HOME

Like language, math, and science, SEL can be practiced and mastered—even in socially distanced or hybrid settings

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SKILLED

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the need for social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools. Consider a few statistics from surveys taken during widespread school shutdowns and distance learning:

- More than half of the students surveyed experienced anxiety.
- 45 percent felt excessive stress.
- 43 percent said they struggled with depression.
- 61 percent reported loneliness.
- Comparing their engagement level prior to COVID-19 school closures, more than 80 percent of teachers defined students' current level of engagement with their schoolwork as "much lower" or "somewhat lower."
- One out of 4 students were reported to be essentially truant (MIA, not logging in, not making contact, etc.) during COVID-19 closures.

Sources: 2020 Harris Poll commissioned by the National 4-H Council and an EdWeek Research Center survey.

This is an urgent matter to which educators must respond now. Each of these statistics represents real students and a situation that's evolving based on the support provided by the school. One evidence-based way to respond is to intentionally integrate SEL into your school and make it as high a priority as any academic initiative. This need is supported by an abundance of research on the benefits of SEL in schools, which include improved academic performance, improved social behaviors, lower levels of distress, improved attitudes, improved social interactions, and fewer conduct problems.

This is not a new concept—SEL has been part of education for decades. But we are now seeing it affect our students, educators, and families in historic ways. Prior to the pandemic, many schools found it challenging to teach essential SEL skills to students with significant mental health, social, emotional, and behavioral needs.

The majority of behaviors students had difficulty demonstrating in the in-person learning environment were social behaviors (e.g., hands to themselves, appropriate language, impulse control, etc.). Subsequently, the gaps have widened, and the cracks in the system of schoolwide support of SEL are no longer hidden in the chaos of the school environment.

Needs have shifted from managing undesirable social behaviors in a face-to-face learning environment to targeting academic behaviors in a virtual or hybrid environment (e.g., lack of engagement, attendance, organization, self-management, self-monitoring, motivation, "grit"). SEL encompasses academic and social behaviors, so schools need to connect specific behaviors to the absence of SEL skills.

As educators, we do a great job of identifying the absence of specific academic skills that impede a student's ability to succeed in a particular subject area and providing targeted instruction to ensure learning, whether that student is a nonfluent reader who needs additional support with vowel blends and digraphs or a student not able to recall basic math facts and formulas. But when it comes to behavior—academic or social—absences are met with frustration, and labels such as "acting out," "being disruptive," or "being lazy" are attached to the student.

Why is it that we teach specific skills in math or reading to get a student back on track, yet when we identify students demonstrating specific behaviors, we don't view it as a student needing the necessary instruction to learn the SEL skill necessary to reduce or eliminate those undesirable behaviors? Schools need to apply the same systematic teaching they use to support students who struggle academically to SEL skills.

THE WHYS OF SEL IMPLEMENTATION

Reacquaint yourself with the definition of SEL and the purpose for its implementation. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) website defines SEL "as a process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals; feel and show empathy for others; establish and maintain supportive relationships; and make responsible and caring decisions."

CASEL further highlights five core competency areas within SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Echoing the importance of the CASEL 5, a newly released World Economic

Forum report listing the top 10 job skills for 2025 includes problem-solving, self-management, working with people, resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility.

As a result, SEL skills must be taught as a matter of course, rather than hoping that a child will gain these skills through genetics or maturation. What is your school currently doing in each classroom or schoolwide to integrate SEL? How do you know if what you are doing with SEL is effective, and is your school changing the narrative on current student statistics? We've worked with thousands of educators to help tackle these questions during the pandemic.

To begin this work on your campus, here is the process we recommend:

1. Identify (prioritize). Identify one SEL competency out of the CASEL 5 to start with at your school and/or in your classroom based on a precise problem statement—a few sentences that capture what skill(s) students are struggling with based on social and academic behavior data and teacher perception data. As a site administrator, you can likely create a problem statement based on the student behaviors your teachers complain about most, turning complaints into part of the problem-solving process.

Another way to prioritize with a leadership team, grade level, or department is to use the SEL Competency Priority Forced Rating Scale (**bit.ly/SELPriorityRating**). After identifying one of the five SEL competencies to focus on, select the deconstructed skill you want to begin with (self-management, for example, includes the deconstructed skill of self-discipline). The goal in this phase is to give your team a starting point based on the needs identified.

2. Define mastery. Define what mastery looks like for the deconstructed skill you chose as your selected SEL competency in the "Identify" phase. For example, if you selected self-discipline, mastery might be a student who improves their logging-in-on-time percentages from 60 percent to 80 percent independently and without prompt.

In a hybrid setting, mastery of self-discipline might be students improving their task completion rates without repeated reminders or prompts. In a hybrid setting, mastery of self-discipline might be students improving their task completion rates without repeated reminders or prompts. The goal is for all staff members to understand what mastery of the particular skill looks look like and provide clarity to the skills students should be able to demonstrate as a result.

3. Teach. Teach the deconstructed skill from your selected SEL competency using multiple modalities (e.g., direct instruction, student-led, role-playing, wrong way/right way, collective projects, classroom meetings, scenarios, curriculum, etc.). Model, reinforce, and allow students to apply what is being taught. The goal in this phase is to make the teaching of the selected skill intentional. When the process is thought through and planned out in detail, it is much more likely to happen.

For example, teaching self-discipline to students in a virtual or hybrid setting could involve a teacher demonstrating the use of a self-monitoring tool to help students set goals, prioritize tasks, and monitor their progress. At first, the teacher may use this tool with all students on a regular basis but eventually continue using it with only those students who have not mastered their self-discipline mastery goals as an ongoing intervention.

4. Repeat. Assess and adjust as needed, then begin the process again based on student data and teacher needs. The goal in this phase is to reflect on the effectiveness of your efforts and either adapt, adopt, or abandon the plan based on data and commit those learnings to the next cycle.

As you go through the suggested phases as a recurring process, you'll begin to see the positive impact on your students, view any problem behaviors as SEL skills students are lacking, and apply solutions to address the area of need. Most importantly, you will establish a culture of support for student behavior that can be sustained in any learning environment. ●

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