

# Study examines impact of high school teacher and student views of freshmen's social, emotional needs

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When high school freshmen and their teachers have differing assessments of students' social skills, the students' attendance and grades are negatively affected, according to a study by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign social work professor Kevin Tan and alumna Jenna White. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

When high school freshmen's teachers give them lower scores on communication skills, the students receive four times as many disciplinary referrals as some of their peers, a new study found.

Students whose teachers rated them lower on several [social skills](#)—including communication, cooperation, [self-control](#), empathy and engagement—than the students rated themselves averaged about eight disciplinary referrals during the [academic year](#).

By contrast, peers whose scores on the [self-assessment](#) were similar to those they received from their teachers averaged just 2.3 referrals, according to the study.

"This finding is really mind-blowing to me because it speaks to teachers' level of understanding of students' social and emotional needs and has important implications" for their academic success and high school completion, said lead author Kevin Tan, a professor of social work at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"It's really important for teachers to have an adequate understanding of their students' needs so the right kind of interventions, support and classroom instruction are provided."

The study included 264 pairs of ninth graders and their teachers from one high school in Illinois. Teachers in the study, who averaged nearly 10 years' experience in the classroom, were matched with students in their classes who they indicated they knew the best.

The teachers and their students completed different versions of the Social Skills Improvement System, a survey that rates students on various social skills, as well as on emotional regulation, and internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

"Because there's no gold standard for evaluating the concordance of these mutual ratings, we treated students' self-assessments as correct and placed the responsibility on the teachers to accurately assess the child's needs," Tan said.

Tan's group collected data on the students' grades, disciplinary referrals and attendance from school records. Researchers compared the students' and teachers' ratings on the various emotional and behavioral characteristics to see if differing scores were associated with poorer attendance or academic or disciplinary problems.

Although research has shown that supporting students' social and emotional needs is vital to their academic success and ability to develop healthy relationships with adults and peers, Tan said educational researchers have not examined how students' academic progress is affected when they and their teachers have differing views of the student's needs.

He said these differences may be critical during ninth grade in particular, which educators view as the make-or-break year for high school graduation.

Tan's team found significant disparities in teachers' and students' ratings on the various characteristics, particularly with regard to social skills.

Mutual agreement on the various emotional and behavioral characteristics ranged from 67% on hyperactivity to 87% on bullying behaviors.

However, their concurrence on the students' social skills ranged from 48% on engagement to 64% on cooperation.

When teachers rated students lower on social skills than students rated

themselves, Tan's team found that these students had more disciplinary referrals than peers whose self-ratings matched the scores their teachers gave them.

Likewise, students whose self-ratings on externalizing behaviors—such as hurting others when they were angry—were in sync with their teachers' ratings had higher GPAs—an average GPA of 2.93 compared with 2.23 for students whose teachers gave them higher scores.

Similar associations were found with attendance. When students' and their teachers' scores on bullying matched, these students had better attendance than peers whose teachers rated them higher on these behaviors, the data indicated.

Research has indicated that educators who are trained on assessing their students' social, emotional and behavioral needs feel better prepared to manage their classrooms and address pupils' disruptive behaviors.

Therefore, enhancing teachers' ability to accurately assess their students' needs should be prioritized in professional development programs, said co-author Jenna White, a recent alumna of the School of Social Work.

And when problems arise, teachers need to be able to exercise discretion in whether a disciplinary referral is the best recourse or if the [student](#) might be better served by a consultation with the school counselor or social worker, she said.

"I also think it's super-important for [teacher](#) training programs to explore cultural awareness, such as what social and cultural norms of these behaviors and skills might look like in different settings," said White, currently a [school](#) social worker.

The study was published in the journal *Educational Studies*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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