

## Learning Throughout the Day

**A school district's evidence-based social and emotional learning program was teaching skills but not changing behavior. What was missing?**

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Many schools are turning to “evidence-based” social and emotional learning (SEL) programs to prevent such student behaviors as bullying and harassment, drug and alcohol abuse, and violence. Research on these programs by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has established that participating students develop knowledge about social and emotional decision making (2003). But do the programs change student behavior on the playground or on weekends?

Needham Public Schools, a suburban school system of 5,000 students in Massachusetts, adopted an SEL approach about five years ago. We began by determining the social and emotional skills that we wanted our students to develop. After study and debate, we decided on self-management, decision making, social communication, and problem solving. Next, we researched programs that had been reviewed and recommended by CASEL. From these, we selected and implemented programs that we believed taught the skills that were important to us, including Second Step, a program designed to reduce impulsive and high-risk behaviors in students.

Just as the programs had promised, students learned to articulate problems, risks, and consequences. Students got better at reading body language and naming emotions. They could apply social and emotional skills in a skit or scenario in the classroom.

But we soon heard from teachers, playground supervisors, and parents that students did not consistently apply these skills in solving interpersonal conflicts on the playground, in the school cafeteria, or after school. We had accomplished cognitive change but had failed to change students' behavior.

We concluded that teaching social and emotional skills was only one part of changing behavior; we also needed to find ways for students to practice those skills throughout the school day. As a result, we developed several school structures that encouraged students to draw on their social and emotional skills.

### Gatherings

People behave better when they feel known and welcome rather than anonymous and alienated. Regular opportunities to gather together help students form connections with teachers and with one another. Successful gatherings—whether they are called Morning Meetings, circles, or advisory groups—share similar characteristics. They provide a structured opportunity for students to get to know one another, to feel explicitly welcomed, to shape the classroom culture, and to learn such social skills as cooperation, communication, and self-restraint.

In Needham's five elementary schools, all teachers use the Morning Meeting structure developed by Responsive Classroom ([www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)). The meeting has four components: greeting, sharing, group activity, and news and announcements. Students lead the greeting segment and choose group activities, thus increasing their sense of ownership of the classroom (Kriete, 2002). The program has produced more cohesive, cooperative, and productive classrooms.

One 3rd grade teacher observed that Morning Meeting offered the class's only African American student a point of entry to the classroom community, changing the dynamic so that the student participated more throughout the school day. A 2nd grade teacher found that she could help a student who had Asperger's disorder by giving his mother notice of upcoming Morning Meeting activities, enabling the child to practice at home and then participate more effectively. Many teachers have documented the benefits of daily practice in leading, participating, listening, and cooperating. They find that Morning Meetings help them consciously set the tone and expectations for a constructive classroom community.

Teachers at our middle school have also begun using the technique of gatherings, with impressive results. For example, a 6th grade English teacher has created an ongoing gathering. She begins each class by writing a sentence or two on the chalkboard about Stella, her dog, who experiences the same social challenges as a typical 6th grader—making friends, struggling to fit in, and sometimes even getting bullied. In addition to its academic focus (students correct the sentences' grammar, usage, and mechanics), the lesson also has a social and emotional learning focus. The daily sentences grow into a story, with students contributing ideas about what should happen next as they think about and discuss Stella's dilemmas and options. The practice has been very popular with the students; they are taking more interest in their grammar work and are incorporating their own pets into the story. The teacher observed that this gathering provides “a safe way to discuss some of the problems students may be facing in their daily lives.”

An 8th grade social studies teacher started implementing weekly gatherings that range from get-to-know-you activities to go-rounds about the U.S. presidential debates, books, and favorite founding fathers. The teacher has observed impulsive students improving their self-restraint and listening skills, quiet students participating more actively, students with special needs discovering

that they have things in common with their classmates, and all students showing a strong sense of community. Through the gatherings, the teacher has created a classroom culture in which all students actively participate.

Teachers who incorporate weekly gatherings into their practice have reported that the structure has created a sense of community in their classrooms, helped them get to know their students, reduced classroom conflicts, and improved equity and access during learning time. A math teacher reported,

I have learned more about my students in just two months than I learned about many of my students last year in nine months.

In our high school, we have established mentor groups in which one faculty mentor stays with the same group of students for several years. We established these groups in part to respond to an alumni survey in which our graduates told us that they wished they had had the opportunity to form a significant relationship with a teacher as part of their high school experience. The mentor groups provide opportunities to encourage academic reflection and to respond to the crisis situations that inevitably happen during high school—for example, the death of a peer. Although some students easily find mentors in their teachers, coaches, and club advisors, a dedicated mentoring structure facilitates that sense of connection for students who might otherwise fall through the cracks.

