Social and Emotional Learning:
A Mindset for School Safety and Student Security

RTI INTERNATIONAL | Center for Education Services

"Educating the whole learner cannot be reduced to a simple set of policies or proposals. It is, instead, a mindset that should inform the entire educational enterprise."

(Aspen Institute, 2018, p. 8)

All Hands on Deck

In the spring of 2019, RTI implemented the All Hands on Deck program in three North Carolina counties. The program was funded by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction School Safety Grant, which was offered in response to a growing need for safer schools in the state. According to the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), 10.1% of high school students in North Carolina reported that at least one day in the past month they "did not go to school because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to or from school." This percentage translates to more than 45,000 students and represents an increase of nearly 4% from 2015. It also represents the highest reported measurement since the survey was initiated in 1993 (YRBS, 2017). All Hands on Deck included a series of three customized, on-site professional learning workshops for 67 teachers, 5 administrators, and 13 student support personnel. One-on-one follow-up coaching for teachers and support personnel provided supports tailored to individual needs and implementation goals. While fewer than 20% of teachers implement new learning following a workshop or professional learning session without additional follow-up, 95% of teachers implement new learning following a workshop or professional learning session with sustained coaching (Bush, 1984).

Results of the program aligned to the five core competencies identified in the framework developed by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness; and led to the following outcomes for students and for the adults who participated in the program.

Relationship Skills (Community Building)

A math teacher—who described herself as uncomfortable with emotions in the classroom—began implementing a relationship-building protocol from the National School Reform Faculty (2014) with her students twice a week to support her classroom community. The protocol—Transitions—provided a structure that encouraged students to share what was on their minds as they transitioned into class, taught students to listen actively to one another, and built a supportive community in the classroom. When asked, students who participated encouraged their teacher to continue the practice with her students the following year.

Self-Awareness and Responsible Decision-Making

An English teacher, who was frustrated with her students' addiction to their cell phones, created and facilitated a unit based
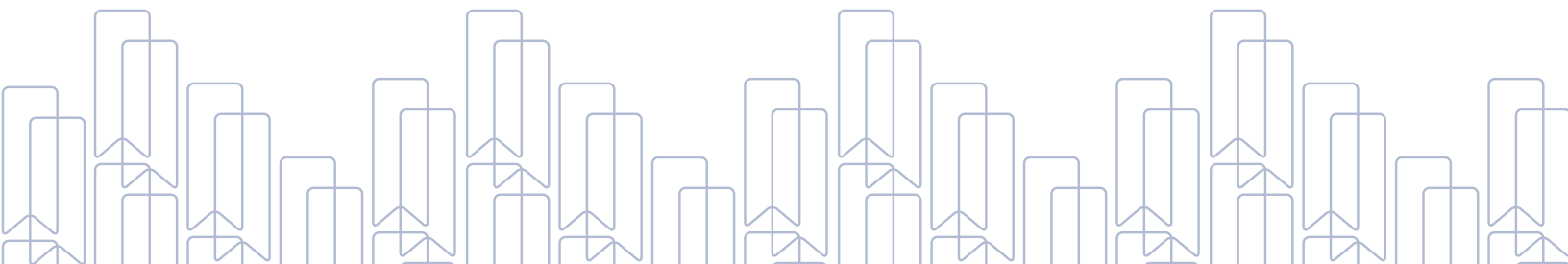
on research and analysis of informational texts that asked her students to learn about the impact of cell phone use on individual users. Research conducted by the students included the impact of texting while driving and the impact of blue light on sleep patterns. In addition to analyzing informational texts, students set their own personal goals for decreasing their cell phone use, tracked their progress, and created infographics to present their results to their classmates. At the end of the semester, the teacher stated that the workshop and ongoing coaching support helped her realize that she was responsible for teaching not only the required English curriculum but also for teaching students social and emotional skills like responsibility, self-awareness, and positive decision-making.

Self-Management and Social Awareness

A Family and Consumer Science teacher engaged her students in a study of how they worked in groups. This study included a self-assessment, observations of peer group dynamics, and a reflection on how actions and choices during group work impacted group results. Based on their reflections, students created individual and group goals for working in teams. Students became more aware of their own role in groups and how to interact with one another for increased productivity and better problem-solving.

Relationship Skills (Collaboration)

A history teacher reflected on her use of collaborative groups in her classroom, realizing that for effective student collaboration, she needed to provide more structure and scaffolding for students to help them understand how to be personally accountable to the group and how to hold their peers accountable. She realized that, in fact, students needed to be explicitly taught how to work in groups. Through intentional planning of collaborative group work, she began to help students learn to be aware of their own contributions to the group and how to support one another in constructing group understanding.

