EducationWeek | SPOTLIGHT 2022

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SEL for Student Trauma

EDITOR'S NOTE

SEL may be the support that students experiencing trauma need to learn how to understand their emotions and academically achieve. This Spotlight will help you discover how teachers can support traumatized students; gain insights into the benefits of prioritizing student well-being; explore research for supporting principals with SEL and school climate initiatives; investigate how to defuse misconceptions about SEL; and more.

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Published March 18, 2022

How Teachers Can Support Traumatized Students (and Why They Should)

By Sarah D. Sparks

Trauma can come in response to a single, intense event like a natural disaster or repeated toxic stressors such as abuse or homelessness. Whether a child develops problems with thinking, self-control, and interpersonal relations as a result of trauma depends on more than just the traumatic event or events. It's also driven by whether the child has healthy, supportive relationships that can help them regain a sense of safety.

"Because the pandemic has gone on so long, we're really functioning in a space where all the adults in the system, as well as all the kids need help to figure out how to move forward," said Micere Keels, an associate professor of comparative human development at the University of Chicago.

In that respect, the pandemic has created something of a perfect storm, with children experiencing illness or death in their families, financial and housing instability, and adult stress that has put children at higher risk of abuse or neglect. And for months at a time, many students experienced school closures or remote instruction that provided less connection to typical school support networks.

Keels and other experts discussed ways schools can support students who have experienced trauma on Wednesday, as part of the "Examining the Evidence" series, a partnership between Education Week and the Annenberg Institute's ED Research for Recovery project.

> "The problem with trauma is we can't always see it. It's not like a broken leg where ... they're wearing a cast and you can act accordingly, knowing they are not yet healed."
>
> **MICERE KEELS**
> Associate professor of comparative human development, University of Chicago

Experts, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the U.S. Surgeon General, have warned that the pandemic has sparked a national emergency in child mental health problems, including rising rates of self-harm among children and adolescents.

If teachers react to a student's behavior by itself, the response can be more intense and punitive—particularly if the teacher also is coping with trauma or stress.

"The problem with trauma is we can't always see it. It's not like a broken leg where ... they're wearing a cast and you can act accordingly, knowing they are not yet healed," Keels said.

When it comes to psychological and emotional trauma, she added, "most of us walk around trying to be as if everything is OK, and so you don't realize which students are coping with what negative, traumatic and distressing experiences."

Gigi Dibello, the coordinator of Project AWARE, a trauma-informed instruction program at the Woonsocket education department in Rhode Island, said it's not enough for teachers and school support staff to try to identify trauma based on symptoms or behavior. Woonsocket schools survey all students to identify which students have or are coping with traumas like the death of a family member or housing instability.

Keels said school leaders and educators should focus on ensuring students feel physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe at school, while also helping them become mindful of their own emotions.

If, for example, a student lashes out or behaves out of character in response to a teacher or peer, Keels said a teacher can help de-escalate the situation by acknowledging a student's distress and asking them to take a few focused breaths.

"You can just give [distressed students] a little nudge, say, I see you, and I can get to you after if you can just make it through this class period," Keels said.

"Quick little statements like that, if the teacher has a relationship with the student, that helps the student engage their self-control in the moment, knowing you are going to come back to them after."

Monique Smith, the director of diversity, equity, and inclusion at Chicago public schools, said schools should shift their mindset from the "what" to the "why" when explaining rules and processes to both teachers and students. She said helping people feel more ownership and agency related to both what they are learning in school and behavioral rules can help them feel more secure and engaged during periods of instability.

"We want students to believe that what they are doing is purposeful. No one wants to just perform a task out of compliance, and students are no different," Smith said. "We have to give them that space."

Ongoing adult training needed

Ongoing training and support for teachers and other adults in a district is critical, Smith said, because staff stress and turnover has also increased during the pandemic. For example,

the district now trains all staff to support executive function and mindfulness in students.

Just before the pandemic began in 2020, Woonsocket public schools implemented Project AWARE, a school-based mental health structure to train teachers in strategies to build supportive relationships with students and use "conscious discipline" rather than simply reacting to students in the moment. The project also provides peer support and problem-solving networks to help teachers to manage their classes and their own stress.

Gigi Dibello, the coordinator for Project AWARE, said the program proved crucial when the district coped with pandemic disruptions and student disengagement and depression. The district trained all of its elementary teachers and half of the secondary teachers in trauma-informed practices, including suicide prevention and first aid for mental health crises.

The district also created a professional learning community for teachers around trauma-informed instruction and trained paraprofessionals, office secretaries, custodians, bus drivers, and other support staff to identify and support students dealing with toxic stress.

Among the educators' recommendations:

- School and district leaders should use policies and practices that are responsive to the kind of developmental challenges trauma can create.
- In schools that have experienced sudden, large increases in the number of students experiencing trauma, teachers may need to adapt moderately intensive "tier 2" interventions, normally used for small groups of students, to entire classes.. For example, they could use reflective essay writing to encourage students to process stressful experiences.
- Social workers and counselors can block out certain times of the day to bolster teachers' capacity to promote positive mental health in classrooms and support children's self-regulation skills.
- School security staff should learn trauma-informed de-escalation strategies.

"If there's a silver lining to the pandemic, it's that it's given all of us a shared experience of trauma," DiBello said, adding, "it's also created a shared urgency around mental and behavioral health that is unprecedented and indisputable." ■

—Julie Denesha for Education Week

Lateshia Woodley, the assistant superintendent of student support for the Kansas City public schools, speaks with Jareon Brown, 17, and other students in Southeast High School's restorative-justice class.

