

# Educators' social and emotional skills vital to learning

**Social and emotional competencies aren't secondary to the mission of education, but are concrete factors in the success of teachers, students, and schools.**

"I yelled at my students too much today."

"I thought I was going to lose it when Nick acted up in class again."

"I'm so stressed out that I don't want to teach tomorrow."

Statements like these are all too familiar to educators. What teacher or administrator hasn't felt stresses that make it difficult to focus on teaching and learning? Who hasn't needed to call on a deep well of social and emotional resources to overcome those challenges?

In the current national focus on teacher quality, the essential role of teachers' social and emotional competencies is often overlooked. But ask educators when they need those competencies and they'll likely respond "every day." And ask students to describe the teachers who most influenced them and why, and their answers will likely include qualities in the social and emotional area — the ability to listen and empathize, pick up on a subtle social cue, find a student's hidden strength, or model calm under stress.

These educators and students know intuitively what research has shown: Social and emotional competencies influence everything from teacher-student relationships to classroom management to effective instruction to teacher burnout.



There is good reason to believe that social and emotional competencies like managing emotions and stress are needed more today than ever before. The latest MetLife Survey of the American Teacher found unprecedented levels of stress and dissatisfaction among teachers and principals, with just over half of teachers reporting "great stress at least several days a week." Students, too, report high levels of stress, negative perceptions of their school environments, and problems in the social, emotional, and behavioral areas, such as bullying, conflicts with peers, and externalizing and internalizing mental health problems (O'Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009). And student and

teacher stress can fuel each other in many ways.

Practices and policies to support and foster educators' social and emotional competencies are fundamental to addressing these challenges. Schools must overcome the false assumption that all educators naturally possess these abilities in equal measure. As with other competencies, they can be built through coaching and other forms of support. At the core of these approaches is a clear understanding of social and emotional learning (SEL), recognition of SEL's effect on teaching and learning, and openness to innovation and shifts in school culture.

## Getting concrete about SEL

Social and emotional learning has often been an umbrella term for a wide range of competencies from emotional intelligence to social competence to self-regulation. SEL competencies encompass three areas:

*Emotional processes* include un-

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derstanding and labeling feelings accurately; regulating emotions and behaviors for the situation (e.g., calmly sorting through a disagreement rather than storming out of a faculty meeting when angry); taking another's perspective, and displaying empathy.

*Social/interpersonal skills* include understanding social cues (such as body language and tone of voice); correctly attributing the intent of others' behaviors (e.g., understanding a student's defiance as a desire for independence rather than a personal insult); interacting positively with students and other adults, and acting in prosocial ways (e.g., offering help and kind words).

*Cognitive regulation* includes maintaining attention and focus; engaging working memory, inhibiting impulses that are not appropriate to the situation (e.g., not yelling at a student or using sarcasm out of frustration), and flexibly shifting gears when needed (e.g., trying a new approach when an instructional strategy is not working).

For all adults, some of these skills come naturally, while others require ongoing effort. SEL competencies develop in a complicated set of interactions and settings from birth into adulthood. They're also influenced by context. For example, managing stress is easier in an environment that encourages learning than in one that is harshly critical; environments where complaints and gossip are the norm tend to bring out more negative behaviors. Supportive school cultures not only enhance staff members' SEL abilities, but, importantly, set the conditions for using them effectively.

To date, most interventions to

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develop SEL and build positive school culture have focused exclusively on students. Educators typically receive little training and support for implementation and for effectively supporting students' social and emotional development and even less training and support for educators' own SEL. But such support is growing.

### Teachers' SEL

Teachers' SEL competencies influence students in at least three ways.

First, SEL influences the quality of teacher-student relationships. Teachers who are good at regulating their emotions are more likely to display positive affect and higher job satisfaction (Brackett, et al., 2010). Teachers who are calm, positive, and content are likely to be better equipped to treat students warmly and sensitively, even when students behave in challenging ways. When students have high-quality relationships with teachers, they have better social adjustment and higher academic competence (Mashburn et al., 2008; Raver, Garner, & Smith-Donald, 2007; Pianta, 2003). Conversely, when teachers and students have negative or conflict-filled relationships, students are less likely to be engaged in school and more likely to have low academic achievement (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003; Raver, et al., 2008). One study even found that the quality of teacher-student relationships was a better predictor of academic adjustment than other factors like teacher education and teacher-student ratio (Mashburn et al., 2008).

