



White Paper

SEL is the Key to Success:

How SEL Impacts Student Success, Safety, and Equity

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Introduction

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has been proven to have value in improving student engagement, academic performance, and relationships. SEL provides a strong foundation for learning, safety, and behavior. The impact of SEL on bullying, mental health issues, substance use, and disciplinary action is often significant. The meaningful outcomes are unmistakable, yet the implementation of an effective SEL program can present challenges. In a recent workshop organized by the Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS) and Rethink Ed, a team of leading experts provided practical information for planning, developing, implementing, measuring, and sustaining effective SEL programs in schools. Approximately 90 people attended including superintendents, district teams, and leading experts in SEL such as Maribel Saimre, Director of Student Services with the Virginia Department of Education. More than 22 Virginia school districts attended representing over 40% of the state. Presenters included Mr. David Adams (Director of Social and Emotional Learning at The Urban Assembly), Dr. Luvelle Brown (Superintendent for Ithaca School District and author of *Culture of Love: Cultivating a Positive and Transformational Organizational Culture*), Dr. Jared Cotton (Superintendent for Chesapeake Public Schools), Dr. Joseph V. Erardi, Jr. (Retired Superintendent for Newtown Public Schools), Dr. James Lane (Virginia State Superintendent), Dr. Doug Schuch (Superintendent for Bedford County Public Schools), and Dr. Jeff Smith (Superintendent for Hampton City Schools). SEL has become such an important topic for the state of Virginia that VASS has formally created an SEL workshop consisting of superintendents and they are working on crafting a state blueprint.

This paper reviews the content presented in this workshop and presents practical strategies and highlights from research regarding effective SEL implementation and meaningful outcomes.

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Executive Summary: SEL is the Key to Success

While everyone understands the importance of academic success, few understand the significance of emotional intelligence and social emotional skills. David Adams shared that emotional intelligence is a greater predictor of success than IQ and employers are looking for talent that have exceptional Social and Emotional skills such as communication, conflict resolution, problem solving, and other “soft skills” that are better indicators of a valuable employee than skill set alone (IBM Institute for Business Value, 2018).

Specifically, companies are looking for:

- 1) Willingness to be flexible, agile, and adaptable to change.
- 2) Time management skills and ability to prioritize.
- 3) Ability to work effectively in team environments.
- 4) Ability to communicate effectively in business context.

These top performance skills and intelligences and are better indicators of success in the workplace. While academic skills may prepare students for taking tests, reading comprehension, math skills, and other abilities needed for college and employment, they alone are insufficient for having a successful career or for life in general.

Social and Emotional skills are also essential for successful relationships in life. Having empathy and understanding others, being able to attend and listen to others, showing gratitude and compassion, etc., are all the pieces of what makes a relationship puzzle fit. Children who have these skills have better quality friendships and work better with others. These skills are good predictors of which children will go on to succeed later

in school and in life. The good news is that Social and Emotional skills can be taught and that having an SEL program leads to improved academic performance, engagement, and relationships. SEL programs have also been shown to decrease disciplinary actions, drop-outs, and behavior challenges. Having an SEL program is critical for student success.

“SEL is not the icing. It is something that you need to do every day,” emphasized Dr. Jared Cotton, Superintendent of Chesapeake Public Schools. In Virginia and many other states “teaching students SEL is now a requirement,” states Dr. James Lane, the VA Superintendent of Public Instruction. SEL is not just a nice thing to teach, it may be the MOST important thing to teach students.

In Virginia, SEL is a top priority and it is now one of CASEL’s Collaborating States Initiative (CSI) states. According to Dr. Lane, Virginia is focused on 3 main components:

