

Cossitt School Case Study

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What does SEL look like when it permeates a school's culture and becomes a way of approaching teaching and learning? Cossitt School, in LaGrange, Illinois, offers an outstanding example.

With 580 students in grades pre-kindergarten through 6, Cossitt is a school where children feel comfortable and happy. It is a school where, after eight years of careful and thoughtful SEL programming, SEL has reached into every corner and affected the entire school community. Take a stroll through the halls, peek into the classrooms, and you are likely to see any one of the following. All are based on actual recent observations at Cossitt:

Class meetings. Second-graders and their teacher gather together on the carpeted floor of a classroom for "morning meeting." The student leader for the day asks everyone to use a "butterfly greeting," welcoming the classmates to their left and right. The students practice skills they've learned as part of the school's SEL programming. These include using eye contact, body language, and an appropriate tone of voice. The student leader follows this with sharing time. She starts by telling what she did over the weekend. Other students ask follow-up questions about her weekend to show they've been using active listening skills. The meeting ends with a "telegraph" activity—students send a message around the circle using hand-squeezes. After finishing the activity they talk briefly about how messages can get distorted. During the meeting, students "check themselves" to correct any inappropriate behavior, a primary means of classroom management. On several occasions, the teacher asks, "Could you check yourself..." followed by various specifics, such as, "to make sure you're sitting with your legs crossed like we agreed?" Throughout, the students are practicing a variety of skills and behaviors—listening, communicating effectively, and showing respect for others—that they've learned through SEL lessons. Morning meetings are a way of life at Cossitt and a key to creating a caring community. Topics can range from students' weekend experiences and vacations to books they've just read to special new vocabulary words they've learned.

Conflict resolution. On the playground during recess, some fourth-graders get into a conflict. One of them, a troubled child who lives with his family in a domestic violence shelter affiliated with the school, has been calling the others names and disrupting their game. Another student in the group approaches the boy and talks to him calmly. "You don't have to be like that here," he says. "This is a caring place, and we'll take care of you here."

Graphic evidence of the rules and common understandings that govern relationships within this community of learners. Every classroom features its own student-generated norms for discipline and behavior, "Ways We Want Our Class to Be," and rules for working with a partner in cooperative projects ("don't interrupt," "use nice words," "don't fool around," "do your share," "don't moan and groan if you're not with your best friend"). Other posters and student artwork highlight values such as friendship, responsibility, respect, and kindness. You can also read students' messages to each other: "I believe in you," "I'm glad you're you," "I trust you," "You're important," "You're listened to," "You're cared for," and "Believe in yourself." You'll also see photographs of the students with statements they've written about things they like to do—a way of promoting understanding and respect for others. In many classrooms you'll see lists of the "jobs" students have in their classrooms, part of the shared understanding that everyone is responsible for a safe, orderly learning environment.

Integrated SEL programming. SEL and academic learning are integrated in a variety of ways. For literature and social studies, teachers develop both academic content objectives and SEL objectives. For example, they may focus on themes in stories or historical events that are related to SEL issues, such as decisionmaking, accepting responsibility for one's behavior, and showing caring and concern for others. This is often expanded to include student writing and reflection. In

math and science, teachers make opportunities for students to do collaborative work and learn skills for working together, such as communication and taking responsibility. This is particularly effective when younger and older students work together as “buddies.” It is also emphasized in the numerous opportunities students have to work together in pairs or small groups.

Calm and orderly students. Two teachers are talking in the hallway. One is telling the other about a school trip the day before to the Museum of Science and Industry in downtown Chicago. She reports proudly that she was stopped four times by people commenting on how impressed they were with the students. People said they had never seen such a well-behaved, engaged group of kids interacting so well together.

Ongoing professional development. Once a week school ends two hours early so the entire staff can engage in professional development activities. One of those early release days each month is related to improving and sustaining the school’s SEL programming. Activities might range from a discussion of ways to integrate SEL approaches with reading instruction to ways to encourage students’ use of problem-solving skills. At other times the faculty might discuss a new book or article related to SEL and how to apply it to their own situation. The meetings, which are planned and led by the building’s SEL team, encourage a sense of a shared collegial mission and heightened professionalism.

These are just a few examples of how SEL affects the ways in which adults and children behave and interact at Cossitt School. How students behave and interact, a basic component of school climate, has a significant impact on how well they learn and numerous other factors related to their success in school and life (Zins et al., 2004). After many years of SEL at the school, studies have shown that Cossitt has a more positive climate than similar schools in the district. In 2003 Cossitt was named one of the top 50 schools in the Chicago area.

