

Social Emotional Learning and Student Achievement

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How Do We Measure Social and Emotional Learning?

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We all know that whatever gets measured usually gets attention and focus. Right now, there is no widespread, practical way for all schools to assess children's social-emotional skills and character development (SECD). Or is there? If one looks at student report cards, one often finds on "the other side" of the academic grades a set of comments about behavior, character, preparation, motivation, and more.

Teacher comments have long been provided alongside academic grades to recognize the essential role of many abilities and competencies in academic performance and future potential. And we know that academic ability and potential are not always directly related. We have all served on committees with colleagues who are extremely smart but not productive members of the team -- indeed, their actions often impede the collective work. In the world that our students will enter as adults, there can be no *either/or* of academic or social-emotional and character competencies. Students require *both/and*. Therefore, feedback about students in schools must incorporate both aspects, systematically and carefully.

Improving Report Cards

In *The Other Side of the Report Card: Assessing Students' Social, Emotional, and Character Development*, J.J. Ferrito, Dominic Mocerri, and I analyzed report card comments and their ubiquitous drop-down menus, and we found many flaws in the current system. Taking what we learned, we've provided [a downloadable guide](#) for you to analyze your own report card's comment section.

The upshot is that current methods are far from systematic. We can, should, and must do a lot better in assessing and reporting on SECD, and the technology exists for this to happen. But making any change in educational practice -- even the most obvious and necessary -- asks many individuals to look at what they are doing and then do things differently. We can't consider asking this without well-thought-out justification. In that light, start by reflecting on the following driving forces for making changes in current report cards:

- Pedagogical requirements of Common Core State Standards and related standards require social-emotional and character competencies.
- Teachers already allocate time to assigning report card comments but almost never receive summary feedback based on those comments.
- Comment sections are often the only formal rating of student behavior.
- Finances are already allocated for producing and distributing report cards three or four times per year.
- Parents and students could receive feedback on student progress toward demonstrating specific skills that have been shown in research and practice to influence academic achievement, as well as feedback identifying a number of positive and negative behaviors.
- Student progress toward the skill and/or character development deemed most meaningful by your school can be tracked on individual, school, and district levels.

- Ratings of SEL skills and character can be used as early indicators of students at risk or who may be able to serve as positive role models and resources for their peers.
- SEL and character ratings present a natural opportunity to emphasize positive behaviors. There's a big difference between "not bullying" and actually being an asset to one's classroom and peers.

These will become important talking points with colleagues as you consider moving in this direction.

Framing Essential Conversations

The gifts of individual students include their academic abilities, personality, character, and skills of relating and interacting. We can use SECD in our report cards to frame essential, multiyear conversations between students and teachers, teachers and parents, and parents and students. Some of the most important of these conversations, particularly for parents and guardians who aren't closely attuned to schools' academic rigors, revolve around that "other side of the report card." Our current comment systems too rarely address the behaviors most worth talking about, i.e., those best aligned with our ultimate goal of educating the future citizens of our society.

Integrating SEL and Character Development Into Report Cards

Schools generally arrive at a decision to integrate SEL and/or character into their report cards in one of two ways:

1. Schools have made a commitment to build students' social-emotional competencies and/or character and now wish to have a formal, explicit, systematic way of assessing progress.
2. Schools realize the importance of SEL and/or character for their broader purposes of developing the whole student, fostering academic achievement, promoting positive behavior, and creating a positive culture and climate for learning.

Either way, the best process is to create assessments aligned with your school and district priorities. And what is most valuable is indeed the process of dialogue, conversation, and selection of SECD priorities and focus. The resulting system is tailored to your school and truly owned by the school community. No specialized school or outside personnel are needed to score or interpret these assessments, which reduces cost and increases efficient use of in-school expertise.

Examples of SEL skills and character indicators can be found in our downloadable guide (see the link above). *The Other Side of the Report Card* provides developmental guidance and examples at all grade levels for how to design and implement a report card comment system aligned with your own SEL and/or character goals, including:

- Guided exercises for analyzing existing report cards
- Samples and suggested report card designs
- Tips on improving communication with parents
- Case studies highlighting common challenges
- Testimonials from teachers and students

We know that our students' social-emotional and character development is essential for their success in school and life. Since it matters so much, we should give serious thought to assessing it in ways that are much better aligned with theory, research, and practical utility than our current report card comment systems allow.

7 Steps for Turning Around Under-Resourced Schools

April 4, 2016

<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/7-steps-turning-around-under-resourced-schools-maurice-elias>

Under-resourced schools face many challenges that are difficult. However, I believe that they can be conquered with sufficient time, dedication, and resources. Above all, success with these challenges stems from *a belief in the potential* of students and staff to achieve victory despite the odds.

The barriers that have to be overcome are deeply unfair, and political efforts must be made to reduce educational and socioeconomic inequities. But our students cannot wait for that to occur. They need help now, and schools need to embark on the path to turnaround sooner rather than later. However, there are no shortcuts, and efforts to rush the process can lead to disappointment.

Taking Action

The following steps are attitudinal and philosophical, as well as technical. They involve difficult dialogue, choices, and follow through. They require dedicated and sustained distributed leadership.

1. Define Success in Phases

Celebrate improving school culture and climate, building students' social-emotional competencies and character, improving discipline and on-task educational behavior, improving academic outcomes, but do not define these outcomes primarily through standardized tests.

