

Teachers Get a Course in SEEAL: Social, Emotional, Equitable and Academic Learning

Think back to the positive teachers and classes that have stuck with you the most. What was it that made them unforgettable? Was it the coursework? Or was it the teacher?

Most likely, it was a powerful combination of both: an educator that deeply connected with you through coursework and discussion that was both challenging and meaningful. This is what the District means when it strives to educate with both the head and the heart. In reality, the best learning emerges from teachers who humanize their students. They intentionally integrate positive social emotional practices into concrete lesson plans and teaching practices.

The School District of University City calls this SEEAL, an acronym for social, emotional, equitable and academic learning. There is a skill set needed for this type of teaching. So, this school year, all of the District's K-12 teachers have been participating in professional development course called SEEAL 101.

The program is led by Nikole Shurn, the District's well-being director, and Christina Grove, CLR coordinator in the Office of Curriculum and Instruction. In her role, Grove leads initiatives to recognize and remediate cultural and racial bias in the classroom. (Learn more about her role on page 9).

Grove and Shurn said teachers sometimes view their teaching role from a purely academic lens. The approach is understandable. The U.S. education system is heavily steeped in assessments that score competency, but not necessarily powerful thinking and learning. There is always a risk of teaching to the test. But research indicates students scale up their learning power when the course content and teaching ensures they are included, heard, challenged and encouraged on a more personal, social and emotional level.

“What we know is that the brain seeks to connect, belong and have a sense of safety at all times,” Shurn said. “Without connections and safety, our brains simply don't operate at their fullest potential. So the integration of social emotional competence and equity are vital if our academic spaces are to fully serve our students.”

In SEEAL 101, Grove and Shurn first teach teachers and school leaders on ways to engage in Panorama data (see story on page 10) to best understand their students' social emotional strengths and opportunities for better personal engagement in the classroom. Teachers are taught to further look for social emotional cues among their students, and, finally, they are given tools to better engage their students on a personal level.

“They really are intrigued by and interested in the Panorama data that we engage in,” Shurn said of the teachers. “It gives them insight into how their students are feeling and thinking. It also raises questions for them about ways that we can support students with social emotional competencies.”

Teachers in all District classes are encouraged to use circle discussions that mix academic content with discussions that may include reflections on student identity, beliefs and their “why.”

Students need to feel like they have some personal “why” in what they are learning, Shurn said. So, a circle discussion on American history and the current issue about what to do with Civil War monuments will not only include students reporting out on different texts they read prior to class, but moments of personal reflection and even discussion about emotional responses to the issue.

There is evidence that this method of teaching nurtures a growth mindset and elevates learning – particularly in an age when information is spewed out on reels, TicTok posts, Instagram, Facebook and Google, just to name a few. Current students have never known a day in their lives without cellphones. Access to a barrage of words, images, videos and texts is so easy and so instantly gratifying, it's often hard to engage youth to understand the difference between active thinking versus passive consuming.

Thinking – or learning – requires effort, Grove said. It entails some struggle, making mistakes and learning from these social and emotional experiences. Shurn and Grove said acknowledging student emotions and the process of overcoming mental hardships in coursework is also part of the learning process, regardless of the subject.

“A math teacher can preface a lesson by asking students how they think they might have to show perseverance as they learn the lesson,” Shurn said. “Or the teacher could possibly ask students to reflect on the problems that required them to use their resolve to finish. In a science lesson, a teacher could use a Socratic seminar or community circle to engage in dialogue regarding a text that highlights a recent science concept.”

Ultimately, the intentional merging of academics with social emotional practices aligns with the District’s vision of creating college and career-ready graduates who are active and engaged citizens.

“Our vision requires that we pair the acquisition and development of these critical 21st century skills with their mastery of academic content,” Shurn said.