

4 Ways to Get Skeptics to Embrace Social-Emotional Learning

Educators must pay attention to students' well-being

By [Peter DeWitt, Opinion Contributor](#) January 4, 2018

Commentary



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An increasing number of school districts are incorporating social-emotional learning into or alongside instruction, thanks to a growing awareness of its importance for students. But within school communities, there are still families, teachers, and school leaders who think social-emotional learning is not the job of educators. Some school leaders simply don't feel they have the time to cover issues around students' relationships, well-being, and motivation in addition to schoolwork. There is a constant push and pull between those who believe SEL is necessary and those who want schools to focus solely on academics.

Here's the reality: Schools no longer have a choice but to take on social-emotional learning. For too many years, the focus has been on standardized testing and international comparisons of student performance with little attention given to helping students deal with the trauma they experience. At the same time, as research around trauma's effects on learning has grown, there has been an increasing awareness of how important it is for educators

to support students who suffer from trauma.

According to a 2017 report by the National Center for Children in Poverty, about **35 million children in the United States have experienced some form of trauma**. Research also shows that students can experience trauma not only from catastrophic events, but **from prolonged stress in family situations**, such as a divorce or a parent's mental-health issues, and many students also have parents who need support.

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From the outside, it's easy to say schools should focus on learning alone, because the social-emotional issues that students face and how they play out at school are often invisible. There are teachers who believe SEL is the job of a counselor or school psychologist. There are families who do not want schools to infringe on the beliefs they have at home.

In a book group focusing on school climate, I once had a principal tell me that she thought social-emotional learning was important but got pushback from parents who wanted the school to focus on AP courses to get graduates into the "right" universities. And too often, politicians cite the need to improve test scores as a reason for not focusing on SEL. But it's very difficult for students suffering from trauma to be fully engaged in academics if they are not supported socially and emotionally.

The question is not *whether* schools should be responsible for the social-emotional learning of students. The question is, *how* do we help schools confront the social-emotional issues they are facing?

Here are four ways teachers and school leaders can truly embrace social-emotional learning to set examples for their communities:

- **Greet students at the door—every single day.** A 2016 report by the Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations surveyed over 100,000

students and found that **only 52 percent believe their teachers take time to get to know them.** Learning students' names and seeing them for who they are as individuals is the first and most important step toward a healthier classroom for students.

- **Use a high-quality social-emotional-learning curriculum.** An organized SEL curriculum can help teachers bring difficult or traumatic topics to light with students. The Collaborative for Social Emotional Learning, or CASEL, offers resources around resiliency and self-regulation. Teachers might, for example, use the multitude of children's books and YA novels that explore situations or behavioral issues students are dealing with, which can weave seamlessly into academic learning.
- **Hire more counselors and nurses.** Many schools lack the appropriate number of counselors and nurses to help students process their thoughts and feelings. Less than half of the U.S. public schools **employ a full-time nurse**, and 21 percent of high schools don't have **access to a school counselor.** School leaders should advocate more health professionals in schools to help meet the needs of those students suffering from trauma and reduce the burden for overloaded counselors and nurses already on staff.
- **Offer training for teachers.** In order to support SEL, school and district leaders need to offer training to teachers on how to work with students in need. However, the organization or trainers chosen to work with teachers must not only have a deep understanding of SEL, but the added complexities of teaching.

We can no longer debate whether social-emotional learning is the job of schools. What students experience at home bleeds into the classroom, affecting how they learn. Students need to feel emotionally connected to school and understand how to self-regulate their emotions. When educators and school leaders work together, they can ensure that students' trauma doesn't continue to define them.

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