
Clayton County Public Schools

Clayton, GA

"You Have to
Reach Them Before
You Teach Them"

**Making Connections Through
SEL in Clayton County Public
Schools During the Pandemic**

Case Study Report 1 of 3



Clayton County Public Schools

Clayton, GA

Dr. Ralph L. Simpson, the Deputy Superintendent for School Leadership and Improvement for Clayton County Public Schools (CCPS) believes that for students to succeed, “you have to reach them before you teach them” and that Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is the key to student, staff, family, and community connectedness. He feels that students are more likely to work hard and be responsive to learning when they have a positive and supportive relationship with their teachers. Dr. Gloria Duncan, the Director of Professional Learning, says that the district wants “SEL everywhere, classified departments, bus drivers, cafeteria works, (they) want SEL everywhere because there has to be some consistency.” SEL is a top priority for CCPS and they have been able to implement Rethink Ed’s SEL program with consistency and fidelity, even through the COVID pandemic and school closures.

CCPS is a diverse Title I district (100% free meals) with 69.6% African American students and 21.8% Hispanic students, as well as 22% of students speaking languages other than English. CCPS aspires to be a district that prepares all 55,000+ students across 66 schools and centers for a successful life and empowers them to achieve their personal and academic goals. Their sense of community and emphasis on communication, safety, and compassion make the district unique and Dr. Kimberly Dugger, the Principal at Kendrick Middle School, describes her community school as “very close-knit, very family-oriented” and when you walk into their school, you “can feel the love, you feel invited.”

Rethink Ed's Social Emotional Learning platform was introduced to CCPS as a pilot program with only 13 schools in the 2019-2020 school year and Ms. Blackwood explained that "when COVID happened and (they) all went home last March, the conversation started about SEL being rolled out in every single school." Without Rethink Ed, she does not "think it would have been possible or successful" but the platform made it "seamless for them to use." Prior to Rethink Ed, Coach Krista Lucich, physical education teacher and the Chairperson for SEL for her school, engaged students in daily mindfulness and meditation. She realized the importance of self-care and was able to extend SEL into other activities with the help of Rethink Ed and has utilized the activities to keep students engaged during remote learning.

SEL is defined by CASEL as "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions." Kim Blackwood, a Training Specialist of Professional Learning, and a lead for SEL in the district, believes that SEL is "about becoming the very best version of oneself" and that "the very best educators have actually been practiced in SEL for years, even before there was term for it." Like most of us, she says that the teachers "who had the greatest impact on (her) life were the ones who really took the time to build a relationship with (her)" and this still holds true today for students and their teachers.

Dr. Bonnie Waring, Assistant Principal at Lovejoy High School, thinks that SEL means that they "are taking time to care about our students, our faculty, and ourselves" and that they are "giving people ideas on how they can be supported and speak up." Mr. Nelson Render, the Principal at Lovejoy High School concurs with Dr. Waring and adds that in addition to empowering students, "it helps them to build relationships and to deal with diversity." On a personal level, he adds that it also assists his son, a Senior in high school, and his

family because it helps them “learn how to communicate better and express (themselves) better.” He says that SEL “means a lot to (him) not just as a Principal, but also as a father.”

Dr. Simpson defines SEL as “a way of managing who you are, what you stand for, what you believe in, and how you go about making decisions or choices, being responsive, and being responsible.” His philosophy is that SEL, once learned, “becomes natural because it is something natural.” Dr. Avery Kenly, a Teacher Development Specialist for the district, believes SEL is a “reflective practice” that helps us “to be able to identify our emotions, to identify our triggers and that helps develop self-awareness and the ability to make responsible decisions.” To Alexandria Ellison, a 3rd-grade teacher, SEL “means that children and adults intentionally learn and apply necessary skills to manage emotions” and they “have the ability to establish and maintain positive relationships, regardless of who the person is.” She describes it as “understanding that you have the right to all of your emotions, and though they are valid” learning “how one can adapt and respond in the most positive way for every situation.” For a high school Senior, Mark Dixon, SEL “is a way for (him) to connect with (his) teachers even when (he’s) not with them” in a virtual learning situation. Similarly, it helps him connect with other students because they “can talk about what’s going on with (their) lives and not just schoolwork.”

