

# THE MORAL IMPERATIVE OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING



Q&A WITH MERIA CARSTARPHEN

**M**eria Carstarphen, superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools, has nearly 20 years of experience in educational leadership, primarily in urban school districts. Her previous roles included superintendent in Austin, Texas, from 2009 to 2014 and administrator in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the District of Columbia. She serves as a commissioner and distinguished educator on the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, hosted by the Aspen Institute.

**Q: Why have you made social and emotional learning (SEL) a priority in your work as superintendent in Atlanta and previously in Austin?**

A: If you want 100% of kids to have a successful school experience, you have to meet them where they are at and teach the whole child. If students don't think they matter or don't think you care about them, doubling down on math isn't going to help them. They will never learn the academics

— even if they memorize the content for a moment, they won't have a deep understanding.

From where I sit, I believe it is a moral imperative to do SEL work in schools, because we undid it for so many years. I think high-stakes accountability is part of why we have the problems with school culture and behavior problems that we are seeing today. When I was the superintendent in Austin, schools were being closed by the state for missing proficiency targets



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people’s children, but kids today aren’t getting that support anymore. For many children, if social support isn’t provided and SEL isn’t taught in school, they aren’t getting it. It becomes reinforced in their hearts and minds that no one cares about them.

When I make the case for SEL in schools, people often mention a case of an extraordinary person who “made it” despite difficult circumstances and a lack of support. But I always ask: For every one child who succeeded, what about the other hundred who didn’t?

**Q: How do you communicate to staff that SEL is an important part of their work?**

A: You need to have an articulated vision from the leadership and to demonstrate with resources that SEL is a priority — that is, by dedicating time, people, and money. And then you have to bring everyone on board.

The commitment to SEL starts with adults. They have to work on their own SEL skills and also understand the core competencies for students. In Atlanta, we provide professional learning on SEL for everyone from support staff (like maintenance staff and bus drivers) to teachers to school administrators.

I present at trainings for our staff,

by very small margins and for very small subgroups of students. Teachers and kids were so stressed. Some kids can succeed in that environment, but many won’t. I had to give everyone permission to do the whole job again, to let teachers do the job they were hired to do.

SEL is particularly important in

the high-poverty, urban communities where I have focused my career because kids are coming to school with so much stress and trauma. There are a lot of challenges in their communities, and the social support networks have broken down.

It used to be that communities would wrap their arms around other

and I start by asking, “Who is the first teacher?” Parents and guardians are the first answers I hear. Then when I ask, “Who is the second teacher?,” people immediately skip to the classroom teacher. But I say, “Let’s back up. Who is the next teacher the child sees after walking out the door in the morning?”

We go through the bus driver, the crossing guard, the cafeteria workers. By the time a kid actually gets to a classroom teacher, there are several adults who could have built a relationship, set the standards, and reinforced the behavior expectations. If any of those people are not greeting the child with kind words or attending to their health and safety, the child’s day doesn’t start off the way we want it to.

The best hope we have for helping kids be the best people they can be is getting every adult we work with on board with embracing and modeling SEL in all they do. This includes how we approach our district and school processes, policies, and procedures that should be created through an SEL lens.

For example, in Atlanta Public Schools, we revised our student behavior code to be more progressive and restorative so a child doesn’t necessarily have maximum suspension days out of school for minor infractions. We have taken it one step further so school Behavior Support Plans (what used to be called school discipline plans) are now aligned to this revamped student behavior code and that those school-based plans, which include the campus rules and expectations for students and staff, are also supportive and restorative when mistakes are made.

We also have invested time in training of staff to get them to where they need to be around our expectations of behavior in schools — training on the protocols, training on how to hold regular community meetings with each other and with their students



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so they can build those important positive relationships, and also training on restorative practices so that when mistakes are made and children or colleagues are not treated the way we expect, the harm can be repaired and the learning and work can continue.

**Q: How can district leaders build a team approach to SEL across the district?**

A: We have changed the way we hire and onboard people. When I interview principals and hire people who report directly to me, we talk about school culture and behavior expectations. It’s bigger than ethics and human resources policies. It’s about the culture we want to create and making sure they share our district’s vision.

