Social-Emotional Learning in Your School’s DNA

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OVERVIEW

The bell rings and children stream through the doors—chattering, laughing—wide eyes, eager minds, and open hearts. Ready to learn. It’s back-to-school time, and they are coming to your door with trust and hope and a fresh start. As a teacher, counselor, principal, or other adult in the school, how will you meet them in this new year? How will you discover the potential of the person who lives behind those eyes, in that mind, in that heart?

Educators know children come to school with a wide range of abilities, interests, and challenges. Engaging the whole child (socially, emotionally, and academically) is the foundation for meaningful, life-long learning. Monitoring progress and adjusting instruction to respond to changing needs is at the heart of both academic and non-academic progress. However, supporting all the dimensions of a child through thoughtfully designed, multi-faceted, and responsive learning opportunities requires careful preparation. Just as academic planning is essential for instruction at the right developmental level, planning for healthy social-emotional skill development assures that students are ready for learning throughout the year.

But, before we can create targeted, meaningful plans for the social-emotional development of students, we must first gain a deeper understanding of individual and collective needs and strengths through sound assessment. Obtaining a baseline profile of the day-to-day use of social-emotional skills provides critical information for creating a rich, positive learning environment that builds on strengths while addressing instructional needs.

And, measuring progress throughout the year enables teachers, counselors, and principals to adjust in real time to what’s working and what needs further focus. Intentionally assessing, targeting, monitoring, and tracking social-emotional competence using proven, reliable measurement tools assures that social-emotional learning becomes a vital part of your school’s DNA. Real, timely data informs real, sustainable learning.

“When you select an assessment tool, it has a profound effect on how you work with kids. What you find has an impact on how you talk about results. What you say has a profound effect on a person’s future. When you look at a child from the perspective of strengths rather than deficits, you tend to see the child as a whole person. And, in turn, they can see themselves that way too.”

Jack A. Naglieri
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Assessment

What is SEL and how can we measure it? SEL has been broadly defined as the process through which children acquire a range of skills associated with success in learning and life. Those critical skills—reflected in behaviors and attitudes—and their impact on learning have been well researched and generally fall into several categories. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified five foundational constructs that include: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA), developed by the Devereux Center for Resilient Children, is a tool that measures competence in the five CASEL constructs and expands that framework to include factors related to resilience by adding personal responsibility, goal-directed behavior, and optimism.

Competencies such as being personally self-aware and able to self-manage (e.g. “Does math make me anxious, and can I calm that stress effectively so I’m ready for new learning?”) or being socially aware and able to establish and maintain healthy relationships (e.g. “Can I comfortably join a new group of my peers and get along with different types of people?”) are foundational for dealing with the stress of new learning challenges or working cooperatively with others in group efforts. The ability to set attainable but challenging goals, to create and execute plans for achieving those goals, to use good judgment in decision-making, evaluate those decisions, and take personal responsibility for one’s own actions are all components of being an active learner and necessary for both school and life success. And, having resilience in the face of set-backs with the optimism to try again—the tenacity to persevere in the face of challenge—is what sets strong students apart from those who struggle.

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These qualities are all measurable and teachable. A meaningful learning plan fosters continuous improvement through baseline profiles and progress monitoring. An effective instructional plan begins with understanding strengths and targeting needs. And that understanding begins with an assessment that provides reliable, valid, and actionable information.

As a behavior rating scale, the DESSA assesses the social-emotional competencies that serve as protective factors for children in kindergarten through eighth grade. This evidence-based...
tool provides psychometrically sound, standardized, and norm-referenced measurement and is available online through the **Apperson SEL⁺ Compass System**, as well as in paper format. The assessment takes a strength-based approach, identifying areas that can be leveraged for greater individual and group success. As a universal measurement tool, the DESSA provides SEL skill profiles for every child as well as aggregated classroom and school-wide profiles of group strengths and needs.

The scale exists in two forms—a quick, eight-item screener and a longer form—both completed by adults who have observed student behavior over time. (There is also a customized version—the DESSA-SSE—that is aligned with Committee for Children's Second Step® program). The DESSA-mini screener yields a snapshot of a child’s composite SEL score and is available in four versions for effective use as a progress-monitoring tool throughout the year. The DESSA, a more specific 72-item rating scale offers a detailed report that profiles strengths and needs within each of the eight SEL constructs. When completed by teachers or counselors within the school and parents or caregivers outside of school, the DESSA provides a student profile that is actionable and measurable over time.

