I am Dr. Ramona Trevino, Chief Academic Officer for the Austin Independent School District in Austin, Texas. Thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts and experience with Social and Emotional Learning, School Climate and Character Education with you today. I have 25 years of experience and study in the areas of early childhood, special education, school leadership, policy and planning, and urban academic planning. As a teacher I worked for the US Bureau of Indian Affairs and Department of Defense Schools. I served 20 years as a campus administrator in Austin, bringing two high poverty campuses to the highest rating in Texas - "Exemplary", and one campus to a National Blue Ribbon. I opened the first university sponsored charter school in the state of Texas at the University of Texas at Austin, am on faculty in the Universities' College of Education and my research is on the development of charter schools and the importance of school culture to academic success.

As a Chief Academic Officer I oversee all curriculum production and the district's academic departments. In Austin this includes a Department of Social and Emotional Learning. What I have learned in the last 25 years is that the demands on schools to implement effective instructional approaches that promote academic success, enhance health, and prevent problem behaviors have grown dramatically. Urban districts such as Austin have the challenge of developing a school system that addresses diverse populations with reduced resources. With 118 campuses Austin is home to 86,000 students of these students 70% are children of color and 64% are living in poverty. Our English Language Learner (ELL) population has grown to 29% and continues to grow substantially each year. Some of our 12 high school programs enroll up to
2,000 adolescents. Our teachers provide instruction to a multicultural and multilingual group of students with varied backgrounds, abilities, and motivations for learning.

Like many states across the country the Texas legislature continues to struggle with our state budget. Proposed bills have Austin ISD looking at between $50 million to $80 million in state funding cuts for next school year, and a possible $111 million in 2012-2013. We have already identified $60 million dollars in cuts for SY 2011-2012. This meant declaring financial exigency with a reduction in force of over 1,000 employees, but even with a drastic reduction in resources Austin remains committed to our focus on Social and Emotional Learning and the education of the whole child. From school board, to superintendent, to principals, to teachers we are confident that the integration of this work will assure student achievement and readiness for life and the work force.

Schools across our nation are faced with the challenge of preparing students to be competent and competitive in the American workforce. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills identified the following skills as critically important for schools to teach in order to prepare students for the workforce: critical thinking and problem solving, ethics and social responsibility, teamwork and collaboration, lifelong learning and self-direction, leadership, creativity, innovation, and global awareness (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007).

Yet, in Austin, like many American cities, we continue to see the increased economic and social stress on families coupled with a reduction in community resources. We also see the strong influence of multi-media as well as the impact divorce, drug abuse, domestic violence, and incarceration on our children. Many in Texas who are immigrants fleeing situations in our neighboring countries to the south.
Whether we are talking about Alison, who burst into tears when asked to read, or Sam, a 12 year old who threw a chair at another student, or Jesse, who was caught smoking pot and often stole from her classmates, we are looking at images of our Nation’s children attending public schools. These children are our future American citizens. Alison cried because she was dealing with a very abusive custody battle between her parents. Sam was angry and frustrated because his dad had been incarcerated and he was left with the burden of “being the man of the family”. Jesse admitted to her teacher that her dad continued to sexually abuse her when he came home drunk. These are all real children to me and there are many, many more that I could describe today. Students such as Alison, Sam, and Jesse, with the myriad of issues and emotional turmoil such as this are common in our urban classrooms. These children are often set to school principals with discipline referrals. I feel we have a responsibility to be ready for them in the classroom. Because of the implementation of a social emotional learning curriculum and training in effective strategies Alison, Sam, and Jesse remained focused on curriculum and instruction in the classroom.

Discretionary aggressive, insubordinate, and disruptive offenses continue to be the most frequent across all instructional levels in Austin. Cutting class has also been in the top five offenses for High School for three years. The majority of student offenses for removal to an alternative education setting in Austin include: possession of drugs, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, assault with injury, fighting, and gang related activity. It is clear that 21st century schools must offer more than academic instruction to assure success in school. As educators we embark on a delicate balancing act of developing children’s academic knowledge and skills and developing children’s social-emotional skills to prepare them to be citizens of tomorrow. Schools and communities such as Austin must address the needs of students in a meaningful way
that will enhance learning across all areas. We must assure that we are developing the skills necessary for student's full participation in our democratic society. Federal and State accountability standards that require only academic performance are not enough. AISD is convinced that by implementing an evidenced based SEL curricula, making it integral to the teaching and learning process, and creating opportunities for students to practice character building skills we will improve academic outcomes, attitude, self-confidence, and performance.

