



Supporting the Whole Teacher

Developing educators' social and emotional skills lays the foundation for success with students

Educators can create classroom and school cultures that provide opportunities for students to learn and practice the social and emotional competencies that are closely linked to academic achievement as well as success in the workplace and in life.

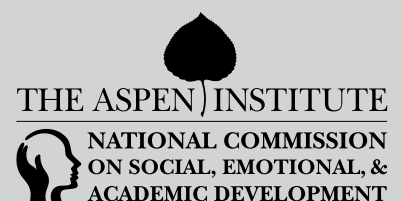
But to do so, teachers need both preservice and ongoing professional learning opportunities to focus on integrating these competencies into their instruction and their interactions with students. Just as important, they need support in developing their own social and emotional competencies.

After all, it's difficult for adults to help students acquire these skills if adults themselves do not possess them.

The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development and its Council of Distinguished Scientists, has released a [research brief](#) that features consensus statements of evidence regarding how students learn. The brief points to evidence that demonstrates how teachers who possess social and emotional skills have more positive relationships with students and peers and are better able to create academi-

Making the Case

This publication is the second of several reports that will explore promising practices for supporting social, emotional, and academic development. Find them all at: as.pn/edresources



cally supportive classroom environments that engage students more deeply in their learning. But, the brief points out, these competencies—such as being able to cope with stress, recognize and manage one’s emotions, and understand the feelings and perspectives of others—also benefit teachers directly by improving teacher well-being and reducing stress and burnout.

“Teachers need to be aware of and manage their emotions; manage and adjust their stress levels; collaborate with others; and create good interpersonal relationships with students, colleagues, and parents,” says Linda Darling-Hammond, the president and chief executive officer of the Learning Policy Institute, a professor emerita at Stanford University, and a co-chair of the Commission.

Modeling Behavior for Students

Recognizing the connections between emotions, student learning, and behavior—and between educators’ social and emotional competencies and their ability to cope with stress and develop these competencies in their students—the Seattle Public Schools adopted an evidence-based program called RULER, an acronym that stands for recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotions.

A key precept of RULER, which was created at Yale University’s



Center for Emotional Intelligence and is now being used in 1,500 schools in California, Connecticut, New York, and elsewhere, is that teachers need to learn how to model the behaviors they want to see in their students.

Just as teaching trigonometry would be difficult for someone who does not understand sine and cosine, teaching students how to collaborate, respect the views of others, and manage their emotions would be challenging for adults who don’t possess these skills themselves.

“We have to start with adults’ social and emotional learning, and then work on kids’ social and emotional learning,” says Lyon Terry, a fourth-grade teacher at Lawton Elementary School, one of 60 in the Seattle district that is implementing the RULER program. “If the adults’ house is not

in order, it’s not going to work with students.”

That is why the focus of the first year of RULER training is on helping teachers better understand their emotions. The first step in that process is an assessment of teachers’ social and emotional competencies, which often leads to surprises. “All of a sudden,” says Marc Brackett, the head of the Yale center and a member of the Commission’s Council of Distinguished Scientists, “they realize that they don’t have an emotional vocabulary and that they don’t know the difference between anger and disappointment.”

Each school participating in RULER sends at least three of its teachers to participate in two days of professional learning at Yale. There, they study the foundations of emotional intelligence, participate in hands-on,

skill-building exercises, and learn about the four RULER tools that help create a supportive and caring school climate. Those teachers return to their schools and spend much of the year training their colleagues in how to use those tools, which help teachers and students identify how they are feeling, manage strong emotions, deal with conflict, and create a “charter” that describes how students and teachers commit to treat one another.

In the second year of implementation, teachers begin helping students learn what they themselves have learned. “They’ve experienced it before they’ve taught it; they have the language; and they have the stories they can tell their students about their own lack of knowledge as well as their excitement about learning new strategies,” Brackett says. “Children are watching you, so you should be the role model.”

Creating a Supportive School Climate

When Lawton Elementary teachers began learning the RULER approach, they wrote their own charter to inform their interactions and create a supportive school climate.

The teachers brainstormed how they wanted to feel at work, tossing out dozens of words before agreeing on respected, supported, invigorated, trusted, and happy. They wanted to feel confident that they could talk frankly about

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classroom challenges without being judged. And they wanted authentic opportunities to share their teaching techniques and insights with one another.

