

Title: Social-Emotional Learning Through Afterschool
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The United State's new *Every Student Succeeds Act* emphasizes a form of learning consistent with the goals of afterschool

On Friday, September 23, 2016, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF), hosted a forum entitled, "Considerations for ESSA's Non-Academic Indicator: Bridging Research, Practice, and Policy." This forum focused on the new Every Student Succeeds Act's (ESSA) emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL) and the impact this type of learning has on students' life skills and outcomes. During this forum, the panel discussed how educators can focus on this type of learning and practice it effectively. They also explained why this type of learning is essential to children's cognitive, emotional, and social skills, and how it affects their development as citizens in the future. In thinking about the event, the importance of exposure to this type of learning via afterschool naturally emerges.

SEL is defined as:

The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2016).

There are five competencies that expand on this definition and they are as follows (CASEL, 2016):

1. *Self-awareness—the ability to understand one's emotions and how they influence behavior.*
2. *Self-management—the ability to calm one's self down when upset, to set goals and work toward them, and to manage and control emotions.*
3. *Social awareness—the ability to recognize what is appropriate in certain settings and empathize with others.*
4. *Responsible decision making—the ability to make decisions that take into account social standards, consequences, and context.*
5. *Relationship skills—the ability to communicate well, to listen and respond appropriately, and to negotiate conflict.*

This type of learning is essential to development, because students of all ages must be able to identify and regulate their emotions. Without regulation, students may respond impulsively to a variety of stimulation without being able to identify why. Emotions are the driving factors for human actions and being able to identify them is vital to function as a productive citizen (Martinez, 2014). If students,

or individuals of any age, do not possess SEL skills he/she may act aggressively, submissively, passively, nonchalantly, anxiously, or a wide range of other emotions, during a situation that may involve a different response in order to work in the individual's best interest. Early education plays a large part in teaching students the skills necessary to regulate their emotions.

Techniques teachers have at their disposal are to encourage SEL during class time (American Institutes for Research, 2014):

Classroom discussions. This practice involves student-teacher dialogue with a focus on content relative to what students are learning. This is a chance for students to elaborate on their own thinking as well as the thoughts they hear coming from their peers. When facilitated correctly, this technique can improve students' communication skills and scope of thinking.

Balanced instruction. This technique involves a balance of active and direct instruction, as well as individual and collaborative learning. This type of instruction includes learning different subject material and then interacting with said material. Interactive learning is a very important component because it allows students to become more interested and engaged with their learning. This can come in many different forms including playing educational games and having students take part in group projects.

Self-reflection and self-assessment. Instructional tasks such as these involve teachers helping students to actively think about and assess their own work. This includes having students compare their work to the agreed upon classroom standards, then thinking of ways to improve their performance. This is important, because without these assessments students are not able to determine their goals, set their priorities, and develop the ability to internalize what they are working towards. Just as well, if students do not reflect on their performance on tasks, they will not be able to monitor progress towards meeting their goals.

Cooperative learning. This technique is more than just "group work." Learning cooperatively allows for students to learn to work together in order to accomplish a goal. Collaboration is great way for students to actively engage with their peers and apply context and meaning to the subject matter they are learning about. It encourages positive interdependence and accountability, forces students to apply social skills, improves self-esteem through the promotion of one another's success, and helps these young learners understand the material better.

By using the aforementioned techniques and incorporating SEL's core competencies, students' attitudes and beliefs towards themselves and school in-general will improve. An improvement in social-emotional skills creates a school climate with the capacity to retain academic, social, and emotional benefits for students such as: improved self-concept, fostering a bond with one's school, improved classroom behavior, as well as reductions in depression, stress and social withdrawal (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). By honing in on skills like social awareness students have the ability to internalize and envision a more tangible future by acknowledging how their school can assist them in attaining their desired goals. Through responsible decision-making and goal-setting, bringing their desired future to fruition becomes more realistic for students. This encourages belief in one's learning ability, while also boosting confidence levels, reducing depression and self-discouragement, and serving as another reason for students to want to attend school and perform well.

Unfortunately, it can be challenging for educators to successfully implement this type of learning because SEL “naturally” trends downwards in children at certain ages. This is especially prevalent in children between the ages of 10 and 12 years old, or children transitioning from 5th to 6th grade. This downward trend includes losses of curiosity, enjoyment of learning, and creativity (Baldwin Grossman, 2016). Traditional teaching does not always allow for the support needed to retain this type of learning, because it takes a substantial amount of time and commitment from adults, which is not always possible in a traditional seven-hour school day.

DC Public School’s (DCPS), Out of School Time Programs division (OSTP), and afterschool programs can be very instrumental in this type of learning. This is because they have the capacity to fill the voids of traditional teaching. Often times these programs offer many of the aspects necessary to produce SEL including hands-on, creative learning and fun, as well as a safe and non-violent space for students, and access to mentors and tutors with the capacity to work with students either individually or in small groups. Studies show that 73% of afterschool programs that use evidence-based student engagement approaches help improve students’ personal, social, and academic skills, in addition to their self-esteem (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). All of these skills are important to a student’s success in school, as well as in life.

