

Chapter 13

Teacher PLCs and the Advancement of SEL

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ABSTRACT

Treating SEL as a typical curriculum implementation or school improvement initiative is problematic because it suggests that there are discrete SEL programs or tactics that can be put into place, regardless of school context or professional culture, to advance student outcomes. Such SEL initiatives risk not only failing to achieve the desired beneficial outcomes for students, but also overburdening or alienating educators. Those who want positive SEL outcomes must fully attend to supporting teacher learning. In this chapter, the authors describe the ways that SEL-related teacher professional development is currently enacted in U.S. P-12 school settings, critique current practices in light of what is known about effective professional development, and showcase a unique and replicable approach to SEL currently being enacted in an urban district in the northeast United States that led to positive social-emotional learning outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is having a period of prominence in the popular press and in educational scholarship. After decades as a matter of minimal concern in U.S. public education, the social-emotional needs of students and how all educators can help meet them have become higher priorities in U.S. P-12 public schools in the 21st century. Once framed as an issue to be addressed by specialists like counselors and health educators, and of concern primarily for students with conduct or mental health problems that interfered with learning and/or school behavioral expectations, social-emotional learning is increasingly understood to be a field of learning and development relevant to improving outcomes

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for all students and in which all educators share responsibility. With the disruption of schooling by the pandemic, and the increasing recognition of the imperative to dismantle white supremacy culture in schools, SEL is often cited as an all-purpose panacea, as a balm that can repair fractured relationships between students, families, educators, and school leaders, and redress systemic biases and institutional and individual inequities.

Too often, however, in the rush to address the urgent needs of students, SEL is treated as an initiative that can be packaged, purchased, implemented, and evaluated in school and district settings. Treating SEL as a typical school improvement initiative is problematic because it suggests that there are discrete programs or tactics that can be put into place, regardless of school context or professional culture, to achieve replication of results. SEL initiatives often attempt to address the social-emotional domain via curriculum implementation, rather than at a human level, and thus risk not only failing to achieve the desired beneficial outcomes for students, but also overburdening or alienating educators. Those who want positive student SEL outcomes must systematically attend to teacher knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The medium-sized, urban, public school district in the northeastern U.S. where the authors have worked as part of a researcher-practitioner partnership for more than eight years has done just that. It has advanced student SEL by ensuring that teachers are embedded in robust - safe, productive, engaging - professional learning communities (PLCs) focused on the advancement of SEL outcomes.

In this chapter, the authors articulate a view of SEL that recontextualizes it from being seen as a curriculum initiative to a systemic professional learning endeavor. Through asserting and explaining five essential elements (teams, time, purpose, process, dissemination) that are essential to scaffold teacher professional learning, the authors describe how a school district has effectively enacted each foundational element, including teacher perspectives on the value and effects of the work on SEL. The chapter also discusses potential barriers to the enactment and scaling up of effective PLCs that the district encountered and that others may encounter while trying to bring about changes in teacher mindsets, more equitable classroom practices, and positive social-emotional learning outcomes. The chapter concludes by identifying recommendations for research and district/school leadership practice related to how effective PLCs may advance teacher capacity to support student SEL.

ISSUES IN CURRENT SEL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ENACTMENT

Despite scientific and popular interest in SEL and the profusion of SEL-related programming in schools, it is apparent that most U.S. P-12 educators do not have sufficient knowledge about SEL, nor do they have sufficient access to high-quality SEL-related professional development. Pre-service training typically focuses on classroom management; in-service training is generally limited to an explanation of SEL programs or strategies and information about how to teach them (Greenberg et al., 2003; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Zins et al., 1997). Oberle et al. (2016) noted that increased expectations for SEL coupled with lack of teacher preparation were a source of teacher stress. A nationally representative survey conducted pre-pandemic by *Education Week* (Schwartz, 2019) found that 78% of teachers agree it is part of their job to help students develop strong social-emotional skills, and 66% believe that all students can and should have strong social-emotional skills, but fewer feel that they or their peers are equipped to do this well. Only 54% described themselves as good at helping students develop strong social-emotional skills, and 40% said they have adequate solutions and strategies to use when students do not have strong

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