

Guidelines for Improving School Culture and Climate and Increasing Staff Understanding of and Buy-In for SEL/SECD

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Overview

The engagement of staff in building a positive school and classroom culture and climate and promoting SECD is a developmental process. It requires breaking through an understandable resistance or avoidance of yet another new initiative and additional responsibilities. If SECD is seen as “another task,” then understanding is not present and any buy-in that is proclaimed will be illusory. SECD must be seen as the vehicle for school success. It will make the language arts class, the arts classes, PE, science, lunchroom, bus rides, hallway passage, and sports teams and clubs work more inclusively, supportively, and effectively. Instruction in social-emotional skills will be understood as direct contributors to reduced bullying, less classroom conflict, and improved academic performance. The ideas below will help you move in these directions but you must know your school and your colleagues and start where necessary to move forward in this development process. Honest conversations about people’s objections and “why this hasn’t happened already” cannot and should not be avoided. Airing of concerns is the SECD thing to do.

How to Build Courage, Commitment, and Support

Informal conversations related to SECD and the Education of the Whole Child are surprisingly important ways to build courage, commitment, and support. Urge colleagues to check www.wholechildeducation.org and the website of *A Nation at Hope* (nationathope.org) and see that what you are doing is part of a movement. Here are some suggestions for engaging in Strategic Informal SECD Discussions:

1. Engage in conversation about common visions for education and the growth of children.
2. Engage in conversations that examine values and beliefs around race, social class, culture, intelligence.
3. Engage in discussion and action that reflects comprehensive integration of cultural competence and responsiveness as threads that run through all strategic formal and informal SECD discussions, activities, etc.
4. Encourage discussion about how to reach the vision, how learners learn, how the values in action are falling short of the espoused values and what is necessary for success in school and life.
5. Encourage discussion about the need for and benefits of modeling SECD, for teamwork, respectful collaboration, and shared leadership among students and faculty and parents (e.g., how will this make teaching better, fewer interruptions, less discipline time, more responsive and engaged students, greater sense of collegiality and how the cumulative and developmental nature of the programming leads to increasing benefits over time).
6. Encourage discussion of why each person's role is important and interconnected and what will help people get better at improving their own classroom climate and their contributions to the school climate.
7. Discuss the structures that will be necessary to accomplish shared goals, beyond the School of Character Leadership Team, and how that group or committee will operate and remain a priority in the plan for school improvement. (e.g., how it will solve problems, make decisions, share responsibility, obtain resources, socialize new people to the school, communicate within its

members and to the rest of the school community, administration and parents, engage and involve students, provide bridges to expert consultation, and monitor progress).

8. Make connections of SECD to such essential areas as the Code of Student Conduct, policies related to Harassment, Bullying, and Intimidation, efforts at positive discipline and classroom management, and service learning.

9. Provide the necessary ongoing mentoring, external consultation, support, networking, connections, and map of the journey (so that people will feel it is well captained, shepherded, championed). Help the work ahead seem tangible and possible, within all staff members' capabilities and aligned with why they entered the field of education.

- Audit and recognize what are already being done.
- Start with a pilot effort/something small and likely to succeed
- Ensure adequate initial preparation and ongoing professional development and support for what is being asked.
- Balance the traditional and the innovative, the familiar and the new- don't ask people to throw out everything they have learned or have been doing, but do add a new dimension/some challenge.
- Provide a mechanism for dealing openly, flexibly, creatively, and in a grounded, no-fault, no-blame, problem-solving way with obstacles, difficulties, ambivalent staff, changing conditions.
- Celebrate and communicate small wins, accomplishments, successes and acknowledge and appreciate efforts in small and large ways; share, share, and share some more **in as many typical and creative ways as you can think of.**

Starting Points for Improving the Climate of Your School

What are some starting points and processes we recommend for getting your school climate on track? Beyond the conversations, **there are at least 4 structural options and we recommend you begin with the one that seems most reasonable and accessible to you:**

