

SPOTLIGHT



—Ian Bates for Education Week

Students walk around the park while eating lunch at the Science and Math Institute in Tacoma, Wash., where a districtwide social-emotional learning strategy focuses heavily on building supportive relationships.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

EDITOR'S NOTE

While barriers remain, educators are forging paths towards implementing social-emotional learning in all schools. In this Spotlight, learn how schools are responding to students' developmental needs, the challenges to carrying out SEL, and how to find time for social-emotional learning in the classroom.

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Spreading Social-Emotional Learning Across All Schools

The Tacoma, Wash., district uses a well-rounded approach that focuses on relationships

By Evie Blad



—Ian Bates for Education Week

TACOMA, WASH.

Students in algebra class at Jason Lee Middle School gathered in small groups to teach each other how to work through a complex math problem. Some of them stood. Some sat at desks. And some pedaled away on stationary bicycles.

In the front of each group, one student stood at a white board, circling the part of the problem he or she didn't understand. The other students asked questions until they could navigate their classmate to the right answer.

As these Tacoma middle school students worked together on math earlier this school year, they were learning relationship skills, how to communicate effectively, and how to press through frustra-

Sophomore Ethan Haller sketches a leaf during an Outdoor Education class at the Science and Math Institute in Tacoma, Wash.

tion, said Principal Christine Brandt. And, hopefully, the end result would be a deeper knowledge of concepts like order of operations than they would get through a traditional classroom lecture.

What happens if they get stuck and they feel like they just can't figure it out?

"That's when we do emotional labor," a student told a group of policymakers, educational leaders, and researchers observing the class last fall. That might mean reassuring the 6th grader standing in front of the math class study group before he looked for a new way to examine the question he'd posed.

That language of emotional labor, or "grinding it out" through tough learning

challenges can be heard in classrooms throughout the 30,000-student Tacoma district. It's one of several concepts that Tacoma has emphasized through an ambitious, cooperative, communitywide plan to bring social-emotional learning, student engagement strategies, and an emphasis on supportive relationships to every school.

Districts around the country have increasingly explored social-emotional learning strategies, which emphasize student skills like self control and social awareness and encourage positive interactions between students. But Tacoma stands out. Through a comprehensive effort, the school system seems to have leaped over hurdles that have stopped the growth of social-emotional learning strategies in other schools, hurdles like a lack of teacher buy-in and a struggle to infuse SEL concepts into traditional classroom work.

The visitors to Lee Middle School earlier this school year were assembled by the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, a group that is exploring similar efforts in schools around the country. The group is seeking broad input before it releases a final report in the fall outlining policies and practices that will make schools more sensitive to the development of students' nonacademic skills.

Working with the Center for Strong Schools at the University of Washington, Tacoma, the district's "Tacoma Whole Child Initiative" worked systematically to bring a focus on social-emotional learning that touches everything from student discipline policies to how teachers approach lessons on traditional subjects like poetry and algebra.

Rather than introducing a new program that teachers would see as just another mandate, the initiative started with administrators, who spent a whole year "braiding" duplicative school programs together, eliminating ones that weren't necessary, and establishing a common vision for what "whole child education" should look like. That plan was then disseminated to schools gradually, allowing teachers and principals to develop their own strategies for carrying it out.

Emphasizing Relationships

Tacoma's deliberative process helps address some big challenges districts face when introducing social-emotional learning, leaders of the Aspen commission said. School and district leaders say they are drawn to social-emotional learning by re-



Inside the open floor plan school, students work together on algebra problems at the Science and Math Institute.

—Ian Bates for Education Week

search that shows effects like reductions in misbehavior and improvements in attendance and achievement, but they often struggle with how to get started.

In a nationally representative survey of 884 principals released in November, just 35 percent of respondents said their school was fully implementing a plan for incorporating social-emotional learning into policies and classroom work.

Among the biggest barriers: a lack of time to train and support teachers, a lack of consensus among school staff that social-emotional learning is important, and a lack of funding to carry out plans, according to the survey, which was commissioned by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

“In some ways, there is a tension in the data: while the vast majority of leaders believe that social and emotional development is essential to education, the pathway to change is not always clear; moreover, the time and training to make the necessary changes are in short supply,” CASEL co-founder Tim Shriver, former Michigan Gov. John Engler, and Stanford University education professor Linda Darling-Hammond wrote in a letter about the survey results. “These experts tell us that there is a lot of will, but not as much clarity and support, along the way.”

The Tacoma initiative started in 2011-12 and is set to last 10 years, with new layers of implementation and training happening each year. The effort was designed with help from business leaders

from companies like Starbucks and other organizations who shared their insights into organizational change.

The aim is to bring change to educational strategies that is meaningful, lasting, and supported by teachers. Because social-emotional learning relies so heavily on building healthy relationships among students and between students and teachers, it’s important that strategies are designed locally and rely on input from everyone involved, including students and teachers, researchers have said.

“This is chemistry,” said Josh Garcia, the deputy superintendent of the Tacoma district. “It’s not something you can just do and say ‘here’s the playbook.’”

Greg Benner, the executive director of the Center for Strong Schools, said the university helped found the initiative as a way of becoming more engaged with the community and to give its students immersive learning opportunities. Students who are in his course on classroom management, for example, observe teachers and provide feedback on how they are interacting with students.

