

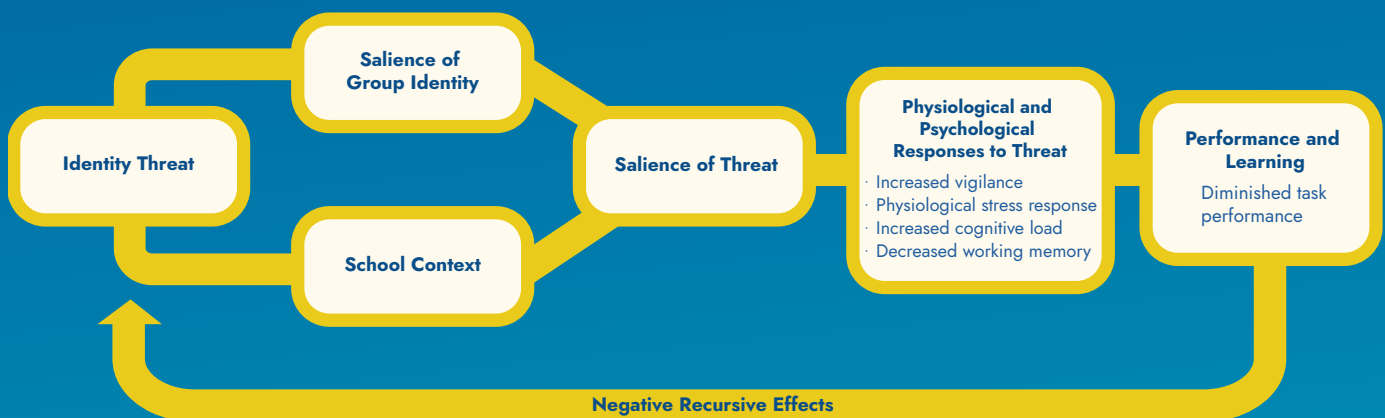
Self-Affirmation: A Powerful Tool for Addressing Stereotype Threat

THE IMPACT OF STEREOTYPE THREAT

Stereotype threat is the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about a group to which you belong. Stereotypes and their associated threats can be based on race, gender, or other group membership. Among Black and Latinx students, a major manifestation of stereotype threat is the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about the academic ability and performance of their racial or ethnic groups (Steele & Aronson, 1995). A meta-analysis of more than 300 laboratory and field studies examining data from nearly 20,000 students found that stereotype threat degrades Black and Latinx students' performances on standardized tests by approximately one fifth of a standard deviation (Walton & Spencer, 2009), suggesting that it can account for approximately a quarter to a third of the Black–White and Latinx–White achievement gaps.

THE CYCLE OF STEREOTYPE THREAT

Stereotype threat leads to poorer academic performance through a myriad of psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses, including stress, anxiety, decreased working memory, and increased vigilance to identity threat cues (Schmader & Beilock, 2012; Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008). In short, the fear of confirming negative stereotypes significantly increases evaluative anxiety and distracts from learning and/or performing academic tasks.