Cossitt is located in a relatively affluent and stable community. Even before SEL, it was a good school. Since implementing SEL, it has become an exemplary school with a pervasive emphasis on social and emotional learning integrated with academic learning. All of these results are the product of many years of thoughtful planning, deliberate effort, and outstanding leadership.

READINESS

Assessing Needs

Cossitt is one of five schools (four elementary and one junior high) in Illinois School District 102. The district serves parts of several towns in Chicago’s western suburbs. SEL at Cossitt is rooted in a needs assessment and planning process that began in 1991 as part of the district’s “102 in the Year 2000” initiative. Over the course of two years, several hundred school and community representatives came together in committees to discuss current district needs and recommend future directions. One concern that arose early in the process was the growing use of alcohol and marijuana among seventh- and eighth-graders. The planners concluded that a broad, programmatic approach fully integrated with regular school activities was needed to enhance students’ prosocial behaviors and enable them to resist negative peer pressure. From the beginning, the planners’ goal was to infuse the program throughout the school day. They shared a vision of a broad, positive change in the environment of the schools, in contrast to the kind of one-shot program targeting a single problem that researchers have often found ineffective.

Laying a Foundation

In 1994 the planners created a school environment action team made up of parents, teachers, and administrators. Their immediate objective was to develop an action plan to achieve an optimal learning environment. Such an environment, they believed, would foster positive attitudes and behaviors among students and counter negative influences in the peer environment and culture. They based their plan on extensive readings in the literature of social and emotional learning, and they were determined to implement a high-quality program that would be sustained over the long term.

PLANNING

After more than a year of assessing community needs and identifying priorities, the District 102 planners had made a commitment to long-term, district-wide reform. The guiding principles and specific steps to reform were outlined in a district-wide strategic plan, which has been the basis of all District 102 programming and curriculum ever since. Although each school also develops its own school improvement plan, all the individual school plans in the district are closely aligned with the district-wide strategic plan. In short, the strategic plan establishes the goals and priorities for the entire district. Addressing the schools' climate, culture, and environment was an important element of the plan from the beginning and was clearly recognized as a key to needed changes. For the environment action team, the next step was to identify programs and strategies to achieve the goal of improvements to the schools' climate and culture.

Creating a Shared Vision of Change and Selecting a Program

The team devoted hundreds of volunteer hours to identifying and carefully reviewing programs that met a clearly defined set of criteria. These included:

- A theoretical base
- A track record of success in schools
- Scientific evidence of its effectiveness
- The capability of being integrated into the curriculum and other school practices

By unanimous decision the team chose the Child Development Project (CDP), later revised and named Caring School Community (CSC), a well-established, nationally available program for the elementary grades based on more than a decade of rigorous research. CDP had gained wide national recognition as one of the most effective youth development and prevention programs in the country. According to a 2000 report on the District 102 project, CDP was "unparalleled in its published research documenting program effectiveness in a variety of school settings" (O'Brien & Murray, 2000).

Central to the adoption of CDP was the District 102 team's support of the program's central values and core beliefs. Those values and beliefs remained a fundamental guide to the educational process at Cossitt when this case study was written nine years later.

- Children learn through relationships. Just as anyone who feels part of a community will uphold the values of that community and promote the well-being of its members, so children who feel they belong to a caring community of learners will value learning and each other as individuals.
- Intellectual, ethical, and social learning are not independent. Each affects the others.
- Children from all social, economic, and cultural backgrounds are learners—and a caring community of learners includes all children.
- Children want to learn, and will learn when presented with a challenging, engaging curriculum.
- Learning must relate to children's lives. It should connect to the issues that matter to them and that confront them—such as how to be a good friend, how to play fair, how to be both "nice" and honest, and what it means to do a good job. _ When children work together, emphasizing collaboration more than competition, they learn more, feel better about themselves and their classmates, like school, and enjoy learning. (Adapted from O'Brien & Murray, 2000)

The importance of this shared vision of the educational process and the nature of an effective school environment cannot be underestimated. Since the inception of the program at Cossitt School, it has been the engine that has driven a continuing and evolving process of school improvement.

At the time of the District 102 commitment to CDP, the program consisted of five basic components.

