

How Struggling Students Can Soar

Across the country, racial and income-based achievement gaps persist, despite widespread and intensive efforts to mitigate them. These enduring gaps reflect a sobering fact about how we educate underserved students in the United States: We're missing the mark. Until recently, our conversation about how to best serve these students rarely turned to the psychological and physiological impacts of trauma and chronic stress. As a result, we have sorely underestimated the importance of social and emotional learning—in terms of both closing achievement gaps and helping struggling students succeed in school.

There is no doubt that our students' home lives—over which they have little control—impact their ability to learn. Research has shown that sustained and acute stress rewires students' nervous systems, readying them to respond to danger and to survive, but not to thrive amid the complex social dynamics that play out in the classroom. School can become a hostile environment full of threats that compound students' already high stress levels, rather than offering a safe space to learn and grow.

After-School Support

My school, Burns Elementary in North Charleston, South Carolina, serves a neighborhood rife with poverty, drugs, and violence. Most of our students are from low-income, minority families, and many have experienced significant hardships and traumas, from housing instability and food insecurity to violence and neglect. Often, their ability to function well in school has been severely compromised.

When I arrived at Burns Elementary, it was clear that we needed to do more to support our students who were struggling the most. Many of them had such poor relationships in their home lives that it was nearly impossible for them to interact with, much less trust, their peers or the adults at the school. They struggled to self-regulate their behavior; they had difficulty focusing

in class; and they were frequently absent from school.

Before I became a principal, I taught children with severe social and emotional challenges. I found that for students who struggle to learn, intentional social and emotional learning instruction is every bit as important as, if not more important than, academically oriented strategies. Admittedly, it can be very challenging to find the time and resources during the school day to provide these opportunities. So I began working to start an after-school program that would enable us to reach the kids who were, in many ways, unreceptive to the academic and behavioral supports we offered them during the school day.

We formed a partnership with WINGS for Kids, an after-school program that focuses on helping kids learn to understand and manage their emotions and behavior, and develop relationship skills. The program is an especially good match for our school because it is designed with low-income and minority students in mind, and is tailored to help them cope with the challenges they may face at home and self-regulate their behavior at school.

Culture Shift and Lasting Impact

The program has been life-changing for our students. Test scores have gone up, and we see better attendance and fewer referrals. But it is hard to quantitatively capture how much WINGS has helped the kids who


participate in the program. Not only do they learn the social and emotional skills they need to be successful in school, but they also develop strong, positive relationships with the adults who are helping them to overcome barriers to their success.

These relationships are truly transformative. Few of the students have had an adult believe in them the way their WINGS leaders (college-age mentors) do. The love and care they receive helps them establish their self-belief and self-worth. This gives them a reason to try to improve their behavior and their other social and emotional skills.

As a result, we've seen an amazing shift in the culture of the school. In the halls, we hear students using WINGS-derived language to mediate conflicts and help their peers manage their feelings. In our classrooms, we see them using the strategies to moderate their behavior and to recognize how they are reacting emotionally in certain situations.

This culture shift has extended to our teachers and staff. All of us are much more cognizant of incorporating the language of WINGS and social and emotional learning into our interactions with students. The program has become an organic extension of the school day, as opposed to an adjunct service.

If we truly want to better serve low-income and minority students, social and emotional learning must play a central role in our efforts. Curricular reforms and cutting-edge instructional strategies will be invariably less effective if we do not first help prepare disadvantaged students to thrive in school.

In light of the challenges students face at home and in their neighborhoods, and the damage that those challenges can inflict, social and emotional skills are as vital as math and literacy. 

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