“Don’t admire any problems,” Benner recalled a university leader saying. “Go out and help fix these issues.”

‘Drop-Out Factories’

And the district had some problems: Crime and domestic violence rates in the city were among the highest in the state, students faced challenges associated with

poverty and trauma, and researchers at Johns Hopkins University once labeled all of its high schools “drop-out factories.”

After a year of planning at the administrative level, leaders of the Whole Child Initiative rolled it out gradually in schools, requiring a yes vote from 90 percent of each school’s staff before bringing it on board. In each cohort, leadership teams made up of administrators and teachers from every grade level learned more about the approach to social-emotional learning and made plans for carrying it out in their school, relying on baseline survey data from each school’s teachers that explored their knowledge of social-emotional learning and their views on teaching.

Teacher-leaders then worked with their professional learning communities to put those strategies into practice within their schools. Building-level strategies could involve addressing school climate issues, like bullying, Benner said.

The entire district adopted positive behavior interventions and supports, or PBIS, a strategy that teaches all students what good behavior looks like and provides additional tiers of support, like counseling, for students who need it. Teachers also learned a set of common strategies, like how to greet students at the doorway and assess their mood and how to address problematic behavior.

At Jason Lee Middle School, for example, teachers can send students to a “reset desk” in each classroom to reflect on how their behavior affected their classmates. Students can also send themselves to the reset desk to take a break before re-entering the classroom conversation.

Leaders of the initiative also provide supplemental training about issues like student trauma. And they’ve trained support staff like bus drivers and volunteers at community afterschool programs in social-emotional learning strategies so that children hear consistent messages from adults throughout the day.

Whole-Child Focus

The district has brought a relationship focus into practices like hiring, Garcia said, by asking applicants questions like “tell me about the last time you got in a fight.”

District leaders track about three dozen indicators to see what’s working in schools. They include the number of volunteers in

a school, how many students participate in extracurricular activities, the percentage of students who haven't been suspended, how many high school students have been accepted to college or another post-graduation institution, and input gathered through school climate surveys.

A 2016 evaluation of the Whole Child Initiative shows it moved the needle on many of those indicators. Between 2014-15 and 2015-16, the number of students who were not chronically absent—defined as missing 15.5 or more school days in a year—climbed from 86 percent to 96 percent. Students saw school climate more favorably in 2015-16 than they did four years prior, and surveys of parents and staff showed modest gains as well. More students participated in multiple extracurricular activities, and the percentage of seniors with verified acceptance to a post-graduate institution climbed from 41 percent in 2012-13 to 73 percent in 2015-16.

In 2017, the district's on-time graduation rate reached 86 percent, an increase from the 2012 rate of 70 percent, district data show.

"There's no magic bullet," Superintendent Carla Santorno said. "It takes everybody in the community being unique and connecting to do the work."

And "the work" looks different at Jason Lee, a school that families once avoided because of problems like student fights, and schools like the district's three innovative high schools, which embed students in Tacoma's science, industry, and arts communities.

The Science and Math Institute, for example, is adjacent to a zoo in the city's sprawling Point Defiance Park. Students there freely pass between classes in an open floor plan building, in outdoor learning spaces set up among towering trees, and in a pavilion situated between animal exhibits.

Students there do live drawings of zoo animals and work alongside zoo staff to design projects like elephant feeders in the school's maker space.

They also meet with a peer mentoring group that includes students ranging from freshmen to seniors to set personal goals and to build a sense of community and empathy.

The school prides itself on student voice and community engagement. School leaders boast of a student who tracked biodiversity in the nearby Puget Sound. After he found fewer animals living around concrete pillars, he took his findings to the Tacoma City Council.

Commissioners who visited both schools said they saw common threads in their approaches.

"You have this alignment but different visions about how you can get there," Darling-Hammond said. ■

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Experts to Plot Map on Social-Emotional Learning for Schools

By Evie Blad

A national coalition of researchers, policymakers, and educators has forged a consensus on why schools need to be more responsive to students' social, emotional, and developmental needs, and it will now finalize recommendations for how to carry out that vision.

The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development has convened working groups and visited schools around the country that are using strategies around social-emotional learning and student engagement.

The commission released its preliminary findings Tuesday and outlined the questions it has yet to answer before making final recommendations to the K-12 field in the fall.

"It's one thing to have some really exciting local pilots in place, but our goal is for this to go to scale," said Gene Wilhoit, the executive director of the national Center for Innovation in Educa-



tion and the co-chair of the commission's policy subcommittee.

A Three-Pronged Approach

The commission's work comes as supporters of social-emotional learning say that the federal Every Student Succeeds Act provides new flexibility and incentives for schools to adopt the approach.

Social-emotional learning strategies center on research that has linked the development of skills like building healthy peer relationships and responsible decision making to success inside and outside the classroom.

The commission supports a three-pronged approach: direct instruction of skills, infusion of those skills into traditional academic subjects like math and reading, and changing broader school practices in areas like discipline to create an environment that fosters students' development in those areas.

The group's leaders hope the commission will give those who are enthusiastic about the issue a common vocabulary and a set of tools for putting social-emotional learning into action.

