

## **Leading an SEL School: The Principal's Role**

[Chapter 6 in CASEL's (2006) *Sustainable schoolwide social and emotional learning (SEL): Implementation guide and toolkit*]

Although effective leadership is an essential ingredient of any successful school improvement effort, it is particularly important to SEL programming. SEL is as much about adult change as it is about improvements in student performance. In addition to focusing on instruction in social-emotional skills, SEL is a process of creating a school community that is caring, supportive, and responsive to students' needs. In a review of the leadership literature, Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) identify three major practices of an effective school leader:

1. setting direction
2. developing people, and
3. redesigning the organization.

Beyond these practices, leaders must show "emotional intelligence." Because their highly visible leadership role requires an ability to demonstrate the SEL skills sought for all students and staff, they need to walk their talk. Modeling is a leader's most powerful instructional tool. It gives the principal credibility in promoting SEL as a "big idea" and in leading the planning and implementation of SEL programming, and it demonstrates the relational trust essential to the success of the school improvement effort.

### **Story from the Field**

At Cossitt School, real understanding of the change process was slow in coming. After initial training of the entire teaching and support staff, which took place in August before the beginning of school, the participants shared a deep trust in one another and an understanding about the kind of environment they wanted for themselves as teaching professionals and for their students. Despite their enthusiasm, after several months the teachers began to experience a sense of disappointment that the new program was not creating the kinds of changes in the school they had envisioned. "We kept waiting for kids' behavior to magically change, and it didn't in dramatic ways," says one teacher. "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 had 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."

### **ARTICULATE AND SUPPORT THE "BIG IDEA" OF SEL**

We cannot overemphasize the importance of the shared vision. Peter Senge notes that, at its simplest level, a shared vision is the answer to the question, "what do we want to create?" Shared visions are pictures that people throughout an organization carry in their heads and hearts. "They create a sense of commonality that permeates the organization and gives coherence to diverse activities" (Senge, 1990, p. 206). Not surprisingly, the leader is vitally important to creating a school community and climate open to change and improvement. He or she is responsible for articulating a clear focus for what the school is trying to accomplish, for gathering the input of all members of the school community so that the vision is truly shared and not imposed, and for making sure every aspect of the school culture supports those goals. The principal, in essence, must generate enthusiasm and buy-in for the big vision of SEL. This big vision may come from the leader or from one or more members of the school community.

SEL comes to each school or district in a different way. A group of parents might feel SEL is an important part of their children's education and bring it to the attention of the school leader. A teacher may test out some activities related to a specific program and see positive results. And the leader may determine that SEL is an important aspect of the school climate he or she is trying to create. No matter where the impetus comes from, it is the leader's responsibility to articulate and support the idea of SEL and present it to the school community.

Our experience is that this is not a hard sell. Many schools today are grappling with discipline issues, problems with bullying, limited achievement, lack of student engagement, and student drug and alcohol use. They have good reason to initiate programs focused on improving students' social and emotional competencies. However, to be most effective, SEL cannot simply consist of a new program in one or two classrooms. The entire culture of the school must embrace it. In addition, the entire school community must understand that SEL is a priority. It is the principal's job to create that understanding and make it a reality. That means not only having a vision of SEL conceptually, but also making SEL in the school a practical reality.

Dennis Sparks (2005) talks about the importance of leaders having clarity in their values and purposes. This clarity provides a filter for planning and decision-making.

For SEL to work, the leader really must make SEL one of his or her core values. To begin, the principal and an SEL steering committee should share their most treasured hopes and dreams for their students, asking themselves, *How would we describe our ideal graduates from this school? What skills and qualities would they possess as a result of attendance at OUR school?* In working with committees, we have found that the qualities they report in such an exercise inevitably include, and sometimes consist entirely of, social and emotional competencies, such as: persistence in the face of setbacks; self-motivation; caring for others; know strengths and limits. (See page 71 in the *Guide* for more on creating a vision and Tool 12 from the *Toolkit* for a sample visioning process.)

After discussing hopes and dreams, it is time for the principal to examine major and minor aspects of school functioning that are supporting or hindering SEL efforts. He or she might ask the following questions and then look for places to make changes to better reflect that SEL is now a priority for the school:

- Are the school's informal structures and culture contributing to a caring environment?
- Does the administrative structure, including rules, roles, and procedures, support collaboration?
- Does the physical plant contribute to a collaborative, safe, caring environment?
- What are the school's key values, beliefs, and norms?

