Communities In Schools®

Building Social Emotional Competencies Through Integrated Student Supports

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for students and families, including experiences of social isolation, economic crisis, stress, and trauma. A May 2020 survey by Echelon Insights found that nearly 30 percent of parents believed their children experienced higher anxiety and more mental health challenges, including depression, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the pandemic has exacerbated the racial and economic inequities that already existed in the education system and forced educators and parents across the country to grapple with an extraordinary set of circumstances to maintain students' engagement or reengage students in learning. For many families, the combination of these stressors and loss of social connections has made for an even more challenging environment in engaging with school and "normal" life. To address these challenges and support students and families in this moment, it is crucial that all members of our school communities deepen their commitment to developing social and emotional competencies and creating equitable learning environments where all students and adults can process, heal, and thrive. It is imperative that all students develop the social and emotional skills that enable them to become empathic, critical thinkers that thrive in school and beyond, especially when faced with unexpected and significant challenges, such as those caused by the pandemic.

Schools can support students and teachers in developing these critical skills by implementing an integrated student supports (ISS) model, which is a student-centered approach to promoting students' academic success by developing or securing and coordinating services and supports that target academic and non-academic barriers to achievement.[1] The ISS model creates efficiencies within schools by connecting students and families to the supports they need while allowing teachers to teach and principals to focus on leading the school. Research shows that, when well implemented, this approach can promote the success of individual students.

The Communities In Schools (CIS™) model of integrated student supports is not about doing the work for students. It's about leveling the field by making sure all students have access to the community resources and tools they need to unlock their potential and thrive.

It starts with our site coordinators—the caring adults who are in schools walking by students' side to get a deep understanding of the barriers and challenges they face. Across the network, site coordinators build, strengthen, and maintain relationships with students and their families—connecting them to the right community resources and tools, and empowering them to use them, to succeed in school and beyond.

Backed by evidence-based practices, personalized care and a "whatever it takes" approach to integrating resources into school and family life, the CIS model of integrated student supports equips every student to take on and tear down the barriers that stand between them and an equitable path to education.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development and can be particularly powerful within the ISS model when it includes individualized support and a trusting relationship between a student and a site coordinator. SEL includes a wide array of non-academic skills that allow individuals to set goals, manage behavior, build relationships, and process and remember information. Broadly, SEL skills can be organized into three interrelated areas: cognitive, social, and emotional skills. SEL can help address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities.[3]

> A June 2020 America's Promise Alliance survey points to a greater need for social and emotional support. Although most young people say that an adult from their school has suggested helpful tools and resources for them, 40 percent say no adult from school has suggested this kind of support.

Implementing an Effective SEL Program Within the Communities In Schools Integrated Student Supports Model

There are a multitude of SEL frameworks to choose from but what is required of every SEL program to be effective, according to Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), are:
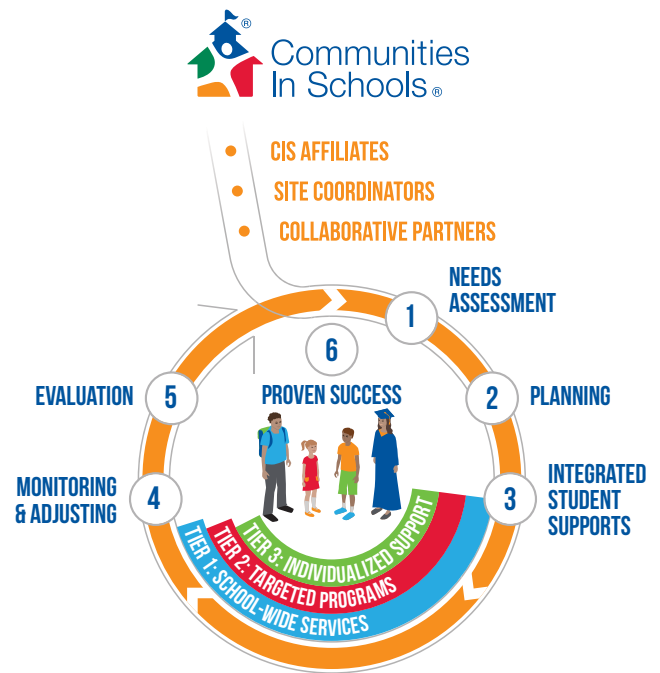
- A foundational plan that establishes a collective vision;
- Strengthening of SEL competency and capacity of adults involved;
- Culturally responsive and consistently applied throughout all student activities, and;
- Reflection on data for continuous improvement.

These components are what make operating an SEL program within the CIS model of integrated student supports a promising approach to implementing a high-quality, effective program. The CIS model is driven by needs assessment, community asset mapping, and a data-driven approach to providing tiered supports, all of which align with CASEL's requirements for effective SEL programs. Thus, the CIS model provides a natural infrastructure for SEL implementation. The role of CIS site coordinators in mapping students' and schools' needs and existing supports can ensure that SEL skill-building opportunities are present in a student's school, home, and community life for an even more effective SEL program.