Self-Awareness

A chorus teacher reviewed data related to the behavior of students in her classroom and realized that to create a safe and structured space for all students, she needed to be more of a leader in her classroom. She came to understand her own role on her students' feelings of safety and security in her classroom.

Self-Awareness and Social Awareness

A first-year English teacher, who thought he had a student discipline problem, realized that his students were not misbehaving. Rather, they were simply disengaged. He realized that his goal as a teacher was not the compliance of his students but authentic student engagement, and he began to recognize the relationship between his own planning and student responses. He learned that planning authentic, relevant, and challenging lessons increased student engagement and proactively supported classroom management.

RTI's Research-Based Approach to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

The All Hands on Deck program was designed to support teachers primarily but also to support administrators and school support staff in understanding the importance of their role in building social and emotional competence through

relationships, structure, intentional planning, and implementation. The program incorporated elements of RTI's research-based, comprehensive, and proactive approach to school safety. This approach emphasizes

- Improving school climate and strengthening adult–student relationships and interactions in the school

- Advancing equity through the use of specific strategies, including cognitive de-biasing

- Implementing a trauma-sensitive approach

- Developing SEL skills among teachers, principals, counselors, and school resource officers (SROs)

- Integrating academic instruction with SEL.

Improving School Climate, Relationships, and Interactions

Research has shown that aspects of school climate can have a profound impact on student experiences and outcomes, including reduced absenteeism and suspension rates (Durlak et al., 2011), improved health and risk prevention (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015), and increased engagement and academic outcomes (Yoder, 2014). Particularly in communities affected by economic distress or impacted by high poverty, positive feelings and attitudes about the physical, social, and academic dimensions of the school environment are critical for fostering high-quality relationships among students and teachers (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Loukas, 2007; USED, 2016). McKnight et al. (2016) found in a global study that included 23 countries and 13,225 participants that the most important quality of an effective (good) teacher across all sectors (e.g., students, parents, teachers, principals, policy makers, researchers) was their ability to develop trusting, compassionate, and productive relationships with students. Teachers who are able to relate to their students, value them as human beings, and serve as role models provide space and opportunity for students to find them approachable. These teachers listen to students' needs, care about the whole child, and develop positive and safe classroom cultures.

During All Hands on Deck, participants explored the characteristics of positive and safe learning environments and visualized what that environment might look like in their own classrooms and schools. Among other characteristics, they considered the impact of feedback, boundaries, protective factors, and relationships on

those environments as well as the role of the teacher in creating these environments. Participants engaged in focused discussions, dilemma analysis, problem-solving, and goal-setting activities for classroom implementation of strategies designed to promote authentic relationships and high expectations. At the end of the All Hands on Deck program, one participant reflected, "When you have established a personal relationship with a student, they're going to be more open and willing to work harder for you… because they understand that you want to encourage them and help them get through life and better understand the subject that you're teaching."

Advancing Equity

Equity in schools is not only about academics, and it is critical that working toward equity includes SEL as a key component of any comprehensive program for schools and districts. Consider this: Black and Latinx students are more likely than their White peers to experience peer aggression, which can lead to an inhibition of appropriate social and emotional skills (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009). Furthermore, research has provided evidence of disparities in SEL support for Black and Latinx students in comparison with their White peers. In student self-perception surveys, for example, disparities were noted in indicators such as the unwelcoming/welcoming school climate, sense/lack of sense of school community, peer aggression/peer support, and challenging/non-challenging school environments. Cognitive bias and deficit mindsets about students are root causes of educational inequity and lead to these disparities. Poor SEL outcomes for Latinx students and English-language learners may result from an unwelcoming school climate and inadequate support for students to feel a sense of belonging (Blanco-Vega, Castro-Olivo, & Merrell, 2008). Because teachers engage in numerous interactions on a daily basis inside and outside the classroom, they are essential to providing support for equitable SEL outcomes and must have not only an awareness of cognitive biases and deficit mindsets but also the motivation to understand, pay attention to, and combat both through cognitive de-biasing strategies.

During All Hands on Deck, participants learned about cognitive bias, engaged in simulated activities to experience and reflect on their own cognitive biases; defined and identified types of bias, including confirmation bias, false consensus bias, fundamental attribution bias, the halo effect, and race and gender bias; and learned and practiced cognitive de-biasing strategies. After participating in the All Hands on Deck program, one teacher

noted, "I didn't realize there were so many different types of bias… You had a student before in class, and so you've predetermined how successful they're going to be based on prior experience… I've heard rumors about a student, and then I carry that into the class without realizing…Every student deserves to start fresh every semester, no matter where you've been with them."

