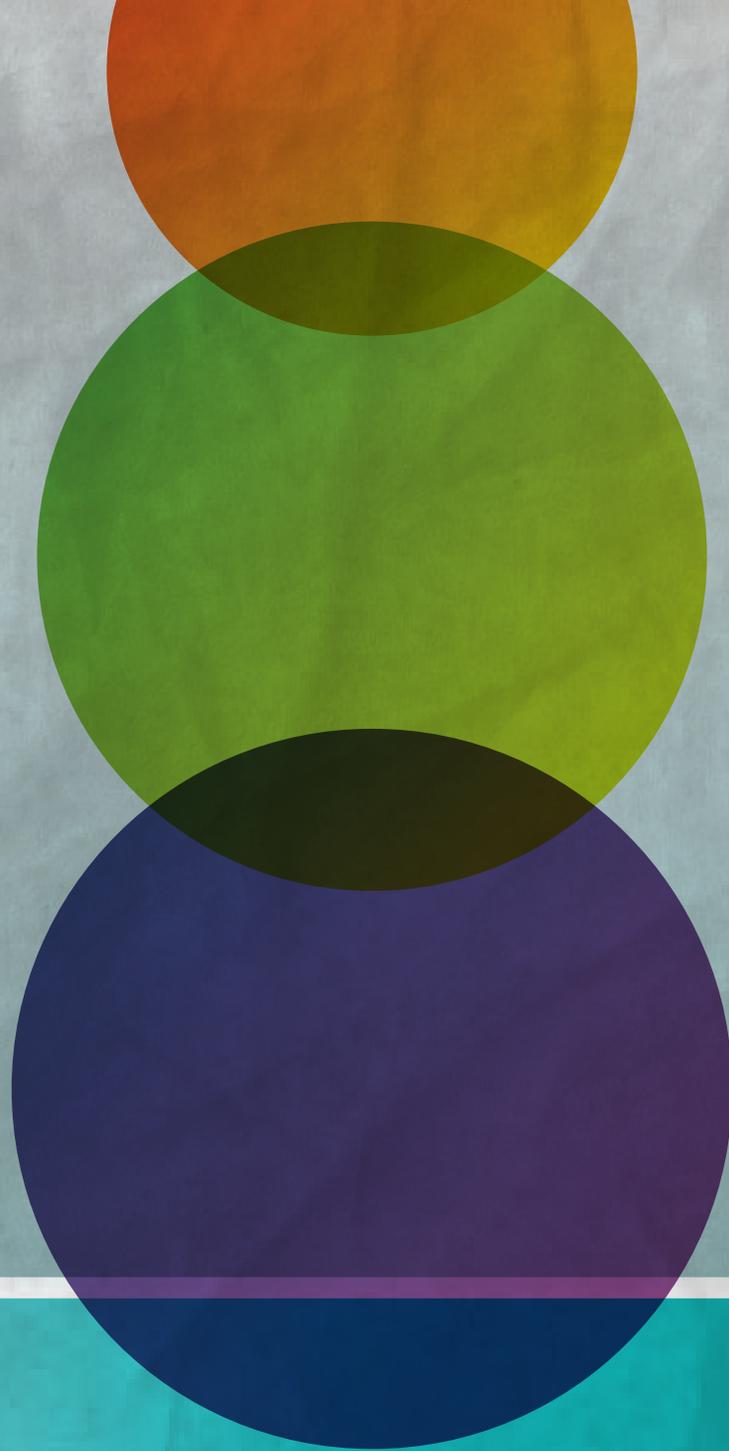




The Education Trust



SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH AN EQUITY LENS

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P-12 Research Associate, The Education Trust

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SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH AN EQUITY LENS

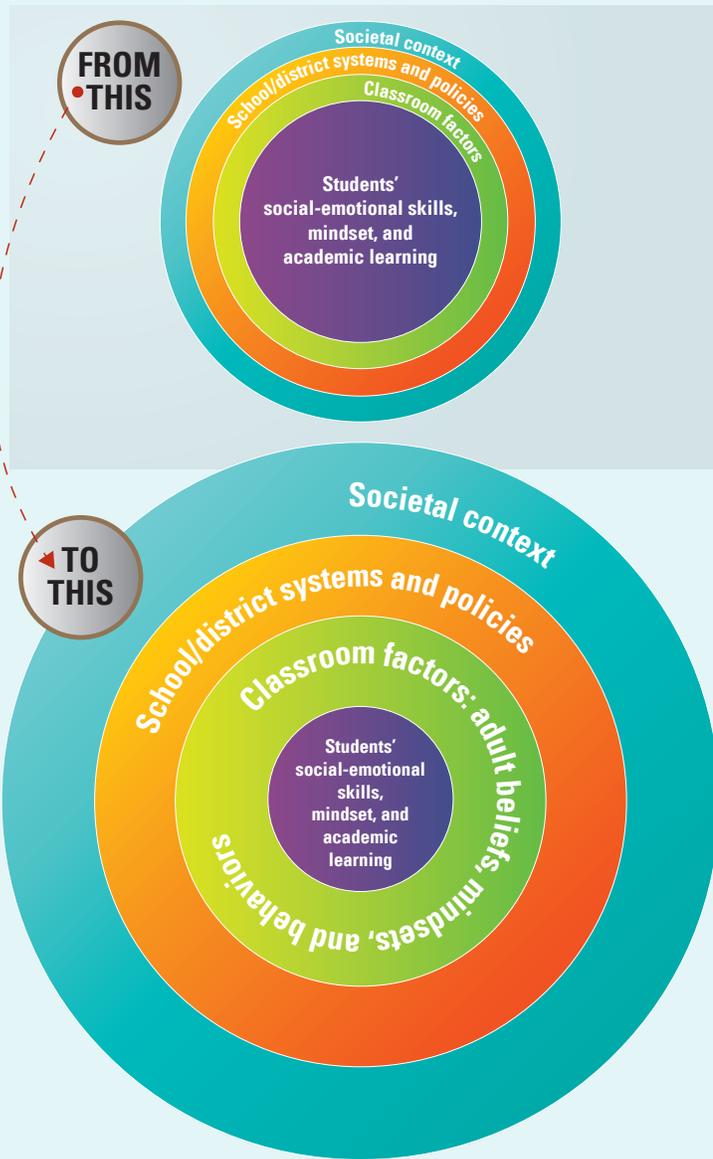
REPORT SUMMARY

THE MAJORITY OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS IN THE U.S. report they are working to support the social and emotional learning of students. But in too many places, the approach is to focus narrowly on changing student behavior rather than implementing practices that build relationships and create learning environments that support positive social and emotional growth. This is especially true in schools and districts that serve large populations of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, exposing these students to environments that could do more harm than good.

This report calls for school and district leaders to approach social, emotional, and academic development through an equity lens. This requires shifting the focus away from “fixing kids” and toward addressing the adult beliefs and mindsets as well as school and district policies that create the learning environment. It also requires school and district leaders to consider the context in which students live. Societal realities (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia), individual realities (e.g., socioeconomic status, family dynamics, experiences in schools, access to opportunities), and cultural background all influence social, emotional, and academic development.

This analysis is supported by existing research as well as what Education Trust researchers learned from focus groups across the country with students and families of color, primarily those from Black and Latino communities. Participants discussed the importance of social and emotional skills; what students of color need to learn other than academic subjects; and what educators and school leaders can do to support social, emotional, and academic development for students of color. As the research in this area continues to grow, and as state, district, and school leaders consider policy changes to support social, emotional, and academic development, the voices of these families and students must be heard and valued.

SHIFTING THE FOCUS



CHANGING ADULT BELIEFS AND MINDSETS



FROM A DEFICIT-BASED MINDSET TO A STRENGTH-BASED MINDSET



FROM ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL TO RECOGNIZING CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES



FROM ALLOWING BIAS TO IMPACT STUDENTS TO TARGETED AND CONTINUOUS EFFORTS TO REDUCE BIAS

CHANGING SYSTEMS AND POLICIES



FOSTER STUDENT BELONGING



CHALLENGE STUDENTS TO REACH THEIR POTENTIAL



PROVIDE ACADEMIC AND HOLISTIC SUPPORTS

SIX RECOMMENDATIONS

for school and district leaders
to implement toward creating equitable learning environments

01

Provide meaningful professional development and supports

02

Engage parents, students, and communities as full partners

03

Diversify the workforce

04

Ensure equitable access to and supports for success in rigorous and culturally sustaining coursework

05

Develop inclusive discipline and dress code policies

06

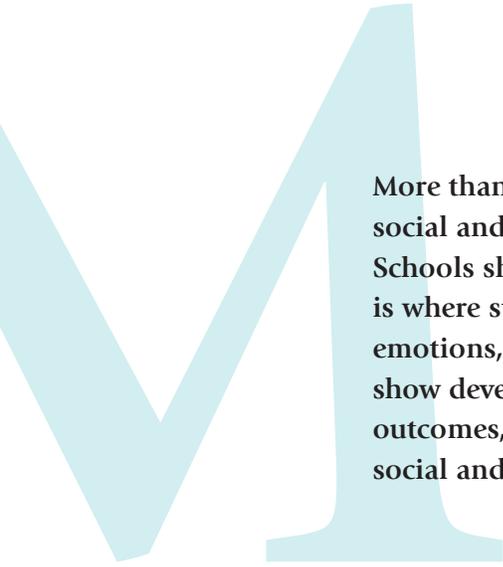
Provide access to integrated wraparound services and supports

SECTION

01

INTRODUCTION: Re-envisioning Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

NANCY DUCHESNEAU
P-12 Research Associate



More than 90% of schools and districts report they are working to support the social and emotional learning of students.¹ It's a smart move with good intentions. Schools should play a role in helping students develop holistically, as school is where students spend the bulk of their time learning about themselves, their emotions, and their behaviors, and how to interact with others. What's more, studies show developing students' social-emotional competence can improve their academic outcomes,² and the conditions for learning in schools affect the development of social and emotional competencies.³

Studies also show that social-emotional well-being, as well as academic performance, are both inextricably linked to the overall context in which students develop and the relationships they build over time.⁴ Contextual factors, such as societal realities (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia), individual realities (e.g., socioeconomic status, family dynamics, experiences in schools, access to opportunities), and cultural background all influence social, emotional, and academic development.