1. Articulate Shared Values, Themes, Essential Life Habits:

Examine the values, themes, and essential life habits that are being presented within grade levels, and then across grade levels. Example of life habits that also link to values and themes include responsibility, integrity, and organization. Examine the context and way in which these value/themes/life habits are being presented. Bring them into alignment so that students are learning a common set of themes/values/life habits within grade levels and that there is continuity or coordination across grade levels (e.g., the values can change upon transition to middle or high school, but there should be an acknowledgement made that students learned *a priori* values and these are being built upon). It is essential that value/theme-based/habit-based SECD be seen as cumulative. Examine the consistency of alignment of espoused and practiced values among the adults in the building. The community is not only made up of the children but of all persons in the school, parents and community stakeholders.

The reason this has potency in building morale and positive climate is because everyone wants to spend their time in places that stand for something they can feel a part of, feel inspired by, and admire. Deciding what kind of school we want to have and then organizing to help make it happen are powerful motivators that allow staff and students to look beyond the everyday tasks and see the deeper meaning behind them.

2. Shift Services Toward Event-Triggered Support and Anticipatory Guidance:

Everyone's morale gets sapped by seeing the same kids get into the same trouble over and over again, or by spending yet another staff meeting talking about the same, recurring issues. A big way to get past

some of this is to anticipate difficulties and work to prevent them, or limit their harmfulness. Here's how:

Examine the procedures in place to provide students with support when they are in difficulty. Do so from a careful equity lens. To what extent are they anticipatory, i.e., triggered by children experiencing difficult life circumstances, vs. reactive to negative behaviors on the part of students. For example, groups for children whose parents become divorced, unemployed, incarcerated, seriously ill or deceased are extremely powerful and reach children before they show the ill-effects of these unfortunate occurrences. Event-triggered services reduce negative incidents in school, allow more energy and attention to be directly toward learning, and improve climate and morale. Note that when your examination shows that those in difficulty or getting exclusionary or remedial services are disproportionately from certain groups, equity considerations should be involved. When event-triggered services reflect racial or socioeconomic disparities, a two-track solution is needed. Those students need the required services; the conditions generating that disproportionality in the community need wider focus for "downstream" prevention.

3. Improve Faculty Readiness to Teach SECD:

No one wants "one more thing" to do. And most staff have never seen SEL/SECD in action. So, it's no wonder that resistance is encountered. To avoid this, three things are necessary.

First, *show how teaching SECD, or using SECD approaches, aligns with responsibilities and expectations that faculty already have.* Consider the requirements of your Code of Student Conduct, your bullying prevention processes, or teacher requirements to create a positive classroom learning environment. Look at how SECD can be integrated with classroom management procedures and instructional requirements. Show how content standards emphasize problem solving, decision making, and critical thinking, all part of SECD, across content areas. For example, programs like Students Taking Action Together fully integrate SEL and student voice and empowerment into social studies instruction without changing the content (cf. www.secdlab.org/STAT).

Second, *show your colleagues what it looks like*. There are many videos available at www.edutopia.org and www.CASEL.org and SELinSchools.org . Once educators see SEL/SECD in action, they realize that it has much more in common with good teaching than they typically expected.

Third, remember that *faculty readiness is greatly enhanced by mutual support*. Have the members of your SEL/SECD/ Character/Culture and Climate Committee or Leadership Team provide a chance for faculty to support one another as their skills develop. Provide a forum for sharing approaches, getting help in overcoming obstacles, and being recognized for accomplishments. If there is a lack of SEL/SECD expertise in the building, reach out to SEL4NJ.org or SEL4US.org to find resources your staff can connect with.

Four, *be an SEL/SECD role model* yourself. Here's how you can do this: <https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-promote-social-emotional-and-character-development>

4. Ask yourselves this question: “When and how are we ensuring that *all* students feel themselves to be appreciated and to be contributors to the well-being of their classmates, school, and community?” In a school with positive morale, students do in fact feel appreciated and see themselves as “adding” something to the school. The same is true for staff members, of course.

