week*, Retrieved from <http://blogs.edweek.org>.