The COVID pandemic has caused a lot of disruption, confusion, and trauma and CCPS was quick to be responsive to the needs of the students, educators, and families it serves. Dr. Waring believes that Rethink Ed SEL was “so timely” and that it was valuable for the students “to have this information available to them at a time when their whole world was turned upside down.” The impact the pandemic had on her high school students was traumatic “when the whole way they learn ceased to exist and when students did not get to graduate and march across the stage, and when students did not get to go to

prom, and when students in 9th grade did not get to start the first day.” Rethink Ed SEL was needed to help the students learn “how to cope, how to think, how to grieve, that it’s okay” and she feels that it was “the best timing and best lessons and the best support that (they) could offer students” and she is “grateful for it.”

Mr. Render agrees and adds that it gives students and teachers “the necessary skills in (their) toolbox to deal with it emotionally” and helps what he calls their “scholars” to show that they truly care about their “self-esteem and well-being.” Families also struggled during the pandemic and as described by Sabrina Stewart, a parent of an 8th grade student, and the Student Engagement Specialist at Lovejoy High School, her son “had to do a lot of things inside and (they) had to learn to adapt” and it was a struggle for them, particularly at the beginning of the school year. With Rethink Ed SEL, she “could see the difference with him” and thinks that he is “better than what he was at the beginning of the school year.” She also noticed that his “academics really changed as well.” She believes that when he transitions to high school, SEL “will help him with his emotions and his state of mind, keeping a positive attitude” and keeping up with academics.

Throughout the pandemic, Dr. Simpson and his team had to “check the pulse and the heart rate from an emotional and a feeling perspective” not just checking temperatures for physical symptoms. Rethink Ed’s SEL platform helped CCPS not only in keeping their teachers and students connected but also in connecting educators with each other, connecting students with each other, and connecting families. It has given them a “road map for the host of activities” that they use not just with students but in staff meetings and their parent workshops and training. As more and more teachers began to use the program, the principals, and other administrators “saw how excited and enthusiastic the teachers were” and “they saw the children were even more engaged” and there has been a “fundamental shift in the culture and climate” in the schools. Ms.

Ellison feels that Rethink Ed has “definitely helped with COVID and remote learning by increasing self-awareness and empathy” and that when they all return to school, it will help them “be able to relate to one another and have positive interactions and grow together.”

Dr. Duncan explains how the pandemic inspired them to go from piloting Rethink Ed SEL in certain schools to going district-wide. She said that she “could not have asked for something better” and that other products could not handle the virtual component or address their needs for student and staff learning. Their special education department has also embraced Rethink Ed’s SEL program for their students and staff and it has been valuable “particularly in this virtual setting.” The transition back to school also requires a focus on SEL and Dr. Duncan points out that we cannot “just be involved in learning loss, but we’ve got to be involved in bringing these kids back in and not stressing them out on the first day of school.” We cannot just “jam everything in that they missed during the last year, we’ve got to get them comfortable with themselves where they can relax, and we have got to learn to teach them where they are.”

Ms. Blackwood also feels that Rethink Ed’s SEL platform will be essential as students return to classes. “I think we’ll probably focus on the trauma modules again, even though they’ve already had them at the beginning of the year, but this is going to be another change and it’s another trauma. Even for those kids that have opted to stay home, they know their friends are back in the building and maybe for whatever reason, their parents don’t want them going back. So, it’s going to be a situation for everybody, and I think it’s going to go kind of smooth since we have this tool at our disposal.” She has seen how receptive students have been to SEL through her husbands’ perspective as well, who is a middle school principal. She shared how she got to be “a fly on the wall” and how “it was just so incredible to hear some of these students, how they support each other and are just very empathetic towards one another.” One student “lost a family member to COVID and another student

started saying, “well, I’m going to be praying for you,” things like that coming out of 6th graders is just amazing.”