Many social-emotional learning experts and leaders understand this, but too often in implementation, approaches to supporting social-emotional learning in schools ignore or minimize context, focusing solely on building specific skills (e.g., lessons on behavior, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, or conflict resolution). Social-emotional efforts in schools too often are used as [another way to control student behavior](#), but true support for social and emotional development is not about prescribing how students should behave.⁵ Instead, it should make schools rethink how they manage student behavior.⁶

There is a spectrum of approaches to supporting social-emotional learning — ranging from those that

narrowly focus on behavior management to those that take a more systemic and schoolwide approach (e.g., Building Assets, Reducing Risks ([BARR](#)) and Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating ([RULER](#))). Still, there has been an over-emphasis on approaches that directly target skill building while those that systematically create equitable learning environments warrant more attention.⁷ According to a nationally representative study by RAND, teachers and principals are more likely to report using practices that focus on student behavior than other practices that build relationships and create learning environments that support positive social and emotional development.⁸ This is especially true in schools and districts that serve students from low-income backgrounds.

Instead of focusing on just the “what” of social-emotional skills, it's important to focus on the “why” and the “how.” After all, the need to support social-emotional learning goes beyond the needs of the individual; society needs human beings and citizens who are well and whole, who can work in diverse settings, and who work with others with differing perspectives to solve the social, economic, and environmental problems our country faces (i.e., the “why”). The approach to support social-emotional learning

For this reason, there is growing consensus among experts that educators and leaders must shift their focus away from “fixing kids” and turn it toward addressing the environments and systems in which students learn to better reflect the needs of students in their contexts.

must be systemic and based in context (i.e., the “how”) because society needs students to grow into adults who address the systemic and contextual issues and injustices that privilege some at the expense of others.

Furthermore, ignoring context carries significant risks, especially for those students who are already underserved by the education system: students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, LGBTQ youth, students with disabilities, and English learners. Approaches that fail to acknowledge the influence of the learning environment, or fail to address the processes and structures in schools that disadvantage some students, may do more harm than good.⁹

For instance, telling students of color to believe in their ability to achieve goals will not be effective if the adults with whom they interact harbor deficit thinking and haven’t addressed their own negative biases and beliefs about the abilities of students of color. Even worse, telling students of color they must learn to regulate their emotions when they are experiencing systemic racism and discrimination is just another form of placing the burden on those who are experiencing harm, and further prevents adults from recognizing when students are already displaying social and emotional competence. On the other hand, when educators have asset-based mindsets and use culturally sustaining practices to truly challenge students and connect them to content, students are more likely to believe in their own abilities.

For this reason, there is growing consensus among experts that educators and leaders must shift their focus away from “fixing kids” and turn it toward addressing the environments and systems in which students learn to better reflect the needs of students in their contexts.¹⁰ It is critical that leaders and influencers in social-emotional learning continue to expand their visions and frameworks to more explicitly call out the need to support social-emotional development and academic performance through addressing contextual factors, and more specifically through the experiences students have in schools. This requires a broader asset-based approach that includes a focus on adult beliefs and mindsets and the systems and policies necessary to create equitable learning environments that support holistic success.

School leaders, for example, must consider the disciplinary context of the school; the cultural competence and responsiveness of the environment; opportunity structures; and the ways in which youth, family, and communities are engaged. The goal should be to give students opportunities, support their growth, and provide them with the emotionally and intellectually safe and culturally sustaining space needed to learn from their relational experiences. That space must be one where students feel like they belong, where they are challenged to reach their full potential, and where they are given both the academic and holistic supports needed to thrive.

This report explains why context matters and why a greater focus on context is necessary, and outlines a broader asset-based approach to social, emotional, and academic development, with a focus on addressing adult beliefs and mindsets and the systems and policies in schools to create an equitable learning environment. It also offers specific recommendations that school and district leaders can consider as starting points to reach this goal.

NEXT UP

Section Two: Social, Emotional, and Academic Development in Context: Why It Matters

THIS ANALYSIS is supported by existing research as well as what we learned from focus groups across the country with students and families of color, primarily those from Black and Latino communities. We asked them how important social and emotional skills are; what students of color need to learn other than academic subjects; and what educators and school leaders can do to support social, emotional, and academic development for students of color. As the research in this area continues to grow, and as state, district, and school leaders consider policy changes to support social, emotional, and academic development, the voices of these families and students must be heard and valued.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

*Researchers and academics use a number of terms to refer to social and emotional learning, such as “character skills,” “soft skills,” “21st century skills,” and others. * No specific term is perfect. At The Education Trust, we use the term “social, emotional, and academic development” because of the critical need to integrate efforts to support both social-emotional learning and academic outcomes in all aspects of schooling. Separating the two is cause for concern as all learning is social and emotional. ** Separating the two also allows for problematic implementation in which the focus is narrowed too much on behavior modification in a way that can be harmful to students who don’t easily fit into the upper-middle class White norms that dominate how and whether competence is perceived for social and emotional learning.*

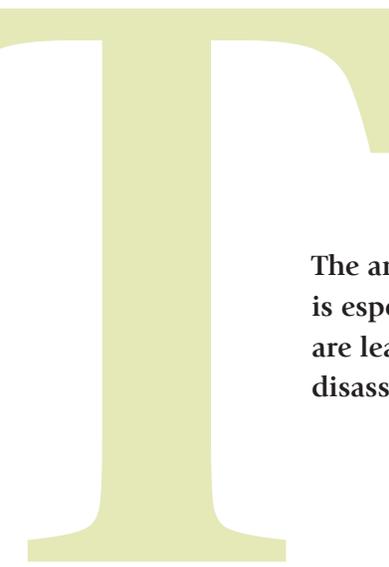
*When using the term “social-emotional learning,” we are specifically referring to learning social and emotional competencies, which is only one piece of the more holistic approach for which we advocate. Furthermore, these competencies vary in definition and overlap according to different frameworks. *** While these skills and mindsets are certainly an important part of student development and have impacts on various outcomes, **** it’s also critical to think beyond these competencies toward “social-emotional well-being,” or the overall mental and emotional health of students as influenced by their environments and experiences.*

A final note on terminology in this report is the use of “Latino” rather than “Latinx.” The Education Trust recognizes the argument that “Latinx” allows for gender neutrality, and we also recognize that opponents argue the change in term is linguistically imperialistic. Because the term is still under debate, we continue to use “Latino.”

* Duckworth, A., & Yeager, D. (2015). Measurement matters: Assessing personal qualities other than cognitive ability for educational purposes. *Educational Researcher*, 44(4), 237-251. ** National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development. (2019). *From a nation at risk to a nation at hope: Recommendations from the National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development*. Retrieved from: https://nationathope.org/wp-content/uploads/2018_aspen_final-report_full_webversion.pdf. *** Bailey, R., Meland, E. A., Brion-Meisels, G., & Jones, S. M. (2019). Getting developmental science back into schools: Can what we know about self-regulation help change how we think about “no excuses”? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1885. **** Gabrieli, C., Ansel, D., & Krachman, S. B. (2015). *Ready to be counted: The research case for education policy action on non-cognitive skills*. Boston: Transforming Education.

SECTION

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEXT: *Why It Matters*



The argument for considering context is necessary in all education issues, but it is especially critical for this topic, because the environment in which students are learning (as well as where adults are teaching and leading) cannot be disassociated from social, emotional, and academic development.

Societal realities, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, etc., greatly affect students' social-emotional development, as well as their academic performance. All learning is social and emotional, whether intended to be or not and whether explicitly stated as so or not.¹¹ The question is not whether educators and schools influence social-emotional development or not; they do. The issue is whether educators and schools do so in a way that is intentionally and explicitly equity focused, because not doing so may cause harm, especially to those students who may not fit the White, upper-middle-class dominant norms that our current education system reflects and rewards. Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, for example, often have to contend with disparaging remarks, experiences, and expectations in school that send them subtle (and not-so-subtle) signals that they don't belong in the classroom, or that they can't master rigorous academic content — signals that their White, upper-middle-class peers are far less likely to receive.¹² These remarks and experiences can hurt their motivation and their confidence in their ability to succeed — key elements of social-emotional development.

These same societal realities influence adult beliefs, expectations, and actions, all of which affect adults' interactions with students and, in turn, students' social-emotional development and well-being, and academic performance. Educators' biases, for instance, influence whether they see a student's behavior as acceptable or punishable, harmless or threatening. Implicit (or explicit) bias can lead educators to disproportionately punish Black students for behaviors that are just as common for White students.¹³ Educator bias is a significant barrier for Black and Latino students' access to advanced courses.¹⁴ In order for educators to guard against microaggressions that harm social-emotional well-being for students of color, and to behave in ways that support conditions that eliminate stereotype threat, educator bias must be addressed.¹⁵

Educators often mischaracterize students and make assumptions regarding their behaviors and social and emotional competencies based on their limited understanding of the child. A student's individual reality, such as responsibilities outside of school or financial resources, also influence social-emotional development. What is or is not a "responsible decision" is not always

clear cut. Consider a student who has to choose between writing the first draft of an essay or taking his or her grandmother to the doctor, or a student who misses three days of school to participate in a model U.N. When educators are disconnected from students' lives outside their classrooms, they may misjudge student motivations and behavior. It is especially critical for school leaders to consider the needs of students holistically, as students who are hungry, unable to see the board, or lack a safe home environment may be misdiagnosed as having "social-emotional difficulties," when in fact they are showing tremendous resilience.¹⁶

Cultural background is also a factor in social-emotional development. Cultural norms "dictate the management and modification of emotional displays depending on social circumstances," psychologists argue.¹⁷ How different cultures express happiness, sadness, anger, and other emotions varies. Educators who are not culturally aware, or lack experience with their students' cultures, might deem a student's behavior as unacceptable when it is outside White upper-middle-class social or cultural norms.¹⁸

