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Making SEL and Educational Equity A Priority for Students' Social-Emotional Wellness and Academic Growth

As educators reflect on the effects of the pandemic on their students over the past year, two things become clear. The first is that students experienced a range of conditions from isolation to trauma and their social-emotional health should be a priority. The second is that the need for educational equity has emerged as a driving factor for change in schools.

Experts note that integrating social-emotional learning into teaching practices not only bolsters skills such as resilience and persistence in children, but also helps “to create safe and supportive environments in which all children feel they belong.”¹ Educational equity means that every student receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential.² The achievement gap is the result of educational inequity. The twin perspectives of social-emotional wellness and educational equity are lenses through which educators can evaluate what their

students will need in order to experience social-emotional well-being and academic success in the fall when they return to school.

The Importance of Social-Emotional Learning and Educational Equity

These twin goals are backed by extensive research showing that social-emotional learning promotes both academic achievement and positive social behavior, while reducing conduct problems and emotional distress.³ Acquisition of these skills equips students with “internal resources needed to take advantage of social and academic opportunities” inside and outside the classroom.⁴ The outcomes of well-designed and well-implemented SEL programs include positive social behaviors, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and improved grades and test scores.⁵

¹ Retrieved from <http://www.selresources.com/sel-and-mental-health>

² Retrieved from <https://www.nationalequityproject.org/education-equity-definition>

³ Retrieved from <https://healthyschoolscampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/RWJF-SEL.pdf>

⁴ Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265966029_Social_and_emotional_learning_in_elementary_school_settings_Identifying_mechanisms_that_matter

⁵ Retrieved from <https://healthyschoolscampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/RWJF-SEL.pdf>

How to Build SEL Programs and Competencies

Students' social-emotional competencies are “built through policies, programs, and practices that enhance children’s and adults’ capacities to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” The competencies students develop foster better outcomes, positive social behaviors, less emotional stress, and improved grades and test scores.⁶

Some districts, such as the Pittsburgh School District, are not waiting until fall to restart instruction after the long COVID year. They are using their federal summer enrichment funds to design summer programs that are fun and academic to re-engage students.⁷ The district might also draw on resources from Pittsburgh schools’ SEL curriculum to help students set goals for the summer and next school year. After the disruptive year students have experienced, district leaders want to use social-emotional learning strategies to help students connect in person, learn about self-efficacy, and work as teams to solve problems—all with elements of fun.⁸

The American Rescue Plan targets 1 percent of \$122 billion for states to support K-12 summer enrichment programs. After a year of stress and isolation, districts must decide the balance between academic enrichment and other types of programming for the summer, such as social-emotional learning, based on the local resources they have.⁹

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How to Ensure Equity

Educational equity means that every child receives what they need to develop their full academic and social potential.¹⁰ Some districts are now working with local community partners to provide social support and enrichment opportunities to augment social-emotional learning. Big Thought in Dallas is an organization that works with youth in marginalized communities with a combination of social-emotional and experiential learning, community-centered partnerships, and an equity lens. This summer Big Thought will provide SEL coaches to work alongside summer school staff to support academic and other programming.¹¹

Districts are shouldering responsibility for the deep inequities of access exposed by the pandemic. This requires much more than adding technology infrastructure and access. Understanding how to shift to more equitable solutions means examining personal and systemic biases and creating multicultural and culturally responsive learning environments where all students are supported in discovering and using their unique gifts and talents.¹²

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/how-educators-are-approaching-summer-learning-this-year/2021/04>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Retrieved from <https://www.nationalequityproject.org/education-equity-definition>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.



Inclusivity is also an element of educational equity. Years of research has demonstrated that when children with disabilities are able to be included in general education classrooms, they have better academic outcomes. In fact, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that a regular classroom with appropriate supports is best for all students with disabilities.¹³

Inclusive education with its acceptance of individual and cultural differences should be part of the curriculum for all students, not just special education students. “The future of a truly inclusive education relies on a cultural shift that supports and nurtures differences, and views success through a lens not focused on standardization but on diversity.”¹⁴

Establishing Policy for SEL and Educational Equity

Districts and states can make policy decisions and investments that respond to current needs and also address the long-standing gaps in students' learning opportunities and access. Jessica Cardichon, director of federal policy at the [Learning Policy Institute](#), recommends using COVID-stimulus funds to build systems and supports to increase districts' long-term capacity and produce immediate benefits for historically underserved students.¹⁵ Her suggestions include:

Double Down on Equity-Focused Investments

Use funds to build schools' capacity in areas of concentrated poverty. Target short-term needs while also addressing the long-term impact of the crisis for vulnerable students. Invest in quality curriculum, teacher professional development, and instructional supports. Investment in SEL can also expand equity.

Attend to the Social-Emotional Needs of Students and Staff

Stimulus funds can be invested in SEL curriculum, increasing access to guidance counselors and social workers and to providing them with training, as well as follow-up surveys to gauge mental well-being after the crisis. Develop community schools that provide health, mental health, and social services to children and families along with instruction.

Lead with Equity

Investments and strategies that have been shown to advance equity and support students' academic success are even more essential now. Look beyond quick fixes and make strategic investments that support all students, but mostly the marginalized.¹⁶

“40 percent of hybrid, 38 percent of remote, and 29 percent of in-person students reported their state of mind during class is more negative now than before the pandemic.”

