

School Safety: Are You Missing Half the Equation?

A school resource officer. Shatterproof glass. Wands. Cameras. Panic buzzers. No, these aren't clues for a word-association game show. It is the reality of schools across America that are spending their annual budgets on a particular line item.

Either way, the answer is the same: "Things to help make schools and children physically safer."

In the wake of deadly school violence across the country in recent years, schools have allocated of millions of dollars toward physical safety initiatives. But when it comes to safe, healthy school communities, that's only half of what schools can and should be doing.

The other half? Social and emotional safety and well-being.

"There are three things that define a safe and healthy school climate," says David Adams, director of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) at [The Urban Assembly](#), "Physical safety so that people feel safe from harm; high-quality interactions in which people can have discussions, push each other's thinking and relate effectively; and a high degree of overall trust."

THE EVIDENCE FOR SEL

Physical safety is the most obvious, of course, but [the data](#) is clear: Supporting the emotional safety of children is just as important.

In fact, [The Aspen Institute](#) released a January 2019 report, [From a Nation at Risk to a Nation of Hope](#), urging public education to rethink what constitutes success in schools. The report cites overwhelming scientific evidence that academic learning along with social, emotional and cognitive dimensions are critical to successfully educating the whole child.

Both educational and clinical experts agree with the report's finding that when schools work to build strong relationships, offer mental health supports, and teach students social and emotional skills, schools become safer.

"The physical manifestations of safety are the most obvious," says Adams, "but they always have a deeper root cause in terms of social isolation or students' inability to solve problems in appropriate ways. They act out physically because they don't feel safe or they have difficulties with problem-solving and decision making."

School safety is a complex issue with no one-size-fits-all formula. SEL, however, comes close. [A comprehensive, PK-12 SEL program](#) in the school all day, every day promotes community-wide wellness.

Indeed, the Nation at Hope report says SEL combined with academic learning “is not a shifting educational fad; it is the substance of education itself.”

Decades of scientific evidence point to a simple truth: To learn, thrive and succeed, children must develop academically, as well as socially and emotionally.

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS MUST LEAD THE CHARGE

So, what is the reluctance on the part of school administrators and leaders in implementing a high-quality SEL program?

“It’s untested,” says Joseph V. Erardi Jr., PhD, “Standardized tests have become critically important, so if something’s not tested, the thinking is, ‘How important is it?’”

Dr. Erardi is an executive board member of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and a retired superintendent of schools from Newtown, Connecticut. He knows first-hand just how critical SEL is, having led the district through community rebuilding after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting.

He says school administrators need to own – not delegate – the responsibility for safety at all levels.

“I tell school administrators, ‘You cannot defend the indefensible,’” he says. “I also ask them, ‘Do you want to stand in front of a national audience going through a crisis that you could have and should have prevented?’ No one has to be negligent. There’s clear evidence that good, strong SEL programming is integral to student safety.”

REAL-WORLD SEL

In spite of anxiety and depression running rampant in our schools, talking about mental health can be a challenge. Developing social and emotional competencies helps students give voice to their feelings. It teaches them emotional vocabulary and equips them with self-management skills.

Most importantly, it instructs in a way that’s practical rather than theoretical.

“You can watch someone play basketball or chess and develop the skill,” explains Adams, “but work with a coach and you get more detail on the rules of the game and how to become a better player.”

And, so it is with SEL. Students learn a language that creates distinction in their minds. Much like a two-year-old learns that a dog and a horse are two different four-legged animals with a tail, SEL helps students understand subtle differences between emotions like anger and frustration.

It also equips them with tools, strategies and practice opportunities for applying what they've learned. At its core, SEL is the intentional development of social and emotional competencies to help students better manage feelings and maneuver challenges.

TRANSFORMATION

We know that physical safety in conjunction with (and on equal footing to) social and emotional well-being, is the fiercest combination for community-wide wellness.

We also know that transformation always begins with a sense of urgency and a pursuit for what's best.

The time is now. And what is best is strong SEL programming that creates vibrant school communities and effectively supports student, teacher and staff well-being."