

INTRODUCTION

There has long been interest in social-emotional learning (SEL) in education, but SEL has recently become a priority. In Nevada, students' SEL needs increased significantly during the COVID-19 crisis, especially with the extended closure of schools in the state from March 2020 to April 2021 and [notably for our students of color, many of whom were disproportionately affected by the COVID crisis](#).¹ Most middle and high school students did not attend in-person learning in Nevada until the fall semester of 2021.

As Teach Plus Nevada Policy Fellows, current classroom teachers in Nevada, and teacher leaders, we've witnessed first-hand how the COVID-19 pandemic and school building closures impacted students' social emotional connections and cognitive well-being, resulting in ongoing traumatic stress. We believe that we must effectively support our students' [SEL needs to improve their outcomes](#) and ensure their academic achievement and success.² In this memo, we are providing context for the necessary policy considerations surrounding social-emotional learning. Our reflections are rooted in the student and teacher panels we conducted, and in research-based SEL implementation practices that bring meaningful support for all stakeholders in education, in and out of the classroom.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

COVID-19 exacerbated the educational challenges within Clark County School District (CCSD). At the height of the pandemic in January 2021, CNN [reported](#) that CCSD had the highest student suicide rates in the country, with an increase of almost 50% compared to the previous year.³ As the pandemic continued, our students' SEL needs also grew, despite teachers' efforts to address those needs through ongoing student wellness checks and hybrid instruction. A year later, CNN [reported](#) that mental health challenges for students across the country were at an all-time high. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) subsequently updated its protocols and programming that support the social-emotional learning and well-being of students, families, and communities.⁴

CASEL publishes the industry-accepted [Framework](#) for supporting SEL needs on and off-campus for students.⁵ This Framework includes self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness; with a commitment to SEL as "[an essential part of education](#)".⁶ For students to thrive, there must be adequate and effective SEL instruction integrated within the classroom. As this SEL structure is built, it must be supported

through authentic partnerships with families and community stakeholders. The CASEL Framework promotes a whole-child approach that cannot be achieved in isolation. As we address the educational challenges and needs of our students throughout the state, it is imperative that we invest in effective implementation of SEL practices in our districts' classrooms.

STUDENT AND EDUCATOR PANELS: REFLECTIONS

Mindful of the many SEL challenges that students in our classroom are experiencing, we convened a student panel discussion in order for students from CCSD to reflect upon their educational experiences, most specifically SEL. The themes that emerged from the students' reflections aligned with several components of the CASEL Framework, including relationship building, social awareness, and self-management.

Relationship Building: Students expressed a deep desire to build strong relationships with their teachers, noting that this provided them with a sense of belonging. They articulated a need for more school staff who value them as people first, rather than grades or test scores, and asked for more on-campus resources to support their well-being. There was unanimous agreement amongst the panel that opportunities for social connectedness with their peers were crucial to their success and happiness. Students shared that their school environment did not provide enough of these opportunities because they are too fast-paced, allowing no time for socializing, self-reflection, or even mental breaks.

Social Awareness: The students on our panel highlighted a need for teachers who exhibit compassion and understanding for their students. They felt that their mental and emotional well-being were not prioritized or even considered in the scope of schooling. Students noted that they had many experiences of feeling as if perfection was required of them. These impossible expectations felt alienating and demotivating, contributing to issues with their self-esteem and performance. Students also expressed feeling unsafe in classrooms where teachers were not knowledgeable of the subject matter, where the scope and sequence felt rushed or encumbered, and where student behavior was a disruption to the learning environment.

Self-Management: Students conveyed a longing for more personal agency and student voice, requesting faculty support in this. They specifically mentioned the need for more project-based learning activities and less of a focus on summative assessments as an indicator of mastery.

