

Introduction: Nothing Succeeds Like Failure

Social and emotional learning (SEL) teaches children to recognize and understand their emotions, feel empathy, make decisions, and build and maintain relationships. Now part of the educational mainstream, these “soft skills” are shown to yield hard gains: In a recent [meta-analysis](#) of over 200 studies involving 270,000 K-12 students, researchers found that school-based SEL programs produced notable long-term academic benefits, including higher achievement test scores, stronger GPAs, and increased graduation rates. Other [research](#) showed these gains to hold well after SEL programs had ended. Based on landmark studies of [student autonomy](#) and [motivation](#), we now understand that focusing entirely on *performance* – whether grades or test scores – severely diminishes the joy and desire of learning. A complete education must also develop *performance mindset* – the set of beliefs, attitudes, and habits that help students succeed both in and out of the classroom.

For this, nothing succeeds like failure. Children learn to thrive as they confront “[desirable difficulties](#),” the small failures that accrue when the stakes are low and the potential for emotional and cognitive growth is high. Taking calculated risks and rising to overcome them hands students early character lessons in grit, curiosity, determination, and patience. These teachable moments show impressionable children that when they fail, it is truly just a “*first attempt in learning*,” one of many such attempts at building mastery and independence. And while there are multiple pathways in SEL education, training students to navigate failure during their formative years will prepare them for the stiffer challenges they’ll face as they grow older.

Easier said than done. Increasing students’ tolerance for struggle and failure is harder now that technology has eased the burdens and bottlenecks of daily living. By and large, these disruptive changes have dramatically improved our quality of life, but not without a cost. As psychologist and author Jean Twenge has pointed out, today’s students are part of an “[iGen](#)” that is more connected but less prepared for adult challenges than ever before. The effects are worrisome. Like many educators, I’m concerned that students are growing more risk-averse and failure-proof, seeking easy outs and quick routes in their learning. They want to Google; I want them to grapple. I want them to struggle, even fail, without ever thinking of themselves as failures – but how?

During the 2016-17 academic year, I attempted to answer that question with an initiative called **#FailureFridays**, a class-wide program that integrated daily SEL with curricular lessons to build character, strengthen resilience, and foster an appreciation for risk-taking and failure. In the reflection that follows, I explore how it was designed and delivered (using an Understanding by Design approach), the mistakes I made along the way, and how I attempted to correct them. Finally, I conclude with the program’s impact on student attitudes towards risk-taking and failure and discuss how it can be scaled and replicated across other grade-levels, disciplines and settings.



Throughout my reflection, I provide alerts for instances of failure **** FAILURE **** as well as suggestions for replicating certain elements **** REPLICABILITY **** across grade levels and disciplines.

Design Phase: Essential Questions, Big Ideas and Initial Assumptions (Summer 2016)

While I had a pretty good handle on the problem – students wanted to step over struggles and fast-track their success – finding a solution proved more challenging. Looking back on the school year that had just passed, I realized this was a problem of large scale and significance. It had affected the way my students approached challenges of all kinds – from learning difficult skills and concepts in the classroom to practicing for co-curricular activities and events. (A telling moment occurred when one student had to be reassigned from our end-of-year program after becoming exasperated by all the rehearsals.) To me, it seemed like many students lacked the will or interest to work through struggles or setbacks, especially when they saw others succeed on their first try. That only served to reinforce their “now or never” attitude towards success and reluctance to take risks in learning. Over that summer, I kept returning to the same question: How could I help students get a fresh view of failure and the life skills it fosters?

I began to map out my solution (which at this point lacked a name) using principles from Wiggins and McTighe’s Understanding by Design (UbD) framework. In this model of “backwards design,” planning begins with the end in mind – first, by identifying desired results, then by determining acceptable evidence, and finally, by planning instructional content. I drafted a list of “essential questions” and “enduring understandings” (as they’re called in UbD parlance) to guide me.

Essential questions – Arguable, open-ended questions that provoke challenges/new thoughts:

- Why do some people succeed more than others?
- How do people learn new things?
- Why does the Torah share the struggles of biblical figures?

Enduring understandings – Broad generalizations (i.e. “big ideas”) that summarize key meanings:

- There are no shortcuts to success
- Failure = First Atttempt In Learning
- Nothing succeeds like failure

The idea started to take form: A class-wide program that would promote and publicize failure, with the goal of shifting students’ attitudes and beliefs towards risk-taking, failure and growth. Having looked at the research on SEL (partially discussed above), I felt encouraged by its strong track record of matching affect with outcomes. Modeling this initiative on SEL frameworks made sense. At the same time, I didn’t want to launch just another “middot program” or character initiative. It had to be deeply rooted in everyday instruction, paired with curricular units, and aligned with the realities students faced in their own lives.

