

A Superintendent Supports Emotional Intelligence: Making the Connection between Academics and Emotions

Article



by Larry Leverett, March 2003

Some critics argue that emotional support and development is the job of families, and that schools should focus exclusively on academic preparation. This is a shortsighted perspective that ignores the connection between school success and social and emotional wellness. Academic performance improves when learners are relieved of the stresses that disturb their academic focus. Educators in Plainfield, an urban district in central New Jersey, view social and emotional learning (SEL) as a means to promote academic progress and create positive, lasting changes that help students in both school and non-school settings.

The Plainfield Public Schools made the decision to recognize the connection between academic performance and social and emotional wellness. Academic success is the primary focus in our district, but we realize that students who are socially and emotionally well are much better equipped to succeed.

Behavior Affects Academics

Plainfield is a small city located in central New Jersey with a population of 48,000. The Plainfield school district consists of ten elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. It serves a population of 7,840 students, of whom 98.5 percent are children of color and 72 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Like all communities, Plainfield has some students who come to school with emotional and behavioral challenges that affect their perseverance and success as learners. Too often, these challenges disrupt their focus on being successful in school. Disaffection, alienation, anger, hostility, and emotional instability influence the academic and behavioral choices made by these students.

In 1996, the community, frustrated by years of low performance, decided that it was time to make some changes in instruction. Early in our efforts to become a standards-driven school district, we recognized that we needed to address the factors contributing to maladaptive behavior in schools and classrooms. Social and emotional learning was the "missing piece," as Rutgers University Professor Maurice Elias has termed it.

The commitment to integrate SEL into Plainfield's instructional program includes a variety of strategies that will continue to grow in the years ahead. It has become standard practice for curriculum and instruction staff to embed SEL learning experiences into all new curriculum guides.

SEL in Action

Last spring I visited a fourth-grade class at Jefferson School. Three students, Tierrah, Laura, and Diamond, were engaged in a peer editing process to prepare a collaboratively developed narrative fictional piece, *The Spy Cruise*, for publishing. Plainfield's efforts to integrate social and emotional learning into the context of standards-based reform came alive before my eyes.

The many discussions required to develop characters, shape the plot, work through editing and revision tasks, and assign responsibilities to members of the team were a challenge. But the team showed good social-emotional learning skills related to conflict resolution, problem solving, and negotiations.

Other SEL approaches used in the district include:

- Selection of a principal's "book-of-the-month" that has an SEL-related theme.
- Modification of quarterly writing assignments to include SEL-related topics.
- Selection of trade books for classroom libraries.

- Letter-writing campaigns to "TJ," the central character of the "Talking with TJ" video program that concentrates on team-building, diversity, and group problem solving.
- Participation in essay contests that have character development or SEL as the focus.

Essays as Character Builders

The Laws of Life Essay Contest, for example, incorporates elements of character development, social and emotional learning, language arts literacy, family and community, and distributed leadership.

In the 2000-2001 school year, for a six-week period, fifth-grade students wrote essays about the core values by which they conducted their lives. All district fifth-grade classes participated, with 94 percent of all fifth-grade students submitting an essay. Middle school students were trained to review the fifth-grade essays and to identify the top forty. Five high school seniors selected the winning essays. Schools honored their winners with special celebrations for parents and students. The process culminated with a banquet attended by more than 250 community members, parents, students, and staff. Since then, other grades have joined the competition, which now includes community input in reviewing the essays.

Literacy and Mathematics Program

The implementation of balanced-literacy and concept-based, inquiry-oriented mathematics programs requires students to manage their emotions, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish positive goals, make responsible decisions, and maintain productive relationships with peers and teachers. Literacy and math classroom rituals and routines require students to accept more responsibility for managing their own development as learners. Plainfield students must be willing to persist through multiple drafts and revisions as they progress toward producing standards-based work. The ability to work independently, in pairs, and in small groups is essential to student success in standards-based classrooms.

The truth is, you can't have a standards-based learning environment without integrating SEL competencies. Teachers who spend disproportionate amounts of time resolving conflicts and managing disruptive behavior have difficulty maintaining a standards-based instructional focus. Students who know and consistently apply SEL competencies contribute to a classroom environment that supports standards-based instruction. Teachers in a standards-based classroom must be able to facilitate greater student ownership and student responsibility for maintaining a socially and emotionally healthy learning environment. Plainfield has committed to providing teachers with the support needed to make these changes through large, ongoing investments in professional development.

Buy-In From Teachers and Parents

However, we know that you can't really mandate what matters most. A compliance-driven, checklist-oriented mandate from the superintendent and school board to integrate SEL in standards-based reform would not be effective in our schools. A commitment from a critical mass of parents and staff in diverse roles was the preferred approach to establishing social and emotional learning in Plainfield schools.

Plainfield has developed a distributive leadership model that has significantly broadened the base of leadership in our schools and community. The investments made to distribute leadership yielded dividends for SEL efforts. The leaders for SEL integration in Plainfield are not always in formal positions of authority. These champions of SEL are relied upon and vigorously supported by the superintendent and others in the organization's formal structure.

In 1999, the National Center for Innovation and Education identified three guiding beliefs as the core of most social and emotional learning programs:

- Caring relationships form the foundation for learning;
- Emotions affect how learning takes place and what is learned; and
- Goal setting and problem solving provide direction and energy for learning.

We can no longer afford to marginalize social and emotional learning in the context of a "No Child Left Behind" policy environment. Leaving no child behind requires school leaders to embrace the responsibility of nurturing the social and emotional well being of our nation's children.

Accountability for the success of students in standards-based instructional programs is a necessary, but insufficient, response to the academic and social development of children and youth. Schools must move beyond current school reform efforts that attend only to academic instruction and school management. Many students cannot focus on learning until their social and emotional needs are addressed.

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