Published February 16, 2022

How Putting Students' Welfare First Can Transform a District

By Eesha Pendharkar

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a hotline for individuals in crisis or for those looking to help someone else. To speak with a certified listener, call 1-800-273-8255.

For Lateshia Woodley, a relentless focus on supporting students facing trauma comes from her own lived experience.

Her mother had her at 13, so Woodley was raised by her grandmother in subsidized housing outside Atlanta. Her grandmother didn't have a car, so when Woodley started in after-school activities, she was sent to live with a relative who had one.

There, she says, she was sexually assaulted by a family member. She had to drop out of all her after-school activities to move back in with her grandmother, and soon after, she tried to kill herself. None of her teachers noticed Woodley's sudden lack of engagement in school—or the trauma she was going through.

Now, Woodley, 44, serves as the educator that she didn't have for thousands of students in Kansas City, Mo.

Over the past four years, the Kansas City district's assistant superintendent of student support and her team have focused on building a trauma-informed school system. That means recognizing and addressing factors in students' lives that might prevent them from learning or being involved in school and ensuring that, at school, they are surrounded by supportive adults.

There are many potential stumbling blocks in this majority-Black school district, where all 14,000 students qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

"We have a lot of challenges in the city that our students are faced with. We're talking about abuse, neglect, parents that suffer from mental illness, homelessness, all those different factors that affect the outcomes of students," Woodley said.

"How do we increase supports so students are getting their social-emotional needs met, so that we can get to the academic outcomes that we need?"

Building a trauma-sensitive school district

Over the past four years, Woodley and her team have implemented a series of ini-

tiatives to address those needs so that students feel safe and welcome in school. Data broadly indicateshe is meeting that goal.

So far, under Woodley's leadership, more than half of Kansas City schools have demonstrated improvements in students' English/language arts and math scores, 56 percent reduced the number of out-of-school suspensions, and 60 percent of schools increased their attendance rates. The state voted to restore Kansas City's full accreditation in January, which the district first lost more than 20 years ago.

It starts with making sure students have access to professionals who are well trained to recognize and respond to students experiencing such trauma as abuse, neglect, or violence.

When she came to the district in 2018, Woodley pushed to hire licensed clinical social workers and professional counselors to monitor students' well-being and offer intervention and therapy as needed in every school building, which there was an absence of before she took the job.

f a student displays any signs of distress, they are referred to a clinician and assessed using a social-emotional learning questionnaire. The screener asks questions about different domains across students' lives, including emotional management, and both physical and environmental safety. The district also has a suicide screener that alerts Woodley's team if any student Googles self-harm terminology on their school laptops.

Woodley worked with Travanna Alexander-Toney, the district's behavioral-health manager, to develop the questions for the screener. Under her leadership, the district also collects data every month on student responses to the social-emotional screener and other reports of students undergoing trauma such as emotional abuse or physical or sexual assault.

These monthly data allow Woodley and Alexander-Toney's team to look for trends in traumatic student experiences and train educators to respond to them.

After students returned to Kansas City classrooms in person this year, the district found increased reports of sexual abuse during remote schooling and an increased percentage of students that had looked up self-harm on the internet during the same period, Alexander-Toney said.

Melissa Sadin, the director of the Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools Initiative, a national group that trains school and district staff, said Woodley's work to build trauma-sensitive schools aligns with best practices for sustainability, including working with teachers to recognize trauma response, creating community partnerships, and hiring social workers.

LESSONS FROM THE LEADER

- **Cultivate the Collective Genius of Your Team:** Working to transform the lives of students and families presents many adaptive challenges. I have experienced the most success when I have been supported by an amazing team that was able to collaborate regardless of position or title to create circles of supports to ensure student success.
- **Understand That the Community Has the Resources to Heal Itself:** As educators we have dedicated many years of our lives to education and professional learning to be qualified to make decisions we feel are in the best interests of students and families. I found that the best professional learning is taking the time to listen to the heartbeat of students by empowering student voice and student advocacy.
- **Leverage the Power of Your Story and Build Relationships:** Don't be afraid to be your authentic self. When you are willing to be transparent and share your story, your students, staff, and parents will get to know you, what you value, and why you make the decisions the way you do.

The ideal trauma-informed district will have no need to suspend students—unless it's for possession of weapons or drugs as required by law—because it will have successfully built a school environment where the underlying causes of students' disruptive behavior is understood and addressed, Sadin said.

Although stopping suspensions altogether is especially hard in urban districts, Woodley's body of work sends an important message to students: that she values them and will do anything she can to help them through school, she said.

"What she's doing is telling the kids she cares about them," Sadin said.

Woodley's motivation to do this work has always been to be the educator she needed growing up.

"I often wonder how my life would have been different as a result of adults understanding what was going on with me socially, emotionally, and having to navigate the dysfunction of our world," she said. "That's why I'm passionate about this work and leading this work that we do in Kansas City."

A history of transforming alternative schools

Woodley's approach in Kansas City is built on years working in alternative education with some of Atlanta's most underserved children.

She started her career as a school counselor at an alternative school in Atlanta, now known as the New School of Carver, and worked her way up to principal of McLarin High School, which she had also attended.

As a counselor, she saw firsthand how life challenges could derail young people's learning trajectories and took steps to remove those obstacles.

At Carver, for instance, she met Dewanna Cuthbert, then a junior who was pregnant with her daughter.

Woodley went above and beyond her role as a school counselor, bringing Cuthbert her school assignments and helping her manage postpartum issues, ensuring she stayed on track to graduate, the former student said. She introduced her to other teenage mothers in Atlanta and built a peer-support group, where Cuthbert found some long-lasting friends.