"We want to think about the way to integrate this work in the very fabric, the practices, the culture, the lifeblood of schooling," said Stephanie Jones, a professor of psychology at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a member of the commission's panel of scientists.

Among the findings in the preliminary report:

- Social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and academic development are “deeply intertwined” and “all are central to learning and success,” says the report, citing a previous consensus statement by the commission’s panel of scientists.
- A variety of instructional practices can help nurture social-emotional skills, but they must be used intentionally. And, while there are many research-based programs for direct instruction of social-emotional learning, more work needs to be done to learn how to integrate the approach into traditional instruction.
- A sensitivity to students’ social, emotional, and academic development should inform all areas of schooling, including areas like family engagement and school climate.
- Educators need preparation programs, professional development and support to lead social-emotional learning efforts and to model healthy behavior and relationships for their students.
- SEL strategies must be designed at the local level to meet the specific needs of a community.



Teachers respond incredibly well to this work. They came to teaching because they love kids, and they want to be successful with kids.”

SHELDON BERMAN

SUPERINTENDENT, ANDOVER, MASS., SCHOOL DISTRICT

Further Questions

Sheldon Berman, the superintendent of the Andover, Mass., district and a member of the commission’s panel of educators, said his district has taken steps to design its own social-emotional learning work.

District leaders weave an emphasis on social-emotional learning priorities into decisions like hiring, teachers receive professional development around special curriculum, and classroom strategies like morning meetings help build



Dustin Franz for Education Week-File

a sense of community among students. Students also take surveys created by Panorama education to measure school climate, and school leaders review the results regularly.

“Teachers respond incredibly well to this work,” Berman said. “They came to teaching because they love kids, and they want to be successful with kids.”

Commissioners said they want their final recommendations to provide a roadmap for schools without reading like a top-down mandate that stifles local innovation.

A policy group will outline recommendations for areas like teacher preparation and cooperation between schools and other sectors, like social services.

Among the biggest questions remaining for the commission:

- What are the most pressing questions for researchers interested in the field?
- What kind of preparation and support do teachers need to develop students’ social-emotional learning?
- What should schools and policymakers do to monitor the success of their efforts and to make improvements?

A common concern about social-emotional learning is that it will be another short-lived trend in a line of educational movements that schools try and abandon without giving it a chance to take effect in a meaningful way.

But commissioners said they hope growing interest in the research coupled with ESSA will give social-emotional learning better staying power.

Madison Reid, a student in a combined 2nd and 3rd grade classroom, leads a discussion on good listening with her classmates during a morning session at Cleveland’s Wade Park Elementary School in 2015.

The new federal education law requires schools to report new factors, like chronic absenteeism rates, in their public report cards, and it requires states to broaden how they measure school success.

No state decided to include direct measures of social-emotional learning in its accountability system. Most cited cautions from researchers who’ve said existing measures are not sophisticated enough to be used for high-stakes purposes. But mindfulness of students’ emotions, relationships, and development can help schools show improvement in other areas covered by the law, like attendance and achievement, commissioners said.

Dr. James Comer, a professor of child psychiatry at the Yale University Child Study Center and honorary commission co-chair, has been studying issues related to children’s development and education for 50 years.

“When I started, I remember being told that the parents will raise them and we will teach them,” Comer said. “We’ve come a long way now in understanding that child rearing begins at home, but that it has to be complemented every step of the way and that all of the institutions along the development pathway have to be involved... I think we are making that progress, but it’s terribly complicated and we have to learn and grow and be flexible along the way.” ■

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Principals Like Social-Emotional Learning. Here's Why Schools Struggle With It

By Evie Blad

School leaders see students' social and emotional development as important factors in school success but, in a nationally representative survey of principals, just 35 percent of respondents said their school was fully implementing a plan for incorporating social-emotional learning into policies and classroom work.

Principals reported several barriers to putting social-emotional learning strategies into place, including a lack of time, inadequate teacher training, and a need for further evidence of its link to academic success.

The findings of the survey—administered to 884 public school principals by Civic Enterprises and Hart Associates on behalf of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning—mirror anecdotal reports from

school leaders and teachers around the country in recent years.

Social-emotional learning, or SEL, is a field that focuses on nurturing students' growth in areas like relationship skills and self control by changing schoolwide policies, using direct instruction on those skills, and then incorporating those skills into traditional classroom lessons in subjects like math and reading.

While the field has attracted broad interest in recent years, administrators who are interested in SEL have told *Education Week* that it can be difficult to know where to start when putting it into action.

Although "interest in social and emotional learning is overwhelmingly high, principals and administrators are hungry for the expertise necessary to adopt new strategies," CASEL co-founder Tim Shriver, former Michigan Gov. John Engler, and

Stanford University education professor Linda Darling-Hammond wrote in a letter accompanying the survey results. The trio co-chairs a national commission on students' social, emotional and academic development convened by the Aspen Institute.