As the superintendent, I participate in all new employees’ training. If you are new to our district, you are going to meet me, and we are going to discuss SEL and school culture and what is expected. I role-play the part of a student, and I go up to one of the new hires — it could be a mechanic or a teacher — and I make some smart-aleck comment and then ask, “How would you show me you care about me? What

would you say to me?”

People struggle because it’s hard. But when I flip it and ask, “How would you show you don’t care?,” everyone has an example, because they remember things that were said to them when they were students. So [my staff and I] model positive responses like, “You have probably had a rough morning, so I’m going to let that slide, but we are going to go to the peace corner and have a conversation when you are ready to talk.”

**Q: The culture shifts you are describing can be difficult to effect at a systemwide level. What was your first step in making these shifts?**

A: During my first week on the job in Atlanta four years ago, school culture and behavior were out of control. Kids were unbolting seats on the buses and throwing them out the emergency door onto the highway. Bus drivers were spraying pepper spray on children and staff.

I even saw staff members threaten to physically fight one another in meetings. This was all happening on the heels of a cheating scandal [during which several former administrators



and teachers were convicted of felonies for falsifying student achievement test data]. The district's culture had to change if we wanted our community and our students to succeed.

I called CASEL [the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, which has an initiative to support school districts on implementing SEL]. They weren't taking on any more districts at the time, but I said, "We need support. We need you to take us on."

When they agreed, I set up a districtwide meeting to kick off the work with CASEL and told staff, "I have seen enough of our culture to last a lifetime. We need to have a conversation about changing our environment." The meeting was held during our June expanded cabinet meeting, so we not only had principals, but district office leaders there as well.

While we were gearing up for the CASEL kickoff that June, CASEL was also helping us develop a plan. We created a dedicated SEL team with a coordinator and coaches to support school implementation, and we began the rollout in the first 25 schools (including middle schools) in August of that same year, incorporating SEL districtwide within three years of that initial meeting.

This dedicated SEL team also implemented SEL 101 training across the district for school leaders, staff, and parents, because we wanted people to understand the whole-child approach. We also trained school resource officers and campus police. We invested in training on restorative practices, mental health, trauma-informed care, and strengths-based teaching through a cross-functional approach involving several district departments.

I also created the position of chief engagement officer, who reports directly to me and oversees school and district culture. This office has spent much time



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focusing on what's strong, rather than what's wrong, plus how we as a district can effectively engage all stakeholders so they feel valued and heard. And just this past year, we redesigned our district SEL team to deepen the work beyond the SEL foundation we had set in place across all our schools.

In my position on the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, I hear from research experts that this work has to be about changing the whole culture, where SEL is incorporated into the academic curriculum and instruction throughout the student's day, including all aspects of their school environment.

This revamped SEL team, which includes a director and three coordinators, now purposely resides in our teaching and learning department to do this important academic integration and support.

Going one step further, some of our schools and clusters have additionally opted to hire their own SEL coaches for even more targeted work with their staff, students, and families. It's so

rewarding to see how much our schools value this work, but also how far we have come in such a short time.

**Q: What changes are you seeing as a result of your SEL efforts?**

A: During my first year, we were putting out fires all year long — and not just about culture. The second year, we were focused on getting the SEL efforts off the ground. We really started seeing results in the third year, and now, after four years, we have data showing our efforts are making a difference.

In two years, the number of students arrested at school is down by 34%. And for the first time in seven years, we are no longer on the state's list of districts that suspend African-American students with disabilities by a disproportionate amount relative to their peers.

These changes have been made in part because we started giving students a chance to participate in restorative practices, and we have also been training staff and school resource officers to understand that students with special education placements and disabilities need different kinds of support and skill-building.

Previously, students were being arrested or suspended for things we should have been redirecting and using as teaching moments. Again, the focus has been about ensuring everything we do is done through the SEL lens.

These changes are fundamental to academics because teachers can't teach and students can't learn if their basic needs aren't taken care of and if they don't feel that someone cares about them. It has only taken about two years of attention to SEL and school culture to start seeing changes. But we have more work to do, and we are in it for the long haul. ■