Second, teachers model SEL skills for students — intentionally or not. Teachers navigate stressful situations nearly every day, and students are watching. Students learn from the way teachers manage frustration, maintain control of themselves and the classroom, stay focused in the face of distractions, and shift tactics when needed.

They also learn from the way teachers handle students who need better SEL skills, such as when students act cruelly toward one another or use inappropriate language, such as "that's so gay." This is why R.W. Roeser and colleagues (2012) suggest that teachers need to possess certain "habits of mind," or dispositions, such as awareness, attention, flexibility, and intentionality. It is also why one intervention program begins with activities to build school leaders' and teachers' SEL skills as a precursor to student programming (Maurer & Brackett, 2004).

Third, teachers' SEL abilities likely influence their classroom organization and management. As every teacher knows, maintaining a calm, organized, and well-regulated environment is essential. Such environments include effective behavior management approaches as well as practices that encourage creativity, student choice and autonomy, and student reflection (Bodrova & Leong, 2006; Mashburn et al., 2008). To build such environments, teachers must maintain a sense of calm, be organized, feel in control of the classroom, and develop social trust with students and families who may be different from them (Carlock, 2011).

Most educators can think of additional ways that SEL influences practice. Focusing on these competencies is like starting a healthy diet: Once you notice the effects, you see more and more benefits.

### Stress and burnout

As noted previously, environmental factors, particularly stress, influence teachers' and students' ability to develop and use SEL competencies. Studies suggest that teachers today are more stressed and unhappy than ever before and that more teachers are leaving the profession.

Stress influences the three pathways from teacher SEL to student outcomes described above. First, research with both teachers and parents suggests that when adults are stressed and/or depressed, their interactions with children

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become less warm, more harsh, and more conflictual. Second, teachers who have limited emotional regulation skills may have trouble coping with stress and struggle to model effective stress management for students. Third, neuroscience research shows that stress also disrupts cognitive regulation processes, including attention, memory, and problem solving. At the same time, it's likely that limited SEL competencies can exacerbate teachers' stress.

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) developed a theoretical model that describes how SEL and stress interact to create a feedback loop that they refer to as a "burnout cascade." According to the model, teachers with stronger SEL competencies have more positive relationships with students, manage their classrooms more effectively, and implement SEL programs targeted to students with greater fidelity. The result is a positive and healthy classroom climate that supports positive student outcomes. These outcomes — including student behavior in the classroom — feed back into teachers' relationships with students, stress, and social and emotional skills. Ideally, the cycle is a positive one. But, when it is negative, the result is a cascade that results in growing teacher burnout over time.

Any approach to building teachers' SEL competencies therefore must address teacher stress. The most effective approaches are likely to be those that work to mitigate factors that cause stress and also help teachers learn to cope with stresses that can't be avoided.

### **Promising interventions**

A limited but growing number of interventions have been designed to support educators' — especially teachers' — SEL and stress management:

*Emotion-focused training:* Support for emotional regulation can help educators cope with stress, frustration, and challenges like the emotional burden of student trauma. Chang (2009) proposed that emotion-focused interven-

tions should help teachers recognize the emotional nature of their work, identify and reflect on their emotions and the causes of them, and cope with difficult emotions through reframing, problem solving, and emotional management. The RULER approach is an intervention for K-12 students, teachers, administrators, and parents that focuses on emotion recognition, understanding, labeling, expression, and regulation. During an initial two-day training, teachers and administrators learn about tools that they and their students can use to create emotionally supportive schools and classrooms. Teachers attend an additional training on implementing the student curriculum, and they receive up to five coaching visits in their classrooms.

*Relationship-building interventions:* Interventions designed to foster positive teacher-student interactions frequently use coaching, in which professional mentors provide classroom-based feedback and specific strategies. The 4R's + MTP project is a promising new approach to SEL-focused coaching. It is designed to enhance an evidence-based SEL curriculum for students, the 4R's (Reading, Writing, Respect, & Resolution), with an evidence-based professional development and support system, My Teaching Partner (MTP). MTP provides a web site with videos and other resources that teachers can access at any time as well as biweekly, one-on-one consultation via the Internet. Teachers regularly videotape their own teaching of lessons in SEL skills, literacy, and language and receive specific written feedback from consultants. The observations and feedback are guided by the empirically validated Classroom Assessment Scoring System framework and assessment instrument, which focuses on teacher-student interactions.