Social-emotional efforts too often focus on student behavior, especially in schools and districts that serve students from low-income backgrounds.¹⁹ Again, this is problematic because when the focus is not on how to support the holistically integrated social, emotional, and academic development of students, what remains is a singular focus on how students should think, behave, and feel based on existing norms that often disengage and oppress students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

How individuals think, behave, or feel is not universal; it's largely based on all the societal, individual, and cultural factors mentioned above. So, when contextual factors are overlooked, efforts to support social, emotional, and academic development are unlikely to be successful. Taken to the extreme, they can become yet another harmful tactic to control children

who don't fit dominant social norms.²⁰ History shows all too well that efforts to assimilate students in this way disproportionately harm students of color and other students from marginalized communities. Such approaches in schools have echoed across history in the United States by viewing the languages and cultures of many students and communities of color as deficiencies to be "fixed" by learning the dominant language and culture.²¹ Take, for example, the English-only laws that, while being overturned in many states, still exist and outlaw English learners from using any languages other than English in schools. These laws sought to force assimilation through language, which holds cultural and racial significance for students and communities, despite clear research showing the benefits of students learning in both their home language and English.²²

But it doesn't have to play out like this. Across the country, school leaders and educators are working to change the way they see students, how they address student behaviors, and how they support social-emotional well-being at large. Take, for example, [Chicago Public Schools](#), where educators are trained in restorative justice as the alternative to exclusionary discipline, or the [Native American Community Academy](#), where positive identity development is a priority and Native culture is integrated throughout the school, such as in culturally relevant pedagogy.²³ Or consider [CASEL's Toolkit for Reopening and Renewing Our School Communities](#), designed to help educators manage amid the coronavirus pandemic as well as the national reckoning with racism. These approaches target context as a driving factor and have direct implications for social-emotional well-being. The vision presented in this report is designed to help more district and school leaders follow this lead.

NEXT UP

Section Three: Focus Group Findings: How Students and Families of Color Approach Social, Emotional, and Academic Development



SECTION

03

**FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS:
How Students and Families
of Color Approach Social,
Emotional, and Academic
Development**

In order to make sure efforts to support social, emotional, and academic development truly benefit all students, it's important to hear and learn from the perspectives of those whose views and experiences might not be represented by White upper-middle-class norms. For this reason, we set out to listen to students and families of color. We held three types of focus groups — students of color, Black family members, and Latino family members. All family members we spoke with had a direct role in their students' educational journey. Student focus groups consisted of multiple races and ethnicities, including Black, Latino, and occasionally others; adult groups included parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. These adult groups (Black and Latino) were separated in an attempt to capture the distinct voices of these communities and their experiences. We asked the following research questions:

1

How do participants perceive the importance of social and emotional skills and how they relate to success?

2

Outside of learning academic subjects, what do students of color need to learn to be successful?

3

What should the school's role be in supporting students of color to learn the factors participants identified?

The themes presented here represent commonalities among all three groups.

FOCUS GROUP LOCATIONS

Researchers traveled to eight locations across five states. Although we attempted to hold all three focus group types in each location, whether this occurred depended on our ability to find participants for each group. Each focus group held up to 13 participants and, in all, we spoke with 70 students and 70 family members. The following table identifies which focus groups were held in each location.

	Students of color	Black families	Latino families
Los Angeles, CA	21	4	10
Oakland, CA	3	8	12
Lexington, KY	13	5	—
Louisville, KY	6	—	—
Chapel Hill, NC	10	7	—
Charlotte, NC	10	6	—
Houston, TX	4	13	—
Tukwila, WA	3	3	2



QUESTION**01****How do participants perceive the importance of learning social and emotional skills and how they relate to success?**

To begin this part of the dialogue, we first asked participants to identify how they envisioned success for themselves (if students) or for their children (if family members). This initial question was meant to set a foundation for what participants hoped to achieve through school. Importantly, we found that participants already considered social-emotional well-being and learning social-emotional competencies to be part of how they defined success. We also followed up with a question in our protocol asking participants whether and how important it is for students of color to learn social skills, skills related to emotion and behavior, and any other social or emotional factors participants had already noted. Participants further elaborated on how critical these things are to their definitions of success.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE IS A PART OF SUCCESS

When asked what success is, participants consistently said that it's more than meeting academic standards and getting a well-paying job. A number of students and family members said happiness and well-being are more critical to success than academic or career outcomes, and that a career they really enjoyed and found fulfilling is pivotal to success. Participants envisioned and hoped for

empathy, respect, positive relationships, giving back to the community, and fulfilling their potential and realizing their dreams. While they still desired financial freedom, independence, and a reputable career, they spoke more frequently about social and emotional components to success.

A Latina student in Oakland, CA, said:

"I think [social and emotional skills] play the biggest role, especially understanding your well-being and all of that, because, I mean, if you're not in a good mental state, it's harder for you to actually achieve those goals that you put for yourself. Social skills, they're highly important when it comes to, like, the work environment. And not just in the work environment, but also when you get to college. ... It's important to know how to socialize with other people that don't necessarily look like you, or don't share the same beliefs."

When asked what she hopes for her grandchildren's future, a Latina grandmother in Tukwila, WA, said her hope is that they grow up to be *"good people, generous, with good hearts."* One Black mother in Los Angeles said that more than just a good job, *"success is a state of mind."*

We then asked participants who is responsible for teaching these social-emotional skills.

IT STARTS IN THE HOME, BUT SCHOOLS PLAY A ROLE

We asked participants where youth should be learning social and emotional competencies, such as those they spoke about when they defined success. Initial answers were always at home with family and in the community, but secondary answers frequently suggested schools should play a role as well.

One Black mother in Lexington, KY, said:

“If there should be a purpose [to school, it should be] to learn life skills. Because you’re away from the bosom of your mother and father for eight hours. So, in that tract of time, you should be learning your basic fundamentals, your educational ABCs, 123s, also learning another language, I believe. And learning also about social, emotional, how to get along with others.”

When discussing her son’s social life, a Latina mother in Oakland, CA, felt that adults in the school should have some responsibility for what students experience when they are on school grounds, especially when discrimination occurs:

“It’s important that both the parent and the teachers see that a child is not more than another because they dress differently or because they speak differently or because they walk differently. Because that’s what I see a lot in schools, that they have a hard time socializing because other students label them, and discrimination begins, bullying begins. ... There should be a communication between teacher and parents. Teachers can get involved no matter how small the problem is — that is, they are calling you, but someone is also present [in the school].”

Students agreed. A Latina student in Louisville, KY, explained:

“It’s your family, but then it’s you knowing when to apply or where to apply, you know, that perspective. But at the same time, it’s school, because you spend eight hours, five times a week at that place. So, it’s almost like everybody should be on the same page.”

A Black Latino student in Oakland, CA, said:

“A lot of people are familiar with the saying, ‘It takes a village to raise a child.’ So, I believe it takes different places. So, you need to get it at home, first and foremost, because that’s where your education actually starts. ... But then also, school sites. ... Schools have a big role to play.”

Ultimately, participants believed family and the community are most responsible for supporting the social and emotional development of children, but because children spend so much of their time in school, adults there should work to support the holistic development of children.

As a Black mother in Los Angeles, CA, said:

“It takes a village to get it done. ... To make sure that we [are] opening doors for them to walk [through] and so they’ll learn how to open their own doors to pursue [their] own paths.”

QUESTION**02****Outside of learning academic subjects, what do students of color need to learn to be successful?**

For this second part of the dialogue, we broadened our question to ask what else students of color must learn, other than academic subjects, to be successful in a variety of ways, including academically, socially, in a job or career, or in any other settings. We did not want to narrow our language to “social-emotional skills” for this question so that participants would not feel limited to what they considered or had heard definitions of social-emotional skills to be. We especially worked to probe participants on some of the comments they had made in the first part of the dialogue. The key theme emerging from this conversation was the need for an explicit focus on racial identity development and how it relates to all of the social, emotional, and even academic needs of students.

IDENTITY IS THE CORE OF SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

Know your culture

We asked participants what factors outside of academic knowledge matter for success, and while most participants did respond with some of the more commonly associated social-emotional skills, such as making responsible decisions, they also responded with factors related to racial, ethnic, and cultural identity. One Los Angeles Black mother’s immediate response was:

“Knowledge of self — who they are, their culture. They need to learn how to love within.”

To which another Black mother responded:

“And that brings about confidence. If you don’t love yourself, you’re not confident in who you are. If you’re not confident, then you’re not really interested in anything, especially learning.”

Latino participants similarly responded with a focus on culture, but immigrant parents often focused on their experiences. One Latino father in Oakland, CA, said:

“My son is American. He was born here. But I want him to know where we come from, our struggle, our culture. That we came here so that he could have a better life, so that he could have a better life than mine.”

Students agreed being culturally aware was critical. One Latina student in Lexington, KY, said:

“Being aware of your culture and everybody else’s, like, around your community, is very important, because you can’t have somebody tell you, ‘Oh, yeah, you came from this background, so this means that you’re a bad person.’”

But being cognizant of one's own racial, ethnic, and cultural identity isn't enough, according to the students and family members with whom we spoke. Participants took the conversation a step further with comments about the need to "code switch" in order to survive in a White society. For many students whose backgrounds don't fit the White upper-middle-class norms, a school filled with adults who ascribe to those norms feels very alienating. Adults need to recognize that they hold the power in school buildings, and place tremendous social and emotional burdens on these students to adapt and change. If adults don't engage with families, welcome the cultures and values from their communities, and work to change the system to affirm and support students of color, this rift will continue to place additional social-emotional burdens on their students.

One Black parent in Charlotte, NC, spoke about the ubiquitous conversation Black parents have with their children about their interactions with police officers:

"They got to know that being Black's not the same as being White. That they have to act a certain way around White people, especially when they got power. We all give our kids 'the talk' so that they come home safe."

A Black mother in Lexington, KY, said:

"I taught my girls early on how to code-switch, and it's necessary. ... They've gotta be able to live in both worlds."

A Latina student in Tukwila, WA, made the case for knowing other cultural backgrounds:

"I think it's like, learning to adapt to your surroundings, one; and two, just knowing that there's other cultures, you know, out there, and respecting those cultures the same way that you would want them to respect, you know, your culture."