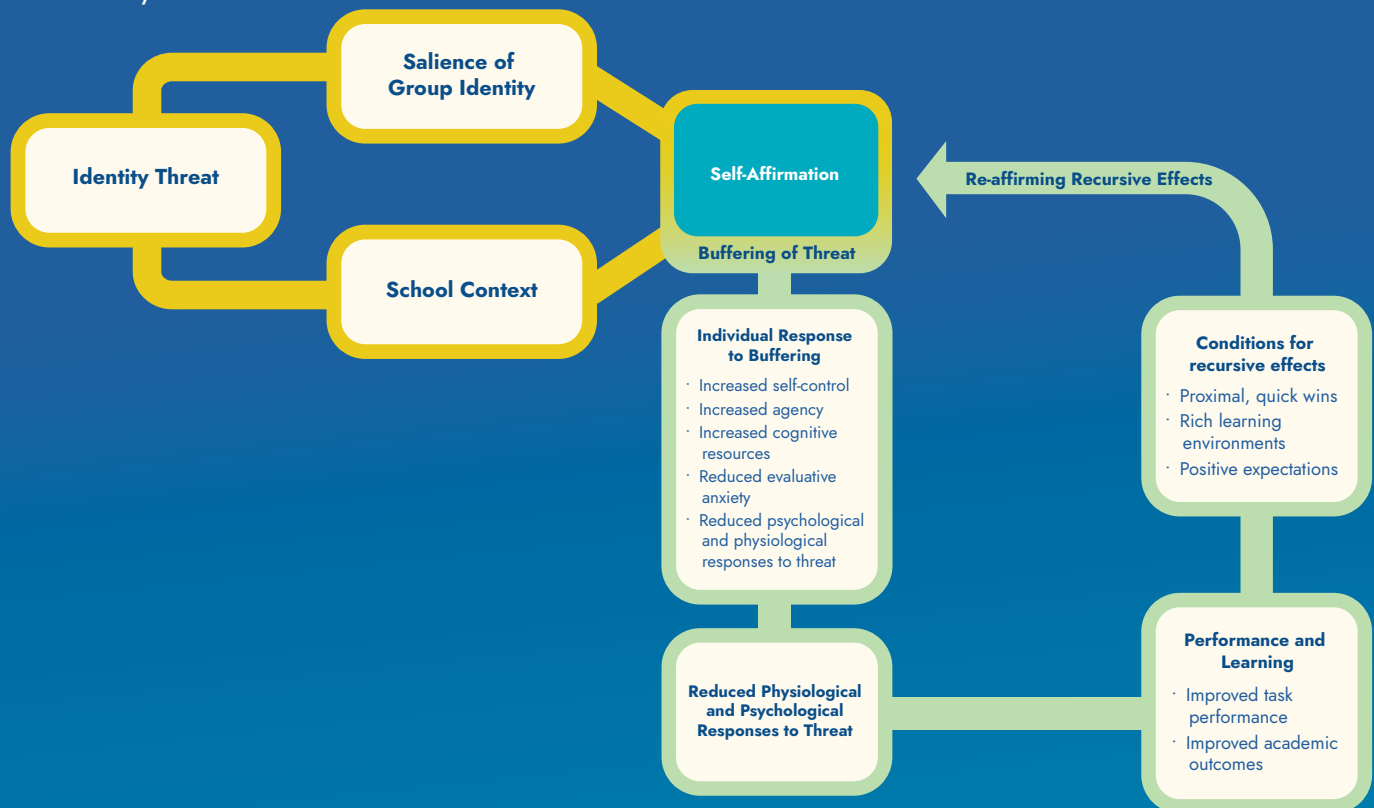


Adapted from: Hanselman, P., Bruch, S., Gamoran, A., & Borman, G. (2014). Threat in context: School moderation of the impact of social identity threat on racial/ethnic achievement gaps. *Sociology of Education*, 87(2), 106–124, and Borman, G. D. (2017). Advancing values affirmation as a scalable strategy for mitigating identity threats and narrowing national achievement gaps. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(29), 7486–7488.

INTERRUPTING THE CYCLE: SELF-AFFIRMATIONS

A growing body of research, including multiple randomized controlled trials (RCTs), suggests that **self-affirmation (SA)**, an intervention aimed at reducing stereotype threat, can significantly mitigate its effects on academic outcomes, and generate significant improvements in grade point average (GPA) and test scores.¹

Self-affirmation can drive a positive, recursive cycle that leads to improved academic outcomes through fostering a broadened sense of self and identity, reduced anxiety, increased cognitive focus, improved engagement in evaluative tasks, and/or proximal quick wins, such as better test grades. These then generate increased success and increased positive feedback, generating and sustaining a positive, recursive cycle.²



Adapted from: Borman, G. D. (2013, March). *An effort to close achievement gaps at scale through self-affirmation*. Paper presented at the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness Spring 2013 Conference, Washington, D, and Borman, G. D. (2017). Advancing values affirmation as a scalable strategy for mitigating identity threats and narrowing national achievement gaps. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(29), 7486–7488.

