



CASE STUDY

First-of-Its-Kind Live SEL Student Coaching Makes Significant Impact at a Public High School



Introduction

Educators are prioritizing students' social and emotional growth like never before. They recognize that young people thrive academically when they feel their best, and comprehensive supports and services reduce the risk of a range of negative student outcomes—from mental illness to school failure.

They are also aware mental health problems among children and adolescents have risen in recent decades. Yet mental wellness is just one of many competing demands on schools' resources, which creates pressure to offer a quick fix and move on.

School counselors, who play a key role in helping students work through challenges, are outnumbered 424:1 on average. "The counselor-to-student ratio is ridiculous at most schools," said John Avritt, a Robin coach and Master Resiliency Trainer and Performance Expert at the R2 Performance Center at Fort Hood, Texas. "The counselors are task-saturated and overwhelmed. They can't stay up to date with what's going on with their students."

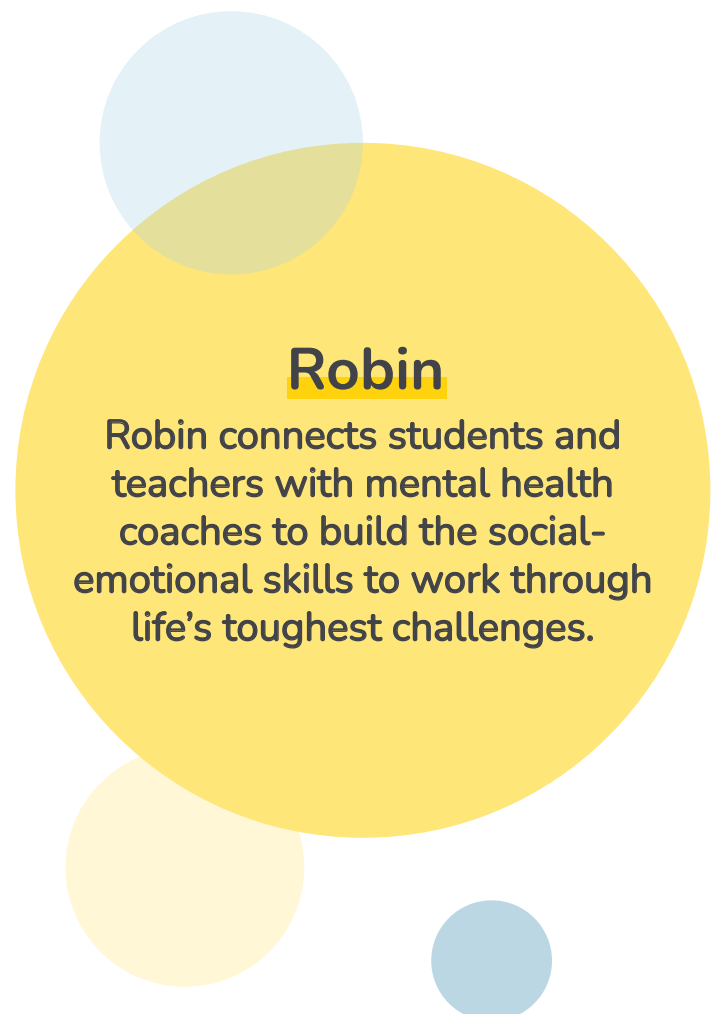
At Robin, we honor the courage and commitment it takes to truly pause and foster deep conversations with students. We partner with schools to support the development of healthy skills, habits, and mindsets – both in and out of the classroom.

Our pioneering live student coaching fosters the positive social, emotional, and behavioral skills and well-being of all students, regardless of whether they are at risk for mental health problems. It is a Tier 1 activity in that it promotes mental health and a positive educational climate schoolwide, helping the majority of students who do not necessarily need Tier 2 or 3 mental health supports.

The Challenge

When schools look for support to attend to the individual needs of students, the sheer number of options can be daunting. In addition, there's little consensus on how mental health at school should be defined and measured. That means finding an approach proven to deliver a long-lasting impact is not an easy feat.

In the summer of 2021, a premier high school for the development of talent in science, mathematics, and technology partnered with Robin for a month-long program that utilized a coaching and practice model to help students build the skills they need to face life's challenges.



Administrators placed a high value on offering a social-emotional learning program that would truly engage students. As a specialized public high school where admission is determined by placement on an entrance exam, it is dedicated to academic success, but its mission also includes facilitating each student's social and emotional growth and providing a supportive environment to a diverse student body.

For example, one of its existing initiatives is a program that utilizes both peer advisors and professional counselors to promote health education, pro-social bonding, and positive alternatives. Robin complements and elevates existing offerings like this, adding another dimension to comprehensive SEL programs and avoiding the risk of succumbing to a one-size-fits-all approach.

