

# From Education Week Opinion: Vander Ark on Innovation

## Social Emotional Learning in Action: How a Leading District Responded to the Community's Clarion Call

By [Tom Vander Ark](#)  
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*Mary Ryerse with Paul Goren*

Paul Goren is superintendent of [Evanston/Skokie School District](#) and has been a champion of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) for many years. We took some time to talk with him about why he believes SEL is important and what he and his colleagues in Evanston/Skokie are doing to promote SEL in their schools and community.

### **Q. What contributed to you becoming so committed to SEL?**

A. Along with caring about academic development, I have always aspired to help students develop into good citizens, good problem solvers, and good decision makers. Further, I have also recognized the importance of helping students pay attention to conflict, its sources, and how to resolve it. I spent time working at the [Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning](#) (CASEL), an organization that has taught me and many others an important lesson: that SEL competencies are teachable and can be part of the routines of any school or district.

Simply stated, as I think of the purpose of education, I think of supporting the development of skills and competencies to do good and do well.

### **Q. Please tell us a bit about your school district and what you are doing to promote SEL in Evanston/Skokie.**

A. We are a fascinating and fantastic community with 15 schools and 7,200 students, 40% of whom qualify for free and reduced lunch and 58% of whom are students of color. We are a very diverse place that represents the demographics of our country.

Our SEL efforts are really an outgrowth of our strategic plan. As we engaged in the strategic planning process, we were committed to listening to the community's voice on what was important for [students to know and be able to do](#). What came from the voice of over 2,000 who participated was a clarion call to embrace not only academics, but also SEL.

Along with academic growth, it was clear that the families who make up our district want young people to become effective decision makers as they prepare to deal with a wide range of circumstances in their lives.

### **Q. Can you give examples of initiatives or practices that support SEL?**

A. There are all sorts of approaches across a variety domains that can help develop multiple cognitive aspects. A few examples include:

- *School Climate Teams*. Adults in schools look at student behavior, suspensions, conflicts, and discern where we're growing, with an angle or lens on SEL. For example, we ask, "How are we serving our students and not just putting them in a penalty box?"
- [\*Restorative Justice Circles\*](#). Students participate in structured processes and activities that promote group problem solving practices.
- *Whole Child Council*. Creating a group of educators and community members to gauge climate, issues and concerns; and to identify how to leverage community resources to make a broad range impact within our warrant (for example, 12% of our students are classified as special needs) and beyond our warrant (for example, we want to partner with community agencies because we care about homelessness).

### **Q. How do you make time for SEL?**

A. One way is for teachers to take what they are teaching (curricular offerings) and embed social and emotional skills and competencies within them. For example, *The Diary of Anne Frank* can be taught not only from a language arts or historical point of view, it can also be taught with an eye on SEL. The teacher can illustrate to students how Anne dealt with conflict in her life and processed that in order to encourage kids to be reflective on their own ways of dealing with conflict or crisis.

Another approach is to use materials that were designed to be used to explicitly teach SEL. For example, [Making Meaning](#) is really helpful for teachers, as are responsive classroom strategies such as [Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies](#) (PATHS).

There are also great opportunities for school wide activities such as morning meetings, advisory, pure conversations, PEACE circles and more.

### **Q. How do parents know about the efforts and respond?**

At a PTA convening, we did a briefing on SEL. We got the biggest turnout with deep engagement. Parents were really curious. We did a parallel presentation to our board that involved educators, teachers, social workers, and a psychologist describing what we're doing and how we're thinking about it.



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As we think about the potential impact, there is powerful evidence supporting the impact of enhancing students' SEL experiences. [CASEL points to research by Durlak, Weissberg, et al](#) that shows that SEL can have a positive impact on school climate and promote a host of academic, social, and emotional benefits for students including:

- Better academic performance
- Improved attitudes and behaviors
- Fewer negative behaviors
- Reduced emotional distress

With those types of results, it is no wonder the Evanston/Skokie community, and many others across the country are calling for an increased focus on SEL.

For more on an educator's approach to social emotional learning, see

- [What Should Graduates Know and be Able to Do](#)
- [Non-Cognitive Skills: Bad Name, Really Important](#)
- [12 Ways to Use Inside Out to Teach SEL, STEM, and Life's Ups and Downs](#)

For more on parenting and social emotional learning, see:

- [For the School Supply List: 25 Ways to Promote Effort, Attitude and Respect](#)
- [Parenting with Social and Emotional Learning: Thinking Before and After Skills](#)
- [The Power of Parenting with Social and Emotional Learning](#)
- [Growth Mindset Parenting](#)

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