(While this entire guide is devoted to providing ideas and strategies for creating schoolwide alignment with SEL, Tool 3 provides the means for beginning to examine school activities and create an "SEL school.")

## **RECOGNIZE THE MAGNITUDE OF SEL IMPLEMENTATION & THE VALUE OF PLANNING**

Often, after developing a core vision of SEL for their schools, leaders and their teams are eager to share it with other staff and get started. They may hope to leap right in and want teachers to leap with them. However, it is important to recognize and understand the magnitude of the change they are leading and know where to focus their efforts.

Teachers are asked to do a lot these days. Just when they have mastered one thing, another program or strategy comes along. It is understandable that many are wary of change. When they are encouraged to ask questions, develop a greater understanding of the initiative, and acquire a new set of skills, teachers will be more receptive to adopting the change for the long term rather than just paying it lip service (Hall & Hord, 2006). In addition, it is critical to involve staff, including several teachers, in the planning for SEL. Staff, particularly the teachers who will be delivering

much of the programming, need to “own” the work and feel they can directly address their personal concerns before any initiative will be successful. (Tool 4 provides a worksheet for leaders to use with a planning team to develop an action plan for SEL implementation. See page 76 for more on developing an action plan.)

Fullan (2001) suggests that those leaders who are most effective in change efforts take a slow, systematic approach that allows them to absorb details, listen attentively, and make informed decisions with the help of their staff. They are less likely to be discouraged if things go wrong in the early stages because they have a vision of the entire change process. A leader who can see the big picture will be less frustrated by slow progress and more likely to wait for the results of change instead of giving up and trying something new.

The word “process” may be helpful in clarifying what we are talking about. Effective implementation of SEL is not an event. It is not something staff members experience briefly until it is over so they can return to business as usual. The SEL implementation process requires commitment, a willingness to make personal as well as systemic changes, and patience. According to school change researchers Hall and Hord (2006), the process of implementing schoolwide SEL programming in a highquality, integrated, and sustainable way takes at least three to five years. Because the process takes time, it is particularly important that everyone in the school be prepared and committed for the long term. The school leader should make it clear to staff that they will not see dramatic changes in their students right away, although positive changes on many fronts will occur quickly. They may go through a planning-and-trying-out process in which very little seems to be happening. However, as they persist with SEL implementation they will be rewarded by the new skills they are learning, the small but important changes in student behavior and classroom management issues they observe, and the school’s emerging culture of collaboration and connectedness. And changes among the adults in the school community—toward a more supportive and respectful climate—will be apparent much sooner.

(Tool 5 provides a list of frequently asked questions and concerns about SEL programming and possible ways to respond.)

### **Handling Staff Resistance**

1. **Set concrete goals.** Agreed-upon goals should form a shared agenda reached by consensus, thus creating a broad sense of ownership and strengthening communication among stakeholders. This step is critically important because if anything goes awry later in the change process, the stakeholders will be able to return to a shared agenda and refocus their intent and efforts.
2. **Show sensitivity.** Managing conflict means being aware of differences among individuals. Each person must genuinely feel he or she is an equal and valued party throughout the change process. All participants need respect, sensitivity, and support as they work to redefine their roles and master new concepts.
3. **Model process skills.** Teaching through modeling the appropriate process skills and actions is fundamental to successful staff development initiatives. Staff developers may find, for example, that reflecting publicly and straightforwardly on their own doubts and resistance to change may help others. At the very least, honesty goes a long way toward building credibility. When staff developers model desirable behaviors, they give other stakeholders a chance to identify with someone going through the difficult process of change.
4. **Develop strategies for dealing with emotions.** All too often, educators concentrate on outcomes and neglect the emotional experiences—*anxiety, fear, loss, and grief*—of change. Effective staff development programs should include ways to address those emotions. Focus on such questions as: How will our lives be different with the change? How do we feel about the changes? Is there anything that can or should be done to honor the past before we move on?