Woodley also offered the young moms tangible resources, such as diapers for their kids, Cuthbert said.

"She really was like a lifeline for me at that time," Cuthbert said. "She went to bat for me and really opened the door for me to get on the trajectory of where I am now."

By 2010, Woodley had become an assistant principal of an alternative school for older students wanting to get their high school diplomas, and in 2013, she took on leadership of McLarin High School. Both were on the state's lowest-performing-schools list when she assumed leadership, according to Lyn Wenzel, a former district school improvement specialist for the Georgia education department. But by the time she left, both had improved enough to exit the list.

"The cards are stacked against those schools to get off the list, but that didn't deter her," Wenzel said. "She knew that if kids could set some personal goals and if you put that support in

place in order to reach those, ... [better] test scores would just be a byproduct."

One important support for teachers: Woodley offered personalized professional development for her staff by analyzing their strengths and weaknesses.

"She knew how to recognize the talents of each person on her faculty and she definitely gave us opportunities to shine," said Marquita Blades, who worked at McLarin as a teacher when Woodley was principal.

"So she wasn't a leader who thought that she knew best when it came to everything."

Blades said Woodley allowed her to sit in on district-level instructional meetings and let her present instructional strategies that worked well in her classroom to high school faculty. She also supported Blades when the teacher needed to take extra time off for her health.

Employees were happy to put in the extra work because Woodley led by example, Blades said.

"It didn't feel like she was giving us extra things to do. It was more like, 'This is what I plan on doing for the kids. Now, who wants to jump in with me?'" she said.

Woodley also built community partnerships to get students' housing, jobs, clothing, and other needs met. When students needed jobs, for example, she partnered with some of Atlanta's largest employers, such as Delta Airlines, to help them work while they finished their high school education. Improved academic outcomes and student attendance followed, Wenzel said.

At McLarin, Woodley worked with the chairman of the National Dropout Prevention Center, Sandy Addis. Using some of the same steps as she had in Atlanta, like personalized training, data analysis, and meeting students' social-emotional needs, McLarin's graduation rate went from 19 percent to 75 percent in three years, an outstanding achievement for an Atlanta-based alternative school, Addis said.

"She allowed the faculty to decide what they needed to do differently," he said. "She facilitated their conversation of determining action steps, and then they owned those action steps, and that made all the difference."

Expanding supports for Kansas City schools

In Kansas City, Woodley continues to expand on her student-centric approach while keeping in mind that educators have also been through a traumatic year. She has been a big advocate for supporting teachers as they support students, Alexander-Toney said.

Woodley is now leading the district's most recent work: hiring restorative-justice coordinators to work within its multitiered system to respond to student behavior.

Within the next four years, the district aims to put a restorative-justice coordinator in every one of its 35 buildings to work with students on resolving conflicts—physical, verbal, in person, online—before they are disciplined.

Responding to an increase in school violence, Kansas City also put into place a homicide screener much like its self-harm alert, which sends an email to Woodley's team if a student searches the internet with the intent to cause violence.

As in Atlanta, Woodley's goal isn't just to drive up test scores. It's based in the knowledge that when kids feel safer and happier, they'll do better academically.

"She's going to make change, not just make the numbers look good so she can go get a different job," Sadin said. "She's making sure that the foundation is really strong and sustainable ... for a resilient community."

"In every academic indicator, we have seen improvements over the last few years," Woodley said. "It is proof that if you focus on the social-emotional needs of kids, the academic improvement will increase." ■

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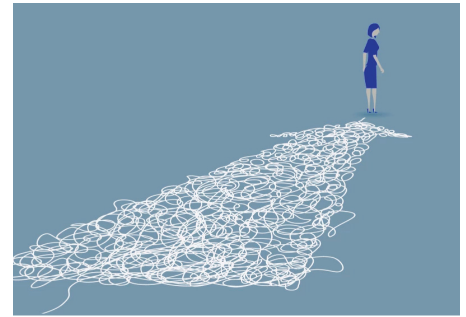
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Published June 30, 2022

Why Principals Must Focus On SEL, School Climate Right Now

By Denisa R. Superville

How do you prepare school leaders for a K-12 system emerging from a pandemic and an ongoing examination of the legacy of racism and inequality in society?

Focus on preparing and supporting them to excel in areas where they'll have the most impact: the combination of social-emotional learning and academics—known as SEAD—as well as school climate, and community engagement.

That's the thrust of a new publication from The Aspen Institute's Education and Society Program, which argues for a complete reorientation of the principal's role for the 21st century.

The report "Rethinking the Role of the Principal," published this month, is premised on the notion that society demands more from schools, and, by extension, principals. It says that research and experiences during the pandemic have shown that the principalship is in dire need of an overhaul if school leaders are to prepare students to participate fully in a democratic society.

"When we are looking at the role of public education in American society and the society that we are right now, we need something different from public schools," said Eugene Pinkard, director of K-12 leadership at The Aspen Institute and a former chief in the District of Columbia public schools.

"Students recognize that there is bias and

inequity," Pinkard continued. "The data tell us that we don't have the same level of upward mobility and economic opportunity ... that we had even in my generation. And certainly it is not equitable across races."

Public education, he said, has a role to play in changing that, but "if you want to change schools, you have to think about the leaders of those schools as institutions."

Principals are 'overextended and under-attended'

Despite research showing that principals are second only to teachers among the factors in schools that affect student learning, the role is both "overextended and underattended," Pinkard said.

