



WDLC BRIEF

Shared Support: Providing for Social Emotional Learning in Online Environments

Introduction

Lisa Lieder is a teacher and counselor and the Alternative Education Coordinator and Online Coordinator for Oshkosh Area School District's Alternative Education Programs. Her history as a high school English teacher, her coordinator roles, and her experience as a counselor while she has been a part of the Wisconsin eSchool Network (WEN) form the basis of her perspective on social emotional learning — SEL — in online and blended environments. She has given a lot of thought to students' social and emotional well being and the pitfalls and possibilities of addressing SEL with and for online learners.

The place to start, says Lieder, is with a shared definition. For this discussion, SEL is the process through which children and adults effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Typically, schools find it challenging to support SEL in face-to-face school settings, so it is not surprising that they would struggle with SEL in online environments.

The goals for this case study are to 1) present context for the role SEL — social emotional learning — has in online and blended learning 2) challenge readers to examine how they are addressing SEL, and 3) offer key questions and next steps for stakeholders to consider related to SEL.

About These Reports

As the field of K–12 online and blended learning continues to evolve, programs around the world work together to discover what fits and what doesn't when it comes to the intricate pieces of the puzzle that make up a school/program. No stranger to this evolution, the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative — consisting of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Wisconsin Virtual School, and the Wisconsin eSchool Network — is working on a collection of topic-based case study reports to share a variety of approaches the programs in their network take to put the puzzle together. The reports are not prescriptive, but intended to stimulate leaders to be purposeful and thoughtful about solutions which will differ based on program structure, student demographics, staff vision, and stakeholder needs. Each report presents associated key questions; taken together, these questions may provide a framework for thinking through these topics and making similar programmatic improvements in processes and services.

Citation

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Lieder identifies concerns, describes opportunities, offers advice, and suggests some critical conversations to prompt further engagement around SEL and online learning. Throughout, she offers examples of best practices as well.

Background

As stated on the Wisconsin Department of Public Instructions (DPI) website. “Social and emotional learning is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”

Making social and emotional learning (SEL) skills part of the learning equation helps children succeed in school and life. With social and emotional skills, children can manage their feelings, build healthy relationships, and navigate social environments. When adults are supported by good policies and training, children develop the skills needed to prepare them for the world.

Wisconsin DPI “Why it Matters”:

- Students receiving comprehensive social and emotional learning instruction increased their achievement test scores by 11 percentile points.
- The soft skills developed by social and emotional learning are exactly what 59 percent of hiring managers surveyed look for in new hires.
- Columbia University found that an \$11 return resulted from each \$1 invested in SEL.
- A nationally representative survey of PK–12th grade teachers found that 93 percent believe SEL is very or fairly important for the in-school student experience.

Guidance provided by the DPI encourages social and emotional learning to be implemented in all learning environments including online learning.¹ As a result the following are key implementation strategies to ensure SEL competencies are incorporated into your online or blended program.

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|  Make SEL a Priority |  Coordinate Efforts to Support All Systems |
|  Integrate SEL into Academic Instruction |  Use Data to Assess Programs |
|  Create an Environment that Supports SEL |  Focus on Equity |
|  Provide Training and Supports for SEL Programs and Practices |  Involve Families and Communities |

We encourage readers to become familiar with the Wisconsin Social and Emotional Learning Competencies that can be found on the DPI’s Social and Emotional [website](#). This begs the question, are we taking SEL serious in the online learning environment?

¹ <https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/mental-health/social-emotional-learning>

Concerns and Next Steps for Educators

Concern #1: Lack of Purposeful SEL strategies in online environments

Often online learning is seen as a fix for students who struggle in the traditional setting. While online and blended can provide academic curriculum, the barriers or trauma students deal with daily do not automatically disappear. Lieder believes people fail to recognize that the struggles students have often stem from, for example, mental health issues, AODA (alcohol and other drug abuse) issues, and/or lack of resources. She says if online learning options are not considered thoughtfully, purposefully, they can separate students from resources and isolate them from educators who can have a positive impact on their academic and personal lives and foster success in both through relationships.

Once students are being served outside their home school, the adults who work with the students locally can be out of the communication loop and unaware of issues that may be arising. Conversely, the online teacher usually has very limited contact with anyone except the student, might not know the student has social or emotional challenges, and, without a shared protocol, would not know how to proceed if a crisis arose.

Relationship is at the core of all learning — including online and blended. We cannot continue to leave the social emotional issues to other agencies to address. We must take responsibility for the whole learner.



Next step: *Develop a survey for students to identify topics they would like to know more about or want some assistance with to identify the range of SEL issues and concerns and provide appropriate support. The survey could be posted in the LMS at the course level or be part of orientation materials offered to all students at the program level.*

Concern #2: How SEL is implemented in online and blended environments

Lieder sees that people tend to view SEL as simply college planning or character education. Character education can teach honesty, empathy, and other values. Learning how to deal with social emotional challenges and developing coping strategies cannot be interpreted solely as structured due dates, personalized by providing an option to ask for extra help. True SEL also gives students the skill set to cope with everyday issues.

