Mindfulness and Positivity Project (MPP)

An Independent Evaluation of Impact

Prepared by

Data-Driven Economic Strategies

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Executive Summary

The Mindfulness and Positivity Project (MPP) was developed by teachers, for teachers, in response to growing concerns around youth mental health and rising rates of suicidal ideation in the Pikes Peak region. The curriculum provides students with practical tools to build mindfulness, emotional awareness, stress-management skills, and healthy coping strategies within the classroom environment.

During the 2025–2026 school year, Data-Driven Economic Strategies (DDES) evaluated the impact of MPP among nearly 500 students across seven schools and five school districts. Overall, students participating in the curriculum demonstrated stronger improvements than comparison students across most measures of student well-being, suggesting that MPP contributed to meaningful gains in social-emotional development.

Key Findings

- **Students receiving MPP demonstrated greater improvement than comparison students** across the majority of survey measures.
- Program students outperformed comparison students in **6 of 7 outcome areas (or "domains")**, with the strongest gains in:
    - Mindful Awareness
    - Non-Judgmental Thinking/Self-Compassion
    - Perseverance
    - Stress and Anxiety Management
- Students reported that breathing exercises, journaling, and gratitude activities helped them feel calmer, more connected, and better able to manage their thoughts and emotions.
- Students participating in a **second semester of MPP demonstrated additional gains** in perseverance, connectedness, stress management, and non-judgmental thinking.
- **90% of teachers** reported they would recommend MPP to a peer and described the curriculum as an important tool for creating calmer, more positive classroom environments.

While mindfulness programming is not a standalone solution to the youth mental health crisis, MPP was intentionally designed as a preventative approach that helps students build emotional awareness, resilience, and healthy coping skills before challenges escalate into more serious concerns. Although broader domain-level changes were modest and not statistically significant, the consistent pattern of small positive gains across domains suggests that collectively, participating students (and teachers) are likely gaining an array of perspectives and coping skills that can meaningfully and positively impact mental health. The findings indicate that even a relatively short intervention can begin strengthening the protective factors that support student well-being, academic engagement, and long-term emotional success. These gains learned during formative years can lay the foundation for a lifetime of healthier emotional and social well-being. And healthy individuals translate to healthier communities overall.

Background

The Mindfulness and Positivity Project (MPP) was developed in response to growing concerns around youth mental health and rising rates of suicidal ideation in the Colorado Springs and Pikes Peak region over the last decade. Founded by teachers, for teachers, MPP was designed to provide educators with a practical, ready-made curriculum that helps students build mindfulness, emotional awareness, stress-management skills, and positive coping strategies within the classroom environment. The curriculum incorporates breathing and meditation exercises, journaling activities, gratitude practices, and lessons designed to help students better understand and manage their thoughts and emotions. As schools increasingly look for ways to support student well-being and resilience, programs like MPP aim to equip students with preventative social-emotional tools that can help strengthen coping skills, emotional regulation, and connectedness before challenges escalate into more serious mental health concerns.

This evaluation was designed to examine whether participation in the MPP curriculum was associated with measurable improvements in student mindfulness, emotional regulation, perseverance, connectedness, stress management, and overall social-emotional well-being. Drawing on established mindfulness and adolescent well-being frameworks, the study aimed to capture both immediate and longer-term changes in how students understand, manage, and respond to their thoughts, emotions, and relationships. **Overall, the findings suggest that students participating in the curriculum generally demonstrated stronger improvements than comparison students across multiple outcome areas, with particularly notable gains in mindful awareness, non-judgmental thinking, perseverance, and stress-management-related outcomes.** Together, these results provide early evidence that structured mindfulness and positivity practices may support meaningful growth in students' social-emotional skills and overall well-being within school settings.

Literature Review

To ensure the evaluation was grounded in established research, the survey questions were developed using several well-cited frameworks related to mindfulness and social-emotional learning. Survey questions were informed by the Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills (KIMS), which focuses on areas such as self-awareness, attention to emotions and physical sensations, and reducing self-judgment; the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-being, which measures perseverance, optimism, connectedness, engagement, and happiness; and competencies aligned with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework, including self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Together, these research-based frameworks helped ensure that the evaluation measured skills and outcomes closely connected to student well-being, emotional resilience, and social-emotional development.

Methods

While the survey was grounded in established research frameworks, it was also intentionally adapted to be developmentally appropriate and accessible for students in the survey population. The evaluation focused on several key components that aligned both with the goals of the curriculum and with broader social-emotional

learning research, including mindful awareness, optimism and positivity, connectedness, perseverance, stress and anxiety management, emotional regulation, and non-judgment/self-compassion. In addition to these broader well-being domains, the survey also included three questions specifically designed to capture student perceptions of core program activities, including breathing and meditation exercises, journaling and reflection activities, and gratitude-based exercises. Please see Appendix A for a mapping of survey questions to the broader evaluation categories.