—EdWeek Research Center

¹³ Retrieved from <https://www.thinkinclusive.us/essential-research-inclusive-education/>

¹⁴ Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1055217.pdf>

¹⁵ Retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/using-federal-stimulus-funds-advance-equity-opportunity>

¹⁶ Ibid.



Transitioning Students Back into the Classroom

Robin Gurwitch, a psychologist and professor at Duke University Medical Center and a specialist in childhood trauma, advises that students may have trouble concentrating or paying attention in class now and as schools transition back to in-person learning. Gurwitch notes that children's responses to trauma may look like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and schools and families might miss the opportunity to take a trauma-informed approach to understanding students' behavior.¹⁷

In an Edweek Research Center Survey administered in January and February 2021, high school students reported lower grades and more procrastination on assignments than before the pandemic. Students are anxious, distracted, and having trouble with concentration and memory. They are also more tired in class and feel more isolated from their peers.¹⁸

Addressing Trauma

The trauma experienced over the last year by both students and educators has taken a toll. This has expanded the need for trauma-informed teaching and social-emotional supports that nurture mental health and physical well-being. Principal James Harelson at Luck Elementary School in Luck, Wisconsin, believes that while educators should not ignore trauma, they have a duty to teach students resilience and perseverance. "Part of the human experience is tragedy," he says. "Teaching students to deal with tragedy and trauma is just as important as teaching the alphabet."¹⁹

Experienced educator Chris Weber advises that while teachers are great at teaching academic skills, they need to blend this with teaching the skills students need to succeed socially and emotionally in school and in life. "We can go a long way toward preventing difficulties by proactively supporting students most in need," he said.²⁰

SEL can help promote understanding, examine biases, reflect on and address racism, build cross-cultural relationships, and cultivate practices that create a more inclusive community and close opportunity gaps. Schools can promote high-quality learning opportunities and positive student outcomes for all students.²¹

Successful systemic implementation of SEL fosters and depends on an equitable learning environment where all students and adults feel respected and valued:

- SEL is relevant for all students in all schools and affirms diverse cultures and backgrounds.
- SEL is a strategy for systemic improvement, not just an intervention for at-risk students.
- SEL is a way to uplift student voices and promote agency and civic engagement.
- SEL empowers adults to strengthen practices that promote equity.
- Schools can engage students, families, and communities as authentic partners in social and emotional development.

"We can go a long way toward preventing difficulties by proactively supporting students most in need."

—Chris Weber

¹⁷ Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-pandemic-will-affect-students-mental-health-for-years-to-come-how-schools-can-help/2021/03>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Retrieved from <https://learn24.dc.gov/event/american-rescue-plan-act-funding-social-and-emotional-learning-0>

²¹ Retrieved from <https://defendinged.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Equity-and-SEL-Casel-Schoolguide.pdf>



How to Fund Social-Emotional Learning Programs

The three COVID-relief federal stimulus bills provide an opportunity for school districts to make long-term investments in SEL to support students' learning and development, promote educator SEL and well-being, deepen relationships with families, and create more equitable learning environments.²² CASEL has just released a [new policy brief](#) to advise districts on the highest priority SEL investments for K-12 schools using funds from the American Rescue Act. The brief urges districts to invest in SEL systemically across curriculum, extracurricular activities, student support services, professional learning, discipline, and ongoing assessment for continuous improvement in:

- Expanding learning opportunities that integrate social, emotional, and academic learning in and out of school.
- Strengthening educator/adult social and emotional competencies, enabling them to feel connected and valued so they can more effectively support their students.
- Aligning SEL efforts across schools, families, and communities.²³

The American Rescue Plan also includes \$3 billion additional funding for students with disabilities. This allocation is welcome as it recognizes the particular challenges faced by students with disabilities during the pandemic and the additional resources needed to support them moving forward.²⁴ All of the federal stimulus dollars are a one-time allocation and the additional IDEA funds are not guaranteed in the future.

This once-in-a-generation investment in public education will most likely focus on interventions and supplemental programming to address learning disruptions and recovery, professional development, and permanent investment in technology infrastructure.

Public and private grants may also be used to fund any of the initiatives discussed in this paper. [Grants.gov](#) and [GetEdFunding.com](#) are good sources.

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²³ Retrieved from <https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/SEL-Policy-Brief-on-ARP.pdf>

²⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.specialedlawinsights.com/2021/03/new-idea-funding-in-the-american-rescue-plan-act/>



An Evidence-Based Approach to SEL

As a research- and evidence-based behavior intervention and classroom management solution, n2y's [Positivity](#) meets all the criteria for relief funding. This one-of-a-kind solution empowers social-emotional skill building, paving the way for students to participate in learning, improve academic and behavior outcomes, and achieve independence.

Built around eight proven behavior strategies that integrate into daily routines, Positivity can help teachers address learning recovery for students who have faced loss and trauma during the pandemic. These include visual schedules, decision trees, calming breaths, alarms, and break cards to alleviate anxiety and help students stay on task; social narratives and video modeling to explicitly teach prosocial behaviors; and incentive charts to motivate task completion and positive choices.

Beginning with completion of a Core Behavior Profile, teachers pinpoint appropriate strategies and are supported through the entire intervention process. The proactive strategies can be delivered online and on demand for just-in-time support. Automated behavior tracking and reporting inform further strategy selection, ensure the interventions are delivered with fidelity, and help demonstrate compliance.

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