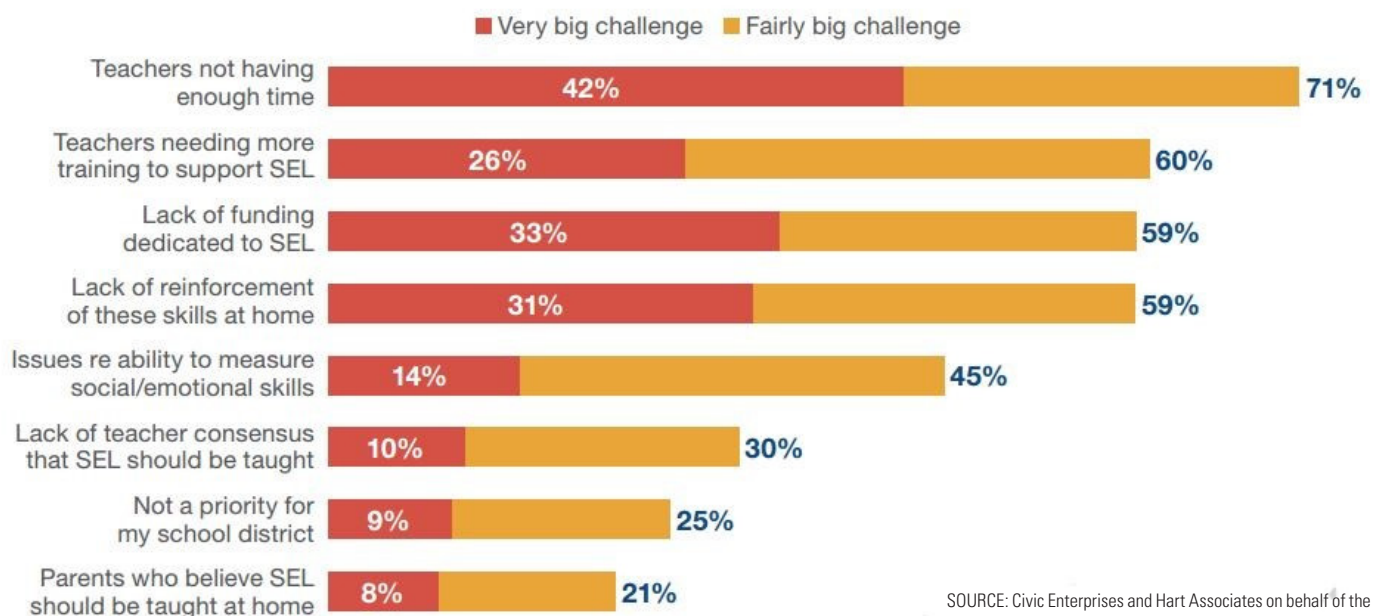
"In some ways, there is a tension in the data: while the vast majority of leaders believe that social and emotional development is essential to education, the pathway to change is not always clear; moreover, the time and training to make the necessary changes are in short supply," the letter states. "These experts tell us that there is a lot of will, but not as much clarity and support, along the way."

Among the survey's findings:

- 72 percent of principals who responded said their school district places a fair amount or a great deal of emphasis on

■ Lack of teacher time is the biggest barrier to increasing SEL; teacher training and funding also need to be addressed.

How big a challenge is this in trying to implement teaching SEL in your school?



SOURCE: Civic Enterprises and Hart Associates on behalf of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

developing students' SEL skills, but only 40 percent reported that their district leadership requires all schools to have a clear plan for teaching social and emotional skills.

- Only 25 percent of principals who responded could be considered “high implementers of SEL,” according to CASEL’s benchmarks. “In school districts where district leaders place a high level of emphasis on SEL, principals are more likely to score high on SEL implementation,” the report found.
- Respondents were largely convinced that SEL skills can be measured, but just 24 percent are using some form of measurement, and just 17 percent said they were “very or fairly” familiar with existing forms of measurement.
- While more than three quarters of respondents supported using SEL measurement for things like program evaluation and sharing data with parents, just 49 percent agreed or strongly agreed that such measurements

should be used in teacher evaluations. That response comes as some scientists in the field have urged caution about the use of SEL measurement for high-stakes purposes.

- While 83 percent of respondents said improved school climate would be a “very major benefit” of implementing social-emotional learning in their schools, just 61 percent said it would be a “very major benefit” to improving results on students’ academic coursework.

Supporting Teachers to Implement Social-Emotional Learning

Respondents reported a lack of time and teacher training as major barriers to carrying out SEL in their schools.

This is not a surprising finding. A survey of teacher-preparation programs across the country, also commissioned by CASEL, found that many do not address social-emotional learning in their core classes. Principals have said it can be

difficult to build effective professional development for social-emotional learning, especially in schools with high rates of teacher turnover where retraining would be necessary to get new hires on board every year.

The report includes interviews with district leaders who’ve had success in implementing SEL.

To address concerns of principals, the report recommends:

- More dedicated funding for social-emotional learning;
- State-level standards that spell out what skills like self-management look like at every grade level from K-12;
- More research and communications about the effects of SEL on student learning;
- Improvement to pre-service teacher training and professional development; and
- Continued work to improve assessments of students’ social and emotional skills. ■

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States Skip Out on Social-Emotional Measures for ESSA

By Evie Blad

When the Every Student Succeeds Act was enacted, speculation swirled that states might use it as a launching pad to use measures of students’ social and emotional competencies to determine whether their schools are successful.

Nearly two years later, not a single state’s plan to comply with the federal education law—and its broader vision for judging school performance—calls for inclusion of such measures in its school accountability system.