The evaluation was designed to balance the need for a rigorous comparison group with participating schools' desire to provide students access to the curriculum. During fall 2025, classrooms were divided into program and control groups. Program classrooms received the first 24 MPP curriculum modules, while control classrooms continued with instruction as usual. Students in both groups completed pre-tests and post-tests at the beginning and end of the semester. Prior to conducting the primary analysis, baseline survey responses were reviewed to ensure that program and control groups were reasonably comparable across the major outcome areas at the start of the study.

This fall analysis served as the primary evaluation and compared student growth in program classrooms with growth in control classrooms that had not yet received the curriculum. In spring 2026, the design shifted so that all participating classrooms received the curriculum. Students in the original program group continued into a second set of 24 modules (which do not introduce new material but reinforce practices learned in the first 24 modules), while students in the original control group received the curriculum for the first time. This supplemental spring analysis therefore examined whether continued exposure to the curriculum was associated with additional gains above and beyond those observed among students experiencing the intervention for the first time. The visual below summarizes the evaluation design.

Methods: Evaluation Design

	Fall 2025 (Primary Analysis)	**Spring 2026** (Supplemental Analysis)
Program Group (MPP Intervention)	**First 24 modules**	**Second 24 modules**
Control Group	**Control: Instruction as usual**	**First 24 modules**

Pre-Tests and Post-Tests were administered at start and end of each semester for each group.

To ensure the analysis reflected a clean and comparable evaluation sample, several inclusion criteria were established prior to analysis. In partnership with the MPP team, it was determined that classrooms were required to complete at least 75% (18 modules) of the assigned curriculum modules to be included in the study. In addition, classrooms indicating prior exposure to the curriculum before the study period were excluded to ensure that all students entered the fall evaluation without previous MPP experience. Students were also required to complete both the pre-test and post-test surveys in order to be included in the analysis. Only classrooms and teachers that met all inclusion criteria for both survey periods were retained in the final evaluation sample for the primary analysis allowing for a consistent one-to-one comparison across time. After applying these criteria, **the final analytic sample for the fall 2025 primary analysis included nearly 500 students across seven schools representing five school districts**, with approximately 59% of students participating in program classrooms and 41% participating in control classrooms.

To estimate program-associated change, the evaluation used a difference-in-differences approach calculated as follows: {(Post Test Program Mean- Pre Test Program Mean) - (Post Test Control Mean – Pre Test Control Mean)}. This type of analysis helps account for other factors that may influence student well-being over time—such as seasonal changes, school environment, or normal developmental growth—by comparing changes in program students against changes observed in a similar control group receiving instruction as usual over the same period.

The spring difference-in-differences estimates the relative gain associated with continued curriculum exposure after accounting for the improvement that occurred with initial curriculum exposure. Negative values indicate that students receiving the curriculum for the first time demonstrated greater improvement than students receiving continued curriculum exposure. They do *not* mean the curriculum stopped working.