Building the Buy-In for SECD

Ed Dunkelblau, International Coordinator for the Academy for SEL in Schools (SELinSchools.org) speaks about 6 interrelated stages that build upon one-another to foster successful SECD buy-in. SECD/SEL School Leadership Teams/Committees and RU Team consultants have found his intuitions to have much practical value in our work with schools:

1. **introduce** – raise awareness of the approach and its potential to be helpful
2. **inform** – deepen people's understanding of what SECD is about
3. **impress** – show external salience – make connections to CASEL, CEP, ASCD' s Whole Child initiative, NJDOE mandates and codes, etc.
4. **instill** – show that there is a local imperative-- why and how will this help your school, short term and long term
5. **invite** – begin to work-- get people directly involved
6. **involve** – deepen commitment -- after initial involvement, plan how to get everyone doing a little more, doing their work with more thoughtful reflection and sharing

Morale Building Structures You Can Try in Your School

1. Formation of a **Youth Engagement Coordinating Committee**: This committee will increase youth voice and visibility of good things that our youth are doing; expand the pool of students involved in particular projects by cross-group collaboration and synergy; use a newspaper club to share youth accomplishments both inside and outside of your school; coordinate student discussion of upcoming school events and how they can be handled with good character; provide systematic student input to address/prevent school issues such as harassment, intimidation, and bullying; substance use and abuse; gangs; cyberbullying; cheating in school.
2. Create a group, **Great Teachers and Teachers Aspiring to be Great**. A group like this provides a format that is empowering to teachers, recognizing both competence and potential; maximize teacher decision-making regarding how to improve their practice and craft; and improve self-definition and camaraderie for those most motivated toward self and school and student improvement.
3. **Teacher Support Groups**: These groups will help process feelings about the challenges of working with difficult, at-risk students, build skills in meeting the challenges using a combination of Problem-Focused, Emotion-Focused, and Meaning-Focused Coping, and embrace a Better Self-Better School process whereby staff engage in mindfulness exercises and positive goal-setting and personal and professional improvements and thereby contribute toward creating an improved school culture and climate.

EIEIO: Cultivating Buy-In for Schools of Social-Emotional Competence and Character

Whether for staff, parents, or community, we recommend the “Old MacDonald” method of encouraging buy-in among stakeholders: EIEIO

Educate- Make sure people understand social-emotional competence and why it is important. Raise awareness of the approach and its potential to be helpful to staff now, as well being beneficial in the long and short term for students.

Inspire- Show what schools of social-emotional competence and character look like. Share examples, visit, link to others who are implementing SEL/character programs in order to make a compelling practical case for adopting the model.

Explore- Encourage staff, parents, the community to look for other examples, such as readings, videos, and blogs (e.g., www.edutopia.org) to deepen their understanding. Start conversations based on this question: “If a student entered our school in the lowest grade and stayed through the highest grade, what would we hope would be different about him/her at graduation as a product of being in our school? What are we doing to help/hinder this from happening?”

Involve- Get started with sample activities and by piloting procedures. For example, get people directly involved by giving them a role, a project, a way to experience activities that build social-emotional competencies and character, such as service learning.

Organize- After initiating involvement, plan to deepen people’s commitment by getting everyone to do a little more. For example, by incorporating more thoughtful reflection and sharing in their daily work, being active on a committee, or helping to plan for systematic efforts to build social-emotional competence.

Getting Buy in for Social-Emotional and Character in Your School: 7 Leadership Lessons

For social-emotional and character development (SECD) to become widespread in schools, those already dedicated have to bring in their hesitant colleagues. Steve Aduato, award-winning journalist, has studied the “buy-in” process in *Lessons in Leadership* (Rutgers University Press, 2016). Here are some of his ideas (all quotes are from his book, pp. 136-138).

