SEL for School Staff - 7 Mindsets

EDITOR’S NOTE
SEL for school staff reduces stress for both adults and students. This Spotlight will help you explore the impact of adult social-emotional awareness on students; discover how to support educator mental health; understand the need for social-emotional support for principals; evaluate what good SEL should look like; recognize that teachers need more than superficial self-care; find ways to discuss sensitive social issues; and more.

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The Secret to Improving Students’ Social-Emotional Skills? Start With the Adults

By Arianna Prothero

To weather the stressors caused by the pandemic, students need strong social and emotional skills. But for schools looking to invest in students’ social-emotional learning, the place to start is not necessarily with the students, but with the adults.

Teachers, administrators, and support staff at schools must understand their own social-emotional abilities and attend to their own well-being before they can teach those competencies to their students. And professional development plans for implanting new social-emotional learning programs should include explicit efforts to build adults’ SEL skills. Those are among several conclusions from an extensive report from the RAND Corporation and The Wallace Foundation on lessons learned during the early implementation of SEL programs in schools and before- and after-school programs in six cities.

While interest in social-emotional learning is surging, research on how best to implement SEL programs and practices has lagged behind the demand, says the report. The report examines two years of data from the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years from student surveys, staff interviews, and school observations in elementary schools and out-of-school time programs in Boston; Dallas; Denver; Palm Beach county, Fla.; Tacoma, Wash.; and Tulsa, Okla.

Problems With Train-the-Trainer

There is hunger among the teaching force for more professional development on social-emotional learning. A separate survey released by RAND earlier this month, but conducted before the pandemic, found that 80 percent of teachers want more professional development on several topics related to SEL.

But in interviews and surveys for this most recent report, RAND found that teachers want their professional development to be both more hands-on and to specifically address how to teach social-emotional skills to different populations, such as students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds or students with disabilities.

Schools found that relying solely on train-the-trainer professional development models—where someone from the central office trains a few school-based staff who then train more people within their school—overburdened school-level trainers and created inconsistencies among schools, especially when it came to training on SEL curriculum. Several schools in the study responded to this challenge by recentralizing SEL curriculum training, although the report recommends reserving the train-the-trainer strategy for some instances, such as when a particular school may need more tailored training to address a specific issue or student population.

Several schools also used SEL coaches to work with teachers, which helped schools customize professional development to meet teachers’ needs. However, because there was some confusion over the role and purpose of SEL coaches in some schools in the study, the report recommends clarifying, codifying, and communicating SEL coaches’ responsibilities.

SEL training was often challenged by staff turnover, especially in before- and after-school programs. One way schools and out-of-school time programs in the trial dealt with this issue was by offering some professional development opportunities in smaller units and more frequently throughout the school year. For example, one school did this by offering 30-minute professional development units on SEL topics before the school day started.

Building SEL Skills and Dispelling Myths

 Principals reported a variety of other ways they helped teachers develop their own SEL competencies and boost emotional well-being, such as setting aside time for SEL instruction, starting an SEL book club, encouraging deeper relationships among adults at their school, modeling at the administrator level strong social and emotional competencies for teachers, and developing a charter outlining what teachers and other school staff need to feel safe and supported at school.

 Principals also borrowed some strategies used to teach students social-emotional skills, such as giving teachers more say in decision making and starting meetings with warm welcomes and optimistic closures.

Finally, school leaders reported that they ran into some misconceptions about, and resistance to, SEL among their teachers, such as beliefs that SEL is only for students with behavioral issues or young children. An Education Week Research Center Survey early last spring also found that while 81 percent of educators said their school placed “some”
Educators’ Social and Emotional Wellness Matters

Experts agree. Educators who possess strong social and emotional skills can successfully manage stress, cultivate relationships, model SEL competencies, and increase student engagement. Also, school leaders with strong social and emotional competence positively impact staff effectiveness and school culture.

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Don’t Forget the Adults: How Schools and Districts Can Support Educator Mental Health

By Madeline Will & Denisa R. Superville

Student mental health is at the forefront of educators’ minds these days after two years of pandemic-driven stress and disruption—but district leaders forget about the adults in the school building at their own peril, experts say.

About 1 in 4 teachers said they were experiencing symptoms of depression in an early 2021 survey by the RAND Corp., a research group and think tank. In a separate survey, RAND also found that most secondary school principals were experiencing frequent job-related stress—and one of their big stressors was supporting teachers’ mental health and well-being.

Left unaddressed, that stress could lead to a massive exodus of educators. Despite that, only a third of district and school leaders said they have made counselors or mental health services available to staff since the start of the pandemic or added to the mental health services already offered, according to a nationally representative EdWeek Research Center survey of nearly 900 educators conducted in January and February.

Forty-four percent of those who responded said they have offered or increased their offerings of professional development on self-care, which educators and experts say is not enough on its own to address clinical mental health needs. And 17 percent said they have not taken any steps to address staff mental health needs during the pandemic even though their current offerings are inadequate.

Targeted mental health support for staff is crucial for a thriving school environment, experts say.

“Teacher well-being is incredibly important, not only for them but for their students’ learning experiences as well,” said Leigh McLean, an assistant research professor at the Center for Research in Education & Social Policy at the University of Delaware.

Her research has found that teachers with depression spend less time doing whole-class instruction—likely because it’s more demanding and energy-intensive—and have fewer warm and responsive interactions with students. They also spend less time planning and organizing their lessons.

Having structural supports for teacher mental health will ultimately benefit everyone in the school building, including school leaders. If teachers and students have access to counseling and other mental health support, that’s a heavy burden taken off their principals’ backs.

Building a culture of support

McLean’s research has found that teachers’ mental health and commitment to their career is better protected when they experience more support and autonomy from school leaders. Having colleagues whom teachers can turn to for help also boosts mental health, she said.

In preliminary research, McLean found...
that during the pandemic, certain teachers are struggling with their mental health more than others: teachers of color, early-career teachers, and those in high-needs schools.

Ronn Nozoe, the chief executive officer of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, has advocated for districts and schools to use some of their federal COVID-19 relief funds to set up targeted support programs for school leaders’ mental health.

However, there’s a huge demand for mental health care professionals nationally, and school districts may be competing with others with deeper pockets.