To go along with these UbD-inspired questions and ideas, I added my own set of assumptions and beliefs:

Creating the “right” program: Assumptions and beliefs

- **Branding:** It needed a catchy name that would excite my students. (These were 4th graders, after all.)
- **Process:** If students could somehow document their failures, they would be able to connect the dots and figure out learning patterns and pitfalls. Journaling seemed like a good approach.

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- **Frequency:** This had to happen often, or else it wouldn't catch on.
- **Messaging:** I tried to imagine how students and parents would react to my proud declaration, *Guess what, guys? This year, we're going to really focus on failing in school! I can't wait for all of you to struggle in my class!* If I was going to propose something so counter-intuitive, I needed to make sure all of the stakeholders – students, parents, the administration – understood the game plan and goals.
- **Buy-in:** Beyond the message, I needed a persuasive argument – something that would convince students to take this seriously. And not just the concept – they had to be willing and ready to trust *each other* when failure started to become a permanent and public fixture in class.
- **Measures:** To show this program was headed somewhere, I had to figure out some way of documenting and reporting shifts in student attitudes and behaviors.

By the end of the summer, I had an action plan in place:

PROGRAM ELEMENT	ACTION PLAN
Branding	I decided to call the program #FailureFridays. Not only did it have a nice ring, but it also captured the program's key components – documenting failure and sharing it openly at a weekly community meeting held each Friday. The hashtag in the title related to one of the program's original features. <i>(More on this below.)</i>
Process	Four times a week (M-Th), students would use their daily struggle logs to identify and briefly journal about academic, social or behavioral challenges they faced that day. As part of that reflection, students would suggest their own ideas for near-term improvement. The log would help students track their failures during the week and choose one to share at the Friday meetings. Additionally, students would personalize their own struggles by reflecting on content scenarios involving biblical figures studied in class. <i>(More on this below.)</i>
Frequency	Daily reflection (M-Th), followed a Friday community meeting where students could openly share their failures – and turnaround plan – with their classmates using a formal discussion protocol .
Messaging	<u>For parents:</u> Two weeks into the new school year, announce the goals and rationale of #FailureFridays with this parent letter . <u>For students:</u> Before reaching out to parents, provide students with an in-depth overview, including guided demonstrations of how to use the logs and write reflections on content scenarios surrounding biblical figures. Explain the process and guidelines for the Friday community meeting and how the discussion protocol will guide it.
Buy-in	<u>From administration:</u> During preservice week, meet with principal to explain program goals and get approval. Loop other members of the admin team as well. <u>From students:</u> Show famous examples of people who failed their way to success. Explain that we need to teach failure just like any other skill or behavior.
Measures	Every three weeks, ask students to complete a self-report (" learning risks " survey) as a gauge of their attitudes towards resilience, drive, risk tolerance, and making mistakes. <i>(More on this below.)</i>

**** FAILURE ****

In this planning stage, I completed virtually all design work by myself without getting any input from others. BIG MISTAKE. Receiving feedback from coworkers and colleagues at other schools would have alerted me to some of my blind spots, which I'll later describe in more detail.

Delivery Phase: Determining Authentic Tasks and Measures (Fall 2016)

As the school year began, I felt very encouraged by the groundwork I laid over the summer. Now I was ready to complete the second phase of UbD: Determining what kind of evidence I would use to build a case for understanding. These tasks and measures had to be deeply rooted in everyday instruction, paired with curricular units, and aligned with the realities students faced in their own lives.

To create authentic tasks and measures, I planned for students to complete two journaling exercises: (1) a daily reflection about something they struggled with (along with their own ideas for improvement); and (2) a content reflection focused on struggles faced by biblical figures studied in class. As for measures, I created a ["learning risks" survey](#) to document changes in students' attitudes towards risk-taking, failure and growth. Together with the Friday community meeting, these components formed the knowledge and performance backbone of #FailureFridays.

Any attempt to change the status quo is bound to have its share of unforeseen and unintended consequences, and #FailureFridays was no exception. For every potential gain, I experienced a setback. Here's a breakdown of my early discoveries and mistakes.

Daily reflection – "Struggle logs":

I set aside time at the end of each day for students to ask themselves, "What did I struggle with today?" and to post a short journal entry in their [struggle logs](#). This could include academic, social or behavioral "fails" that posed a specific challenge. More importantly, students also suggested their own ideas for improvement. In UbD, there is a strong preference for "credible and helpful" evidence that provides useful and transparent feedback for all learners. Because the struggle log encouraged self-rating, honest disclosure and near-term goal setting, it appeared to provide highly credible and helpful tools for understanding failure in a learning context.