An SEL program that is missing key components is not the only barrier to achieving effectiveness. CASEL[4] has identified five barriers to equitable access to high-quality SEL education and growth. The barriers include poverty, exclusionary discipline practices and policies in school, lack of trauma-informed practices in school, implicit bias in school staff, and educator stress and burnout. These barriers existed before the pandemic and will need the attention of educators and leaders more than ever as we reimagine our education system.

CASEL has identified five opportunities for overcoming those barriers:

1. School racial and socioeconomic integration initiatives;
2. Restorative justice practices for school discipline;
3. Trauma-informed system interventions;
4. Culturally competent and equity-literate educators, and;
5. SEL and mindfulness programming to support students and teachers.

Highlights from the field: Communities In Schools of Georgia

Relationships are key to the CIS model of integrated student supports. This year, CIS of Georgia affiliates were encouraged to work with their case-managed students to create one academic and one SEL goal. Setting goals collaboratively is a form of sharing power, encouraging agency, and developing positive relationships with students. Based on self-report assessments, students are given the opportunity to identify what resources, assets, and challenges they have and work with their site coordinator to address the barriers to their success and achieve their goals.

Social Emotional Learning Impact on School Performance and Economic Impact

SEL programs delivered within an integrated student supports model have shown promise for improving results on school performance. Research suggests that participation in SEL programs can improve students' academic achievement[5], reduce delinquency and other challenging behaviors[6], and increase the likelihood of graduation, postsecondary enrollment, and postsecondary completion.[7]

The positive effects extend beyond the classroom with studies showing long-lasting impacts on reducing rates of depression and anxiety[8] and lowering rates of risky behaviors, such as drug use and teen pregnancy.[9]

The impact on academic and non-academic outcomes amount to a substantial return on investment. Social-emotional programming and practices are estimated to be worth roughly $11 for every $1 spent.[10] This is the kind of investment we should always be making in our students, but with the compounding effects of the global pandemic and racial reckoning our students and families are experiencing, this investment cannot be underestimated and is likely to have an incalculable return on the dollar.

Implementing SEL Virtually During the Pandemic

Implementing social emotional learning virtually can certainly have challenges. Some of which include students not fully engaging in virtual learning; not participating at all in academic activities; difficulty building relationships without face-to-face interactions; and understanding the additional barriers students are now experiencing. With inequitable access to online learning, students in under-resourced communities find it even more difficult to connect to SEL opportunities, when they likely need it the most.

Implementing SEL through an integrated student supports model serves to break down these barriers to serving students virtually for SEL as well as academics. Site coordinators work with students, their teachers, and their caregivers, linking all aspects of a student's life—including academic, social, emotional, and cognitive—so that every student they serve receives comprehensive supports to address each student's barriers. Site coordinators work with students to identify their barriers to social and emotional development and collaborate with their students to identify internal, community, family and relationship assets to build their social and emotional competencies. The connections of these relationships and innovations of site coordinators proved to be invaluable in continuing to implement SEL during the pandemic.

Highlights from the field:

Communities In Schools of Michigan

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and inequitable conditions for remote learning, CIS of Michigan led the way for their coordinators to check-in on the whole child amid the pandemic, to ensure that their students had an opportunity to self-report on their wellbeing. To understand the barriers to SEL development facing students, coordinators developed meaningful and developmental relationships with their case-managed students through the Whole Child Screener program. This program provided structured monthly check-ins, and meaningful conversations ensuring support for students was responsive to key wellness areas, including supportive relationships, resilience and mental health, school performance, food security, safety, and dental health. As schools across the country pivoted to remote/hybrid learning environments, many CIS coordinators were tasked with the critical role of identifying and connecting with students who were not showing up for remote learning. Site coordinators were equipped with the Whole Child Screener as well as virtual engagement practices like setting up socially distanced porch visits for parent engagement; Zoom meetings with students for their check-ins; text messaging with families to coordinate on basic needs and student goals. Tools like the Whole Child Screener were developed to ensure that students were not falling through the cracks during the chaotic start to the school year and practices were adapted to meet the students and their families where they are.

Communities In Schools of the Gulf South

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Communities In Schools of the Gulf South required all employees take Telehealth Training to ensure all case-managed students receiving SEL and mental health supports continued to receive services even while learning from home. CIS of the Gulf South prioritized their student's safety and wellbeing by creating policies and procedures to ensure students continued to receive SEL supports heading into the school year—despite the remote learning environment. Every site coordinator was required to take training on best practices for providing telehealth supports and the organization updated informed consent documentation for families to stay connected to what supports their students were receiving in the remote environment. Early in the pandemic, when a teacher passed away from COVID-19, CIS of the Gulf South responded with their crisis intervention supports, including providing the school with materials on how to talk to students about death and providing a form for students, families, and teachers to refer students for follow-up conversations with a CIS site coordinator for bereavement support.