That raises some new questions: Did backers of social-emotional learning miss a chance to encourage wider adoption of its strategies? Or did they avoid the concerns and pitfalls that would have come with attaching it to high-stakes accountability?

Schools that adopt social-emotional learning seek to nurture students’ devel-

opment in areas like self-management and responsible decision making alongside traditional academics. Doing so helps to deepen students’ learning experiences and prepares them for interpersonal situations they will later face in the workplace, educators say.

As the U.S. Department of Education works to approve state’s ESSA plans, some of social-emotional learning’s biggest boosters are expressing relief that states are steering clear of trying to measure such personal skills for accountability.

Existing measures of social and emotional development, which largely rely on students’ responses to surveys about their own character traits, are

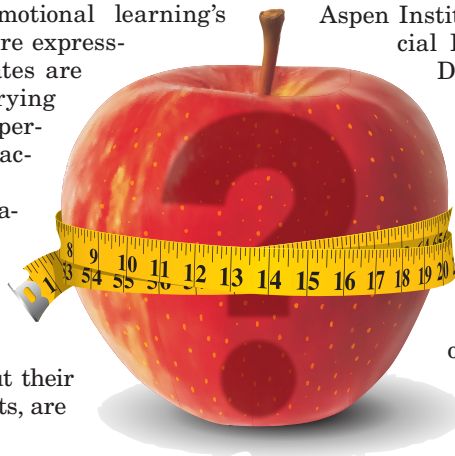
not sophisticated and consistent enough to be used for such purposes, they have long argued.

“There is a groundswell of recognition that the academic, social, and emotional development of children are intertwined in all experiences of learning,” said Tim Shriver, the co-founder of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL. “I think that’s booming... Someone might say, ‘Why aren’t you holding states accountable for teaching it?’ The answer to that is we are not ready for it yet.”

At the same time, several of ESSA’s other provisions will serve as incentives for schools to consider “the whole child” as they comply with the law, said Shriver, who is also the co-chair of the Aspen Institute’s Commission on Social Emotional and Academic Development.

Broad Latitude for States

In addition to traditional measures of success like student test scores, ESSA requires states to use at least one additional “indicator of school quality or student success,” such



as measures of student engagement or access to advanced coursework.

The law gave states broad latitude in which factors they selected, requiring that those measures allow for “meaningful differentiation in school performance” and are “valid, reliable, comparable, and statewide.”

Schools must also be able to disaggregate data related to that indicator to show how it affects students in different groups, such as racial and ethnic groups and students with disabilities.

After *Education Week* reported on early drafts of the law in 2015, a flurry of policy watchers and district leaders who had experimented with measuring social-emotional learning wondered if its inclusion as a school quality indicator would give schools an incentive to more meaningfully integrate it into their daily work.

Many pointed to a group of large California districts that had worked under a 2013 waiver from the previous federal education law, No Child Left Behind, to include social-emotional learning survey results in a complicated system they designed to measure school quality.

Leaders of that effort said the data would serve as a “flashlight, not a hammer,” meant to identify and spread successful school strategies. They committed to tweaking and replacing social-emotional learning measures as researchers perfected them.

And there’s a public interest in broader accountability as well. In an annual poll released by Phi Delta Kappa International in August, 8 in 10 respondents rated “the extent to which schools help students develop interpersonal skills, such as cooperation, respect, and persistence,” as extremely or very important in school quality.

But some of the researchers who’ve popularized social-emotional learning also said measures of that work are prone to biases that make them unreliable and unusable for accountability purposes.

Currently, “perfectly unbiased, un-fakeable, and error-free measures are an ideal, not a reality,” researchers Angela Duckworth and David Yeager wrote in a 2015 essay published in *Educational Researcher* that detailed an array of flaws with current measures.

Not Ready for ‘Prime Time’

States appear to have responded to those concerns.

Louisiana State Superintendent John White said that social-emotional learning, growth mindsets, and other non-cognitive

factors were never under consideration as part of Louisiana’s new accountability plan under ESSA.

“The instruments for measuring are not ready for prime time,” he said, “but that’s not to say that [social-emotional learning] doesn’t have value in schools.”



First and foremost, measurements have got to be meaningful to the teachers and the kids and families.

ROGER WEISSBERG

PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION,
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO

An *Education Week* analysis of state ESSA plans—including those that have not yet been approved by the Education Department—found that most opted to rely on data many districts already collect in their accountability systems. Thirty-four states and the District of Columbia chose to include a measure of chronic ab-

senteism in their plans. Six chose to include school climate surveys—which ask students questions about how safe and supported they feel at school.

A better measure of social-emotional learning “could very well be developed in the future,” and states could revise their plans to include it, said Deborah Temkin, the education research director for Child Trends, a non-profit research organization that focuses on children’s issues. For now, schools may be motivated to use some social-emotional strategies, like teaching students how to resolve conflicts and manage their emotions, to meet other non-academic goals and to improve academic achievement. And those strategies could help decrease chronic absenteeism by promoting self-discipline and reducing situations that make students feel unsafe at school, she said. ESSA also increases schools’ reporting requirements in areas like bullying and discipline, which can both be affected by a “whole child” approach, Temkin said.

