

# Schools focus on student's emotional health

10/27/2021, Rutland Herald, by Jim Sabataseo

As schools work to help students recover from the pandemic, social-emotional learning has become a major focus. But measuring a child's social well-being isn't as simple as assigning a letter or number grade. Rather, it requires schools to assess a range of indicators to understand where a child might be struggling.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, a leading resource among educators, 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 breaks SEL into five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

Through the SEL process, students acquire and apply the skills to manage their emotions, show empathy for other people, and build and maintain relationships.

"We know that without this core of, what we call social-emotional learning, it's really tough for kids to focus on their academics," said Heather Bouchey, deputy secretary at the Vermont Agency of Education.

Bouchey said that having developmentally appropriate skills in SEL core competencies also helps students develop resiliency, which can buffer against mental health issues.

As the AOE worked with school districts to develop student recovery plans following a year of hybrid and remote learning and increased absences, Bouchey said SEL has been essential in assessing how students are adjusting.

She said assessments conducted by schools over the summer showed an increase in anxiety for most students.

While she didn't have data for the current school year, she did acknowledge anecdotal reports that seem to indicate an increase in negative behavior in schools statewide.

"There seems to be patterns across the state that there is a lot more challenging behavior going on," she said.

Initially, Bouchey said, educators had expected to start the current school year in a post-pandemic recovery phase. However, the delta variant of COVID-19 has meant that schools still are navigating a pandemic while simultaneously attempting to address students' many social-emotional and academic needs.

Rob Bliss, assistant superintendent at Rutland City Public Schools, said the overall health of a community is an important indicator of students' emotional health in schools.

"Really solid public health is an indicator of much better social-emotional well-being of students in schools as they go forward," he said. "Things like public health and community health and community well-being, that's everybody's job."

In a school setting, Bliss pointed to attendance and behavioral data, peer interactions in unstructured settings, and visits to a school counselor or nurse as indicators a student might be struggling. In addition, he said drug and alcohol referrals, suicide attempts and the number of students in foster care also are important factors schools use when assessing students' social-emotional well-being.

Conversely, he pointed to positive indicators, such as participation in clubs, sports, music and community building activities as additional useful data points.

Bliss said data collected by the annual Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey and the Vermont Youth Project helps to inform schools on broad trends within communities.

The survey is being conducted this month. Bliss said he is eager to dig into that data when it becomes available.

"When we get that data back, it'll give us an indicator of how our students are doing compared to two years ago," he said.

As schools attempt to get their arms around student social-emotional health issues brought on or exacerbated by the pandemic, the state has been providing new supports.

This fall, the AOE has launched a new virtual platform of SEL materials for teachers to use in the classroom. The platform, which is broken down by grade level, uses videos to demonstrate positive and negative examples of behaviors related to SEL core competencies. Teachers can then use the materials to lead discussions with students.

The platform also features corresponding modules for parents to help them better understand SEL concepts.

Bouchey explains that all the materials have been developed and vetted by child psychologists, educators, mental health clinicians and social workers.

She noted that the platform is not a panacea — it's a foundation on which teachers can build.

“There will definitely, probably be some students who need more intervention than these particular lessons are geared for,” she said.

The federal government also has stepped in to support schools' SEL efforts.

The Early and Secondary School Emergency Relief grant program identified SEL as one of the program's major pillars — along with academic achievement and student reengagement — making SEL-related initiatives eligible for millions of dollars in federal funding.

At RCPS, Bliss said ESSER II money was used to hire more professional counselors, case managers and clinical care staff.

“We made a real attempt to increase our capacity in terms of counseling for kids in every school,” he said.

Many schools have used ESSER funds to purchase various services to assess SEL in order to get a baseline of how students are functioning in relation to SEL competencies.

Schools in the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union are using such a service, according to Kristin Hubert, direct or curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Hubert said RNESU recently purchased a program called Panorama, which surveys students throughout the year to assess SEL core competencies. When improvement is needed, the program provides a variety of interventions that teachers, counselors and administrators can utilize.

While SEL has gotten some buzz due to the pandemic, Hubert noted that elementary schools have been focusing on it for a long time, pointing to community building activities like morning meeting as an example.

She said counselors also go into elementary classrooms on a regular basis to specifically teach SEL skills.

“Why you hear about it so much right now is because we know that kids have been out of school in a lot of places without access on a ... consistent basis to teachers and peers,” she said.

She explained that schools are trying to track SEL loss similar to academic learning loss.

Hubert acknowledged, however, that SEL competencies can be vague. Panorama, she said, will help by condensing data into reports, or “snapshots,” that teachers can present to parents at conferences similar to how they report reading competencies.

The plan was to fully implement Panorama this fall, but the pandemic has forced RNESU to delay some elements of the rollout to next year.

“It’s our hope that next year we can start — at the elementary (level), at least — reporting out to standards on how students are progressing,” she said.