



## White Paper

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# The Power of Addressing the Whole Child: Social and Emotional Learning Skills for Life

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*by Dr. Kurt Hulett*



**RethinkEd**  
Together We Power Potential



*We are at a point where we can no longer ignore (students') needs based on ZIP codes. Their needs dictate what, and how, we teach and live.*

*- Lori Caplan, Superintendent  
Watervliet City School District, Watervliet, New York*

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## Introduction

Malcom Gladwell, global thinker and author, contends that there's a phenomenon called the tipping point. The tipping point is what happens when a minor thing like an idea or trend spreads like wildfire, then leads to a major shift in the way people think and believe. There's a tipping point going on in education right now and it's called SEL or Social and Emotional Learning. It's a hot topic among educators, and the focus of a two-day New York state educators conference: The Meeting the Needs of the Whole Child, Whole School and Whole Community: The Council's New York State Social and Mental Wellness Symposium. This conference brought together educational leaders, mental health experts, industry thought leaders, and school practitioners for a series of panel discussions, conversations, collaboration, case studies, and best practices sharing. The goal? To find new and better ways of meeting the needs of children with mental health and social emotional challenges in our schools.


**The goal?** To find new and better ways of meeting the needs of children with mental health and social-emotional challenges in our schools.

**This white paper highlights key points of the symposium, and takes a high-level look at why SEL is at its tipping point – and how some educators use it to help K-12 public school students succeed in and out of the classroom.**

## Executive Summary: How SEL Empowers the Student

Historically, little attention and few resources were given to the topic of social-emotional learning and mental health in public education. In recent years, though, things have changed. Namely, significant increases in the rate of mental health diagnoses, school shootings, and suicide-related issues for school-age children, not just in prevalence, but also in frequency.

To help them understand the underlying issues leading to such violence, conference goers used “the invisible backpack” metaphor to discuss the experiences educators and students bring through the school door each and every day. The invisible backpack represents a wide variety of traumas experienced by both students and teachers. Tucked away and out of sight of others, these experiences, nonetheless, influence the way a student or adult sees the world. Unfortunately, the invisible backpack can quickly unravel in the classroom setting.



*“The invisible backpack, while important, can overshadow something else: a student’s immense abilities and positive character traits.”*

- Kristen Hopkins, CEO, *Dangers of the Mind*

Kristen Hopkins, author, educator, social-entrepreneur, youth worker, and CEO of the empowerment organization Dangers of the Mind, says that the invisible backpack, while important, can overshadow something else: a student’s immense abilities and positive character traits. So, Hopkins encourages educators and others to look beyond student deficits toward student strengths and areas of opportunity. She calls this their “high promise.”

Between the invisible backpack and the high promise, educators at the New York Symposium discussed a number of other topics and issues. The most prominent being this: now is the time for mental health awareness and implementation of SEL initiatives at both district and building levels.

## **Academic and Mental Health: Either/Or vs. Both/And**

When it comes to choosing between academic concerns and mental health, there's a consistent theme among New York state school superintendents, school practitioners, educational thought leaders, and mental health experts in attendance at the New York State Social and Mental Wellness Symposium – **academic concerns cannot be separated from social and emotional needs.**

“A child with no social-emotional awareness, with tremendous academic abilities, often will become a bright, but disconnected child,” says Blaise Aguirre, MD, Medical Director of McLean Hospital, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry/Harvard Medical School, and conference presenter. “We know that disconnectedness and isolation are huge vulnerability factors for depression and suicide,” he says. “Being academically bright does not protect against mental illness. Social-emotional skills enhance resilience, connectedness, and reduce mental suffering.”

