SEL starts at the top

SCHOOL LEADERS' WELL-BEING HAS A RIPPLE EFFECT ON SCHOOLS

BY MELANIE STEFANOVIC, DANIEL REYES-GUERRA, AND DANA ZOROVICH-GODEK

Emotional intelligence is good for business. That's the growing consensus across sectors in recent years. Anyone who has been on the receiving end of a physician's detached delivery of upsetting news would be glad to know that empathy training is gaining increasing traction in medicine. CEOs in a range of other fields increasingly consult emotional intelligence coaches to develop upper managers' so-called soft skills because they know that happy employees are more productive than unhappy ones. In schools, we call this focus on people's well-being and interpersonal skills social and emotional learning (SEL).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2020).

Vast and mounting evidence demonstrates the positive impact of SEL programming for students' educational experiences and outcomes (see Durlak et al., 2011, and Weissberg et al., 2015), as well as the impact of teachers' social and emotional competencies on student mental health, behavioral outcomes, and academic performance (Jones et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Indeed, dozens of recent empirical studies and government reports signal growing calls for policy adaptations that embrace

SEL's short- and long-term benefits for teachers, students, families, schools, and society.

For many years, an intense focus on high-stakes accountability eclipsed SEL in schools, but that has begun to change. SEL has achieved increasing national attention and growth within the past year at the national and state policy levels. Congress approved and the president signed a bill with $123 million in landmark federal funding for SEL (Stringer, 2019).

The U.S. Department of Education launched the Center to Improve SEL and School Safety, and 40 states now have some form of SEL standards or competencies, with hundreds of school districts following suit. For instance, in our home state of Florida, 43 of the 67 school districts currently implement SEL initiatives and programs, as demonstrated through SEL Florida, a statewide clearinghouse for collaboration and advocacy.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, SEL has been more visible than ever: The topics of well-being and mental health now seem to permeate everything. They're in our daily conversations and the news headlines, trending on social media, and popping up in virtual trainings for educators.

But SEL research and practice have largely neglected a key player: the school leader. Most leaders have few, if any, professional learning opportunities to either improve their own SEL competencies or learn how to implement and facilitate SEL efforts for staff and students.

Yet we know about the ripple

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, SEL has been more visible than ever: The topics of well-being and mental health now seem to permeate everything. They're in our daily conversations and the news headlines, trending on social media, and popping up in virtual trainings for educators.

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

effect of school leaders and the scalable impact of school leadership. Through their direct influence on teachers, school culture, and the community (Clifford et al., 2012; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2004), school leaders have significant effects on student outcomes (Hallinger, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2006; Louis et al., 2010). Therefore, to continue to improve the SEL of students and teachers, we must turn our attention to school leader SEL.

Research (e.g. Hargreaves, 1998) has shown, and educators know intuitively, that teaching, learning, and emotions are inseparably intertwined. Although the instructional leadership paradigm that has predominated in leader preparation and professional development since the 1980s tends to view the integration of SEL as beyond the basics of academics and curriculum, SEL is actually a return to the basics and supports instructional goals and academic progress. A 2017 meta-analysis of school-based SEL intervention categorized direct skills and effective outcomes in campus-based climate and culture as being inherently

linked to the foundational knowledge of the instructional leader (Taylor et al., 2017).

With a view of SEL as foundational and essential for positive school outcomes, the Office of Educational Leadership and Learning at Florida Atlantic University, in collaboration with Dana Zorovich-Godek, adjunct instructor and policy leader at CASEL, recently launched a course of professional learning designed for school-based and district-level administrators to enhance their social and emotional competence and build their capacity for facilitating teacher and student SEL. The following account of the professional learning program describes the general purpose and format, course content and the underlying research, and a description of the powerful impact of the program on participants.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The course was originally built on the CASEL 5 competencies for SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, as well as an analysis of workplace expectations for adult SEL (Dusenbury et al., 2020). In light of the pandemic, the course was revised to include the theories and practices of trauma-informed and healing-centered school leadership as well.

The 16 participants involved in summer 2020 are students in an executive-level partnership program for aspiring school principals. They are all seated assistant principals in one of the

nation's largest urban school districts primarily serving in Title I schools and schools with high proportions of racial and ethnic minority students.

