

The Role of SEL in Academic Achievement

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- Learning is a social activity
- Cognitive development and identity development co-occur:
 - They are intertwined
 - We cannot be successful with academic achievement if we ignore SEL
- The evidence regarding the importance of SEL is substantial, consensus exists among:
 - ✓ National Research Council
 - ✓ National Academy of Medicine
 - ✓ Aspen Institute
 - ✓ Minnesota Education Equity Partnership
 - ✓ Minnesota Department of Education

In MN, our students are going to school with very high levels of commitment to learning, positive identity and outlook, social competence, and empowerment. However, the levels of each of these developmental skills have fallen from 2016 – across all racial/ethnic groups and across the state.

We see much lower levels of SEL among students who have experienced trauma, have been disciplined in school, skip school, identify as LGB, and have been homeless or in foster care.

Students who are at SEL levels where they are prepared to succeed in learning (a level we call *to be equipped for learning*) have a full grade-point higher GPA, are twice as likely to have college goals, are one-third likely to experience significant mental distress, and far less likely to use drugs or alcohol or skip school – far more likely to thrive and avoid risky behaviors.

These differences are consistent across student groups, including American Indian, Asian, Black, White, Latino, Somali, and Hmong students – we have remarkably consistent findings in MN.

We know that students succeed best in relationship-rich environments, including preschool through high school, and higher education settings. Every effective educational and youth development intervention and program has at its core *relationships* – it is the active ingredient like the roots of a tree that nourish the tree, keep it stable during storms, and allow it to thrive.

COVID-19 has interrupted many important relationships in the lives of our students – relationships they had with their peers, teachers, coaches and counselors, bus drivers, and others. We now need to re-establish those relationships if we are to be successful moving forward. Schooling will not be the same this fall as it was last fall – and in some ways this is a good thing, since the status quo was not equitable. But can we achieve greater equity through hybrid and remote learning? We still have a digital divide that needs to be closed – access continues to be an equity barrier.

What can we do? We can be more mindful and intentional about developing relationships – not because we think it’s a good idea, but because the evidence tells us that it is a core component of effective teaching and learning. Effective relationships are developmental, helping students grow, with encouragement to reach high goals and provision of the needed supports. We can connect teaching and learning to the learning contexts students face – through the development of social and emotional competencies. Because these competencies are also culturally bound, it requires getting to know students – allowing teachers and school staff to connect learning goals, disciplinary knowledge and practices, to students’ contexts, making learning relevant and powerful, giving students reasons for learning.

These considerations are particularly important for students of color and for students facing persistent learning challenges, including those in special education. Because we are not tuned into the social and emotional competencies and learning contexts of many of our students, we identify too many students for special education services or for behavioral interventions. When we don’t acknowledge the fact that *academic, social, and emotional development are fundamentally interconnected*, we are not able to meet the learning needs of our students.

I am happy to support efforts that make SEL more intentional, which is consistent with the MDE guidance that was developed through a community, K-12, and higher education collaborative process. This collaborative effort promotes SEL practices and assessments in schools that are school wide, intentional, and used to help us learn how to do schooling better, better meet the needs of students that have not been adequately supported, and move toward more equitable practices and policies.