I began to embrace social and emotional learning as a curriculum area in 2004 when I opened the University of Texas Elementary Charter School. My previous experience taught me that there was a significant impact on student academic performance when efficient, strategic teaching and learning was well balanced with the human side of schooling. Due to the unique nature of this charter school, I was empowered to design the program of study with my staff and community that included extensive professional development, a well-designed curriculum, defined instructional methods, and curriculum resources. We created a high performing learning community that embraced the whole child to be college, life, career ready. It was a delicate mix of rigorous curriculum and instruction, data-driven decision-making, strategic interventions, and a culture of care. Students learned and were expected to apply social skills and emotional regulation. Students like Alison, Sam, and Jesse felt safe and supported in their learning community. Though much was going on in their lives school was a successful place.

The nature of a charter school is to be a "test bed" for effective, innovative practice. Our next move was to incorporate social and emotional learning into the teacher preparation program in the College of Education. Through the Urban Education Program two local Austin schools were selected in high poverty areas to teach and demonstrate SEL to student teachers. In the two years since this program began one of the selected schools, Metz Elementary, has moved to an
Exemplary rating, the highest academic rating in the Texas accountability system. This was exceptional due to the historical nature of achievement in this high Hispanic, high poverty area of Austin. The principal was quoted as saying "we are committed to preparing our children for their future as students, but also as citizens, parents, and co-workers. This includes teaching, modeling, and providing opportunities for application of social skills. We must produce confident students’ ready of college, life, and work in the 21st century. Simply passing the state accountability assessment is not enough for them to navigate this complex world." The principals at both schools reported a drastic decrease in discipline referrals and referrals to the health clinic, and an increases in attendance. The principal at one of the elementary schools remarked that she often had up to 60 discipline referrals during the first 3 months of school and that after a year of implementation of an SEL program was down to 6.

Austin ISD was recently named as one of three districts in the country funded by the NoVo Foundation to implement a district-wide social emotional learning program. We applied for this funding because especially during these tough financial times we are convinced that our students will achieve a greater level of academic success and personal self-confidence through SEL programming. We are in the process of selecting 20 schools (PK-12) that will embed social emotional learning curriculum and practice into their school communities. Eventually, rigorous, data driven instruction coupled with social and emotional learning will be taken district-wide. We are grateful for this funding because as one of the 8 large urban districts in Texas, we continue to seek answers to the complexities of our work.

Our superintendent, Dr. Meria Carstarphen, recently addressed social emotional learning on a national panel. I quote her, "There is a brutal reality to our work in education that creates a grind in the urban world that is felt by students, families, and staff. Without mincing words, what
I see, what is my experience is at the heart of our issues is racism and classism. This is not easy to express, but these issues get passed from one generation to the next. As I see it our children will never break the cycle unless they acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to be self-aware, self-manage, build relationships, make responsible decisions, and have greater social awareness”.

In large, urban bureaucracies, like my district, we must begin the work of systemic change. For all students, but especially families and kids who have been disenfranchised from the process - poor black, Hispanic, language learners, special needs - we, even after all this time, hardly know them. When we see active, verbal, expressive behavior, especially from black and Hispanic boys, with a teacher who does not have formal training in social and emotional learning or cultural competency, we see what happens to that child. Our data shows that he is suspended, placed in alternative education program, and given limited learning opportunities. By teaching social skills and emotional regulation and by providing teacher training we will better prepare our students to be college, career, and life ready.

Similar to the way students learn all other academic skills they must learn, practice and apply SEL skills. As part of the NoVo Foundation's national initiative we are creating a three-tier approach in which all students will receive SEL as part of the core curriculum. We predict that the number of students needing intervention outside the classroom will decrease as all students are taught social skills and emotional regulation through an SEL curriculum within the classroom.

Our district is also doing an analysis of practice at alternative learning centers. We are aware that they are not effective and only lead to a greater drop out rate. We cannot continue to assume that students come to us with social skills and can not continue to punish, suspend, expel,
and remove students to alternative placements when they do not. What I have learned in my 25 years as an educator is that children want to achieve, they want to succeed, they want to feel part of a successful team, they want to be seen for who they are, they want to be safe, and they want to be loved. It has been ten years since the signing of No Child Left Behind. There is a new generation of school leaders that know that there needs to be a different expectation beyond current accountability systems. We have learned much about the importance of rigor, standards, and accountability, but we must now add components that will support the affective side of learning.

As you weigh the necessary components and language to be included in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act please consider the profile of the diverse learner in our nation’s classrooms in 2011. I urge you to consider the skills that they will need to compete in our global economy, as well as contribute to our society and simply be good human beings throughout their lives. Please consider the integration of social, emotional and character education in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. I will end with a quote from FDR, "We can not always build the future of our youth, but we can build the youth of our future."

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