

Washoe County School District: Linking Social and Emotional Learning to Achievement

The learning sciences are not just limited to the cognitive aspects of learning. One strand of research that has recently gained traction is “social and emotional learning.” Researchers define social and emotional learning (SEL) as the “process of acquiring core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions and handle interpersonal situations constructively.” In other ⁴¹ words, SEL involves students attaining certain skills, attitudes and behaviors that enable them to understand and express their thoughts and emotions in a healthy manner and constructively interact with peers and adults. For example, people demonstrate SEL in their day-to-day lives by thinking from another person’s perspective before making a decision, staying on task when faced with distractions and controlling emotional expressions to build and maintain healthy relationships.

Many studies have demonstrated a strong link between SEL and student achievement. For example, a 2011 meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs found that “compared to controls, SEL participants demonstrated significantly improved ... academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement.”⁴¹ Furthermore, surveys of business executives have shown that effective communication and collaboration are desirable lifelong competencies.⁴² Due to this connection between SEL, academic performance and well-being, school districts around the country have begun recognizing the benefits of investing in SEL programs. A recent national survey conducted by the American Association of School Administrators, the National Association of Federal Program Administrators and Whiteboard Advisors found that more than half of school districts intend to leverage new federal funding opportunities under the Every Student Succeeds Act to support SEL programs.⁴³

Washoe County, a large local education agency in Northern Nevada, is an example of a district that has recently committed to SEL. From 2006 to 2010, the district had observed poor high school graduation

⁴¹ Durlak, J. A., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., Weissberg, R. P., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405-432.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>

⁴² Committee for Children. (2016). *The importance of employability skills: How and why educators should teach these skills*. Chicago, IL: CASEL.

Retrieved from <https://www.cfchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/policy-advocacy/sel-employability-summary.pdf>

⁴³ Ng, N. E. & DeSchryver, D. (2018). *Bringing ESSA Title IVA to life: How school districts are investing Student Support & Academic Enrichment funding*. Alexandria, VA: AASA. Retrieved from

http://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Policy_and_Advocacy/files/AASA%20NAFEPA%20WBA%20ESSA%20Title%20IV%20Survey%20FINAL%20061818.pdf

rates. Trish Shaffer, Washoe County's SEL coordinator, explained that "basically one out of two students [would] walk across the [graduation] stage. That was a real wake up call for us as educators."⁴⁴ To improve the number of students completing their K-12 education, district leaders looked to ensure that students are provided a safe and supportive school environment and taught skills to develop healthy attitudes toward learning. On a webpage dedicated to their districtwide SEL program, Washoe County's leaders outline their beliefs regarding the benefits of SEL, stating that it "promotes students' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship and responsible decision-making skills ... [which] improves student attitudes and beliefs about self, others and school."⁴⁵

District leaders also recognized that for any SEL program to be successful, the district must view it as a long-term initiative that cannot be achieved through a one-off teacher training event. They could not expect teachers to automatically translate the research literature into classroom practices without continuous support from the district. Therefore, since 2012, the district has engaged in efforts to introduce SEL comprehensively and sustainably into classrooms.

First Steps to Ensure Safe and Supportive School Environments

During the 2012-2013 school year, district leaders began by establishing a vision for what exactly a safe and supportive school environment looks like. With grant funding from the NoVo Foundation, Washoe County partnered with consultants from the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a national organization that provides research, tools and resources that facilitate district implementation of SEL programs. With CASEL's support, Washoe County officially adopted its [SEL standards](#) that delineate five core competencies described as "fundamental skills for life effectiveness," including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. In addition to defining what each of these five competencies entail, the standards explain the typical behaviors of students that demonstrate mastery in each competency.⁴⁶

Also during the 2012-2013 school year, the district brought on board an SEL specialist who coached a pilot group of Washoe County educators on strategies to incorporate SEL into classroom instruction and culture. The specialist led a workshop where the pilot group could learn how SEL complements the newly-adopted Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics. The specialist

⁴⁴ Education Week. [Education Week]. (2018). Social and emotional learning: Goal-setting and relationships are part of district's academic core. [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cq5mex-l7JY>

⁴⁵ Washoe County School District MTSS-SEL Department. (n.d.). SEL fast facts. Retrieved from <https://www.washoeschools.net/Page/1840>

⁴⁶ Washoe County School District MTSS-SEL Department. (2017). Social and emotional learning standards. Reno, NV: WCSD. Retrieved from <https://www.washoeschools.net/cms/lib/NV01912265/Centricity/Domain/202/Social%20Emotional%20Learning%20Standards%20English%20and%20Spanish/SELStandards%202017.pdf>

also led SEL-focused professional learning community (PLC) discussions in several schools, and provided individual guidance for teachers who had selected SEL as their professional growth focus area.⁴⁷