Many of the studies conducted focusing on this topic reiterate the importance of afterschool in positive child development and tangible results. In a study conducted by Vandell, Reisner, and Pierce (2007) it was found that compared to those who did not, student that participated in afterschool exhibited better work habits, task persistence social skills, and lower aggressive behavior. This same study found that elementary school students who participated in afterschool were 7% more likely to improve their math scores and middle school students were 4% more likely to display reduced misconduct.

Afterschool has other shown other student benefits as well. Both Blazevski and Smith (2007) and Brand and Valent (2014) found a negative correlation between afterschool participation and suspension rates. Arcaira, Vile, and Reisner (2010) found that afterschool-participating students attended school at a 5% higher rate than those that did not. Goerge, Cusick, Wasserman, and Gladden (2007) found that students that participated in afterschool were 6% more likely to pass any given course and 2.7 times more likely to graduate high school than non-participants. All of these findings are indicators of the importance of afterschool in the development of a student.

As the American Institutes for Research reported, “afterschool programs typically promote SEL through practices and approaches... creating a climate that supports the development of social and emotional skills” (American Institutes for Research, 2015). This information is vital for a child’s development towards a successful future, because the same skills learned through SEL coincide with the Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education’s (OCTAE) list of “employability skills.” Skills like OCTAE’s “interpersonal skills” and “communication skills” correlate directly to Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning’s (CASEL) “social awareness” and “relationship skills (American Institutes for Research, 2015). So, through learning social-emotional skills, children and teenagers are being equipped with employable skills, helping them progress as productive citizens.

Tactics that Must be Utilized to Incorporate SEL

In order for afterschool program personnel to ensure they are actively and correctly incorporating SEL, as well as making sure their students are gaining these necessary skills for their futures, there is a variety of tactics that must be utilized including (WINGS for Kids, 2010):

All staff members must be educated on competencies and benefits of SEL. If the staff is not educated on SEL, and/or does not buy into the idea of this type of learning, it will not be practiced during the staff's interactions with the students.

All staff must be trained on SEL-supported behavior-management techniques. A supportive environment is critical to accomplishing SEL, so staff must be trained on how to identify negative behavior before it begins, and how to deal with misbehavior in a positive way. This helps students create long-term solutions to overcoming obstacles. These corrective actions can come in many forms including the popular "G-E-T P-A-S-T" model. This framework includes these options: "Give choices, Experience consequences, Take it away, Problem (state it), Amends (show them how to fix it), State feelings strongly, and Tell it in a word" (WINGS for Kids, 2010). Models like this actively assist adults, facilitators, and mentors in teaching children consequences to their actions, how to reflect on them, and how to make sure they do not act in that same manner again.

Policies that encourage specific, positive feedback must be implemented. Children require individual attention. The more frequently they receive specific, positive attention the more likely they are to repeat the action(s) that prompted positive feedback from adults. For example, programs can introduce a meaningful feedback quota for their staff, in which each day leaders in the program must verbalize a specific number of compliments to a number of students. This will help facilitators ensure they are encouraging and reinforcing good behavior.

At least 30 minutes of community building must be reserved during program time. Adults showing students they care about them is one of the most important parts of afterschool. Building community and positive relationships is an aspect that cannot be overlooked when engaging with children. If students feel a sense of community, long-term behavior and learning will improve. This can come in the form of something as simple as snack-time during which adults interact with the children in a non-hierarchical manner and set forth the week's goals, while reminding students of the positivity good behavior brings.

Intentional SEL lessons must be incorporated. When challenging activities are incorporated, many children may become overexcited and/or frustrated, which can cause them to act erratically. This can become a great teaching moment for facilitators, because it creates an opportunity for them to help the student identify their emotions, reflect on their actions, then help to teach him/her how to calm himself/herself down in an appropriate manner.

Programs leaders must link afterschool program with what is happening during school.

To accomplish this, leaders must gain information from teachers during traditional school day hours. The purpose of doing this is to see what students are learning in school and then in-turn linking the program's Academic Power Hour (APH) curriculum with that of the school's. Next, leaders must speak with teachers and become informed as to which afterschool students (if any) are having issues during school hours. Since a child's behavior can vary between class time and afterschool, it is important for facilitators to be informed in order to help the child become more productive in both areas.

These findings indicate that SEL and afterschool programs have a deep impact on student trajectory. In the short-term, these entities help students improve their academic performance and behavior while in school. Focusing on the long-term, the skills learned from SEL and afterschool will help these students become more employable, productive, successful citizens in the future. In both APH and enrichment activities, afterschool staff must ensure that intentional emphasis is placed on strengthening SEL. So, in order for ESSA's initiatives to come to fruition and impact students in the desired way, there must be a close alignment with DC Public Schools' and SEL's approach, as well as an investment in afterschool programs and the personnel supporting them.

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