

CHAPTER TWO

**Educational  
Leadership for  
Academic,  
Social, and  
Emotional  
Learning**

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**E**ducational leaders have always been forced to address social and behavioral problems that find their way,

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uninvited, into the schools. This is a continuing challenge to which few genuinely effective responses have been developed. In the mid-1990s, we wrote an article for *Education Week* called "No New Wars!" (Shriver & Weissberg, 1996). It opened with a description of the myriad categorical responses to student problems that typified schools at that time. Discrete programs abounded that addressed student drug use, AIDS and pregnancy prevention, poor citizenship, discipline, and other problem behaviors. These problems still abound, and now we can add to the list of "crisis crusades" the programs generated by Columbine and other school shootings, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack and its aftermath, and concerns about the achievement gap and American students' underachievement in general. Educational leaders need to respond to these diverse challenges in a coherent and effective way that recognizes the reality of children and schools, as well as of the society in which we now live.

One approach is the reactive, short-term, categorical "war on the problem" approach that we wrote about in 1996. Given limited time in the curriculum; limited resources to support and sustain planned, ongoing, and coordinated initiatives; limited training supports; and the pressures of testing, it is understandable that educational leaders resort to this response. Nonetheless, it is unlikely to be effective for the following reasons:

- Staff members may work on similar issues without any coordination of expertise or resources.
- Few prevention programs last more than a few years; which is not long enough for improvements to be made.
- There is little developmental or curricular continuity across grade levels and schools.
- Many initiatives are reactive rather than preventive, so that by the time the work is begun, the problem is well out of hand.
- Different programs are frequently aimed at the same children, splitting them into categories of problem behaviors and never addressing the causes underlying the problems in the first place.

Meanwhile, the larger body of students receives little or no attention or help with the challenging developmental issues they

face. As a result, new prevention initiatives are met with ambivalence in most schools. School personnel frequently regard problem prevention campaigns with skepticism and frustration, because most have been introduced as a succession of disjointed fads. Fragmentation breeds breakdown, and the school emerges as a hodgepodge of social initiatives with little direction or effectiveness. At the same time, teachers are held more closely accountable than ever before for student performance on standardized tests. To them, these programs seem at best to be tangential to the academic mission; at worst, teachers see them as taking away precious time needed for academic focus. Unfortunately, they have also left undiminished those problems that spurred on the programs.

## **A NEW STRATEGY IS REQUIRED**

It is time for a different strategy. We need not counter each behavior issue that arises with a new categorical initiative that has no place in the structure of the school. Instead, schools can capitalize on what they are already in the business of doing: promoting the personal and social development and well-being of children en route to imparting academic skills and knowledge. They can proactively build comprehensive programs that help children develop academically, socially, and emotionally. We call these social and emotional learning (SEL) programs. As a result of SEL, children become competent in ways that can help them to learn better and to avoid problem behaviors. Such an approach requires leadership that is committed to creating a coherent vision and that will work to marshal the resources and the staff energy and skills needed to realize it.

We begin our description of the SEL approach by making explicit a few assumptions:

1. Virtually all educators and parents want to graduate young people who are knowledgeable, responsible, caring, and healthy.
2. Social and emotional factors are key contributors to producing positive outcomes, including academic performance that measures up to one's potential; positive relationships

