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Where Does Social-Emotional Well-Being Fit into the School Curriculum?

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For the past decade schools have been faced with increasing pressure to enhance student academic achievement. Thus, schools can become focused primarily on preparing students for tests, and hesitant to attend to other areas of student development, including social and emotional development. However, it is possible to attend to both academics and social-emotional learning (SEL) for students with and without disabilities. In fact, such attention can improve academic performance and the overall school learning environment.

A strong connection exists between SEL, school behavior, and academic performance. Researchers have found that positive social behavior in the school setting is linked to, and predictive of, positive academic achievement (Haynes, Ben-Avie, & Ensign, 2003; Malecki & Elliott, 2002; Welsh, Park, Widaman, & O'Neil, 2001). In a meta-analysis of school-based programs to promote social and emotional development, researchers found an 11% gain in academic performance in programs that measured SEL and academic effects (Durlak, Weissbert, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Even a number of the national K-12 standards for various academic disciplines recognize development of specific social skills as necessary for successful participation in education and employment beyond K-12 schooling (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010).

Though there is mounting evidence of the importance of SEL for the success of students in school and beyond, teaching these critical skills may be viewed by many educators as additional duties instead of integral and necessary for learning. So what is the solution to this tension between recognition of the importance of attending to the social and emotional development of students with and without disabilities, and the need to maintain the highest possible levels of student academic achievement? One approach is to integrate SEL into the daily curriculum and routines.

Embedding SEL in Academics

New Jersey, Iowa, Wisconsin, New York, and South Carolina are among the states where SEL competencies are already reflected in their educational standards (Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias, & Seigle, 2004). Social-emotional learning can be embedded in general academic curricula such as language arts, physical education, science, social studies, fine arts, and health. The Collaborative for Academic, Social,

and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2005) has developed five areas of competencies for SEL: Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships skills, and responsible decision-making. Table 1 identifies and defines each, and provides examples of how teachers can integrate SEL into the required academic standards by creating grade-level goals based on the competency areas. Additionally, Table 1 illustrates ways to embed SEL supports at the school, classroom, and individual levels without taking time away from academics.

Table 1: How to Integrate SEL Support: School-wide, Classroom, and Individual

| Competency Description | Examples of Supports | | | |
|------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| | Grade Level Goal Examples | School Wide | Classroom | Individual |
| Self-awareness | Recognizing feelings, values, strengths and limitations. <u>Elementary:</u> Recognize and label emotions such as happiness and sadness. <u>Middle:</u> Identify triggers for stress reactions. <u>High:</u> Develop an understanding of how emotions affect others. | Adopt and implement specific SEL curricula to guide instruction. Adopt a school-wide values program focused on character education. | <u>Elementary:</u> Language arts. Teach students to identify feelings using characters in books such as <i>Have You Filled a Bucket Today?</i> | Teach individual students to recognize a range of emotions on a rating scale, such as <i>The Incredible 5-Point Scale</i> (see http://www.5pointscale.com). |
| Self-management | Regulating emotions and behaviors to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere. <u>Elementary:</u> Describe steps of setting goals. <u>Middle:</u> Make plans to achieve goals. <u>High:</u> Identify resources and obstacles in achieving goals. | Reinforce SEL skills at lunch, at the playground and other informal settings. | <u>Middle:</u> Science. Teach students to set and achieve goals to complete a science fair project. | Teach individual students to use a self-monitoring system to regulate behaviors, such as <i>How Does My Engine Run Analogy</i> from the Alert Program (see http://www.alertprogram.com). |

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|-----------------------------|---|---|--|--|---|
| Social awareness | Demonstrating understanding and empathy. | <p><u>Elementary:</u> Identify cues about how others feel.</p> <p><u>Middle:</u> Predict others' feelings and perspectives.</p> <p><u>High:</u> Empathize with others.</p> | Engage students in service learning projects and civic activities, including school-wide drives to collect donations for causes such as disaster relief. | <p><u>High:</u> Social Studies. Teach students about empathy in the context of the Civil Rights movement by using resources such as the film <i>The Children's March</i> from http://www.teachingtolerance.org.</p> | Teach individual students perspective-taking skills through strategies such as Social Stories (see http://www.thegraycenter.org). |
| Relationship skills | Forming healthy relationships, cooperating with others, resisting inappropriate social pressure, and handling conflict. | <p><u>Elementary:</u> Make and keep friends.</p> <p><u>Middle:</u> Demonstrate cooperation and teamwork.</p> <p><u>High:</u> Form relationships with peers, teachers, and family members.</p> | Promote and celebrate partnerships of family-school-community through activities such as picnics, open houses, dinners. | <p><u>Elementary:</u> Physical Education. Teach students to cooperate during team games and activities. <u>Middle:</u> Take the class through a team-building outdoor education course.</p> | Teach individual students a conflict management system and steps to problem solving. |
| Responsible decision-making | Making safe and ethical decisions, and respecting others. | <p><u>Elementary:</u> Respect peers and others.</p> <p><u>Middle:</u> Resist peer pressure.</p> <p><u>High:</u> Analyze impact of decisions on future.</p> | Integrate SEL methods into extra-curricular activities. Define what respect looks like in different school settings and post it visually. | <p><u>Middle and High:</u> Language Arts. Teach about derogatory words by using resources such as the film <i>Offense Taken</i> (see http://rtc.umn.edu/rtcmedia/offensetaken).</p> | Teach individual students about good choices using resources such as a social behavior map (see http://www.socialthinking.com). |

Adapted from CASEL, 2005; Kress et al., 2004; Zins et al., 2003.

Enhancing Learning Environments

Another effective and efficient way to integrate SEL into the school day is by establishing psychologically safe and caring learning environments through universal school-wide systems and well-managed classrooms. Growing evidence supports the use of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to address the social-emotional and behavioral issues that impede student's learning by promoting a learning environment that is positive, safe, and productive (Scott, Park, Sawain-Bradway, & Landers, 2007). Implemented school wide, PBIS provides a three-tiered prevention system to proactively teach and acknowledge pro-social behaviors and prevent or reduce challenging behaviors. This system provides universal intervention for the entire school and more explicit, small group instruction for students who need a more targeted level of support. In addition, PBIS includes intensive support for students requiring individualized intervention. Through this tiered model, schools can create positive environments so all children feel safe and can learn (OSEP, 2010).

Another way to enhance the learning environment and SEL is by teaching classroom expectations and routines in order to establish a positive, consistent, and predictable environment that conveys safety and care, and builds healthy relationships. When classroom procedures are explicitly taught, on-task behavior and engagement increases, which allows more time to be dedicated to learning. There are a variety of routines required to manage a classroom effectively, such as entering and exiting, keeping students engaged in learning activities while others are working with the teacher, and planning transition times. Educators sometimes assume all students know how to carry out these everyday routines when, in fact, these skills need to be taught just like academic skills in a sequenced, active, focused, and explicit manner (CASEL, 2005). By teaching these expectations and routines, educators are preventing predictable problems and increasing the opportunities for students to engage in appropriate behaviors and receive positive feedback. Over time, there is a shift from these behaviors being predominantly controlled by external factors such as positive feedback, to internalized factors such as caring and concern for others, making good decisions, and taking responsibility for one's behaviors (Bear & Watkins, 2006).

Conclusion

Because social and emotional factors play such an important role in student mental health, behavior, and academic performance, schools must attend to this aspect of the educational process for the benefit of all students, including those with exceptionalities. Engaging the whole student promotes positive growth that leads to academic achievement and well-being. When SEL is in equal partnership with academic learning, educators *can* fit it all in and will graduate students who are better prepared for real success in society.

References