"By overextended, I mean when we ask schools to do something new—whether it's distributing masks, or food services, or curriculum, or to address complex issues—we expect the principal to be able to manage that," said Pinkard. "Yet, it's underattended in the sense that when we think about the research of how principals actually have impact and what would be a sustainable role, we haven't actually designed for that."

The Aspen report urges a careful consideration of what the role means now, and removing duties and tasks that do not help school leaders accomplish their key objectives, while ensuring they have support to fulfill their core functions.

"We can't just reshuffle or resequence the job functions," Pinkard said. "It's actually about eliminating some things that might typically sit with principals, introducing some depth where it currently doesn't exist, creating a role that's more impactful and more sustainable—but it's going to look and feel different." A prime example: a combined focus on SEL and academics.

The publication doesn't break new ground on research on the gap between what principals learn in their preparation programs and their day-to-day realities of the job, or in raising the idea that the central office can often be an impediment for principals. Recent publications from the RAND Corporation and The Learning Policy Institute, both backed by the Wallace Foundation, delve into those areas.

Changing central office to support principals

To reorient the role, principal preparation and central office support must also transform, according to the Aspen paper.

"When the principal role changes direction, the system must re-align so leaders do not expend valuable energy working at cross purposes," according to the paper.

For example, principal evaluations would need to focus on the areas districts designate as priorities for principals and remove accountability in those areas that are no longer determined to be part of school leaders' core functions.

Those duties can be distributed to others in the school or in central office.

Districts should also clearly communicate to principals and their communities their new expectations for principals—for example, principals are now required to prioritize instructional leadership and school climate over operations, the paper said.

Districts can also ensure that professional development targets areas that are central to principals' new roles. Peer-support groups and mentoring as well as "principal-in-residence" programs can help principals manage the demands of the job.

And preparation and professional development programs should also devote more time to the science of learning, which continues to get short shrift in training programs, according to Aspen.

While the decades-old shift away from the managerial aspects of the job to instructional leadership has been a major development in the principalship, there's still too much emphasis on test scores and not enough on helping principals deepen their understanding of the science of learning.

"When we talk about the science of learning and development, we're not just talking about how this applies to early childhood or adolescents," Pinkard said. "There is an aspect of this that applies to adults. There is a need for coaching and development that should be embedded into [supervision] that allows principals to grow and reflect."

Aspen argues that communities should be a key part of the new school leaders' work. School leaders should address the needs and priorities of their school communities.

That includes listening to and engaging with school communities, and being culturally responsive leaders, who not only prioritize equity, but also ensure their communities' "values and experiences" are reflected in the schools, according to the publication. It also includes allowing students to play active roles in their own education.

Building a positive school climate should also be at the heart of school leaders' work, which benefits both students and teachers.

> "It's a fundamental reconception of the role, and it's going to ask people to think differently about what they're asking of principals and giving to principals."
>
> **EUGENE PINKARD**
> Director, K-12 leadership, The Aspen Institute

The report also does not separate SEL—for both students and staff—from academics. Districts such as Cleveland had already started to weave SEL into academic expectations and focus on school climate and relationships long before the pandemic, Pinkard said.

There's often a misunderstanding that SEL is incompatible with or detracts from academic rigor, he said.

"That is not what we are proposing here," Pinkard said. "What we are saying here is that this integration and this understanding of research and development helps you recognize great teaching."

Combining SEL with academics, "helps you recognize great assessments and great student engagement," he said. "It helps you recognize how we are crafting relationships, and that's why it's so essential for the leader to bring that into how they build climate in their schools."

Creating a system of new school leaders

While there are individual principals and school systems focusing on the areas that Aspen is advocating, Pinkard said the organization is hoping to make those practices more than just one-offs, with the understanding that

this would look different in every community.

"It's not just normalizing it and making it acceptable. It's authentically prioritizing it," Pinkard said. "Because if we have a principal who says, 'I know that this is important, but at the end of the day, my evaluation is attached to test scores,' it creates a dissonance, and it means that we are not authentically prioritizing it."

The new publication is a deepening of Aspen's entry into school leadership. It partners with 15 mostly urban school districts across the country.

Aspen says it will shine a light on schools and systems that are already rethinking the role of the principal, highlight policies and other initiatives that support principals, and convene stakeholders that work on principal preparation and support—such as researchers and state departments of education—to ensure that principals remain central to conversations on K-12 transformation.

"We are asking folks to take a step back from the principalship as it's currently constructed and not just think about tweaking a thing here or there or aligning the job description," Pinkard said. "We can't just move the deck chairs around." ■

—John Tully for Education Week

First graders Natalie Walove, left, and Brooke Boone dance and sing during music class at the William H. Rowe School in Yarmouth, Maine.

Published June 13, 2022

As Terms Like 'SEL' Draw Fire, Organizations Supporting Schools Sharpen Their Message

By Libby Stanford

Nonprofit organizations that have spent decades offering social-emotional learning and equity-based support to schools are facing a new challenge: defending their existence.

This year, education terms like SEL and equity have become embroiled in the controversy surrounding "critical race theory," an academic framework that argues racism is a social construct that has been embedded into legal systems and policies.

In some states, lawmakers have passed bills, rejected books, and censored teachers with the goal of preventing the discussion of "divisive topics" like racism and sexuality. In April, the Florida education department rejected math textbooks because they included content related to SEL. Forty-two states have introduced bills or taken other steps to restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how race and sexuality are discussed in class, according to Education Week's critical race theory tracker.

The discourse has created a difficult situation for nonprofit organizations that have SEL and equity at the core of the work they do in schools and school districts.

