

Transformative Leadership for Social-Emotional Learning

The social-emotional skills necessary for success in school and in life can be taught and reinforced in school.

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Anyone walking through the main doors of Thomas Jefferson School is greeted by a poster: “The House of Learners: Where Dreams Are Born, Respect and Responsibility Rule, Caring Is Shown, and Leaders Are Grown.” These are not mere words; they are the organizing principles for the integration of social, emotional, and academic learning at each grade level. Students are encouraged to dream and empowered to act. There is a focus on the process of discovery and experimentation in science, social studies, music, art, and writing. And students are asked what kind of school they would like to have and what they are willing to do to make it happen, and then they are given the chance to develop the skills they need to get involved. The same questions are asked about their community and the wider world in which they live. There is increasing evidence that students who attend such schools as Thomas Jefferson are more social-emotionally competent, are less likely to engage in violence and related problem

behaviors, and are more academically engaged and successful (Durlak & Weissberg, 2005).

Social-Emotional Learning

When it comes to the impact of mental health on academic outcomes, the research is finally catching up with veteran teacher leaders' observations: developing social-emotional competence is key to success in school and in life.

SEL addresses the development of five key areas of social-emotional competence (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2003):

- Self-awareness: identification and recognition of one's own emotions, recognition of strengths in one's self and others, a sense of self-efficacy, and self-confidence
- Self-management: impulse control, stress management, persistence, goal setting, and motivation
- Social awareness: empathy, respect for others, and the ability to see different perspectives of the same issue

- Relationship skills: cooperation, willingness to seek and provide help, and communication
- Responsible decision making: evaluation and reflection and personal and ethical responsibility.

Research shows that SEL has positive effects on academic performance; benefits physical health; improves citizenship; is demanded by employers; is essential for lifelong success; and reduces the risk of maladjustment, failed relationships, interpersonal violence, and substance abuse (Elias et al., 1997; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Greenberg et al. (2003) reported that well-designed and well-implemented SEL programming enhances social-emotional competencies (e.g., assertiveness and communication skills), reduces internalizing and externalizing disorders, and improves academic performance. Multiyear, structured classroom instruction that applies social-emotional skills to real-life situations and focuses on school ecology and climate has the most enduring benefits.

Durlak and Weissberg (2005) have conducted the most extensive research synthesis of school-based prevention programming to date—a meta-analysis of almost 300 studies of social-emotional development interventions in elementary, middle level, and high schools. In research with experimental and control groups, these programs significantly improved social-emotional skills, self-

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esteem, school bonding, and adherence to social norms; reduced disruptive behavior, school violence, and suspensions; and increased positive classroom behavior, academic achievement, and test scores. A clear pattern of results showed that mental health is affected by SEL classroom instruction and school climate, and that these factors combine to enhance academic performance.

Performing well on tests requires such social-emotional skills as self-control, cooperative interaction, appropriate assertiveness, and problem solving. These skills are required during test preparation, on the day of the event, and when engaged in the larger set of tasks associated with academic learning and homework. Because students today are faced with higher degrees of uncertainty and pressure regarding their daily lives and their futures, many feel insecure, disenfranchised, disillusioned, and even fearful. When a school is not a safe, engaging place, when it is filled with adults and youth who are in conflict or beset by expressions of disrespect, the attention and energy needed for learning is dissipated or diverted.

Although an extensive body of research has demonstrated that skills can be taught through curricula and other forms of discrete intervention programs, their internalization is a function of schoolwide opportunities for skill development, practice, and

reinforcement in multiple contexts throughout the day and an overall climate of caring, support, and high expectations (Devaney, O'Brien, Resnik, Keister, & Weissberg, 2006; see also www.casel.org). Ultimately, a reciprocal relationship exists between social-emotional skills and school climate. A positive school environment promotes SEL, and SEL facilitates a supportive climate. Because social, emotional, and academic growth are interdependent, the result of schoolwide SEL is synergistic progress in all of these areas.

This is well illustrated by some of the projects in Thomas Jefferson School in which students integrate their academic and social-emotional learning. The trust and positive expectations of adults in middle level and high schools provide the gateway for students to gain a sense of community and mutual self-worth as they plan special school events, such as dances, concerts, musicals, plays, and spirit nights.

The public nature of these activities and the cooperation required to plan them give students opportunities and strong incentives for enhancing their social-emotional skills. Participating in gift drives for needy children, working with Habitat for Humanity or another charity, or mobilizing relief efforts in response to a sudden local tragedy strengthens students' commitment to others and makes the school a source

of positive identity and service to the larger community. Academics become a means to achieve valued goals. Descriptions of these student skills and more can be found at the Web site of the Illinois State Board of Education, which has established SEL standards for early elementary through high school students (www.isbe.net/ils/social_emotional/standards.htm).

Transformative Leadership

Accomplishing the kinds of changes needed to integrate SEL into secondary schools requires transformative leadership: leadership that is willing to realign structures and relationships to achieve genuine and sustainable change. Although there are more elements of transformational leadership than we can elaborate here, we can describe some key aspects derived from education research and stories of successes (Bencivenga & Elias, 2003; Devaney et al., 2006; Elias & Arnold, 2006; Elias, Arnold, & Hussey, 2003).

Many transformations can be identified as important, but the three that we deem to be essential are leading with vision and courage, beginning and integrating efforts schoolwide, and implementing with integrity.

