


Byron M.  4 days ago 9 min read

Why Every School Must Have A Social Emotional Learning Plan Prior to Reopening

Updated: 2 days ago



It was Tuesday, September 11th, 2001. I was sitting in Ms. Jones' Chemistry class, most likely thinking about football practice or what I was going to eat for lunch. All of a sudden, a student burst into the classroom and said "we're under attack, we're getting bombed". We laughed it off and thought it was a prank. Ms. Jones politely escorted the student out of the class. The student said "I'm serious, turn on the tv". I recall an eerie feeling that seemed to cast a shadow over the entire class. For some reason, Ms. Jones actually listened and turned the tv on. Perhaps she felt the same sense of uneasiness we all were feeling. As soon as she turned on the television, a news reporter was in the midst of explaining that a plane had just crashed into the Twin Towers in the heart of New York, City. After the second plane hit it was clear this was no accident. Our attention immediately turned to whether an attack was headed towards the Nation's Capital. Within a few minutes, there was confirmation a plane had just crashed into the Pentagon.

It's important to note that my school, located in Prince George's County, Maryland and not too far from the Pentagon, had many students with parents or relatives who worked at the Pentagon and other Federal buildings across the region. This caused widespread fear,

Ultimately, close to 3,000 people were killed during the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It's almost twenty years after 9/11 and I can still vividly recall the utter shock, fear, and devastation from the attacks. While I wasn't directly impacted, I still experienced a traumatic event, which caused direct harm to others. Today, in 2020, our nation and the entire world is facing another deadly attack - COVID19, which has killed approximately 88,000 American citizens in just a few short months.

Without a doubt, this pandemic is wreaking havoc and causing a collective trauma. Make no mistake about it, this pandemic has shaken the American Education system to its core. Schools across our nation have been closed since as early as March and some districts are already making plans to remain closed well into the fall. **This is trauma.**



This is a collective adverse childhood experience (ACE) that has directly or indirectly impacted everyone. ACEs are traumatic events that occur before the age of eighteen and include all types of abuse and neglect, parental mental illness, substance use, domestic violence, divorce, even incarceration. It's important to understand these experiences because they can affect a student's attention, decision-making ability, how they learn, and even how they respond to stress. Children who experience traumatic events may even have difficulty forming healthy and stable relationships.

ACEs are also linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance misuse in adulthood. Some children face stress from historical and ongoing traumas due to systemic racism as well as the impacts of poverty. In fact, jurisdictions around the country are beginning to [declare](#) racism a public health emergency around the country. This matters because adverse childhood experiences can have lasting, negative effects on health, well-being, and even opportunity later in life. This means that we can not afford to passively sit back and ignore the social emotional (SEL) needs of our students. We must have a sense of urgency now, to adequately respond AND be proactive, in addressing the needs of our students, their families, as well as our teachers, administrators, and other school-based staff.

Supporting the SEL needs of students and families is perhaps one of the most urgent concerns facing school systems right now. The reality is that while schools are closed,



To be clear, traditional instructional practices and returning back to “normal” alone can not and should not be the sole focus when schools reopen. Why? For starters, because learning can not happen unless the SEL and behavioral needs of students (and adults) are addressed. The focus of schools reopening must include providing effective SEL learning strategies for staff and students. Before the pandemic, many school districts and system leaders had begun to buy into the idea that SEL was a promising approach to helping children deal with the stressors and challenges of school and life. Research supports this claim and shows that students who attend schools prioritizing SEL, have better outcomes such as higher academic achievement, more prosocial behavior, fewer conduct problems, and reduced emotional distress! It is evident, even amongst parents, employers, principals, teachers, and students, just how critical SEL is.

The overwhelming majority of administrators, teachers, and parents, believe that social and emotional learning is just as important as academic learning. There is strong consensus among school and district administrators that SEL skills are important & should be taught in schools to all students. According to [CASEL](#), 95% of principals are committed to developing students’ social and emotional skills in their schools and 93% of teachers want a greater focus on social and emotional learning. Additionally, 3 out of 5 parents give greater importance to their children being happy and not overly stressed, than doing well in school. In fact, the majority of high school students and recent grads agree that going to a school that focuses on developing SEL skills would help better prepare them for life after high school. As schools consider opening in the midst of this pandemic, it is critical that schools, districts, and state leaders consider crafting a social emotional learning plan.

Here are four considerations to help schools begin crafting a social emotional learning plan for reopening schools.

Consideration #1 - Identify and plan to address the needs of staff.

There is no question that educators have been greatly impacted by this pandemic. It’s important to address the needs of educators so that they may be prepared to address the

[A study from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence](#) found that teachers who were mandated to teach SEL but did not cultivate their own practice worsened their students SEL skills and teachers who developed their own SEL skills not only improved their own well-being, but also improved the social, emotional and academic development of their students. Adults who recognize, understand, label, and regulate their own emotions are [less likely to report burnout](#), demonstrate higher levels of patience and empathy, encourage healthy communication, and create safe student learning environments. This will be an essential skill for adults, especially as schools begin to reopen.

SEL also protects from burnout! Teachers who possess social and emotional competencies are more likely to stay in the classroom longer. Teachers with high levels of social competence are better able to protect themselves from burnout by: developing and managing nurturing relationships with their students managing behavior in their classrooms serving as behavioral role models for children and regulating their own emotions.

