Marc Brackett never liked school. “I was always bored,” he says, “and I never felt like any of my teachers really cared. I can’t think of anybody that made me feel inspired.”

It’s a surprising complaint coming from a 42-year-old Yale research scientist with a 27-page CV and nearly $4 million in career funding. But Brackett knows that many kids feel the way he does about school, and he wants to do a complete emotional makeover of the nation’s schools.

At a time of contentious debate over how to reform schools to make teachers more effective and students more successful, “social emotional learning” may be a key part of the solution. An outgrowth of the emotional intelligence framework, popularized by Daniel Goleman, SEL teaches children how to identify and manage emotions and interactions. One of the central considerations of an evolved EQ—as proponents call an “emotional quotient”—is promoting empathy, a critical and often neglected quality in our increasingly interconnected, multicultural world.

Brackett quickly learned that developing empathy in kids requires working on their teachers first. Ten years ago, he and his colleagues introduced a curriculum about emotions in schools, asking teachers to implement it in their own classrooms. When he observed the lessons, he was struck by the discomfort many of the instructors showed in talking about emotion. “There was one teacher who took the list of feelings we had provided and crossed out all of what she perceived of as ‘negative’ emotions before asking the students to identify what they were feeling,” Brackett says. “We realized that if the teachers didn’t get it, the kids never would.”

So in 2005, Brackett and his team at the Health, Emotion, and Behavior Lab at Yale developed a training program—now called RULER—that instructs teachers in the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for emotional health, then helps them shift the focus to children. The program focuses on five key skills: recognizing emotions in oneself and others, understanding the causes and consequences of emotions, labeling the full range of emotions, expressing emotions appropriately in different contexts, and regulating emotions effectively to foster relationships and achieve goals. Classrooms adopt “emotional literacy charters”—agreements that the whole community agrees to concerning interpersonal interactions—and kids use “mood meters” to identify the nature and intensity of their feelings and “blueprints” to chart out past experiences they might learn from.

But the curriculum doesn’t just exist as a separate subject—teachers are trained to integrate lessons in emotion into other subjects. A discussion about the protagonist in a
young adult novel, can be an opportunity for students to practice reading emotional cues. History becomes not just a lesson about dates and battles, but a study in the ways in human emotion can be inspired or manipulated by charismatic leaders.

Now in use in hundreds of schools around the country, RULER has been measurably successful. Research indicates that the average student in a RULER-enriched classroom has 11 percent better grades and 17 percent fewer problems in school. Now, Brackett’s group is embarking on a 10-year study of the longer-term effects of the RULER curriculum on 200 students in New York City and New Hampshire high schools.

In one New York City school that serves a high number of special needs students, administrators attribute a 60 percent reduction in behavioral problems to the RULER approach. “One teacher used to go home with welts on her body because these kids were so emotionally challenged that they were kicking and hitting her,” Brackett says. “Since she’s been doing emotional literacy for two years, she’s had no incidents.”

Why the change? “She told me that she developed a lot more empathy for her students when she grew to understand that emotions didn’t only exist when they exploded,” Brackett says, “Kids in these classrooms now have permission to say that they’re shifting in to the red quadrant of the mood meter, rather than exploding.”

The idea of emphasizing emotional learning began in 1994, when Goleman created the Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning. Now the group serves as a central body for programs like Brackett’s across the country and the world.

CASEL president Roger Weissberg, says that it takes “the three Ps” to make effective social and emotional learning a reality: policy, at both the state and federal level; principals’ buy-in; and professional development. CASEL is teaming up with other leaders in the field to conduct a study of SEL standards in all 50 states.

Despite substantial data indicating that SEL raises test scores, there are naysayers, particularly as school systems struggle with tight budgets. In a recent interview on a local television station in Connecticut, a newscaster said to Brackett: “The kids can’t read, but now they’ll learn how to whine really well.”

He chuckled, but responded in all seriousness: “You have to think about what motivates students to want to learn. If you know how emotions drive attention, learning, memory, and decision making you know that integrating [SEL] is going to enhance those areas.”

Interest in SEL spiked after Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi jumped from the George Washington Bridge in September 2010 after being bullied by his roommate. Clementi’s death was one of at least a half dozen suicides of gay teens around that time, prompting the creation of legislation, the hugely popular “It Gets Better,” campaign, and an uptick in interest and foundation funding to the nation’s various SEL programs.

But real change, Brackett says, will come from embracing SEL as a core part of the curriculum, not by parachuting into assemblies at schools trying to “solve bullying.” “Emotional literacy should be taught from womb to tomb, because the emotional challenges we meet vary as a function of our age,” he says. “You’re not going to teach a kindergartner not to alienate people, but you might point out that little Mario looks lonely. In middle school, it’s appropriate to start talking about alienation.”

Brackett says his own experiences being bored and bullied in school contributed to his
interest in emotional learning. “I think back to being 12 years old, sitting in 7th grade, having kids push me, bang my fingers in the lockers, draw on me with a pen, and no one was doing anything about it,” he says. “I didn’t want anyone to stand up for me, I just didn’t want it to happen. We have to make people more empathic.”