*Mindfulness and stress reduction:* Mindfulness refers to both a state of being and an approach based in meditation and other centering techniques. When people are mindful, they are focused, aware

of the present moment, nonjudgmental, and accepting of situations as they are. Strategies for building mindfulness include deep breathing, reflection, yoga, and secular meditation. Mindfulness practices have been used in medical and military populations with evidence of effectiveness and are now being applied in education settings with the goal of helping educators be less reactive and more reflective, responsive, and flexible. Two mindfulness programs for educators are CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education) and SMART (Stress Management and Resilience Training). Both programs aim to build educators' mindfulness, job satisfaction, feelings about students, and efficacy for regulating emotions.

*SEL routines:* Like students, educators can benefit from structures and routines that continually remind and guide them in using SEL skills. Used in ongoing ways throughout the school day, routines can take the form of structured activities (e.g., techniques for calming down) or specific language (e.g., "I messages" for stating feelings). Some programs and classrooms have wall posters that remind students and adults to use these strategies. For example, routines are an important part of a new program for students and educators in grades pre-K to 3 called SECURE (Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Understanding and Regulation). Routines include Stop and Stay Cool, a three-step process for staying in control of emotions, and a Decision Tree that guides choices. One factor that appears to make the routines effective is their consistent use throughout the school day and building, with staff and students using them in the same way that they use strategies like raising hands or forming lines.

### **Build SEL into daily work**

While these interventions are promising, they're not enough on their own. Support for SEL skills must be embedded into the daily life of the school for everyone — students, teachers, staff, and admin-

istrators. This is essential because SEL skills are developed in and needed for everyday interactions. This cultural shift will be uneasy for many schools, especially given that so many are intensely focused on academic achievement. But as we've argued, the impact of such cultural shifts on both SEL and academic achievement can be large. Many forms of support are also inexpensive and easy to implement.

Making SEL a core part of a school's work means integrating practices that:

**Build emotional awareness.** All administrators and staff need to develop greater understanding of how their own emotions affect students (and colleagues). The emotions surrounding teaching and learning should be discussed in supervision and staff meetings, addressed in professional development, and explored through tools like journals, logs, and nonevaluative videotape review. Some teachers are likely to be resistant to talking about emotions, responding to it as flaky, for example, or not seeing it as part of their job. School leaders will need a repertoire of strategies for increasing teachers' emotional awareness that is responsive to teachers' backgrounds, temperaments, and cultures. Sometimes, school leaders may also need to use strategies that are indirect. When teachers are asked to reflect on how students view them, for example, they can indirectly develop greater emotional awareness.

**Incorporate reflection into daily practice.** Reflection — understanding what is happening, why, and how it might be changed — is a critical skill for reacting effectively in challenging situations. Reflection should be continually modeled and reinforced. Administrators can build it into meetings and supervision, colleagues can be assigned partners or teams for regular reflective discussions, and all staff can be encouraged to take regular time for reflection, even if it's just five minutes at the beginning of the day and five minutes at the end.

**Tackle professional and personal stress.** A school can't eliminate all stress, but administrators should ask

staff regularly about stress, work to reduce stressors like scheduling and resource issues, and provide tips for dealing with stress (for example, taking deep breaths, briefly meditating, talking through frustration). Administrators should also provide referrals for mental health services when needed.

**Create a culture of continuous improvement and learning.** Nonevaluative supervision, open staff discussions, and open-door policies can encourage staff to be reflective and to acknowledge both SEL competencies that are personal strengths and those that need improvement. An emotionally safe and learning-focused environment is essential for exploring these topics.

Involving everyone, especially administrators, and integrating adult SEL with ongoing approaches to support students' SEL means a significant shift in how we think about the mission of education: A fundamental understanding that social and emotional competencies are not secondary to the mission of education, but concrete factors in the success of teachers, students, and schools. **K**

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