

## *Emerging, together...*

Everywhere we look in schools we see what we had taken for granted prior to March 2020, but which is now so absolutely refreshing to see: students crowded together with friends around the lunch table, students working side-by-side in small groups, and perhaps most importantly, students' smiles! There is a positive energy and a sense of "school spirit" emanating in the hallways and classrooms that has been missing, and it feels SO good to have it back. Equally as worthy of celebration is the fact that we are not needing to spend countless hours of "adult time" talking about implementing ever-changing covid-protocols, meaning that we can get back to talking and thinking about teaching and learning.

However, it would be a mistake to think that we can just return to doing things the way they were being done as of February 2020. To do so would negate the collective experience of the past two and a half years. We are not the same people as educators, and our students are not the same students.

As educators, we learned to integrate instructional technology in more meaningful and systematic ways. We collaborated with our colleagues regarding the essential learning for the courses that we teach and have increasingly seen the value of having greater alignment of what we teach, when we teach it, and what the evidence of student learning looks like. We wrestled with the degree to which our curriculum and instructional materials are culturally responsive and relevant to students. We have learned to rely on one another to get us through some of the most challenging experiences of our professional lives.

Those challenges have included, among many other things, students who appeared less motivated to engage in what we had to offer, who were absent from school at higher rates than ever before, and whose behavior surprised us, and not in a good way! The mental health struggles experienced by students, and staff, were and continue to be real. Our little ones entering kindergarten this year experienced significant disruptions in their pre-school experiences as classrooms shut down for weeks at a time last year due to covid exposures. Our 9th graders did not have one year of a "normal" middle school experience. The academic and social emotional impact of the past two plus years will be felt by us, and our students, for years to come.

So, yes, it feels good to be able to return to a focus on teaching and learning. But what we now know is that we can not afford to uncouple academics from social/emotional learning. Our students need classroom environments where they feel emotionally and physically safe in order to do their best learning and succeed academically, and we all need to be explicit about providing them with that environment.

In this edition of the newsletter, I've included a number of resources that explore the connection between academic and social/emotional learning from a variety of angles. What our students need now, to be successful with authentic and rigorous learning experiences, may be different from what they needed a few years ago. I hope you will find some of these resources interesting and helpful as we seek to emerge, together and successfully, from the pandemic.

Until next time...

*Melanie*

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## *Student engagement*

We all know that student engagement is at the heart of meaningful learning. Student engagement in learning is the centerpiece of Charlotte Danielson's [Framework for Effective Teaching](#) with Danielson, herself, saying that all other components of the framework contribute to engagement. Engagement for learning is "minds-on", not just "hands-on". It involves "brain sweat" as students are intellectually engaged in challenging content through well designed learning tasks that are fully aligned with the instructional outcomes. It's where the "magic" of learning takes place. Sadly, it was more challenging to create the kinds of learning experiences that truly engaged students in this way over the past couple of years, given the constraints we were dealing with.

*"You have to secure the heart of a student before you have a shot at their frontal lobe."*

In the **September 6, 2022 edition of the What Works! Podcast**, the contributors celebrate the return to the joy of learning that they see as possible as we are coming out of the pandemic. They explore the conditions necessary for student engagement, including:

- ◇ Clarity: Students must know what it is they are being called to learn and why.
- ◇ Relevance or worthiness: The learning goals must be tied to something of interest for the students.
- ◇ Student choice: As appropriate, engagement benefits from providing students with some degree of choice in product or process.
- ◇ Students' perception of their ability to succeed: The degree to which students believe they can be successful influences their willingness to put effort into, and engage with, the task.

There is also, however, strong acknowledgement that on top of these four conditions, ***students need to feel a sense of belonging and connection in their learning environments in order to become fully engaged as learners.*** We are reminded by the panelists that, "engagement is the result of motivation, empowerment, and ownership of one's learning." In one of my favorite quotes from the podcast, educator Angela Maiers states, "you have to secure the heart of a student before you have a shot at their frontal lobe." In other words, students need to know that you care, before they are able to learn. Take a listen by clicking on the link below.

[What Works! Why We're Rethinking Student Engagement for the New School Year on Apple Podcasts](#)

## *The academic power of friendship*

In a November, 2020 article appearing in Mind/Shift, author Gail Cornwall says recent research has confirmed what many teachers have known for a long time: (a) social-emotional and academic factors are closely linked; and (b) friendships in elementary schools can be harnessed to drive academic growth. This research seems particularly relevant now, given the social emotional lags some of our students appear to be experiencing coming out of the pandemic. Several different studies are synthesized in the article, but all point to the importance and value of friendships in insulating students from social and academic missteps, boosting resilience, supporting students' willingness to take academic risks, and their feelings of self-worth.

The research also demonstrates that the opposite is true. "Not having a friend in school is linked to a decline in mental health, truancy, susceptibility to peer pressure, inability to focus, deficits in working memory, low classroom participation, and poor grades."

Strategies and considerations for supporting friendship development in the classroom, through purposeful engagement in academic tasks, are provided by the author. While there are certainly times when friends may need to be separated in a classroom, being purposeful about making sure all students have someone else in the room to connect to and whom they can consider a friend, appears to go a long way toward supporting the achievement of academic goals.

To read the synthesis of this article that appeared in The Marshall memo, click here: [909 Friendship copy.pdf \(dropbox.com\)](#). If you want to go more deeply into the topic, you can do so from within that link.