Additionally, Nozoe said, even school leaders who know the importance of mental health care are more willing to spend available funds on students and teachers than themselves. And there’s still a stigma around mental health, he said.

“It’s not for lack of want, it’s not for lack of ideas,” Nozoe said. “It’s really a lack of available professionals who are willing and qualified to provide these kinds of services to help kids and families and ultimately educators.”

How can school leaders best respond to these pressures? One way is to take stock of their resources, make workers aware of them, and ensure they’re available.

In May, the Colorado School of Public Health’s Center for Health, Work, & Environment partnered with the University of Colorado’s Depression Center to launch a workplace mental health module—an online tool kit for employers to take stock of the management and workplace strategies they have in place to address the mental health of their staff. Employers take a survey that assesses their workplace culture, employee benefits, education and training, and equity and accessibility.

The module is open to all employers in the country, including schools. So far, five districts in Colorado have signed on, including the Denver public schools, said David Shapiro, the program manager for Health Links at CHWE, which distributes the module. These districts typically score high on employee benefits for mental health, he said, but there was a need for more education and training.

For example, all school employees should learn how to access available supports for their own mental health needs. And schools should establish peer-support programs, so some employees learn “how to be an ally or ‘askable’ adult for their colleague to get the support they need,” Shapiro said. He recommends that districts train certain teachers or other staff members so there are “champions for mental health within the school district” who aren’t in leadership positions. (After all, it can be intimidating to confide in your boss, Shapiro noted.)

Also, school and district leaders should make sure they’re sharing information about mental health benefits in an equitable way, he said. Some school staffers, like bus drivers, might not check their emails as frequently as teachers—so principals should consider delivering the information through nonelectronic methods, like posters or mailers, too.

And school leaders must create a workplace culture where people can be open about mental health, he said.

“It’s important to have ‘people be willing to share their stories, and I think this starts with leaders,’” Shapiro said. “[They can tell staff], ‘This pandemic has been challenging for my own mental health—here’s how it impacted me, and I’ve used my mental health benefits [to get help].’ The more we can build the story of mental health, the more we can spread awareness, the more we can reduce stigma.”

Partnerships to Uplift Communities Schools, or PUC, which serves students in northeast Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley in California, has counseling sessions available for students, teachers, and principals. Max Valadez, the principal of PUC Lakeview Charter Academy, said those sessions have helped him navigate challenges in his personal life and served him in his role as a school leader.

“As a principal, there are so many moving pieces, sometimes I just need to talk to somebody who is not going to judge or anything
like that—just to let me know if I am doing things correctly or if I’m not,” Valadez said.

**Modeling and demonstrating concern for mental health**

When Sarah Broome was the executive director of Thrive Academy, a statewide public boarding school in Baton Rouge, La., everybody on staff knew when her weekly therapy appointment was because she spoke about it so freely. Broome, who resigned as the executive director in June 2021 and is now an education consultant, said that openness about mental health helped lessen any stigma for other adults in the building to get help.

When students returned to campus in August 2020 after the initial coronavirus shutdowns, Paul Sampson, Thrive’s principal at the time, and Chelsea Trice, the school’s head social worker, decided that it wasn’t enough to prioritize students’ mental health—they needed to offer robust support to educators, too. Broome agreed.

“We are not a place that cares about mental health unless we care about mental health for everybody, and that includes our adults on campus,” Broome said. “Teaching was really hard before the pandemic, and it’s only gotten exponentially more so. Teachers need places to process [their feelings].”

The school began offering teachers the option to participate in individual therapy sessions with school social workers every other week. (Thrive later hired contract social workers, in case teachers felt more comfortable talking with someone who wasn’t on staff.) The social workers kept all information shared during the sessions confidential but also compiled top-level trends and shared that data with administrators.

Moreover, the school held weekly group therapy meetings where teachers could talk about specific student academic and social-emotional needs and discuss the best strategies to take. The meetings allowed administrators to hear teachers’ concerns and address them immediately, Broome said.

But none of this work was an overnight fix, she said. And teachers were able to go to these therapy sessions because school leadership had built significant amounts of teacher planning time into the schedule.

“You can’t mental-health-support your way out of structural challenges,” Broome said. “There is literally nothing you can do for a teacher who is not able to go to the bathroom all day.”

Valadez, the Lakeview Charter Academy principal, has also been trying to find ways to reduce the strain on his teachers, especially those who’ve had to fill in for colleagues who’re absent because of COVID-19.

A few nonteaching staff members have recently obtained their teacher-substitute permits, and the charter school network also contracted with a substitute company, which allows the school to have a substitute ready if a teacher gives two weeks’ notice that he or she will be absent. Both changes reduce the frequency teachers will be called upon to fill in for peers—eliminating a huge stressor.

**Outside resources and partnerships can help**

The PUC charter schools network relies heavily on graduate interns studying American family therapy—a cheaper way to staff counseling programs for students and educators, since the interns are not paid and are getting experience and credit toward their degrees.

That program was started in the early 2000s and is run by Christine Sartiaguda, a licensed marital and family therapist who also has a doctorate in education. It has grown from Sartiaguda and 16 interns to include 50 to 60 clinical interns annually, working under a team of five licensed clinical supervisors. While the program was initially geared to support students, teachers and school leaders were always able to tap into it. But the outreach to teachers and principals became more systematic since the pandemic.

“With COVID, we realized that it wasn’t a matter of waiting for the teachers to ask, it was about us being proactive—recognizing and just seeing the impact COVID has had on teachers trying to pivot to online learning,” she said. “They look tired, they look stressed, and we just need to provide the support and hope they take advantage of it.”

Just one month after the initial shutdown in spring 2020, Sartiaguda started offering teacher-support groups via Zoom. By fall of the 2020-21 school year, those groups were available at all the network’s campuses. Staff meetings include meditation and mindfulness exercises. Professional development has self-care for teachers—“simple, simple ways that they can fit in one minute of mindfulness in their day, just to kind of disconnect from the chaos of having to practice and teach,” she said.

Sartiaguda’s staff can tailor supports to meet individual schools’ needs.

