

National Association of State Boards of Education

⊕ School Leaders' Role in Empowering Teachers through SEL

By Don Long

Spurred by research showing the gains students realize from school-based social and emotional learning (SEL), states are pursuing supportive policies for districts that are implementing, sustaining, and spreading it. But unless they also address the SEL needs of teachers—especially those experiencing stress, poor working conditions, and classes with many historically underserved students—long-term, systemwide gains for students are less likely. To meet this challenge, California, Illinois, Massachusetts, and Washington are harnessing the school leaders' role in supporting and empowering teachers through “adult SEL” in their schools.¹

Across the fields of education, physical and mental health, and neuroscience,

Figure 1.



Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

researchers agree that social, emotional, and cognitive capacities are intertwined and interdependent.² Research shows that integrating students' social, emotional, and academic development improves their motivation, engagement, learning, and academic achievement, as well as their physical and mental well-being.³ To succeed in school, work, and life, students need to develop five SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, social relationships, and responsible decision making.⁴ In conversations about the intersection between equity, diversity, and SEL, educators are also emphasizing the importance of agency, identity, character, voice, leadership, cultural competency, inclusion, and compassion.⁵

According to a recent survey, most principals understand that SEL competencies are

teachable, believe they should be developed in all students, and know that young people equipped with SEL skills will become better students now and better adults in the future. Principals who are “high implementers” of SEL are more likely to report teachers who are “well prepared to successfully teach SEL.”⁶ It is a virtuous cycle in which effective SEL implementation reduces time spent on classroom management and allows more time for teaching and learning.

Yet few schools have implemented comprehensive SEL. Districts are increasingly

working with states to scale SEL, focusing particularly on how states can support districts' implementation of systemic SEL (figure 1). To illustrate, states alone can set and communicate a state's vision and values, and they can have impact on improving teaching, learning, culture, and climate. Moreover, helping school leaders empower their students and teachers to lead in SEL's organic development can lessen their often overwhelming workload by fostering school-wide ownership of their priorities.

Common sense, as well as emerging research, suggests that it is important for teachers to develop these competencies before they can integrate them with student instruction and that by doing so, teachers can improve student outcomes.⁷

TEACHER STRESS

State, district, and school leaders face a significant challenge in enlisting teachers to integrate SEL in classrooms. Stresses associated with lack of classroom support, poor working conditions, and inadequate pay and compensation greatly diminish teachers' capacity to cultivate and model SEL themselves.

Another source of stress relates to teachers' support for students who have experienced trauma. Between half and two-thirds of all school-aged children have been exposed to one or more traumatic incidents, or adverse childhood experiences (ACE).⁸ Teachers in schools with large numbers of students who have experienced trauma—who are disproportionately historically underserved students—are more likely to experience “vicarious trauma.” This secondary type of

trauma causes similar harm though is less recognized and less often treated.⁹

Between the 2007–08 and 2015–16 school years, the number of people completing teacher preparation programs declined 23 percent, with the perception of teaching as an undesirable career cited as the top reason for avoiding the field.¹⁰ Teaching has long been deemed one of the most stressful occupations in the United States, with almost half of teachers experiencing high levels of stress on a daily basis.¹¹ Stress contributes to high levels of burnout, which can lead to higher attrition.¹² The consequences of teacher stress affect everyone around them—most notably their students.¹³

The convergence of teacher stresses has led to some of the highest turnover rates ever. Greenberg et al. found that these stresses harm students' educational outcomes and teachers' health and cost U.S. schools billions of dollars each year.¹⁴ The study recommends improving school organization, mitigating job demands, and increasing professional support and autonomy, as well as encouraging teachers to exercise self-care.

