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## Why We Can't Afford Whitewashed Social-Emotional Learning

*Dena Simmons*

**Students need the skills to navigate unjust realities.**

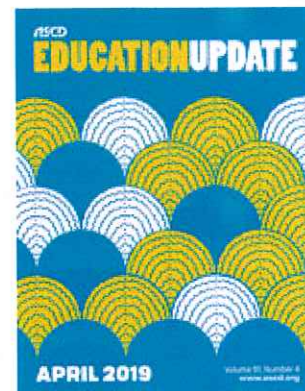
Our young people are growing up in an increasingly complex world—one where our own citizens commit terrorist acts against their fellow countrymen and women. Hate-fueled violence against black and Jewish Americans this past fall was a particularly terrifying reminder of our new reality.

Last year, the FBI released 2017 data showing [hate crimes in the United States increased for the third year in a row](#). Of the 7,106 hate crimes involving about 8,500 victims in 2017, 60 percent were targeted based on race, and about 20 percent were motivated by religious identity. 2019 began with reports of [a white man attacking a black motorist](#), repeatedly striking him in the head with a U-lock, because of his hatred for black people. American youth are consuming these narratives of hate with too few opportunities to digest what is happening or to recognize their agency in creating meaningful change.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) skills can help us build communities that foster courageous conversations across difference so that our students can confront injustice, hate, and inequity. SEL refers to the life skills that support people in experiencing, managing, and expressing emotions, making sound decisions, and fostering interpersonal relationships. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines [five core SEL competencies](#), including self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. These competencies seamlessly lend themselves to preventing violence and to building a more peaceful world.

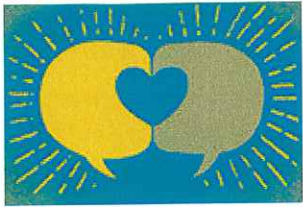
### Calling on Courageous Educators

However, educators often teach SEL absent of the larger sociopolitical context, which is fraught with injustice and inequity and affects our students' lives. As an SEL practitioner-researcher who speaks nationally about the intersection of emotional intelligence, equity, and culturally responsive practices, I hear that educators shy away from such discussions for fear that they will be accused of politicization or that they will lose their jobs.



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them as a way to develop their abilities to build relationships with diverse team members, resolve disagreements, and work collaboratively to debate in effective ways.

### Develop responsible decision-making skills through community-based projects.



Responsible decision making means constructive choices about how we behave and interact based on safety, social norms, and ethical standards. Ask students to identify a community problem they want to solve and then, in groups, decide how best to solve it, keeping in mind safety, resources, social norms, and ethics. Students might start a community garden or organize a farmer's market to address access to fresh food in food deserts, protest a community-identified injustice, or partner with an organization to provide a service lacking in the community. The goal is for students to use their responsible decision-making skills while creating change in their communities.

### Use current topics to foster social awareness.



Social awareness involves appreciating diversity, building empathy, and respecting others. To develop these skills and use them to create social change, students can study a current event or social issue that is important to them. For example, teachers could lead students on a unit about restroom accessibility. Students can research recent court cases, read and discuss narratives from transgender and gender-expansive students, and interview classmates. A culminating project could include a campaign or a letter to a government official to advocate for a cause or a creative writing piece from the perspective of a marginalized group.

### Explore different expectations for self-management.



A key component of self-management is regulating one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations. Students can investigate the relationship between emotion regulation and race, gender, or other aspect of a person's identity to explore the different expectations for marginalized groups' self-management. For instance, police-related killings of people from marginalized backgrounds as well as the spate of "concerned citizen" calls on black people **napping**, **celebrating in the park**, or **entering their own homes** make clear that certain groups of people are expected to regulate their behavior and emotions more strictly in public. Research has confirmed this **racial bias**. Students can also study how **implicit bias influences teachers' behavioral and academic expectations** for students as it relates to the school-to-prison pipeline. At the end of the unit, students can write an opinion piece, produce a YouTube minidocumentary, or present their learning to the school board.



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## KEYWORDS

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literacy, reading, content areas, language arts, school climate and culture, social-emotional learning, diverse classrooms and schools, culturally responsive teaching, student engagement and motivation, audience: teachers, audience: principals, audience: district-based-administrators, level: k-12

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