



# The Front Page



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## Students Taking Action Together (STAT):

### *Helping Students Get Along Better and Communicate Respectfully And Empathically via Social Studies Instruction*

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### Setting the stage

Dialogue is a cornerstone of a thriving democracy. The free exchange of ideas paves the path to understanding and innovation, while the stifling of dialogue leads to mistrust at best and extremism at worst. We are currently living in an age in which the Internet and social media facilitate polarized communities and a decrease in dialogue. The result is an inhospitable political climate. Now, perhaps more than ever, our students need ways to speak to one-another about important matters and get along better with one another so they can work together to solve problems and make the world a better place.

The Rutgers University Social-Emotional and Character Development (SECD) Lab is working to address these issues by helping students build the skills to take different perspectives, engage in respectful debate and dialogue, and solve social problems. Thanks to funding from the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust's *Helping People Get Along Better Fund*, the SECD Lab is in the process of refining and disseminating a middle school-based social action pedagogy called **STAT**, which stands for **Students Taking Action Together**. Below we provide an overview of STAT, two example lessons, and ways in which you can get involved in piloting STAT in your school or other settings. Additionally, in the spirit of dialogue, we would like to learn more about the ways in which you are addressing the topic of civil discourse, particularly in elementary and high schools. To reach out, please refer to our contact information at the end of this article.

### Overview of STAT

Students Taking Action Together—STAT—is a social action pedagogy that helps middle school students engage in feasible and personally meaningful social action. To do this, STAT combines 1) the PARD/C (Preparation, Action, Reflection, Demonstration/ Celebration) service-learning framework, 2) an empirically validated social problem-solving intervention, and 3) problem-based learning techniques. STAT is specifically tailored to help middle school students engage in feasible and personally meaningful social action planning and, where appropriate, social action within the existing social studies/ history/civics/ current events curriculum.



Each STAT lesson uses the PLAN social action problem solving process:

**P:** Create a **Problem description**, which defines the issue being discussed  
**L:** Brainstorm a **List of options** to solve the problem  
**A:** Develop and act on an **Action plan** to solve the problem  
**N:** **Notice successes** as part of ongoing evaluation and refinement.

Students' solutions can become small-scale projects that are refined by a feedback loop among students, teachers, and administrators. The STAT feedback process creates a social justice-oriented school climate with empathy, by demonstrating that students' suggestions (even if not enacted, e.g., an alternative way an historic event might have been handled) have been heard by others and seriously considered. In addition, Students' STAT conversations and suggestions give school personnel unique access to student concerns in a way that can deepen their understanding of the students they serve. This allows them to create both synergy and continuity across students' efforts. In turn, students' social action, sense of empowerment, and contribution are reinforced. Note that STAT has been piloted for over 5 years in seven New Jersey Middle Schools, including with many at-risk, minority, disadvantaged youth. Thus, we have confidence in the wide applicability of this approach.

***The ability of STAT to integrate into existing structures is its key asset.*** This integration takes place in two ways within an overarching framework. The overarching framework is the intention to teach students how to analyze social issues and formulate action plans to address them. The integration occurs either via issues that are historic or issues current to the school or wider social context.

The lessons are designed to expose students to a series of pedagogic elements over multiple years, each of which is designed to help students get along better with one another, including (and especially) those with whom they might disagree or whose opinions and ideas they don't know. The pedagogic elements include:

- (a) Responsible Listening,
- (b) Respectful Empathic Debate,
- (c) Peer Opinion Sharing,
- (d) PLAN Problem Solving,
- (e) Collaborative Creativity,
- (f) Audience-Focused Communication, and
- (g) Reflective Improvement.

***Key to the approach is for students to create products they have to prepare, deliver, and defend collaboratively.*** These might be social action improvements in their classrooms or schools, or they might be alternative solutions to historical problems or proposed solutions to current events. They will get feedback on what they create and will learn to modify in light of feedback. Adults model, and students are taught, how to lead and participate in discussions using Non-Judgmental Facilitation.

In essence, what we are doing is providing a systematic and social-emotional learning (SEL)-informed pedagogical framework for what typically is a content-focus in schools. That framework guides students toward formulating opinions, expressing them, listening to others, considering modifications, and working collaboratively to communicate one's perspective to others. These are fundamental habits for respectful, engaged dialogue and democratic action, as envisioned by John Dewey in *Democracy and Education*.



### **Example #1 of STAT in action: Social studies historical event**

**Note:** *The lesson is an example of how an historical topic might be approached using the **PLAN framework**. Students could be divided into subgroups to consider the set of questions and then brought together to share responses. Their work would occur in conjunction with assigned readings/media materials recommended in the curriculum for this topic. In the ensuing discussion, teachers can use the pedagogy suggestions below to enhance learning and skill development.*

#### **Topic: The Civil War**

**Task:** Consider the problem from different perspectives, using the PLAN framework:

#### **Problem Description:**

- How did the North and the South define the problem in the country?
- What were the issues, from each perspective?
- Who were the key people involved in making important decisions?