"This is the first time I've seen the divisiveness and the polarization that's happened," said Bridget Durkan Laird, the CEO of Wings for Kids, an organization that works to improve SEL within schools by operating after-school, teacher-training, and curriculum programs in Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina.

The interest around SEL has always ebbed and flowed, and organizations like Wings for Kids are experiencing that roller coaster in real time, Durkan Laird said. At the start of the pandemic, the nonprofit saw an increased interest in their SEL programs, as educators worried about the lack of support for student mental health when schools closed.

Despite the negative rhetoric surrounding the term in some places, organizations that Education Week spoke with haven't found themselves losing out on funding or opportunities. But they are being more careful about how they talk about the work they do.

Clarifying just what 'SEL' means

For a long time, Durkan Laird spent much of her energy focused on telling people about what SEL is. Now, she's tasked with convincing people of what it's not.

"Some of the politicians or individuals that are coming out against it might not necessarily know the true definition of [social-emotional] skills," Durkan Laird said.

Being aware of the changing landscape, Durkan Laird said Wings for Kids has focused on expanding the definition of SEL when talking to parents, lawmakers, and others outside the education world. The best way to do that, she said, is to go through what those in the field call its "five competencies": self-awareness, self-management, responsible decisionmaking, relationship skills, and social awareness.

SEL curriculum has teachers work with students so they can master the competencies and be better equipped to handle challenges in the future. Once she explains that, Durkan Laird said she rarely faces pushback.

"I do find myself speaking in terms that are a little bit more definable by a general audience," she said. "Because I do think that if you say 'social-emotional learning,' it's now becoming pigeonholed in this whole bucket of controversy."

Urban Teachers, a nonprofit that works

to diversify the teacher workforce in schools in Baltimore, Dallas, the District of Columbia, and Philadelphia, has also found success through clearer communications. The organization has tackled the pushback against critical race theory and social-emotional learning by having "open lines of communication" with school leaders and the community, CEO Peter Shulman said.

"We work in education, so we should be educators ourselves to make sure that when we're talking to someone, we're working to advance their knowledge and also being honest about who we are and who we aren't," Shulman said.

Doubling down on values

Although the rhetoric surrounding critical race theory and SEL can be loud at times, it has not deterred education organizations from being vocal about their work.

"If anything, we've doubled down on our values, we've doubled down on our program," Shulman said.

Urban Teachers isn't coy about its stance on race and racism in its messaging. On its website, the organization writes "Structural racism and inequality have kept generations of urban children from receiving the education they deserve."

Shulman said the commitment to staying true to the organization's values has been a necessary part of navigating the current cultural landscape. He's not the only one who thinks that way.

Naila Bolus, the CEO of Jumpstart, a nonprofit that provides early-childhood education programs in 15 states across the country, wrote in a letter on the organization's website of the organization's commitment to being anti-racist and inclusive after lawmakers in several states worked to ban from schools books about race and sexuality.

"After two years of a pandemic that took an immeasurable toll on young learners, it has never been more important to support children's social-emotional development by empowering them to ask questions and think creatively and critically about the world around them," Bolus wrote.

Durkan Laird has also remained steadfast in her dedication to SEL, not shying away from promoting the educational method. She said she's always sure to back up her assertions with data that show the impact SEL has on student outcomes.

"We all just have to continue to believe in what we do and stick together and not back down," she said. ■

—xavierarnau/E+

In a national survey of educators by the EdWeek Research Center last year, about 85 percent said one hour should be the maximum amount of time devoted to social-emotional learning per day.

Published May 24, 2022

How Much Time Should Schools Spend on Social-Emotional Learning?

By Lauraine Langreo

How much time should educators spend during the school day helping students develop healthy social and emotional skills?

It's an important question as school districts across the country invest more money in social-emotional learning programs and some communities face parent pushback against those efforts. Plus, local and state policies—as well as differing levels of sophistication in how social-emotional learning is integrated at the classroom level into academic subjects—make the question difficult to answer.

"There isn't a time limit for it," said Juany Valdespino-Gaytán, executive director of engagement services for the Dallas Independent School District. "When we talk about social-emotional learning in Dallas, we're not talking about SEL happening at one time of the day. SEL has to be taught and embedded throughout the entire day in order for students to really have the opportunity to develop those skills and apply these skills to everyday life."

That may be the case in Dallas. But in a national survey of district leaders, principals, and teachers across the country by the EdWeek Research Center last year, about 85 percent said one hour should be the maximum amount of time devoted to social-emotional learning per day.

In interviews with Education Week, social-emotional learning experts said that spending some classroom time explicitly teaching social-emotional skills is important, but what matters even more is effectively integrating the skills—such as time management, collaboration skills, and responsible decisionmaking—into everything that students are learning in school and in after-school programs.

"Social-emotional learning can be applied in a lot of different ways," said Justina Schlund, senior director of content and field learning for the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning or CASEL. "I often describe this by looking at three things: One, are there some really intentional efforts to build positive relationships among teachers and students?

Two, is there some dedicated time to teach social and emotional skills? And three, are there really intentional efforts to integrate social and emotional learning practices throughout academic instruction?"

School district leaders also recognize that social-emotional learning needs to not only be taught explicitly at times but also be embedded throughout the school day. And some even said an hour a day would be excellent.

"Well, if we had an hour a day to explicitly support SEL, that'd be amazing," said Jill Bryant, assistant director of social-emotional learning for the Portland Public Schools in Oregon. "But then I would just go a step beyond that. It really needs to be woven into the fabric of everything we do all day, even after-school programs as well."

Valdespino-Gaytán pointed out that educators might be more likely to dismiss SEL or say only an hour or less should be devoted to it if they don't understand how social-emotional skills can be integrated into the lessons they're already teaching.