Participants received school district professional development credit as well as university credit toward their doctoral degrees by participating in the program. The course was held virtually over six Saturdays in early summer and will be offered to a new cohort of executive level students in summer 2021.

The course and its participants are part of a study sponsored by The Wallace Foundation, with the intent of building on the body of research on school leaders and those who supervise them. For this reason, course participants also include principal supervisors who worked to refine coaching strategies and instructional approaches that seek to infuse SEL into academics.

COURSE CONTENT

A thread uniting all six learning modules is transformative SEL leadership for equitable schooling (Jagers et al., 2019). Throughout the course, exercises and assignments develop skills in applying a transformative SEL lens in analyses of policies, procedures, programs, curriculum, and data.

Transformative leadership is defined as leadership that challenges inequitable social frameworks to create change in society, and it is distinct from transformational school leadership, which focuses primarily on change within the school. Transformative leadership theory positions the school leader as a social change agent with the responsibility and capability to elevate the voices of children, families, and communities to advance equity in society (Shields, 2010).

To that end, participants engaged in weekly reflections in response to prompts centered on the connections between SEL theory in course readings and their lived experiences as school leaders in historically underserved schools. They also learned ways to

explicitly address educational equity through authentic school-family-community partnerships and to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships.

Understanding that SEL can help address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities, course participants worked to produce specific and authentic parent engagement strategies that moved campuses from compliance to commitment.

The summative assessment, a culmination of work throughout the course, also challenged participants to apply SEL leadership competencies by investigating and addressing school leadership policy and practice within a specific geographic region.

Five major competency goals guided the learning activities. The first two goals were to understand the foundational theory of SEL relative to the whole-child needs of learners and apply an integrated approach to student development. The next two goals were to use tools to diagnose adult and student SEL needs and gain the skills in developing others in SEL. The fifth competency goal was to understand the processes necessary to sustain SEL-related efforts.

Supplemental readings to develop these competencies included research and publications from such authors as Elena Aguilar, Joseph Durlak, Roger Weissberg, Jason Cascarino, and Brené Brown, and from organizations including CASEL and PDK International.

In addition to video lectures and assigned course readings, participants identified their own resources to build on course learnings and synthesize various theories and approaches. To take theory to practice, learning activities involved acquiring and applying SEL knowledge and skills, including application of the three SEL signature practices — welcoming

rituals, engaging activities, and optimistic closures — and the tenets of youth empowerment theory, which holds that empowering children in meaningful, prosocial activities promotes the development of cognitive and behavioral skills they need to understand their social environments and become independent problem solvers and decision-makers (Zimmerman, 2000). Finally, participants engaged in rotating peer coaching, where protocol check-ins called for reviews of fostering youth voice, agency, and engagement that are grounded in authentic family and community partnerships.

In the first of six learning modules, participants are exposed to the physiological basis of social and emotional competence. For example, neurological and physiological research findings were related to the specific competency of focus, deepening the knowledge of brain-based learning and the effects of emotions on cognitive processing.

In a particular session, participants explored the limbic system of the brain and physically constructed models of this system, particularly the amygdala — the area of the brain that signals flight-fright-or-freeze signals to the body. Next, the group was asked to add a series of weights and other elements to illustrate how trauma can physically inhibit other systems of the brain responsible for content acquisition and memory.

A strong foundational knowledge of the connection between leadership and neuroscience also guided the leaders as the course progressed, and they came to understand their own social-emotional states as central to the social-emotional health of their schools.

For example, the summer 2020 cohort discussed the crushing forces of constant accountability and compliance, and participants discovered how the toxic stress produced by this environment influences their daily decision-making and relationships. They explored how their most effective leadership practices — shared

leadership, relationship building, capacity building, and conflict resolution — become difficult, if not impossible, when the limbic system of the brain is in a constant state of emergency.

We worked with these leaders to help them develop strategies and techniques in de-escalation to reset the amygdala and stimulate the vagus nerve to promote regeneration. Sometimes thought of as meditation, simple breathing exercises and oxygenating the nerve system dramatically decrease stress hormones and open up neuropathways to a balanced state.