#### **List Options:**

- What options did they consider to be acceptable ways to resolve the problem?
- What did they ultimately decide?

#### **Action Plan:**

- How did they carry out that plan?
- What obstacles did they encounter?

#### **Notice Successes:**

- How did it work out?
  - What can be learned from their experience that would be relevant to the present?
- NOTE:** *This is where project-based learning can emerge and connects to **Audience-Focused Communication** pedagogy, below.*

### **Pedagogies that can be linked into the instructional process:**

- Respectful Empathic Debate**-- asking students to argue from the perspective of all sides of an issue, especially ones they disagree with
- Responsible Listening**-- having to summarize the positions one just heard
- Collaborative Creativity**—how else could the problem have been viewed? What other solutions might have been considered?
- Audience-Focused Communication** – how can students share what they have learned with others? Create a mock Civil War newspaper? Conduct an interview? Use maps to illustrate other options? Identify a current analogue to the historical situation studied?
- Reflective Improvement**-- reflection on what was learned from taking this kind of look at a historical situation and how a similar approach might be valuable in other situations, as well as present contexts.



### **Example #2 of STAT in action: Current event**

**Note:** *This lesson is an example of how a current event can be approached using the **PLAN framework**. Please note that the example below was created before the most recent shooting incident in Florida.*

#### **Topic: A shooting incident**

**Task:** Consider the problem from different perspectives, using the PLAN framework:

#### **Problem Description:**

- Who were the individuals involved?
- What was the problem from different perspectives?
- What feelings did they have?

#### **List Options:**

- What options did they consider to be acceptable ways to resolve the problem?
- What did they ultimately decide?

#### **Action Plan:**

- How did they carry out that plan?
- What obstacles did they encounter?

#### **Notice Successes:**

- How did it work out?
- What can be learned from their experience?
- What social action can be taken, by the class, in the class, in the school, community, etc. **NOTE:** *This is where the project-based learning can emerge and connects to **Audience-Focused Communication** pedagogy, below.*

#### **Pedagogies that can be linked into the instructional process:**

- Respectful Empathic Debate** -- asking students to argue from the perspective of all sides of an issue, especially ones they disagree with, perhaps in this case regarding specifics of how a situation was handled, the availability of the weapon(s) used, how various groups of individuals involved responded, before, during, and after the situation.
- Responsible Listening**-- having to summarize the positions one just heard
- Collaborative Creativity**—how else could the problem have been viewed? What other solutions might have been considered?
- Audience-Focused Communication** – how can students share what they have learned with others? Write a letter to a newspaper? Send something to the victims or relatives? Reach out to an elected official? Conduct a mock debate? Some other kind of social action?
- Reflective Improvement**-- reflection on what was learned from taking this kind of look at a current event



### Summary:

The STAT pedagogy is a method for students to take different perspectives, hear those they do not agree with, and work with peers with empathy, good communication skills, and problem solving to consider creative and constructive ways to address historical, current events, and current classroom or school-related issues. It is designed to fit in social studies/history/civics/current events instruction in middle schools.

### Next steps and forms of involvement\*:

\*Feel free to choose one or both forms of involvement. Note that there is no cost for being involved in any of the pilot efforts.

**Option 1: Pilot STAT and provide feedback:** While the focus of STAT has been its application to social studies classes, STAT can also be used as a format for clubs dealing with school problems, issues, climate, discipline, or current events, by student government, in Tier 2 discipline-related forums, and after-school and out-of-school programs. We invite all those interested in beginning implementation of STAT in middle schools to be in touch with us. We are still creating and revising new materials and we would be excited to share them with you and get feedback about your experiences, in a spirit of continuous improvement. Ongoing collaboration is the key to ultimate success!

**Option 2: Share your existing strategies for civic engagement/social action:** We also want to hear about the techniques you are already using to help students with social action, civic participation and engagement, and building respectful dialogue and collaboration in the elementary or high school grades. We will work with NJASCD to find ways to share those ideas, foster collaboration, and collectively help make the ideas and techniques better.

### Contact information:

For additional information regarding participating in piloting applications of STAT in middle school, or to share what you are doing at the elementary or high school levels, please email Maurice Elias at [RutgersMJE@AOL.com](mailto:RutgersMJE@AOL.com) or Samuel Nayman at [samuelnayman@gmail.com](mailto:samuelnayman@gmail.com). We look forward to hearing from you.