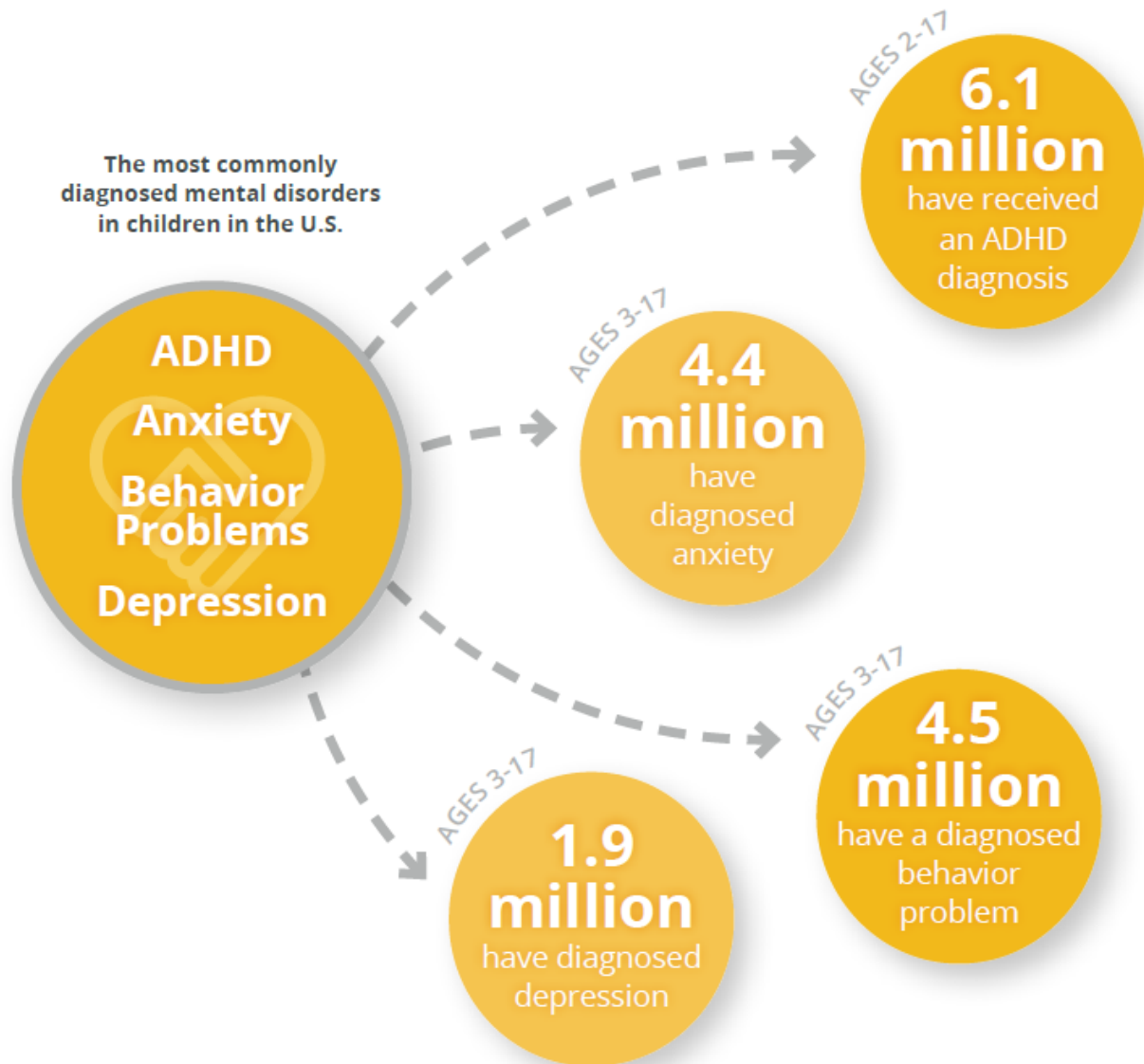
Yet, for decades, American public schools focused solely on academic achievement. The advent of educational policies, initiatives, and accountability measures and consequences in the 1990s also did not address social-emotional skill building in the classroom. Instead, it further tipped the scales in favor of an academics-first-and-only approach.

