

If things are not done differently over the years, the status quo becomes the culture of a school, and the culture dictates how students react to any given situation. Two years ago, at West Jordan Elementary (WJE), the school climate survey indicated that 65% of the students did not feel safe from bullying. Office referrals were high and the principal's entire afternoon would be determined by what happened at lunch recess. The school's leadership team was sensitive to the need to change the culture of the school to ensure that the students felt safe and the culture of the school was more positive. In order to make a cultural shift, they first identified and prioritized needs and communicated those needs to the school faculty to ensure that everyone was working towards a common goal. They helped instill and maintain collaborative relationships among all school staff, provided needed professional development, and closely monitored and evaluated the progress.

The social-emotional well-being of students has a direct impact on their academic achievement. Emotional well-being is not only considered the predictor of students' academic and economic success, but it is also crucial to navigate through life effectively. For students to be successful as adults, they require more than just academic skills. A successful adult's life demands that one take care of themselves physically and emotionally, get along with others, and continue to learn and adapt in this ever-changing world. In addition to academics, teaching social-emotional skills and promoting mental health have become WJE's highest priority.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is defined as the "process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (SELAMA, 2020). In today's world where parents are busier and more stressed than ever and social media and video games are often the only means by which students learn social skills, it is even more imperative that these skills are taught explicitly in our schools. Ms. Sheri Morris, the social worker at WJE, aptly said "Growing up in this world is so stressful, the students need all the help they can get." While the school professionals agree that we need to teach social and emotional skills to our students, it is important that the school staff is trained, guided and supported throughout this process.

In the process of evaluating students' needs, the school leadership team noticed that many students lacked basic problem-solving skills, they struggled to identify emotions, and they often resorted to fighting to settle differences. It became apparent that these skills needed to be taught to our students in a systematic and comprehensive manner. At the National Title one conference, the principal came across a research-based SEL curriculum, and she brought back the idea to the school culture committee. The rest of the staff was introduced to the SEL curriculum in a kick-off meeting where the training plan was introduced. Teachers were challenged by being asked to explain why they thought teaching Social-Emotional skills explicitly in their classroom was important. This exercise led teachers down a path of self-realization and the responses received from teachers were powerful and poignant. One of the teachers wrote 'I don't want any of my students to feel that suicide is a viable solution to their dealing with their stressful lives'. Teachers' responses were on display in the faculty room and helped them recognize multiple justifications for the need to have a formal SEL curriculum. Needless to say, this exercise had an

immense impact on teachers and secured their buy-in to get trained and to implement the SEL curriculum in their classrooms.

The teachers now spend fifteen minutes every day in their morning meetings on lessons outlined in the curriculum. The curriculum entails 6 units including Skills for Learning, Empathy, Bully Prevention, Emotion Management, Problem Solving, and Friendship Skills. The entire school learns the same unit simultaneously which helps to reinforce the skills all students are learning both in the classroom as well as other areas and at other times such as during recess, specials, assemblies, cafeteria, etc. Not only are these skills reinforced at school all day every day, the parents also receive letters included in the curriculum from teachers describing the skills learned along with activities for students to practice at home. The hope is that these skills are modeled and reinforced at home as well. Additionally, the student council members introduce each unit in school assemblies which creates excitement and anticipation among the student body to learn the new skill. The school staff makes every effort to tie the school activities to the SEL unit the students are learning in their classrooms.

Another excellent initiative from the staff of WJE to teach and reinforce appropriate social skills is what they like to call 'Empower Play'. The school leadership team recognized the need to provide a structured recess for students who struggled with following social norms, had difficulty understanding the expectations of others and recognizing their boundaries during unstructured times of the school day like recess. The Empower Play is led by the Physical Education teacher who plans games and activities for students during the recess. Every student has an opportunity to participate in Empower Play if they wish to. Students who are struggling to meet social expectations on a consistent basis at school may be required to attend Empower Play during recess for a determined amount of time while they learn and practice skills.

According to Mrs. Angela Hamilton, the culture and climate teacher specialist, the purpose of Empower Play is for students to learn to play games and follow rules, to be more socially and emotionally aware, to learn to be kind, and to learn good sportsmanship. Students who participate in Empower Play and follow the rules earn an 'Empower Play Ticket' every day which they can save up and redeem for prizes. In order to keep the excitement and interest in participating in Empower Play and earning tickets for a prize, the staff surveys students to find out their preferred prizes and includes prizes that the students want to earn. Ms. Cindy Crump, the PE teacher who leads the Empower Play at WJE says, "Students who do not fit in socially with other peers participate in Empower Play as it is a safe place for them'.

At the end of the first year of implementation of the above initiatives, WJE conducted the school climate survey again to find that the school had made an astounding ten percent jump, from 65% to 75% of students reporting feeling safe from bullying. The office referrals have been reduced almost by 50% as well. Many students and families have attributed SEL lessons to the improved culture at the school.

In WJE, the entire school community works together in a systematic way to teach identified skills. Each SEL curriculum unit is introduced to teachers at the faculty meeting and introduced to students by the student council. Students receive the Empower Play cards based on the theme of the SEL unit, and the social worker teaches unit-related lessons in classrooms. The

PTA organizes activities for the students based on the current SEL theme, and parents are sent letters describing the skills that students are learning and encouraging caregivers to continue to reinforce those skills outside of school. The key to effective implementation of a new initiative in a school is to identify the need, to communicate the need, and to solicit and encourage a collaborative effort from all the stakeholders. Only when students receive clear and consistent expectations repeatedly in multiple settings throughout the day, can we expect them to learn the desired skills.

References

Social Emotional Learning Alliance for Massachusetts. Retrieved March 12, 2020, from <https://sel4ma.org/about/what-is-sel/>

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