1. **Schoolwide community-building activities.** These are cooperative activities designed to involve students, parents, and school staff in building a caring school community. The emphasis throughout is on helping others, taking responsibility for creating an inclusive school environment, and building connections with parents and the community at large.
2. **Cross-age/cross-grade “buddies” activities.** Younger and older students work together on activities such as interviews with each other, math games, and service-learning projects.
3. **Parent involvement activities.** In its “Homeside Activities” materials, the program provides specific suggestions and readings that students can do at home with their parents or caregivers.
4. **Classroom management through building responsibility.** The CDP model emphasizes helping students take greater responsibility for establishing classroom rules and managing their own behavior.
5. **Values-rich, literature-based reading and language arts.** CDP’s reading program is based on years of research into how children learn—to be academically successful, socially and emotionally healthy, and committed to a compassionate and ethical society.

Key Decision Points

Initially District 102 planned to phase in the CDP components in all elementary schools over a period of three years. A major step in preparing for effective implementation of CDP was securing funding to carry out a pilot project. Members of the planning committee succeeded in obtaining a grant of \$250,000 from Chicago’s Community Memorial Foundation. The proposal outlined an ambitious plan to expand the project to all five District 102 schools by the end of the third year. It also included funds for an outside evaluation. Most of the funding was allocated to the Developmental Studies Center in Oakland, CA, the developer of CDP, for initial and follow-up training.

It soon became apparent that the original plan was overly ambitious and unrealistic. During the 1995-96 school year, the program was pilot-tested in 20 classrooms in all five schools in the district. Out of this pilot test came the unanimous recommendation that instead of gradually implementing the program in selected grades or classes, as originally conceived, it should first be tested through implementation in just one school—in the entire school and at all grade levels.

Cossitt Principal Mary Tavegia recalls the rationale for this decision. “At Cossitt the four teachers who had been doing it had compelling stories to tell,” she says. “They said they felt the children were behaving better and treating each other better. They felt they were making a difference in the way kids viewed the classroom and responded. But they felt everyone in the school had to be doing it. They said it would be hard to have expectations in one classroom and different expectations in other rooms or gym class or within the grade level. They felt it would only work if everyone was involved.”

Pilot teachers who became “champions” of the program made a significant difference at the beginning, Tavegia believes. “Cossitt had teachers who supported the program who were able to convince other teachers it was important. That was critical to securing teacher buy-in,” she says. “Without some champions at the teacher level, an administrative mandate will never work.”

In the spring of 1996 the Cossitt staff unanimously agreed to be the first pilot school for the program.

INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION

In many ways the Cossitt example illustrates the extent to which effective SEL implementation will vary from one school or district to another. The District 102 planners were guided by

considerations specific to the time and place in which program planning and initial implementation occurred. Although the basic steps of effective SEL implementation remain the same no matter what the setting, the exact sequence and nature of those steps will always be a reflection of unique local conditions and needs. Just as important, the Cossitt example illustrates the way in which continual self-assessment and reflection can lead to changes in plan or direction. Several local factors affected Cossitt's initial implementation of the project.

Building Evaluation into the Project from the Beginning

A key decision at the beginning of the project was to involve a community resident, with expertise in program development and evaluation, as a planning and evaluation consultant. The consultant co-authored the proposal that funded the initial three-year implementation and served as the lead evaluator for the project's process and outcome evaluation efforts.

This enabled the district to undertake a process and outcome evaluation from the beginning. Schools engaged in SEL implementation rarely have significant resources for evaluation. The initial grant to implement the Child Development Project, however, included an unusually extensive evaluation process. It was a direct outgrowth of the district's decision to implement CDP in a way that had not been tried before. The District 102 program design included a training-of-trainers model that would enable the district to adopt CDP in all five schools and sustain it within the regular school budget. Otherwise, the district planners realized, the cost of the program would have required major outside funding, making district-wide implementation of CDP difficult.

Using a training-of-trainers approach, i.e., a core group of lead teachers who would become resident CDP training experts and in turn train the other staff members, made district-wide adoption of the program more feasible financially. The process evaluation was designed to collect data on the implementation of CDP, including the adequacy of the training, optimal levels of staff supervision and support, and classroom and homebased activities. The outcome evaluation was designed to assess changes in the school environments and students' perceptions of those environments.

The First Year—and a Critical Turning Point

The teachers at Cossitt entered the first year of CDP implementation with high expectations for the program and great enthusiasm. As described in the evaluation report, "The August training of the entire teaching and support staff generated a deep well of trust in one another and shared understanding and unity about the kind of environment staff wanted for themselves as teaching professionals and for their students. Many described it as 'a gift' just to be invited to think about and articulate broader visions about the school environment and the long-term purpose of their classroom activities" (O'Brien & Murray, 2000).