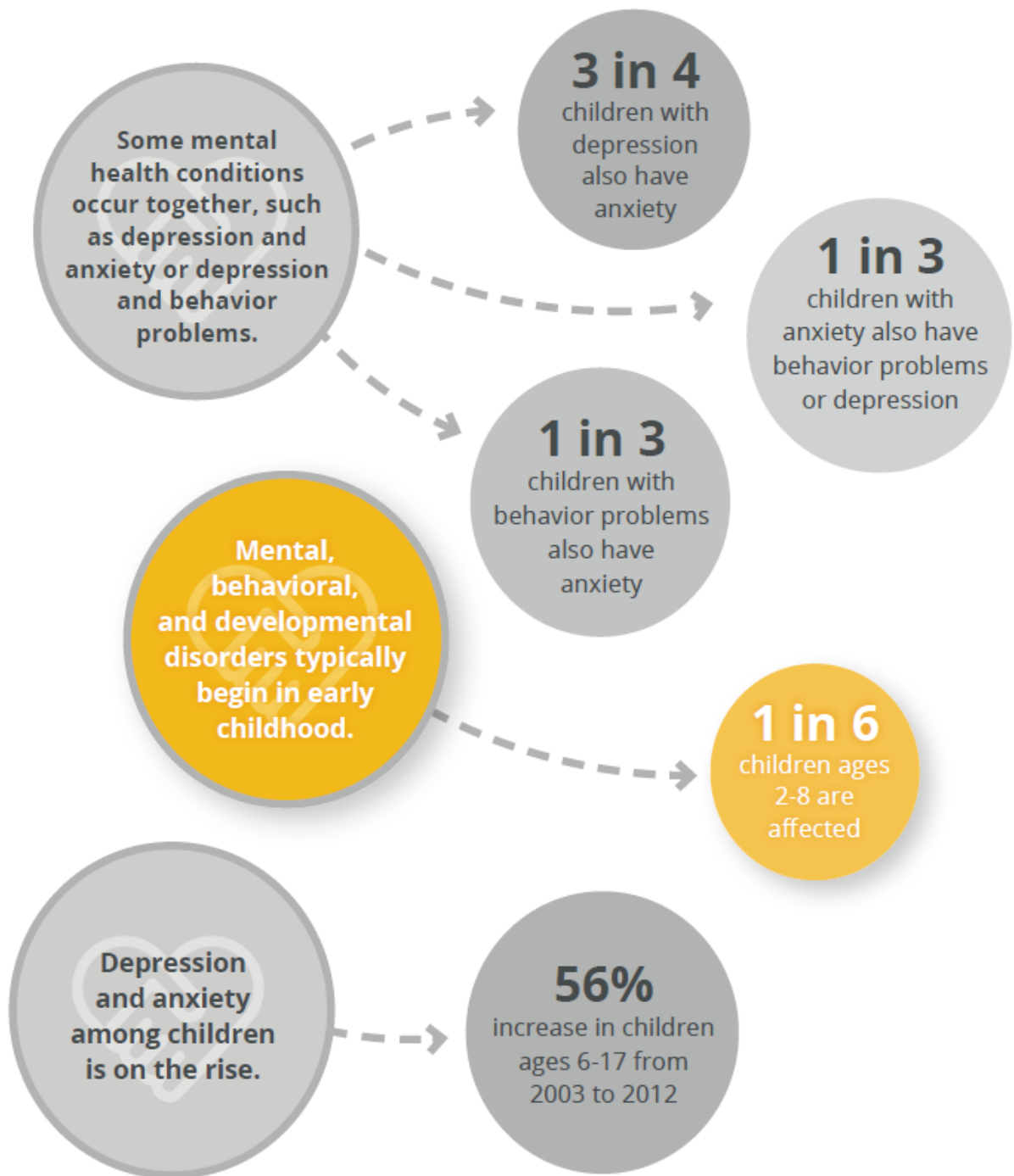
The advent of educational policies, initiatives, and accountability measures and consequences in the 1990s **did not address social-emotional skill-building in the classroom.**

The result, say some, is limited time and resources for educators, leaving them often unable to support parents and primary caregivers in developing their children's social and emotional well-being. With SEL making its way into the conversation, the either/or approach is starting to give way to a both/and approach that includes both academics and Social and Emotional Learning.