Consideration #2 - A social emotional learning plan must include and prioritize a fully staffed school-based mental health team.

As school leaders consider plans to reopen schools, the right people must be in place to meet the needs of students AND staff! It is imperative to have a comprehensive plan for deploying and utilizing school-based mental health professionals (aka the right people) now more than ever. School-based mental health professionals include School Counselors, School Psychologists, and school Social Workers. At the most basic level, schools must ensure that they have an adequate amount of school-based mental health professionals to meet the existing and emerging mental health needs of students.

Prior to the crisis, the ratios of school-based mental health professionals were inadequate, which meant most schools already had a hard time addressing the mental health needs of its students. This is even more reason, why as part of a comprehensive plan to meet the social emotional needs of students, districts MUST prioritize meeting the recommended ratios of school-based mental health professionals in order to support the needs of students.

School-based mental health professionals are key to a social emotional learning plan because they specialize in working with young people and their families to make sure they know how to manage their emotions, develop coping skills, and how to navigate difficult as well as stressful times. *School Psychologists* directly support the well-being of children and are experts at screening, evaluating, and identifying children who have academic and behavioral difficulties. This unique skill set will prove to be crucial as schools begin to reopen by helping to identify students who might be in need of additional support.

School Social Workers are trained mental health professionals who can assist with mental health concerns and behavioral concerns. They also provide individual and group counseling or therapy, which will be essential as schools reopen. *School Counselors* are vital members of the school-based team in elementary, middle, and high schools. School Counselors improve outcomes for all students by implementing a comprehensive school counseling program, helping students to properly manage emotions, and even providing grief and trauma counseling. School counselors are and will continue to serve as essential personnel in a post COVID19 world.

Consideration #3 - This plan must address the social emotional needs of students. At its core, this includes helping students (and staff) to identify, understand, and manage their emotions.

Now more than ever, we must prioritize SEL. As schools reopen, it will be imperative to effectively teach students how to effectively identify, understand and manage their own emotions. The focus here must be helping students correctly label their own emotions, recognize the impact of their thoughts and feelings, and to understand how their emotions can affect their behavior as well as their physical health. The focus should also include teaching students how to have concern for others, to make responsible decisions, how to properly develop healthy relationships, and effectively manage challenging situations. It will be important to teach students how to set and work towards achieving positive goals, to manage time and stress, and to show empathy for others.

Consideration #4 - A social emotional learning plan must prioritize relationships and human connections.

Relationships over Everything. Connection before Content. Maslow before Bloom.



As we are in the midst of a global pandemic, we must be able to center and remain focused on the things that matter most. At the most basic level, it is human nature to want to feel loved, to be valued, and to be connected with others. The only way that we will make it through this difficult time is if we do it together. Therefore, district and school leaders must be okay with prioritizing relationships and healthy human connections. This means that we must spend even more time ensuring our students have the skills and ability to manage relationships with peers (and adults) and to maintain those relationships over time.

As part of a comprehensive SEL plan, schools should develop ways for students to learn to communicate effectively, engage productively and collaborate successfully with others, and be able to offer and seek help. The focus of this must be on establishing and maintaining healthy relationships. This includes teaching students how to communicate clearly, resist inappropriate social pressure, resolve conflict peacefully, share their thoughts and feelings

- Model and reinforce effective communication and relationship building.
- Teach students when and how to ask for help. You can help students learn how to identify resources and supports (academic, social emotional, community, financial, etc.).
- Establish a conflict resolution process that is used school-wide any time there is a conflict.
- Give students authentic feedback for resolving conflicts peacefully.
- Work with your school-based mental health professionals for additional strategies to help students build and develop relationship skills

The Takeaway

These four considerations are just the tip of the iceberg to begin to help your school, district, and state leaders get started crafting a comprehensive SEL plan. As these plans are developed, it's worthwhile to consider the following: 1.) How this might fit within a tiered system of support; 2.) How to use universal screeners as a preventative measure; 3.) What might be some barriers to implementing interventions and supports; 4.) What are the financial considerations; 5.) How transportation might be a factor for some students; and 6.) How a re-emergence of COVID19 in the fall might impact vulnerable populations.

Mike Tyson once said, **“everyone has a plan until they’re punched in the mouth”**. This past spring, the pandemic hit hard and punched the American education system in the mouth. What matters now, is how we will respond to this adversity. Our students need and deserve for us to be ready to fight and protect them. This fall, let’s make a conscious decision to be ready to return the fight.

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M

21 hours ago 

I 100% agree and thank you for drawing attention to this issue. Your book and youtube channel have been very helpful prior and during this distance learning. I have forwarded this post to several admin and colleagues in my district in hopes we will get a SEL district wide program. I will say, however, as a fellow school psychologist you short changed our role. Having worked in schools without a social worker and school counselor we do everything you outlined regarding their roles. Even in the schools I have worked in with social workers and school counselors I have done and continue to do those things. This is not to belittle the roles of social workers or school counselors, but just to draw attention to the versatility of school psychologists. I know school psychologists often get put in the testing corner and some are happy with that, but we can and should do so much more. Thank you for what you do and the information that you are bringing to others. It is very much appreciated.

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