

# The Mood Meter Project: A practical tool helping children in the South Bronx to feel psychologically safe.

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Navigating adolescent development is challenging for children. There are physiological and psychological growth spurts that can be emotionally distressing and difficult to process and communicate. A case study of a small group of elementary school students in the South Bronx is using a new approach to address these challenges.





Hunts Point is geographically located in the South Bronx and its residents experience some of the highest poverty and low high school graduation rates in New York City. Research shows that children living in poverty are more likely to experience adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and to have negative health, education, and well-being outcomes (Felitti, Anda, Nordenberg, & Williamson, 1998). ACEs are “potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years)” (CDC, 2024) and can include experiencing or witnessing violence in the home, having a family member die or be incarcerated or living with a parent who struggles with substance abuse or mental health.


With the support of an innovative mental health program rooted in research about trauma and the developing brain, a group of children in Hunts Point, an area with the highest rates of psychological distress in New York City, are being equipped with new strategies to manage their feelings. Frequent exposure to adversity affects brain development. In turn, this negatively impacts attention, memory, language, decision-making, and self-regulation, key markers for academic success and performance (Siegel, 2021).

The Mood Meter Project is an integrative pediatric mental health model that creates psychological safety in a child’s learning environment and helps develop internal states of calm and ‘centeredness’. The program helps students ages 10 to 14 to become aware of their own needs and feelings, to self-advocate and to build their regulation behaviors and the language to communicate with peers and adults in the school community. Children between the ages of 10 and 14 are most likely to experience mental health disorders, especially anxiety and depression (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2024). The Mood Meter is a unique science-informed diagnostic tool that empowers students to understand how they are feeling and learn how their brains and bodies respond to trauma.

In partnership with the Hunts Point Alliance for Children and operating out of PS48 The Joseph Drake School, the only public elementary school in Hunts Point, the Mood Meter Project started in March 2023 and reached 95 fifth-grade students in its first year. Each day, students completed the Mood Meter screener, which was administered electronically using Google Forms.


The Mood Meter is divided into four quadrants: blue, red, yellow, and green, each describing and dealing with a different emotional state, ranging from sleepy, grouchy, or sick to brave, centered, and relaxed.


How do you feel today?			
Blue	Red	Yellow	Green
<small>FRANKIE THE FRONTAL LOBE</small> 	<small>FRANKIE THE FRONTAL LOBE</small> 	<small>FRANKIE THE FRONTAL LOBE</small> 	<small>FRANKIE THE FRONTAL LOBE</small> 
Sleepy Grouchy Sick	Upset Irritated Furious	Concerned Nervous Overwhelmed	Brave Centered Relaxed



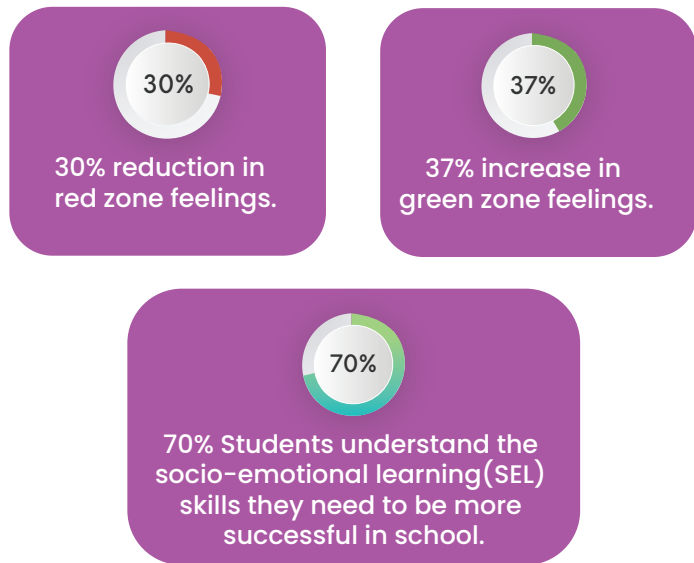
The Mood Meter quadrants identify whether students are experiencing emotions that can impact key developmental assets vital for academic success and help them to recognize and name their moods. A team of social workers working on site then analyzes responses and examines the data to determine which students need to be triaged. The triage process consists of a multi-layered intervention whereby students are asked questions that correspond to each quadrant. For example, students who select the blue quadrant are asked about their dietary and sleep habits. The process also involves skill-building exercises that help students learn and practice three self-regulation strategies: Box Breathing, the 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Method, and Progressive Muscle Relaxation.