It's not only during "circle time" in the early elementary grades that students are building their social-emotional skills. Before students take a test, teachers can teach them techniques to calm themselves; before working in teams, students can talk about what makes a good team member; when discussing a story, students can reflect on how they connected to it personally.

There are still some people "who silo SEL in a way that I wouldn't like to see," said Lynn Lawrence, SEL and mentoring coordinator for LaGrange School District 102 in Illinois. "They're going to do that circle, check it off, and then do the rest of the day. Trying to get everybody to see that this is just the way we approach everything, this is our lens through which we view everything, is still something we continue to work on."

Teachers struggle to find the time to fit anything new into their days

Time might be the biggest challenge for teachers when thinking about how to integrate SEL into their lessons.

Consider, for instance, that the typical teacher works 54 hours a week and just under half that time is spent directly teaching students, according to the 2022 Merrimack College Teacher Survey that was conducted by the EdWeek Research Center.

"Time's the most finite resource we have, really, even more than money," said Mary Tavegia, a professional learning lead for the Center for the Collaborative Classroom, which develops literacy and SEL programs. "We can always try to get some grants and get more money, but you can't get more time. That is something we hear from educators all the time."

District leaders agreed. Valdespino-Gaytán said a lot of teachers are probably more worried about the core content that students are being tested on and that teachers are being held accountable for than the potential SEL skill development that could be integrated into those lessons.

Bryant said that if districts are emphasizing explicit SEL instruction as opposed to integrating it across the curriculum, then it makes sense when teachers voice concerns about not having enough time.

Reframing the thinking to weave SEL into academic content

If districts "reframe" their thinking and see that SEL is "woven into everything that we do in creating those conditions for students to thrive," then the priority stops becoming about the number of minutes spent on SEL, Bryant said. Instead it just "becomes how we do things" and then can have "a more sustaining and significant impact for students and staff."

According to CASEL research, students participating in SEL programs showed improved classroom behavior. District leaders who spoke to Education Week have seen similar effects.

If kids are feeling like they belong, if they're feeling more cared for, and if they're feeling more respected, then they are willing to cooperate with their teachers or peers, said Jennifer Heckmann, an instructional coach for the Vinton-Shellsburg Community School District in Iowa.

Before working at the Center for the Collaborative Classroom, Tavegia was a principal at an elementary school in Illinois. She said when the school started implementing an SEL program, many teachers were concerned about not having enough time to get it done. But after a semester, she said teachers found that they had gotten "further and deeper into the curriculum" because students were learning how to better manage themselves. ■

Published July 21, 2022

Want to Support English-Learners? Prioritize SEL, New Study Finds

By Ileana Najarro

When students test out of an English-learner program, or are reclassified as proficient in English, they report a higher sense of self and a greater belief in their ability to complete challenging academic tasks, a new study finds.

Past research has examined how exiting students out of English-learner programs—and removing the label of English-learner—impacts students' academic outcomes. Monica Lee, a senior research associate at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, and her co-author James Soland of the University of Virginia, wanted to look at what reclassification means for social-emotional learning, or SEL, outcomes.

Their study suggests that SEL strategies for English-learners should be prioritized, not sidelined, in the discussion of how to support this growing population.

It's an especially relevant insight as more evidence emerges of how virtual learning impacted the services these students received at the start of the pandemic.

"I know it's tempting to focus with the English-learner population on what they're missing. They need to catch up and become proficient in this language," Lee said. "But I do think the social-emotional aspect of this is hugely important."

How English-learner programs overall impact students' sense of self

English-learner programs typically consist of extra support for students mastering the English language alongside academic subjects such as math and reading. Students in these programs accounted for 10 percent of public school enrollment or 5 million students in 2019, according to the latest federal data. Policies vary across states and within school districts for determining how students exit out of the extra services.

Lee's study analyzed survey results from English-learner students in three large school

districts in California in 2014-15. The surveys asked students about their SEL skills in growth mindset, academic self-efficacy, self-management, and social awareness. The study compared results for students who were still in English-learner programs with those who tested out the prior school year. In all, the study examined results from about 10,600 students.

The researchers found that multilingual students who tested out of the English-learner programs rated themselves significantly higher in academic self-efficacy upon reclassification than did students who remained in the programs. These reclassified students reported about eight percentage points higher on that measure than the average of all the multilingual students observed. There weren't notable differences in the other measures.

While the study couldn't explain how or why those students who were reclassified reported these higher levels, Lee suggests three possible reasons based on past research:

- The label of English-learner might change the way students see themselves. It's a label associated with something they cannot do, so removing it could have an impact.
- English-learner programs often offer less-rigorous academic coursework. So when a student tests out of the program and gains access to more-challenging course work, it can impact their sense of self.
- Because of the label, peers and teachers might have lower expectations of students in English-learner programs. Testing out can expose students to higher expectations, and in turn a higher sense of self.

The way an English-learner program is run can even impact students' sense of self. For instance, some programs separate or pull out these students from mainstream classes, further stigmatizing them. But research shows that students need to be immersed in English and provided scaffolding and support at their level. Teachers, must continually monitor how they are improving and make adjustments as needed, said Megan Waugh, director of the department of English-language development for the Washoe County school district in Nevada.

The study also points to the need to address students' social-emotional needs well before they test out of the English-learner label, Lee said.

—Getty

What integrating SEL within English-learner programs looks like

Waugh and her colleague Trish Shaffer have been working on that goal for years.

For SEL strategies to work for English-learners and others, they need to be continually embedded within the school day. That means putting them at the forefront of the planning process for content and curriculum,Waugh said.

