

What We've Learned About Implementing Social-Emotional Learning

Author: 'No other initiative ... in my four districts was better received or more enthusiastically implemented'

BY SHELDON BERMAN

Creating an effective environment for social-emotional learning requires planning, professional development and significant staff time. It demands clarity of vision and focused attention by district and school leadership.

In each of the four school districts in which I have served as superintendent, social-emotional learning was pivotal in improving school climate, students' academic performance and connection to school, and teachers' morale. Over time, I've learned several important lessons that contribute to the effectiveness of SEL.

► **No. 1: The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.**

Teaching and learning are inherently social and emotional. A classroom culture where collaboration and support are the norm conveys a very different social and emotional message than a classroom based on strict discipline, rewards and punishment. A culture of caring and responsiveness supports academic learning by fostering a safe climate in which students can take risks, make mistakes, collaborate with others and receive support.

Structuring a positive social environment requires the same attention and planning for developmental appropriateness and consistency that we provide for the academic curriculum,

including clear messages, a common language and sequential skill development. When I observe a classroom, taking note of the culture and climate is key to helping me guide that teacher toward greater success with students.



The new 3rd graders in Mary Rose Meehan's classroom in Andover, Mass., gather on the rug for their morning meeting, eager to hear the hopes for the year that their parents wrote at last night's parent meeting. Listening, they compare their parents' responses with the ones they themselves wrote just days before. These hopes and goals will remain a yearlong reference point for the work they will do and the community they will build in their classroom.

► **No. 2: Weekly 30-minute lessons aren't sufficient.**

Social curricula that directly teach such skills as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship building and responsible decision making are an important first step. However, these lessons must be integrated into academic instruction, modeled by adults and revisited throughout the day.

At its core, SEL is about helping students develop empathy and work cooperatively to



achieve goals. Students need to practice empathy and social skills daily in the social environment of the classroom, where they can talk with peers and adults about what works.



To foster social development through caring classroom communities, Oregon's Eugene School District launched Caring for Kids, an elementary SEL program that prepares teachers to facilitate classroom meetings and refocus discipline on restorative practices.

► **No. 3: The experience of community is central.**

Experiencing the interdependence and inter-relatedness of belonging to a community not only teaches students social skills but helps them understand the meaning of the common good, appreciate that their actions have consequences for others and feel responsibility for the larger human community. For children who have known

emotional or physical trauma, the first step in developing SEL skills is to foster their trust in the classroom community.

Building a community entails providing students with ongoing experiences of being valued contributors to a classroom that is dedicated to the learning and well-being of all its members. For example, elementary students can take part in morning meetings that unite them for the day ahead and closing meetings that frame the events of the day just ended. Through class meetings they can define classroom norms, deal with classroom issues and make choices that give them voice.

That sense of community extends to models of discipline. In a classroom that focuses on relationships and learning, errors in judgment and behavior are addressed through logical consequences and restorative practices that help students learn to resolve differences, manage their emotions and see others' perspective. The goal is to restore the



Community building is one objective of the morning meeting, a daily practice inside classrooms in Andover, Mass.

relationship, provide restitution when appropriate and enable the student to re-enter the classroom community bolstered by the trust and respect of other students and adults.



It's September 11. The 9th graders in Scott Armstrong's advisory period at Andover High School are getting to know each other as they discuss the first responders who risked their lives at the World Trade Center in 2001 and the people they know who have taken risks to help others. This hour-long advisory period, occurring every eight days, will be a mainstay of their high school experience, personalizing a large school and strengthening students' sense of community.

► **No. 4: SEL classrooms are culturally inclusive.** We tend to be formulaic in teaching social skills, presenting particular strategies for greeting others, offering feedback or resolving differences. However, even something as simple as eye contact can elicit strong and varied reactions among people from diverse backgrounds.

Community requires authenticity, particularly in terms of the cultural norms and identities that students bring to the classroom. Encouraging students to celebrate their cultural identities and honoring the richness that diverse cultural perspectives bring to learning are essential to creating a safe and affirming classroom.

In culturally inclusive and responsive class-

rooms, teachers encourage open conversations about cultures and cultural experiences. Such conversations may stem from literature, historical events, stories about individuals of different cultures who made contributions or approaches to social situations. Appreciating the value of cultural diversity while understanding the pain of prejudice in our world enhances compassion and awakens an aspiration for justice.



Lining the halls outside the 5th-grade classrooms at Andover's High Plain Elementary School is an array of family portraits from the Family Diversity Project's traveling exhibit "Of Many Colors." Inside the classrooms, students — including immigrants from many countries — listen to teachers read *Their Great Gift: Courage, Sacrifice and Hope in a New Land* by John Coy as they launch a unit on immigration. In the coming weeks, the students will trace their families' cultural and national origins and then examine the challenges and prejudices that new immigrants have confronted throughout U.S. history.

► **No. 5: Integration into academics unifies instruction.**

When the core curriculum integrates cooperation, collaboration, investigation and problem solving, students connect their social skills to academic learning. Collaborative investigations in science, problem-solving groups in math,

writing workshops in language arts and project-based learning in social studies foster social skills development — provided students have the opportunity to learn and reflect on the skills they are using. Embedding SEL across the curriculum cements it as an integral component of the school climate.

