



Integrate SEL Skills to Make Learning Come Alive

Students thrive when given opportunities to solve real-world problems

By *Karen Dresden*

After 18 years as a school leader, I firmly believe that students need to see a purpose for what they are learning in school. They need knowledge and skills that they can apply *today*—not in some distant future.

This philosophy guides Capital City Public Charter School, a 1,000-student school in Washington, D.C., that serves students in grades pre-K–12. We create experiences that help students learn and apply knowledge in a way that makes sense to them. In fact, we teach most of our lessons through carefully designed projects that we call “learning exhibitions.”

Projects that integrate social and emotional skills with academic

learning teach and challenge students. This project-based approach to education is the foundation of everything we do, and it’s what makes things “fit” for students. They see connections when math and English language arts aren’t in separate boxes—and they thrive when they have the social and emotional skills to tackle meaningful projects that blend these academic topics.

For instance, when our school needed a new playground, we engaged our first-graders to help. They did a “learning exhibition” about playgrounds. This exhibition was, of course, grounded in academic standards in science and math.

Children visited playgrounds around the city and surveyed students in our school about what they wanted in a playground. They met with a safety expert and with a landscape architect. And they designed a playground, built a model of it, and presented it to our school leaders. Now our students are enjoying a playground that they designed!

Students Need Support to Develop Social-Emotional Skills

For this kind of project-based learning to be successful, students need to learn to work together. Such teamwork isn’t automatic. Teachers must very carefully help children learn

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how to share their ideas, explore different options, and respectfully disagree with one another. We use some familiar practices to achieve these goals, including morning meetings and having students learn to “turn and talk” to one another, so that they’re not just talking to or responding to their teacher.

The social and emotional skills that students must learn in order to do “field work” for their projects also need to be developed so that our excursions go smoothly and students can gather the information they need. We teach students how to safely walk in groups on the sidewalk, travel on the Metro transit system, and engage while in museums and at other field work sites.

Leaders Must Prioritize Integrated Learning


Our school was recently featured in a case study released by the Aspen Institute’s National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development; we were recognized for our emphasis on integrating these three components of learning. We’re part of the EL Education network and serve as a “mentor school” for the national network of 150 schools. This network has a vision of teaching and learning that stresses academics, character, and citizenship, and offers curricula and tools to help teachers achieve this vision.

We stress that incorporating social and emotional skills into project-based learning can’t be an “add-on” to regular practice, done a day a week, or saved for when testing is finished. It really has to be the way school is organized. That means encouraging teachers to take risks, and allowing them

to give up familiar practices. It requires school leaders to create an environment where it’s OK for teachers to take chances.

These changes are worth making to create experiences that make learning relevant and meaningful for students. When young people complete their projects and present them in the community, for example, they gain the confidence and ability to speak to adults. We had third-graders who recently testified before the Washington, D.C., city council on an issue related to Native Americans; elected officials were extremely impressed by their presentations. Second-graders studied homelessness in our city. These are topics that students approach with empathy, are invested in, and care about. When students can effect change in their classrooms, in their schools, and in their communities, it’s tremendously empowering.

I struggle when I hear critics suggest that this type of integrated, project-based approach is great for affluent students, but doesn’t work well with low-income students. My experience at Capital City—a diverse, open-enrollment, publicly funded school with more than 70 percent of students qualifying for reduced-price meals—has shown me the opposite is true.

In fact, I believe low-income students who have fewer opportunities outside of school need integrated learning that builds academic, social, and emotional skills even more than their more affluent peers. Students need to see connections and know they have a voice. They need to see that they can make a difference in their world. 

Karen Dresden was the founding principal and is now the head of school at Capital City Public Charter School in Washington, D.C.



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