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Your Expert Guide to Supporting the Health & Wellbeing of Students Through Social-Emotional Learning

How the Long-Ranging Benefits of SEL Help Students Return to In-Person Learning

Social-Emotional Learning SOLUTION OF THE YEAR

EDTECH BREAKTHROUGH AWARD 2023

An Introduction to SEL

Supporting the health and wellbeing of students begins with social-emotional learning, or SEL. While some may use social-emotional learning synonymously with character development, it truly goes beyond that. SEL creates an avenue for students to explore their emotions and deepen their understanding of others. It is proven to positively impact students' academic achievement and build their sense of empathy, both now and in the future.

Students should be able to apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes developed in their SEL program to lead a happy and healthy life. Additionally, SEL programs have a crucial impact on school climate. Research shows that students who participate in high-quality SEL programs are better able to manage their stress, interact more appropriately with peers and adults, and exhibit fewer challenging behaviors that can disrupt learning. In turn, this leads to better grades and increased scores in standardized testing.

Meet the Expert: Dr. Crystal Ladwig

Dr. Crystal Ladwig is a veteran special education teacher, professor and researcher-turned-homeschool-mom. She has vast expertise working with children with learning disabilities, challenging behaviors, autism and mental health issues. She is a published author and veteran speaker at state, national and international conferences and has extensive experience in educational research, project evaluation, course instruction and social-emotional learning.

Dr. Ladwig has a bachelor's degree in special education and a master's degree in special education with early childhood emphasis from Florida State University. He holds a Ph.D. in special education with early childhood emphasis from the University of South Florida. Alongside her role with Navigate360, Dr. Ladwig serves as an advisory board member for Boon-dah Publications and is an adjunct professor at Saint Leo University.

On-Demand Webinar Featuring Dr. Ladwig

SUPPORTING THE HEALTH & WELLBEING OF STUDENTS THROUGH SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Because the impact of the pandemic is expected to be both far-reaching and long-lasting, it's difficult to imagine a more critical time to support students and staff. Implementing a social-emotional learning curriculum is not a question of "if" but "how." Learn the fundamentals of an effective SEL program, what schools are looking for in SEL, and how to implement a program that stands the test of time.
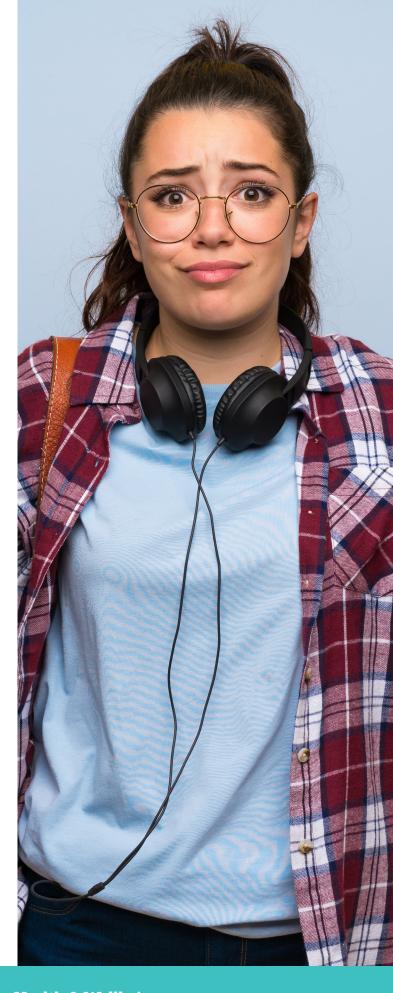
WATCH NOW

Addressing the Current Landscape of Student Health and Wellbeing

CURRENT TEEN SENTIMENTS ON PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY

A recent **Navigate 360/Zogby Safety and Wellbeing Poll** surveyed 16– and 17-year-olds to learn how the pandemic, ensuing economic crisis, and racial justice movement have affected their lives and sense of safety. The result? Teenagers are incredibly concerned about both their physical and emotional needs:

- More than half of teens (53%) are thinking more about their physical and emotional safety than they were six months ago.

- Less than a quarter of teens (23%) believe their school is prepared to handle the mental health issues that students face, and only 38% of respondents feel that school officials can create a physically and emotionally safe atmosphere in the classroom.

- More than half of teens (54%) feel their schools are not prepared to respond to emergencies and mental health needs.

- When asked where they feel safest, schools consistently came in last compared to places such as after-school jobs, places of worship, restaurants, and stores.

These factors will certainly weigh on students as they return to their classrooms. With so much to unpack from the past year, it will be vital for educators to offer tools and strategies that help students process and understand complex thoughts, feelings and emotions.