The backward design model allows a clear identification of what is required to obtain better academic success by students: They must be in well-managed classrooms and engaged in learning tasks. For this to happen, they need to have appropriate skills and values, which they will be more likely to acquire when they are in a caring, respectful, and supportive, yet challenging school environment. There are no shortcuts. We also know that standardized tests are systematically biased against low SES and disadvantaged students, and therefore, they are not a valid or appropriate sole or primary criterion as currently configured.

2. Define the Task as One of Ethical and Moral Responsibility and Educational Equity

Being in a positive school climate and learning social-emotional competencies and character virtues essential for life, college, and career success are not options or frills. The likelihood of disadvantaged students completing college depends greatly on their ability to negotiate the many challenges of the higher education setting, as well as the conflicts their pursuits often create with family and peers. True educational equity requires full preparation for the tests of life, both academic and social-emotional.

3. Build a Leadership Team, and Allow This Team Time to Learn and Grow Together

Before tackling the most significant school challenges, schools need to build their own local resource expertise in the model of a professional learning community that builds competence and networking regarding school culture and climate and social-emotional and character development.

4. Create and Communicate a Compelling School Identity

Students and staff want to go to a school that stands for something. By identifying core values, key themes, or other forms of identity, and by infusing that identity in all aspects of school life, schools become places that have meaning and generate commitment and enthusiasm. My favorite comes from a New Jersey middle school: *We are the learning place, where dreams are born, caring is shown, and leaders are made.*

5. Engage and Empower Youth in Meaningful Roles in the School

Including students ensures that diverse voices are heard. One of the most replicated findings is that of a downward spiral of under-resourced schools: ratcheted academic pressure, student disengagement, discipline problems, staff mobility, and no stable or meaningful improvements in academic functioning. This all ratchets up the academic pressure. Students are the major shareholders in the school. They are the most invested in having no bullying, gangs, substance abuse, and chaos. Engage them in solving the problems of schools.

Ask them to give feedback about teachers, lessons, and school routines. Provide them with opportunities and responsibilities for cross-age tutoring, cross-ability mentoring, and other forms of mutual helping. Use project-based and service learning to allow individual talents the chance to emerge and create reasons to want to come to school to learn and to contribute. Create a positive reason for every student to feel he or she belongs in the school.

6. Network With Others on a Similar Mission

Schools face many common problems and often have developed solutions or at least have found what does not work. Everyone need not recreate the wheel or create the square wheel. By networking and sharing, all boats rise together, and faster. An excellent example of a multi-school sharing network is the [School Support Network in New Jersey](#).

7. Connect SEL to Existing Mandates

Don't simply add social-emotional learning and character development. Social-emotional competencies and character are essential to all areas of schooling. Connect to mandates such as whole child, bullying prevention and response, discipline and codes of conduct, substance abuse, comprehensive school health, and positive school culture and climate. This cannot be another add-on, but rather must be systematically integrated into school.

The best analogy for this is reading. Students must read well to succeed in any other subject area. Similarly, students must have social-emotional competencies to succeed in any learning environment. And so we must have dedicated periods of reading instruction, but also infusion of reading throughout the school day and year. It is identical with social-emotional competence.

Emotionally Intelligent Parenting

By Maurice Elias, Steve Tobias, and Brian Friedlander

- Have A Family Mission Statement/
Vision
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- Emphasize Your Kids' Strengths
- Apologize When You Lose Your Cool
- Children Follow What You Do Even
More Than What You Say, But They Do
Listen!
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Every professional working in schools should possess all the skills and attitudes needed to promote the social-emotional and character development of all children--all meaning all-- in those schools, and should be prepared to make positive, constructive contributions to school climate and adult communities of learners in schools.

Every child needs competencies for success beyond the test score—skills for the tests of life, a life of college, career, contribution, and caring. How do we strengthen these competencies, basic skills, increase higher-order thinking, and warn about the dangers of substance abuse and violence, all while promoting appreciation and respect for diversity?

In response to these challenges, the Academy for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools is now offering its **Certificate in Instruction for Social-Emotional Learning and Character Development (SECD)**. The certificate program prepares educational professionals to help prepare their students for college, career, and life success, and to prepare for the tests of life, as well as their required tests. In so doing, educators help their schools become more positive places for children to learn, adults to teach, and all to thrive.

Program Participants Include:

- ✓ Current or aspiring teachers,
- ✓ Counselors, school psychologists, social workers
- ✓ After-school program providers

Program Highlights

- ✓ Online, convenient, affordable program with focus on applicable skills
- ✓ Three courses: Foundations of SECD (101), Pedagogy and Practice (102) and an online Supervised Implementation Practicum (103)
- ✓ Can be completed in one academic year or calendar year
- ✓ Adds value to your qualifications as an education professional

“The real core of education is the relationship between the teacher and the student, and the extent to which that relationship nurtures the longing of the child to matter in the world... To the extent to which we strengthen SEL (social-emotional learning), we increase the likelihood that students will learn to the best of their ability.”

Tim Shriver (Chairman, International Special Olympics and CASEL) and Jennifer Buffett (Co-President, NoVo Foundation)

“Teaching the mind and encouraging the heart for success beyond the test score.”
Contact us with questions at sel-certification-group@scarletmail.rutgers.edu