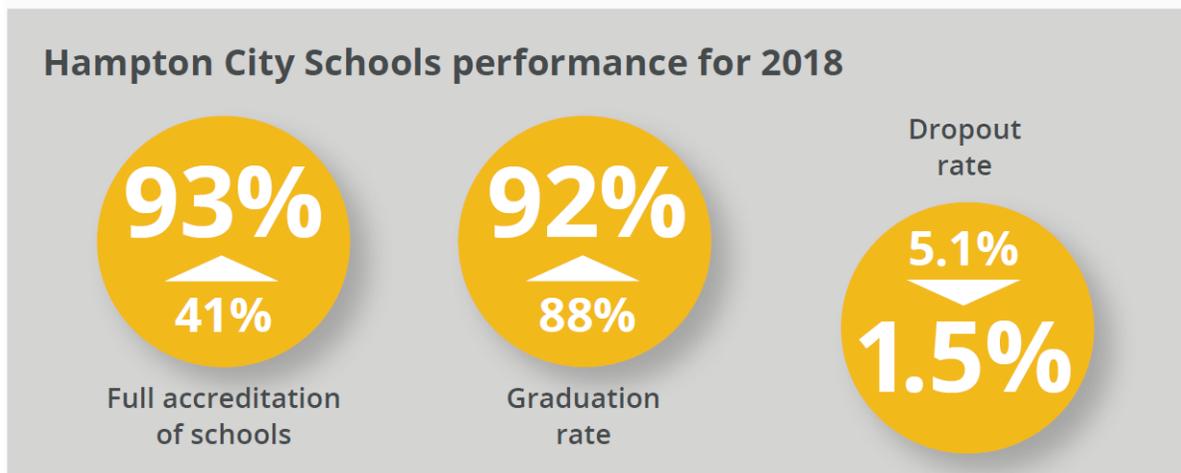
- 1) Training K-12 students to go deeper.
- 2) Making student success the highest standard for every school (including placing increased emphasis on racial and economic equity).
- 3) Preparing graduates for what comes next in life (e.g. college, work, relationships, adult life).

This preparation for adult life emphasizes Virginia's 5 C's:



Dr. Jeff Smith, Virginia’s Superintendent of the Year in 2018 and Superintendent for Hampton City Schools, is another devoted leader in recognizing SEL as a necessary and mandatory component of his mission. In addition to increasing full accreditation of schools in his district from 41% to 93%, graduation rates have soared from 88.3% to 92.6% in his district with the dropout rate falling from 5.1% to 1.57%. Dr. Smith attributes much of this success to the focus on SEL and equity in his district. Like the other presenters, he believes that a focus on SEL for students and adults in education is key to transforming student success and school climate.

This paper will unlock how SEL is the key to success, safety, and school culture and how schools can plan, implement, and soar with an effective SEL program.



The Importance of SEL for School Safety

Sometimes it takes a great tragedy for people to realize what is important and what needs to be done to keep people safe and to prevent tragedy from happening again in the future. The Sandy Hook shooting on December 14, 2012 in Newtown, CT changed the

life of an entire community and had a profound impact on a country in need of awareness and change in its school systems. A young man shot and killed 26 people, including 20 young children, at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

Before the shootings, the perpetrator shot and killed his mother and after, he took his own life as first responders arrived at Sandy Hook. This young man suffered from serious mental health issues such as anxiety and depression and had grown up in Newtown and attended Sandy Hook as a child. He had a traumatic home life and people in the community described him as being a deeply troubled child and teen. He shifted in and out of the school system but had no criminal record.

The community and the world were shocked by this event and people realized that things needed to change. School administrators and mental health professionals began to look more closely at SEL as a promising strategy for helping build resiliency, empathy, and other important skills for students and school staff. “The SEL piece to Newtown Public began to emerge when staff, particularly at Sandy Hook, realized that doing what’s been done every day was not good enough” stated Dr. Erardi.

Dr. Erardi explained how Newtown Public Schools and others across the country embraced SEL as a “cornerstone to any safety program.” While measures such as locks, cameras, and security may increase safety to some degree, they do not solve the problem. Some research has shown that security measures such as metal detectors can decrease weapons being brought into schools, but other studies show that these kinds of measures can increase fear and anxiety in students (Anthony, 2018). Plans should be put into place

“If SEL is not in place in your district, that has to be your highest priority.”

- Dr Erardi, Retired Superintendent of Newtown Public Schools

“The beauty of what Rethink has done is that they have put together absolutely brilliant modules around student need, teacher need, and student opportunity.”

- Dr. Erardi, Retired Superintendent of Newtown Public Schools

to prevent violence, but SEL may be the key to creating a supportive and safe learning environment for students. SEL programs promote positive behaviors and interactions and reduce emotional distress and feelings of hopelessness and isolation. Students who are better able to manage their emotions, understand and work with others, and who

feel confident and capable are more grounded, and this builds a safer and more productive learning environment.

Dr. Erardi believes that there are low and no-cost solutions to build SEL into the school culture and that programs need to be user-friendly and natural for the classroom environment. He emphasized that “if you are trying to launch an SEL program by layering one more thing on a classroom teacher or mental health provider just because you want to check that box off, don’t waste your time or money.”