In the following year, working closely with CASEL, Washoe County's leaders sought to scale their districtwide SEL program through a three-step process. First, they hired one additional SEL specialist to expand the program's reach. The SEL specialist worked to build the capacities of 23 teachers who would in turn facilitate PLC conversations at various sites across the district. Second, through a standardized RFP process, the district's board of education assigned a committee of teachers and administrators to recommend specific SEL curricula. Upon reviewing several requests for proposals, the committee approved the adoption of [MindUp](#) for students in grades K-8. MindUp provides teachers with a digestible explanation of the science behind common student behaviors as well as concrete steps to address them. For example, in the lesson plan for grades 3-5, the curriculum provides an overview of how feelings of anxiety and anticipation of failure can trigger a threat response in the brain, leading students to avoid challenging mathematical tasks. MindUp subsequently suggests specific activities to help students identify their emotions and appropriately address them.⁴⁸ Finally, several principals volunteered to join the first SEL cohort that committed to an SEL implementation process. This commitment included designating an official school-level SEL leadership team — comprised of the principal, teachers and other support staff — participating in a districtwide leadership summit and providing three to four SEL professional learning sessions at their respective schools.⁴⁹

Leveraging School Climate Data

With funds awarded from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences, Washoe County, in partnership with CASEL and the University of Chicago, developed a [climate survey tool](#) grounded in the district's SEL standards that measures students' "social and emotional skills, habits and mindsets such as self awareness and responsible decision-making."⁴⁹ The survey is taken by all students in fifth through ninth and 11th grades, and the data is disaggregated according to demographic factors such as gender, individualized education plan (IEP), free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL), English learner (EL) and gifted and talented education (GATE) statuses.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2015). *Washoe County School District*. Chicago, IL: CASEL. Retrieved from http://dev-financial-sustainability.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Washoe_CaseStudy.pdf

⁴⁸ Hawn Foundation. (n.d.). MindUP training workbook 2: Grade levels 3-5. Santa Monica, CA: Hawn Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.washoeschools.net/cms/lib/NV01912265/Centricity/Domain/202/Social%20Emotional%20Learning/MindUP/Subject%20Alignment/Subject%20Alignment%20Guide_3-5.pdf

⁴⁹ Darling-Hammond, L. & Cook-Harvey, C. M. (2018). *Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support student success*. Washington, D.C. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Educating_Whole_Child_REPORT.pdf

⁵⁰ Washoe County School District Office of Accountability. (2018). *Social and emotional competencies by grade*. Retrieved from <http://www.wcsddata.net/data-topics/sel/secdetail/>

Data Collection

All students in grades 5-9 and 11 take an annual school climate survey, where, for a given SEL competency, they rank the difficulty of mastering it.



Interpreting the Data

The district holds an annual Student Data Summit, a daylong symposium where students have an opportunity to reflect on the gaps in the data and share their social and emotional needs with educators. Students assist district leaders in developing action steps around those gaps and needs.

Implementing Action Steps

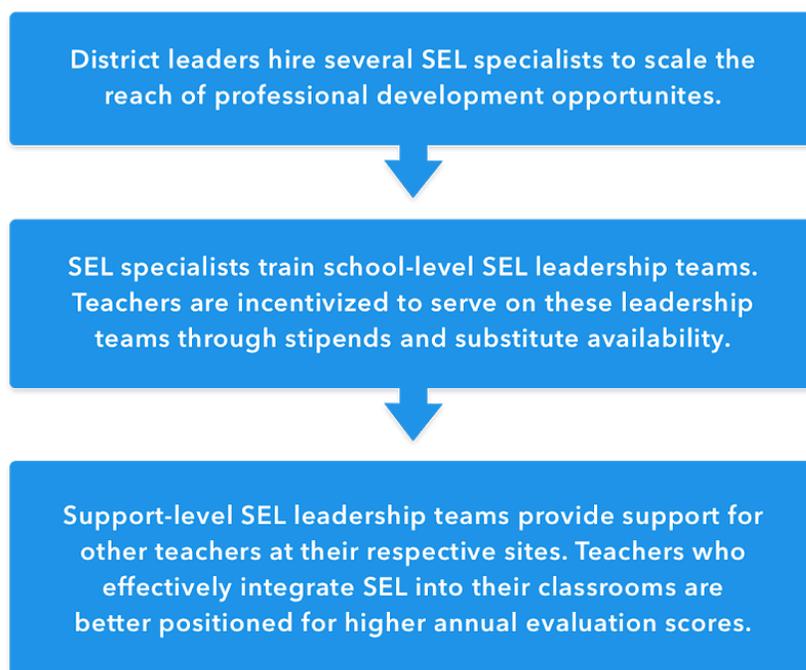
School-level SEL leadership teams provide professional development for teachers on research-based methods to address the gaps and needs identified at the summit.