## Mental Health by the Numbers

It's a fact: across United States, there are large numbers of children with mental health disorders attending public school. Running parallel to these growing numbers of children with mental health challenges are two issues: (1) a lack of support services and (2) a sharp increase in mass shootings and other school-related violence. If not alarming, these statistics regarding school-age children and mental health are, at the very least, illuminating.







## Why SEL, Why Now?

Until recently, SEL was not directly correlated to student achievement, nor was it a policy requirement. That, however, is beginning to change as educational leaders and clinicians recognize an interdependent relationship between academics and social-emotional needs. This shift in thinking is due, in part, to a combination of factors, including growing concerns over the standards movement, a continuous rise in mass shootings, and a sharp increase in mental health-related challenges in schools.


This, of course, has particular relevance to children with mental health issues since a primary strategy for improving the lives of these children is to equip them with social and emotional skills and strategies in order to live more productive lives. Empirical investigations of the impact of SEL interventions have found that students who participate in SEL programming perform better academically, have less anxiety, are more attentive and less hyperactive in school, and are less aggressive than their peers. The effects are largest for the students at most need, both academically and behaviorally.

It's becoming more and more clear that social and emotional fitness directly affects a student's ability to learn. Even those who possess strong academic skills, yet limited social-emotional fitness are shown to struggle in school and in life. As awareness of SEL and its possible benefits grows, some educators and experts want to see the public school system take a more balanced educational approach – one that takes into account the needs of the *whole child*.

According to Emily Tate, a K-12 reporter at EdSurge.com who writes about the role and influence of technology in education, terms like “whole child” and “social emotional learning” are making headlines in the news and at educational conferences. She contends that while these may seem like new buzzwords, they are, in fact, not new concepts. “Behind

the buzzwords are programs,” she says, “often led and managed by schools, that take into account all the different things a child needs to be able to learn and grow – even if those things reach outside the traditional roles of a school.”

According to Tate and others, social-emotional learning isn’t new. What is new is the number of initiatives addressing SEL and a growing number of those in favor of putting the social-emotional needs of children on par with academic learning.



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“Whether you call it ‘character education,’ ‘peace building,’ or ‘conflict resolution,’ they all have foundations in the social-emotional learning frameworks and in that research base,” says Tate. “We’re beginning to realize that SEL is an important skill everybody needs.”

## Opportunity: Social and Emotional Skills for Every Learner

The benefits of SEL on student success are under study. Research is just beginning to validate the value of SEL, even as awareness of the need to address mental health in the classroom grows. SEL, says Christina Cipriano, PhD, Director of Research at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and research scientist at the Child Study Center in the Yale School of Medicine, is for all learners, meaning students, parents/caregivers, and educators.

Dorothy Drexel, assistant principal of Plainview-Old Bethpage CSD in Plainview, New York says, “It’s very important to look at the whole child and reflect on what we can improve. The importance of self-care and SEL is not going away... Everything you say with students is synonymous with adults. Both kids and adults need SEL support.”

Maurice Elias, PhD, Director of the Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab, encourages school leaders to not only focus on student needs, but also to address the social-emotional needs of educators. He recommends promoting a “caring culture,” which includes developing procedures to support staff who face difficult personal circumstances.

Although SEL is top of mind for many educators, including those at the New York Symposium, there’s a large gap between awareness of SEL and implementation of high-quality programming in public schools.

At the conference, Dr. Aguirre shared that a caring culture is often characterized by connectedness. “Connectedness,” he says, “is a basic human need”. He also says it’s something we’re currently struggling with all across the nation due, in part, to influences like social media, mental health, and other variables.