Roger Weissberg, a professor of psychology and education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and CASEL’s chief knowledge officer, said a group of 20 states that are cooperating to explore social-emotional-learning plans largely favor allowing districts to select and design their own measures to ensure they fit into their strategies. Some districts, for example, have adopted grade-by-grade standards that outline how to incorporate students’ social and emotional development into classroom work. In those districts, student surveys can help teachers track if their strategies are working on a broader level, but they aren’t used for accountability purposes.

“First and foremost, measurements have got to be meaningful to the teachers and the kids and families,” Weissberg said.

CASEL also has a measurement working group, which asks researchers and educators to tackle the challenges associated with measuring non-cognitive skills and to experiment with creative alternatives, like video games that track students’ engagement.

Shriver said he’s confident schools will continue to express interest in approaches that recognize the value of social and emotional development, regardless of state and federal policies.

“This horse is out of the barn,” he said. “It’s policymakers who are trying to catch up.” ■

Assistant Managing Editor Lesli A. Maxwell contributed to this report.

COMMENTARY

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4 Ways to Get Skeptics to Embrace Social-Emotional Learning

Educators must pay attention to students' well-being

By Peter DeWitt

An increasing number of school districts are incorporating social-emotional learning into or alongside instruction, thanks to a growing awareness of its importance for students. But within school communities, there are still families, teachers, and school leaders who think social-emotional learning is not the job of educators. Some school leaders simply don't feel they have the time to cover issues around students' relationships, well-being, and motivation in addition to schoolwork. There is a constant push and pull between those who believe SEL is necessary and those who want schools to focus solely on academics.

Here's the reality: Schools no longer have a choice but to take on social-emotional learning. For too many years, the focus has been on standardized testing and international comparisons of student performance with little attention given to helping students deal with the trauma they experience. At the same time, as research around trauma's effects on learning has grown, there has been an increasing awareness of how important it is for educators to support students who suffer from trauma.

According to a 2017 report by the National Center for Children in Poverty, about 35 million children in the United States have experienced some form of trauma. Research also shows that students can experience trauma not only from catastrophic events, but from prolonged stress in family situations, such as a divorce or a parent's mental-health issues, and many students also have parents who need support.

From the outside, it's easy to say schools should focus on learning alone, be-

cause the social-emotional issues that students face and how they play out at school are often invisible. There are teachers who believe SEL is the job of a counselor or school psychologist. There are families who do not want schools to infringe on the beliefs they have at home.

In a book group focusing on school climate, I once had a principal tell me that she thought social-emotional learning was important but got pushback from parents who wanted the school to focus on AP courses to get graduates into the "right" universities. And too often, politicians cite the need to improve test scores as a reason for not focusing on SEL.

But it's very difficult for students suffering from trauma to be fully engaged in academics if they are not supported socially and emotionally.

The question is not *whether* schools should be responsible for the social-emotional learning of students. The question is, *how* do we help schools confront the social-emotional issues they are facing?

Here are four ways teachers and school leaders can truly embrace social-emotional learning to set examples for their communities:

- **Greet students at the door—every single day.** A 2016 report by the Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations surveyed over 100,000 students and found that only 52 percent believe their teachers take time to get to know them. Learning students' names and seeing them for who they are as individuals is the first and most important step toward a healthier classroom for students.
- **Use a high-quality social-emotional-learning curriculum.** An organized SEL curriculum can help teachers bring difficult or traumatic topics to

light with students. The Collaborative for Social Emotional Learning, or CA-SEL, offers resources around resiliency and self-regulation. Teachers might, for example, use the multitude of children's books and YA novels that explore situations or behavioral issues students are dealing with, which can weave seamlessly into academic learning.

- **Hire more counselors and nurses.** Many schools lack the appropriate number of counselors and nurses to help students process their thoughts and feelings. Less than half of the U.S. public schools employ a full-time nurse, and 21 percent of high schools don't have access to a school counselor. School leaders should advocate more health professionals in schools to help meet the needs of those students suffering from trauma and reduce the burden for overloaded counselors and nurses already on staff.
- **Offer training for teachers.** In order to support SEL, school and district leaders need to offer training to teachers on how to work with students in need. However, the organization or trainers chosen to work with teachers must not only have a deep understanding of SEL, but the added complexities of teaching.

We can no longer debate whether social-emotional learning is the job of schools. What students experience at home bleeds into the classroom, affecting how they learn. Students need to feel emotionally connected to school and understand how to self-regulate their emotions. When educators and school leaders work together, they can ensure that students' trauma doesn't continue to define them. ■

Peter DeWitt is an author, presenter, and former K-5 public school principal. He is an independent consultant working with schools, state agencies, and education leaders. He can be found at www.petermdewitt.com. He is on Twitter @PeterMDeWitt.

COMMENTARY

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With Social-Emotional Learning, Keep It Simple

We need to simplify social-emotional and character education

By Hunter Gehlbach

Years ago at a conference where funders, tech entrepreneurs, and academics were furiously brainstorming ways for educators to fix schools, a teacher's voice cut through the cacophony: "With all that is asked of teachers already, where do you propose that we find the time for your pet projects? If you want us to listen, please show us ideas that simplify our lives." That complaint is as true for the education field today as it was then.

