Making School a Calmer Place to Learn

Schools integrate daily routines for social-emotional learning with academics

BY SUZANNE BOUFFARD

Like most children their age, first-graders at the Children's Aid College Prep Charter School (CACPCS) get into arguments at recess. But rather than get mad and lash out, they are more likely to say things like, "I'm frustrated because I'm not being heard." And when they get angry or anxious during class, they walk over to a designated Secure Corner and use a strategy called Stop and Stay Cool to calm down.

Since CACPCS opened in 2012, it has been using SECURe, a new schoolwide approach to social and emotional learning (SEL). CACPCS is located in the Morrisania section of the South Bronx, where the child poverty rate is 57 percent, trauma is common, and academic performance levels are some of the lowest in New York City. Before opening the school, Drema Brown, vice president of school-age programs at the Children's Aid Society, knew that school staff needed an effective approach to building what she calls "life skills." When she heard about SECURe, she liked how it folded SEL skills into the whole school day and building. "What sold me on it were the routines," she says, referring to a set of structures that staff and students use to manage feelings, solve conflicts, and navigate other daily challenges so that teachers can keep teaching and students can keep learning.

An umbrella term for a broad set of skills from managing emotions to maintaining attention and focus—as well as a descriptor for programs that promote these skills—social and emotional learning has often been confined to discrete programs aimed at helping teachers deal with their number-one complaint: student behavior in the classroom. But armed with research linking effective programs to increased academic achievement, schools across the country are taking these lessons further, making SEL an integral feature of school life alongside, and in support of, academics.

A growing number of schools, like CACPCS, are experimenting with SEL routines that can be used at any time and in any part of the school. To support such efforts, a few districts have created SEL departments, and some are providing SEL coaching to teachers. States are getting involved, too. Seven states, including Illinois and Kansas, have stand-alone SEL standards or guidelines, and almost all states have embedded SEL in academic standards to some degree, according to a recent study by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a nonprofit organization formed in the 1990s to advance the development of academic, social, and emotional competence. To further integrate SEL and academics, some districts, like Washoe County, Nev., are showing teachers how SEL standards support specific Common Core State Standards.

Growing Interest in SEL

SEL has been taught in schools for decades, typically through structured curricula like Second Step, Responsive Classroom, and PATHS, many of which include weekly lessons on such topics as understanding feelings and taking others' perspectives. The choice of programs and approaches can be dizzying, especially because there is overlap among programs that label themselves as promoting SEL, character education, bullying prevention, and school climate, which experts say target many of the same skills.

CASEL has aimed to make that choice easier by identifying what it considers to be five core SEL "competencies"—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision making—and producing a guide to effective programs. When the original guide was released in 2003, it included 22 programs for grades K–12 labeled "select" based on quality and effectiveness criteria; when it was updated in 2013, 23 programs met more stringent "select" criteria for preK–5 alone. (A middle and high school edition is forthcoming.)

In the last few years, highly publicized instances of

Four Characteristics of Effective SEL Programs

According to a meta-analysis of 213 programs conducted by Joseph Durlak, Roger Weissberg, and their colleagues, SEL programs are most effective when they are SAFE:

1. *Sequenced* with a connected and coordinated set of activities
2. *Active* in engaging students in building skills
3. *Focused* on developing one or more social or personal skills
4. *Explicit* about targeting specific SEL skills.

bullying, suicide, and youth violence have fueled interest in SEL, but the recent popularity has been driven largely by mounting evidence of its academic benefits, say SEL experts. Studies show that when students can cope with frustration and anger, listen to others, and get along with classmates, teachers are better able to teach, and students are better able to learn.

One influential study, a 2011 meta-analysis of 213 SEL programs, found that students who participated in school-based SEL programs had higher academic performance than their peers, especially when the programs were implemented well and met four criteria for effectiveness (see "Four Characteristics of Effective SEL Programs," p. 4). Separately, a randomized controlled trial of one program, the 4Rs (Reading, Writing, Respect, & Resolution), found that academic impacts were greatest for the most at-risk students.

