

Democracy and Education

What School Board Candidates Need to Know About: **Social-Emotional Learning**

Overview

Not only can every child learn; every child is hardwired to learn. But the ability to learn is intertwined with a child's sense of self and well-being.

Most of us understand this at an intuitive level. We are better able to learn when we feel comfortable; we are less able to learn when we are experiencing anger and confusion. We also know that children aren't born knowing how to manage those emotions. Nor are they born knowing how to navigate the social situations they find themselves in classrooms and schools: How to share space and objects; negotiate the use of time; get along with people who have different experiences and backgrounds; and follow the sometimes confusing and conflicting rules that govern classrooms and schools.

By working deliberately to help children feel a sense of belonging and purpose in school, know how to work well with classmates, be able to plan and set goals and persevere through challenges, schools are creating the conditions that allow children to learn to high levels.

The term used to talk about that role of schools is social-emotional learning, or social, emotional and academic learning. It incorporates some of what used to be called "character education," in which schools tried to inculcate traits such as honesty and responsibility, but it puts the responsibility on educators to create the environment in which those character traits are valued, encouraged, and built into reliable routines of everyday school life. Some consider these "workforce skills," since employers value the ability to work collaboratively.

Although some right-wing propagandists have tried to paint social-emotional learning as indoctrination, most parents welcome a renewed emphasis on what older educators used to call the "second curriculum." Parents want their children to learn how to get along with others in school and want their children's schools to help their children feel welcomed, valued, safe and a sense of agency over their own learning.

What to Look for in Your School District

Data: If students feel a sense of belonging and comfort in their schools, it should be reflected in high attendance rates and low numbers of disciplinary actions. Of course, data always needs to be viewed in context—COVID changes attendance expectations, for example. In terms of disciplinary data, children will always test limits; there is always a need for consequences. But suspensions should be few and expulsions rare. Look at disciplinary rates between schools and ask what different schools are doing to result in different data. Look at disparities between boys and girls; between children of different ethnic groups; and between children from low-income

backgrounds and those who are not. Ask what the schools are doing to address disparities. Look at survey results to see if students, parents, teachers and staff feel comfortable and welcomed. And don't forget to look at graduation data—it's an indication of persistence.

Curriculum and Training: Find out what curricula the district uses to teach social-emotional learning and ask what evidence of effectiveness they have. Ask whether teachers are trained on these new approaches. Ask how they ensure that children have reliable routines where children learn what they are expected to do and regular ways to check in with a caring adult. Ask if the district has ways to measure engagement and feelings of safety and belonging. Ask what its procedures are to address the needs of individual children who are struggling, either with academics or with behavior. And ask whether all the rules in place are necessary, wise, and inclusive. For example, many schools still try to police how African American children style their hair, which automatically creates an unwelcoming environment.

Note: School board members don't choose social-emotional programs, curricula, or professional development plans. Rather, their job is to hold the district accountable for ensuring that all children are successful and address any disparities in achievement.

Stories: Talk with teachers. Do they have the time to reflect on how their students are doing both individually and collectively as a class? Do they have ways to learn from each other and from the literature of the field? **Talk with parents.** Do their children feel safe and welcome at school? If their child has been bullied, do they have confidence in the response by the school? **Talk with students:** Do they feel safe and welcome at school? **Talk with principals:** Do they understand the evidence base for the curriculum? Do they have the resources they need?

Possible Message to Voters

Not only can every child learn, every child is hardwired to learn. But the ability to learn is intertwined with a child's sense of self and well-being. So in addition to academics, we need to make sure students feel safe and respected at school, that they learn to manage their emotions, that they can work well with others, and that they believe they can master any subject. You can call it character education, workforce skills or social-emotional learning. It's an important part of what schools do.

For More Information:

The Aspen Institute convened a commission of national experts in the fields of psychology, education, and more to review decades of research linking cognitive development with social and emotional development. [This consensus report](#) is a readable review of the research and why we should pay attention to it. The Commission's full [report](#) is here.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) reviews the research and best practices in [The Fundamentals of SEL](#).

Johns Hopkins University's [Center for Safe and Healthy Schools](#) provides resources and research.

NPR's story, [How social-emotional learning became a frontline in the battle against CRT](#), traces some of the conflict over SEL.

Please Note: This is a living document that may be edited and changed from time to time.