

# Staff Mental Wellness and Social Emotional Literacy

## Teaching social and emotional skills to school adults

When the social and emotional needs and skills of school adults are addressed, they are better able to model SEL skills for students and meet their and their families' needs. A consistently safe and supportive school relies on adults modeling the social and emotional skills that SEL programs teach to students. Learning and applying these skills in our personal and professional lives will help all school adults to enjoy mental wellness and to contribute to the wellness and success of our students.



A foundational element of a positive school climate is the development of a *shared mindset and intentional way of communicating with all stakeholders*. When school adults learn how to express their feelings and needs without judgment or blame, and to listen empathically for the feelings and needs of others, we open the door for beneficial dialogue to take place. We feel heard and are better able to detect what unmet needs might have caused a student to act out, disengage, or fail to thrive in school. Positive communication skills do not excuse poor behavioral choices. Rather, they allow us to understand the behavioral choices of others and invite them to collaborate with us on how to restore or resolve situations. When students and staff feel understood, we are all more willing to consider how we can “right a wrong.”

## Developing skills together

Developing Adult SEL skills follows the same process as teaching these skills to students. We create a series of small group opportunities for all staff to meet and learn together. Effective Adult SEL trainings

- help staff to identify challenges and needs,
- introduce and model a behavioral skill or process to address a situation or need,
- provide time for practicing the skill with colleagues,
- include time to reflect on how it felt to use the skill and when it might be helpful,

- suggest ways to apply the skill in everyday encounters, and
- provide opportunities to share successes and challenges with colleagues.

When choosing strategies to develop Adult SEL, examine the language of the strategy to ensure that it presents a “doing with” rather than “doing to” approach to teaching a skill. Social and emotional learning is not about blaming people for how they behave or requiring them to behave differently. Rather, it is about learning and practicing a skill that will be beneficial to you and those with whom you interact. Social and emotional learning explores the challenging situations we all experience and invites us to consider beneficial ways of meeting our needs and those of others.

## Achieving buy-in

Every adult that works in a school should be invited to participate in staff training. All staff interact with each other, students, and caregivers. The way we message others greatly influences their self-concept - what they believe to be true about themselves and in turn, their self-concept influences their choices of behavior. Thus everyone, and everything that happens to us in school contributes either positively or negatively to the climate of the school. It is essential that every building level and district administrator participate actively in trainings and model the skills being taught. When staff are treated in the same way we expect them to treat students and parents, schools will succeed in accomplishing the “buy-in” that is always sought yet seldom achieved when introducing new initiatives.

The overall goal is to include everyone and to keep the door open for involvement. Our greatest critics often have insights that will benefit us during the process. Before attempting to “adopt” a program or consistent way of communicating in a school, it is important to allow time for people to try out and reflect on the skills and concepts being taught. The process of **Consensus Decision Making** may be of great assistance when discussing new initiatives and generating sustainable staff support.

## Planning staff development experiences

Effective staff development for social and emotional literacy focuses on:

- helping school adults to be self-aware, resilient and manage their emotions
- creating a shared mindset and way of communicating with all stakeholders, by providing ongoing training in how to communicate feelings and needs without judgment or blame, and listen empathically for the feelings and needs of others

- Exploring ways to teach, practice, and reflect on the skills and concepts being introduced through effective courses, book discussions, professional development presentations, and related media resources

*The CASEL SEL Framework* provides a detailed explanation of the Core SEL Competencies. No matter what a staff member's job responsibilities are, we all benefit from developing these skills together, along with our students and caregivers.

## Exploring theories of practice as well as strategies

When considering different types of training for staff, it is beneficial for school wellness teams to identify the purpose of the training and distinguish between *theories of practice* which help schools develop an overarching framework, and *strategies* that help develop specific skills. Some staff members enjoy reading and learning about a theory of practice and the research behind it. Others prefer a “try it out tomorrow” strategy that they can use right away. Mental Wellness teams are encouraged to explore evidence and practice -based theories, involve volunteer staff members in their investigations, and then discuss and choose like-minded theories that resonate with their goals. These theories then serve as a framework to guide the choice of strategies that will be taught to staff. Establishing a theoretical framework prevents initiative overload, and ensures that strategies chosen align with and support that theory. This is an effective way to develop support for selected training, and begin to create a shared mindset and consistent way of communicating in a school.

## Resources: Adult SEL & Staff Development

All resources and recommended books for [Adult SEL & Staff Development](#) may be found in [Appendix D: Mental Health & Wellness Resources](#)