The Urban Assembly, a New York-based nonprofit that works to advance students’ economic and social mobility by improving public education, says that while 98% of school principals believe students should be taught social and emotional skills, only 35% have an implementation plan. Of those, only 25% are implementing what would be called a “high-quality plan.”

And so there exists an opportunity to take a fresh, objective look at SEL, including the school’s role in a child’s social and emotional development, and, in particular, how schools can evaluate and implement an SEL strategy.

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The Urban Assembly's three-part strategy for evaluating and implementing SEL initiatives is as follows:

- 1. Scan:** Review ongoing approaches that support SEL using a program matrix.
- 2. Plan:** Use an implementation rubric to plan instruction, integration, and assessment.
- 3. Act:** Leverage a sustainability rubric to evaluate capacity.

This simple strategy is, of course, only a starting point for school districts, but it brings to light the importance of having a well-thought-out process. But process isn't the only consideration. To help ensure maximum effectiveness, a high-quality SEL program must also be cohesive and comprehensive.

Theresa Lindsay, Middle School Principal at Lake Placid CSD in Lake Placid, New York, says her district has "really good pockets of practice, but not a full continuum of services." As such, the district is going to re-think their approach.

Tom Bon Giovi, Superintendent of Highland CSD in Highland, New York, likens SEL implementation to quilting. "Many districts have all these great pieces," he explains, "but you need to sew them all together. We need to take what we have and organize it into a comprehensive plan, not individual initiatives."

## Conclusion

In light of the escalation of school shootings and mental health-related violence, it's understandable why we've seen increases in security on school campuses. While such measures may help address the issue once it happens, they are proving to do little to

address the root cause, or to eradicate the violence and maladaptive behaviors our nation's schools continue to face.

In addition to screening and progress monitoring of maladaptive behaviors, preventive strategies, such as pro-social and Social and Emotional skills, are beginning to prove their worth in creating more positive school environments.

The big question, though, is this – can SEL in schools make a real and profound difference in the lives of students, their families, and the educators who support them? If the speakers, experts, and participants of The Council's New York State Social and Mental Wellness Symposium have anything to say about it, the answer is yes.

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## Endnotes

1. Tate, Emily (2019). "Why Social-Emotional Learning Is Suddenly in the Spotlight," retrieved September 2019 from EdSurge. com (<https://www.edsurge.com/news/2019-05-07-why-social-emotional-learning-is-suddenly-in-the-spotlight>).
2. "Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health, retrieved September 2019 from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html>).
3. Hulett, K. (2019) "The Tipping Point: New York Educational Leaders Take on Mental Health and Social Emotional Learning." Unpublished.

## About the Author

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Dr. Kurt Hulett is a special education consultant, child advocate, writer, author, and former school principal whose goal is to bring educators and stakeholders together to work for the benefit of all children. He is a member of the Center for Special Education Advocacy and hosts a video podcast called, Kurt's Kitchen Table EdTalk. Dr. Hulett is the author of *Legal Aspects of Special Education* and is currently working on *Miles to Equality*, an education reform book due out in 2020.



# White Paper



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# About Us

Rethink Ed was founded on a simple, yet powerful idea: To re-think education. To make it better and easier. To unburden school districts and empower educators. To improve outcomes and elevate accountability. To promote collaboration and inspire learning. And most importantly, to make a difference in the school day for everyone – administrators, educators, and students.

The Rethink Ed solution is part of Rethink First, a global company that is transforming behavioral healthcare. Similar to Rethink First's other solutions that are innovating and improving outcomes for clinicians and employers globally, Rethink Ed is pioneering EdTech with our relentless pursuit of innovative methods that put evidenced-based, data-informed, digitally delivered instruction and assessments into the hands of educators, clinicians, and parents who share our singularly minded focus: To power the potential of all children and to work together to help them succeed.

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