But Washoe County schools, where 14 percent of students are in English-learner programs, take it a step further. They make sure the SEL strategies educators use in their day-to-day work is also culturally responsive and relevant to the schools' racially and ethnically diverse student body, said Shaffer, a multi-tiered system of supports and SEL coordinator for the district.

This helps address cultural nuances. While SEL strategies for English-learners don't fundamentally differ from those for other students, some concepts such as self-efficacy or self-awareness don't translate neatly to other cultures, Shaffer said.

For instance, many of the district's English-learners are Latino, and Latino culture places a greater emphasis on collectivism over individualism. So practicing self-efficacy may look more like practicing collective efficacy, such as using "we" statements rather than "I" statements.

These kinds of investments pay off in increased student engagement and student ownership of their learning, Shaffer added.

For those educators looking to dive into SEL strategies that are culturally responsive, Shaffer recommends getting stakeholder buy-in; establishing why they're doing this work; finding evidence-based strategies that can be integrated throughout the academic day; and modeling the strategies for educators.

> "Research shows that students need to be immersed in English and provided scaffolding and support at their level. Teachers, must continually monitor how they are improving and make adjustments as needed."
>
> **MEGAN WAUGH**
> Director of the department of English-language development, Washoe County school district, Nevada

Lee, the researcher, was an English-learner herself back in the day, so she understands the link between social-emotional skills and academic outcomes.

"Students should flourish in ways beyond what is measurable by test scores," Lee said. ■

—Vanessa Solis/Education Week and Jorm Sangsorn/iStock; Getty images

OPINION

Published June 27, 2022

This Is What Happens to a Student's Brain When Exposed to Gun Violence

Traumatized and hypervigilant brains cannot learn effectively

By Amanda M. Dettmer & Tammy L. Hughes

As gun violence takes its place as the leading cause of death in children and teens, Americans must consider whether schools are among those places where children are persistently at-risk. It is true that children and teens live in homes and neighborhoods where there are increasing rates of violence, death, and suicide by guns, and that mass shootings account for the smallest number of those gun deaths.

Yet, it is also true that in the wake of the events at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, and after more than 250 mass shootings in the country this year, more than half of educators report fear of a large-scale school shooting as a key safety concern. Parents, educators, and the public are faced with the question: How can schools be safe for learning?

The answer: by prioritizing and optimizing psychological safety.

Traumatized brains cannot learn effectively. Hypervigilant brains cannot learn effectively. The science has been clear on this for years, and the COVID-19 pandemic brought this knowledge into sharp relief: When young, developing brains experience a toxic stressor—meaning, a strong, uncontrollable stressor absent adequate psychological supports—they are profoundly affected.

The same is true whether children survive a mass shooting at their school, witness gun violence in their homes or communities, or lose a primary attachment figure such as a teacher or relative to gun violence. The experience of gun violence (trauma), or the heightened worry over their own safety even in the absence of experiencing gun violence (hypervigilance) rewires the brain at its most sensitive periods of development.

The experience of, or excessive worry about, toxic stressors like gun violence affects three key brain functions which students depend on for learning. First, the brain's emotional response function goes into overdrive: It shows heightened reactions to emotional stimuli and has greater difficulty disengaging from them, ultimately resulting in greater reactivity to threat and therefore greater perceived stress. Because the brain's emotional processing areas are also critical for perspective-taking, social interactions, and for attention, learning is impaired.

Second, the brain's reward processing areas are diminished. The brain responds less robustly to rewards, which in turn increases reward-seeking behavior. This impairment affects learning by directly affecting students' motivation and attention, decisionmaking, and ability to respond to different types of reinforcements in the classroom, which are crucial for learning new skills.

Finally, the brain's "air traffic control tower" is compromised. The prefrontal cortex coordinates higher cognitive functions including working memory, attention shifting, and executive function skills. It also mediates empathy and self-regulation. Following traumatic events like gun violence, the prefrontal cortex coordinates connections in the brain are weakened while responses to threat are strengthened, impairing top-down control and shifting the brain from a more reflective to a more reflexive state.

Children are not primed for optimal learning in a reflexive state. Brains in pain do not learn. The traumatized and hypervigilant brain affords most of its energy toward survival and the least amount to learning. Under psychologically and physically safe conditions, however, the brain can focus most of its energy on learning.

Children, of course, are not the only ones affected by the toxic stressor of gun violence. Teachers across grade levels and across the country are traumatized by school shootings, and they need time and space to process events like these—not to treat the day after "like any typical school day." How can teachers be expected to provide the best learning environment for the students under these conditions?

Teachers require their own time to share their reactions with other adults. Support from friends, family and community is irreplaceable. "Solider on" approaches can disrupt expressions of care by minimizing teachers' experience of stress. When teachers need time to step away and refresh, explicit support from colleagues and administrators, and in the form of policy protecting these needs, is required. Ignoring personal needs is a recipe for burnout, and, in the

longer term, for teachers leaving the profession.

There are straightforward preventive measures we can take to maximize students;' learning potential. The science also informs us here. When children feel safe and secure—physically, yes, but especially psychologically—they are primed for optimal learning.

This type of safety comes in many forms. Consistent and predictable routines and stable adult presence, such as those provided in homes, schools, and communities, are paramount to optimizing learning. When teachers have the structures in place to model how they manage their own reactions, students benefit. Teachers explaining how they notice the need for help and how to reach out for support are valuable lessons. Hearing that "we are in this together" can make students' fears more manageable, which in turn enables and promotes their learning.