Groups used a deck of cards that directed them to either add or subtract the weights based on adverse childhood experiences. The results demonstrated the physiological challenges to the fundamental architecture of the brain when constant stressors are present. In the adolescent brain, these adaptations to tissue and functions can be permanent and dramatically impact the trajectory of the individual's life.

Participants experienced a tangible model of these effects, which led them to examine the logic of stringent discipline practices or even academic rigor unless the brain is in a state of readiness and its executive functions engaged.

THE IMPACT

Based on participants' self-reflections and their course evaluation forms, participants reported leadership growth and personal development. When asked if they would apply these practices, 90% of them reported yes and gave specifics on how they might incorporate them into their practice, including discipline, parent engagement, and instructional coaching.

Participants reported a heightened sense of self-awareness and a commitment to carrying their new focus on social and emotional well-being into their relationships with teachers and staff. Further, they made a commitment to critically analyze practices intended to address students

in trauma but that neglect to focus on the renewal or reengagement of the brain.

These analyses resulted in the redevelopment of policies and practices on their campuses, such as the intentional inclusion of student voice and leadership in the formation of new policies — particularly ones that addressed equity and climate on campus. In their roles as leaders of adults, they viewed their new learning as immediately applicable for coaching sessions, collaborative decision-making, and difficult conversations.

An imbalanced leadership approach focusing on achievement alone diminishes the power of the school leader's influence to inspire and support staff and students. An academics-only approach is insufficient for leading effective schools because SEL skills and competencies are essential to good teaching and to effective learning.

A new model of instructional leadership inclusive of social and emotional competencies is possible. In fact, successful leaders combine often-dichotomized leadership practices to promote school improvement and student outcomes (Day et al., 2016). It is time to engage school leaders in professional learning in SEL that will improve social-emotional well-being for adults and students.

REFERENCES

CASEL [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning]. (2020). *What is SEL?* casel.org/what-is-sel/

Clifford, M., Behrstock-Sherratt, E., & Fetters, J. (2012). *The ripple effect: A synthesis of research on principal influence to inform performance evaluation design.* A Quality School Leadership Issue Brief. American Institutes for Research.

Day, C., Gu Q., & Sammons, P. (2016). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: How successful school leaders use transformational and instructional strategies to make a

difference. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 52*(2), 221-258.

Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., & Schellinger, K.B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82*(1), 405-432.

Dusenbury, L., Yoder, N., Godek, D., & Atwell, M. (2020). *Cultivating the SEL skills employers demand.* CASEL.

Hallinger, P. (2010). Developing instructional leadership. In *Developing successful leadership* (pp. 61-76). Springer, Dordrecht.

Hallinger, P. & Heck, R.H. (1996). Reassessing the principal's role in school effectiveness: A review of empirical research, 1980-1995. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 32*(1), 5-44.

Hargreaves, A. (1998). The emotional practice of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 14*(8), 835-854.

Jagers, R.J., Rivas-Drake, D., & Williams, B. (2019). Transformative social and emotional learning (SEL): Toward SEL in service of educational equity and excellence. *Educational Psychologist, 54*(3), 162-184.

Jones, S.M., Bouffard, S.M., & Weissbourd, R. (2013). Educators' social and emotional skills vital to learning. *Phi Delta Kappan, 94*(8), 62-65.

Leithwood, K., Louis, K.S., Anderson, S.E., & Wahlstrom, K.L. (2004). *Review of research: How leadership influences student learning.* The Wallace Foundation.

Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2006). *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership.* National College for School Leadership.

Louis, K.S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K.L., & Anderson, S.E. (2010). *Investigating the links to improved student learning: Final report of research findings.* The Wallace Foundation.

Schonert-Reichl, K.A. (2017).
Social and emotional learning and
teachers. *The Future of Children, 27*(1),
137-155.

Shields, C.M. (2010).
Transformative leadership: Working
toward equity in diverse contexts.
*Education Administration Quarterly,
46*(4), 558-589.