The process evaluation found that in the first year the Cossitt staff were "on track and on schedule with the program's implementation." Nevertheless, despite their enthusiasm, after several months the teachers at Cossitt began to experience a sense of disappointment that the new program was not creating the kinds of changes in the school they had envisioned. Looking back on this early phase from the vantage point of many years, staff members now refer to this experience with self-mocking humor. "We kept waiting for kids' behavior to magically change, and it didn't in dramatic ways," says one. "In fact, for many kids it was a struggle and a time for 'testing.'"

According to principal Mary Tavegia, "The fall of 1997 was a major turning point for the staff. People were saying, 'Why aren't these kids changing?' We were doing a great deal of reflecting on the process at our staff meetings, and finally we had a group 'aha!' We realized we expected the children to change—but not ourselves as teachers. We'd been thinking the program would work if we 'fixed' the children, but we realized we were the ones who had to change—and then the children's behavior would change, too. That was a major awareness for us."

The “group ‘aha!’” was a critical step in moving the project forward. As one teacher observed, although prior to CDP they might have encouraged students to assist in developing classroom rules, they viewed it as a way of exercising control over the children. Under the new approach, they came to think of it as a way of encouraging children to take responsibility for their own behavior and learning. This shift was both subtle and profound.

As teacher Lynn Surin recalls, “At first I found giving up some control and allowing students more autonomy personally challenging, but I’ve learned to take these risks. When we started the program I was a fairly new teacher. I was still trying to get a handle on classroom management, but I’ve been so pleased with the results. Adding SEL has made a huge difference in my teaching and is a big part of who I am as a teacher today.”

The Importance of Effective Leadership

One of the key factors in the early success of CDP at Cossitt was the new principal. Mary Tavegia had been a teacher at the school for 17 years prior to being selected as principal in June of 1996. She had taught second grade and special education classes. “This was my first principalship,” she recalls. “I was very familiar with the school and the community, but I’d never been a principal and was not all that knowledgeable about what this project would entail. I wasn’t sure what my role would be other than that our school would be doing the pilot.”

Eight years after the initiation of CDP at Cossitt, no one familiar with the school would question Tavegia’s role in supporting SEL. She has received national recognition as an outstanding leader of school-based SEL implementation. Her leadership has been so important that it raises a concern common to discussions of the leader’s role in organizational change: Will schoolwide SEL continue if Tavegia is no longer involved? Many Cossitt teachers insist that it will. “SEL has become a way of life at Cossitt,” says one. “It’s now deeply embedded in the school culture. We would miss Mary a lot if she were no longer here, but SEL is part of the way I teach now, and that isn’t going to change.”

Asked how SEL has affected her own sense of herself as a professional, Tavegia is unequivocal. “As far as how my skills and effectiveness have been affected,” she says, “I would say it has been the single biggest influence in everything I’ve done. It gave our staff a unified purpose and language. It has colored everything I do in this role—relationships among kids, teachers, and parents, and how we organize everything in the school. It’s been a major influence.”

One teacher who recently joined the staff sums up the principal’s impact on the school, saying she has been impressed by how Tavegia models SEL attitudes and actions, particularly at staff meetings. “Mary runs the meetings in a way that builds community, that elicits discussion and opinions,” she says. “She never talks down to teachers.”

EXPANSION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Over the years the staff at Cossitt School has created an unusually harmonious and effective community of learners. The importance of social and emotional learning is a pervasive theme. It is sustained and nurtured in many different ways.

Assessment

Careful assessment of both the process and impact of SEL at Cossitt has been a hallmark of the program’s effectiveness since its inception. Particularly important at the beginning was the three-year process and outcome evaluation built into the initial pilot project. Among other outcome findings, the evaluation concluded that Cossitt students’ attitudes toward the school environment showed significant improvements during the three-year pilot program compared with those of students in the other schools. Most noteworthy, Cossitt’s male students reported an increasingly positive school environment over time, in contrast to their peers at the other schools, whose scores declined (O’Brien & Murray, 2000). “The three-year study was very important in moving the program forward,” says Mary Tavegia. “It showed a significant difference in our students

compared with students across the district. That was a major step because it led directly to the decision of the board of education to adopt the program. Until that point the board had not adopted it district-wide. It was still a pilot program.”