Post-COVID Re-Entry for Students and Staff

The post-COVID re-entry process is not an isolated event. Throughout the past year, it has happened over and over again as schools re-open for in-person learning, as different holidays and breaks occur, and during periods of quarantine due to COVID exposures. What's more, the fall of 2021 will bring more changes to the school landscape as the vast majority of students across the country will be back to in-person learning. Some of these students will have spent the last 18 months at home and in isolation. Integrating back into a school environment may be a difficult transition, one that can be helped through SEL programming.
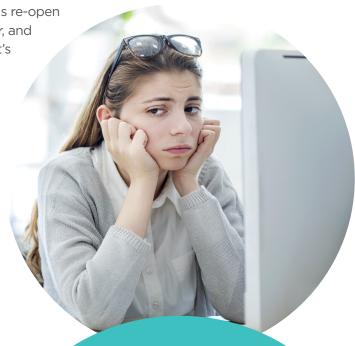
As teachers try to preserve a sense of normalcy in the classroom while also providing a high level of academic learning, many feel:

- Anxious
- Fearful
- Worried
- Overwhelmed and overworked
- Sad

COVID has introduced trauma into our lives in various ways. Everyone has worried about losing someone, contracting COVID, or having someone they love contract COVID. Many among us have lost a loved one, and everyone has lost their sense of connectedness with other people. Many families are dealing with economic hardship due to a loved one losing their job because of the pandemic. Unfortunately, COVID trauma comes in all shapes and sizes, and nobody is immune from it.

While not all students will experience trauma, they will all face challenges at some point in their lives, so all can benefit from learning skills for managing adversity. A trauma-sensitive environment that supports students' needs to feel safe and supported — paired with strong adult social-emotional competencies and SEL supports for students — helps to cultivate healthy student behaviors and opportunities to thrive in the face of difficulties and hardships.

RE-ENTRY SNAPSHOT: STUDENTS

Many students are feeling a whirlwind of emotions right now, such as:
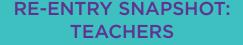
STRESS

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

ISOLATION

LONELINESS

GRIEF

That's why developing trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning programs are especially essential right now. A trauma–informed school believes in the concept of "Maslow before Bloom," which describes how students must get their basic needs met before they can process higher-order learning. They must be able to talk to their teachers, administrators and other trusted adults and feel as if their emotions and experiences matter. Students need to feel safe at school — including feeling safe from contracting COVID — and that their basic needs of health and safety are being met. This is how students learn to process their emotions and attain a basic level of safety in order to move into higher-order learning.

Additionally, a trauma-sensitive school focuses on its staff just as much as its students. Before COVID, teachers were already overwhelmed, burned out and dealing with compassion fatigue. COVID has only added more stressors to their already-full plates. Everyone working in a school setting — from administrators and teachers to cafeteria workers and custodial staff — should feel they have the support and skills they need to take care of themselves during trying times.

RE-ENTRY SNAPSHOT: TEACHERS

As teachers try to preserve a sense of normalcy in the classroom while also providing a high level of academic learning, many feel:

ANXIOUS

FEARFUL

WORRIED

OVERWHELMED

OVERWORKED

SAD

Common Behavioral Concerns and Contributing Factors

There are four areas of common behavioral concerns that have resulted from the pandemic: Learning loss, depression and anxiety, loneliness and isolation, and acting out and aggressive behaviors. These concerns impact students in various ways.
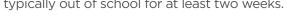
LEARNING LOSS

One of the top concerns for educators across the country is learning loss. Three prominent factors have contributed to this loss:

- **Virtual schooling is not effective for all students:** COVID thrust students into an entirely different learning environment, and many were not well-equipped. It takes time to learn how to be an effective student using online school, but students and educators had to pivot to this format quickly, leading to many students falling behind. The simple truth is that some students learn better in a classroom setting.

- **High rates of absenteeism:** Educators are now seeing high rates of absenteeism and more extended absences. This can be due to students who have to quarantine after exposure to COVID, families that are afraid to send their children to school for health reasons, and students who have contracted COVID. Additionally, extended absences are contributing to learning loss as students who have been exposed to or have COVID are typically out of school for at least two weeks.

- **Lack of technology and Internet access:** Many students, especially minority and lower-income students, may fall behind because they lack the right technology or dependable Internet access. They are unable to even begin the process of virtual learning.

DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

There are a handful of factors that contribute to students feeling more depressed and anxious than ever before, all of which can have a snowball effect and keep them locked in a cycle of sadness and fear. Consider how some of these factors are affecting students today:

- Prolonged isolation: Humans thrive when connected with others, so it makes sense that students are feeling depressed about being away from their friends, their school, their favorite places, their sports teams, and their extracurricular activities.

- Grief and loss: Students have lost a lot this year. They may have lost loved ones, milestone events, and other opportunities. For some students, important academic contests and national competitions may have been canceled, limiting opportunities they thought they had.

- Uncertainty: Many students are dealing with uncertainty due to the pandemic. Be it parents who lost jobs, worrying about money, or the loss of reliable school-provided meals, students have a lot to grapple with these days.

- Monotony: The monotony of everyday life can be taxing on a student, especially those who are doing online school and do not have extracurricular activities, friends and sports to break up the day.

- Getting behind in school: Students are anxious about catching up academically if they've fallen behind, and teachers are worried about this, too. This anxiety can be exacerbated for high schoolers who may wonder if they will catch up in time to graduate and be ready for college.

LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

Loneliness and isolation can deeply contribute to depression and anxiety for students, so it's an important behavioral concern to consider. There are a variety of factors that lead to these feelings, including:

- Remote learning
- Having to quarantine from others
- Extracurriculars being canceled or limited in scope
- Becoming ill with COVID-19
- Older students not being able to work or find a part-time job

AGGRESSION AND ACTING OUT

Aggression and acting out are common behavioral patterns for students who are dealing with depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues, and it's a concern for educators who are noticing these behaviors as students return to school. There are a variety of factors that contribute to aggression and acting out:

- Students may lack coping skills to effectively process their emotions about the pandemic.

- Students may lack support at home and haven't had a place to talk about their feelings.

- Students may lack knowledge about how to access their feelings and express them appropriately

- Students may lack awareness of their own social, emotional, or mental health issues.

Helping these students develop their social-emotional skills can provide a way for them to better understand and process their emotions. In turn, they will be able to respond appropriately during times of stress and anxiety.

How to Support These Issues and More Through Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

CONSIDERATIONS FOR AN EFFECTIVE SEL PROGRAM

An effective SEL program has six key components. They are:

- **Customizable:** The content should be highly customizable to meet students, teachers and families right where they are.

- **Grade-appropriate:** The content should be differentiated based on grade level and should grow and mature as students do the same. Students should be presented with scenarios and images that help them relate to their lives now.

- **Aligned with CASEL:** The CASEL framework is the gold standard, and an effective SEL program aligns with its core competencies.

- **Flexible:** High-quality SEL programs strive to meet students at an individual level. For example, if a student is struggling with anxiety right now, the teacher should customize lessons that relate to the anxiety the student is feeling.

- **Include assessments:** Regular assessments help schools make informed decisions about their SEL programs. This data can help schools learn which SEL skills students are struggling with, which instructional tools are working or not working, and more.

- **Multilingual:** A high-quality SEL program must be able to meet the diverse language needs of students. Having a program that includes language translations and read-aloud options helps to make it accessible to everyone.

WHAT IS CASEL AND WHY SHOULD SEL STANDARDS ALIGN WITH ITS COMPETENCIES?

CASEL — the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning — developed five core competencies crucial for effective SEL programs: Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. CASEL believes that social-emotional learning isn't something that only takes place in the classroom, but also with the other people students interact with throughout their school days. This includes bus drivers, cafeteria workers, administrators and school nurses. All of these people have the potential to make a positive impact on students. What's more, this learning should also incorporate families and community leaders so that students can talk about the issues they are experiencing both at home and at school.

PUTTING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING INTO PRACTICE

An effective SEL program will incorporate the acronym S.A.F.E. into its curriculum. S.A.F.E. stands for:

- **Sequenced:** Students have a coordinated set of activities that they can build on, starting at a low level and scaffolding upwards.
- **Active:** With active learning, students understand how to apply the lessons in real-world settings.
- **Focused:** The lessons emphasize the development of personal and social skills.
- **Explicit:** Each lesson targets specific social-emotional skills.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF WELL-EXECUTED SEL PROGRAMS

The research doesn't lie: There are a lot of positive outcomes of a well-executed SEL program. Take a look at some of the expected results:

- **Increased student engagement:** Students can pay attention for longer periods and have better focus to take their learning to the next level.
- **Long-term knowledge retention:** SEL helps students absorb more content, and absorb it more deeply, to allow for long-term retention.
- **Improved social behavior:** Students can better manage their own emotions and have improved attitudes about themselves and their classmates.
- **Increased academic performance:** All of the above leads to students who succeed academically.

SEL provide students with a wide range of social-emotional skills that serve them well throughout their schooling and into adulthood. For example, they will have better self-awareness and self-efficacy, maintain more positive relationships throughout their lives, and be more prepared for college and beyond. SEL can also help students be proactive with their mental health and take measured steps to effectively manage their anxiety and depression. Furthermore, SEL develops engaged citizens who make a difference in the world around them.

S.A.F.E.

Conclusion

It's clear that social-emotional learning programs have vast and long-ranging benefits for students, educators, families and communities. What's more, they can have an economic impact, too. According to the Journal of Cost-Benefit Analysis, for every $1 invested in SEL programming, there is a return on investment (ROI) of $11.

As schools and districts go about implementing SEL programs, it's important to remember that the content must be optimized to meet the learning needs and preferences of today's students. Gen Z and Gen Alpha students are digitally savvy and highly connected. SEL programs must be visually engaging and accessible via web-based platforms and mobile apps to draw these students in and make an impact in their daily lives.

Learn more about social-emotional learning and the benefits these programs can provide by checking out **The Complete Guide to Social-Emotional Learning.**

Suite360 Social-Emotional Learning and Restorative Curriculum is the most effective way to engage students, staff and caregivers with the information they need to support a successful school career and future.

Launch Your SEL Program with Help from the Experts

Visit navigate360.com/sel to get started or give us a call at 330-661-0106.

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