Results

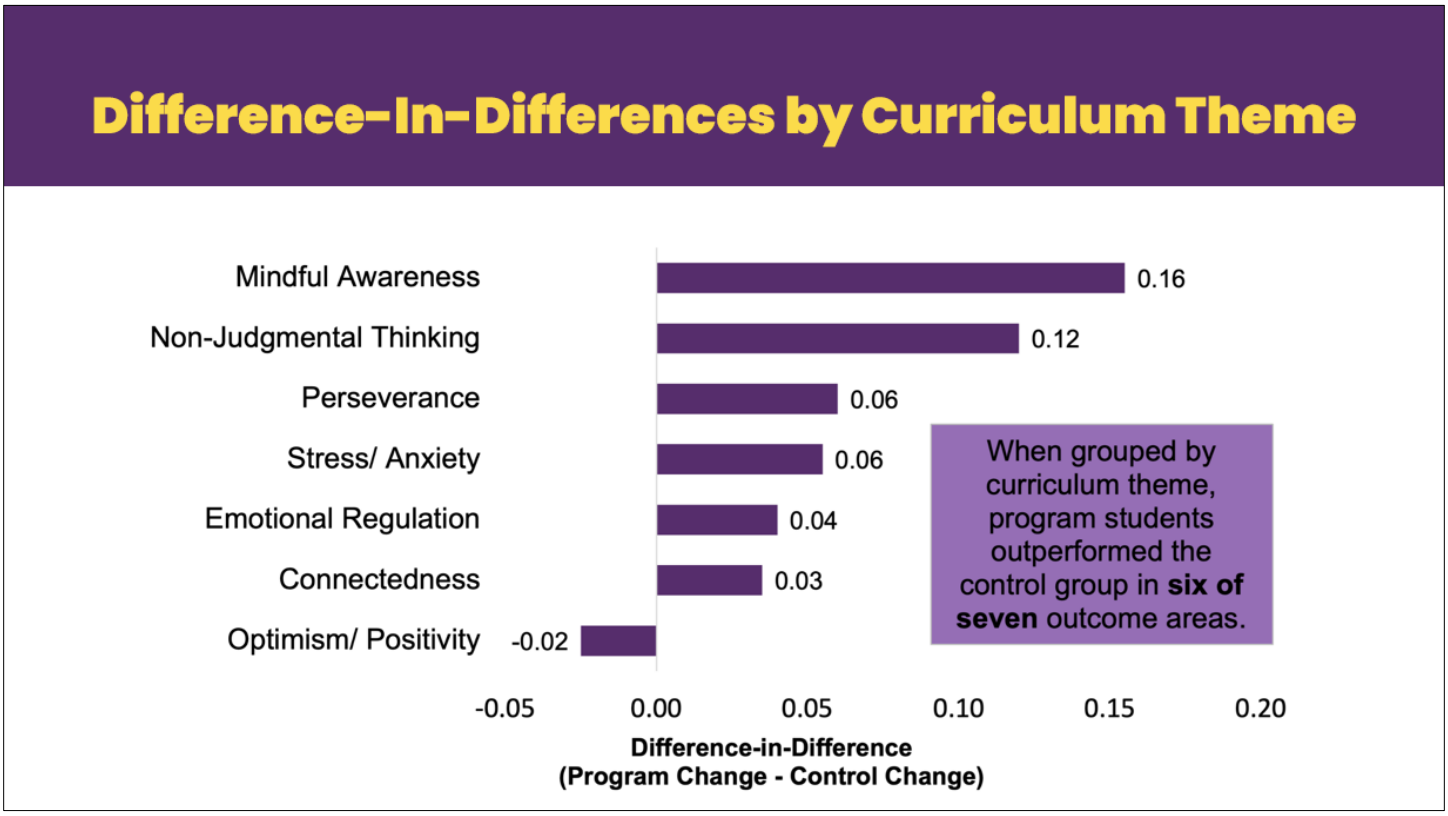
Student Quantitative Results

Overall, the results demonstrated a consistent pattern of greater improvement among program participants compared to control students across the majority of survey measures, suggesting that the positive differences observed throughout the evaluation are more likely reflective of a program-associated effect rather than random variation alone. Please see Appendix B for question-specific quantitative results.

