



What should SEL look like this fall?

EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS WEIGH IN ON HOW TO FOSTER RESILIENCE

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused enormous stress and trauma for students and educators, exacerbating existing needs for mental health support and underscoring the importance of social and emotional learning. With the new school year on the horizon, it is vital for educators to consider the social and emotional needs of students and staff as some of them return to school buildings for the first time in more than a year, some continue to cope with trauma, and many experience anxiety and uncertainty.

The Learning Professional asked teachers, students, administrators, SEL leaders, and our online community: How should schools address students' social and emotional needs and foster resilience in the coming school year? Here are their responses, which have been edited for length.

LINDA ROST
Science teacher,
Baker High School, Baker, Montana
2020 Montana Teacher of the Year



Rost

TO SUPPORT

SEL in the future, we must critically question every practice that we use. We must evaluate whether that practice actually promotes

student lifelong learning and growth or if the practice is there to have power over the student.

The past year and a half has really had me rethink a lot of the structures of “normal school.” So much of how we structure the school day and classroom time does not focus on learning. Rather, the focus is on control and making the teacher’s life easier.

During this time, while teaching online and fully in person, I decentered these practices and centered student learning more than I ever had before. I questioned all of my practices and methods and reflected on their impact on learning.

Educators were referring to the idea of Maslow before Bloom throughout the pandemic, meaning we need to focus on the basic human needs outlined by psychologist Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs before the learning objectives outlined in educator Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy of pedagogy. I am hoping it doesn’t become cliché.

As we move forward, we must prioritize student autonomy and student-centered learning and let go of the stereotypes about what learning should look like. It is time to rethink and reimagine how we do school and learning and evaluate the structures that actually harm children.

SHELDON A. EAKINS
Founder of the Leading Equity Center
and host of the Leading Equity
Podcast



Eakins

WE NEED TO

SPEND the first week or more welcoming students and families back. A lot of parents and guardians have taken on the

role of teacher at home, a role they never asked for, and we wouldn’t have made it through the school year without them. So I would love to see a welcome celebration for families, not just for students. And I would like to see administrators thank their teaching staff, too.

In the beginning, we need to give kids time for play and time to interact, because they missed out on those things last year, even if they were in school. I would also like to see schools place more emphasis on social skills — and not in a deficit-focused way.

Last spring, I saw educators applying a lot of harsh discipline. I had to remind my colleagues to be patient. Kids have been dealing with a lot — losing loved ones, families breaking up, added responsibilities at home. Last year, I worked on a reservation, and I had kids who became homeless because COVID spread so fast through their housing project that residents were displaced for two weeks.

We need to remember that they have struggled just as we have. Patience is key. We may have to reinforce and model social and emotional skills more, but that’s OK. We can start by modeling patience and empathy for them. We can’t say we’re a social and emotional school and not practice it ourselves.

If we put too much emphasis on testing in the first weeks of school and use it to place kids in remedial courses,

we are punishing them because of a pandemic that’s not their fault. If you have a kid who has been an A student and now tests two levels behind, they’re going to say, “I was a thriving student, but now you put me in the slow class because I had something going on in my life.”

We need to give those students some time to get back into school. If we don’t, they’re going to question whether we actually care about them and they’ll tune out.

As we go back to school, I hope to see administrators remind staff that paying attention to social and emotional development is not an add-on. It should be embedded in everything. It’s the way I speak to someone, the things I model when a student tests me, how I respond to challenges. We need leaders to make sure educators know that all learning is social and emotional.

AY’LONNIE GILBERT
Student at Akron Early College
Highschool, Akron, Ohio



Gilbert

I THINK I CAN

SPEAK for all students when I say that this last year has been very detrimental to the social and emotional health of most students. I

have spoken to many of my peers from several schools about the situation, and we have all seen a common issue within each of our schools.

There are always resources for academic advancement but rarely resources that help to positively affect students’ mental, emotional, and social health. If schools can strive to have resources like counseling, support groups, or any other creative ideas based around the overall stability of their students, then I feel as if that would be a huge step in the right direction.

MICHAEL GALLAGHER
Superintendent, Sunnyvale School District,
Sunnyvale, California



Gallagher

SUNNYVALE SCHOOL DISTRICT has a strong commitment to balancing academic, social, and emotional outcomes. That commitment

positions us well to start the new school year. We will build on our existing work on social and emotional learning, which includes coaching and other professional learning for staff as well as student skill-building, supports, and assessment, by leaning into the concept of a “restorative restart.”

We will be using concepts outlined in Policy Analysis for California Education’s blueprint for the first six weeks of school, *Reimagine and Rebuild: Restarting School with Equity at the Center*. This report, which has been endorsed by every major education advocacy group in the state of California, calls for schools and districts to create a restorative restart by focusing on five areas during the first six weeks of school and continue with an emphasis in these areas as the year progresses: center relationships; address whole-child needs; strengthen staffing and partnerships; make teaching and learning relevant and rigorous; and empower teams to reimagine and rebuild systems.

These concepts resonate with us in Sunnyvale, especially in the emphasis on taking care of adults as well as students, rebuilding the community, and re-establishing partnerships with community agencies.

In addition, we will continue significant work around equity and antiracism. Each of our schools created equity action plans last year to assess where they were. Now we will be consolidating that data and creating districtwide plans.