The Mood Meter has impacted the Hunts Point community and PS 48 in several positive ways. Survey results from the first year showed that 71% of students use breathing techniques to regulate their feelings. The program has also helped alleviate pressure on educators who are working in an under-resourced area. Program surveys demonstrate that 100% of educators would recommend the program, which they describe as “helpful, easy, and kid-friendly” (Mood Meter Survey, 2022).

  
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The Mood Meter officially launched during the 2021–2022 school year at MS581 in Brooklyn, New York with 169 middle school students across grades 6 to 8. Students who participated in the program reported a gradual but significant reduction in red responses between September (40.38%) and May (10.86%). These results indicate that students felt less upset, irritated, or furious as the year progressed, and felt braver, more centered, or relaxed at the end of the school year. In total, the 2020–2021 participants experienced a 30% reduction in red zone feelings and a 37% increase in green zone feelings, on average, after participating in the Mood Meter program.



Post-program survey results also demonstrated that 70% of participants better understood their feelings, the way their brain works, and the socio-emotional learning (SEL) skills they needed to be more successful in school after completing the Mood Meter program.

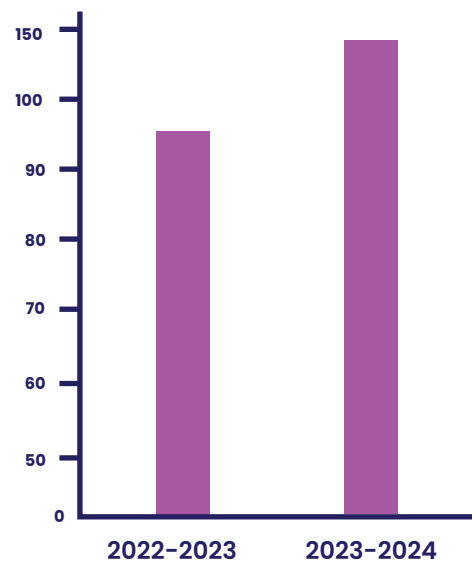
According to the School Pulse Panel (SPP) of the National Center for Education Statistics, a study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that out of 830 American public schools surveyed, 69% reported an increase in students seeking mental health services in particular for depression, anxiety and trauma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Additionally, due to the increased psychological stressors caused by the pandemic, the United States Preventive Services Task Force strongly recommends that children ages 8 to 18 be screened regularly for anxiety disorders and depression, the two most common mental health disorders among children and teenagers (American Medical Association, 2022).

The Mood Meter Project was born out of a practical need to address growing anxiety and depression in school and a goal to transform mental health services for students living in neighborhoods with a high rates of adverse childhood experiences and limited access to mental health practitioners.

### The program’s main objectives are to:

- 1: Increase feelings of psychological safety among students at risk of developing mental health disorders, especially those living in under-resourced communities.
- 2: Increase access to trained social workers and educators that understand trauma and adolescent brain development.
- 3: Eliminate punitive approaches like over policing and over disciplining often administered in under-resourced schools.
- 4: Decrease the activation of school-based crisis intervention teams and the need for clinical/emergency mental health care.

Given its early successes, the Mood Meter Project at PS48 has expanded to fourth and fifth grade students and is expected to reach 140 children during the 2023–2024 school year. The program material was also translated into Spanish to meet the dynamic language needs of our South Bronx students.



The positive feedback the program has received from educators and students indicates that the Mood Meter is helping children in the South Bronx to feel psychologically safe and improving the school’s response to their mental health needs. For example, students reported the Mood Meter “improves their day” and “helps them calm down” (Mood Meter Survey, 2023). While the program is still in its infancy, the overwhelmingly positive reception from students and educators is promising.

The Mood Meter Project aims to reach 15,000 students in the South Bronx by 2030. This ambitious goal is vital for children at critical stages of brain development and would help redesign a healthcare system that can better respond to children and as they cope with and recover from trauma.

## About the Author

Natasha A. Atkins, MSW, MA is a non-profit executive and award-winning social worker committed to transforming mental health care for K-12 students. She is the creator of the Mood Meter Project, a mental health program for middle school students. Natasha is also the pioneer of neuro-trauma-informed social work - a branch of study that builds awareness of the neurobiological effects of trauma on the brain across the lifespan. Natasha received her MSW from NYU ('18), MA from Teachers College, Columbia University ('15), and BA from SUNY Purchase ('02). She completed five years of postgraduate studies in neuroscience, education, and mental health and is completing her doctorate in behavioral health at Arizona State University. To sample the Mood Meter [click here](#).

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