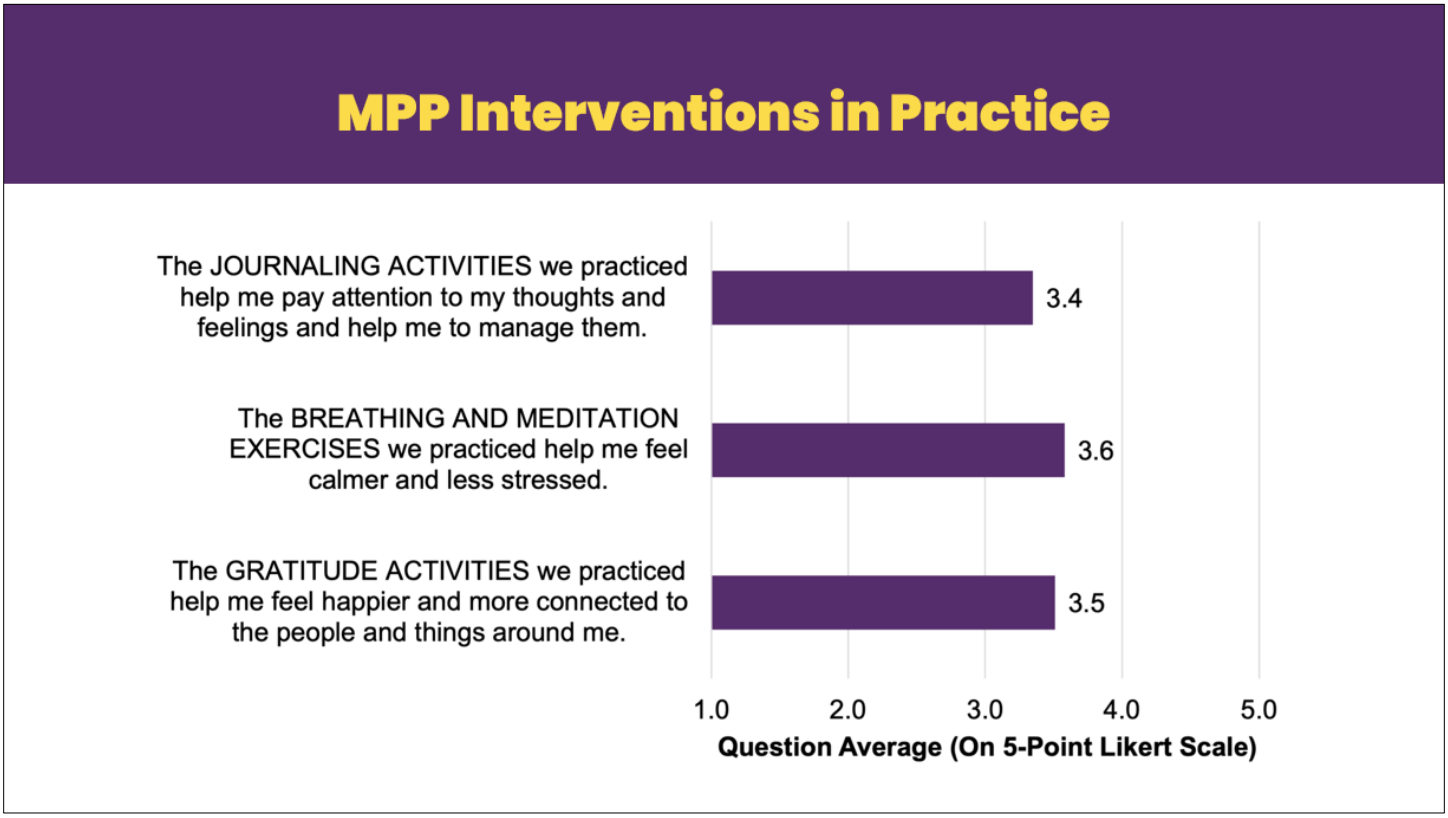
While many of the individual differences observed across domains were modest in magnitude and did not reach statistical significance at the domain level, this is common in school-based social-emotional interventions where change often occurs gradually, over a relatively short period of time, and across multiple interconnected skills rather than through a single large outcome. **Importantly, student well-being does not depend on any one factor in isolation. Skills such as emotional regulation, self-awareness, connectedness, perseverance, optimism, and stress management work together and reinforce one another over time.** As a result, the consistent pattern of positive movement across multiple domains may be more meaningful than the size or statistical significance of any single effect alone, particularly in a preventative intervention designed to build foundational habits over time.

When survey items were grouped into broader themes, **program students outperformed comparison students in six of seven outcome areas**. The strongest gains were observed in mindful awareness and non-judgmental

thinking, followed by perseverance and stress/anxiety-related outcomes. At the individual question level, several items showed stronger positive movement—including one statistically significant gain related to journaling as a self-awareness practice—suggesting the curriculum may be helping students build specific habits and skills that can accumulate into broader well-being over time. The visualization below summarizes these results by domain.