Implementing a Trauma-Sensitive Approach

Although general development of social and emotional skills among adults and students is important, it must be recognized that these skills are not developed within a vacuum, absent of the school and community context in which students and educators live. An increased number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; household substance abuse; parent separation or divorce or having an incarcerated household member; and recurring stress can lead to risky behaviors during adulthood, decreased academic success, illness, and early death (Finkelhor et al., 2015). The negative effects of these ACEs can be mitigated by schools that take a trauma-sensitive approach in their ongoing SEL work.

The Massachusetts Advocates for Children (Cole et al., 2013) suggests a "trauma-sensitive" approach that is adopted by the entire school to benefit all students, families, and staff. This means that schools adopt schoolwide strategies for addressing trauma and building resilience for all students and staff. These are prevention efforts that are critically important particularly when a multitiered system of support is in place. These prevention efforts influence and impact practices, policies, and culture. Additionally, they enhance and support the evidence-based, trauma-informed approaches during secondary (group interventions) and tertiary (individualized) interventions. Students impacted by trauma spend more time out of class; are at greater risk for failing a grade; score low on achievement tests; and have higher rates of suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to special education (Perfect et al., 2016). Schools that take a trauma-sensitive approach mitigate the effects of trauma on students.

While the All Hands on Deck program did not specifically address trauma, other workshops facilitated by RTI in the past year in both Texas and North Carolina have. At a workshop addressing trauma-sensitivity and resilience in western North Carolina, participants learned about brain research that explains differences in traumatized brains and learning-ready brains as well as the impact of these differences on memory and learning. The workshop included outcomes related to types of trauma and trauma triggers

in schools, and participants engaged in scenario analyses and role plays to apply knowledge to common school contexts and learn to de-escalate emotional responses in students to bring them back to a learning-ready brain.

(Note: All RTI workshops are customizable based on district needs. The All Hands on Deck workshop series did not include a trauma-sensitive approach to education.)

Developing SEL Skills for Educators and Other School Adults

Teaching is a stressful career that can affect the health and well-being of teachers and administrators alike, leading to impacts on educator retention as well as student outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). To mitigate their own stress, model SEL competence for students, and ensure that they are aware of their own emotional triggers and can remain calm when students are agitated or acting out, adults must develop their own SEL skills and get the support that they need. This includes developing their own self-care routines. Development of social and emotional competence must be an ongoing learning activity as teachers continue to understand SEL, own their role in developing their own competence and that of students, and help shape the school's environment on meeting the social and emotional needs of students through collaborative decision-making. A systemic focus on adult SEL development includes supporting members of the
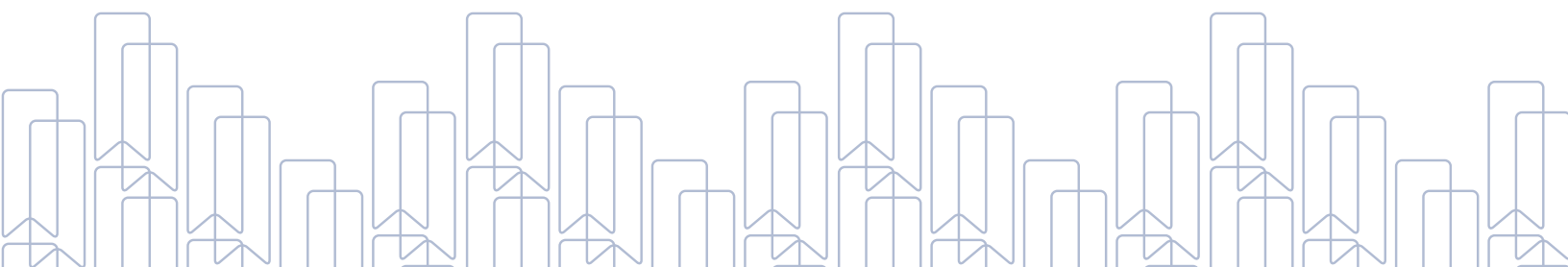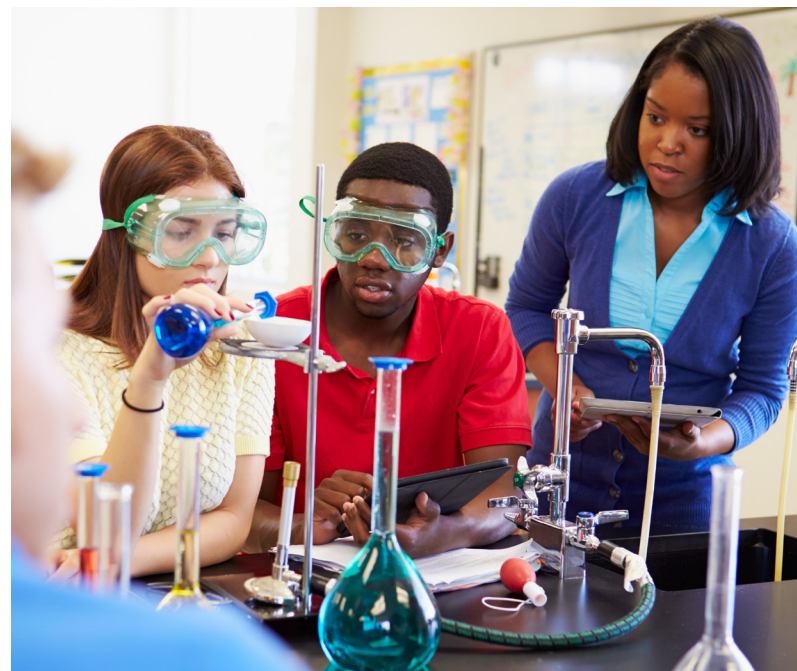
school community from their onboarding through experiences of sustained professional learning (Aspen Institute, 2018).