“We tried to be as explicit and clear with our thinking as possible,” says Terry, the 2015 Washington State Teacher of the Year and a member of the Council of Distinguished Educators, which was also created to advise the Commission. “We couldn’t just say we’d respect each other. Instead, we said we would ‘actively listen and greet each other by name.’ ” Now, each morning, Lawton teachers and staff touch base with at least two colleagues before they start their workday.

Terry has similar expectations for his students, which are embedded in classroom routines and norms. Each morning, he stands at the

classroom door, greeting his students by name and shaking their hands. He encourages them to start their day the way their teachers do, by checking in with a few friends. “We will talk about the things you can do to make people feel welcome, such as how to say good morning, and I will model how to have that conversation,” he says.

Every school day offers new opportunities for students to practice social, emotional, and academic competencies, Terry adds. “When the kids play a math game, when the class collaborates and works together to solve a problem, when we teach them specific language for how to get along with someone and how to agree or disagree,” they are all teachable moments, he says.

“The relationships they have with each other and with me help



them understand that we are all in this together,” he says, echoing the central idea of the teachers’ charter.

The teachers’ charter and the RULER training seem to be having a positive effect on the school’s climate for learning. In the spring of 2017, 81 percent of students said the school had a positive social-emotional climate, compared to 76 percent for the district as a whole. Two years earlier, only 69 percent of students rated the school’s social-emotional climate positively, compared to 76 percent for the whole district. Students’ sense of belonging, their opinion of the classroom environment, and their sense that the school promoted a learning mindset all increased significantly during that period.

In order to create a supportive school climate and help students develop social and emotional competencies, teachers must hone their sensitivity to students’ cultures. Dena Simmons, the director of education at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, says teachers need to be aware that how students are expected to behave and show respect in school may differ from how they are taught to act at home, which may add to their feelings of stress.

“Teachers have to be self- and socially aware of their power and be able to think through and reflect on their values, emotions, thoughts, and identity,” Simmons says.

Maurice J. Elias, the director of the Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab at Rutgers University, says that cultural competence is a part of social competence and that teachers need explicit instruction in both. All teachers need to be “empathetic, aware, interested, and ask their students about themselves,” he says.

Elias, a member of the Commission’s Council of Distinguished Scientists, is also a co-founder, with Patricia Heindel of the College of St. Elizabeth in Morristown, N.J., of the Academy for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools, an online professional-learning community and mentoring program that offers a certificate in school leadership for social and emotional learning.

“Kids don’t learn subject matter from just anybody,” Heindel says. “They learn from people they respect and care about. Learning is a social enterprise, and teachers’ ability to create

that kind of relationship with their students is critical.”

Teacher Prep Matters

Although RULER and similar programs have been found to be effective, many teacher-preparation programs do not intentionally prioritize social and emotional development for prospective teachers or their eventual students. A [50-state scan](#) of the required curriculum in teacher-preparation programs found that few colleges require teacher candidates to hone their relationship skills; be able to identify their feelings, strengths, and weaknesses; control and appropriately express their emotions; or manage stress. The report by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning also found that the majority of colleges of education in 49 states do not require their graduates to learn how to help their students develop these skills.

“The importance of teacher-preparation programs adopting a much stronger focus on developing candidates’ skills and knowledge about social and emotional development of students cannot be overstated,” says Robert C. Pianta, a Commission member and the dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. “The knowledge and skills to engage students in the classroom are fundamentally about relationships and interactions. We have evidence

that these can be taught ... and when candidates are exposed to this training, they enter the classroom far better equipped to manage and teach effectively. For too long, teacher-preparation programs have not attended to the explosion of information on relationships as core assets in fostering students' learning and development. We now know enough to change that."

Teacher candidates' student teaching experiences are a key opportunity to develop these skills. But the cooperating teachers assigned to work with student teachers are not always chosen for their social and emotional competency, so they may not explicitly model these skills.

In addition, the Commission's Council of Distinguished Educators has pointed out that student teaching often begins several weeks into the semester, denying candidates the opportunity to see how an experienced teacher forms relationships with new students and collaborates with them to establish classroom routines and expectations.

Nancy Markowitz, the executive director of the Center for Reaching and Teaching the Whole Child in San Jose, Calif., views social and emotional learning not as a discrete program or even a component of teaching. She believes social and emotional learning is teaching, and that it should be stressed at every stage

in a teacher's career, including preservice classes and student teaching experiences.

