

A Path to Equity Paved by Social-Emotional Learning

AS EDUCATION LEADERS, we have long labored to close achievement and opportunity gaps and create inclusive environments in which all students succeed. Over the past several years, our attention to these issues has been heightened by brazen attacks on diverse cultures and blatant displays of racial injustice, prompting a national sense of urgency to address inequity.

So, what can we do differently in our schools to realize the vision of equity in educational opportunity and outcomes?

In my view, the critical intervention rests not so much in the schools' academic arena as in their social-emotional environment. In attempting to close gaps, we too often take a

deficit approach and try to "fix" the student, rather than building on students' strengths and assets. Students are more than the challenges they face. All students bring a wealth of lived experience and cultural insight that, if tapped, can enable them to be fully present and engaged.

Therefore, the work on equity is not about fixing the student, but rather fixing the school environment so that students feel known and valued, sense a connection to other students and adults, have learning options that enable them to access the curriculum, and see themselves in that curriculum. These are the essential goals of social-emotional learning.

Promoting Belonging

Social-emotional learning isn't simply developing the social skills to work with others or the emotional skills to manage one's emotions and self-regulate one's behavior. It isn't a treatment for students who have behavioral issues or have been impacted by trauma, although it can help address both. And it isn't the promotion of the dominant culture's values.

At its heart, social-emotional learning is about nurturing empathy, taking the perspective of another, appreciating the richness of diversity and being able to enter into constructive dialogue to resolve differences. Acknowledging that students come from a multiplicity of cultures — many of which are more communitarian than America's traditional individualism — social-emotional learning ensures students experience culturally inclusive and identity-safe classrooms that promote a sense of belonging. It's also intended to eliminate barriers to quality education, particularly for traditionally underserved students. Responding to this diversity means transforming classrooms into collaborative and caring communities that recognize and honor cultural richness.

Social-emotional learning helps educators apply an equity lens to become aware of the subtle but devastating impact of racism, stereotype threats, microaggressions and implicit bias. Teachers come to realize that relationships and rigor are codependent and inextricably connected, that discipline is not about reward and punishment but about learning and restoring relationships, and that a sense of community in classrooms promotes the collective engagement and agency of all students.

Grounded Decisions

In its largest context, social-emotional learning is about helping students develop a social consciousness and a sense of social responsibility. By experiencing what it means to be responsible community members, students find their moral compass, empowering them to make ethically grounded decisions based on justice and care.

Social-emotional learning will not address all disparities, particularly those stemming from inequitable funding and distribution of resources or historical institutional bias. However, social-emotional learning promotes an asset-based approach for affirming students' strengths, cultural identities and lived experiences. It creates fair and just environments that value all students, supporting those who learn differently or have experienced trauma or poverty.

Through the relationships students develop, the competencies they acquire and the support they experience within caring classrooms, social-emotional learning not only serves these students but models how an inclusive and respectful community can bring compassion, responsibility and equity to life in the world around them.

SHELDON BERMAN is AASA lead superintendent for the Social-Emotional Learning Cohort in Redmond, Ore. E-mail: shelberman@comcast.net

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