In the first few years of participating in the survey, many Washoe County teachers and students were left unsure of the survey's direct impact. Laura Davidson, director of research and evaluation, added, “[the district] started doing focus groups with students about the school climate survey and these SEL measures we were developing and a lot of them were saying, ‘It’s the fourth year I’ve taken the survey, I’ve never seen the results, why should I put any more time or effort into it if I don’t see anything change at my school?’”⁴⁹ In response to this feedback, the district trained the school-based SEL leadership teams on how to properly debrief the climate survey results with staff, such as how to present and interpret school-specific data and suggest action steps that teachers can take to address gaps. Furthermore, Washoe County is hosting [annual data summits](#) where students have an opportunity to verbally express their social and emotional needs.⁴⁹

Supporting Systemic Integration of SEL

Three additional district practices serve to facilitate Washoe County's coordinated approach to SEL. First, district leaders ensured that all stakeholders have a shared vision around SEL by explicitly incorporating the topic into the district strategic plan. Objective 5.1 of Envision WCSD 2020 states that the district will “provide and continuously improve a climate of belonging and self-worth amongst students, families, staff and the community that is centered around an inclusive, collaborative and engaging learning

environment by providing equitable practices, strategies and materials.”⁵¹ Second, the [teacher evaluation rubric](#) used by Washoe County administrators, based on Framework for Teaching by Charlotte Danielson, outlines expectations for teachers to use SEL strategies in the classroom, writing that teachers should “[facilitate] a climate in which all students demonstrate genuine caring for one another, support each other’s learning, and monitor one another’s treatment of peers, correcting classmates respectfully when needed.”⁵² Therefore, teachers who integrate SEL into daily activities are better-positioned for a higher annual evaluation score. Lastly, Washoe County incentivizes educator participation in the districtwide SEL program by allocating a bulk of its grant funds toward stipends and substitutes for teachers who serve on school-level SEL leadership teams.⁴⁷



Impact of SEL on the District, Educators and Students

Recent data and educator feedback point to successes in Washoe County’s districtwide SEL program. Since 2012 — the first year of the districtwide SEL program — the number of schools that have adopted a SEL curriculum such as MindUp has doubled from 43 percent to 80 percent, suggesting increased buy-in among administrators and staff. In Washoe County, students who report higher SEL ratings on

⁵¹ Washoe County School District (WCSD). (2015). *Envision WCSD 2020: Investing in our future*. Reno, NV: WCSD. Retrieved from https://www.washoeschools.net/cms/lib/NV01912265/Centricity/Domain/633/2015%20Strategic%20Plan%20Update_2_27_18_FINAL%20Eng%20Web.pdf

⁵² Washoe County School District (WCSD). (2016a). *Washoe County School District: Professional growth system*. Washington, D.C.: National Council on Teacher Quality. Retrieved from https://www.nctq.org/dmsView/Teacher_Evaluation_Rubric

the annual climate survey generally have higher achievement scores and lower rates of disciplinary issues. As such, they are less likely to be at risk for dropping out. At the same time that the district has focused on this link between academics and SEL, the graduation rate at Washoe County has risen by 20 percentage points.⁵³ Ruby Burnley, a third grade teacher at Washoe County, elaborated on what SEL means for her students, saying, “Happy students are better thinkers ...They’re not stressed. They’re not worried. Their confidence level is higher. They just seem to persevere more and have that confidence to extend themselves.”⁵⁴

Future Steps

Work remains to be accomplished at Washoe County. According to the Nevada Department of Education, over 2,000 cases of student violence against other students and over 1,000 cases of bullying were reported in the district during the 2017-2018 school year.⁵⁵ Furthermore, across many SEL competencies, students identified as gifted and talented often rate themselves higher than FRPL, IEP or EL students.⁴³ However, Washoe County remains confident that doubling-down on the districtwide SEL program will narrow this gap in the future. District leaders state that one of the most critical parts of this effort would not only be to collect data regarding school discipline and SEL competencies, but to also continuously provide educators with support to interpret this data and implement specific practices and strategies. In a recent interview, Laura Davidson explained, “Data are useless unless people can use them to promote student success for college and career. Behind every data point is a person ... If we are using data and there is a story to tell, then SEL competence has to be part of that story.”⁵⁶



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⁵³ Shaffer, T. (2018). *What is SEL?* Reno, NV: WCSD. Retrieved from https://www.washoeschools.net/cms/lib/NV01912265/Centricity/Domain/202/Social%20Emotional%20Learning/SEL%20Snapshot/REFINEMENT_WASHOE_SEL_ONEPAGER_F.pdf

⁵⁴ Washoe County School District (WCSD). [WCSD MTSSSEL]. (2016b). *Social and emotional learning Washoe Cty* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfHodYIRF1s>

⁵⁵ Nevada Department of Education (NDE). *Nevada accountability portal: 2017-2017 WCSD at a glance*. Retrieved from <http://nevadareportcard.com/DI/nv/wcsd>

⁵⁶ Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2018). *Washoe County Schools embeds SEL assessment in their climate surveys*. Retrieved from <http://measuringcel.casel.org/sel-assessment-in-action-washoe-county-schools/>