Programs need to consider the busy schedules of educators and the needs of the students as well as educators, mental health providers, school staff, administrators, and families. Schools should not feel overwhelmed by the notion of introducing and implementing because there are effective and user-friendly tools available such as Rethink Ed’s Social and Emotional Learning program. Dr. Erardi believes that, “The beauty of what Rethink has done is that they have put together absolutely brilliant modules around student need, teacher need, and student opportunity. There is no need to reinvent something that is already there for you.”

In Newtown Public Schools, they “had to show a result and [they] had to show

that [they] cared deeply.” Dr. Erardi and others came to the realization that change was necessary and that SEL was the key. He encourages administrators to have the “courageous conversation” that needs to be had to ignite change in your schools. He says that you need to show your team that “you are the SEL guru” and that you have the knowledge, the research, and “most importantly the heart” to create positive change and results for your students, staff, and community.

Equity, Cultural Competence, and SEL

Dr. Lane stated that if we really want to be equitable to all students, we must incorporate SEL into our curriculum. “You can’t have true equity without teaching students to self-advocate and self-regulate.” Regardless of background, all students need to learn to manage emotions, build resiliency, and learn to self-advocate.

SEL may be the key to building equity in schools and an important piece of this is creating a climate that embraces cultural competence in students and all school staff. Dr. Jared Cotton, Superintendent of Chesapeake Public Schools, shared his district mission that focuses on the foundation of equity. He believes that strengthening social emotional skills and supporting mental health is essential not only for academic success and reducing disciplinary actions, but also for building equity and acceptance throughout schools at every level. Simply focusing on diversity is not sufficient; SEL needs to be part of the equation. David Adams from The Urban Assembly pointed out that “diversity paired with the ability to handle conflict effectively” is what works rather than just diversity alone.

“You can’t have true equity without teaching students to self-advocate and self-regulate.”

- Dr. Lane, Virginia State Superintendent

Students must learn effective communication, conflict resolution, problem solving, cultural competence, and other SEL skills in order to have true equity and acceptance.

Cultural competence is awareness of our own world view and the ability to understand and accept people from different cultures. This includes having a positive outlook on cultural differences and the willingness to gain knowledge and listen to different opinions. Dr. Brown, Superintendent of Ithaca City Schools and a native Virginian who completed K-12 and post-graduate work there, believes that most people don't really understand true cultural competence. He stressed the importance of building a cultural environment in schools through academics (e.g. using books and materials that represent different cultures) and through an "authentic journey for equity" that includes advocacy, instructional shifts, policy, and struggle. He believes that we must challenge people to think differently and to listen to different perspectives. This "struggle" is the key to building change and strengthening equity. Dr. Brown's path to equity includes 3 areas of focus that include voice and choice, culturally responsive practices, and love.

Students must be allowed to have a voice and allowed to have choices. Dr. Brown pointed out that "we need to recognize different levels of engagement" and "we need to understand true student engagement." He described the stages of engagement as:

- **Rebellion** (standing up and speaking against authority)
- **Retreatism** (tuning out, retreating cognitively, e.g. social media, texting)
- **Ritual compliance** (obeying rules like lining up)
- **Strategic compliance** (going along with the crowd and trying to gain acceptance, e.g. trying to get good grades, wearing cool clothes)
- **Engage** (meaningful, emotional, challenged, persisting even when things are difficult)

Dr. Brown believes that ritual compliance is not the level of engagement that we want as it is not meaningful and can even be degrading and worsen, rather than help, with equity at times. Giving students a voice and a choice leads to true engagement.

The next focus area is culturally responsive teaching that encourages educators to “validate, affirm, build, and bridge.” Schools must create an environment of cultural acceptance. For instance, they should have tools that represent different races and cultures in a positive and meaningful way, not a library full of books with just white people and animals on the covers. We can address negative stereotypes by changing the learning environment, teaching materials, having students identify social problems and solutions, including different cultures in lessons, having student-led lessons, and utilizing student interests in lessons. In addition, teachers need to be using culturally responsive teaching practices such as attention signals, discussion protocols, movement activities, vocabulary, acquisition strategies, etc.

Dr. Brown’s third area of focus is on the “culture of love” that encompasses patience, caring, trust, honesty, forgiving, commitment, and selflessness. To best help students, he says that we need to “think about where [we] are as an individual first. In addition to teaching students, we need to embrace cultural competence and evaluate our own prejudices and area of improvement.”