Reflections from the educator panel paralleled those from the student panel. With regards to relationship-building, teachers unanimously agreed that this was the most important factor when it comes to student motivation and success. Teachers offered personal anecdotes of how prioritizing relationships over grades has resulted in higher student achievement in their own classrooms. Teachers on the panel also provided anecdotal evidence of how their own social-emotional awareness helped them to better support their students; they emphasized that compassion and understanding went a long way. Student choice and agency were also mentioned as a key strategy in their social-emotional learning practices, noting that students performed better when they had a say in how they demonstrated their knowledge and when they were given grace for being human. Students simply achieve more when they feel supported by their teacher. Educators echoed the sentiments of students by expressing that high professional demands contribute to teacher burnout and negatively affect the classroom environment by reducing teacher performance. Those most significantly impacted by teacher burnout are our students. If we want to improve student performance, we need to collectively agree to reduce the pressure on teachers and students to perform at their best at all times. There is overwhelming [evidence](#) that teaching and learning is best for students when social-emotional competencies are integrated.⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

1. Require the addition of SEL and CASEL Framework Components to all Teacher Preparation Programs in Universities and Colleges

Presently, only a few teacher preparation programs in Nevada include social-emotional learning strategies in their coursework. Of those programs, there are none that include *all* of the [components](#).⁸ This has left a significant portion of the educator workforce without an adequate foundation for meeting the needs of students on a social-emotional level. Teachers are well prepared to teach content but do not possess the professional skills necessary to respond to their students' mental and emotional needs. Colleges and universities that offer teacher preparation programs should include the components of the CASEL Framework. This bedrock of evidence-based strategies for social-emotional learning is critical for new teachers to learn as they prepare to address the needs of their future students.

2. Provide Authentic, Targeted Professional Development for Teachers

Providing ongoing professional development requires investing in authentic professional development opportunities for each educator. Though each district in Nevada has ongoing professional development opportunities to support various content areas (Math, English, Electives, etc.), teachers also need to deepen their understanding of SEL. Such programs are available nationally. For example, CASEL-based and certified through the Regional Yoga Alliance

[*Breathe for Change*](#)⁹ is a 200hr yoga, meditation, and social skills program. [*Breathe for Change*](#)⁹ includes training on trauma-informed practices for learners at *all* levels. By investing in teachers becoming certified in this program, the state would ensure educators can engage in SEL practices and enhance their mental health and social needs. Participation in the program could be determined based on district need and the state could offer scholarships to educators to offset the program's cost.

3. Provide Authentic, Whole-School/District SEL Training to Create an Engaged School and Community Culture

We believe the entire school community must be invested in SEL instruction on its campus. One program that offers such training is [*Capturing Kids Hearts*](#).¹⁰ This program allows the entire school staff, including teachers and administration, to connect to students using practices that invite students to be part of how they participate in school through social contracts, listening cues, and welcoming messages daily as they arrive to class.

The implementation of SEL should not fall solely on teachers. Social-emotional learning practices are a group effort, requiring the support of the entire [*school community and the surrounding community*](#) the school resides in.¹¹ We should aim for a culture of SEL throughout the school and a partnership between parents, families, and community allies to ensure that students are emotionally supported. This is the responsibility of not just teachers, but also coaches, administrators, parents, families, and community members, as well as legislators and other district or state decision-makers responsible for drafting policies that affect the efficacy of such SEL initiatives.

CONCLUSION

With students expressing a deep desire for social-emotional learning practices and the mounting evidence proving its effectiveness, we must focus on training teachers in these practices and building them into solutions to the challenges schools face. The students on our panel were clear that building relationships are a precursor to their academic success. Educators on our panel also shared stories of success with SEL in their classrooms. Students learn best when they feel psychologically safe. For SEL to be most effective, it must be a part of the school culture and of the school community. District officials should partner with educators and administrators to make this a reality and provide the resources necessary for schools to build a culture around SEL. Most importantly, we should continue listening to the voices of students and educators as we undertake the effort of embedding SEL in our education system.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We appreciate our community series panelists who generously shared their time, wisdom, and reflections with us, including Nevada high school students:

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ENDNOTES

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