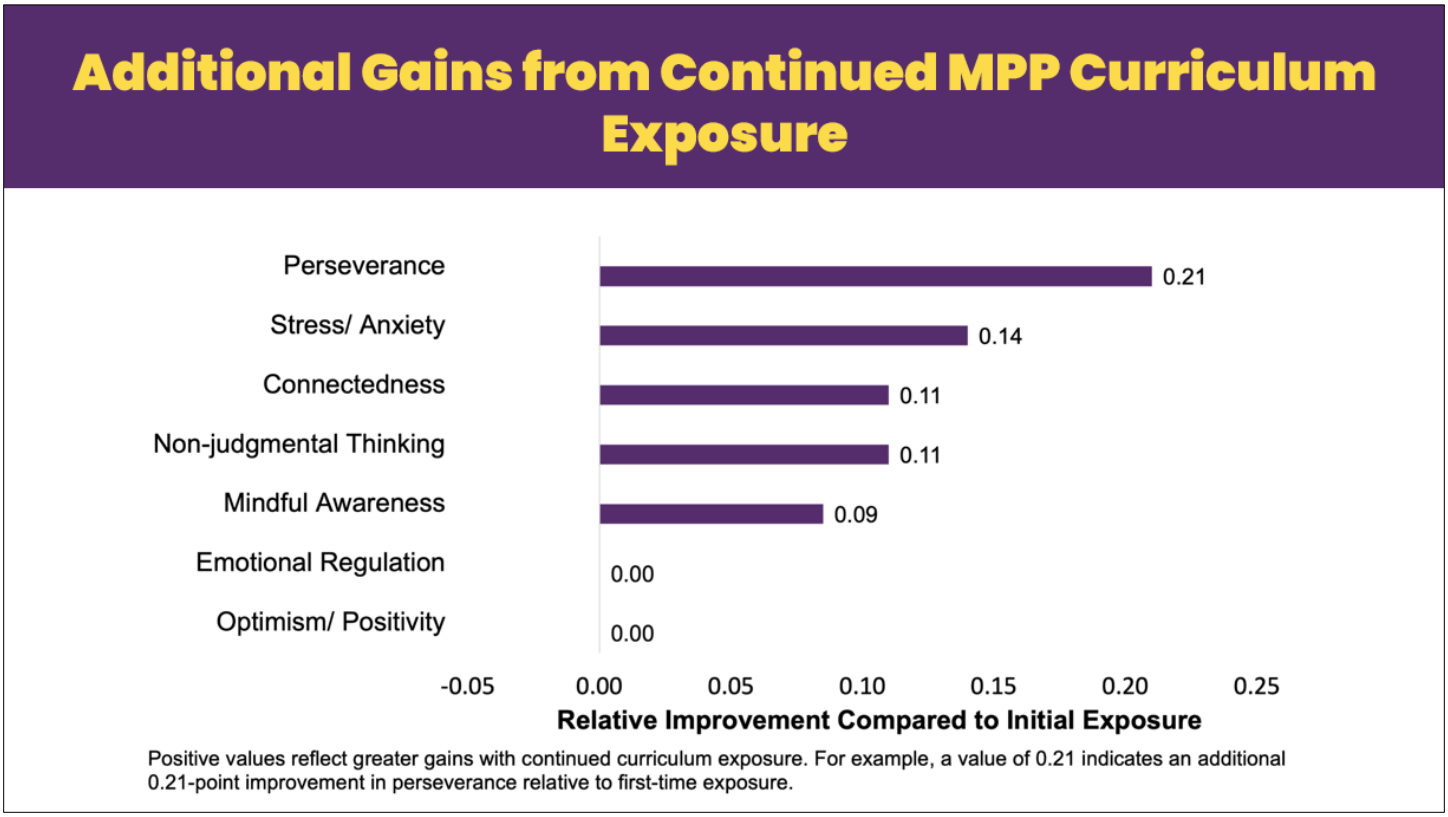


The following visual summarizes survey results for the questions regarding specific tactics taught in the MPP curriculum including the journaling activities, breathing/meditation exercises, and gratitude activities.



Some individual survey question responses around mindful awareness yielded slight negative effects. However, these findings are consistent with a phenomenon identified in the academic literature around mindfulness. As students become more mindful and self-aware, they may initially become more conscious of stress, tension, discomfort, or physical sensations that they previously ignored. In mindfulness research, increased awareness is often considered an important first step toward stronger emotional regulation and self-management. As a result, this type of increased awareness may temporarily offset or dampen some of the more immediately positive findings observed in other areas of student well-being, even while reflecting meaningful progress in mindfulness development.

The spring 2026 findings suggest that continued participation in the curriculum may provide additional benefits over time. **Students with continued curriculum exposure demonstrated additional gains in perseverance, stress management, connectedness, and non-judgmental thinking relative to students receiving the curriculum for the first time**. These findings suggest that mindfulness and social-emotional skills may strengthen gradually through repetition and sustained practice. (See Appendix C for question-specific quantitative results for spring 2026.) The visualization below shows these additional gains from continued MPP curriculum exposure.