Moreover, when implemented in middle grades, these effects appear to grow over time, ultimately resulting in substantial reductions in racial achievement gaps and significant improvements in high school graduation rates among Black and Latinx students.³

¹ Wu, Spreckelsen, & Cohen (2021); Borman (2017); Liu et al. (2021); Yeager & Walton (2011).

² Borman (2017); Borman et al. (2021); Cohen et al. (2009); Cohen & Sherman (2014).

³ Borman (2017); Borman et al. (2021); Cohen et al. (2009); Cohen & Sherman (2014).

WHAT DOES A SELF-AFFIRMATION ACTIVITY LOOK LIKE?

One self-affirmation intervention consists of a series of 15 to 20-minute writing exercises in which students are asked to reflect on and write about meaningful personal values unrelated to school, such as family, friends, music, or sports. The assignments are facilitated by classroom teachers four times during the school year, with the timing aligned to critical moments for students such as the beginning of the school year and during the days just prior to stressful evaluative events, such as high-stakes tests or final exams.⁴

Writing Activity: What are your personal values?

Please read this list of personal values and think about each of the values. Then circle the two values that are MOST important to you. We understand that all of these values may be important to you. Even if you feel that many of the values are important, please pick only TWO or THREE of them to circle.

The most important values to me are: (circle two or three)

- » Enjoying Sports
- » Being Good at Art
- » Being Creative
- » Being Independent
- » Living in the Moment (or Enjoying Today)
- » Belonging to a Social Group (such as your community, racial group, or school club)
- » Listening to Music or Playing Music
- » Following Politics or Government
- » Being with Friends or Family
- » Being Religious
- » Having a Sense of Humor

Writing Prompt: Look at the things you picked as most important to you. Think about times when these things were very important to you. Write a few sentences about why and how these things are **important to you**. Focus on your thoughts and feelings, and don't worry about spelling or how well written it is.

⁴ Cohen et al. (2006); Cohen et al. (2009); Cook et al. (2012); Sherman et al. (2013).

POSITIVE OUTCOMES OF SELF-AFFIRMATION INTERVENTIONS FOR BLACK AND LATINX STUDENTS IN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS

In multiple studies, self-affirmation interventions in middle school have shown positive impacts on academic outcomes among Black and Latinx students.

Implementations of the self-affirmation intervention during the 7th grade has been shown to:

- Reduce the downward trajectory in grades, improving GPA among 7th grade Black students by 0.24 grade points (compared to the control group of students who did not have the intervention)⁵
- Reduce a downward trajectory and improve GPA by 0.41 grade points among low-achieving 7th grade Black students (compared to the control group of students who did not have the intervention)⁶
- Reduce the Black–White and Latinx–White GPA gap by 40%⁷ (compared to the control group of students who did not have the intervention)
- In addition, GPA effects among Black and Latinx students persisted and grew over time from the 7th through the 12th grade⁸

Effects on High School Courses:

- Self-affirmation increased the percentage of Black and Latinx students who enrolled in a “college track” in high school rather than a “remedial track” from 8% to 44%⁹

Effects on Graduation Rates:

- Self-affirmation improved Black and Latinx student graduation rates, cutting the Black–White on-time graduation rate gap from 18% to 9%¹⁰

Effects on Disciplinary Actions:

- Self-affirmation cut suspensions and “being sent to the office” among Black students in half, reducing the Black–White suspension gap by 67%¹¹

⁵ Cohen et al. (2009)

⁶ Cohen et al. (2009).

⁷ Cohen et al. (2009); Borman et al. (2021).

⁸ Borman (2017).

⁹ Goyer et al. (2017).

¹⁰ Borman et al. (2021).

¹¹ Borman et al. (2021).

