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THE Importance OF Social-Emotional Learning

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New Jersey School Boards Association

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Social and Emotional Learning and Arts Education

A secret weapon—and a superpower—for
our schools

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The importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) is indisputable—and in recent years the recognition of that fact has grown exponentially.

SEL has rightfully emerged as an educational priority, as school leaders confront the ever-increasing signs of stress and trauma our students are experiencing. The alarming rise in suicides (which are now appearing in our middle schools and high schools), social media shaming, ghosting, peer pressure, and school shootings have all contributed to what is clearly a mental health crisis in our schools. All of this was occurring pre-COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these issues due to the anxiety and loss some students are sustaining, the social isolation that comes with stay-at-home orders, the milestones students have missed (graduations, concerts, proms, trips, sports activities, travel), and even questions regarding career aspirations and students' finding a successful pathway to their passion in life.

The confluence of student mental health and well-being issues and the COVID-19 pandemic has thrust the need for SEL front and center.

Social-Emotional Learning Let's take a step back for a second and consider the recent ascendance of SEL. These competencies are nothing new. They have always been with us, and their purpose is to help us meet the tests of life.

These tests begin for children when they wake up in the morning. Some wake to chaos, hecticness, and/or disorganization. These tests are exacerbated in context of poverty, or pandemic. Maybe they have to take care of siblings, or leave early because their parents have to get out to work. Maybe they walk to school in a dangerous neighborhood. Or maybe their school is not safe—a concept that now evokes concerns about health in addition to physical or emotional safety. Maybe they come home to an empty house, or go to an after-school center, or have to pick up siblings and take care of them after school. Maybe their parents—or one parent, or guardian—has a physical or mental health or substance abuse issue—or is dealing with COVID or grief from a COVID loss.

When young people—or any people—experience these tests of life, their ability to complete important tasks—like schoolwork, homework, workplace responsibilities, and even child care—is affected. We don't have the concentration we need, the focus, the emotional control, or the perspective. Teachers don't teach effectively and students don't retain and use much of what they have been taught. When we are able to adapt to the tests of life—which, amazingly, is more often than not—it's because we are able to put a set of skills we are born with—SEL skills—to productive use. But just like our inborn ability to learn language or mathematics, these skills

need to be guided and developed if they are going to be robust enough to handle challenges today—and the unknowns we surely will face tomorrow.

What is SEL exactly? It's the process of acquiring the skills to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively. The skills we are talking about, often called the "CASEL 5" because they were named by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (www.casel.org) are these:

Self-Awareness

- **Identifying emotions:** Identifying and labeling one's feelings
- **Recognizing strengths:** Identifying and cultivating one's strengths and positive qualities

Social Awareness

- **Perspective-taking and empathy:** Identifying and understanding the thoughts and feelings of others
- **Appreciating diversity:** Understanding that individual and group differences complement each other and make the world more interesting

Self-Management

- **Managing emotions:** Monitoring and regulating feelings so they aid rather than impede the handling of situations
- **Goal setting:** Establishing and working toward the achievement of short- and long-term pro-social goals

Responsible Decision Making

- **Analyzing situations:** Accurately perceiving situations in which a decision is to be made and assessing factors that might influence one's response
- **Assuming personal responsibility:** Recognizing and understanding one's obliga-