Mental Health and AntiRacist Social, Emotional Learning

Introduction
Over the past academic year, traditional models of teaching and learning have been completely transformed because of the pandemic. More than ever, it is critical to consider the impact that such dramatic changes have had on the mental health and well-being of our students and educators. Across the nation, we must recommit to providing our young people and those leading their learning with a scaffold of support to ensure that the challenges of today are met with long-term investments in their resiliency.

Social and Emotional Learning through an AntiRacist Lens
Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which individuals build awareness and skills in managing emotions, setting goals, establishing relationships, and making responsible decisions that support success in school and in life. When implemented effectively, engaging in SEL through restorative practices can lead to safer schools, greater belonging, higher achievement, higher graduation rates, improved college and career-ready skills, and achievement gains that persist over time (Taylor, Obeirer, Durlik, & Weissburg 2017). However, Social and Emotional Learning that is provided in absence of an antiracist lens can do more harm than good to our students of color. Failure to teach SEL within the larger sociopolitical context can make learning opportunities irrelevant to our students, whereas SEL through an antiracist approach can leverage opportunities for students to bridge differences and foster courageous conversations that confront injustice, hate and inequality.

In the classroom, Antiracist SEL humanizes learning and teaching through creating authentic connections and relationships with students, families, community, and educators. These relationships support dismantling inequities, transforming systems, and centering the healing, belonging, and thriving of adults and youth. For a pandemic that has disproportionately impacted the Black community, other communities of color and refugees intensifying the likelihood of re-traumatization for young people who previously experienced trauma, it’s critical that the social and emotional support we offer to our school communities is grounded in anti-racism. Systems leaders, superintendents, school boards and educators all play a part in taking action to ensure that Antiracist SEL is infused into all aspects of school culture.

Connecting and Empowering a Network of Support
To effectively nurture the social and emotional development of our students, we must think beyond only the confines of the classroom. In the Social and Emotional Learning Roadmap for Reopening School, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) outlines the importance of implementing clear processes and structures for school staff to work with families and partner with school-employed or community-based mental health and trauma professionals. Emphasizing SEL in our school systems underscores a shift toward a whole-child approach that brings together the resources of our schools and communities to provide the appropriate support for each student. Intentional partnerships with community partners who provide culturally responsive approaches aligned with the ethnic communities they serve creates an intentional connected and supportive network.

Today’s Educators are more stressed than ever. Providing educators with opportunities to learn strategies to better identify and manage their stress can increase their overall well-being. Social and emotional skills not only improve academic outcomes and classroom behavior for students, but they can have a positive impact on educators’ personal and professional success as well. To teach SEL, we need to acknowledge and continue to develop, the social and emotional skills of educators and other school staff. We must acknowledge dismantling inequities, center healing and belonging for educators and school staff. Only then can we effectively model and teach those same skills to our students. Educators need to be provided with training, coaching and consistent support.

Adoption and Evaluation
The adoption of an SEL program represents one step towards prioritizing the social, emotional, and mental health of our students. However, it is imperative that we invest in sustained training and support for our educators to provide them with the necessary skills and resources to meet the unique needs of each student and school community. Allocating funding for continued professional development ensures that the adoption and improvement of SEL practices is an integral part of school-wide culture. Furthermore, when more educators are equipped to incorporate SEL into their curriculum and embed lessons throughout the school day, the benefits to students are even more pronounced.

Youth Behavioral Health
While SEL and mental health have important areas of overlap, they are not the same. We know SEL can support positive mental health in many ways including serving as a protective factor which helps to protect from mental health risks. However, SEL is not designed to address mental health. An increasing number of students are in need of mental health supports to achieve success in school and life.

Behavioral health is critically important for the healthy development of our youth. There is a current and rapidly increasing mental health crisis in our schools. The number of students reporting poor mental health has increased in Washington state and nationally since 2020 and is of great concern due to short-term impacts on attendance, grades, and school completion as well as long-term impacts into adulthood.

50% of mental disorders begin by age 14, 75% begin by age 24
The time from first onset of symptoms to diagnosis is approximately 8-10 years
In 2021, 42% of students felt persistently sad or hopeless, and 26% of students seriously considered attempting suicide
Students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and students with disabilities report mental health challenges at higher rates

A focus on prevention and early intervention results in improved short-term and long-term outcomes by promoting positive relationships, healthy coping skills, school and community connectedness. Evidence based universal prevention strategies implemented in schools help mitigate the structural inequities such as racism and discrimination. When universal education and prevention is available, biases that may present with targeted strategies are eliminated and all students benefit. Prevention and early intervention strategies implemented in schools have an additional effect of reducing the number of students who might progress behavioral health challenges to developing a mental disorder, and subsequently reduce the number of students requiring clinical treatment.

Part of our current youth mental health crisis is the sharp spike in youth needing mental health services compounded by a mental health workforce shortage. Much focus is being placed on problem solving and resolving issues related to access. However, equal focus needs to occur with prevention and early intervention services. Efforts to invest in upstream services (prevention and early intervention) will lessen the flow for the need of downstream services (formal treatment). Our youth are voicing their experiences of behavioral health challenges and demanding meaningful strategies to address the issues they face (Rescue Agency). Our school must be empowered to respond without fear of what adults perceive as uncomfortable topics, such as suicide, in order to foster school environments that are supportive of positive behavioral health. Our youth are ready for and are demanding open and honest conversations about mental health. We should not shy away from what they are ready for. Youth are ready to talk. They do not want sugar coated conversations, they are using the words adults are using to like depression, anxiety, trauma, suicide. Our youth are asking for higher accountability from adults; they want more adults to be better equipped to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health challenges. They want teachers and other adults to know how to talk to youth about mental health concerns, and how to facilitate connection to help. Youth are asking for culturally inclusive and relevant mental health services that span the spectrum from prevention, early intervention, and to formal treatment.

Contact:
Lori Pittman
Early Learning and K-12
Policy, Advocacy and Government Relations
425-917-7759
LPittman@psesd.org

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