Stringer, K. (2019, July 9). *SEL
in the house: Democrats approve millions
in landmark federal funding for social-
emotional learning in bill that now faces
test in Senate.* www.the74million.org/
sel-in-the-house-democrats-approve-
millions-in-landmark-federal-funding-
for-social-emotional-learning-in-bill-
that-now-faces-test-in-senate/

Taylor, R.D., Oberle, E., Durlak,
J.A., & Weissberg, R.P. (2017).

Promoting positive youth development
through school-based social and
emotional learning interventions: A
meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child
Development, 88*(4), 1156-1171.

Weissberg, R.P., Durlak, J.A.,
Domitrovich, C.E., & Gullotta,
T.P. (2015).** Social and emotional
learning: Past, present, and future. In
J.A. Durlak, C.E. Domitrovitch, R.P.
Weissberg, & T.P. Gullotta (Eds.),
*Handbook of social and emotional
learning* (pp. 3-19). Guilford Press.

Zimmerman, M. A. (2000).
Empowerment theory. In *Handbook
of community psychology* (pp. 43-63).
Springer.

•

Melanie Stefanovic
(mstefanovic2013@fau.edu)
is research and professional
development coordinator at Florida
Atlantic University. Daniel Reyes-
Guerra (dreyes@fau.edu) is associate
professor in the Department
of Educational Leadership and
Research Methodology, program
coordinator in the School Leaders
Program, and project director
and primary investigator of the
Principal Preparation Initiative at
Florida Atlantic University. Dana
Zorovich-Godek (dzorovic@fau.edu)
is policy and research manager at the
Collaborative for Academic, Social,
and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
and an adjunct faculty member in the
School Leaders Program at Florida
Atlantic University. ■

---

8 dimensions of wellness for educators

S. (2015).** Self-efficacy and causal attributions in teachers:
Effects on burnout, job satisfaction, illness, and quitting
intentions. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 47,* 120-130.

Zurawik, M. (2020).** Moving through spaces – leisure
walking and its psychosocial benefits for well-being: A
narrative review. *Human Movement, 21*(2), 1-8.

•

Angel L. Montoya (dramontoya81@gmail.com) is
a high school dean in Denver Public Schools. Laura L.
Summers (laura.summers@ucdenver.edu) is an assistant
clinical professor in the School of Education and Human
Development at the University of Colorado Denver. ■

Stress, burnout, and mental health among teachers of color

Washington, DC, United States.

Salyers, M.P., Hudson, C., Morse, G., Rollins, A.L.,
Monroe-DeVita, M., Wilson, C., & Freeland, L. (2011).**
BREATHE: A pilot study of a one-day retreat to reduce
burnout among mental health professionals. *Psychiatric
Services, 62*(2), 214-217.

Williams, D.R., Mohammed, S.A., Leavell, J.,
& Collins, C. (2010).** Race, socioeconomic status and
health: Complexities, ongoing challenges and research
opportunities. *Annals of the New York Academy of
Sciences, 1186,* 69.

Wong, W.H., Ruble, L., Yu, Y., & McGrew, J. (2017).**
Too stressed to teach? Teaching quality, student engagement
and IEP outcomes. *Exceptional Children, 83*(4), 412-427.

World Health Organization. (2001).** The World Health
Report 2001: Mental health: New understanding, new hope.
Author.

Zuckerman, M. (1999).** Diathesis-stress models. In M.
Zuckerman (Ed.), *Vulnerability to psychopathology: A biosocial
model* (pp. 3-23). American Psychological Association.

•

Christopher J. Cormier (cormierc@stanford.edu) is
a postdoctoral research fellow in the Graduate School
of Education at Stanford University. Venus Wong
(vwhwong@stanford.edu) is a postdoctoral research design
fellow at Stanford Medical School Clinical Excellence
Research Center. John H. McGrew (jmcgrew@iupui.
edu) is an emeritus professor of psychology at Indiana
University-Purdue University. Lisa A. Ruble (laruble@bsu.
edu) is a professor in the Department of Special Education
at Ball State University. Frank C. Worrell (frankc@
berkeley.edu) is a professor in the Graduate School of
Education at UC Berkeley. ■