“If a [school] leader comes to us and says, ‘I’ve had a lot of my teachers who’ve experienced deaths in their families since COVID
began, can you do a specific group just addressing grief and loss? The answer is yes," she said. “Regardless of the need is, we can accommodate it.”

Because the interns are receiving their degrees in marital and family therapy, their primary focus in schools remains getting experience in those areas.

“Even if we have really restructured our program to include the teacher piece,” Sar-tiaguda said. In addition, her team provides referrals to low-cost counselors and therapists in the community.

**Getting buy-in from educators**

Although teachers are stressed, not all are taking advantage of the mental health resources the PUC network is offering, Sar-tiaguda said.

After the end of a long day, some teachers did not want to log on to Zoom for another hour—even if they knew the benefits, she said. “We do try sometimes to offer it during lunchtime, and sometimes teachers say, ‘You know what. I just want to eat my lunch, [or] I need to prep.’” But she added, “what we emphasize is, it is here if you change your mind. If you reach a point of, ‘Well, I actually want to make time for this support,’ it is absolutely available.”

Valadez, who became the principal of PUC Lakeview Charter Academy just a few months before the pandemic, said about 20 percent of the school’s teachers have taken advantage of the on-site counselors over the last two years. Some needed help with family issues such as deaths in the family and personal problems, so he always lets them know that “there’s somebody else they can talk to.”

Jennifer Lopez, a teacher at PUC Community Charter Elementary School in Los Angeles, started a self-care committee shortly after the shutdown in March 2020, with the support of Principal Jocelyn Velez, to help teachers focus on their well-being, develop coping skills, and provide other support, amid the pandemic.

Both say the committee will become a permanent part of the school going forward. “One of the teachers said, ‘This is the one meeting I can miss but the one meeting I don’t want to miss because I need this type of support,’ ” Velez said. “That’s always really nice to hear.”

The topics Lopez tackles during the meetings, which initially were held over Zoom, come from teacher surveys and feedback. She’s also organized book studies on wellbeing and hosted sessions on yoga and financial wellness.

Now back on campus, the group continues to meet weekly. Administrators have also joined in, including on a recent nature walk.

“It’s been really cool to bring that community back to campus,” Lopez said. “It’s been really awesome to have our admin support and [have] them thinking of ways for us to take care of our mental health.”

Weekly emails go beyond self-help pick-me-ups, Velez said, and provide concrete tips and techniques that teachers can use to weather this traumatic period.

This semester, the group is studying Tina Boogren’s *180 Days of Self-Care for Busy Educators*, a guide to helping educators find the right balance.

Lopez recently hosted a “vision board” activity to help staff members visualize both their professional and personal intentions.

“It was nice to take that time in our busy lives to sit down, cut out pictures, and print out pictures, and sit down with our staff members, and talk about our goals in a very genuine way,” said Velez. “In a time of chaos, ... allowing ourselves to be ourselves, bringing that person behind the professional into the classrooms with a group of teachers—that was very impactful, I think.”

Principals can create an environment in which teachers know they can go to their bosses and say they need to take a break, Velez said. She has been encouraging teachers to take the day off when they need to and she’s been modeling that behavior to staff.

“We have a trusting relationship at our school and we’ve built that culture—it’s taken some time, but it’s that trust,” Velez said.

For example, a teacher, who is pregnant, recently texted Velez one night saying that her feet were swollen.

Velez responded, “You can take the day off tomorrow,” she said. “I would just need to know so I can get a sub. But we want you to be healthy, we want you to take care of yourself. We want you to follow the doctor’s orders. So, if it means extra rest—take the day off.

“It’s really letting them know it’s going to be OK,” she said. “I just want you to take care of yourself.”

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**Principals Need Social-Emotional Support, Too**

By Denisa R. Superville

Before the pandemic upended lives across the globe, K-12 districts were proud of their efforts to weave social-emotional learning into the fabric of their schools.

But they seemed to have overlooked a very important group in the process: principals—the people who set the tone and climate in schools and on whom the success of any school-based initiative rests.

That’s a remarkable oversight because SEL really can’t work in schools unless principals understand the research and practices undergirding it and are modeling appropriate behaviors for staff and students.

And the principal’s responsibilities—attending to students’ academic and social-emotional well-being; building relationships with staff, students, parents, and the broader community; engendering trust with stakeholders; making sound management decisions while also juggling their personal lives—demonstrate that they’re prime candidates who would benefit from a firm understanding and practice of SEL.

The pandemic and social justice protests over the last 18 months were clarion calls that principals desperately need SEL, too. Not just to support students and teachers, but for their own well-being and survival.

In the early days of the crisis, the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators, the principals’ union for the New York City school system, surveyed school leaders in the city, then the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the emotions school leaders said they were experiencing: anxiety, stress, and frustration.

As principals start another uncertain school year, we must ask: Who is looking out for them? Leadership preparation programs would be one place to start taking school leaders’ emotional and mental health seriously.

Knowledge and training in SEL competencies will help principals become better leaders, improve relationships schoolwide, and create stronger bonds with parents and communi-
ties, contends Julia Mahfouz, an assistant professor in the school of education and human development at the University of Colorado-Denver, who thinks that educator-preparation and licensure programs should infuse SEL competencies into coursework.

This would give principals a firm grounding in the research, along with opportunities to build their SEL muscle through reflection and collaboration, Mahfouz and others argue. It would also put school leaders on stronger footing to run successful schools and reduce job stress and, hopefully, principal turnover.

“We need to integrate social and emotional learning into the immune system of the entire school district, if we want to get the outcomes that we all care about,” said Marc A. Brackett, the director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the co-creator of the RULER Approach to SEL—a program that teaches school community members how to recognize and regulate emotions.

The shift to center SEL in educator-preparation programs should ideally start when candidates are preparing to become teachers. This ensures that the awareness will be a “second skin to their professional identity” by the time they become principals, said Maia Niguel Hoskin, a visiting assistant professor and co-academic director of the school counseling program at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

An early start also ensures that the burden of equipping school leaders with SEL skills does not fall solely on school districts, according to Melissa Schlinger, the vice president of practice and programs at CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, which saw a spike in interest from districts during the pandemic.

There’s still a crucial role for districts to ensure that principals are continually refreshing these skills.