The emphasis on evaluation and assessment has continued. Most important, it has led Principal Tavegia and the school staff to think more broadly about what they accomplished with the Child Development Project in the early years and what new directions they might take. Effective assessment of SEL continues to play an important role as the Cossitt staff develops and pilot tests new assessment methods and tools. During the 2005-2006 school year, the school began conducting an assessment of students’ social and emotional competencies in order to determine areas to target for expanded programming and to ensure that they are aligned with state learning standards for social and emotional development.

Professional Development

The staff and principal at Cossitt knew early on that effective implementation of the Child Development Project would take significant amounts of time for professional development. Further, they realized that SEL-related professional development should be a continuing process of education and reflection on actual classroom practice.

The staff benefited greatly from an initial five-day training workshop offered by CDP trainers in August just prior to the first year of implementation. Even more important was a change in the district’s contract with its teachers’ union that provided for two hours of professional development time every week.

The district’s strategic planning process had elicited many recommendations for improvement in instructional practice. Technology, differentiation, and social-emotional learning all required staff development. District 102 teachers felt that it was not possible to teach a full day and still get training in all the areas they needed. As part of contract negotiations in 1999, the District 102 teachers agreed on a plan to lengthen four school days by 15 minutes and shorten one school day by 45 minutes. The teachers also agreed to extend their work day until 4:30 p.m. on the shortened day to allow for two hours of teacher- and district-planned staff development activities.

Although the majority of the teachers approved of the plan by ratifying their contract, in the community the news was greeted with an outcry about the change in the school and student hours. Several meetings were held so members of the community could express their concerns to the board of education and the Teacher’s Association. It was a difficult period for the district. Parents felt they had not been involved in the process, and the district and Teacher’s Association felt it was not appropriate for parents to participate in a negotiated issue. During the first year of the new arrangement, district staff attempted to provide students with activities on the shortened day, but very few students participated. After the first year, a survey of the parents found that very few of the original concerns remained. Staff surveys were very positive as to the use of the professional development day, and it has continued for the past five years.

The structure of the professional development time varies by time of year and needs determined by team leaders within each school. At Cossitt, in addition to SEL workshops, the time has been used for grade-level meetings for teachers across the district, for training in language arts strategies and techniques, for technology training, for analysis of test scores, and for grade-level team meetings at which teachers plan together, communicate ideas, solve problems, and meet with specialists from various curricular areas.

In addition to the regularly scheduled time for professional development, the district has provided a district-level SEL facilitator. The teachers-as-trainers model of the Child Development Project had worked well initially. Nevertheless, it was becoming a time-consuming task, primarily for principal Mary Tavegia. CDP was also being perceived as a “Cossitt initiative” more than a district initiative. Some members of the original training team were leaving the district because of changes in their personal lives, and another trainer wanted to work less intensively. The Cossitt

staff realized that in order to bring on more trainers from across the district and have the program viewed as a district-wide initiative, a staff member at the district level should be designated as the SEL facilitator. This person could then also serve as a model to classroom teachers and work with individuals and building principals toward more complete district-wide implementation of CDP. Thus, the district, in its annual budgeting process, agreed to support one full-time SEL facilitator instead of a group of teacher trainers.

Also important to the development of a cohesive, schoolwide approach to SEL is hiring of new staff. Although staff morale at Cossitt is unusually high and turnover relatively low, some staff turnover is inevitable. As part of the process for hiring new staff members, Tavegia has built questions into the staff selection process to identify people whose approaches are in line with SEL theory and philosophy. Once hired, all new staff are given opportunities to participate in training workshops that address the basic principles and methods of SEL.

Securing Resources and Support

Cossitt's program, which began with grant funding, is now fully funded under the school district's annual budget. Each spring, as part of the district budget process, the school develops a budget proposal for SEL-related planning, materials, and workshop development. The total has ranged from \$30,000 to \$90,000, depending on what kind of training is necessary and what aspects of the training for new teachers are included.

The Cossitt SEL Team

In order to meet building specific needs, Cossitt staff felt it would be best to establish a team of teachers representing a variety of grade levels to serve as Cossitt's own planning group for SEL workshops and activities. This team was developed from a group of teachers who had served on Cossitt's original CDP Coordinating Team for the building. It consists of five teachers (four classroom teachers and one teacher from the special subjects, e.g., art, music, and PE), a student support staff member, and the principal. One of the teachers is designated as the team leader. The team meets at least once each month but usually more often. The primary purpose of the meetings is to plan upcoming workshops, including community-building activities, readings, discussions, and logistics. The SEL team has also put together schoolwide activities and assemblies and worked on parent communications. In exchange for this additional work, the team members receive Professional Advancement Credits, part of the negotiated structure for salary advancement.

