

TWINNED for Achievement

School leaders must recognize the mutually reinforcing relationship between equity and social, emotional, and academic development

By Ross Wiener

Social and emotional learning (SEL) that isn't tethered to equity is akin to a ship without a rudder. The usual means of encouraging improvement in equity is to add teachers, time, money, and materials, but if school leaders fail to first think through the implications for adult learning or do not direct resources in ways that reduce bias and close gaps in opportunity, any effort to promote social and emotional learning will be insufficient.

Successful implementation of social and emotional learning begins and ends with principals. Research shows that the most significant impact principals have on student learning is the school climate they create; leaders must commit to establishing the conditions that enable SEL to be fully integrated into academic lessons.



But integration of social and emotional learning also necessitates changes in how schools and districts operate and how adults approach their work. It demands that school leaders recognize the mutually reinforcing relationship between equity and social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD).

The nomenclature matters. Deliberate use of the term SEAD prompts educators to move beyond morning meetings and other “checklist” items to instead see SEL as pivotal to academic achievement—not just as a strategy for managing classroom behavior.

According to “Ready to Lead,” a report from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, only 35 percent of principals say their school has a plan for teaching students social and emotional learning skills. And only 40 percent believe these skills will improve academic performance.

If school leaders are skeptical of the positive impact of SEL on students’ academic performance, they won’t be moved to create a comprehensive plan to make SEAD a reality. Social and emotional learning benefits all children, but as school leaders consider how to distribute staff and resources, they must do so through the lens of equity. The students who struggle the most—children of color and students from low-income families—should be given additional support.

Taking Action

Equity does not mean every child gets the same thing. The Aspen Institute’s *Integrating Social, Emotional, and Academic Development: An Action Guide for School Leadership Teams* can help principals and school teams understand that social and emotional learning must be enmeshed within academic instruction and paired with equity. It walks school leaders and their teams through aspects of SEAD implementation few might otherwise think about, including adult learning, asset mapping, and resource allocation. The goal is to improve entire schools and districts and to reimagine the school experience for students.

SEAD must be paired with equity because schools, as they are designed, do not adequately serve children who are most in need of a quality education. This is a systemic problem, and school leaders have to acknowledge this in implementing SEAD.

Lower expectations disproportionately affect children of color and low-income students. They often receive less effective teachers, fewer enrichment activities, lower-quality instruction and coursework, and curricula that don’t reflect their backgrounds. These factors can lead them to disengage from school.

Approaches to SEL based on equity can not only enable educators to differentiate instruction according to a child’s needs but also prompt principals and district leaders to direct targeted support to mitigate the effects of children facing multiple challenges. An equity framework for SEAD takes it from being



a means to correct deficits or address disruptive behavior to being an impetus for leaders to examine how schools play a role in certain students' lack of success and to find ways to build on each child's assets.

Adult Learning

Teachers have hundreds of interactions with students every day and often make quick judgments that are influenced by stereotypes and unconscious bias. The effects of bias on students can be deep and lasting among children who perceive themselves as unable to excel. The effect takes a toll on students' self-esteem and compounds as the years pass, leading to lower college graduation rates, lower-paying jobs, and fewer employment opportunities.

Leaders must recognize that no one is free of bias. How students see themselves relies heavily on their relationships with teachers, so creating opportunities for teachers to identify and mitigate bias is critical. Adults need time for self-reflection to understand and explore their identities and how unconscious biases might be revealed in their practice and interpersonal interactions.

The danger is that the opportunity is carried out on the surface level—as one-time diversity training that's driven by compliance. School districts must commit to cultural sensitivity and implicit-bias professional learning experiences long-term.

This is likely to draw pushback from stakeholders who insist they don't have biases or are

Tap All Available Resources

To successfully promote SEAD, a school's resources—staff, time, money, technology, physical space, and community partnerships—must support its vision for student success, *Integrating Social, Emotional, and Academic Development* says. School leaders must identify all resources available and maximize their use to make salient improvements to the student and teacher experience.

Begin with an assessment of your current investments and how well they meet student and teacher needs. Does the school's curriculum reinforce social-emotional competencies and guarantee enough time to teach them? Is there a district or external curriculum that suits your students and teachers best? Do staffing and groups build strong student/teacher relationships?