“SEL is a lifelong process of reflection and building your own capacity,” and it requires continuous support, Schlinger said.

But districts also have a burning problem in front of them right now and can’t—and should not—wait for prep programs to catch up.

They can take small steps that won’t break the bank to ensure that their principals are emotionally and mentally ready for the job as this national trauma chugs along.

- Start with a baseline assessment.
  Offer a quick mandatory, anonymous 5-10 question survey for principals on SEL competencies. The survey can help districts assess the types of stress principals are experiencing in order to tailor professional development and other supports. said Hoskin.
- Provide ongoing PD. Targeted, ongoing, job-embedded professional development and resources can improve principals’ understanding of SEL. With lots of products on the market, districts should carefully select those backed by evidence and a record of improving outcomes for staff and students. That would be a wise use of federal funds from the American Rescue Plan, which provides aid to help with recovery from the pandemic.
- Create “wellness days.” Wellness days for principals, like sick days, drive home the message that school systems value mental and social-emotional health. Districts can also add a “wellness corner” or “mental health watch” to their newsletters or host wellness weeks to normalize the importance of healthy school leaders, Hoskin suggested.
- Transform meetings. They are often agenda-driven. Start instead with a welcoming ritual to build relationships and trust. Include time for reflections and small-group discussions, Schlinger said. End on an optimist note.
- Strengthen mentoring. Veteran principals can help support or guide current early-career school leaders with stress management, coping strategies, and self-care.
- Establish support groups. Trust and relationships are important SEL touchstones. Think about organizing groups of like-minded or similarly situated principals. For example, those leading elementary or Title I schools can help their peers with on-the-job challenges and reduce isolation.
- Communicate clearly. Mixed messaging is a major reason why many principals have been feeling unmoored. While information continues to change rapidly during the pandemic, district officials can ensure that they are communicating clearly with school leaders what they know and when they know it, and provide school leaders with the necessary supports to accomplish their tasks. Communication should also be a two-way street. Principals must have opportunities to give feedback and to be heard by their bosses.

Changes can start small and be subtle, but consistency is the lynchpin. And that’s especially crucial this year for educators, parents, communities, and students weighed down by the accumulated trauma of the last two years.

“It’s not enough to have one PD a year,” Hoskin said. “That’s great, but what are we doing to maintain it during the year? That’s when the newsletter comes in, that’s when the wellness week comes in. … That’s when allowing them to take off mental-health days comes in. Those are the kinds of things that create an environment [that says] ‘we care about you.’”

In the longer term, we can look to prep-programs to fill the SEL knowledge and skills gap. And some programs are already adjusting.

“You can see there is a cry that’s happening on behalf of principals,” said Mahfouz, who
wants national standards and state evaluation systems to recognize the importance of SEL for school leaders. “Higher education institutions are trying to respond. They are aware of the need.”

Through Yale, Brackett is offering an eight-week online course for school staff called “Managing Emotions in Times of Uncertainty and Stress.” Available on Coursera, more than 60,000 teachers, principals, and other educators have enrolled in it so far.

Hoskin also encourages brain breaks and mindfulness in class. In one exercise, students note everything that’s on their minds. They reflect on what is causing them distress. Sharing is optional, but Hoskin asks students to select something that is troubling them and put it aside for the duration of the class so they can be present in the moment.

Professors can also model the kinds of behaviors they’d like to see in their principal-candidates by discussing openly how they engage in self-care. “Sometimes there is this shame behind self-care,” Hoskin said. “There should not be shame. There should not be a stigma.”

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What Good Social-Emotional Learning Should Look Like: First, Listen to the Community

By Arianna Prothero

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, has selected a new president and CEO: Aaliyah A. Samuel, the deputy assistant secretary for local, state, and national engagement for the U.S. Department of Education.

Samuel is taking the wheel at a time when there is an unprecedented surge of interest in social-emotional learning among educators and policymakers brought on by the pandemic and the trauma and disruptions it has caused for schoolchildren. But the spotlight also brings challenges—in particular whether the social-emotional learning field can deliver on the research that shows SEL can boost student academics and well-being.

Samuel has worked both as a special education teacher and a principal before moving into policy work, and as the daughter of immigrant parents from Panama growing up in Washington state, Samuel said she has seen up close the promise and limitations of American public education.

“I was bilingual,” she said. “As a Latina who presents as a Black woman, living in an area that was not culturally diverse, my sister and I faced challenges in our identity and how we were seen.”

It wasn’t until 8th grade that she said she had a teacher who invested in developing a relationship with her, something that completely altered her academic trajectory. Samuel didn’t have her first teacher of color until she went to Tuskegee University for her undergraduate degree.

Samuel spoke with Education Week about the challenges and opportunities facing social emotional learning at this unique time.

There has been a surge of interest in SEL because of the pandemic and racial justice issues. Then there’s all this federal money now available for schools to adopt or expand social emotional learning. Are you concerned that in this rush to put SEL programs in place that schools will adopt unproven approaches or curricula, or they won’t implement them correctly?

Yes, I do share that concern. I can say this as a pure educator who is coming to this policy space, that if you look across the history of education, that if you look across the history of education, there’s a silver bullet that has often come in and people want to focus on this thing and then it goes away. And teachers have often expressed frustrations of not being able to keep up with the ricochet of things coming and going.

But I will say that one thing that has been...
consistent, and consistent with CASEL specifically, is its commitment to high-quality and evidence-based SEL. I think that is going to be something that is critical to continue to elevate in the field.

SEL is not a new concept. So how do we make sure that as district leaders, as educators, and even as state leaders are trying to think about what SEL practices should look like in their states and in their communities, that we’re guiding them towards what the evidence is telling us, making sure we are elevating both the high-quality and the evidence-based SEL.

What can education leaders do to make sure they’re doing social-emotional learning right? What advice would you give them?

So, for district leaders, I think the first thing that they really have to do is make sure that they’re including the community. When I say communities, I mean the school community and the larger community of who they serve.

I did virtual school with my kids. We’ve seen firsthand the role now more than ever that parents are playing in their kids’ education and the heightened awareness that parents have. Parents want to be included. So, I think number one, district leaders need to get really clear on who they’re serving and what their needs are. Then start to move towards what is the right SEL approach that will work for that community. I think making sure that decisions aren’t made in isolation and that it’s inclusive in nature has to be step one.