In the fall of 2017, Markowitz's center began working with five teacher-preparation programs in California, Massachusetts, and Ohio to help them integrate teacher and student social and emotional competencies into their classes. The programs are working to become more effective in helping teacher candidates master seven "anchor competencies," Markowitz says. They are: building trusting relationships; being self-reflective; fostering a growth mind-

set; cultivating perseverance in themselves and their students; creating a sense of community in their classrooms; practicing cooperative learning skills; and responding constructively across differences.

To build these competencies, Markowitz says, preservice programs can have candidates watch and read about teachers in action, and then ask them to reflect on what those teachers believed about their students, what questions the teachers could have asked but didn't, and how the teaching they witnessed made them feel. Those strategies

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help them learn to analyze their own teaching through a social and emotional learning lens.

If teachers enter the profession and haven’t had opportunities to build their own social and emotional competence or learn how to help their students acquire these competencies, they may find it difficult to create the optimal conditions for learning, which adds to the stress of teaching.

Relieving the Pressure

Teaching, in fact, is tied with nursing as the most stressful occupation in the United States. An influential report on teacher stress for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation by Joshua Brown, a professor at Fordham University, says about half of teachers say they feel a great deal of stress every day and report poor sleeping habits, drowsiness during the day, and even depression. Nearly half of teachers leave the profession before their fifth year, and it is estimated that teacher turnover costs school districts about \$7 billion per year.

Turnover also has been [linked to lower achievement in mathematics and language arts](#).

Patricia Jennings, an associate professor at the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education and a co-developer of a professional learning program called Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education, which trains teachers in mindfulness and social and emotional learning, says the cognitive demands of teaching are one source of classroom stress. Not only do teachers have to deeply understand the content, they have to monitor all their students simultaneously and individualize instruction and support to keep them engaged. Teachers have to show students that they care about their well-being, Jennings says, while simultaneously pushing them to stretch themselves to master intellectually demanding academic work.

According to Joshua Brown, teachers are more anxious and under greater strain when their students frequently misbehave

or struggle academically. Disadvantaged students, in particular, may be responding to family estrangements, drug abuse, hunger, housing uncertainty, or neighborhood violence. All students need empathetic teachers who don’t take their misbehavior personally, who recognize when they are suffering from trauma, and who work to gain their trust.

“Evidence suggests that kids who have risks in their background are advantaged by teachers who have lower levels of stress,” Brown says. “Conversely, when you couple disadvantaged students with highly stressed teachers, it’s a double whammy.”

Fall-Hamilton Elementary School in Nashville, Tenn., serves many students who have had traumatic experiences related to poverty, homelessness, or violence. So, it has taken a number of steps to help them gain more control over their emotions, including designating “peace corners” in their classrooms. These are places where, for a few minutes, students who are angry or frustrated can decompress and regain their composure.

The school also created what it calls a “tap in-tap out” system that allows teachers who need a break to ask a colleague, via a text, to take over for them for a few minutes. “We know you can’t help others if you can’t help yourself,” Natalie Vadas, a special education teacher at the school, says.

“This job is hard. This job is exhausting, and, sometimes, you ... need to ask for help and it’s OK. It’s really accepted and promoted here. No one’s alone. We’re a ship and we run together.”

School leaders can do a lot to help teachers deal with stress. In addition to providing training that helps teachers manage their emotions and relationships, as well as training in how to help students learn to do the same, schools can offer workplace wellness programs, which have been shown to reduce health risks, health care costs, and teacher absenteeism. They can also give teachers opportunities to be leaders and provide time for them to collaborate and provide support and advice to one another on how to help students reach their potential.

“The most important thing is having each other, so it’s not just you working by yourself to help a student who is having a hard time,” says Leticia Guzman Ingram, an English language development teacher at Basalt High School in Roaring Forks, Colo., and a member of the Commission. “If your administrator is on board, it makes that situation even better.”

Balancing Caring and Rigor

It would also help if teachers had a more realistic sense of the demands of the job, even before they enter the classroom.

“When new teachers come out of college, they can hardly wait to get the key to their classroom, and they think teaching is going to be this phenomenal, inspiring, exciting professional experience,” says Ellen Moir, the founder and chief executive officer of the New Teacher Center in California and a member of the National Commission. “That should be married with a realistic perspective on what they are going to face out there.”