*Not having a friend in school is linked to a decline in mental health, truancy, susceptibility to peer pressure, inability to focus, deficits in working memory, low classroom participation, and poor grades.*

## *Personal Relationship Building*

[Personal Relationship Building \(PRB\)](#) is the term used by Jon Saphier at Research for Better Teaching for establishing meaningful connections with our students, helping them to feel known and valued as individuals in our learning environment. PRB is not a “nice to do”, it is a “must do” if we want all students to succeed to the best of their ability. PRB is the foundation of high expectations teaching, as without those positive, connected relationships, all but the most driven students may lack the motivation, self-efficacy, or effort to succeed. According to Saphier, “If we build relationships and then convince students they have the capacity to grow their ability in a subject and give them the tools to actualize that belief, wonders can happen.” This is similar to the concept of being a “[warm-demander](#)”, a term coined by Judith Kleinfeld in 1975. A “warm demander” is a teacher who expects great things of their students, convinces them of their brilliance, and helps them to reach their potential within a structured environment full characterized by respectful learning tasks.

It is not a question of taking time for relationship building OR taking the time for academic instruction; the two must go hand-in-hand in order for students to achieve their potential. It’s also not the case that we can afford to “leave the relationship stuff” to someone else on the staff; our students need their teachers—each and everyone of them—to demonstrate that they care, to get to know them as individuals, and to support their learning through the provision of well designed, appropriately scaffolded, and rigorous learning expectations.

Below are links to a few resources to provide you with some fresh ideas for building positive, personal relationships in your classroom. While some of the activities listed might be framed as useful for the beginning of the year “get to know” you activities, many of them can be repurposed to engage students with academic content WHILE supporting and strengthening relationships. In addition, it never hurts to periodically do another “getting to know” you activity with your students—even if it’s November!

[Personal Relationship Building Activities and Resources, RBT](#)

[A 4-Part System for Getting to Know Your Students, Cult of Pedagogy](#)

[SEL Three Signature Practices Playbook, CASEL](#)

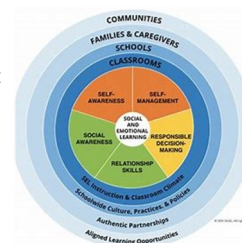
[10 Powerful Community Building Strategies, Edutopia](#)



## *Beyond Relationships...*

Supporting the social emotional needs of students goes beyond establishing positive, supportive relationships, as important as those are! The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning ([CASEL](#)) describes SEL in terms of five domains of competence: **self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making**. It’s important to think about how those various competencies manifest themselves in academic settings and actually support students’ ability to meet academic standards. Self-awareness, for example, is critical to the creative process involved in writing or creating a piece of art. The ability to set goals, be organized, and persevere through challenges, all of which are part of self-management, are critical to success in every academic area. The more explicit we can be about teaching students these skills, coupled with the academic content, the more success our students will experience in school and in life.

This article, from Edutopia, provides some examples from various disciplines of connections that can readily be made between SEL competencies and academic outcomes: [Connecting Social and Emotional Learning to Academic Outcomes | Edutopia](#). For our teachers of mathematics, this resource, [Social and Emotional Learning and Mathematics | Inside Mathematics](#), not only describes the strong connection between SEL and the mathematical practices, but provides links to additional supports for doing this work well within the context of teaching math.



## *Additional resources for teachers*

There is no question about it, teachers have a lot to keep track of! That has always been true because teaching, at its essence, is a complicated and demanding job. These days, with ever changing standards and assessments, new district and state-level initiatives, and increased community attention on what is happening in our classrooms, it can feel like there is more to juggle and keep track of than ever before.

Over the years, in an effort to assist teachers in accessing helpful documents and resources, we have worked to make many things available on the district website. However, things posted to the website are only helpful to the degree that teachers know that they are there! So, in an effort to be supportive, I want to use this opportunity to highlight a few of the tools and resources and where you can find them on the website.

**Equity Toolkit:** The Equity Toolkit contains a variety of documents created, or adapted from other sources, designed to support teachers in implementing the tenets of the NYS Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework. Documents in the toolkit range from [Six Ways to Foster Cultural Awareness](#) (a general guide for all classroom teachers) to specific guidelines for handling materials that contain the [N-word](#), support for navigating [Challenging Moments](#) in the classroom, and the [Quick Guide](#) for reviewing instructional materials through the lens of diversity and representation. I would strongly encourage every teacher to print out a copy of the Quick Guide and keep it handy as you think about any materials, resources, or tasks you put in front of your students. This tool is designed to “train our brains” to think about materials through an equity lens.



**Professional Learning Communities:** As a district, we highly value collaboration at every level of the organization, including the powerful collaboration around student learning that can take place within a PLC culture. While we acknowledge that we don't have structures in place to support the work of PLCs at all levels, we also know that many teachers are fully invested in this work, with or without a consistent structure supporting them. To that end, we have some resources on this site that may be helpful, most especially the [PLC Playbook](#) assembled by members of the PLC Advisory Committee last year.



**Grading Philosophy Resources:** Several years ago we created a space on our website to house not only our [Grading Philosophy](#) and agreed upon [Grading Practices](#), but also numerous resources (videos, articles, books) to support that work. Access to some of the resources require you to sign in to the district website. (The user name is your first name.last name {melanie.ward}; the password is a unique one that you create for this purpose.)



**Additional Resources for Teachers:** This section of the website contains a variety of resources for teachers that may come in handy from time to time. Everything from the Lesson Plan format, to information about Field trips, textbook ordering forms, to the Social Justice standards can be found in this area. If there is something that you think would be useful to link to this site, please let us know and we can make that happen!



The goal is to make it easy for you to access important information, supporting documentation, and resources that will be helpful to you in planning instructional experiences for your students. I hope you will consider bookmarking some of these sites as favorites and remember to come back to them frequently to access whatever might be helpful and check for updates! If there is something you are looking for that you can't find, please don't hesitate to reach out!