Student Qualitative Results

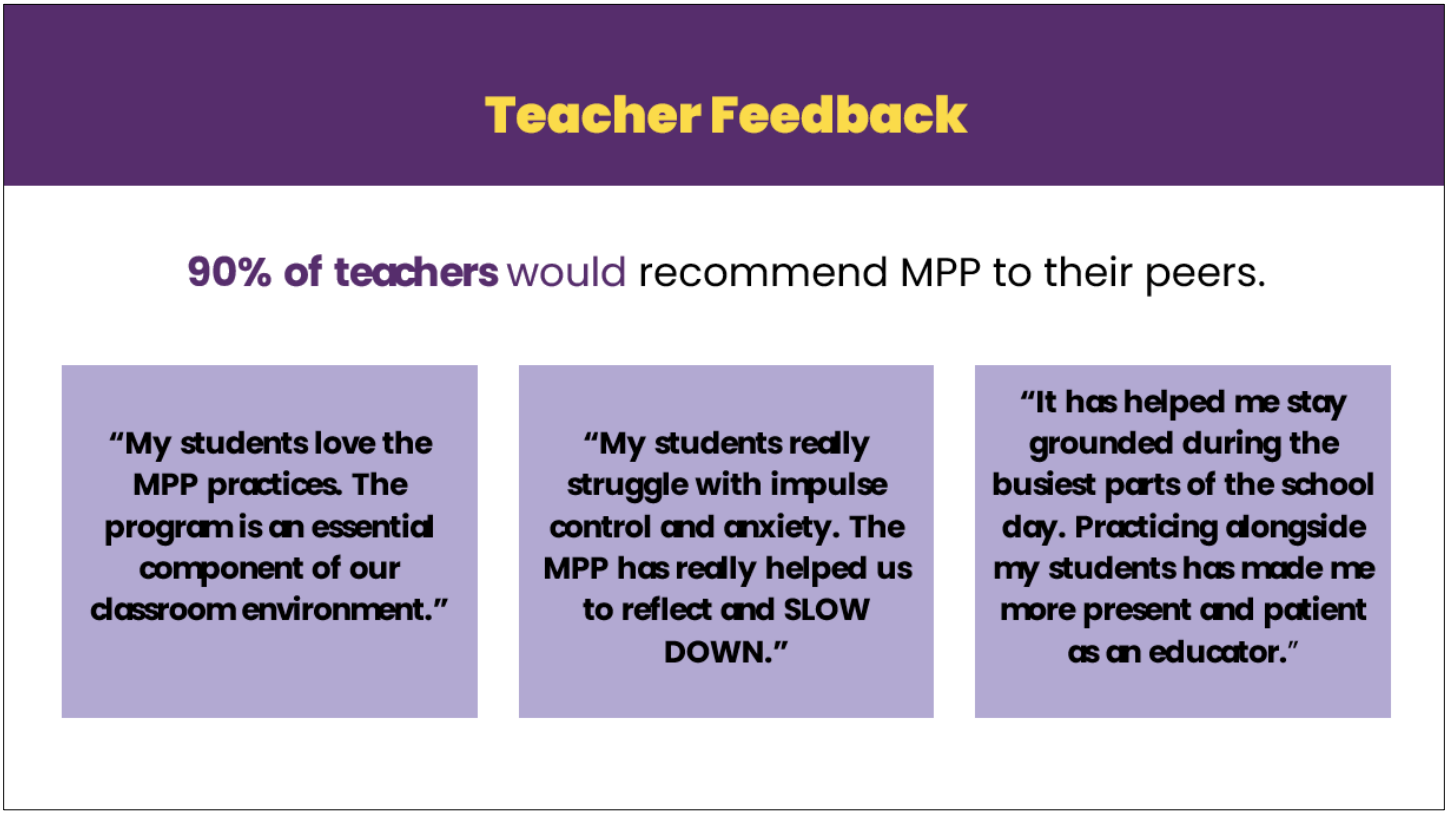
Importantly, student perception findings aligned closely with the broader quantitative results. Students generally reported that breathing and meditation activities helped them feel calmer and less stressed, gratitude activities helped them feel happier and more connected, and journaling activities helped them better understand and manage their thoughts and emotions. **These findings suggest that students not only demonstrated measurable improvements over time but also perceived the curriculum activities as personally meaningful and helpful.**



Constructive feedback primarily centered on students wanting *more* opportunities to engage with the program, including requests for additional journal writing space, longer meditation sessions, and more time dedicated to mindfulness activities during the school day. Some students also reported that they did not notice a major difference in themselves over the course of the semester. Given the relatively short duration of the intervention and the gradual nature of social-emotional skill development, this finding is not unexpected. Mindfulness and emotional regulation skills often strengthen over time through repeated practice and reinforcement (as seen in the spring 2026 results), and students may experience these changes at different rates depending on their prior experiences and individual needs.

Teacher Survey Results

Finally, in looking at teacher survey results, teacher feedback was overwhelmingly positive. An astonishing **90% of surveyed teachers (18 out of 20) reporting that they would recommend the Mindfulness and Positivity Project curriculum to a peer.** The MPP curriculum is unique in that it was created "by teachers, for teachers," and teachers practice mindfulness techniques *alongside* their students. Despite representing only approximately four hours of programming across a semester, it became an "essential component" of classroom routines because it created opportunities for students and teachers to slow down and reset during the school day. Teachers also reported noticing positive effects in how they themselves felt, which as a whole can contribute to a more positive and regulated classroom environment (see visualization below for example quotes). These observations closely aligned with both the quantitative findings and student feedback collected throughout the evaluation.