REFERENCES

- Aronson, J., & McGlone, M. S. (2009). Stereotype and social identity threat. In T. D. Nelson (Ed.), *Handbook of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination* (pp. 153–178). Psychology Press.
- Borman, G. D. (2017). Advancing values affirmation as a scalable strategy for mitigating identity threats and narrowing national achievement gaps. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *114*(29), 7486–7488. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1708813114>
- Borman, G. D., Choi, Y., & Hall, G. J. (2021). The impacts of a brief middle-school self-affirmation intervention help propel African American and Latino students through high school. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *113*(3).
- Borman, G. D., Grigg, J., Rozek, C. S., Hanselman, P., & Dewey, N. A. (2018). Self-affirmation effects are produced by school context, student engagement with the intervention, and time: Lessons from a district-wide implementation. *Psychological Science*, *29*(11), 1773–1784. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797618784016>
- Borman, G. D., Pyne, J., Rozek, C. S., & Schmidt, A. (2021, September). A replicable identity-based intervention reduces the black-white suspension gap at scale. *American Educational Research Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312211042251>
- Cohen, G. L., Garcia, J., Apfel, N., & Master, A. (2006). Reducing the racial achievement gap: A social-psychological intervention. *Science*, *313*(5791), 1307–1310. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1128317>
- Cohen, G. L., Garcia, J., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Apfel, N., & Brzustoski, P. (2009). Recursive processes in self-affirmation: Intervening to close the minority achievement gap. *Science*, *324*(5925), 400–403. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1170769>; Link to What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) review: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/QuickReview/selfaffirm_020910.pdf
- Cohen, G. L., & Sherman, D. K. (2014). The psychology of change: Self-affirmation and social psychological intervention. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *65*, 333–371. <https://doi-org.udel.idm.oclc.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115137>
- Cook, J. E., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Garcia, J., & Cohen, G. L. (2012). Chronic threat and contingent belonging: Protective benefits of values affirmation on identity development. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *102*(3), 479–496.
- Hanselman, P., Bruch, S., Gamoran, A., & Borman, G. (2014). Threat in context: School moderation of the impact of social identity threat on racial/ethnic achievement gaps. *Sociology of Education*, *87*(2), 106–124. <https://doi-org.udel.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0038040714525970>
- Liu, S., Liu, P., Wang, M., & Zhang, B. (2021). Effectiveness of stereotype threat interventions: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *106*(6), 921.
- Parker Goyer, J., Garcia, J., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Binning, K. R., Cook, J. E., Reeves, S. L., Apfel, N., Taborsky-Barba, S., Sherman, D. K., & Cohen, G. L. (2017, July). Self-affirmation and the path to college. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *114*(29), 7594–7599.

- Schmader, T., & Beilock, S. L. (2012). An integration of processes that underlie stereotype threat. In T. Schmader & M. Inzlicht (Eds.), *Stereotype threat: Theory, process, and application*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Schmader, T., Johns, M., & Forbes, C. (2008). An integrated process model of stereotype threat effects on performance. *Psychological Review*, *115*(2), 336–356. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.115.2.336>
- Sherman, D., Hartson, K. A., Binning, K. R., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Garcia, J., Taborsky-Barba, S., Tomassetti, S., Nussbaum, A. D., & Cohen, G. L. (2013). Deflecting the trajectory and changing the narrative: How self-affirmation affects academic performance and motivation under identity threat. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *104*(4), 591–618. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031495>
- Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*(5), 797–811. <http://dx.doi.org.udel.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.5.797>
- Walton, G. M., & Spencer, S. J. (2009). Latent ability: Grades and test scores systematically underestimate the intellectual ability of negatively stereotyped students. *Psychological Science*, *20*(9), 1132–1139. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02417.x>
- Wu, Z., Spreckelsen, T. F., & Cohen, G. L. (2021). A meta-analysis of the effect of values affirmation on academic achievement. *Journal of Social Issues*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12415>
- Yeager, D. S., & Walton, G. M. (2011). Social-psychological interventions in education: They're not magic. *Review of Educational Research*, *81*(2), 267–301. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311405999>



Citation: Snipes, J., & Jacobson, A. (2021). *Self-Affirmation: A Powerful Tool for Addressing Stereotype Threat* (REL 2022–123). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

This product was prepared under Contract ED-IES-17-C-0012 by Regional Educational Laboratory West, administered by WestEd. The content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.