Currently, leaders of social-emotional-learning and character education programs are making big demands on educators' time and attention. They argue that schools must help students cultivate aspirations, belonging, curiosity, decency, engagement, flexible thinking, grit, happiness, intrinsic interest, and so on. Meanwhile, teachers must try desperately to squeeze 365 days of academic content into 180-day school years.

Yet these SEL capacities remain vital attributes to cultivate in our youths. Herein lies the crux of the problem: Social-emotional learning represents crucial skills and dispositions, but we already ask too much from our teachers. So how can we simplify their lives, without oversimplifying these complex ideas?

We might start by distilling social-emotional learning. If we separated the nice-to-know domains from those that teachers must know deeply, wouldn't we be left with those capacities that are truly fundamental for students' academic success and personal well-being? I propose, therefore, that we focus primarily on students' social connectedness, motivation, and self-regulation.

That approach makes sense. Students cannot learn if they hate their teacher or fear ridicule from their class-

mates. Without motivation, they have no goals to pursue, nor energy with which to pursue them. Furthermore, for learning to occur, they must select learning strategies, focus their attention, and stick to their goals. In short, social connectedness, motivation, and self-regulation are prerequisites for learning—not to mention a host of other desired school outcomes.

Research reinforces the logic of focusing on that triad. Psychologists increasingly appreciate the importance of social relationships for human functioning. Many scientists hypothesize that a portion of our brains evolved expressly to connect with others. This extra gray matter can pay big dividends in schools. Studies on thousands of students show that learners who are better socially connected to their teachers and class-

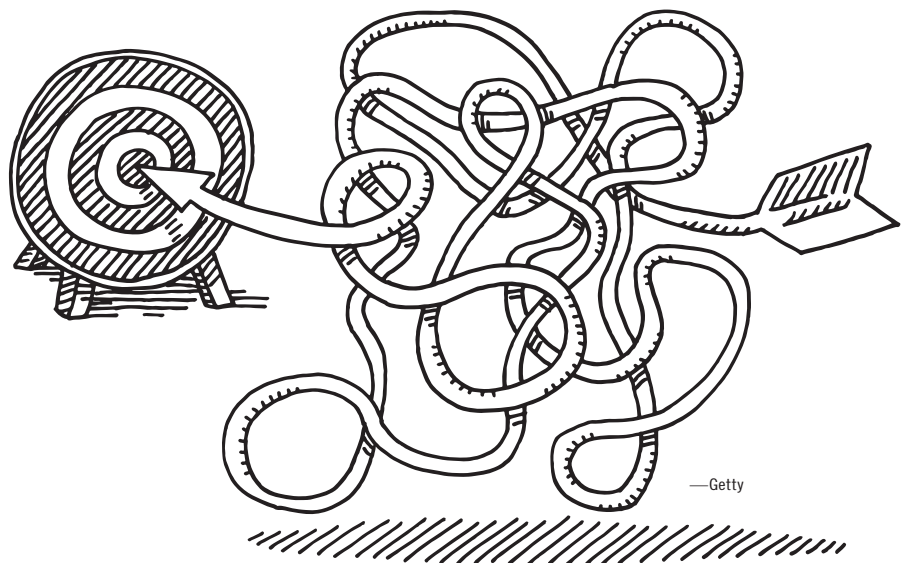
mates are significantly more engaged and achieve better than their less well-connected peers.

Of course, bonding with teachers and classmates, by itself, does not ensure learning—motivation is equally important. Simple motivational strategies—such as giving choices on homework assignments—can improve feelings of competence as well as actual competency on exams. Convincing students of the value of the content in question should augment their motivation further. The motivational climate and the types of goals that teachers promote in the classroom are no less important.

Better self-regulation in students, including self-control, emotion regulation, and the adoption of effective learning strategies, typically results in youths who are likely to achieve higher grades, test scores, and graduation rates. Arguably even more important than those schooling outcomes, self-regulation is critical to life outcomes including health, wealth, and public safety.

Beyond logical arguments and robust research, this simplification of social-emotional learning would improve teaching and learning.

By drilling down to students' three core needs, teachers are armed with a powerful troubleshooting diagnostic. If a student is not learning, her teacher can ask: How healthy are her social relationships? What goals is she pursuing? What are her self-regulatory strengths and weaknesses?



However, distilling SEL to its core components provides more than a diagnostic tool. Research increasingly suggests that even modest interventions in these domains may yield big improvements in student outcomes. In many ways, these areas represent low-hanging fruit for improving student outcomes.

This less-is-more approach allows teachers to diagnose problems and strategize solutions. My own teaching career exemplifies why this deep knowledge is so important. Each semester I assigned my 10th graders an essay on any topic from the course—my teacher-preparation program had alerted me to the motivational benefits of choice. Both semesters, a student named Molly showed up after school begging me to pick the topic for her. Each time, she walked away from our argument frustrated and despairing. Only years later in graduate school did I understand the key nuance that undermined my motivational strategy.

Nearly two decades ago, a now-famous study found that when both offering jam to shoppers at high-end grocers and when suggesting essay topics to undergraduates, participants reacted better to having fewer choices. A large body of subsequent research has reinforced that surprising conclusion: Choice is highly motivating, but only if the choices are limited and meaningful to the chooser. I had paralyzed Molly with too much of a good thing.