**** FAILURE ****

That turned out to be mostly true, but with some unexpected turns. Among them:

1. Even though students kept careful daily logs, they often focused on *behavioral* "fails" – calling out, not listening to their teacher or classmates, and talking during transitions. Their near-term goals for improvement were canned and predictable: *Raise my hand. Listen better. Don't talk in the halls*. It didn't take long before the daily journaling produced lopsided results: Students were developing greater awareness of personal conduct flaws, but not much in the way of academic perseverance, which was a primary goal.
2. Additionally, students were becoming overly focused on crafting memorable hashtags to summarize their struggles. (One example, from a student named David: *Today I struggled to understand Rashi's question. #RockedByRashi.*) The hashtag was supposed to lighten up a heavy

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topic, not become a personal branding competition. It turned out to be a huge distraction and was eventually phased out. (At the students' urging, we decided to keep the hashtag in the program's title – a way for them to remember their failure to exercise better restraint and decision making. Irony of ironies!)

3. Finally, there were a handful of students who claimed they didn't struggle with *anything* and wanted to leave their logs blank. (Um, how about "misplaced confidence"? Could that count?) Truthfully, I didn't have a good answer for them, and they knew it.

Content reflection – "Struggle snapshots" (aka "Quick writes")

It's fair to say that we only understand something when we can explain its meaning and apply it to novel situations. With that in mind, I wanted students to deepen their lesson study of Tanach by personalizing the struggles of biblical figures through their own experiences. I chose several relevant content scenarios from our Chumash and Navi lessons and packaged them as "[struggle snapshots](#)" – opportunities for students to think and write about the challenges experienced by these biblical figures through a personal lens. We called these "quick writes" because the reflections were meant to capture students' gut reactions in a short amount of time (no more than 10 minutes) with virtually no editing or revision. Not only did the struggle snapshot/quick write closely align with one of our essential questions ("*Why does the Torah share the struggles of biblical figures?*"), it also seemed like a smart way to fit failure into the instructional day without surrendering a lot of time or losing much ground. On top of that, helping students feel empathy for biblical figures was an appealing side-effect. As a bonus, I anticipated that my General Studies counterpart could later use these writing samples to help students practice Language Arts content standards (e.g. grammar, spelling and punctuation), creating opportunities for crossover learning and team teaching.

As part of my UbD planning and program goals, the struggle snapshot seemed to hit so many positive marks: provide an authentic task, serve as a useful measure of understanding, offer personalized learning, and add value through interdisciplinary sharing. I thought it would be a total win.

**** REPLICABILITY ****

This journaling exercise can be useful to teachers of Tanach across a wide-range of grade levels (starting as early as 2nd grade and extending through high school). For General Studies teachers, it can be modified based on subject matter and used as a tool for either formative or summative assessment:

Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write a profile of a scientist whose breakthrough discovery came through a failed attempt.• During an experiment, keep a log of your hypotheses and why they didn't work out.
English	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write a profile of a character in this story whose life was marred by personal conflicts yet rose to overcome them.
Math	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Solve the following logic problem. Keep a log of each failed attempt you make, noting why it didn't work out.

**** FAILURE ****

The struggle snapshot/quick write didn't quite pan out as I hoped. Here's why:

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1. For starters, I had a hard time finding the right content scenarios for students to journal about. While there was plenty of human drama in our Chumash and Navi storylines, not much fit the “failure profile” of personal struggle – which meant students had to stretch for personal connections or real-life applications in ways that sometimes felt inauthentic.
2. Additionally, the compressed “quick write” format didn’t allow for feedback opportunities or leave enough time for students to revise, edit and polish their reflections – which, ironically, ran counter to the very notion of growth-through-failure!
3. Finally, students couldn’t easily discern the degrees of difficulty in each scenario: Having to admit you’ve abused your leadership position (as Yehudah did in his handling of Tamar, one of the content scenarios) is more personally vexing than, say, subjecting your brothers to a calculated ruse to ascertain their true feelings (as Yosef did to his brothers in another scenario).

In the end, the struggle snapshot/quick write helped students build empathy for biblical figures, but didn’t quite translate into lessons on embracing risk and failure.

