

Why Leadership Matters in Establishing a Culture of Social, Emotional and Academic Learning

By Dennis Best and Michelle Gill



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Social, Emotional and Academic Learning (SEAL)

Despite our best efforts, there are some things we all know but fail to act on proactively. Educational leaders have long been aware of the need to consistently address students' social, emotional and academic learning (SEAL) needs. However, due to educational leaders' many hats, this recognized need was more frequently addressed in pockets than across school organizations. The impact of the pandemic only accelerated our collective desire to strengthen SEAL support. A recent report published by the United States Government Accountability Office (2022) highlights this impact as seen during the 2020-21 school year:

Nearly two-thirds of teachers (61 percent) had more students who showed signs of emotional distress than in a typical year. In addition, among those teachers who had students who made less academic progress compared to a typical year, the vast majority said social or emotional issues were a contributing factor to the lack of progress. These issues were especially common in high school.

Anticipating those increased needs, the Centennial School District's (CSD) leadership team sought to evaluate and potentially refine the systems and practices used to support students' social and emotional wellness throughout the district. Therefore, in the spring of 2021, the CSD Board of School Directors approved a new position to lead this work – a Social, Emotional and Academic Learning (SEAL) Coordinator. In contrast to the more widely used acronym SEL, SEAL reflects CSD's organizational stance that social and emotional learning is as important as, and supports, academic learning (Durlak et al., 2011).

SEAL Coordination - Who Owns the Work?

Dedicating SEAL coordination to a new position, instead of adding it to a previously existing position, reflects the district's commitment to sustaining this work. Adding school- or district-level coordination to a current position would have served as irony, considering the impact it could have on the social and emotional well-being of the designated employee, as well as potentially setting the initiative up for failure. Further, housing the position within CSD's Schools and Student Services department created the potential for systemic impact through district-level coordination of evidence-based K-12 SEAL practices.

This action represented an intentional organizational shift for CSD. Previously, well-intended approaches to social-emotional learning existed in some classrooms and pockets of schools. While that addressed the needs of some students, this approach no longer aligned with our understanding of SEAL as a universal, Tier-1 approach, nor did it reflect CSD's commitment to equity in educational opportunities for all students.

Adding and staffing the SEAL coordinator position was CSD's initial step toward better addressing its students' social, emotional and academic needs. The next, and equally critical step, was soliciting the buy-in of the district's building level administrators to support the SEAL coordinator in carrying out this work – building shared ownership of SEAL implementation. Again, without the

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support of the building-level administrators, the intended student outcomes would not be attainable.

Principal “buy-in” and collaboration with the SEAL coordinator are critical to this process as they set an organizational culture in their school that impacts the school’s climate.

Organizational Culture

Principals are responsible for constructing the organizational norms by which school constituents are expected to interact. This includes preferred modes of communication, shared priorities and behavioral etiquette. To become pervasive, principals must model these norms and encourage school community members to abide by these expectations consistently. Established organizational cultures ultimately become the fabric of a school (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010).

Simply put, when principals “own” SEAL, eliciting staff “buy-in” and subsequently permeating the practice throughout the school’s culture is a likely outcome.

School Climate

Principals that establish an organizational culture of respectful behavior by modeling respectful interactions with the constituents of their schools enhance the school climate. In such instances, the principal values teachers and students, and the resulting climate of respect encapsulates the interactions between teachers and students (Koth, Bradshaw & Leaf, 2008).

School cultures and climates characterized by trust, respect, engagement, high expectations and supportive practices create the necessary conditions for students to continuously develop and practice practical social and emotional skills (Louis et al., 2010).

What Does SEAL Implementation Look Like in Schools for Leaders?

Establishing a SEAL Coordinator position has provided relief and support for CSD’s principals in better-addressing students’ social, emotional and academic needs.

The SEAL Coordinator can:

- Dedicate the time necessary to gather stakeholder input and lead the development of a district-wide comprehensive SEAL plan.
- Collaborate with principals to transparently share the plan’s why, how and what.
- Articulate a systematic process for implementation, data collection, and progress monitoring.
- Maintain alignment between SEAL goals and implementation steps, *Pennsylvania’s Career Ready Skills* (<https://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/K-12/Safe%20Schools/PA%20Career%20Ready%20Skills/PA%20CRS%20Introduction.pdf>) and existing district priorities. Design and facilitate professional learning to provide clarity and develop SEAL practices for leadership, staff and community members.

In this arrangement, the requirements of principals are limited to sharing their leadership in demonstrating the importance of the initiative, subsequently eliciting the “buy-in” of staff and recursive collaboration with the SEAL coordinator.

Systemic SEAL implementation is easily doable at the building level for principals when structured in this meaningful and collaborative way. Especially when juxtaposed with the unfortunate recipe for unsuccessful implementation of initiatives demonstrated too often in school districts – adding to the already overflowing plates of principals by asking them to lead work that may not be in their wheelhouse independently.

Practical/concrete examples practitioners can use tomorrow to infuse these practices into their organization’s culture.

In districts with or without a SEAL coordinator, leaders can leverage high-impact, low-maintenance practices to intentionally shape organizational culture and school climate – creating the conditions for social, emotional and academic learning to flourish.

➤ Cultivate One’s Social-Emotional Competency:

- Use a personal SEL reflection, like the one provided by CASEL (<https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/adult-sel-self-assessment/>), to build familiarity with your SEL competencies. Self-awareness, self-management strategies and effective relationship skills provide protective factors that can increase leaders’ resilience and allow leaders to model effective SEL skills in interactions with staff, students and family members throughout the school day (Mahfouz et al., 2019).
- Self-management strategies like taking a deep breath or pausing to allow a moment to process during interactions, model effective self-regulation and enhance your ability to respond rather than react. Modeling this in everyday interactions also communicates that others can do the same, potentially impacting many in the school community.
- Giving others the gift of your full presence through active listening models a key social and emotional skill and sends the message that you value the person or people in front of you. In addition, the positive ripple effect of this practice on an organization’s culture is far-reaching as staff mirror the practice with one another and among students.

➤ Prioritize belonging and relational trust:

- Begin conversations and staff meetings with a brief inclusive opening such as, “what is a

success you've experienced recently?" If you are with a small group, invite all members to share. For a large group, create groups of 4-6 people to share amongst themselves.

- Create a calendar reminder system that prompts you to have a brief check-in with each staff member throughout the year, with specific students undergoing challenges, or with new students. Use this quick conversation, email or phone call for good news, avoiding task-related school topics.
- Notice and acknowledge what is going well. This does not need to be tied to a big incentives program or public ceremony. It can be as simple as including it as part of a conversation or email or on a sticky note left on a desk that lets the person know that what they did is valued: "You put a lot of effort into that project!"

or "Your team's collaboration is fun to see in action and shows in your work with students."

We anticipate that the increased prioritization of students' social, emotional and academic learning needs over the last two years will become a sustained component of K-12 education. However, there can be a wide space between mere prioritization and students' improved social, emotional and academic outcomes. School leaders have the potential to create a clear path through that space with their support for implementation steps and the robust and positive climate and culture they set.

Located in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, the Centennial School District comprises Warminster Township, Upper Southampton Township and Ivyland Borough, serving approximately 5,300 students in grades K-12. For more information, contact the authors at bestde@centennialsd.org or gillmi@centennialsd.org

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