5. **Manage conflict.** Ideally, change is a negotiated process. Administrators and union representatives should develop collaborative implementation plans to foster the positive development of all students.
6. **Communicate.** Openness in communication is a necessary component of collaborative problem-solving. Communication that focuses on differences can move issues of concern out of the shadows. Another technique that increases community is reflective questions, i.e., when the questioner tries to help stakeholders explore their thinking, feelings, needs, or attitudes. Such questions can include: Where are we in the change process? What has changed so far? Where are we headed?
7. **Monitor process dynamics.** The change process must be carefully monitored and appropriate adjustments made. Evaluation begins with the original assessment of the need and readiness to change and should be a key factor in a continuing reform effort.

Adapted from Janas, M. (1998). Shhhhh, the dragon is asleep and its name is resistance. *Journal of Staff Development*, 19(3).

### **MODEL SEL COMPETENCIES—LEAD WITH EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

High-quality, sustainable SEL programming cannot be led by someone who lacks the skills he or she is expecting students and staff to teach and demonstrate. An SEL leader should model SEL competencies, creating a climate and culture that will engage staff and demonstrate what SEL is all about.

In his classic *Harvard Business Review* article “What Makes a Leader?,” Dan Goleman (1998) describes research he conducted with executives that showed emotional intelligence to be twice as important as other qualities, including technical knowledge and IQ, in predicting successful leadership and company performance. Experts in the field of school leadership (Lambert, 2003; Patti & Tobin, 2003) have confirmed the importance of emotionally intelligent leadership in schools. According to Goleman, to be an emotionally intelligent leader in any setting requires mastery of five key competencies, closely connected to those CASEL recommends for children’s development: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-regulation, (3) motivation, (4) empathy, and (5) social skills. Leaders who possess these:

- Are energized by their work and are driven to achieve for the sake of achievement because they have chosen jobs that fit with their values
- Are able to manage their emotions, stay calm in stressful situations, and create an environment of trust because they possess self-knowledge
- Are successful at motivating others and are not easily discouraged
- Are thoughtful and consider other employees’ feelings when making decisions
- Are good at coaching and mentoring
- Have a clear understanding of group process
- Are often successful in interacting with all kinds of people
- Are skilled at taking on only what they can handle and therefore are generally successful at the tasks they agree to undertake (Cherniss, 1998; Goleman, 1998; Rabinowitz, 2003)

These characteristics, although useful in any setting, are particularly relevant to leadership in a changing school environment, where motivation, enthusiasm, and level headedness are necessary to prevent an initiative from spinning out of control or losing support. Further, emotionally intelligent leaders are more likely to build relational trust between and among themselves and the teaching staff—an essential ingredient in school reform (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Emotionally intelligent leaders know that they must be flexible, adaptable, and aware of others’ needs. (See Tool 6 for a self-assessment of one’s own social and emotional competencies as a leader and ideas for how to develop them.)

### **SERVE AS THE LIAISON TO THE GREATER SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

School leaders often must take on the role of liaison to the school community during a change process, addressing the questions and concerns of parents, school board members, local

government officials, and other stakeholders. Questions the leader might face when implementing a change initiative, particularly social and emotional learning programming, include: Does it work? Does it conflict with other course content? Will it burden already overloaded teachers? Will parents support it? How will you deal with teacher resistance? (Educational Commission of the States, 2000). Any one of these questions can stall the implementation process. Effective leaders must be ready with good answers and encourage team members and stakeholders to participate in the process of developing answers.

Although we cannot emphasize enough the importance of leadership, particularly the role of the principal, it is misleading to imply that one person alone must carry the entire weight of SEL program implementation. In subsequent sections of this guide, we expand on the concept of “shared leadership.” An effective leader is, above all, someone who can build an effective team of leaders “in the pipeline” (Fullan, 2005). Teamwork and relationship-building are central to a program’s success.

### **KEY THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT LEADERSHIP**

- Leadership is crucial to successful implementation and long-term sustainability of SEL programming in a school.
- The leader is responsible for creating the “Big Idea” of SEL and articulating it to the entire school community so that SEL becomes a priority.
- The leader must prepare staff for change and be supportive throughout the process.
- The leader should model the social and emotional competencies he or she expects students to learn and teachers to teach.
- The leader must be an advocate and visible and vocal supporter of SEL, particularly to staff and parents, in order to generate and maintain enthusiasm.