CENTERING RACIAL IDENTITY IN CLASSROOMS

In 1995, researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings framed the connections between cultural competence, academic success, and critical consciousness (i.e., sociopolitical consciousness that encourages questioning cultural norms and the structures and systems that oppress and discriminate) and explicated the need to have a culturally relevant pedagogy in schools. In the years since, a series of asset-based pedagogies (e.g., culturally sustaining pedagogy** and culturally revitalizing pedagogy***) have grown from that framework. These approaches to teaching require an asset-based mindset and center racial and cultural identity in academic learning, which connects deeply to participants' statements regarding the critical nature of identity. [TeachingWorks](#) provides a more detailed understanding for those who wish to learn more.*

* Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice*, 34(3), 159-165. ** Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85-137. *** McCarty, T. L., & Lee, T. S. (2014). Critical culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy and Indigenous education sovereignty. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 101-124.



QUESTION

03

What should the school's role be in supporting students of color to learn the factors participants identified?

In the third part of the conversation, we first asked participants whether they trusted schools to teach the social and emotional skills they value, and then asked what schools need to do to ensure students build healthy relationships and confidence, and can celebrate and develop racial identity the way participants had discussed, as well as, generally, what schools should do to support students of color as they strive for success. Although participants felt schools should support social-emotional skill building, most felt that school systems are not currently set up to do so, and especially not for students of color. Participants cited a lack of basic building blocks to create environments where all students succeed, and so, said that they couldn't trust schools to support social-emotional learning in this way. One Black and Latino student in Oakland, CA, explained:

"The way schools are structured now, and the way education is structured, it's not set up for students to succeed in those environments. And not to say students don't succeed, but not all students do. Some students make it out, but aren't ready for the world after high school, or even after middle school. So, it's like you're not always set up to succeed based on how schools are structured."

In fact, when asked whether they trust the education system to teach students of color the social-emotional factors they valued, **MOST PARTICIPANTS RESPONDED WITH A RESOUNDING "NO."** Participants argued that school systems and many educators are too biased, fail to incorporate student and family voice, and are systemically racist, and therefore are not prepared to implement pull-out programs or explicit social-emotional curricula in a way that reflects students' needs. Participants recognized the importance of explicit conversations and teaching about social-emotional skills, mindsets such as believing in students' abilities, racial identity, and managing behavior, but had significant concerns about teachers explicitly discussing these skills given past experiences that left families feeling that educators too often don't have the right mindset to even broach these topics with students of color. When a group of Black family members responded that even when some teachers might be trusted, the school as a system could not, one Black mother in Lexington, KY, explained:

"We all have a story. I can remember, my son ... had always been at the top of his class, but had a teacher, and he started to slip. And [the teacher said], 'Oh, don't worry, he's just starting to normalize.' So I mean, he was marginalized. His lid was tightened right then, and if I hadn't — I lost trust in the school, lost trust in the administrator that no one was gonna continue to push him. ... We have schools that would rather just kind of put kids on a mute button to get through — go through the motions of every day."

Participants argued that educators must consistently believe that all students can thrive and grow to the best of their abilities, and that students' identities and cultural resources are assets. They also argued that educators must intentionally build supportive relationships with students and families. Unfortunately, participants also noted that these necessities are too often not part of their experiences with schooling. If the systems in place are not designed to ensure students don't experience discrimination and marginalization, then Black and Latino families will not trust schools to explicitly discuss hard things like whether some behaviors are appropriate, or other social-emotional skills, such as students believing in their ability to achieve their goals. Instead, parents believe they must prepare their children for what schools are *not* going to do for them because of their race or ethnicity. This is an untenable situation that will actively suppress the social, emotional, and academic development of students of color.

One Black parent in Lexington, KY, said:

"I guarantee every one of us at this table taught their kids something, or got them ready before they went to school, because there was this thing in our bodies that said, 'They're not gonna do what we can for our children.'"

Participants argued that schools could not be trusted to do this work well without addressing systemic racism and inequities and creating environments where students of color are encouraged to thrive. Without gaining trust from families and communities by creating a positive and inclusive learning environment that truly supports social, emotional, and academic development, distrust and unsupportive environments will undermine skill-building efforts. It is therefore critical to understand how school structures and policies should shift to gain that trust. In particular, participants focused on ensuring schools foster student belonging, challenge students to reach their potential, and provide students with the academic and holistic supports they need to thrive — all components of social, emotional, and academic development.

WHY TRUST MATTERS

In [Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement](#), Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider detail the results of a longitudinal study of 400 Chicago elementary schools, in which relational trust among teachers, parents, and school leaders played a central role in building effective education communities. Trust is a key resource for reform as well as the culture and climate in a school. If school leaders wish to create meaningful change and improvement that lead to better social, emotional, and academic outcomes for students, it will be critical to build this trust.*

* <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar03/vol60/num06/Trust-in-Schools@-A-Core-Resource-for-School-Reform.aspx>

CREATE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS WHERE STUDENTS SEE THEMSELVES AND TRULY BELONG

Allow students to be their authentic selves

Students, especially youth of color, are often expected to leave their identities at the school door. But learning and development are inherently social and emotional, and identity is a critical piece of how youth socialize and address their emotions. Furthermore, how students see themselves as fitting into an academic world is critical to their intellectual engagement. As one Black grandmother in Los Angeles, CA, said:

“School should be a safe zone for a kid to be able to come and really be their self.”

A Black and Latino student in Oakland, CA, argued the importance of being able to be himself in school because:

“At the end of the day, my name is my brand, and I can’t separate personal and professional because — at the same time — I’m the same person.”

Teach our history

Participants noted the need for academic curricula to be more inclusive. Students must see balanced and non-stereotypical representations of themselves in their curricula because being reflected in their learning environments sends messages about whether they belong in their schools. Missing this has a profound effect on how they see themselves. A Latina student in Los Angeles explained:

“You know, not every Latino’s a farmer. There’s Latinos that are involved in law, you know, everything else. So, it’s like, just seeing our culture in the curriculum would be nice, because once we get to college, we know where we come from. So, you’re not gonna necessarily feel belittled when you see everyone around you is, you know, a different culture, or a different race.”

Black parents unanimously agreed, noting that a brief and shallow inclusion of their history in schools during Black History Month does not suffice. Across the country, this sentiment is being [echoed](#) — that teaching about the history of Black oppression should be met with equal time given to narratives of Black resistance and excellence; that Black history should be more holistic than just a few notable names being spoken over and over; and that it’s critical to discuss the still-existing mechanisms of White supremacy that systematically oppress people of color rather than end the teaching of Black history with the Civil Rights Movement.²⁴ As one Black parent in Chapel Hill, NC, said:

“Well, first of all, they need to put Black history back in our schools, and not just in February.”

Another Black parent in Houston, TX, exclaimed:

“Teach our history!”

Similarly, a Black student in Louisville, KY, expressed her frustration:

“I think that we should talk about other people, other than just Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King. ... I’ve been learning about that since I was like in first grade. ... I had to read myself about people like Malcolm X and things like that. ... Why can’t we talk about other people? Because we’ve been reviewing the same information for the past eight years.”

BEYOND ETHNIC STUDIES

A pilot program of ethnic studies classes in San Francisco high schools led to gains in student attendance and grades, as well as an increase in credit accumulation. These ethnic studies courses engage students by providing opportunities to examine the roles of race, nationality, and culture on identity, and the political and historical forces affecting racial, ethnic, and religious groups, all in an academic context. Research shows that ethnic studies classes have significant positive impacts on academic outcomes for students of color, and there are advantages to all students taking these courses. California's Department of Education is currently [working to revise and support](#) ethnic studies curricula for the state.***

*While this is a first step in recognizing the importance of including the histories of people of color, we hope states and districts will go beyond these courses by working to include this content in all aspects of academic curricula. Teaching the history and contribution of communities of color as a separate "ethnic studies" course perpetuates the notion that people of color are "outsiders" and are not part of "American" history. Additionally, beyond teaching this history, studying systemic racism and injustice throughout academic curricula encourages critical analytical skills and perspective taking, which are all skills important to academic development. [Seattle](#) is applying this concept in math.*** Math in the district's curriculum is reframed through a social justice lens and gives students opportunities to apply their skills to understand real inequities.*

*Dee, T., & Penner, E. (2016). The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance: Evidence from an Ethnic Studies Curriculum (CEPA Working Paper No.16-01). Retrieved from Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis: <http://cepa.stanford.edu/wp16-01>. **Fensterwald, J. (2020). California's schools chief states his position as his department revises ethnic studies curriculum. EdSource, <https://edsources.org/2020/californias-schools-chief-states-his-position-as-his-department-revises-ethnic-studies-curriculum/623427>; ***Seale, C. (2019, Nov 23). Seattle Public Schools' plan for math and social justice actually adds up. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/colinseale/2019/11/23/seattle-public-schools-plan-for-math-and-social-justice-actually-adds-up/#42006274ac2>



Diversify the teaching workforce

In addition to lack of representation of people of color in curricula, participants noted the lack of representation in their teachers. One Black father in Chapel Hill, NC, said succinctly:

“Hire more Black teachers.”

When students see themselves in their classrooms, they are more likely to feel they belong and build relationships with teachers and build trust in schools. And those relationships and trust are key to supporting social, emotional, and academic development.

A Black mother in Lexington, KY, shared one experience:

“I think that having a teacher that looks like you is very important. I went to an all-boys’ school last year to read to the kids — about 90% were Black. And all the teachers were White. The kids were rowdy, they weren’t listening; and the teachers were frustrated, and I just felt like they didn’t get [the boys]. I feel like they didn’t understand their culture, and they weren’t trying to.”

CHALLENGE STUDENTS TO THRIVE AND TRULY BELIEVE THEY CAN SUCCEED

Provide challenging coursework

Participants argued that students need to be challenged in school, and that doing so not only provides students academic stimulation but supports their sense of self and their emotional fulfillment. Contrary to the belief that students want it easy in school, many students we spoke with, regardless of whether they participated in advanced courses, expressed a desire to be challenged by their coursework. As one Black student in Lexington, KY, said:

“I think being successful for me would mean feeling challenged every day.”