What should schools be doing now to make sure they build sustainable SEL programs that are not fully dependent upon federal funding streams that are going to dry up?

I think understanding that SEL, in part, doesn’t have to be a separate thing, that it can be integrated into the work, into the fabric of what’s happening. I also think focusing on adult SEL as well is really important to the sustainability.

I want to switch gears a little bit. There has been criticism that some popular social-emotional learning programs or approaches aren’t relevant for children from marginalized groups or that social-emotional learning doesn’t adequately recognize the barriers and challenges some children are facing—whether it’s racism, poverty, or violence in their homes or communities. Is this a big issue within the field and how should it be addressed?

So, yes. Period. I agree. And I think that there absolutely needs to be a deeper focus on equity and how we approach it. As we think about what does this look like and how do we unpack it so that SEL does meet the needs of subgroups, I think there are two groups that are critical to engage in as we enter this conversation. One, parents, and two, the field. This should be a collaborative conversation with those who are impacted the most.

But I also think, and as a woman of color, yes, the race piece is important, but we also have to talk about students with disabilities, whether it’s learning disabilities, kids with special healthcare needs, and how do we include them in this SEL conversation? I think it’s also really important to think about students who are coming from rural settings and how are we thinking about SEL approaches and supports for them?

Absolutely we need to be thinking about this and we also need to be thinking about it from a strength-based approach because solid SEL builds on the strengths of communities, families, and of the student.

On the flip side, there’s been increasing criticism from some political conservatives that social-emotional learning is a form of liberal indoctrination, Marxism, or a Trojan horse for integrating critical race theory into instruction. Do you see politicization as a threat to social-emotional learning?

So much of education has become politicized. And that is why I think it’s so important to elevate the practitioner voice and the parent voice in this conversation.

Is there a concern that there’s the potential? Yes. But I can also tell you first-hand that I have seen a bipartisan interest on SEL, on practices that help kids thrive academically.

When I was running the education division at the National Governors Association, we had 33 Republican governors in office. It took a lot of work and conversations, but we had a shared mental model of what it meant when we said “SEL”, what it meant when we said “equity.” And I think that’s something that we need to do as a field, particularly with policymakers. Right now, depending on who says SEL, there’s a very different mental model of what it is. And I think if we can get to a shared mental model and what we’re trying to accomplish, it will then make it easier to [get] bipartisan support. And I will tell you, there is not a policymaker, on the left or the right, who does not care about education and workforce, there’s not one.

In your eyes, what are the biggest challenges facing schools related to social-emotional learning?

I had an opportunity to sit down and talk to a group of educators in Charlotte, North Carolina, and a veteran teacher of over thirty plus years said to me, “Dr. Samuel, we have returned to school, but we haven’t returned to learning because we need to focus on the relationships.” And I think right now the biggest challenges for schools, or even for educators, is that there’s been such a heavy emphasis on reopening and the academics, it’s almost like educators feel like they’re pitted against the actual SEL and relationship needs and supports that kids need to adjust to being back.

I think really underscoring that it doesn’t have to be either or, it can be both. We can attend to the academics while we attend to the needs of the students. I really think that’s one of the biggest challenges for the field.
As challenging as COVID-19 has been for educators, students, and schools, there is also positive news. Emerging evidence indicates that promoting teacher well-being and mental health reduces stress and anxiety. By addressing their own social emotional wellness first, teachers are more successful in impacting the social emotional wellness of their students and changing school cultures for the better.

The Importance of Social Emotional Learning

Decades of research confirm that social and emotional learning (SEL) can be taught, modeled, and practiced and will lead to positive outcomes that are important for success in school and life. Social emotional learning helps students develop the self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills that are vital for school, work, and life success. The value of SEL is that people with strong social-emotional skills are better able to cope with life's daily challenges by using skills such as problem solving, self-discipline, impulse control, and emotion management.

A recent article in Psychology Today noted that teachers also need social emotional learning. "If you want a better education system, the best way to take care of kids is to make sure that the people who interact most with the kids are taking care of themselves." Socially and emotionally competent teachers set the tone in their classrooms by developing supportive and encouraging relationships with their students. Many school districts assume that teachers already have these competencies. “Although adults can develop these competencies (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013), they need to be built intentionally, assessed regularly, and continuously improved (Bouffard, 2018).” 1

Teachers need to know how to explicitly teach SEL competencies as well as how to create a nurturing learning environment. This requires them to have SEL competencies of their own.2 Researchers who looked at this specifically suggest that the most important SEL competencies for teachers to have include self-awareness, social-awareness, cultural awareness, prosocial values, and self-management.3

Positive outcomes of SEL programs that support educators include reducing stress and job-related anxieties and depression while increasing teachers’ feelings of job control, warmth, and high-quality interactions with students (Greenberg et al., 2016). These changes are linked to students’ feelings of being connected to school and successful positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes.

At the district and school level, successful SEL programs depend on good leadership, staff working together with shared goals that facilitate SEL instruction, and leadership and staff fostering a positive school culture that models social, emotional, and cultural competence.
Insights and Lessons—Theory into Practice
Chilton Independent School District (ISD) in central Texas is a small rural district with 540 low socioeconomic students. Superintendent Brandon Hubbard had been looking for an SEL program to help teachers, staff, and students develop the mental frameworks to push past economic and social barriers to higher levels of achievement. “I believe culture precedes achievement: we needed a culture of grit, resilience, and everything is possible to become and sustain a high-achieving school,” said Hubbard.

When Hubbard initially focused on getting buy-in from teachers, he understood that for the program to be successful, teachers had to invest in their own social-emotional health first. When a SEL program was selected, the initial training was for all teachers and staff; even several board members attended. Hubbard wanted the new culture to start at the top before implementing the SEL curriculum with students.

“As a leadership team, we try new things to ensure our teachers are okay. In order to address the learning needs of our students, teachers need to be okay,” he said. We knew we would have to hit the ground running and knew once it started, it would be difficult and challenging.