Yet, SEL has been criticized on the grounds that it is hard to define and hard to implement effectively. A 2010 randomized evaluation of seven programs by the federal Institute of Education Sciences found virtually no effects of the programs on student outcomes, even though several of those programs, including 4Rs, were shown to have significant effects by their separate evaluators. "Even the most effective SEL programs have relatively small effect sizes, which means they are helping kids, but there is room for improvement," says Stephanie Jones, an associate professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and one of the developers of SECURe. "Weekly SEL lessons are very important for teaching skills, but those skills need to be practiced and reinforced throughout the school day," she says.

New approaches aim to make that improvement by weaving the building of SEL skills into schools' daily practices and making it more of a priority.

Routines to Create Consistency

In addition to routines like Stop and Stay Cool and a conflict resolution approach called the Peace Path, SECURe includes games that promote self-control and hand signals that preK–3 teachers can use to prompt students to "stop and think," "focus," and use "active listening." The hand signals are effective because they teach students to regulate their own behavior, replacing traditional classroom management techniques that are sometimes "more positive to teachers' development than to kids'," reports Miguel Balbuena, CACPCS's community school director.

Patricia Li Zhang, a life coach at CACPCS (a role the school describes as a reimagined guidance counselor), says that consistency is key to making the routines work; all the adults have to know them and use them. She and Balbuena credit the routines, as well as weekly SECURe lessons on topics such as identifying feelings, solving conflicts, and listening attentively, with helping their students to stay calm and focused and "tuned in" to one another in ways that they don't typically see in that age group.

An evaluation of SECURe at CACPCS is under way, but results from a study of SECURe in low-income urban elementary schools in Phoenix, Ariz., were positive, showing that students in schools randomized to use SECURe had significantly more ability to control impulses and pay attention and had slightly higher reading and math achievement.

Daily routines are also the main strategy for teaching SEL at Keller Middle School in Houston, Texas. Keller uses an approach called Conscious Discipline, which provides no structured lessons but, instead, a set of strategies that can be used throughout the day. Each day begins with the Brain Smart Start, which includes a moment of focused silence, noticing and "wishing well" to staff and students who are absent, and a breathing exercise. Other routines include calming-down techniques posted in hallways and classrooms and a jar for recording acts of kindness.

One of the core principles of Conscious Discipline is that language has a powerful influence on feelings and behaviors. That's why the program encourages everyone in the school—students and adults alike—to use certain phrases that encourage self-reflection. For example, at Keller, staff and students talk about behavior as being "helpful or hurtful" rather than "good or bad," and everyone is encouraged to use language that focuses on positive expectations. So instead of telling students "Don't run!" in the hallways, staff advise calmly, "Walk."

Although these language changes "might sound hokey," they work, says Diane Phelan, Keller's principal. Running and chaos in the hallways are decreasing, as are disciplinary referrals. Changing language and habits isn't easy, she admits, especially for the adults. "Some of the staff initially said, 'I'm not touchy-feely. I just don't do this stuff,'" she remembers. But over time, she says, most have come around after seeing students' behaviors change.

Coaching for Teachers

Even with good routines, SEL can thrive only when teachers know how to make it part of their daily interactions with students, experts advise. That knowledge is rarely cultivated in teacher preparation programs or required in teacher certification, according to a research project under way by the Social and Emotional Learning in Teacher Education consortium. Even when teachers have training, they still need ongoing support because they often encounter challenges they didn't anticipate, points out David Osher, vice president and AIR Institute Fellow at the American Institutes for Research, who is leading an evaluation of a CASEL project to build SEL capacity in eight districts.

One approach that is growing in popularity is SEL coaching. With instructional coaching becoming common practice, some districts are embedding SEL skills into existing teacher observation and feedback

For Further Information

CASEL Collaborating Districts Initiative: http://www.casel.org/collaborating-districts

J. Durlak et al. "The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions." *Child Development* 82, no. 1 (2011): 405–432.

S. M. Jones and S. M. Bouffard. "Social and Emotional Learning in Schools: From Programs to Strategies." *Social Policy Report* 26, no. 4 (2012): 3–22. Available online at www.srcd.org/sites/default/files/documents/spr_264_final_2.pdf

"Social-Emotional Learning." Practice to Policy Brief 1. Arlington, VA: National Association of State Boards of Education, 2013.