1. **“Accentuate the positives, but don’t act as if there won’t be challenges.”**

“Being honest and having a positive ‘we can do this’ attitude about those challenges is a key to leading change, because a leader of change has to be credible. Remember, even if a change is challenging or difficult, many team members will ‘buy in’ if they believe in *you* as a leader. Establish credibility and trust by recognizing the obstacles and challenges present, while communicating confidence that they can be overcome.”

Communicate that you are not asking your colleagues to do something brand new. Yes, it’s new for them. But other educators like them, in schools like theirs, have implemented SECD successfully despite facing many of the same initial concerns. Folks do not decide to do SEL to make their and their students’ lives more difficult. “If there are particular people in the organization who are resisting change, those people must be convinced that it is in their interest to be a part of the transformation.”

2. **Explain clearly how the status quo is “is actually more dangerous and risky than the change itself.”**

Change is difficult, so it will often seem easier to continue to do what we have been doing. Overwhelmed educators holding on for dear life say, “Don’t rock the boat.” Steve says, “Really good leaders make it crystal clear that the risks of *not* changing present concrete and serious problems; make it clear what the payoff or tangible benefits of implementing this change will be.” In other words, show how the boat is sinking, or how some folks below decks are drowning, or whatever is happening that cannot be tolerated.

3. Change is personal, not virtual.

“Too many organizations try to sell the change through detailed standard operating procedure manuals or highly detailed descriptions of the steps needed to implement the changes.” Extensive on-line resources, though valuable and well-intended, are more likely to be daunting at the beginning of a change process than helpful. Start with a clear conversation about what the vision is, how things will look and feel once the changes have taken place and why will they be better for the person you are speaking to. Buy-in never happens through “compliance, command, and control.” It happens through understanding. Then, the details can be better grappled with.

4. Take the position that making progress on SEL, or whatever the change focus is, is not negotiable, but you are open to feedback and suggestions about exactly what happens and how it happens.

Change cannot be rushed. Buy-in is like a lay-away plan— ownership comes over time. “Create an environment conducive to an honest dialogue, even if the feedback is difficult to hear.” Don’t allow yourself to think that your way is the only way. Doubts exist, whether you think they are justified or not. Open dialogue can be created in feedback forums, faculty meetings, interactive email, or a one-on-one with leadership. Leaders have the courage and confidence to proactively bring up potential opposition before anyone else because they’re not afraid of it. They confront it. They make the case that the status quo is absolutely not acceptable.”

5. Those who are implementing SEL or related curriculum changes see things differently from those who are championing those changes.

Successful change agents understand that they must empathize and understand the position of their colleagues and act accordingly. There are no magic or silver bullets in the change business-- only hard work, dedication, and persistence to pursue constant improvement that seeks organizational excellence. One thing to be especially aware of is “change fatigue,” which is common in schools as a reaction to too many changes simultaneously or in a short time period. Even well-intentioned and necessary interventions have to be scaled down when they are coming into highly jumbled, over-programmed schoolhouses (<http://www.secdlab.org/mission1/>)

6. “Celebrate and recognize any success or accomplishment associated with the change effort, no matter how small. People want to be part of a winning team.”

Especially at first, recognize small steps because major victories are not likely to happen quickly. As the leader of change, “never forget that real change about real problems and issues is a marathon, not a sprint.” Modeling patience, process, and progress help foster buy-in, especially in schools that link so much staff morale and worth to standardized test scores.

7. Don’t shy away from seeing yourself, and your like-minded colleagues, as leaders.

Creating buy-in is a leadership activity, even if you are doing it among your peers. You exercise leadership through your vision, passion, and commitment to students’ social-emotional and character development and what it means for their future success in school, college, careers, community, and life. By keeping a realistic perspective on change, you use the attractive elements of SEL to help create positive and lasting motivation among your colleagues.

[reprinted from the blog, <https://www.edutopia.org/article/creating-buy-sel-your-school>]