We will also be working with Playworks and Substantial founder Jill Vialet at the Stanford D-School to cultivate a design thinking approach as we make plans to return and re-evaluate existing practices. We want to be thoughtful about how we are trying new things in the name of “reimagining education.” That term is frightening to many who really just want to return to “normal.”

We want to be cognizant of where everyone is so they can continue the journey together. Last year we adopted the theme of “Learning Together, Arriving as One,” accompanied by a bridge metaphor, to convey a sense of community and collectivism and to commit to making sure we left no one behind. That spirit will continue to guide us in ensuring that students progress on their academic, social, and emotional journeys.

VAL BROWN
Principal academic officer,
Center for Antiracist Education
Former member of Learning Forward
Board of Trustees



Brown

A SOLID SEL APPROACH needs to address a wide range of human experience. During the past year, some students experienced disruption and

major losses, including death in their families, housing dislocation, food and work uncertainty, while other students connected with their families, felt valued as learners, and had enriching learning experiences.

Because of the vastly different realities of our students, we need to remember that students will have different social and emotional needs. We will have to listen with patience and compassion in order to meet those needs and extend grace when moments get rocky.

Any SEL approach needs to intentionally center authentic relationship building. Practically, educators should make time and space for that and school leaders should ask teachers to support students in processing their emotions through discussion or writing activities. The processing will not only help students identify and reinforce their coping skills, but help refine their listening skills and develop empathy for others.

#TheLearningPro

CATHERINE G. MURPHY
ESL teacher

MENTORING is a sure way to build relationships and grow a sense of stability and belonging for families and students. Mentoring is a key contributor to SEL and would be a great addition to any school’s SEL tool kit next year.

SARAH POTLER LAHAYNE
Founder & CEO, Move This World

TWO THINGS all schools should do to support #SEL & #mentalhealth next year: 1) Prioritize deliberate, sequential, evidence-based SEL for students & training for staff and 2) Remember that educators, administrators, and parents need to put on their own oxygen masks before taking care of others.

SOPHIE LEWIS

Student at Yorktown High School,
Arlington, Virginia



Lewis

THE ISSUES

pertaining to students' mental health are vast and complicated, yet many solutions don't address the fundamental causes or deeply

explore the "why." The issues need to be addressed at the root. Students need to be supported through crisis, and they need resources.

Many times, schools have mental health weeks, where the school raises awareness and discusses mental health. But that talk is empty if it's not backed up by individualized attention. For example, students need adults to notice when they aren't getting to class or if they are showing up every day but never turning in assignments.

Even students who never miss class or assignments need people to notice them and understand them. They may be struggling, too. Adults need to understand when students are falling into bad habits and help them address why.

It would help if people like behavior analysts and therapists were added to school environments. Unfortunately, in our current system, this would most likely begin in wealthy, white neighborhoods like my own, even though disenfranchised communities face more challenges

and worse repercussions when coming face-to-face with mental health issues in school.

In wealthy communities, students who struggle with drug abuse, engage in criminal activity, or face mental health issues tend to have a large safety net and treatment options available to them. In lower-income communities and predominantly Black communities, students often receive harsher punishment and less support for the same behavior, not because the people around them don't care about them, but because of lack of available services, the ongoing destruction of generational wealth that results in fewer resources, the prison industrial complex, and other structural issues.

While we cannot solve all those problems overnight, we can change the attitudes adults have toward students. If adults begin noticing students as people, giving them confidential outlets for discussing their mental health, then we can make the change. If adults provide opportunities for students to take mental health days or weeks without failing or falling behind in classes, and if we can support students facing poverty and racism, then we can begin to tackle mental health in schools.

BETSY BOWMAN

Instructional coach
and restorative justice trainer,
Boston, Massachusetts



Bowman

OUR YOUNG PEOPLE

need adults to resist silver bullets, quick fixes, and flashy smartphone apps that promise to remediate learning loss and heal us

from the trauma of the pandemic. We need common practices and regular opportunities that center students' voices and experiences to teach and practice the social and emotional skills that our students will rely on to heal and move forward.

One important practice that we should have in every classroom is restorative justice circles. Restorative justice is often mistakenly understood to be a discipline program or approach to behavior management. It is neither of those. At its heart, restorative justice is a way of being in relationship and community, and circles are a way of practicing those relationship skills together.

In circles, we are challenged to speak from the heart, listen deeply, consider others' perspectives, develop connections with the community, and trust the wisdom of our own lived experiences. Circles are how we practice social and emotional learning, and we can do them in every classroom if we have the political will and leadership to make it a reality.

CONSTANCE EASTON

Coordinator of mental health, SEL, & counseling,
Richmond School District No. 38, British Columbia, Canada

CONNECT-MODEL-TEACH. We need to focus on connection and cultural humility to create a gathering place where all feel heard and seen. When SEL becomes the schoolwide focus, it becomes the water we swim in. ... But to do that, we have to go back to the basics: Prioritize educator SEL and wellness, support explicit SEL in classrooms through scaffolding, coaching, modeling, and teaching, and check in with our learners daily.

MIRIAM LOPEZ

NYCDOE Universal Literacy Reading coach

I BELIEVE we need to take the precious time to get to know our students and their families on a personal level. We need to continue reaching out to families and creating a welcoming environment where transparency and community building continue to be valued.