Parents agreed. As one Black mother in Los Angeles said:

“They need to be challenged mentally.”

But too often students of color are not provided with challenging coursework²⁵ or have inequitable access to advanced course pathways.²⁶ This has an impact not only on students who are left out of these classrooms but also on the few who do gain access. One Black student in Louisville, KY, discussed her experience:

“I think being a Black girl had a little bit to do with [not feeling like I belong], especially because ... I took two AP classes my senior year, and in both of those classes, I was the only Black person. And I think that’s happened throughout my entire high school career.”

A Latina student had a similar experience:

“It’s been like a cultural shock when I go into programs and I see that like, 99% of the population there is either Caucasian or Asian of some type.”

Address adult bias

To ensure all students have access to rigorous coursework, adult biases must be addressed. When bias and deficit thinking creeps into decisions regarding what level of rigor students are ready for, students of color are sent the message that they aren’t able to handle these challenges.²⁷ This has a direct impact on skills and mindsets such as self-efficacy, or the belief in one’s ability to achieve goals, as well as on academic outcomes.²⁸ When students experience environments as hostile or uncaring, and when there is deep distrust in schools and educators, students’ intellectual engagement

gets suppressed — and gets interpreted by teachers as lack of motivation or lack of skills. Expressing deep belief in students' intellectual ability while simultaneously expressing deep commitment to support their academic success and social and emotional well-being can have transformative effects on student performance. But educators won't see that if they don't believe it or act on it. Believing that students of color can't succeed in rigorous coursework will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, when educators believe in their students, this also sends a message that parents and students appreciate. One Black parent in Los Angeles commented on the distinct reality that educators do not always have the same expectations of their children:

“Your expectations might not be as high as mine.”

A Black parent in Lexington, KY, commented on teachers who believed her daughter was ready for an advanced course pathway:

“I commend those teachers. ... Because they saw something in her.”

Another Black parent in Lexington, KY, noted that, while having same-race teachers matters, at the very least teachers who are not the same race should be culturally competent:

“If you can't have folks that look like you, at least have the ones in the place culturally competent so that they understand, and they don't just make assumptions.”

PROVIDE THE ACADEMIC AND HOLISTIC SUPPORTS STUDENTS NEED TO THRIVE

Partner with students, families, and communities

Because participants felt social-emotional learning begins in the home and community, and because families know their own cultural identities best, schools will need to listen to and partner with students, parents, and communities to support social, emotional, and academic development for students. Educators will need to become humble and interested learners. As one Latina mother in Oakland, CA, said:

“Parents have a lot to do with culture, and know their culture better than the schools that deal with everyone.”

Participants believed school leaders and educators should be partnering with parents and relying on their expertise about their own families. One Black mother in Chapel Hill, NC, recognizing that school can't do everything alone, suggested that there should be communication between schools and families:

“It's not a teacher's responsibility to spend half the day trying to get kids to act right, or do right. But, I do think that it's still a partnership — and I have a hard time with my son's school right now — because there should always be a social worker or a resource person ... I don't care what school you go to, what area you are in, where parents can go to that person.”

A Latina grandmother in Oakland, CA, noted that, while schools cannot be expected to do everything, there are other useful resources:

“There are more opportunities, more support, more organizations.”

School and district leaders should therefore find ways to partner with these organizations to support students in ways that schools may not have the capacity to do. Furthermore, schools should ensure that supports and services are available to all students without discrimination. A Latina mother in Tukwila, WA, stated from her own experience:

“Because being Latino, they sometimes discriminate against us in services.”

Provide holistic supports

Students frequently discussed the need for schools to support mental and physical health as well. For example, one Black student in Louisville, KY, said:

“I know that at our school, lots of people were depressed. Lots of people had anxiety. Things like that were everywhere, and it kind of became normalized, and it shouldn’t have been, right? We should’ve had [supports] and people should have been seeking help.”

Another student discussed how powerful an effective school counselor can be:

“We have a counselor that goes above and beyond the call of duty, and what she does is open doors and give opportunities.... Ultimately, you know, we’re the ones who step up and do it, but somebody in power, like, who opens doors, gives us opportunities.”

The message was that students who go hungry or have other unmet needs would be more likely to succeed in school if they are provided with the right supports. As one Black student said:

“A lot of people ... really don’t got a lot of money, so they resort to other things. ... So, I feel like [if] they had a program that could help them ... that could keep them focused.”

Additionally, participants spoke about the need for adults in schools to be prepared to support the holistic needs of students. One Black and Latino student in Oakland, CA, described an experience of a friend:

“I have a friend who suffers from, um, depression and anxiety, and she’ll have panic attacks. And she’s like, ‘How do I explain to my teacher I’m having a panic attack while I’m having a panic attack?’ So, I was like, [teachers] have to notice those cues that’s happening, and then understand, like, be trained on how to react to those.”

Given the existing research connecting social-emotional skills to academic outcomes, the current predominant narrative in social-emotional learning that often overlooks critical pieces of context, and the experiences of families and students of color, specific shifts in adult beliefs and mindsets as well as changes in systems and policies are needed to ensure social, emotional, and academic development is supported through an equity lens. Together, these shifts can significantly improve learning environments that support holistic development for all students.

TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS, TRANSFORMING OUTCOMES

In 2010, The Oakland Unified School District launched the [Office of African American Male Achievement](#) to address the inequitable patterns and processes in the systems, structures, and spaces that affect African American male students in the school district. The asset-based effort explicitly recognizes the innate excellence and racial and cultural identities of students with classes for Black male students, taught by Black male teachers on a range of social, emotional, and culturally relevant topics, while also focusing on how to address the systemic issues that create obstacles for students to thrive. Research shows that the program led to significant positive impacts for both Black male and Black female students in the district, such as lower dropout rates. Additionally, as a CASEL partner district for almost 10 years, Oakland has developed pre-K to Adult SEL Standards that integrate the teaching of social and emotional competencies across race, class, culture, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, learning needs, and age.*

* Dee, T., & Penner, E. (2019). *My brother's keeper? The impact of targeted educational supports* (CEPA Working Paper No.19-07). Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis: <http://cepa.stanford.edu/wp19-07>

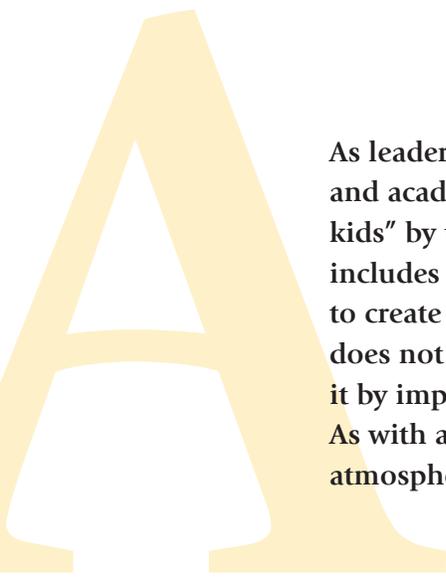
NEXT UP

Section Four: Shifting the Focus: Moving Away From “Fixing Kids” to Creating an Equitable Learning Environment



SECTION

SHIFTING THE FOCUS: Moving Away From “Fixing Kids” to Creating an Equitable Learning Environment