Communication

Frequent communication about SEL is, like SEL itself, a way of life at Cossitt School. Messages about SEL—what it is, why it's important, and the specific skills and concepts that comprise social and emotional learning—abound in all school communications. Everything from letters home to parents to the regular school newsletter to casual conversations in the lunchroom or in the hallways underscores the importance of the mutually agreed upon importance of SEL.

A noteworthy transition in the school's communications came in the spring of 2002 when the staff undertook a subtle but important change in their basic vocabulary. "We felt that what we're doing had gone beyond CDP," says Mary Tavegia. "We still do the components of the program. But we've been trying to pull knowledge and best practices from everything we've read and learned about SEL. CDP was an environmental approach, a school climate program. Now our focus is more on specific SEL skills. With our trainers and staff, we discussed what the difference was, where we were going, and why we were using the broader SEL umbrella term. We explained it to parents through newsletters and meetings. It's a subtle change, but it marks an important step forward."

School-Family-Community Partnerships

Cossitt School has an unusually involved and aware community of parents and caregivers. The school places a high priority on continuing interaction and communication with parents. Parents have supported SEL at Cossitt since the program's earliest days, when the initial assessment

process included a detailed questionnaire to determine parents' attitudes toward and support for SEL. The overwhelming majority of respondents affirmed that SEL was an appropriate role for the school. Communication with parents about SEL continues in the form of regular newsletters, bulletins, and "Homeside" activities from the Child Development Project. The school also maintains a parent-oriented library on SEL topics.

Initially Cossitt had a coordinating committee made up of six parents and six staff members. The committee's role was to encourage support for SEL and ensure effective schoolwide communication about SEL. Eventually the committee members agreed that SEL was accepted and understood so broadly throughout the school that their job was no longer needed. Currently a representative of the school's parent organization serves as the SEL liaison to the school staff, fielding questions about SEL and informing families new to the school about its SEL emphasis. In response to a fall 2004 survey of the school's parents, more than 50 percent said that the greatest strength of the school is its nurturing environment and social-emotional programming.

Overcoming Obstacles

Any schoolwide improvement process is likely to encounter obstacles. Even at Cossitt, the stresses of today's high-pressure educational accountability environment and the demands of No Child Left Behind are being felt. Cossitt teachers observe, for example, that there is less and less flexibility to make time for SEL in the school day. District 102 has adopted a set schedule of how many minutes teachers should be spending on each subject, and the pressure on teachers to get more and more done has increased. So, therefore, has the awareness of needing new ways to integrate SEL into the academic content areas.

Cossitt staff talk of a need for a stronger and more informed role for parents in supporting the schools' SEL efforts and their children's educational responsibilities and priorities both in and out of school. Just as with the academic disciplines and content, the more new learning is modeled, observed, corrected, and reinforced in various settings, including the home, the better the learning.

Looking Toward the Future

According to the professional literature on school reform, a major process of school improvement is likely to take a minimum of three years. "At Cossitt," says Mary Tavegia, "we felt after three years that we had come a long way and that all the pieces were in place. But it was not until the fifth year that we felt we really had a deep understanding of the programs we were implementing and what SEL really is."

Tavegia remains optimistic about the future of SEL at Cossitt. She accounts for her optimism in recalling how the entire school responded to the September 11 terrorist attacks. "That was truly a test of how SEL worked for us," she says. "It was a day that everyone felt we handled well with the students. It was our work with CDP that made that possible. Our kids had already come in at the time of the attacks, and classes had started before we learned what was happening. Because many of our children go home for lunch, we wanted to make sure they would be prepared to go out and hear the kinds of things people were saying and the fears they were expressing. I typed up a quick memo telling the staff what we did and didn't know and asking them to hold an age appropriate class meeting on what was happening. I went door to door with the memo. Within two hours teachers had sat down and talked openly with their students. Kids didn't panic, they weren't worried, but they knew there was something going on. By the end of the day we had sent a letter home to parents explaining what we'd done. Afterwards the parents all said they felt their kids were in a good place. The kids were comfortable because they were used to sitting down and talking about tough topics. We all felt it was because of our work with CDP and SEL. That was a huge test of what we'd been doing, and it worked."