"A lot of social-emotional learning platforms and mental health nonprofits targeting students take a very tech-centric view," said Sonny Thadani, Robin Co-Founder and CEO. "But a lot of them lack any human connection – which is what young people crave."

"Human connection is at the core of everything we do at Robin," Thadani continued. Through live coaching events, SEL lessons and activities, and gamified 30-day challenges, students learn social and emotional concepts, openly express their feelings, connect with and support each other, and develop habits like expressing gratitude, pausing for mindfulness, and journaling.

While some may have balked in the past at the idea of live coaching, Thadani says as more adults within school ecosystems utilize coaches themselves, the higher their comfort level becomes and the more open they are to the idea of facilitating coaching for their students. Live coaching makes it easier for members of the school community to get past the stigma of talking about mental illness.

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"Sometimes I get so tired of hearing the word 'strong.' That's all I heard from my mother, my grandmother, my great-grandmother. But their idea of 'strong' was suppression. They didn't voice their emotions or what they were feeling. Being vulnerable is strength, and I want to show children that."



– Robin Coach
Nyeesha Williams

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"What made the event great for me was that everyone shared the negative things they said about themselves; it made me realize that I'm not the only one who tells myself negative things. I liked that we changed the negative thoughts into positive ones."

– Student



Robin's Innovative Solution

Social and emotional learning is typically taught in the classroom, both explicitly and embedded into other curriculum. Robin is the first to use a coaching model to teach students how to apply and practice skills such as:

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Responsible decision-making
- Relationship skills

Through sharing their own personal life-challenge stories, the coaches create a safe, supportive space where students can think and talk about their mental well-being. These coaches are accomplished leaders in their fields – including business, nursing, sports psychology, psychiatry, arts, and education – but also people who can build trust and connect with students to lead lively discussions.

After the high school decided to utilize the innovative Robin coaching and practice model, the two organizations collaborated closely to design two parallel experiences for students in three grade levels:

1. A Discovery Program for 9th graders: For four weeks, incoming freshmen received a live coaching experience early in the week, paired with a lesson delving more deeply into the same life challenge later in the week, and daily 5-minute online practice in a gamified format.
2. A coaching and reflection experience for 10th and 11th graders: Sophomores and juniors participated daily in viewing short coaching videos and writing a 5-minute response to prompt reflection on their learning.

For the Discovery Program with 9th graders, Robin incorporated these evidence-based techniques:

- **Four live group coaching events**, one each week from July 6-Aug. 2, 2021. Three were live virtual and one was live in person conducted by Scott Farber, Robin's Co-Founder and Head of Strategy and Growth.

Evidence-Based Techniques

Live group coaching

Life challenge lesson plans and activities



Gamified digital challenges for daily skill practice

Youth voice and engagement

- **Life challenge lesson plans and activities** that featured asynchronous videos of the Robin coaches to deepen understanding of skills students had already learned. These 3-minute videos from each coach are used as the basis for longer lesson plans, which include reading and writing prompts, and as separate short exercises emphasizing practice of the skills, mindsets, and tools students were taught.
- **A Mindfulness Challenge** in which more than 100 students participated. After the initial session with the live speaker/coach, students were asked to log in for 30 days in a row. The challenge was a fun, gamified experience that encouraged students to build mentally healthy habits.

The programs matched guidance from the Collaborative on Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). The multidisciplinary network recommends that school-wide implementation of social-emotional learning incorporate a systemic model that includes explicit and embedded lessons along with youth voice and engagement, adult social-emotional learning, and aligned community partnerships.

“Robin’s model isn’t just focusing on children,” explained Nyeeshia Williams, a Robin coach, clinical researcher, author, and women’s health expert. “They’re focusing on the parents and faculty as well.”

Importantly, this focus differs from the use of instructional coaching solely for educators. Robin’s replicable model uses local experts such as former educators, counselors, mental health coaches, award-winning authors, and social workers. In addition, Robin has developed a nationwide network of coaches with expertise in various social-emotional topics. **“Our coaches are real-life people coming in to talk about real-life topics such as how to calm your nerves when taking an important test or what to do when your parents are arguing,”** Thadani said.

Robin carefully vets coaches based on their openness and authenticity with young audiences during a detailed hiring process. “The worst thing you can do, even at the junior high level, is to underestimate them and ‘dumb it down,’” Avritt said. “If you do that, they have you where they want you. They will go down to that level. But kids will rise to meet you too. They want to be coached.”

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“This event was one of the first things that actually helped me relax and calmed me down.”

– Student

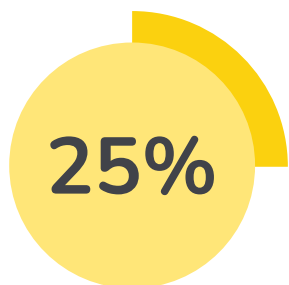
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“Robin works with our school to address our specific social-emotional learning needs and provides the best and most personable programs that really benefit our community.”