The social-emotional-learning movement has identified a universe of important capacities to develop in students. In one way or another, most of these capacities address students' fundamental needs for social relationships, motivation, or self-regulation. The sooner SEL leaders can narrow the choices they promote to educators and simplify teachers' lives, the sooner teachers might listen. ■

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—Getty

COMMENTARY

Published March 4, 2018 in Education Week's Finding Common Ground Blog

No Place for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools? Are You Sure?

By Peter DeWitt

Back in early January, I wrote a commentary for *Education Week* that focused on ways that those of us who care about SEL can get critics to understand why it's important that schools focus on SEL. If you read the blog, and scrolled down to the comments, you saw that I did not win everyone over. I actually had some people e-mail me to send support because they were appalled by the comments.

Unfortunately, I was not surprised by those comments. I was actually expecting them because I have heard those same arguments before. Unfortunately for the naysayers, they don't understand what schools are actually experiencing with their student populations.

To the naysayers I ask, "If schools could just focus on academics, don't you think they would?" Given the fact that they have standards and curriculum that they are struggling to find the time during the day to cover, don't you think that they would prefer that all students come to school healthy and ready to learn?

Let's begin with some staggering statistics from the American Psychiatric

Association, National Institute of Mental Health, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

- 1 in 4 people are diagnosed with mental illness over the course of a year in the U.S.
- Half of all chronic mental health conditions begin by age 14.
- Half of all lifetime cases of anxiety disorders begin as early as age 8.
- More than 60 percent of young adults with a mental illness were unable to complete high school.
- Young people ages 16-24 with mental illness are four times less likely to be involved in gainful activities, like employment, college or trade school.
- Those with a psychiatric disability are three times more likely to be involved in criminal justice activities.
- Each year, 157,000 children and young adults, ages 10-24, are treated at emergency departments for self-inflicted injuries.
- One in 12 high school students have attempted suicide.

It's very difficult to solely focus on academics when students entering school are experiencing issues from the list above.

Should we throw them out of school? Would that make the critics happier? Perhaps we should build a wall so they can't get in? That should work, right?

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Besides students with mental health issues, we have students who are suffering from trauma, also known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), which actually cause some of the issues from above. According to the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS), *“trauma is used to describe negative events that are emotionally painful and that overwhelm a person’s ability to cope.”* Examples that inspire trauma include *“experiencing an earthquake or hurricane, industrial accident or vehicular accident, physical or sexual assault, and various forms of abuse experienced during childhood.”*

These Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) are divided into three types, which are Abuse (physical, emotional, sexual), Neglect (physical, emotional), and Household Dysfunction (incarcerated relative, mental illness, domestic violence, substance abuse, divorce, deployed family member and loss of a parent). It’s sad that we have to add school shootings to that list.

Perhaps the critics of SEL have insight into how to help students that experience trauma or ACE? Perhaps behind the anonymous names and posting lies an expert on how to end the need for SEL?

What Can Schools Do?

While we wait for people to provide their solution that will end all traumatic experiences for students, many schools are moving forward with interventions. Many school leaders have gained new flexibility due to the Every Student Succeeds Act, which allows states and local districts to create school improvement plans that will fund social-emotional programs.

According to the Massachusetts Advocates for Children, and the Legal Services Center of Harvard Law School, trauma informed schools do the following:

School Wide Policies & Practices: Schools need to have districtwide health and wellness policies that they put into place every day.

Classroom Strategies and Techniques: Strategies that are created in partnership with school counselors and psychologists that focus on the social-emotional growth as well as the academic growth of students.

What would you add?

Instead of...

Saying, “What did you do wrong?”

Stopping students in the hallway and asking for a pass...

Solely focusing on academics

Focusing on a disappointing problem

Creating zero tolerance policies

Try...

Saying, “Tell me what happened.”

Stopping students in the hallway and asking them how their day is going...

Focus on social-emotional learning too

Focus on getting to the heart of the issue

Utilizing empathy informed choices

Collaboration and Links to Mental Health: *“Policies describe how, when, and where to refer families for mental health supports; and staff actively facilitate and follow through in supporting families’ access to trauma-competent mental health services.”*

Family Partnerships: Ways to communicate with families that encourage inclusion rather than exclusion.

Community Linkages: Schools maintain relationships with state mental health organizations that understand the context of schools. Teachers and leaders cannot do it all, and outside organizations can offer the expertise that school personnel may not have.

In the End

We can continue to argue whether schools should be exploring SEL or we can understand the sad reality that students are suffering from trauma and mental health issues, and do something about it. We can argue about politics, or realize that our schools are not supposed to be war zones.

Students who suffer from trauma, and those with mental health issues are not throw away kids that we toss to the side. They are children who have the potential to do great things in life. That is not a political argument...it is a reality.

In order to have a stronger education system and help students meet their potential, we need to work together as a school community with families and outside organization. We need to stop blaming and start acting. We need to stop burying our heads in the sand that all of this will go away *“when we start focusing solely on academics.”* SEL is not a fad, nor is it less important than other things we have to teach. SEL and academic learning are equally as important and we need to find a better balance on how to do both. ■

Peter DeWitt, Ed.D. is the author of several books including Collaborative Leadership: 6 Influences That Matter Most (Corwin Press. 2016), School Climate: Leading with Collective Efficacy (Corwin Press. 2017). Connect with him on Twitter.

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