

POLICY BRIEF

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Addressing Traumatic Stress and Academic Regression with Social Emotional Learning

by Cathleen Beachboard

As schools start making COVID-19 contingency plans for next school year, a second lurking crisis is about to show up in school systems and classrooms everywhere – traumatic stress. Before this pandemic even started, almost half the nation’s children had experienced at least one or more types of serious childhood trauma. This pandemic, unfortunately, is adding to that trauma with its far-reaching ripple effects from families losing jobs and income, people going hungry, children seeing family members sick and dying, and a looming fear to leave home due to threat of illness. Even the parents or guardians who students normally turn to for stability may be overwhelmed trying to keep their own mental health stable.

Addressing the mental health of students is going to be critical in the future of classroom practices. Especially with the research on childhood trauma showing that prolonged traumatic stresses has the potential to leave students with impaired ability to learn, heightened anxiety, and lifelong health problems.¹ The good news is that by using trauma informed practices with social emotional learning (SEL), teachers have the ability to relieve the weighted impact of traumatic stress.²

SEL Increases Long-Term Achievement and Positive Classroom Behaviors

Social emotional learning is no longer an option with rising amounts of traumatic stress due to this pandemic. It is a necessity and is also critical to addressing academic skill regression and learning loss in students. The more positive mental supports schools provide students the less they will be affected by traumatic stress. Research has shown that students who participated in SEL programs showed remarkable gains over students who did not.³ Those same students also showed improved classroom behavior, an increased ability to manage stress and depression,

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and better attitudes about themselves, others, and school. In addition, this study discovered that SEL has the ability to give at-risk students the tools they need to overcome obstacles and plug into their education for long-term achievement.

There is also evidence to suggest that including SEL in school curricula can help promote resilience and therefore increase academic achievement. However, fearing academic regression and finite time schools may consider eliminating SEL to focus on core subjects. The logic behind this decision, that more time for content delivery will better the gains for students academically, is mistaken.

Quick SEL Practices for the Classroom: Mental Health Check-Ins and Self-Care Plans

SEL can work in tandem with teaching academic content and enhance the teaching of the content presented. For example, Mental-Health Check-Ins can be conducted at the start of class in a few minutes and can significantly enhance the amount of learning a student does in class. According to one study, “simply talking about our problems and sharing our negative emotions with someone we trust can be profoundly healing—reducing stress, strengthening our immune system, increasing academic attention and reducing physical and emotional distress.”⁴

Communication helps with coping and healing. Teachers can create spaces—even remotely—where every student can check in. Communication allows teachers to gain insight on student safety concerns, feedback, and levels of traumatic stress. This small practice can be done in a few minutes of time in which a teacher asks students to rate their feelings and asks if they need individual assistance before they start learning. This allows the teacher to provide SEL practices and coping mechanisms as they are needed by students. It also allows the teacher to get an overall gauge of the class mood and helps the teacher use the data to plan SEL lessons for the whole class based off trends in Mental Health Check Ins.

Teachers can also use the practice of creating self-care plans to help students learn and refine SEL skills. A self-care plan is an intervention that can give students a sense of control and prevents them from being completely consumed by emotional reactions due to traumatic stress. As students create their own, they also develop ownership and autonomy. When an educator knows a student’s individual plan, they gain insight into the strategies, activities, and tools students have to deal with traumatic stress.

Self-care plans start by asking students to identify support structures and activities that help them feel better such as music, exercise, coloring, art, or meditation. Students also identify one or two people with whom they have a good relationship and to whom they feel they can turn for help and support. After completing the support section, students list stressors that might act as hurdles to their mental well-being. This section serves as a guide for moments when they might use their self-care plan. This small practice will help students in times of overwhelming

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stress and provide them with the confidence that they have internal capacities to face traumatic stress. This simple practice takes minimal time and yields massive benefits to the teacher and student.

SEL is not one more thing for schools to do, it is an integral part to a child's academic, social, and emotional development. It yields gains in academics, provides mental safety for students, and can coincide with content, therefore not adding anything to a teacher's "plate". If schools want to truly help at-risk students, get greater gains in academic achievement, and deal with the traumatic stress from this pandemic utilizing SEL is necessary and critical as a whole school practice. The future of the COVID-19 pandemic is uncertain, but the mental health of our students should not be.

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¹ Bremner, J. D. (2006, December 8). Traumatic stress: effects on the brain. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3181836/>

² Lazar, K. (2019, October 15). Positive relationships can buffer childhood trauma and toxic stress, researchers say - The Boston Globe. Retrieved from <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/10/15/positive-relationships-can-buffer-childhood-trauma-and-toxic-stress-researchers-say/ebR0F2XGgruN6ysJsMz9XO/story.html>

³ Durlak, J., Dymnicki, A., Taylor, R. D., Weissberg, R., & Schellinger, K. (2011). The Impact of Enhancing Student's Social and Emotional Learning : A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions. *Social and Emotional Learning—Child Development*, 82(1), 405–432.

⁴ J.W. Pennebaker, J.K. Kiecolt-Glaser, & R Glaser. (1988). "Disclosure of traumas and immune function: Health implications for psychotherapy". *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 56(2), 239–245.