Using SEL to Promote Equity and Healing

SEL is a process by which young people and adults build skills to understand and manage emotions, work toward positive goals, feel and demonstrate empathy for others, and establish and maintain positive relationships and thus offers an ideal platform to examine equity and healing.

CASEL's five core social and emotional competencies, situated within the contexts of classrooms, schools, and communities, may feel familiar to many educators, but take on deeper significance as we navigate a very different type of schooling.[11] As we reengage with students, an understanding of the collective and individual trauma from the pandemic and racial reckoning will need to be assessed to either adjust existing SEL programs or initiate appropriate and targeted programming.

As an example, social awareness is the ability to empathize with others. This competency can expand to include building an understanding of the broader historical and social contexts around ongoing inequities caused by individual and institutional impacts of systemic racism that have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

As students are witnessing angry and occasionally violent exchanges over politics, disparate views on social justice, and peaceful civic engagements, it is imperative that we help them process what is going on around them. Processing and filtering complex information entering from social media, news, and people will require critical thinking skills. Fostering the development of SEL competencies is a promising and powerful way of doing so. SEL competencies such as responsible decision-making and forming and maintaining healthy relationships can help build a framework of abilities that enable one to act appropriately with digital and in-person citizenship. By using the analytical and evaluative skills taught through SEL, students learn how to engage with digital platforms and media, while having the ability to identify scams and misinformation.[12] In doing so, we can build a future of critical, empathetic thinkers that understand how to thoughtfully engage in civic life and in their communities.

Federal Policy Recommendations

Pass comprehensive federal wraparound services legislation that funds an on-site coordinator in Title I schools. Scientists and practitioners have developed a better understanding of how to effectively address out-of-school factors that interfere with learning. When well implemented, integrated student supports (e.g., wraparound services) can improve school climate, academic outcomes, social emotional competencies, and student health and well-being across the lifespan.

Increase Title I, the largest funding stream for low-income schools, to close the funding gap between low-income and wealthy districts. It is important that resources supporting academic and non-academic supports, such as SEL and integrated student supports, be equitably and adequately distributed in relation to student need.

Reintroduce and pass the [Strength in Diversity Act](#) to fund grants to districts to implement strategies to address the effects of racial isolation or concentrated poverty by increasing racial and socioeconomic diversity.

Increase funding for the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) by at least $10 million. This will support efforts to bring much-needed trauma-informed supports to more communities, which can include SEL programming and training.

State- and District-Level Recommendations

Use federal funds available in both Title II-A and Title IV-A of ESSA to fund trauma-informed care and social-emotional learning professional development for all teachers. An SEL program cannot be effective without teachers and school personnel understanding their own implicit biases and understanding the competencies of social-emotional learning. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), encourages the use of social-emotional learning in academic settings by requiring that schools be held accountable for measuring and reporting on "at least one non-academic factor." Title IV-A (Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants) provides flexibility for school districts to make investments in programs providing well-rounded education including professional development. Title II-A of ESSA funds are used to improve the quality and effectiveness of teachers, principals, and other school leaders.

The ESSA law states that professional development must be "sustained (not stand-alone, one-day, and short-term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom focused," making SEL programming and training a justifiable investment.

Leverage Title I of ESSA to fund evidence-based integrated student support models, wrap-around services, and social-emotional programming. Research shows effective outcomes result from high-quality implementation and adequate resources. In addition to the seven percent set-aside under Title I of ESSA, federal funding under Titles II and IV can supplement broader integrated student supports implementation. Title II funds help to prepare, train, and recruit high-quality teachers, principals, or other school leaders and Title IV funds can go to a wide range of programs that support students and provide opportunities for academic enrichment. In addition to federal funds, states and districts can also draw from other public and not-for-profit sectors, such as housing, health, and children and family services to provide integrated student supports.

Closing

As we begin to reimagine thriving schools, we need to prioritize safe, equitable, supportive, and culturally responsive learning environments where all students are ready to learn and achieve their fullest potential. A social-emotional learning program imbedded in an integrated student supports model aids students in building the resiliency they need to cope with everyday life stressors and the challenging times we now face. By surrounding them with a network of trust they can turn to no matter where they are in their journey, we empower students to confront and overcome personal challenges and structural barriers— so they can take charge of the future they want for themselves, their communities and each other. The competencies developed through effective SEL programming help students to understand injustices, empathize with others, build meaningful connections, and make responsible decisions that promote a more just and equitable society. The investments made into integrated student supports and effective SEL programming pale in comparison to the possible long-term health, well-being, and financial gains for students and society at large.

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