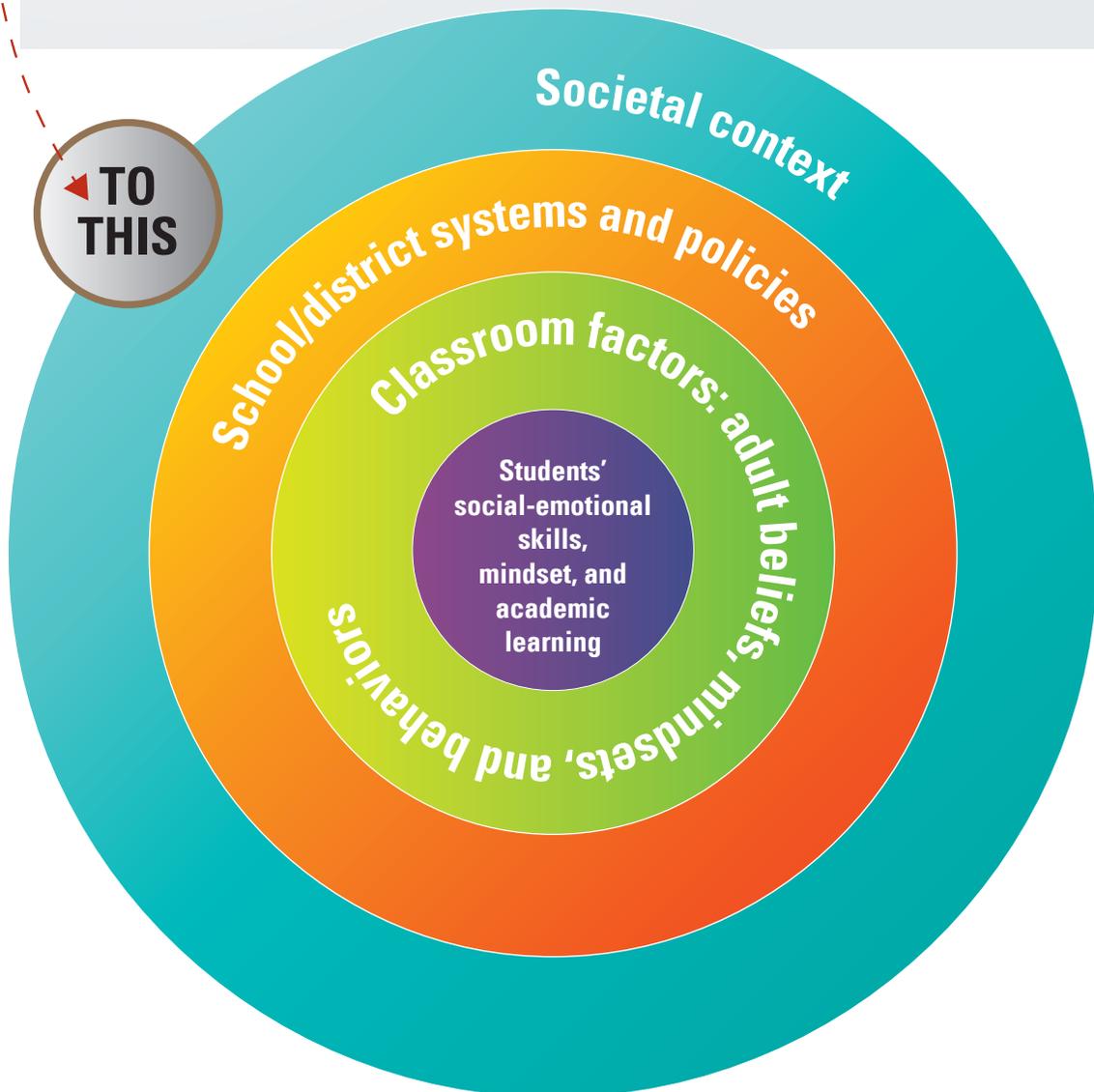
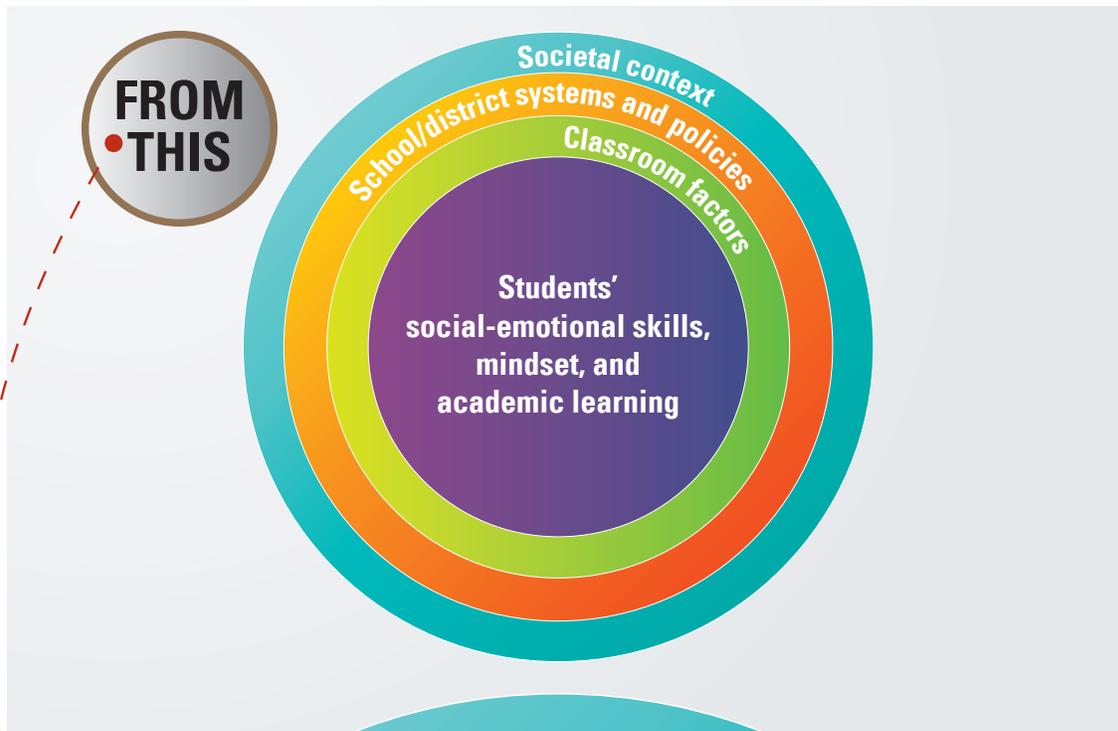


As leaders and influencers in the field argue, supporting students’ social, emotional, and academic development with an equity lens calls for a shift in focus: from “fixing kids” by teaching them specific competencies to a broader asset-based approach that includes a focus on adult beliefs and mindsets and the systems and policies necessary to create equitable learning environments that support holistic student success. This does not mean abandoning concern for social-emotional competence but supporting it by improving the learning environment and adults’ social-emotional competence.²⁹ As with anything that needs to grow, what good is fertilizer if the soil is toxic or the atmosphere lacks the proper elements to [thrive](#)?³⁰

Studies show a strong relationship between social-emotional skills and academic outcomes, and educators often cite this research as the reason for teaching these skills in schools.³¹ The hope is that social-emotional learning will contribute to educational equity by disproportionately benefiting children from low-income communities.³² But teaching students self-management and self-efficacy, while important, will have limited impact if school leaders do not address a toxic atmosphere due to discrimination or systemic racism. In fact, it can put the onus on students, sending the message that if they control their behavior and believe in themselves, they can overcome racism, sexism, homophobia, or lack of food or housing, or any other disadvantaged situation. Or, even worse, it can put educators and school leaders in the position of [continuing that harm](#).³³ It is especially critical, then, that approaches to supporting social-emotional learning are based in addressing the learning environments students experience and are used to ground academic learning to be compelling and meaningful for historically marginalized students.

It is up to adults to provide the supports and resources that all students need — from educators who challenge and believe in their students, to whole child supports that allow students to thrive, to a school climate and culture where students feel they belong. Unless leaders address existing systemic racist and harmful policies and practices, and unless adults in schools truly view all students as having the potential to thrive, a sole focus on teaching social-emotional competencies will become yet another approach that marginalizes students and families of color. Failing to respond to these mounting criticisms, social-emotional learning will be attacked and lose ground despite the clear science behind why it’s needed. Instead, by shifting the focus to address the context in which students learn, a focus on efforts to support social-emotional well-being can be used as a lever for equity and for evidence-based approaches that support learning and development for all students.

SHIFTING THE FOCUS



CHANGING ADULT BELIEFS AND MINDSETS

Adult biases, beliefs, and skills influence their behaviors in schools and classrooms, and in turn affect students' mindsets, beliefs, and skills. Educators' biases and beliefs about students, beliefs in their own abilities to make a difference, and their skills (e.g., classroom management and culturally sustaining pedagogy) influence instructional decisions such as what they choose to teach in the classroom, how they choose to teach it, and how they interact with students. We heard from our focus group participants that all of these experiences matter for social, emotional, and academic development. In addition to teachers and administrators, other adults, including bus drivers, cafeteria workers, janitorial staff, security staff, secretaries, and others, matter as well. Adult interactions with students across the entire school structure matter for social-emotional development, and too often, even well-intentioned adults in schools (much like well-intentioned adults outside of schools) have biases and beliefs that can harm students' development and overall achievement. These beliefs and mindsets are often reinforced when educators' approaches exclusively focus on teaching social-emotional skills to students without attention to learning environments and the contextual factors previously discussed. Educators and school leaders should aim to shift these beliefs and mindsets:



FROM A DEFICIT-BASED MINDSET TO A STRENGTH-BASED MINDSET



FROM ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL TO RECOGNIZING CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES



FROM ALLOWING BIAS TO IMPACT STUDENTS TO TARGETED AND CONTINUOUS EFFORTS TO REDUCE BIAS



From a deficit-based mindset to a strength-based mindset

FROM: As attention to this topic has increased over the past several decades, social-emotional leaders and influencers have tried to encourage educators and researchers to build on the strengths students already have.³⁴ Too often, however, the implementation of social-emotional efforts has resulted in a focus on identifying the “deficiencies” of historically marginalized students without attention to their strengths.

When social-emotional efforts target only specific competencies students should develop, the conversations often tend to focus on all of the challenges students face and the skills they are “missing.” This is particularly problematic, because while all students could benefit from meaningful social-emotional supports, the students typically being discussed are students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and English learners, who are already the targets of stereotypes about race and socioeconomic status. This focus on student shortcomings rather than student strengths inadvertently reinforces these deficit-oriented views of students and become another justification for low expectations. It's critical that educators maintain high expectations for all students.

TO: Efforts to support students' social-emotional growth should therefore begin by recognizing the assets students bring to the classroom and figuring out how to build on them both in and outside of the classroom. Many historically marginalized students frequently show tremendous resilience, self-awareness, and metacognition; have experience navigating and code switching in different environments; and have strong family and community connections, multilingualism, and cultural history and heritage. For example, rather than viewing a student who frequently cares for a family member as distracted

from school, the student should be recognized for the tremendous responsibility he or she shows outside of academics. With this positive mindset, school leaders can then work with students and their families to identify the unique combination of supports needed for students to exhibit that strength both at home and in school.