Why These Findings Matter

The findings from this evaluation suggest that the MPP curriculum may provide schools with a practical and meaningful approach for supporting student well-being and social-emotional development. Beyond the positive changes observed across multiple outcome areas, the evaluation also suggests that mindfulness-related skills may strengthen over time through repeated exposure and practice, highlighting the potential value of sustained implementation models within schools.

These findings are especially important within the broader context of growing youth mental health challenges nationally and within the Pikes Peak region. The United States now spends approximately $5.3 trillion annually on health care—roughly 18% of GDP—with mental health disorders ranking among the top ten health care spending categories nationally. At the same time, mental health challenges continue to contribute to lower workforce participation, higher rates of disability, and long-term disengagement over time (see visual below).

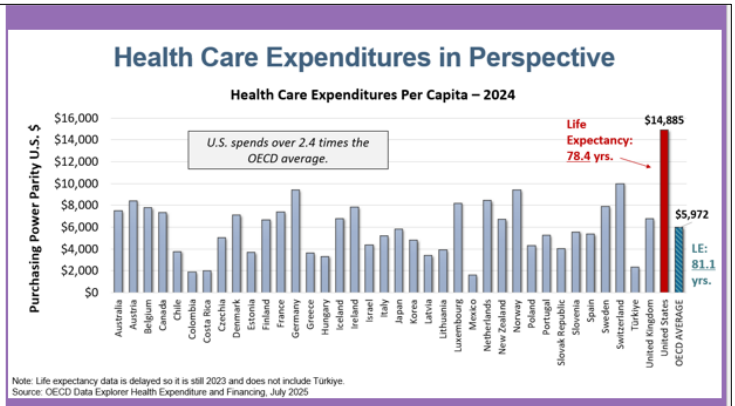
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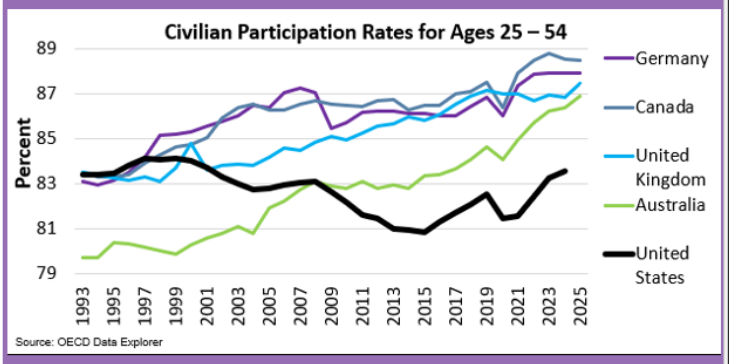
Highlights & Implications:

Improvements were **consistent** and **cumulatively,** all these improvements add up to overall better mental health and active adoption of coping mechanisms - after just **one semester** of the MPP intervention.

Stepping back as an economist:

1. U.S. spends twice the OECD average on health care
1. U.S. labor participation is very low compared to other developed countries (and MH is a driver of low or no labor participation as well as disability).





As such, poor mental health is not only a personal and familial challenge (or sometimes tragedy), but also an economic challenge precisely at a time where we need more working-age people who thrive in their jobs and in their lives. The U.S. has 11,000 new retirees a day, Medicare and Social Security comprise almost 40% of national expenditures, and we need a strong tax base to support the higher dependency ratio. Concomitantly, we want to reign in our high national health care expenditures as all spending has an opportunity cost (e.g., the more we spend on health care the less we have for K-12 education, early childhood education, etc..). In sum, there is a strong economic rationale for teaching mindfulness awareness and positive coping skills as well as the compelling human rationale.

While school-based mindfulness programming is not a standalone solution to the broader mental health crisis – from a personal or economic perspective - the findings suggest that helping students build emotional awareness, stress-management skills, self-compassion, perseverance, and healthy coping strategies may in aggregate play an important role in strengthening protective factors that support resilience and long-term well-being.

MPP was intentionally designed as a preventative rather than curative model, equipping students with practical tools and habits before challenges escalate into more serious and concerns requiring costly clinical intervention. The consistent positive findings across student surveys, teacher feedback, and classroom observations suggest that school-based mindfulness programming serves as a meaningful component of broader efforts to support student mental health and well-being.