SUPPORTING TEACHER WELL-BEING AND SEL

Implementing these recommendations in full requires long-term effort and perhaps a significant change in political will and public support. School leaders, however, can act more immediately. Based on their districts' strengths, resources, and context, they can promote teachers' well-being and help them advance toward greater mastery, impact, and leadership by enabling them to cultivate their own SEL competencies. According to research from the Wallace Foundation, "Schools with effective leaders have more satisfied teachers, lower rates of teacher turnover, more positive learning climates, greater parent engagement, and, ultimately, higher student achievement."¹⁵

Washington. The state's approach to SEL grew out of its Compassionate Schools Initiative, launched in 2008.¹⁶ In the wake of research that showed childhood trauma was far more pervasive in the state than was recognized, Washington sought to improve student outcomes through compassionate teaching and a focus on student physical and mental well-being. Characterized by "unprecedented collaboration across researchers,

K-12, and higher education," the initiative was intended to build student capacity for resilience and to develop their empathy and agency in response to trauma—for example, by leading discussions and inspiring action on local issues. The initiative built upon research on post-traumatic growth, which highlights the potential for students' experiences with trauma to build their SEL skills.¹⁷

The initiative lays out principles for compassionate teaching and discipline, the first of which is "always empower students, never disempower them."¹⁸ This principle holds true for teachers as well. According to Ron Hertel, SEL program supervisor at Washington's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the state recently developed an educator teacher module that focuses on equity, cultural relevance, and adult SEL and devoted a chapter in the 2009 handbook, "The Heart of Learning and Teaching: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success," to self-care for teacher well-being and the role played by technical assistance and leadership development in promoting it.¹⁹ Describing trauma's impact on learning as "playing chess in a hurricane," the handbook's authors see teachers of traumatized students as highly vulnerable to vicarious trauma, and they strongly recommend self-care as an ethical obligation for teachers.

Principals are critical to supporting teachers in this self-care and themselves must exercise it if they are to handle stress and encourage and support their staff. They are well positioned to help teachers manage their emotions and relationships by providing training in mindfulness, trauma-informed practices, and wellness programs. Mindfulness-based interventions and stress-reducing strategies can lead not only to improvements in teachers' well-being but also in instructional climate and student engagement.²⁰

Principals in Washington reported that in-service training on trauma sparked teachers' interest in self-care, reflection, and engagement in peer support.²¹ Principals also led communitywide programs to engage and mentor parents as advocates for their children and other families. Teachers benefit from deepening relationships with these families and gaining greater understanding of their strengths and struggles. This, in turn, enriches their own capacity for self-care and promotes empathy and resilience.

Illinois. The state is a long-established leader in SEL and school leadership policy. In 2005, the Illinois State Board of Education became the first in the nation to develop and adopt K-12 SEL standards. These standards are centered on a state vision of "whole, healthy children nested in whole, healthy systems supporting communities wherein all citizens are socially and economically secure."

In 2010, following pioneering legislation, the state board committed to redesigning its principal preparation programs. As part of this shift, Illinois cemented formal partnerships between programs and school districts in order to drive improvement in the capacity of principals to meet concrete, evolving school needs. Illinois is strengthening all points on principal pipelines, from recruitment to retention. Adopting Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, Illinois seeks to transform professional learning for teachers by cultivating principals as instructional leaders.²² Illinois is using Title II and state funds under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to expand its educator leader network for this purpose.

Illinois is therefore well positioned to leverage its school leadership to address teachers' needs for SEL, especially by ensuring they receive effective, job-embedded professional learning. The Illinois Principal Association has been supporting schools' implementation of the SEL standards, providing consultation, professional development, and data collection and analysis. Illinois also focuses on coaching and mentoring. State board member Ruth Cross, a leader in developing the state's SEL standards, emphasized the impact of the school leader:

I truly believe that school leaders should give specific, supportive, timely, and relevant feedback to teachers as they integrate SEL into the practice of teaching. In DuPage, Illinois, where I coach districts to implement the SEL standards, we have cross-walked the standards with the Danielson Framework for teaching and support teachers as they identify and use the competencies to effectively plan, deliver a lesson, collaborate with students to ensure a safe and supportive classroom climate, and grow in their professional responsibility.²³

In a recent Wallace Foundation report, Ellen

B. Goldring et al. outlined the benefits of shifting principal supervisors' roles more toward coaching and mentoring instead of operations and administration.²⁴ Extending this coaching model to school leaders can be a catalyst for cultivating SEL practices in teachers, and available resources and technical assistance can help school leaders assess and promote teacher SEL competencies, which mirror student SEL competencies.²⁵

California. Its statewide SEL initiative focuses on supporting systemic change in its districts and diverse, inclusive leadership teams. California adopted SEL Guiding Principles in 2018 to help districts and schools that are implementing SEL. Through California's Local Control and Accountability Plan, districts and school leaders have authority and flexibility to tailor SEL strategies to meet their needs. State guidelines encourage school leaders to build SEL capacity for adults through "an intentional focus on relationship-centered learning environments."²⁶ Substantive organizational and cultural changes (e.g., time, collaboration, teacher leadership) enable teachers to strengthen their SEL competencies.