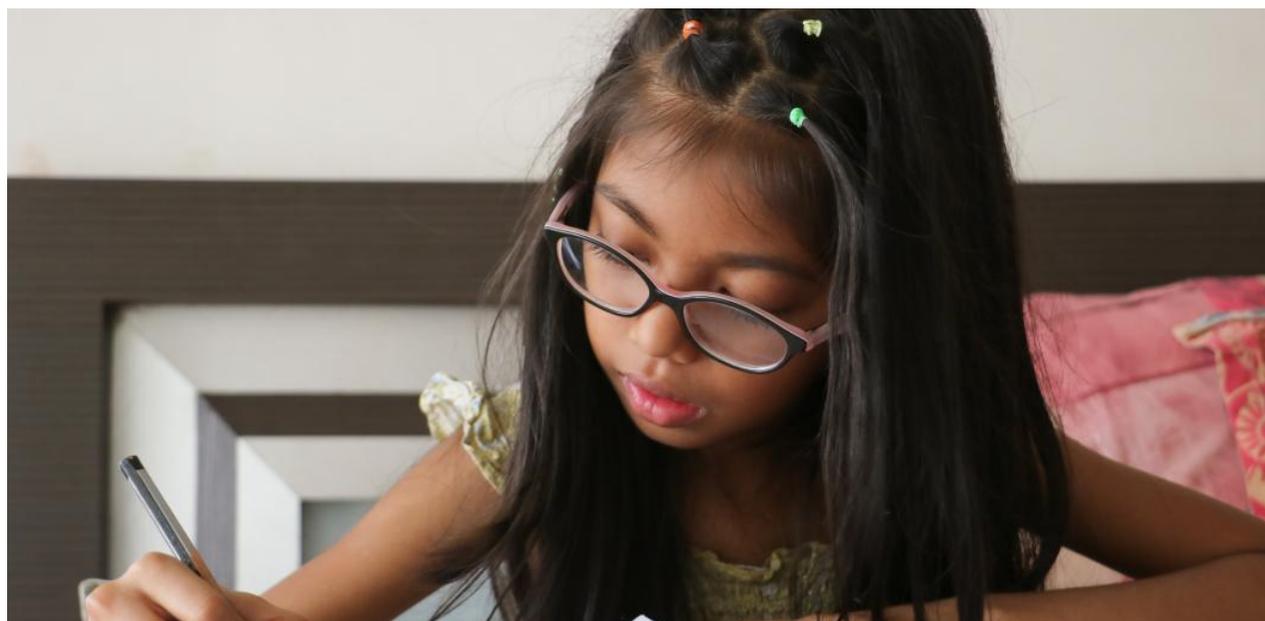


From one-size-fits-all to recognizing cultural and contextual influences

FROM: While many educators know that social-emotional learning is about more than simply skill building, almost all social-emotional work includes a focus on teaching specific competencies to students. All too often, however, educators separate these efforts from context and rely on an underlying assumption that these competencies should look the same for all students. This is inaccurate, and social-emotional learning must center issues of race and injustice.³⁵ What is appropriate management of emotions and behavior in one culture may be perceived as inappropriate by individuals from another culture. Given the culturally diverse population of the United States, it is not safe to assume that all students' growth in specific social-emotional competencies should appear the same, especially since norms in the United States are largely

based in Eurocentric White cultures. Educators must recognize these influences both on their students and on themselves, including the impact of privilege or the lack thereof.

TO: It's important to acknowledge the differences in students' lives, cultures, and prior classroom experiences.³⁶ For example, many students of color are already highly skilled at anger management, given their daily experiences with racism, and adults who interact with students should recognize such assets. (See **Recognizing the Advanced Social-Emotional Competence of Many Students of Color** on page 35.) While all students can benefit from learning to self-manage, educators should be cautious not to stymie the need for students, and especially students whose communities are historically underserved and discriminated against, to also learn to protest and resist against injustice in productive and democratic ways. Furthermore, White students may require differentiated social-emotional supports, such as in learning to be anti-racist, particularly since they have the responsibility to dismantle a racist system that discriminates against Black, Latino, and other students of color and they will need to learn to respectfully work with diverse populations as the country continues to diversify.





From allowing bias to impact students to targeted and continuous efforts to reduce bias

FROM: Bias can lead even the most well-intentioned and mission-driven adults in schools to disproportionately view students of color as missing social-emotional competence. Implicit bias may lead an educator to see a particular behavior as inappropriate for Black students but as something to dismiss for White students. This occurs in school discipline practices, where students of color are disproportionately punished for the same behaviors that White students exhibit.³⁷ Similarly, English language learners are often seen as academically at risk by virtue of their home language, rather than recognizing bilingualism as a critically important benefit to their lives and futures. More than this, students who are competent in many of these social-emotional skills are not given the opportunity to practice or show their competence. For example, when a biased teacher does not call on students of color in a classroom, the students are unable to show their belief in their abilities (self-efficacy), the work they've put into learning the material (self-management), or their skills to socially engage (relationship skills). These experiences may harm students' mindsets and their beliefs in their ability to achieve goals, which are critical success factors for students.

TO: Ensuring students are supported socially and emotionally is not a matter of teaching students to feel differently about the harms they experience in school, or how to behave — it's a matter of addressing the implicit and explicit biases of educators and adults who interact with students. This is especially important for social-emotional learning because, as discussed previously, social-emotional competence is not displayed uniformly across all students. Adopting restorative justice policies, working toward a positive school climate, systematically enrolling native Spanish speakers in AP Spanish, and utilizing culturally sustaining pedagogy, while steps toward progress, are only effective if educators are aware of their biases and are consciously working to reduce these effects on students with professional learning support from their schools and districts. Educators should explicitly state high expectations, build meaningful relationships with students, and welcome students' cultural values and beliefs into the classroom.

HOW IMPLICIT BIAS IMPACTS EDUCATOR BEHAVIOR

In [one minute and 28 seconds](#) Deborah Loewenberg Ball counted 20 separate micro-moments in which she had to decide how to react as a teacher, and further noted how racism and sexism can unintentionally creep into the classroom when teachers respond to student behavior. Even with good intentions, educators may cause harm to students' sense of belonging and confidence in using skills or exhibiting mastery of content if their implicit biases are not addressed. This video shows direct links in how an educator's mindset impacts their responses to student behavior, which in turn affects students' social-emotional well-being.

RECOGNIZING THE ADVANCED SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE OF MANY STUDENTS OF COLOR

We heard from all family members that they do value and want their children to learn social and emotional skills. What's more, from our focus group discussions, we learned that students and families of color often feel that they are already learning aspects of the social and emotional competencies named in most frameworks because of how they must navigate racism and racist systems and practices in society. They already have an advanced level of competence, while skill-building programs are often seeking to teach the basics that these students have already well surpassed. Furthermore, these students are not recognized for the higher levels of competency they already have.

Take, for example, the Black parent who referenced “the talk” that Black parents have with their children about how to handle interactions with police officers. Everyone, regardless of race, must self-manage (i.e., manage one's emotions and behaviors) when approached by a police officer, but given the continuous onslaught of police brutality within communities of color, Black boys and girls must learn to self-manage to a greater extent because of how their emotions and behavior might be perceived. Such situations present a threat to Black children's safety in a way that isn't true for White children and youth.

Furthermore, self-management has often been narrowed in concept to ensuring students behave in an “appropriate” way, ignoring the need for students, and especially students from historically marginalized backgrounds, to go against the grain in order to self-advocate. When speaking up for themselves, students of color have to demonstrate social-emotional skills above and beyond their peers by considering their tone, body language, and even facial expressions, even when fearful for their lives — all of which are frequently misjudged and may be seen as defiance rather than self-advocacy. This is when the notion of self-management becomes a harmful weapon. In these instances, students of color are excelling at a social-emotional competency, but bias is preventing educators from seeing it as an asset, and educators instead punish students they perceive to be talking back. This plays out in the disproportionate tendency to punish students of color for “defiance.”³⁸ Furthermore, this is an indication that educators themselves require support for social-emotional learning in order to commit to social justice.

Another example is in the focus on identity. Self-awareness is included in social-emotional frameworks but is usually defined with limited specifications, such as knowing one's own emotions and values. Racial, ethnic, and cultural identity involves a deeper regard for self-awareness that is not typically included in most definitions. For example, exploring one's own family, ethnic, or racial history and how that influences one's motivations, beliefs, and attitudes involves an underutilized way of supporting self-awareness in schools.³⁹ Furthermore, conversations about race and ethnicity are an important part of developing a strong racial-ethnic identity, which is critical for youth of color.⁴⁰

So, while schools and districts are being pushed to support basic skill-building levels of social-emotional learning, many students and families of color have surpassed these basics and are already at the next level. Unfortunately, these skills are not always acknowledged by educators. As adults in schools and school systems work to implement the vision laid out in this paper, these next-level skills should register as strengths and a sign of greater competency.

CHANGING SYSTEMS AND POLICIES

While improving adult beliefs and mindsets is important, it is also necessary to address existing systems and policies in schools in order to create equitable learning environments. To support students' social-emotional development, district and school leaders and policymakers should reimagine the policies and systems in place to ensure they are evidence based, not discriminatory or harmful for students of color, and will positively support social, emotional, and academic development. Part of this is ensuring social-emotional development is not treated as separate from academic learning: The two go hand in hand. Just as students must be engaged to learn more rigorous content, students of color are more likely to engage when they feel they belong in their classroom and believe in their ability to succeed. Policies and systems in place in schools, districts, and states should aim to:



FOSTER STUDENT BELONGING



CHALLENGE STUDENTS TO REACH THEIR POTENTIAL



PROVIDE ACADEMIC AND HOLISTIC SUPPORTS



Foster student belonging

All individuals are social learners, or put differently, social experiences are a part of learning. For example, it is critical for students, especially students of color, to see themselves as belonging in learning spaces. When students face stereotypes that make them feel like they don't belong in academic spaces, they are less motivated to engage academically. Belonging does not merely mean students feel comfortable sitting in a crowd, but that they are comfortable speaking up and that they are heard and valued for their agency [rather than punished for engagement and self-advocacy](#).⁴¹

To support students' social-emotional development, educators must believe and project the belief that each student has real value to add and assets to bring to the table, and district and school leaders must revisit a wide range of policies and structures to bolster the sense of belonging for students of color, English learners, and students from low-income backgrounds — who too often receive the message that they *aren't* welcome and *don't* belong. When educators don't see the assets that a student is bringing into the classroom, they should interpret that as a function of their own bias or that they are missing some information about the student. The onus is on adults to have the mindset to look for the assets and to reach out humbly to students and families to understand what they are missing. Policies related to discipline, educator diversity, representation in curricula, student-teacher relationships, [student voice](#), and culturally sustaining pedagogy for example, all play a role in whether students feel they belong in schools.⁴²



Challenge students to reach their potential

When bias creeps into schools and classrooms, educators are less likely to believe historically marginalized students can do challenging work.⁴³ This occurs both through personal biases educators bring with them into schools and through systems and structures that can promote bias, such as tracking.⁴⁴ These low expectations impact both the social-emotional development and the academic achievement of students. Indeed, research shows that when teachers underestimate their students' abilities, students themselves have lower expectations of themselves, and that this is especially true for Black and Latino students.⁴⁵ Educators may mistakenly believe that when students are not engaging it is because the material is too difficult. Easier material, however, doesn't make students engage more. If anything, the opposite is true. Providing challenging work for students and encouraging students to reach their potential leads to higher academic outcomes and more positive social-emotional development.⁴⁶ School leaders and educators should therefore adopt policies that encourage learning environments where adults have high expectations of students and communicate those high expectations to students and their families, such as automatically enrolling students into advanced courses based on metrics such as GPA or test scores, rather than only enrolling students based on subjective measures such as teacher and counselor recommendations, which create artificial barriers.