Conclusion

SEL works and there was consensus among the speakers and participants that it is not just a nice thing to have, it is a critical thing to have in schools. As Mr. Adams pointed out, SEL is a “good return on investment” with 11% of academic gains and 11:1 return on investment. In other words, “for every dollar we put into SEL, we save \$11.” Unfortunately,

not enough schools are focused on SEL or implementing programs effectively. Mr. Adams shared a study (DePaoli, et al., 2017) showing that although 98% of principals believe that students should be taught SEL, only 35% have a plan to implement it and only 25% supported school wide SEL in high schools. In the schools in this study that were implementing SEL, only 25% were implementing with quality. As Mr. Adams astutely stated, “Intention does not equal impact.” Schools need a plan for SEL and must make effective and consistent implementation a priority.

SEL instruction needs to begin early in education and continue through high school. Good social emotional skills are a strong predictor of kindergarten readiness and success throughout the school years. That being said, these skills can be taught and as Dr. Lane emphasized, “We have to teach kids earlier how to cope so that by the time they go to high school they can better support themselves.” He shared the fact that “31.5% of high school students experienced periods of persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” and believes that effective SEL programming can change these numbers.

SEL is not just for students. Educators, administrators, school support staff, parents, and the community also need quality SEL education. Dr. Cotton pointed out that effective SEL needs 4 components:

- 1) SEL curriculum and instruction embedded into all subject areas.
- 2) Employee wellness and professional development.
- 3) Mental health and tiered behavioral supports.
- 4) Family engagement and community partnerships.

In the panel consisting of David Adams, Dr. Luvelle Brown, Dr. Joe Erardi, and Dr. Jeff Smith (Superintendent from Hampton City), Doug Schuch (VASS President) moderated and posed questions regarding how schools should rethink SEL and build it into school systems. Panelist emphasized that we need to organize schools around student needs rather than adult needs. In other words, SEL should be embedded into all grades and all content areas and a multitiered approach should be utilized with more individualization of student needs in Tiers 2 and 3. Everything that we do already has SEL built into it and these skills are already there to some degree in all students and educators. Our job is to be more intentional and make SEL a priority.

One concern of attendees at this workshop was how to get buy-in from staff, families, and community who may be resistant or not get the importance of SEL.

One suggestion from the panel was to point out how SEL can help the physical and emotional safety of students. They also suggested figuring out where each person is in the continuum of engagement and starting there. Some people are resistant, some are supportive, and some are willing to participate. We need to figure out where people are at and build engagement over time. It can be helpful to point out to people that they are already using SEL and that being more intentional about it can be more beneficial to everyone. Panelists pointed out that student voice can go a long way in getting people's attention and engagement. They also suggested making SEL meaningful to people by showing them how it applies to their own lives and how it can help underserved populations in that particular school or district. For example, ask families and the community members what they want to see from students in adulthood and chances are, many SEL skills will come up in that discussion. Educators may also be resistant and

"For every dollar we put into SEL, we save \$11"

- David Adams, Urban Assembly

feel that social emotional skills should be taught at home, not at school. While it is true that these skills should be taught and modeled in the home, some students may not have the best home situations for learning these skills. It takes a home, school, and community to build strong SEL skills and schools are responsible for teaching students to be successful in college, employment, and life. Without SEL, educators are not fully doing this.

SEL is the key to improving not only academics but meaningful relationships, behavior, mental health, and engagement. Having an effective SEL program in place can unlock doors to improving equity and acceptance and can even improve safety in schools. As Mr. Adams stated “SEL skills can be applied across gaps and are the same skills you need to succeed in business, relationships, sports, academics, etc.”. SEL skills “cross the spectrum” in all areas of life and it is time for schools to make it a priority. SEL skills need to be targeted and schools need to be intentional in instruction. Panelists pointed out that schools must have a process and structure in place to move SEL forward and get positive results. It needs to be more than just a nice idea or concept; “process will lead to product” and the structure will ensure that all classrooms and all schools are implementing SEL programs rather than just some.

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About the Author

Dr. Christina Whalen, Director of Research at Rethink Ed, is a psychologist and Behavior Analyst. At Rethink Ed, she is the primary author of Tier 3 curriculum for Social Emotional Learning and assists with the development of professional development videos for educators. She has over 20 years of experience working with children, teens, and adults with special needs. She is the author of the book *Real Life, Real Progress for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Strategies for Successful Generalization in Natural Environments* and has presented at numerous education, behavior analysis, and psychology conferences. Dr. Whalen was the initial founder and creator of a computer-assisted behavior analysis intervention tool for children with developmental disorders. She also worked for various clinics, schools, and research programs. She received her PhD from University of California, San Diego and did post-doctoral training at UCLA and University of Washington.



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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