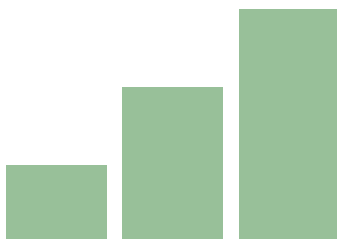
– Michael Parent, Ed.D,
Principal, Glen Rock Middle
and High School



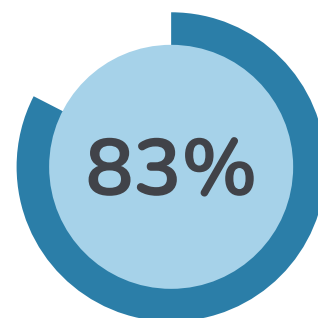
Three outcome areas of the Discovery Program



25% average increase
in scores on the
Connectedness Survey



Largest gains were
among children with the
lowest initial scores



83% of students were
“likely” or “very likely” to
use the skills taught

Programming Results

This high school’s Discovery Program was the first to implement and measure the effects of student coaching on social and emotional skills. The impact was measured by the Connectedness Survey, which assesses the degree to which students feel connected to others within their social and home environments and provides valuable insights into the growth of the community’s collective feeling of connection and belonging.

Increased levels of connectedness lead to lower psychological stress, including anxiety and lonelinessⁱ and are the foundation of the Robin effort to include human interaction with coachesⁱⁱ at the intersection of social-emotional learning and student mental wellness.

Results showed 25% increases in connectedness scores, with the largest gains among students who had initially scored the lowest. Connectedness Survey results from the 9th-grade students showed a significant increase in overall connection and well-being in relation to themselves, their families, their school, and their peers.

Overall quantitative results rose from 4.94 (areas for targeted improvement) to 5.45 (areas of strength) overall on a scale of 7.ⁱⁱⁱ



Discovery Program for 9th Graders	Pre-Program	Post-Program
Number of student responses	156	100
Average Connection Score	4.94	5.45
Students scoring above a 5	44.23%	64.96%
Students who were likely or very likely to use the skills taught	N/A	83%
Response to the statement “At my school, people care for one another.”	5.06	5.91
Response to the statement “I feel a sense of community at my school.”	5.28	6.10

Researchers also found that:

- More than 90% of students stated that they were “likely” or “very likely” to practice the skills in the Power of the Voice lesson from coach Marshall Davis Jones.
- Faculty liked the asynchronous social-emotional learning option for the sophomores and juniors, who used the video coaching library as part of an advisory activity and exit ticket for the day.
- Due to the number of students who requested to follow up afterward with the coaches, it was beneficial for Robin to set up a dedicated email: coaches@robin.com.

The qualitative results from the program were also resoundingly positive. “We heard from students that no one was what we at Robin call ‘sparking a conversation,’” Thadani said. “Our coaches were allowing them to be free to talk about something more emotional – which they might not have done in an assembly at school.”

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“I learned how to stay motivated and resilient when facing difficult situations.”

– Student

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“I really enjoyed the interactive aspect of the seminar! I think that it was a great way to help and introduce students and get rid of the awkwardness and apprehension! Thank you!”

– Student

What's Next

After the impressive results from the summer pilot, the high school has incorporated Robin into its social-emotional learning plans for the 2021-22 school year, an investment both in terms of financial resources and instructional minutes.

As part of Robin's long-term efforts to enable students to access its supports in a scalable way, it partnered with the widely used learning management system Canvas in the fall of 2021. The partnership makes it easier for students to go over Robin lessons anywhere they have access to their online Canvas courses.

Robin's leaders and coaches believe the time is right to shake up the paradigm and talk more frankly with students about mental wellness. "Out-of-the-box thinking is what we need right now," Avritt said. "When people see the amazing things this coaching model is capable of, they will want to do it too."



ⁱLee, R.M., Draper, M., and Lee, S. (2001). Social connectedness, dysfunctional interpersonal behaviors, and psychological distress: Testing a mediator model. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 48(3), 310-318. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.48.3.310>

ⁱⁱSezer, S. (2016). The Effects of Educational Coaching on Students' Academic Motivation, Error-Oriented Motivation and Educational Stress. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 2016(Special): 850-855.

ⁱⁱⁱIn scoring the Connectedness Scale, items are summed and the mean average is taken; a higher score indicates a greater connection. A score of 1-3 indicates areas for close attention and possible intervention. A score of 3.01-5 indicates areas for observation and targeted improvement. A score of 5.01-7 indicates areas of strength.