To ensure that your vision drives resource usage, the Aspen Institute's guide suggests several high-impact actions:

- Use data to review your school improvement plan annually and engage the whole community in updating the school's vision for student success aligned to that plan.

- Ensure that your vision for student success addresses the distinct developmental needs of the students you serve (e.g., young children vs. adolescents).
- Communicate clearly and consistently about specific attributes of the school's vision for student success and the strategies and resource decisions that advance this vision.
- Map investments (e.g., instructional programs, personnel, co-curriculars, partnerships) against specific elements of the school's vision as a leadership team.
- Invest every adult who interacts with students, including specialists and support personnel, in understanding the school's vision and taking ownership for enacting it.
- Establish classroom communities and build authentic relationships with students that are warm, positive, and welcoming, with clear rules and procedures.
- Reinforce the vision for student success as an organizing principle for every decision the school makes.
- Develop measurable outcomes for each critical aspect of achieving the vision for student success.



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“colorblind.” This was the case at one school profiled in the Aspen guide, in which parents blamed redrawn attendance zones for making the school “chaotic.” Once predominantly white, the school’s population had changed to 49 percent students of color; the new students were blamed for disrupting class and were disciplined disproportionately.

The principal and her leadership team knew they needed to deal with the racial tension consuming the school and the excessively punitive treatment of its students of color. The school staff participated in implicit-bias training. Although the mandate was not well-received by some staff members, an assistant superintendent’s backing helped the effort proceed.

What helped the principal settle disagreements with skeptical teachers was data. The school monitors rates of chronic absenteeism, referrals, and suspensions every quarter. It also administers a brief survey that asks students and teachers about the school and classroom climate. Data showing an upward trajectory can go a long way toward bringing reluctant teachers into alignment with the school leadership’s vision.

Asset Mapping and Allocation

The Aspen action guide advises schools to orient their resources—staff, time, funding, and community partnerships—toward a shared vision of student success. But it also urges schools to explore going further through changes in how staff are hired and assigned and increasing “the value proposition for your teachers to accept priority assignments.”

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools once placed 28 of its best principals in its most challenged schools on a voluntary basis. Cabinet-level leaders allowed principals to bring teachers with strong track records of positively impacting student achievement to the schools to which they were assigned. It was a shift in mindset that changed the culture of the district: To be seen as successful, highly effective principals and teachers understood they needed to take on challenging school assignments.

Focus groups held with teachers helped determine what would inspire them to teach at a struggling school. At the top of the list was a great principal, followed by being part of a team of talented teachers, principal autonomy, compensation, and an agreement that staff would remain committed to the school to ensure stability. Once the district heard from teachers that an outstanding school leader was the

critical factor in motivating the most effective teachers to transfer to a struggling school, the district leadership invited the most effective principals to lead struggling schools.

This was part of a 10-year effort for the district to develop its principal pipeline to install outstanding principals in all schools, not just low-performing ones. But it was imperative to begin with schools that presented the most urgent need.

As school leaders weigh decisions of asset allocation, they must decide what’s worth keeping or losing. The list of tasks is infinite, but the resources needed to accomplish them are not. Another school profiled in the Aspen guide knew its teachers were overextended and didn’t have the time for professional development related to SEAD. The principal assembled a small workgroup to devise a solution. It made the difficult decision to cut two teaching assistant positions and slash funding for external conferences to hire a new full-time science teacher who could provide coverage.

Principals don’t often think of time as an equity issue, but how leaders distribute the precious minutes of the school day to advance learning for challenged students is key. Time, it can be argued, is the most valuable resource.

A Symbiotic Relationship

Equity and SEAD are symbiotic. The relationship means paying more attention to the students schools tend to overlook and placing them at the center of academic instruction, professional development, and resource allocation. Such thinking represents a shift from how social and emotional learning tends to be executed.

While the skills SEL imparts—persistence, conflict management, goal-setting, empathy, and management of one’s own emotions—are beneficial to all students, there is a growing recognition among researchers and educators that these skills are of even greater use to children of color and low-income students who are unable to acquire them outside of school. The barriers these students face are much higher, and because of that, school leaders must rethink what kind of experience these children receive. 

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