Measures – “Learning risks” survey:

To see the impact of journaling on students’ attitudes towards risk-taking and failure, I created a brief [“learning risks” survey](#) (Likert scale) as a gauge of their resilience, drive, risk tolerance, and comfort with making mistakes. I adapted the eight survey questions from a social and emotional [competency questionnaire](#) developed by [CASEL](#) for the Austin (TX) independent school district. While no one would mistake this survey for rigorous research – I would be the first to acknowledge its limitations in construct validity – it did help me detect trends in student attitudes.

Over a period of almost three months (September – December 2016, minus time off for Jewish holidays and winter break), I administered the survey three times – approximately once every three weeks. Over the duration of this survey period, I observed an appreciable difference in students’ attitudes towards failure and their comfort with making mistakes. (*Note: The following data tables are representations of notes I kept during the process. For brevity, only three of eight survey questions are shown below.*)

Q1. When something doesn’t come easily to me, I am likely to give up right away.

(Student responses = 28)

	1 – Strongly disagree	2 - Disagree	3 - Neutral	4 - Agree	5 – Strongly agree
Survey #1	2	10	16	0	0
Survey #2	5	14	9	0	0
Survey #3	7	17	4	0	0

Q2. I become embarrassed when someone sees me struggling with a concept or task.

(Student responses = 28)

	1 – Strongly disagree	2 - Disagree	3 - Neutral	4 - Agree	5 – Strongly agree
Survey #1	2	8	4	11	3
Survey #2	1	13	3	9	2
Survey #3	1	17	3	5	2

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Q3. I can reach the goals I set for myself.

(Student responses = 28)

	1 – Strongly disagree	2 - Disagree	3 - Neutral	4 - Agree	5 – Strongly agree
Survey #1	0	2	9	13	4
Survey #2	0	1	5	17	5
Survey #3	0	0	0	21	7

In the program’s first three months, it seemed that our daily journaling, perspective taking, and intentional conversations about taking risks and embracing failure produced a positive shift in student attitudes. Despite my early mistakes, I was encouraged to see a notable improvement in how my students thought of failure...and themselves!

**** FAILURE ****

To make this a genuinely valid assessment tool, I should have searched for other similar (but valid) instruments instead of trying to create my own.

The community meeting: #FailureFridays

Even though the bulk of activity – from journaling to goal-setting – called on students to think as individuals, the program’s most defining feature – the Friday community meeting – challenged them to grow as a team. Guided by our [discussion protocol](#), students participated in a warm-up exercise (“Marker Talk”) informed by our “big ideas” of failure (outlined in UbD format), then took turns sharing a specific challenge they faced during the week and how they tried to overcome it. (As I describe in the next section, the warm-up activity was not part of the program’s original design, but a late-stage addition.) On many occasions, students brought up journal examples from content scenarios and the lessons they derived from biblical figures. The meeting format promoted core SEL values like relationship skills, social awareness, and self-management. Most importantly, it provided students a forum to discuss risk taking and failure in an open and supportive environment.

**** FAILURE ****

Regarding the meetings, I came up short in two particular areas:

1. Managing emotions – While most students felt comfortable sharing their challenges in public, several did not. At the first community meeting, one student even broke down in tears and had to leave the circle. (She suffers from anxiety and experienced a mild attack. She told me beforehand she could handle the meeting, but it became too overwhelming for her.) Even though students acted with respect and sensitivity at these gatherings, the mood felt tense. Managing these emotions became easier by our third meeting, after a short adjustment period had passed. Looking back, I should have done a better job to prepare students for the community meeting through role play or other SEL-inspired activities. Talking them through the process wasn’t enough – students needed an interactive demonstration to feel comfortable and safe.
2. Managing the clock – I imagined that community meetings would last no more than 15 minutes: ten minutes for student sharing, five minutes for class discussion. I was wrong. Students told me

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that our first few meetings felt rushed and that there wasn't enough time for group processing/discussion. I took their feedback to heart. About five weeks in, I added the silent warm-up activity ("Marker Talk") to give students a chance to express personal thoughts and feelings related to our "big ideas" (a UbD concept), and designed a more structured closing conversation to wrap things up. Keeping our meetings under 20 minutes still proved to be a challenge, however.

Adjustment Phase: Responding to New Facts and Failures (Winter/Spring 2017)

If the driving goal of #FailureFridays was to help students live with and learn from failure, then it was time for me to join them.

As school resumed in January, I planned a reboot of the program based on the failures and false starts described above. The following chart shows each of my missteps and how I planned to fix them in version 2.0 of #FailureFridays. (*Side note:* I announced the changes by handing students a similar version of this chart and walking them through my failures and plans for improvement. Looking back, it's now clear to me that this simple act of modeling – showing my students I was not immune to failure or afraid of it – delivered a knockout message that resonated more clearly than anything else they experienced at other points in time.)

