



Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

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CASEL SEL STORIES

Cultivating the Future of SEL

Sara Rimm-Kaufman is one of two recipients of CASEL's 2007 Joseph E. Zins Awards for Early Career Contributions to SEL Research and Practice. CASEL launched the Zins Awards to support and encourage a new generation of SEL leaders.

Sara Rimm-Kaufman readily admits that a key to her success as an educational researcher has been skilled and caring mentors. Now an associate professor, she is directing an innovative social science research laboratory at the University of Virginia, and can return the favor by mentoring other young professionals.

The daughter of a clinical psychologist and a professor of epidemiology, Rimm-Kaufman says, "I was always interested in why people do what they do." This curiosity led her to focus on psychology as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin. In Rimm-Kaufman's sophomore year she began working in one of the university's primate labs under the guidance of professor of psychology Mary Schneider. "She exposed me to the challenges and the joys of the work," says Rimm-Kaufman. "She helped me in my personal growth, and she took my research ideas very seriously."



Sara Rimm-Kaufman

Rimm-Kaufman went on to graduate studies in psychology at Harvard, where she worked closely with developmental psychologist Jerome Kagan. While there, she volunteered in a first-grade classroom. "I became fascinated by the magic that teachers seemed to hold," she says – and that fascination led to Rimm-Kaufman's abiding interest in elementary education. For her dissertation, she studied very shy and very bold children as they made the transition into kindergarten. "It was really eye-opening," she says. "I observed tremendous variability in school contexts."

When Rimm-Kaufman was appointed to a post-doctoral position with another outstanding mentor, Robert Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, she continued studying the transition from preschool to kindergarten. She began to focus not so *(continues)*

Cultivating the Future of SEL *continued*



much on the characteristics of the child as the context in which children spend their time. “Children bring competencies with them to school, but the extent to which those competencies play themselves out depends on the environment,” she says.

Rimm-Kaufman was well-prepared to serve as lead researcher on a grant to study Responsive Classroom, an SEL approach to promoting effective teaching and student engagement. She now directs the university’s Social Development Laboratory, where she and her colleagues conduct interdisciplinary research on classroom social processes and their influence on children’s social and academic growth in the early years of school. Recently, her laboratory received a prestigious multi-year grant from the Institute of Education Sciences to compare 12 elementary schools using Responsive Classroom with 12 elementary schools that do not use the approach.

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Rimm-Kaufman believes CASEL’s Zins Awards help people like herself. “We all need to think about what our goals are in the field and set very high expectations of what we do, just as Joe Zins did,” she says. She also welcomes the connection to CASEL. “CASEL attracts a really interesting group of people committed to SEL,” she says. “Through the Zins Awards, CASEL is showing that we all need to take responsibility for this field. It’s not just a transient movement. We need to be thinking about the sustainability of SEL from one generation to the next.”

Learn More

To learn more about CASEL and ways to advance SEL, please visit us at www.casel.org or contact us at: 815 West Van Buren, Suite 210 Chicago, Illinois 60607 Phone: 312.226.3770