Many districts support school leaders and teachers through the Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS) program, which engages the school community in learning about the causes and effects of trauma and supports teachers in managing stress and burnout. Based on work of the Massachusetts-based Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, HEARTS covers trauma's effect on the brains of students and teachers and trains educators to manage classrooms with chronically stressed students.²⁷

Teachers who participate in HEARTS become more attuned to early indicators that they are experiencing burnout. They are trained to understand symptoms and be responsible for self-care. As teachers developed their SEL skills, they are better able to manage student behavior, deescalate conflict, and build positive relationships with co-workers and students.

ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

Good working conditions for teachers are good learning environments for students. Thus, professional learning, coaching, and wellness programs are necessary but

not sufficient for teacher well-being. The perennial problem in U.S. schools—the isolation of the classroom teacher—limits and even erodes the impact of these personal supports. School leaders must therefore make organizational and cultural changes to support and empower teachers.

Local and school leaders can choose from a broad array of strategies for this purpose: 1) reduce excessive work demands, increase job control, and provide more time for reflection, learning, and planning for SEL self-awareness and self-management; 2) institute effective professional learning communities, other collaborative structures or projects, and supportive school cultures for SEL social awareness and relationship building; and 3) establish opportunities for greater mastery, individual judgment, and teacher leadership for SEL-responsible decision making—hallmarks of mastery in teaching.²⁸ By holding teachers to higher standards and giving them more authority, school leaders can promote teacher growth and leadership.²⁹ Schools that lack strong principal leadership, a healthy school climate, work resources, and a collegial, supportive environment limit a teacher's sense of autonomy and decision-making power.³⁰

Massachusetts. The state's mature understanding of SEL is manifested in its focus on driving improvement in teaching and learning by addressing student and teacher well-being. The state's Trauma Sensitive Schools program advocates a "whole-school" approach and views teachers' well-being as fundamental to a school's success. Program strategies focus on school culture and infrastructure; staff training; and links to mental health professionals for consultation and services for staff, students, and families. Massachusetts's standards for High Quality Professional Development (HQPD) require professional learning experiences to be culturally proficient and grounded in strong SEL practice. Its ESSA plan focuses on advancing school leadership, professional development, and collaborative learning for teachers.

Massachusetts has long been a national and international leader in improving student outcomes through standards-based reform, which it has sustained over two decades. But progress appears to have levelled off, and persistent achievement gains remain, something former state education chief David

Driscoll and others attribute to their relative neglect of school leadership. By placing greater emphasis on principals' roles in its school improvement model and by extending this model to all its schools, Massachusetts hope to create schoolwide communities of practice through leadership, shared responsibility, and professional collaboration. Its state education agency provides tiered services and resources for a coaching partnership with school leaders, and it plans to expand the pipeline of principals able to lead turn-around schools.

CONCLUSION

State boards can support adult SEL by embedding it within school leadership policies such as standards, licensure, accreditation, and evaluation. They can also use their powers of questioning and convening to build statewide consensus on the importance of supporting the SEL of teachers and staff.

To be effective advocates, state boards should first develop understanding of evidenced-based SEL and its associated implementation challenges. Building upon a vision of learning and teaching that prioritizes student and adult SEL, state boards can make SEL a priority in their strategic plans. (Massachusetts and Rhode Island identified SEL as a priority in their strategic plans, but only for students.) They should also empower school leaders as organizational change agents and include systemic SEL in their school improvement models. They should support strategies for addressing school stress and anxiety, especially for teachers of color.

Finally, boards should embed adult SEL training in all points of school leadership pipelines. They can emphasize SEL core competencies for leaders and teachers when they approve and oversee principal preparation programs as well as promoting its inclusion in professional learning. They can incentivize districts to support school leaders through research-based SEL resources and best practices. At the same time, boards can empower district and school leaders through support for peer-to-peer learning, innovation, collaboration, and networking.

NOTES

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