Lead With Vision and Courage

Much of what we have described should make intuitive sense and resonate with

why most people entered the field of education. As we previously noted, research and practice in support of SEL and its interconnection with academics is growing, but in the environment created by the No Child Left Behind Act, acting on this knowledge is not simple at all. It requires courage. The first transformation required is to make a personal commitment to advocate for this vision of “whole education” with courageous leadership. This requires becoming aware of one’s own social-emotional strengths and shortcomings.

Also required is a commitment to develop the social-emotional skills of staff members and to improve the relationships among and between adults and students in the school (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Sometimes the transformation begins with the adults. Beyond becoming familiar with SEL theory, research, practice, and pedagogy, some administrators lead themselves and their staff members in exploration of their individual and collective social-emotional assets and areas in need of improvement. This is followed by an ongoing process of continuous improvement. Many resources support such approaches (e.g., Devaney et al., 2006; Patti & Tobin, 2003).

Caring and moral behavior must be modeled. Transformational leaders understand that for a student to reach social, emotional, and academic goals, the school, the parents, and the community must act in consonant ways. All students and adults thrive when administrators, teachers, and other education support staff members trust and respect students and exude boundless optimism. In such a culture, the classrooms, schools, and communities are safe havens for children and engaging sources of partnership for parents.

Begin and Integrate Schoolwide

Different schools have used different starting points for bringing in SEL and connecting it with academics. The common denominator is that their leader recognized the necessity to start, persist, extend, and coordinate the work. Among these starting points are:

1. Create organizing and unifying themes, values, and visions for your school. Thomas Jefferson High School is a clear example of this approach and where it can lead. Many other examples can be found among schools designated by the Character Education Partnership as National Schools of Character (www.character.org).

2. Involve students in integrative service-related projects. From an SEL point of view, secondary schools should require all students to be engaged in some kind of service-related activity. This requirement brings with it the necessity of preparing the students with the skills needed to participate in these projects and integrate them with academic subject areas (Fredericks, 2003). More can be found on the integration of SEL and service learning at www.casel.org/projects_products/servicelearning.php.

3. Implement skill-building curricula that are linked to existing school subject areas. Some evidence-based examples include Facing History and Ourselves (social studies and literature), Teenage Health Teaching Modules (health), Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving and Lions-Quest Skills for Adolescence (guidance or advisories), and Lions-Quest Skills for Action (civics and social studies). What is equally important is the collaborative, community-building process by which the need for a curriculum is determined and a specific

approach is selected and implemented (see CASEL, 2003).

4. Infuse SEL into existing academic subjects. Pasi (2001) and Zins et al. (2004) point out that numerous opportunities exist for integrating SEL into academics, including using SEL problem-solving and critical-thinking activities in regular academic curricula (e.g., literacy, history, and performing arts); using collaborative strategies to involve students in improving school and classroom climates; altering instructional processes to foster more cooperative learning and project-based learning; and reflecting SEL in behavior management and discipline practices and policies by including positive behavior and contributions to the school.

Implement With Integrity

There is a proven framework to guide the process of selecting a particular starting point, getting it going, expanding it, linking it with other potential starting points, and continuing to deepen and grow the process in a spirit of continuous improvement. (See figure 1.) The process, which typically takes from two to five years to carry out in a sustainable way, should be familiar to administrators as a general road map to foster adoption of any comprehensive, innovative effort. (See Elias et al., 2003, and Devaney et al., 2006, which include strategies and tools to assist in all these activities.)

Transforming Schools

School administrators now see that schools must be renewing, exciting places for both students and adults—places in which academic and social-emotional learning are brought together. Accomplishing this requires

transformative leadership. Transformative leaders recognize the roles of students, teachers, parents, and community stakeholders in making schools current and meaningful. The many tasks of transformative leadership are beyond any single individual. Leadership must be distributed, and ideally each staff member will see that the mantle of leadership touches everyone who is entrusted with the care of the students. Principals have special roles in setting the agenda for leadership and inspiring others to share and elaborate their vision. That vision includes helping everyone understand the relationship between social-emotional well-being and success in school and life. Perhaps the greatest transformation of all will come when visionary and courageous education leaders are supported by policies and accountability systems that emphasize that achievement in schools involves developing the caring, character, and academic success of all children. **PL**

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Figure 1

Implementing SEL in Your School

Ten Steps in the Implementation Cycle

1. Commit to schoolwide SEL. Be a champion for SEL.
2. Engage stakeholders and form a steering committee. Invest them with genuine authority and responsibility for the work.
3. Develop and articulate a shared vision. The high hopes and dreams for students bring energy and a positive focus to the work.
4. Conduct a needs and resources assessment. Identify specific issues to address; build from what's already in place and working well.
5. Develop an action plan. Include the goals and objectives as well as a plan for attaining them.
6. Select evidence-based programs and strategies. The resulting shared framework and vocabulary creates consistency and coherence for the students.
7. Conduct initial staff development. Ensure that staff members understand SEL theory and practices.
8. Launch social-emotional skills instruction in classrooms. Help staff members become familiar with and experienced in SEL.
9. Expand instruction and integrate SEL schoolwide. Build a consistent environment and experiences for students.
10. Revisit activities; adjust for continuous improvement. Check on progress to catch problems early.

Source: Devaney, E., O'Brien, M. U., Resnik, H., Keister, S., & Weissberg, R. P. (2006). *Sustainable schoolwide social and emotional learning (SEL): Implementation guide and toolkit*. Chicago, IL: CASEL.