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Appendix

Appendix A: Mapping of Broad Category to Survey Question

Question	Category
I have people in my life who care about the things that make me happy, sad, or angry.	Connectedness
I care about the people in my life.	Connectedness
I can calm myself down when my emotions get big.	Emotional Regulation
I can identify and name what I am feeling.	Emotional Regulation
I take slow, deep breaths to help myself stay calm and focused.	Emotional Regulation
I notice what I feel in my body, such as my breath, my temperature, or pain.	Mindful Awareness
I pay attention to my environment, such as sounds, temperature, and light.	Mindful Awareness
I think about what I'm grateful for.	Mindful Awareness
I write in a journal to help me pay attention to my thoughts and feelings.	Mindful Awareness
I am kind to myself and avoid judging myself.	Non-judgmental Thinking
I am kind to others and avoid judging others.	Non-judgmental Thinking
I feel excited about my day when I wake up in the morning.	Optimism/ Positivity
I feel happy during most of the day.	Optimism/ Positivity
I finish the work and projects that I start.	Perseverance
I keep trying my best even when there are challenges.	Perseverance
I feel relaxed and calm at school.	Stress/ Anxiety
I feel relaxed and calm at home.	Stress/ Anxiety

Appendix B: Fall 2025 Question-Specific Difference-In-Differences Results

Question	Category	DiD Result*
I care about the people in my life.	Connectedness	-0.02
I have people in my life who care about the things that make me happy, sad, or angry.	Connectedness	0.09
I can identify and name what I am feeling.	Emotional Regulation	-0.03
I can calm myself down when my emotions get big.	Emotional Regulation	0.15
I take slow, deep breaths to help myself stay calm and focused.	Emotional Regulation	0.00
I think about what I'm grateful for.	Mindful Awareness	0.25

I write in a journal to help me pay attention to my thoughts and feelings.	Mindful Awareness	0.49
I notice what I feel in my body, such as my breath, my temperature, or pain.	Mindful Awareness	-0.17
I pay attention to my environment, such as sounds, temperature, and light.	Mindful Awareness	0.05
I am kind to myself and avoid judging myself.	Non-judgmental Thinking	0.24
I am kind to others and avoid judging others.	Non-judgmental Thinking	0.00
I feel happy during most of the day.	Optimism/ Positivity	-0.06
I feel excited about my day when I wake up in the morning.	Optimism/ Positivity	0.01
I keep trying my best even when there are challenges.	Perseverance	0.03
I finish the work and projects that I start.	Perseverance	0.09
I feel relaxed and calm at home.	Stress/ Anxiety	0.11
I feel relaxed and calm at school.	Stress/ Anxiety	0.00

**Difference-in-differences (DiD) results represent the additional improvement among MPP students beyond the improvement observed in the control group. For example, a result of 0.49 indicates that MPP students improved nearly half a point more (on a 5-point scale) than comparison students.*

Appendix C: Spring 2026 Question-Specific Difference-In-Difference Results

Question	Category	Spring DiD Results*
I care about the people in my life.	Connectedness	0.05
I have people in my life who care about the things that make me happy, sad, or angry.	Connectedness	0.17
I can identify and name what I am feeling.	Emotional Regulation	-0.02
I can calm myself down when my emotions get big.	Emotional Regulation	-0.10
I take slow, deep breaths to help myself stay calm and focused.	Emotional Regulation	0.12
I think about what I'm grateful for.	Mindful Awareness	0.08
I write in a journal to help me pay attention to my thoughts and feelings.	Mindful Awareness	-0.05
I notice what I feel in my body, such as my breath, my temperature, or pain.	Mindful Awareness	0.10
I pay attention to my environment, such as sounds, temperature, and light.	Mindful Awareness	0.21
I am kind to myself and avoid judging myself.	Non-judgmental Thinking	0.18
I am kind to others and avoid judging others.	Non-judgmental Thinking	0.04
I feel happy during most of the day.	Optimism/ Positivity	-0.01
I feel excited about my day when I wake up in the morning.	Optimism/ Positivity	0.01
I keep trying my best even when there are challenges.	Perseverance	0.17
I finish the work and projects that I start.	Perseverance	0.25
I feel relaxed and calm at home.	Stress/ Anxiety	-0.09
I feel relaxed and calm at school.	Stress/ Anxiety	0.37



** Spring 2026 Difference-In-Differences (DiD) results represent the additional benefit of continued curriculum exposure beyond the improvement associated with first-time participation. For example, a result of 0.37 indicates that students with continued exposure improved an additional 0.37 points (on a 5-point scale) beyond the gains associated with initial curriculum exposure. Negative values do not indicate that the curriculum stopped working; they indicate that students receiving MPP for the first time improved more during that semester than students with continued exposure.*