Same Challenges, Different District
After a 2018 school shooting nearby at Santa Fe High School, administrators in New Caney ISD decided it was time to do something intentional with social emotional learning. They believed with an SEL program for their 19 schools and 16,000 students, they could identify those in difficulty before they got to the point of violence. The district wanted an evidence-based program that addressed teachers’ competency to teach SEL by developing a common language from K–12, increasing the depth of content and understanding at each grade level, and ensuring that it was developmentally appropriate.

“I felt that having a curriculum and having something that would give us common language across the district was really important,” said Loree Munro, director of advanced academics and counseling.

The district won two grants to pilot their selected SEL program in five schools. “Professional development should come first for a successful implementation,” said Munro. “SEL begins with addressing the needs of your teachers first and getting them in step to have the right mindset. Then you can engage students and push through the curriculum aspects of the program.” The pilots were so successful that the district decided to expand to 18 schools for Fall 2020. Due to the onset of COVID-19, multiple leadership groups participated in the virtual summer institute offered by the program. They also conducted back-to-school training virtually in the fall.

“Last year during the pilots we were measuring teacher SEL growth through teacher surveys before and after the year,” said Munroe, “and our teacher group showed growth in their own SEL.” The entire district benefited from what was happening at the pilot schools because there was so much conversation about SEL across the district.

The principals from the pilot schools saw changes in their teachers and their students after the first year and have been able to leverage that success through this past year. “With each year, we will close the gaps in deficiencies and help build a healthy, functional group of students who will go into their future colleges and careers well prepared,” said Munro.
A Wider View
When working with schools and districts this year, the big takeaway is how fatigued teachers and staff are, says Chelsea Buchanan, Director of Educational Services at 7 Mindsets, a SEL digital solutions provider. "COVID has been the catalyst that allowed administrators to begin seeing how important teacher social emotional health is," said Buchanan. "Teachers are struggling, and districts are trying to be intentional about SEL to better support teacher wellness."

During the initial training in schools, Buchanan's team of coaches hear many of the same things from teachers. "They'll tell us things like they're worried and anxious, and they don't know what's going to happen," said Buchanan, "which are the exact same emotions their students are feeling." The interesting thing about this realization, says Buchanan, is how surprised teachers are to recognize their own vulnerabilities. "Their brains are so wired to think about their students and what their students need, that it's a little uncomfortable for them to talk about what they need," said Buchanan.

However, the research is clear: investing in teacher SEL is necessary in order to maximize effectiveness for teachers, students, and school culture. "We want teachers to be happy to come to school every day and feel like school is their safe place, and that they know their coworkers and can trust them no matter how hard the work is. The team can lean on each other," says Buchanan. "Then they can work together to change the school culture."

Conclusion
Decades of research have confirmed that social emotional competence can be taught and positively impact schools. To create a school culture with a growth mindset and a sense of possibility that prepares students with the skills they need for academic and future success, it is imperative that schools begin with the social emotional competence of their teachers and staff. A positive school culture rooted in relationships models social, emotional, and cultural competence and offers long term improvements to students' skills, attitudes, social behavior, and academic performance.

"We want teachers to be happy to come to school every day and feel like school is their safe place, and that they know their coworkers and can trust them no matter how hard the work is. The team can lean on each other."
Superficial Self-Care? Stressed-Out Teachers Say No Thanks

By Alyson Klein

Louise Williamson’s phone lights up whenever an administrator raises the importance of self-care and wellness in a meeting. “This is the last thing I needed to hear right now,” someone will write on a text chain the English teacher in Southern California has going with some of her colleagues. “Just shut up and let me go home,” someone will write. Or, “They say they care about our wellness, but we’re told to go teach in a petri dish every day.”

Being a teacher—always a difficult job—is especially stressful these days. Teachers often lose their own planning period to cover classes for absent colleagues, who may be out sick or quarantining after a COVID-19 exposure. Students are wrestling with trauma brought on by lockdowns, losing a family member to COVID, and more. Talk of lost learning time continues in schools is on the rise. And some teachers worry they are putting their own health on the line every time they come into work.

What’s more, many teachers have had to prepare both for in-person instruction, and virtual learning for kids quarantined at home. That means creating slide decks, videotaping lessons, and more, Williamson said. Her planning time has more than quintupled this school year.

To help teachers cope with what many say has become an emotionally draining, bottomless workload, administrators around the country are turning in part to the wellness and self-care practices that have become increasingly popular—and fueled a multi-billion dollar industry—over the past decade.

Districts have held professional-development sessions on meditation and breathing exercises. Staff emails remind teachers to remember to take time for themselves and their families. Teachers are encouraged to check out yoga, aromatherapy, or write in a journal, typically on their own time. One large urban district sent out a calendar with self-care reminders like, “On the 25th, take a walk.”

Some teachers say they find this sort of thing helpful. Others see it as well-intentioned, but no substitute for the kind of broader, systemic change that would keep them from feeling that their jobs have become untenable.

And still others see it as myopic and even insulting. “I think that when people in charge recommend wellness to teachers instead of fixing the situation, it comes off as being insincere, patronizing, or even just shortsighted, wanting to put a Band-Aid on a problem,” said Williamson, a nearly 30-year veteran educator who teaches at Hilltop High School in Sweetwater Union High School District, south of San Diego.

Or, as Tiffany Moyer-Washington, an 8th grade English teacher in Hartford, Conn., put it: “I feel like I’m drowning, and they throw you a rubber ducky. Rubber duckies are cute and all, but I’m not in a position to take it [because] I’m literally drowning right now.”

“People get soured on the whole concept”

That doesn’t mean that mindfulness techniques aren’t helpful—up to a point.

In one study, first published in 2017, with follow-up results published in 2019, researchers randomly assigned 224 teachers working at high-poverty elementary schools in New York City to a group that received professional development in emotional regulation, mindfulness and more, and one that did not. After nine and a half months in the program, the teachers who got the training reported significant decreases in psychological distress, fewer physical aches and pains, and an improved ability to stay calm amid the intensity of the classroom, compared to the control group teachers.