During All Hands on Deck, participants self-assessed their own ability in CASEL's five domains of social and emotional learning (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making). They discussed their self-assessment with their peers and identified both a personal strength and an opportunity for their own personal growth. Other activities increased educators' awareness of their own reactions in the classroom. As one teacher reflected, the scenario "about student/teacher stressors really hit home for me at the current time. It gave me ideas on how to help myself and made me aware of the effect [stress] has had on my students."

Integrating SEL and Academics

Nonacademic skill growth often receives little attention in classrooms; however, academic outcomes cannot be isolated from emotional needs or behavior, and learning happens best when social, emotional, and cognitive growth are connected (Aspen Institute, 2018). A 2011 study found that students who received SEL instruction had more positive attitudes about school and improved their scores on standardized achievement tests by 11 percentile points (Durlak et al., 2011). Moreover, developing SEL skills in children has been demonstrated to predict adult outcomes—such as higher educational attainment, stronger employment outcomes, better mental health, and reduced criminal activity and substance use (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015). Unfortunately, while many educators recognize that SEL needs are important, they also struggle with finding the time and space to address these needs while at the same time meeting curricular standards.

Integrating SEL with instructional practices allows teachers to address SEL while also teaching their content. In his research, Yoder (2014) identified 10 research-based practices—including cooperative learning, classroom discussion, academic press (rigor), self-reflection and self-assessment, and responsibility and choice—that also address SEL skills. Coupling these practices with

culturally responsive pedagogy "shifts, changes, adapts, recycles, and recreates instructional spaces to ensure that consistently marginalized students are repositioned into a place where they are active participants in the instructional process" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 76). Taken together, Yoder's practices and culturally responsive pedagogy provide teachers with the tools they need to help all students be academically, socially, and emotionally successful while designing rigorous tasks for students to engage with and maintaining high expectations.

During All Hands on Deck, participants not only learned about Yoder's 10 practices, but they also selected a practice on which to create a personal classroom goal and engaged in one-on-one follow-up coaching to support implementation. Based on their individual goals, teachers co-planned lessons and classroom activities with their RTI coaches, implemented the activities with or without the support of coaches, and reflected on outcomes. One-on-one coaching emphasized the integration of SEL and everyday planning to ensure that teachers understood that SEL could be a part of their everyday instructional practice. While many organizations offer packaged programs for SEL, RTI's approach emphasizes ongoing and integrated support of SEL through the use of every-day, research-based instructional practices.

Conclusion

While schools and districts often look for a curriculum or program to meet their SEL needs, SEL is not simply a specific product or packaged curriculum. Schools and districts that want to improve SEL for both teachers and students should instead focus on developing competencies and mindsets that emphasize the importance of relationships and equity in schools, build the SEL skills and trauma-awareness of adults in the school, and intentionally integrate SEL and everyday classroom practice. Afterall, "Educating the whole learner cannot be reduced to a simple set of policies or proposals. It is, instead, a mindset that should inform the entire educational enterprise" (Aspen Institute, 2018, p. 8).

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