Although teachers who understand SEL strategies consciously adjust their curriculum to integrate social skills development into their academic instruction, it is unrealistic to expect teachers to completely redesign their academic curriculum on their own. At the district level, we can support the selection of core curriculum materials that integrate instruction in social skills and further the application of those skills.



Organized to simulate a publishing company, Colleen McCormick's 7th-grade language arts students at Andover's West Middle School brainstorm ideas, work in teams around particular publication roles, edit each other's work and produce publications. The experience includes time to reflect on how they are working together and how they can provide each other with actionable and thoughtful feedback.

► **No. 6: Service learning solidifies SEL skills.**

One of the most significant lessons I've learned is that students benefit from real opportunities to demonstrate their social skills and their sense of caring. Service to others affirms those skills and gives them purpose, empowering students through both their actions and the positive response from those who benefit.

Service and service learning take many forms. For example, through such programs as Where Everyone Belongs, 8th graders are paired with incoming 6th graders, offering them insights on making friends, managing the unfamiliar environment and understanding the flow of the day. The older students serve as mentors throughout the year, checking on their younger peers' acclimation, celebrating birthdays and supporting their success.

Through service and service learning, students make the connection between what they are learning and its relevance to the world outside the classroom. Because it connects to the curriculum, service learning enhances both academic skills

Shelley Berman, superintendent of Andover Public Schools in Andover, Mass., which has incrementally introduced social-emotional learning practices.

and social development, giving students an experience of community and a belief in their own power and effectiveness.



In Hudson, Mass., each grade developed a service-learning experience that was integrated into the regular curriculum. For example, kindergartners created alphabet and number books for schools in Uganda. First graders partnered with the senior center in shared reading. Third graders adopted a local service organization as they studied civics and civic engagement. Fourth graders became involved in reclamation of local woodlands and wetlands as part of their science unit on ecosystems.

► **No. 7: Professional development is foundational.**

Another lesson I've learned is the importance of high-quality professional development for all school staff — including cafeteria workers, bus drivers and custodial staff. Many SEL program developers offer training on implementing their specific programs, yet how teachers demonstrate their own SEL skills and address demanding situations in the classroom has even greater influence on school climate and students' development.

It's challenging for teachers to consciously model social skills, facilitate social development in conflict situations, demonstrate cultural proficiency, and be mindful of the impact of adults' language on students' social perceptions. Teachers and administrators require targeted training and guided practice in how to teach SEL skills and



how to reflect on their own daily practice and communication.

When teachers refrain from praise and criticism and instead promote understanding through sincere questions, they enable students to non-defensively explore their own thinking and behavior. When teachers engage students in thinking through conflict situations to find their own solutions, students experience the reward of resolving these differences in positive ways.

When teachers apply restorative discipline and focus on re-establishing and restoring relationships rather than punishing, students begin to experience how they, too, can heal relationships and recover from mistakes. These instructional skills are developed over months and years through effective training, daily practice and collegial support.



Although Andover hosts week-long professional development experiences to help teachers implement SEL effectively, Pam Lathrop's team from High Plain Elementary School takes it one step further. Joining a year-long certification program in school climate and social-emotional learning at William James College, the team digs into what it means to transform, create and sustain a positive school culture through a focus on the core concepts of SEL, systems change and coaching.

► **No. 8: Administrative vision and leadership are critical.**

When the superintendent articulates the district's vision and commitment to SEL, the staff understand its importance. When district leaders show organizational support through specific references to SEL in the district's strategic plan, theory of action and mission statement, the staff feel empowered to move forward. When the superintendent provides such structural supports as SEL instructional coaching or an SEL director, the staff know they have the organizational support and leadership that promote success.

Principals, too, must demonstrate a commitment to SEL, guide its implementation, offer candid assessments of progress and model in personal and management behavior what is expected.

To assist administrators and policymakers, the National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development is developing a roadmap for making SEL part of the fabric of every school. States also are moving to put policies and standards in place to support districts' SEL efforts.



Reflecting the board's and administration's clear purpose of wanting students to be humane, caring and engaged individuals who have a moral compass and are willing to stand up to injustice and prejudice, the Jefferson County school district in Kentucky wrote into its theory of action that staff will "collaborate to create caring and culturally responsive classroom communities ... so that all students are prepared to create a more just society."

► **No. 9: Progress is incremental.**

Finally, I have learned that implementing a comprehensive approach requires incremental steps, starting with a simple foundation that works best for that district. That foundation may be faculty professional development in SEL or the adoption of an elementary-level SEL program or the integration of SEL into the district's strategic plan. From that first step, a district can deepen and extend the approach over time.



In Jefferson County, 70 elementary schools were implementing a structured SEL program, supported by professional development for teachers and principals. An in-depth program evaluation in 2011 revealed that the program had a positive and significant correlation with improvements in school climate, students' attendance and suspension rates, and reading achievement. The correlations were stronger for schools that had implemented the program for more years and in greater depth.

Timely Initiative

In spite of the challenges, no other initiative that I pursued in my four districts was better received or more enthusiastically implemented, largely because of the positive relationships, classroom culture and student responsiveness that SEL fosters.

The schoolwide application of SEL principles helps to ensure that students have a dependable haven where they can express their ideas and concerns without fear, develop skills that help them to interact in a positive fashion with people who hold different perspectives, and count on finding support among adults and peers as they confront issues in their academic and personal lives.

If ever there was an era when social and emotional learning could make a significant difference in our nation's future, that time is now. ■

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