The problem is that while mindfulness can help teachers deal with their high-pressure jobs, it doesn’t take away the cause of that pressure, said Patricia Jennings, a professor of education at the University of Virginia and the lead author of the study. “Mindfulness can help teachers be more aware in the moment, when their own stress level is starting to rise, and do things proactively to calm themselves,” she said. But, she added, “mindfulness is not going to help with the kinds of structural problems that stretch teachers beyond their limits. Just telling a teacher to breathe when they haven’t had a break all day is not going to help at all.”

Fans of mindfulness worry that districts’ superficial embrace of self-care and wellness has backfired, closing teachers off to the real benefits of those techniques. “People get soured on the whole concept,” said Williamson, a certified yoga teacher and daily meditator who wakes up at 4:30 a.m. every day to get her practice in before school. “And then when it is sincerely presented, or when there are practices that would be helpful, they reject them. They want to go on the warpath against wellness.”

What’s more, Shayna Boyd, a middle school
Mindfulness is not going to help with the kinds of structural problems that stretch teachers beyond their limits. Just telling a teacher to breathe when they haven’t had a break all day is not going to help at all.”

PATRICIA JENNINGS
Professor of education,
University of Virginia

teacher in Chicago, wonders whether self-care would be coming up so often if education wasn’t a female-dominated profession. It’s hard to imagine, for instance, telling construction workers to “take a bubble bath or get some candles” in response to pervasive stress on the job, she said. “It just seems a bit sexist.”

Being ‘honest about what’s hard’

What many teachers say they want instead of breathing exercises: The kind of big, structural transformation that will make their jobs more manageable.

Those broader changes could include: hiring more social workers, school counselors, and others who can support teachers in dealing with student mental health; giving teachers more time to prepare for their classes; reducing class size; hiring more paraprofessionals to help with the workload; and offering better compensation, especially for teachers who take on extra responsibilities.

Teachers recognize that those sorts of high-level changes may be costly, take time to implement, or be beyond the purview of a single principal or even a superintendent.

Other suggestions might be easier to act on. Administrators could combine important announcements into one easy-to-digest email a day, instead of bombarding teachers’ inboxes with information, Williamson said. And they should consider cutting way down on the number of meetings teachers must attend, at least for the rest of this school year.

Or, if districts are going to embrace self-care and mindfulness, they should “take it seriously,” said Rachel Vidaure, a kindergarten teacher in Los Angeles. That might mean hiring certified meditation instructors or breath coaches and sending them out to school sites, she suggested. Teachers have also recommended that any self-care training be entirely optional, and that professional-development time devoted to mandatory mindfulness might be better spent by allowing teachers to get work done, or even leave for the day.

Administrators can also work on building community and encouraging teachers to take time for themselves, even during a hectic school day.

A case in point: Earlier this year, Moyer-Washington realized she wasn’t really getting to rest her teacher brain during her lunch break. So, she brought a puzzle into the teachers lounge and invited her colleagues to help her complete it.

“Everybody friggin’ loves it,” Moyer-Washington said. “We finished 11 puzzles so far this year.” The time spent working on a fun project also helps cut down on the shop talk during lunch, she added. “It just naturally gives people time to get out of the stressed headspace of teaching all the time.”

It’s a good idea to give teachers a chance to talk about what strategies they think would help tackle job-related stress, Jennings said.

“Give teachers some voice about what their needs are,” she said. “Let them talk, let them communicate, let them be engaged in the problem-solving process. Because right now teachers are sort of left out of the conversation.”

Teachers also appreciate when leaders are frank about the challenges K-12 systems face.

“My principal is really honest about what’s hard. She acknowledges when she is struggling,” said Neema Avaisha, a fourth-grade teacher in Boston Public Schools. “So many people in positions of leadership aren’t able to just say, ‘This is hard, and it’s hard for all of us. Here’s how we can take care of each other during this.’”
have virtually (32 percent) or teachers felt unprepared to lead them (31 percent).

Yet students of all ages have questions about recent distressing events. These questions will not go away if teachers ignore them. In fact, not addressing difficult topics like race and inequality can be detrimental to student development, learning, and society in general.

When teachers ignore racial and cultural differences or deny the existence of inequality, research shows that students belonging to racial or cultural minority groups often struggle to focus and question whether they belong in school. Turning a blind eye to socially significant differences can also undermine the development of critical-thinking skills, decrease sensitivity to discrimination, cramp cross-racial and cross-cultural friendships, and lead white students to minimize the role of race in society. Together, this research suggests that “colorblind” educational approaches can fuel existing inequalities.

In contrast, having conversations about race and other difficult topics bolsters academic and social development. For students of color, race- and culture-conscious conversations can support positive racial or ethnic identification and foster identity safety—the belief that they belong and can be successful in school.

Even with these benefits, teachers’ concerns about initiating difficult conversations are real and often warranted. Discussions that go the wrong way can make students feel singled out or stereotyped and exacerbate racial and cultural divisions.

Last October, our group led a workshop for the Forest Grove District Equity Team to help educators successfully address sensitive current events in the classroom. We focused on the barriers to difficult but important conversations and how to overcome these.

**Barrier 1: Teachers feel unprepared for the task**

Some teachers fear they don’t know enough about the issues or how to guide students through a discussion. Forest Grove teachers offer these recommendations:

- Learn the facts about hot-button issues and consult multiple sources to understand the different perspectives students are likely to hear.

- Frame difficult discussions as learning experiences and center student voices. You do not have to have all the answers; acknowledge when you are still processing or need to learn more. Help students work together to learn about the issues, process reactions, and develop opinions.

- Develop go-to strategies for leading difficult conversations; for example, begin by asking students what they know or by giving the class grounding information to spark discussion. Connect difficult conversations to curriculum. Ask students to apply skills and concepts they learn in class to the issues and allow them to direct their own learning through task boards or similar activities.

**Barrier 2: Classroom norms don’t yet support these conversations**

Students are often ready and willing to talk about difficult topics, but teachers have to set the stage for inclusive, productive conversations by making it safe for all students to participate:

- Establish guidelines for respectful listening and responding.

- Ensure all students can participate without feeling hypervisible or singled out. For example, allow students to submit anonymous questions and comments.

- Ask students to speak from their own experiences and not on behalf of their group (for example, speaking for all Black Americans or immigrants).