CCPS has taken on an important initiative to educate and engage families in SEL and as Dr. Kenly pointed out, “in order to be truly impactful, you must touch every individual that touches that child, so how could we skip their parents.” They have done this by providing parents with Rethink Ed SEL access, additional resources, videos, and having parent nights that focus on building relationships and expanding their SEL expertise. Dr. Dugger’s school has a full-time parent liaison who shares information on SEL with families and has noticed a significant difference in parent engagement and it has helped staff communicate more effectively and compassionately with families. Rethink Ed, according to Dr. Simpson, has “afforded (them) the opportunity to extend (SEL) to the parents” and has made it possible for them to have structured and productive parent workshops. They “want SEL to be a part of the household” and not “just experiences when they’re at school.” They want “the parents to know and understand that SEL will help them be able to manage things around the house.”

Dr. Duncan reports that parents are so stimulated by the workshops that they often stay around after the meetings and ask questions and are truly engaged in learning more about SEL and building relationships with and helping their children. She says that “the numbers have increased every time” and that the parents “just bounce off each other and have the same ideas” about what might work well for their children. Ms. Blackwood has also seen a lot of progress and reported that parents are saying that “students have been more respectful at home” and that it “helps them to understand their children better.” Ms. Ellison feels that parent involvement is particularly important at the elementary level and that “we all have to learn and grow together” and teaching parents more about SEL is a great way to connect everyone.

Social justice issues can also be more readily discussed with SEL skills because as Dr. Simpson explains, it helps students feel safe to talk and “to get children to understand how to manage those feelings” and navigate through these types of difficult issues. “There’s a level of responsibility, self-responsibility, and self-management that’s attached to this, and you have to be able to continue to function.” He importantly also points out that “even as adults, because even we felt and feel a certain type of way about some of the injustices. Even as it relates to the vaccine roll out, either as it relates to those who had access to adequate health care and accessibility to health care and how it's impacted certain communities, all of those are conversations that we would want them to encourage our families to have with their children, and you can do it through the eyes of SEL.”

Dr. Duncan believes that the pandemic has “been a blessing and a curse” because when students were in school, they had a lot of distractions and protection from the outside world but during COVID, the “students knew exactly what was going on in terms of social justice” and they were “more involved in learning more about what’s going on” and “what decisions are being made for their lives.” SEL has helped students to better identify, express, and manage their emotions and are learning how to have more productive and respectful conversations about difficult topics. Ms. Blackwood believes that SEL is the key to unlocking emotions and learning how to manage them when addressing challenging issues in our society because Rethink Ed SEL provides students with “a safe place to be able to voice what they’re feeling.” “We’ve given them these tools and you know, it hasn’t changed the world yet, but I really think moving forward with us, with more and more implementation poured out, we could change our whole community. It’s changed the whole mindset.”

It has been a challenging year for everyone, and Clayton County Public Schools have leveraged Rethink Ed’s SEL program to nurture students, families, and faculty through the pandemic, school closures, distance learning, trauma,

social justice issues, and more. They have taken the opportunity during a difficult time to connect everyone and bring them closer together. Their dedication to communication, empathy, compassion, and learning is clear and they have managed to create a positive and safe climate for everyone.



© Rethink Ed. All rights reserved.

About Us

Rethink Ed combines the power of technology and research to deliver innovative, scalable, and evidence-based instructional materials and supports for learners with disabilities. The comprehensive suite of tools ensures that every student develops the academic, behavioral, and social/emotional skills they need to succeed in school, at work and in life. Rethink Ed positions educators, students, and families for success. Rethink Ed is a division of Rethink First, a company that aims to place evidence-based treatment solutions in the hands of every educator, clinician or parent working with a child with special needs. We are unique in our footprint, leveraging the power of technology to provide clinical support, best-practice tools, and research-based content to all market segments, reaching more children with special needs than any other solution.

Get in touch

info@rethinked.com

(877) 988 - 8871

49 W 27th Street, 8th Floor

New York, NY 10001

rethink Ed
Inspiring Hope. Powering Potential.