



# Prioritizing Mental Health Pays Off

Handy cards help staff support social-emotional development

By Alex Schukow and Theresa Stager

**S**tandardized testing. AP courses. Extracurricular activities. Social media. K–12 students experience pressure to succeed, academically, socially, and athletically. That pressure takes a toll—mentally, socially, and emotionally. It takes a toll on happiness.

According to psychologist Antonia Delle Fave and colleagues, happiness is generally interchangeable with “life satisfaction.” The development of positive social and emotional health promotes life satisfaction. The Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation defines social and emotional health as a child’s capacity to “form secure relationships, experience and regulate emotions, and explore and learn.”

## How Saline Area Schools Prioritizes Mental Health

Saline Area Schools, ranked as the No. 11 school system and No. 5 high school in the state of Michigan, is focused on the social-emotional health of students and staff. In an interview with Michigan Radio on September 8, 2017, Saline Area Schools Superintendent Scot Graden referenced the importance of producing *happy* students.

The focus on social-emotional health is reflected at both a district *and* building level. Saline Area Schools’ Strategic Framework, developed during the 2016–2017 school year, contains a wellness goal. Goal three of the framework states, “Enhance a positive school

environment that promotes student and staff well-being, satisfaction, and positive morale.”

Additionally, over the past three years, Saline Area Schools has developed a learner profile or “compass.” The Saline Area Schools’ Learner Profile reflects the essential elements of social-emotional learning through the following student attributes: positive communicator, ethical and responsible citizen, collaborative leader, complex thinker and problem solver, and motivated and self-directed.

## Health Cards Guide Staff—and Parents

During the 2017–2018 school year, Saline Area Schools staff have taken

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another step toward promoting social-emotional health across the district. All Saline Area Schools staff members have a “Foundations of Positive Social, Emotional, and Mental Health” card (see images below, at right) to use when talking with a student experiencing a social or emotional challenge. The front of the card outlines descriptors of positive social, emotional, and mental health, while the back of the card states strategies for a conversation with a student based on the student’s challenge at that moment.

Parents of Saline Area Schools students have been provided Foundations of Positive Social, Emotional, and Mental Health cards, too. Each school building in the district designed a communication plan to inform parents about these cards. For example, at Heritage School, the fourth- and fifth-grade elementary school, a cross-section of building staff—administrative assistant, custodian, general education, special education, and administrative—participated in constructing a video sharing how they will use the card with students. The video was shared with parents, along with an accompanying blog post, in the weekly building newsletter emailed to all parents. The motivation for developing the video and blog post: to show parents *all* staff will use the cards, and to convey the importance of parents using them, too.

The Foundations of Social, Emotional, and Mental Health cards are just one example of a building practice to support wellness. Saline Area Schools, three K–3 buildings (Harvest Elementary, Woodland Meadows Elementary, and Pleasant Ridge Elementary), Heritage School, and Saline Middle School use Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS). Over the past three years, the focus has been on Tier 1 instruction.

“Respectful, Responsible, and Kinder Than Necessary” are the building expectations. These expectations are seen on posters throughout buildings and in staff-student conversations.

Last school year, following the lead of Harvest Elementary, Pleasant Ridge Elementary, Woodland Meadows Elementary, Heritage School, and the Saline Middle School sixth grade began incorporating community meetings. The community meetings bring the school community together for a common PBIS message. For example, at Heritage School, each meeting contains the following elements: a lesson on being respectful, responsible, or kinder than

necessary, classroom awards, and students-of-the-month awards.

The community meetings are a representation of the Heritage School motto: “We Swarm Together.” Heritage School is the first place district students will meet all of their peers in the grade level. “We Swarm Together” signifies more than just the coming together of three different buildings; it signifies a focus on creating a safe environment for *all* students. Creating a safe environment promotes positive social-emotional health for *all*. 

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