In addition, most teachers are not trained counselors, so online teachers cannot have the sole responsibility for supporting a student's social and emotional needs. While being in an online course may alleviate the anxiety caused by being in a traditional face-to-face classroom, the online experience typically does not provide the student the opportunity to develop and practice the necessary coping skills to interact with others, maintain a job, and pursue goals. Without proper training, teachers can find themselves in a very difficult situation when students reveal trauma or social or emotional issues and the teachers do not know how to respond. Appropriate responses require multiple levels of support, that is, people who are trained to support students in crisis and the people who interact with them as well. For example, Lieder notes the important progress local schools have made in bringing in area mental health

agencies to screen students. However, the high volume of identified need makes it difficult for quick response and causes a gap in communication between families, schools, and resources. It would be easy for this gap to occur for online learners.



Next step: Offer online support groups with a trained counselor who could Skype with students weekly, use online meeting tools for group meetings, and conduct regular mental health checks.

Concern #3: Lack of follow through relating to mandated reporting for students using online/blended formats

WEN emphasizes the importance of mandated reporting and provides a process for those working with students in the online learning environment. This works well for a teacher who has concerns, but students who are not connected to a home school of peers will most likely have a very different experience. Often the mandated process begins when a peer shares that she or he has seen something posted on social media by another peer. Although it is important that online students' classmates are willing and feel safe to share with an adult what they see others post, do they know who to turn to with that information? Especially if the peer is online and lives across the state.



Next step: Develop, promote, and require protocols to maintain regular contact with students specifically to monitor SEL issues and challenges.

Opportunities

While the need for SEL support and its challenges are systemic, blended and online environments provide options and opportunities at multiple levels. Lieder offers a few ideas:

- Online learners are looking for answers online. Schools need to provide proactive curriculum covering topics such as self-esteem, substance abuse, grief, anxiety, anger management, healthy relationships, restorative justice, and coping skills. With a click of a button, students could have access to tips and information. A clear connection to someone in a support role benefits students further. For example, it would be easy to educate students on AODA issues using online curriculum. Although students may not choose to change their behaviors, the course content may make them more aware of the addiction process and lead to conversation and possibly a relationship with someone in a support role.
- The blended format allows for face-to-face support with the SEL curriculum. For instance, students could identify traits they want in a healthy relationship in online activities; listen to podcasts provided by sexual abuse resources; and then, in a small group setting, process what they learned with a trained group facilitator or counselor.
- A self-advocacy/help tab located in every course could lead students in crisis to immediate contact, for example, suicide prevention numbers, sex trafficking support sites, and local agencies.
- Parent involvement in online learning makes it easier to distribute necessary SEL curriculum. With parent accounts, parents would have access to the same list or resources or trainings. NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) does a great job of connecting people to local chapters/support groups. Often parents don't want to share with the school counselor. The online platform makes it easier to distribute information without the stigma.

Critical Conversations about SEL

The WDLC and WEN provide a rather unique opportunity for colleagues across Wisconsin to plan, strategize, and problem-solve. The culture of these organizations is marked by critical conversations. The hope is that similar conversations will take place locally. The variety and depth of the concerns related to SEL are well represented in this report. Each section contains kernels of critical conversations that could lead to systemic change. Two conversations encompass recurrent themes: sustainability and accountability.

Currently, many middle and high school counselors are forced to spend more time scheduling students than engaging in individual or group counseling. With a bigger push for ACP (Academic and Career Planning), what is the potential impact on addressing the growing social and emotional needs of students? How will staff continue to meet the personal needs of students while addressing other expanded initiatives?

Students are leaving districts because their social and emotional needs are not being met. What does that say about student and educator accountability? Consider how easy it is to drop a student or encourage them to consider full-time online learning based on student count, graduation rates, and issues that are not driven by students or their choices. School districts expect online programming to provide a personalized approach to meeting student needs. Academic issues are addressed fairly well. What are schools doing to address the whole learner?



KEY QUESTIONS

What are effective strategies for checking in with students to gauge whether the social emotional issues that prompted interest in online learning are being addressed and managed?

How does your school/program define equity in SEL? What is required to address equity issues around SEL?

Advice and More Next Steps

- Elevate the value of SEL in general. It should not be seen as punitive or else it loses its value.
- Develop layers of support and flow charts so — from having a question to coping with a crisis — teachers, coaches, mentors, and parents know what to do and who to contact.
- Provide more training for coaches, mentors, and teachers so if something does occur, there is someone on the local side to support the student.
- Prepare for sustainability. Have enough trained staff (FTE) to handle concerns after identifying areas of concern and encouraging students to share.
- Determine how to use data to assess programming, from the number of times students click on resources to the number of follow-up, discussion, or support groups that meet in blended or in fully online settings.
- Consider adopting SEL curricula that could be helpful to both students and parents.
- Foster collaboration between schools and agencies, and identify who on each side will continue to update resources, connect with districts, and maintain contact.
- Give students a voice in their SEL. Sharing decision-making and offering opportunities for reflection promotes self-concept and heightens the importance of SEL to students. Students may also be the best recruiting tool for SEL programs.

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