N. Yoder. *Teaching the Whole Child: Instructional Practices That Support Social-Emotional Learning in Three Teacher Evaluation Frameworks.* Washington, DC: Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, American Institutes for Research, 2013. Available online at www.gtlcenter.org/

processes. Others have coaches dedicated to SEL. In each case, the goal is to help teachers learn how to foster SEL at the same time that they teach academic skills by interacting with students in positive ways and helping them learn how to focus and stay calm.

Two years ago, the Austin (Texas) Independent School District (ISD) embarked on an ambitious plan to provide SEL coaching to all school staff. In a systematic rollout, schools are being paired with coaches from the district's Department of Social and Emotional Learning who are former teachers or social workers. At least once a month, coaches observe and provide non-evaluative feedback to each teacher on how well she or he is promoting SEL both during lessons from the Second Step curriculum and during instructional time. It's important to see the instructional time to ensure that teachers are using consistent SEL approaches throughout the day, advises the district's SEL director, Sherrie Raven. Coaches also provide training and modeling for cafeteria monitors and other support staff in order to build consistency among all the adults.

Schools need three to five years of support at this level, with an additional two to three years of less intensive support, estimates Raven. During the less intensive phase, coaches will gradually release responsibility to the schools, in part by training campus-based instructional coaches and mentor teachers to integrate SEL with academic feedback. Raven believes that this will help schools truly commit to SEL and ensure sustainability of the initiative, which is currently supported by grants and Title II funds. It's too early to see quantifiable results, she says, but administrators report that teachers and students are solving problems more productively and that the school climate is more positive and conducive to learning.

Because SEL coaching is a new strategy, "we don't know enough yet about what is the appropriate dosage," says Osher, and it's not clear which aspects of coaching (for example, feedback or modeling) matter most, adds Jason Downer, the director of the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, who has extensively studied the coaching model MyTeaching-Partner. They both hope to see more research emerge.

An Ongoing Commitment

School and district leaders report that making SEL a daily priority takes an ongoing commitment and "a lot of patience and practice," as CACPCS's Li Zhang puts it. Some educators worry that this takes too much time away from academic instruction. But many others say that building SEL actually supports academic learning. A choice between SEL and academics is a false one, according to Austin ISD's Raven, who says, "We want kids who are well adjusted *and* high achieving." ■

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School-Based Instructional Rounds

continued from page 8

norms allow, and encourage, visitors to talk to students about their work when it does not cause any disruption in the classroom. On school-based rounds, the visiting teachers may not only know the subject and lesson plan intimately (in Killingly they are likely to have helped develop it at their grade-level team meeting and be teaching the same lesson the next day), but they may have even taught the children whose work they are examining. In contrast to the more generic questions most outside visitors ask, in-school visitors will ask sophisticated probing questions of kids, such as: "What strategy are you using?" and "What do you do when you don't get it?"

The more intimate knowledge of students and content also shows up after the observations, when teachers are trying to identify patterns and look for evidence of changes in what the students know, whether they are being pushed outside their comfort zones, or if they are able to understand and articulate concepts they are learning. Since so many rounds visits focus on student thinking, this insider ability to talk and listen to students and to assess their work in much greater detail is a big asset.

When the visit is more detailed in its focus and conducted by close colleagues, it can lead to more immediate adjustments in improving practice. In contrast to cross-school network rounds, where observations and suggestions from the visiting team are filtered through the principal and whatever teachers

Key Elements of IR

An idea adapted from the medical rounds that doctors conduct, instructional rounds help educators work together systematically to improve classroom instruction using these key elements:

- The host school identifies a "problem of practice" on which visitors will focus during classroom observations.
- After a brief orientation, visitors divide into groups to observe in three or four classrooms, spending about 20 minutes in each.
- During the observations, visitors jot down specific, nonjudgmental notes about what teachers and students are saying and doing related to the problem of practice.
- Following the observations, visitors and participating hosts then analyze the data, looking for patterns, and ultimately making suggestions for improvement.
- Hosts incorporate data and suggestions into their continuous improvement work.