Provide academic and holistic supports

Students need academic and holistic resources that support and scaffold learning. Social-emotional development is integrally influenced by the realities of society, including experiences with race and socioeconomic status. Separating the experiences of students' lives outside the classroom from their ability to learn within the classroom does a disservice to students. For example, students experiencing food or housing insecurity will not be able to give their full attention to their education unless these needs are addressed. This does not mean school systems need to be responsible for all facets of students' lives, but they should ask whether and how their decisions provide supports for students in their context. Therefore, school personnel should ensure they are providing holistic supports, as well as connecting students to resources outside of school and including student and community voice throughout these efforts.

Additionally, supporting students should be seen as contradictory to policies that disproportionately harm historically marginalized students. For example, Black students are much more likely to be suspended or expelled, and so zero-tolerance policies, corporal punishment, exclusionary discipline, and other harmful discipline policies should be replaced with policies and practices, such as restorative justice, that support social, emotional, and academic development.⁴⁷

NEXT UP

Section Five: Where to Start: Action Items for Equitably Approaching Social, Emotional, and Academic Development



SECTION

WHERE TO START:

**Action Items for Equitably
Approaching Social,
Emotional, and Academic
Development**

The work needed to fundamentally change schools to integrate supports for social-emotional well-being into all aspects of schooling will not happen overnight, or even in a single year. Working to reverse 400 years of systemic oppression will require generational change. But school and district leaders can get started by following the list of recommendations below. This is not a comprehensive list; even when fully checked off, the work is not done. School and district leaders will need to continually assess whether their policies foster belonging, challenge students, and provide the supports students need to thrive.

HERE ARE SIX RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS:

Each recommendation, done well, should advance the goals outlined in Section 4:

 FROM A DEFICIT-BASED MINDSET TO A STRENGTH-BASED MINDSET	 FROM ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL TO RECOGNIZING CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES	 FROM ALLOWING BIAS TO IMPACT STUDENTS TO TARGETED AND CONTINUOUS EFFORTS TO REDUCE BIAS	 FOSTER STUDENT BELONGING	 CHALLENGE STUDENTS TO REACH THEIR POTENTIAL	 PROVIDE ACADEMIC AND HOLISTIC SUPPORTS
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1

Provide meaningful professional development and supports. Teacher preparation programs should be held responsible for ensuring teachers entering the workforce have the skills needed to create culturally affirming environments, to build relationships with and understand their students, to support students’ academic success, as well as have mindsets geared toward anti-racism. For teachers already in schools, professional development to support them in developing these skills and mindsets is critical. District and school leaders should provide ongoing high-quality opportunities such as embedded coaching for educators to continually grow in these areas; one-time workshops do not provide sufficient support for educators to practice and improve these skills. Additionally, professional development on these topics should be provided to all adults in the education system rather than restricted to teachers and administrators. While professional development of this kind can be one of the primary tools to changing adult beliefs and mindsets, it is insufficient without both creating systemic opportunities for educators to build relationships with their communities and making changes to systems and policies, such as in the examples below.

Equity-focused school, district, and state leaders can provide high-quality and ongoing professional development and coaching on:

Reducing bias and developing anti-racist mindsets ⁴⁸ 	Culturally sustaining pedagogy 	Restorative justice practices ⁴⁹ 
Positive classroom management ⁵⁰ 	Student, family, community, and cultural strengths 	Changing mindsets for empathic discipline ⁵¹ and to provide feedback that conveys high standards and belief that students can succeed ⁵² 

2

Engage parents, students, and communities as full partners. By strengthening educator relationships with students, families, and communities, adult beliefs and mindsets will shift through experiences with, and deepen understanding of, the students and communities they serve.⁵³ This includes engaging and being engaged by parents and youth. It is critical that school leaders take on the responsibility of ensuring the voices of students and parents of color, and those from low-income backgrounds and other historically marginalized backgrounds are centered in policy and practice decisions.

Equity-focused school and district leaders can:

Use reliable climate and voice surveys, [such as these free surveys available from the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments](#), to determine needed areas of school improvement⁵⁴



Co-create school and district policies with families and students



Create student-teacher advisory groups



Adopt a home visit program and provide support and time for educators to participate, including [training and ongoing support](#) about what to do in a home visit⁵⁵



Include more time and support for parent-teacher conferences, including training and ongoing support about how to make best use of this time



Provide translation services to communicate with families who find it easier to participate with language supports



3

Diversify the workforce. Educators of color are more likely to have higher expectations for their students of color and benefit the social-emotional and non-academic needs of students of color.⁵⁶ Students of color and White students also feel cared for and academically challenged by teachers of color.⁵⁷ Additionally, research shows that Black students who have at least one Black teacher are less likely to drop out of school and more likely to enroll in college,⁵⁸ and teacher-student racial matches affect social-emotional and academic skills.⁵⁹ By working to diversify the teacher workforce and retain diverse teachers, leaders will foster belonging and challenge students to thrive.

Equity-focused school, district, and state leaders can work to diversify the teacher workforce by:

Creating proactive hiring strategies (e.g., hiring earlier in the year and including teachers of color in the hiring process) that increase hiring of educators of color who are committed to racial equity⁶⁰



[Improving working](#)
environments and conditions
to retain educators of color⁶¹



Prioritizing recruiting and
retaining bilingual educators⁶²



School, district, and state leaders can examine our publications on hiring and retaining educators of color (linked above) for deeper analyses of actions they can take.



4

Ensure equitable access to and supports for success in rigorous and culturally sustaining coursework. Because students must be challenged in schools and encouraged to meet high expectations, leaders should ensure all students have access to rigorous, [deeper learning](#) and culturally sustaining curricula, and the supports they need to succeed.⁶³ When students are able to both see themselves in the work and see that schools are challenging them to thrive, what follows is a belief in themselves to reach their goals.⁶⁴

Equity-focused school and district leaders can:

Adopt rigorous curricula that provide a balanced and non-stereotypical representation of ethnically, culturally, and racially diverse students



Integrate SEL into rigorous academic instruction and pedagogy



Ensure inclusive opportunities for historically marginalized students to gain access to advanced course pathways



A FRAMEWORK FOR TRANSFORMING STUDENT EXPERIENCES

The [Building Equitable Learning Environments Network](#) has developed a [framework](#) that lays bare the structural inequities that have affected students, and provides a guide to transform student experiences and learning outcomes. The framework offers action items to create equitable learning environments that support the holistic development of students, with an eye toward racial equity.



5

Develop inclusive discipline and dress code policies. Discipline and dress code policies have too often been used to further marginalize students of color and disproportionately exclude them from schools.⁶⁵ When students are pushed out of schools based on arbitrary standards of acceptable clothing or hairstyles, or when discipline policies are used to disproportionately suspend or expel students of color for minor infractions, these students are sent the message that they do not belong in school or that what they wear is more important than what they learn.

Equity-focused school and district leaders should revisit these policies and ensure they:

Do not discriminate based on race or gender



Adopt positive discipline policies focused on developing, maintaining, and repairing relationships, rather than retributive and exclusionary consequences



Include parent and student input in discipline and dress code policies



End exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., suspensions, expulsions), particularly for PK-5 grades



[End corporal punishment](#)⁶⁶



Divest from efforts to “harden” schools, such as bringing in school resource officers or metal detectors, and prioritize investing in supportive personnel such as school counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and others



School, district, and state leaders can examine our forthcoming discipline guide for a deeper analysis of actions they can take.

6

Provide access to integrated wraparound services and supports. In addition to providing academic supports, leaders should work to ensure all students have access to the nonacademic supports they need to thrive. These wraparound supports must be youth and family driven, be individualized, utilize interconnected systems, monitor progress, and be culturally competent.⁶⁷ When educators and school leaders cannot provide the health supports students need, they can work with community resources to ensure these students' needs are met by working collaboratively with community-based organizations and agencies and ensuring that services are integrated.

Equity-focused school and district leaders can work to ensure students have access to wraparound services and supports by:

Developing early warning systems to identify who needs supports and adopting multi-tiered systems of support to meet student needs



Hiring sufficient school support staff, including school counselors and school psychologists⁶⁸



Adopting a [community schools model](#)⁶⁹



Partnering with community-based organizations and other government agencies to provide services schools are unable to provide



Integrating and supporting collaboration among social-emotional, health, and wraparound services to ensure a streamlined effort to holistically support students



Collaborating with other agencies, such as law enforcement, hospitals, etc., to adopt Handle With Care policies that alert school personnel when students may have experienced an emergency situation



[Assisting students and families to receive sufficient and affordable health care](#) (e.g., access to Medicaid, signing up for health insurance through the Affordable Care Act, developing processes for schools to claim Medicaid reimbursements)⁷⁰



A CALL TO ACTION

Educators and learning environments are affecting the social-emotional development and well-being of students in every practice and policy decision. School and district leaders and policymakers must use an explicit equity lens to support the social, emotional, and academic development of all students. This means broadening the way social-emotional learning is discussed beyond thinking about students' individual competencies. Adult beliefs and mindsets and the systems and policies in place must create equitable learning environments that foster belonging, challenge all students to thrive, and provide holistic supports.

School leaders should consider changing the learning environments as the first step to support social, emotional, and academic development for students, and it should be done with meaningful engagement with students, families, and communities as partners and decision makers. Importantly, these changes should happen before opting for social-emotional programs that solely provide explicit instruction on competencies without attention to context, for doing so can too easily result in policing students to assimilate to White upper-middle-class norms and hindering their social, emotional, and academic development.

This report provides starting points in understanding the importance of shifting the focus to addressing context, hearing the perspectives of students and families of color, and providing recommendations for how to leverage policy to create a more equitable learning environment. These are only starting points, however; the work is in the hands of school and district leaders and policymakers to continue.



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The Education Trust is a national nonprofit that works to close opportunity gaps that disproportionately affect students of color and students from low-income families. Through our research and advocacy, Ed Trust supports efforts that expand excellence and equity in education from preschool through college; increase college access and completion, particularly for historically underserved students; engage diverse communities dedicated to education equity; and increase political and public will to act on equity issues.



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