



A *Culture* of

A Virginia school district ups its social-emotional learning game to keep students healthy, happy, and safe

Over the years, the responsibilities of schools have evolved to include meeting the academic needs of students and focusing on students' health, safety, and wellness. While the methods and strategies schools use to meet these nonacademic needs are often different, a core component of any health and wellness initiative is social-emotional learning (SEL).

The importance of teaching social-emotional skills in the classroom is well-documented. A growing body of research shows that a focus on SEL can boost academics, contribute to a positive school environment, and reduce disciplinary incidents. SEL, in other words, is a vital part of creating a safe and healthy school environment for students, teachers, and staff.

Consider this example: Your school has been experiencing an increase in the number of students suffering from trauma and chronic stress. Families are dealing with everything from poverty to divorce to drug abuse. These stressors affect students' ability to learn and can contribute to behavioral problems. Teachers are feeling the impact, too—a sort of secondary trauma—from working with students who are under so much stress. What do you do to bring the focus back to learning?

This was the situation Chesterfield County (Virginia) Public Schools' (CCPS) Marguerite Christian Elementary School faced last year. To address the situation, one of this article's authors, then-principal Jennifer Lenz, and CCPS administrative staff applied school-specific and districtwide strategies centered on trauma-informed teaching, student wellness, and social-emotional learning, including the following:

1. Creating a “Caring School Community.” CCPS uses an SEL curriculum for elementary school students called Caring School Community, a nationally recognized, evidence-based program that builds classroom and schoolwide community and develops students' SEL skills. Its strategies include holding regular class meetings in which students discuss common concerns, organizing “cross-age buddy” activities that match older students with younger students to practice SEL skills, providing home-based activities to generalize SEL topics, and facilitating activities to promote a positive school climate. Among the schools to pilot the program last year, Marguerite Christian Elementary found that disciplinary referrals dropped significantly in classes using the curriculum.

Caring

By Jennifer Lenz, Lisa Micou, Connie Honsinger, and Rachel Bulifant

An Ounce of Prevention

When it comes to health and wellness, teachers, principals, and district-level administrators should focus on prevention. One strategy that can be extremely helpful is to teach adults and students how to adjust their mindsets. This is a cornerstone of trauma-informed care.

Imagine this scenario: You are an elementary school teacher, and one of your students becomes agitated. Things escalate. The student throws a chair. What do you do? Now, imagine you're the principal. The student arrives at the office even angrier and out of control. What do you do—suspend the student?

Punishing students for misbehavior typically does not help them learn to behave differently. Instead, adults should be trained to be responsive rather than reactive. For example, encourage teachers to think about what might be driving the behavior. Maybe the student has been exposed to a lot of violence at home and is acting it out in school.

Instead of sending them to the principal's office, perhaps suggest they take a walk or use self-regulation strategies in a "cooldown zone" before addressing what happened. Some principals have items in their office such as stress balls or coloring books to help students calm down.

2. Assessing impact. CCPS uses the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA), a social and emotional learning assessment from Aperture Education. Data from these assessments can be used to identify students' SEL strengths and areas in which additional instruction is needed.

The district first administers DESSA-mini, a universal screener that can be completed in less than one minute per child, to identify students who may need additional SEL intervention. This data helps schools monitor their progress and determine whether students' skills are improving. For students identified as needing extra support, teachers complete the full DESSA, a 72-item measure that takes approximately 10 minutes to complete. This approach builds a more complete picture of those students' SEL needs and helps develop targeted interventions and supports for students who might have otherwise "flown under the radar." Lenz says that the assessments have helped the school be more intentional and comprehensive in its approach to SEL.

3. Teacher reflection. Marguerite Christian Elementary added faculty time for teachers to reflect on what they are doing well and what's making a difference for students. Lenz also rewarded teachers with incentives such as leaving work early while she took over the classroom, helping her get to know the students better.

4. Physical wellness. Exercise is a proven stress-reliever, but teachers were so busy that they couldn't find time to get to the gym. Marguerite Christian Elementary provided space and equipment to help teachers exercise and organized afterschool Zumba classes. The school's wellness committee expanded strategies to increase movement in the classroom, recognizing the influence of physical and overall well-being on student learning.

5. Parental involvement. Getting parents involved is a great way to improve social-emotional learning. Marguerite Christian Elementary's parent engagement coordinator planned an evening on which staff members taught yoga and mindful meditation, also describing Caring School Community class meetings so parents could hear the language used at school.

6. Zones of regulation. Students sometimes struggle to identify their emotions and with how to move from a "red" zone (angry) to a "green" zone (ready to learn). Helping



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REFLECT ON THIS

A 2017 meta-analysis from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning says that academic performance among students exposed to SEL programs averages 13 percentile points higher than that of non-SEL peers.

students understand and regulate emotions can help reduce behavioral issues and disciplinary incidents. CCPS teaches students how stress affects the brain and provides them with self-management strategies.


A Districtwide Effort

When it comes to creating a safe and supportive learning environment, no single teacher or principal can do it alone. It takes support, resources, and cooperation from everyone to make a difference that has an impact on student well-being on a long-term basis. CCPS has several districtwide and countywide initiatives to improve student wellness.

CCPS' School Health Advisory Board makes recommendations to the school board on issues around health and well-being for the district and the county, identifying SEL as a priority. It recently launched a School Safety Task Force that focuses more deeply on issues involving student safety, conduct, and support services such as its partnership with the Chesterfield County Police Department. And four administrative staffers make up "Team Whole Child," charged with developing targeted strategies for positive behavioral interventions and supports, social-emotional learning, trauma-informed care, and restorative practices.

The district measured the SEL initiative's results using data and anecdotal evidence,

looking at DESSA data, disciplinary incidents, and academic assessments in pilot schools and classrooms. At one pilot school, Ecoff Elementary, the number of yearly suspensions dropped from 58 to 16 during a two-year period. Other schools that adopted the SEL initiative reported similar decreases in disciplinary referrals. Talking to teachers and observing students practicing SEL skills in the classroom can also provide an indicator of the program's impact.

School leaders at the district and school levels must ensure students and teachers get what they need to be successful in an SEL program, and districts should focus on creating wrap-around services targeting the social-emotional needs of students and staff. By implementing strategies such as those discussed above, schools and districts can better meet their responsibility to create a safe, healthy environment in which students can thrive. 

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