Teacher-preparation programs should do more to make sure that those they accept have some of the interpersonal qualities and skills that they will need to succeed, she says. “We should be asking, ‘Can the candidate build strong relationships with adults?’ ‘Does the candidate have empathy?’ ‘Does she have compassion?’ ‘Does she have good listening skills?’ ‘Would this person be a good colleague?’ ”

School districts, Moir says, should ask the same questions when they hire new teachers. “Teachers make a huge difference in the lives of kids, and when people talk about their favorite teachers, it’s not always the content they remember,” Moir says. “It’s about how we lifted their lives, how we listened to them, how we cared about them, how we saw them as really talented, helped them get a picture of where they could be going, and create a better vision of themselves.”

Moir and others caution, however, that the emphasis on social

skills should not overshadow the importance of effective, rigorous teaching. “Fundamental to student learning is this social-emotional connection with teachers,” she says. “But caring and rigor go hand in hand, and, if they don’t, we’re disadvantaging kids. You can care until the cows come home. But if you don’t build their academic capacity, you’re not helping them succeed.”

Ronald F. Ferguson, the director of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University, and his colleagues [studied the responses of 16,000 middle school students](#) to a survey that was designed to measure the influence of teachers on the emotions, motivations, mindsets, and behaviors that are associated with student agency, which, essentially, is the opposite of feeling helpless. Agency, in turn, is closely related to academic success.

The survey found that teachers who students identified as caring may see some negative results in their classrooms (e.g., less student agency and persistence) if they move beyond being attentive and sensitive to their students and, instead, coddle them.

Ferguson, a member of the Commission’s Council of Distinguished Scientists, says the findings show that teachers need to strike the right balance between what he calls “academic press” and being supportive. Teachers should “challenge kids to think rigorously, challenge them to

keep pushing, and not back off just because it's a bit stressful."

The 7,000-student Sunnyvale School District, just outside San Jose, Calif., has a districtwide focus on social and emotional learning and is working with Markowitz's Center for Reaching and Teaching the Whole Child so that both its new and seasoned teachers are prepared to strike this balance. The district's instructional coaches have been trained to help teachers develop high

expectations for students while showing them that they care about them deeply.

"The concept is that we would get teachers out of the university who had a mindset, training, and philosophy that matched what our veteran teachers have," says Michael Gallagher, Sunnyvale's deputy superintendent. That way, "when they go into the staff room," he adds, "everyone is talking the same language and has the same attitude."

Teachers in the ethnically and socio-economically diverse district, which serves students in grades pre-K to 8, are enthusiastic about the efforts to integrate social and emotional learning into every aspect of the district. "Teachers got into this profession because they really care about social and emotional learning for their kids, and this work resonates with them immediately," Gallagher says.

About the Series

Future reports will explore these topics:

Promoting a positive school climate and culture. Educators and students agree that a positive school climate and culture fosters student engagement and improves student learning. And research has confirmed that schools where students feel safe, engaged, and connected to their teachers have narrower achievement gaps between low-income children and their wealthier peers. We will explore efforts to improve school climate by developing students' social, emotional, and academic skills.

Working in collaboration with the broader community to promote healthy student development. Community engagement is essential to spurring meaningful change and key to efforts to ensure equity for all students. We will examine the need to generate grassroots awareness and demand for social, emotional, and academic development; the need to unite local leaders across sectors to fully integrate students' development in schools and in the community; and the need to be smart about the use of community resources.

Read the first report, about curricula that integrate social, emotional, and academic content, at [as.pn/edresources](https://aspeninstitute.org/edresources).

About the Author

Richard Lee Colvin headed the speechwriting team for former U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King Jr. He was a longtime reporter specializing in education for the *Los Angeles Times* and is the founder of *The Hechinger Report*.

The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development is engaging and energizing communities to re-envision what constitutes success in our schools. With the help of educators, families, local leaders, community organizations, employers, and partners, the Commission is exploring how to fully integrate social, emotional, and academic development into all aspects of preK-12 education. Along the way, the Commission is unearthing challenges and opportunities as well as crucial lessons learned from those engaged in this work. Ultimately, the Commission will compile and release a final report with specific action steps for building and sustaining a new era of education that supports the full development of our students.

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