- Make room for multiple perspectives. This does not mean allowing hate speech. Rather, it involves helping students understand that different perspectives arise from people’s experiences in relation to the issues. For example, even among recently immigrated families, families that include undocumented immigrants may feel differently about immigration issues from those that include naturalized citizens or permanent residents. Encourage critical thinking and empathy by focusing on the reasons underlying different viewpoints more than the differences themselves.

**Barrier 3: Teachers fear negative reactions from families**

Sometimes families ask teachers not to discuss sensitive issues with their children, and teachers often anticipate negative reactions from families, a concern that may be heightened because many parents are supervising distance learning. The way teachers engage families can make a difference in how families respond to classroom activities:

- Build relationships and create identity safety for families. Understanding families and their experiences allows educators to anticipate and address concerns. Moreover, when families have good relationships with teachers, they trust them to help their children process difficult topics.

- Front-load the conversation. Some families worry that teachers have “an agenda” in discussing sensitive issues. Alleviate these worries by explaining that your goal is to use age-appropriate discussions to help students master the curriculum and develop the critical-thinking skills they need to thrive in a complex and changing society.

- Get parents involved in the discussion. Ask students to find out what their families think or work with their families to learn about the issue.

- Share resources with parents. Direct parents to trustworthy sources that they can use to learn about the issue.

Rather than shying away from challenging conversations, teachers have a responsibility to lean in with empathy and provide the support students need to process complex events. With effective planning, teachers can use difficult conversations to enhance learning and help students become engaged citizens.

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When Social-Emotional Learning Is Misused

By Eve Colavito & Kalila Hoggard

This year has seen the United States come face to face with inequity in many of our longest-standing institutions: our police, our health-care system, our democracy itself. Our school communities are no exception. For those of us who work with vulnerable children, the two systems of pandemic-era education that have solidified this fall—one for children who have the resources they need to excel and one for everyone else—are a searing reminder that these same systems have always existed, separate and unequal.

A conversation about policing in America, for example, isn’t complete without acknowledging and addressing that many well-funded schools that serve Black and brown communities police student behavior to a degree that predominantly white schools typically don’t. Much has been written about the potential harm of physical police presence in schools or submitting children to metal detectors as they enter a building. But what if, especially in the era of remote learning, policing can extend beyond the walls and roofs of school buildings, becoming something much more insidious?

Particularly in schools serving low-income children and children of color, where we’ve spent much of our careers, policing can take the form of student-behavior-management techniques masquerading as social-emotional learning. SEL is intended as a framework for learning that teaches students to understand and respond to their own emotions and those of the people around them. Of late, there’s been a renewed surge of interest in SEL as a method for school staff to manage the unpredictability of the 2020-21 school year (an objective that, as educators, we can all sympathize with). But when SEL is pitched to schools as a trendy way to regulate student behavior, we’re missing the point—and the opportunity to equip children with leadership-building tools to use their voices and exercise their agency.

Misuse of social-emotional learning—using it to regulate rather than empower, whether intentionally or not—frequently stems from a failure to design and implement it through an equity lens. Primarily white systems that serve Black and brown children and families sometimes start with the wrong question: “What can this system do?” rather than, “What kind of support do our families want?”

The “no excuses” education model often born of this approach relies on order for order’s sake, and, when combined with institutional racism, has begotten a culture where children can be sentenced to juvenile detention for not completing homework. This model offers our children two options: Comply or don’t comply, and the cost of noncompliance is that you simply can’t exist in this space.

As teachers and administrations grasp for ways to make virtual learning feel like “real” school, these dynamics will be replicated—often in arbitrary, ultimately harmful ways, such as some districts’ Zoom policies that are now bringing restrictive dress codes into students’ bedrooms.

Coding behavior management as “order” or “structure” is nothing new in this country. We see it in national calls for “law and order,” and closer to home, when it comes to children of color and neurodiverse children. When we say, “Stop crying. Get back in the line. We don’t do that”—what are we really telling children? Be respectable. Assimilate. Reshape yourself to fit into this institution, because we’re not going to reshape it to fit you and your needs.

It’s a trap we’ve all fallen into. And, of course, children, particularly those who are neurodiverse, thrive on routine and predictability in school, especially at times when so much has been upended. But the structures we create in our schools often feel more about routine for routine’s sake—what feels comfortable for the teacher rather than what centers student voices.

Predictability means something different from “order,” and it doesn’t start with policing; it starts with creating a space for children to establish their own vision of success. Children already know how they want to feel: safe, cared for, respected. Social-emotional learning, applied through an equity lens, helps them express what they need to get there.

So, what does it look like to create an educational space, virtual or in person, that nourishes social and emotional health? At the charter school network in New York City that we hail from, it looks like creating classroom norms that every student contributes and commits to. It looks like, rather than requiring students to turn their cameras on, cultivating a space where they feel safe and comfortable enough to want to. It looks like extending the same practices and the same options toward all students, no matter how they look or how they learn. It looks like realizing that we can’t
expect children to succeed in school until they are not only fed, sheltered, and safe but also known, seen, and loved.

Social-emotional learning works—not only because it improves academic outcomes, but also because it helps young people be active partners in their own education. Done right, it grows not just people who can show up to school, remain silent in class, and fill in a bubble on a test but critical thinkers and lifelong learners who leave school ready to live in the world, to be a citizen, and to do equity work of their own. But in order for this vision to become reality for all children, we must ensure that SEL remains a mechanism for positive, relationship-building interactions rather than traumatizing ones.

We know that the children who suffered most during a spring of remote learning were overwhelmingly Black and brown, low-income, and/or neurodiverse. With this school year like no other in full swing—and no guarantee of when the pandemic will abate—it is our responsibility to make sure that the classrooms of 2020 and beyond aren’t simply new theaters in which to restage the same old inequities.

Although many educators are physically farther from our students, our lens into their daily lives and the challenges they face has never been clearer. This year has spurred us to reflect on and reform practices that may be harmful—but changes we make now must extend beyond this moment in time. They must be the foundation of a more equitable school system in this country, one that levels the playing field for every child it serves.

And if we grown-ups need role models in this work, we don’t have to look any further than our students. They already have the answers, if we’re willing to listen. ■

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