FAILURE (VERSION 1.0)	IMPACT (VERSION 2.0)
Lack of input from others	I teamed with my General Studies counterpart to create a "skinny" version of the program in her classroom, focused around a complex math curriculum she recently began to use. Talking through issues with a "failure partner" helped me see my own classroom concerns differently and become more aware of my blind spots.
#Distraction	Eliminating the closing hashtag from the daily struggle journals improved the quality of student reflection. There was plenty of pushback, but once students got over it, they realized it was a needless #distraction.
Not enough emphasis on academic perseverance	I started making students aware of their academic struggles "in the moment" by cueing them with phrases like, "Wow, it looks like this pasuk is really difficult...keep pushing through it." Real-time labeling helped them see the problem more clearly – and caused it to be top of mind when it came time to journal later on.
Insufficient feedback and revision cycles	I overhauled the "quick write" process. Instead of stretching to create lots of content scenarios and providing little time for feedback and revision, I shifted to a single overarching "master scenario" that truly captured a profile of failure and guided students through multiple rounds of editing and revision featuring just-in-time feedback and coaching. I started using a performance rubric to assess the quality of their written reflections and connections to program goals. The master scenario also served as a compelling summative assessment for Tanach studies, allowing students to deeply reflect on what they learned and tie it together with the themes of failure and growth.
Need for additional modeling	I worked with our school guidance counselor to find SEL-inspired activities and exercises that boosted students' confidence, cooperation and communication skills. I also staged role-plays showing students how

	to speak and act during community meetings, helping them feel more prepared and empowered to talk freely.
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Benefits and Broader Applications

** REPLICABILITY **

The design of #FailureFridays is scalable across a broad range of grade levels, disciplines and practitioners. It can be replicated at any Jewish day school, regardless of its affiliation, size or location.

Unlike most school-wide initiatives, this program is action-ready and relatively easy to implement:

- **Financially sustainable** – does not require expensive technology, increased budget allocations, or donor support
- **Time-efficient** – embedded into everyday instruction and part of classroom routines
- **Sensible** – eliminates need for complicated scheduling, additional periods or outside services
- **Interdisciplinary** – integrates Judaic and General Studies instruction through crossover learning, team teaching, and shared lesson planning using content and materials teachers already possess
- **Light touch** – no need for extensive training or professional development
- **Universal reach** – can be adopted by any teacher at any time, regardless of subject-matter expertise and professional experience

Most important of all: This program targets the “master gene” that helps determine growth in virtually every conceivable aspect of a child’s life. If we can train students to treat failure as a blessing rather than a burden, they will cultivate the determination, resilience, curiosity and optimism to push past challenges on their way to achieving true and lasting success. Failure does not say who they are. It shows who they are *becoming*.

Closer to home - Implications for my own school:

During my trial with #FailureFridays, I observed its local impact at my own school:

- **Increased awareness** – Until now, SEL engagement was limited to weekly push-in lessons from the school guidance counselor. This program showed that character lessons could become more wholly integrated and immersive.
- **Standards alignment** – By connecting the program’s components to content standards, my lesson plans became more coherent and the quality of my instruction improved.
- **Rethinking assumptions** – As a faculty, we are now starting to re-evaluate grading and reporting practices. What is the role of character assessment? How do we capture and communicate the total child in our formal documentation? This program galvanized us to think more closely about the true measures of success and how to deliver them.

Conclusion: A Road Map for Replication

**** REPLICABILITY ****

In this narrative, I tried to provide readers with an in-depth look at how my program was conceived, delivered and redesigned, including some reflections on how it flourished and failed – in ways both expected and surprising.

My hope is that other educators try to replicate something like this in their own classrooms – only better! As a head start, here’s a summary of what I learned along the way:

DO –

- Find a planning partner (or team) to work out issues related to the rollout, especially for the complex design process of UbD.
- Craft a clear onboarding message for parents and students.
- Find opportunities for content crossover and interdisciplinary learning/skill-building.
- Model the behaviors and norms you want students to adopt.
- Develop measures that give a clear picture of progress and potential.
- Provide lots of opportunities for feedback, dialogue and coaching.

DON'T –

- Avoid the temptation to force-fit “failure” onto content material – students know when it’s a stretch.
- Stay away from gimmicks and shtick. Let authenticity drive your delivery.
- Avoid overreach – pick manageable targets and stick to them.
- Let go of your own fear of failure. Students won’t take risks if you don’t.