Increased public safety begins with practical solutions that help our young people to thrive in their school and communities. We can accomplish this by focusing on stacking positive factors, such as implementing programming that addresses traumas and establishes school connectedness, and by addressing bullying and other times kids are feeling excluded.

However, these types of psychological safety nets are compromised when easy access to military-style weapons and high-capacity magazines result in the murder of children's peers, teachers, caregivers, and neighbors. Any positive in-school interventions must be simultaneously accompanied by reducing potential harms, such as limiting what kinds of guns and ammunition are available for purchase, and by whom.

Our courts and lawmakers must reduce potential harm to students by making it harder, not easier, to acquire and carry firearms. They must also require, not just encourage, red flag laws across the country.

By stacking positive factors and offloading negative factors, the scales tip toward the positive, and children and educators are situated to optimize learning in the classroom. The end result will be a lasting effect on a student's capacity to develop into healthy adults and responsible citizens. ■

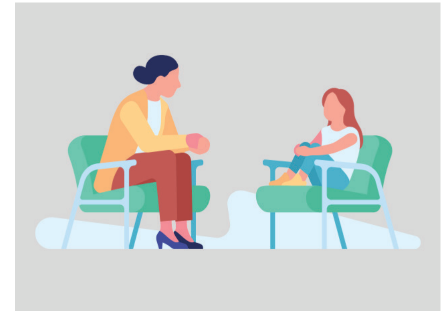
Amanda M. Dettmer is a behavioral neuroscientist at the Yale Child Study Center. Tammy L. Hughes is a school psychologist, licensed psychologist, and professor of school psychology at Duquesne University. Both are members of the American Psychological Association's Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education.

OPINION

Published March 20, 2022

What Can Schools Do as Trauma Continues to Rear Its Ugly Head?

By Lisa Meade


—DeWitt - Canva

I first remember hearing the term "trauma-informed practices" while watching Paper Tigers. The documentary followed Principal Jim Sporleder's efforts to turn an alternative high school around. As a principal, I was always seeking stories of inspiration to keep me on the path of doing good work. In this movie, we meet so many students facing incredible challenges. Their obstacles require Jim's school to think outside the box and understand the impact of adverse childhood experiences on a student's trajectory through school. This would be the first time I had heard of the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study.

The ACES showed that *"the more traumatic experiences the respondents had as children (such as physical and emotional abuse and neglect), the more likely they were to develop health problems later in life—problems such as cancer, heart disease, and high blood pressure."*

The study went on to show that *"there was also a troubling correlation between adverse childhood experiences and prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse, unprotected sex, and poor diet. Combined, the results of the study painted a staggering portrait of the price our children are paying for growing up in unsafe environments, all the while adding fuel to the fire of some of society's greatest challenges."*

While many educators express concern over the learning loss we see due to the COVID pandemic, I can't seem to effectively remediate what we see in the area of trauma. Our counseling team meets every two weeks to brainstorm interventions and strategies for students facing too much for adolescents to bear on their own, but they still do. Some of our students are juggling so much more than should be dealt them at their age.

A student moves from friend to friend to avoid living in their family's home. Another student is admitting alcohol addiction. A young lady fears another fight with her boyfriend, who lives in her dad's house with her father's permission. Still, there are students who are hungry and worried about how their parents will pay the bills they hear them discussing in other rooms. Some of my students look at me like I am from another planet when I try to bring up their grades and attendance for review. It's as if that stuff even matters to them at that moment or will ever. The pain is front and center, instead.

In Jennifer Bashant's book, *Building a Trauma-Informed Compassionate Classroom*, she reminds educators that our mindset around interpreting a challenging student and their behavior will impact the path chosen to address that misbehavior. We can choose to rely on traditional forms of punishment or look at the misconduct as a symptom of a more significant need to be examined collaboratively.

That student that just stormed out of the building calling the principal every swear word he could muster is most definitely disrespectful. Yet that same student is sending a clear message of how he is feeling at that very moment: angry, unheard, trapped, and maybe even misunderstood. At this moment, it is so very important that the leader not take the words personally. We must remember words are words and behavior is always sending a message. Our better approach is to find a time when that student is de-escalated to discuss the event. Acknowledge what happened but don't stop there. Help the student to express the root cause of their frustration. This will take time.

Schools need a more explicit definition of what school discipline means and what the purpose of it is. If it is to punish misbehavior, traditional suspension methods fit that crime. If it is to teach and remediate

wrongdoing, we will need more tools and permission to do things differently.

These tools could include having honest conversations with students to help them express what they are feeling and accepting restorative practices by a school community. Instead of jumping to traditional consequences, start a conversation (Amstutz. 2015):

- What happened?
- What were you thinking at the time?
- What have you thought about since?
- Who has been affected by what you have done? How?
- What do you think you need to do to make things right?

Start there instead of with a punishment. This will require time for conversation and listening. We can't force trauma and pain out of a student. We have to find ways and safe spaces to help them deal with whatever is standing in their way at that moment. Practicing forgiveness has to be OK. Can a leader decide to impose a nontraditional consequence as part of a plan to repair it? Will that be supported by the colleagues and community they work within?

We can't take away the hardships that our students are facing. But we can do a better job at acknowledging that the pain is real, exists, and impacts behavior. Things haven't gotten any easier for our students, our children, especially over these last few years. ■

Lisa Meade is a principal in upstate New York She has previously served as an assistant superintendent, pupil-personnel services director, and special education teacher. Lisa was NASSP's/SAANYS 2015 Principal of the Year.

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Published by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc.
6935 Arlington Road, Suite 100
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Phone: (301) 280-3100
www.edweek.org