This diagnostic and formative approach shifts the focus of social-emotional development from intervention to prevention; from waiting for behaviors to interfere with school success to proactively building a foundation of skills that science tells us are vital for school and life success.
SEL AS PART OF YOUR SCHOOL’S DNA

Research has demonstrated that intentionally and systematically teaching evidence-based SEL skills correlates with a significant increase in academic skills (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Educators have found that the following practices help maximize the benefits of SEL programming:

- Understanding students’ strengths and needs through psychometrically sound assessment tools
- Using results to set clear outcomes for SEL
- Establishing a common language for program planning
- Articulating shared goals
- Systematically teaching skills using research-based strategies
- Integrating plans for a team approach
- Measuring steps toward success

Establishing these practices as part of a school-wide approach will ensure that SEL has deep roots for every child beyond the classroom. As educators know, children learn skills in a number of ways: through explicit teaching and coaching, from their peers, by watching the modeling of the adults around them, and by repeating what gets reinforced. Opportunities for social-emotional skill development occur across the school day—in the classroom, in the lunchroom, on the playground, and when used as a foundation for discipline and classroom management. The DESSA Strategies Guide, also available online through the Apperson SEL+ Compass System, provides a variety of ways that each of the DESSA constructs can be strengthened. Strategies aligned with each of the eight constructs are available for classroom, small group, and individual skill development. In addition, the Strategies Guide provides materials for adult reflection and personal action that deepen awareness and enhance professional practice.

When adults throughout the school consistently communicate hoped-for outcomes, notice and recognize positive efforts, and highlight strengths rather than deficits, students are motivated to learn. Using a common framework for assessing, talking about, teaching, and measuring progress toward greater social-emotional competence provides the core for a successful year that can be supported by every adult.
Educators across the nation are committing to helping every child reach his or her own highest potential by integrating social-emotional skill development across the school day. For example, Urban Assembly Schools in New York City will use the DESSA as a baseline measure and leverages the resulting information to plan an integrated approach for social-emotional skill development in this school year. David Adams, Director of Social-Emotional Learning at Urban Assembly Schools, has this to say about the DESSA:

“The Devereux Student Strength Assessment has played a foundational role in my work to develop the social-emotional competencies of students in both general education and special education environments. The DESSA helps increase collaboration between counselors and teachers by providing a common lens by which to communicate student behavior and allows for goal setting and progress monitoring over time. It integrates into systems of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports by providing data around areas of need at the school-wide level, and helps counselors to identify and remediate individual challenges for students with special needs. Lastly, it serves as an evaluative tool for SEL programs and approaches so schools can measure gains that reflect not only a decrease in negative behaviors, but an increase in pro social behaviors that are otherwise difficult to capture. It is an old adage that people respect what you inspect. Incorporating the DESSA has proved to be an essential aspect of the development of sustainable practice around social-emotional learning in my work in New York City.”

Do you know the SEL strengths and needs of the children who will be on the threshold of new learning in the fall? Will your school-wide plans leverage those strengths and target those needs? And, how will you know if your efforts are producing the kind of change you are seeking?

Establishing an SEL Baseline Needs Assessment through a universal screening approach can launch a new way of thinking, talking about, and planning for the success of all students. To get you started, Apperson, the publisher of the DESSA, is offering a free 60 day Baseline Needs Assessment to help you better understand your school’s strengths and needs.

Click here for details.

This school year, plan to make SEL a part of the DNA of your school so that every day contains rich learning for the whole child—socially and
REFERENCES:


ABOUT SHERYL HARMER

Sheryl L. Harmer, Ed.D., specializes in social and emotional strategy and skill development, school improvement, and community-wide systems change. Her consulting work creates alliances and collaborative efforts that bridge research, policy, and practice with the focus on advancing social and emotional learning as an integral part of basic education and healthy youth development.

Harmer’s thirty–year career in public schools included serving as principal of three award-winning elementary schools; K-12 teacher and learning specialist; instructor in community college and university teacher and principal preparation programs; and service on a wide range of professional advisory councils and boards. Following her public school career, Sheryl was the Director of Program Development for 6+ years at Committee for Children – a Seattle-based social enterprise - where she led the development of social and emotional learning programs that are acclaimed by research experts and used by educators in over 20 countries.

Dr. Harmer’s work has been recognized through numerous awards at the national and state levels including the 1998 NAESP National Distinguished Principal of the Year for Washington State; selection of Glenridge Elementary as a case study site for Harvard University Project SUMIT (Schools Using Multiple Intelligence Theory) in 1996; and selection of Spring Glen Elementary as a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence in 1992. Sheryl holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (Ed.D.) and Superintendent Certification from the University of Washington.