## **Cooperative Groups**

More than 20 years ago, Roger and David Johnson (1984) showed that cooperative learning not only improves academic achievement but also teaches social skills and improves classroom climate. As a result of their work and that of others, schools began routinely using cooperative groups.

But social skills instruction—one of the major components of the cooperative group—has often been neglected. What we typically see in schools today is not cooperative work but groupwork. As part of our social and emotional learning efforts in Needham, we have reestablished the model of the cooperative group in which social skills are taught, practiced, and assessed as part of the group exercise.

At the elementary level, teachers carefully coach students on cooperative skills—listening, encouraging, leading, sharing, strategizing, and reflecting on the group process and individual contributions. Teachers have become more astute observers of group dynamics and more sophisticated designers of cooperative activities that take advantage of varied perspectives and skills. For example, when one teacher noticed a student who tended to isolate herself, she developed a checklist that helped the student assess and improve her own behavior.

In our middle school, a social studies teacher found that students were better able to understand the Constitutional Convention as well as their own conflict-resolution behavior when he integrated reflection about conflict styles into the content and into students' cooperative process of investigating the event. Students identified which historical figures played competitive, collaborative, or accommodating roles in the Convention, and to what end. They also reflected on which style they were using during the classroom simulation of the Convention and whether that choice was helping or inhibiting the learning experience.

Two math teachers combined math review, community building, and cooperative skill building in opening-week activities. Students worked in cooperative groups to create survey questions to learn about one another and to analyze the resulting data.

At our high school, the science department explored better ways to group students for lab assignments. When we interviewed students about lab group experiences, the findings surprised us. Students said they preferred that teachers form the groups because when it was left to them, they felt pressured to choose friends, even though they recognized that they had difficulty separating work time from social time. Students also said that they learned more when the groups stayed together for longer periods of time.

## **School Routines and Schedules**

For social and emotional learning to succeed, students need opportunities to practice their skills in safe and reinforcing environments. We examined our school routines to find opportunities for such practice and to make simple, practical changes that met our students' developmental needs.

One of the most helpful changes we made in our elementary schools was switching the order of recess and lunch so that recess now comes first. The students can expend some energy, eat in less of a rush, and use lunchtime to calm down before going back to class. Several other adjustments have improved recess as well: Our schools have given careful thought to age-appropriate games and have ensured consistency between the rules and consequences used by the recess teachers and those used by classroom teachers. Students meet the recess teachers during Morning Meetings, a practice that creates a connection among classroom teachers, recess teachers, and students. When all the adults in the school come to a consensus on the rules, recess becomes a structure that students understand, one that has the same limits and responsibilities as the rest of the school day.

Our middle school teachers, inspired by a summer course on SEL, decided that the school schedule, broken into 45-minute classes, impeded social and emotional learning. A rushed and disjointed day led to rushed and disjointed student behavior. Students had limited opportunities to form relationships or to practice social and emotional skills. In addition, the teachers thought that longer

blocks of time would provide opportunities for more authentic learning experiences. The teachers proposed to begin each week with two days during which core subjects are taught in double blocks.

Teachers observed that as a result of this change, students were calmer and more focused and thus were learning more. One teacher noted that even students who had doubted their ability to sit and pay attention for 90 minutes found that they enjoyed the double blocks. Students' comments included,

- I feel like I learn more in the 90-minute blocks.
- I like going to math and being able to stay in a math mood and then going to social studies and staying in that mood.
- It's better for me because I have ADD, and it takes me longer to focus, but once I do, I can be very focused.

## Changing the Learning Environment

In Needham Public Schools, consciously rethinking our structures, routines, and practices has produced immense payoffs. Although we know we still have work to do, we are observing students practicing their social and emotional skills at lunch, during recess, and in cooperative learning groups. Almost all participating teachers have reported spending more productive time on learning.

Effective social and emotional learning requires diligent attention to explicitly teaching social and emotional skills, but students also need opportunities to see skills modeled, to practice emerging skills, to apply skills in novel situations, and to receive feedback and reinforcement. Too often, schools look for quick answers to complex problems. Changing students' social and emotional behavior requires more than skill lessons—it requires attention to the environment in which students learn.

### Aims of Education

*Education has for its object the formation of character. The great aim of education is not knowledge but action.*

—Herbert Spencer

## References

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