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## **Life is Complicated: The Urgent Call to Support Student Wellbeing through Social Emotional Learning**

Taya Kinzie  
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LIFE IS COMPLICATED:  
THE URGENT CALL TO SUPPORT STUDENT WELLBEING THROUGH  
SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Taya Kinzie  
Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of  
Doctor of Education

National College of Education  
National Louis University

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Life is Complicated: The Urgent Call to  
Support Student Wellbeing through Social Emotional Learning

Taya Kinzie

National Louis University

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Approved:

*Hampton Gibbs*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chair, Dissertation Committee

*Hampton Gibbs*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Director, EDL Doctoral Program

*A Emsdy*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Member,  
Dissertation Committee

*R Muller*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean,  
National College of Education

*Elizabeth Minor*

\_\_\_\_\_  
DEAN'S REPRESENTATIVE

JULY 12, 2021

\_\_\_\_\_  
DATE APPROVED

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## **ABSTRACT**

Students face increased mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, trauma, racial trauma, and suicide risk, in addition to opportunity gaps. Despite educators' work to support students through mental health services and despite the existence of social emotional learning (SEL) programs within the school environment, the impact on student learning and long-term post high school outcomes can feel overwhelming. There is also a perception that the responsibility for SEL belongs only to social workers, psychologists and counselors. The primary research question is; how does embedding of SEL practices vary within instructional, non-instructional, and leadership roles? The related questions are: to what extent does staff capacity building for SEL practices incorporate support for the social emotional competence of both staff and students, and how does race relate to social emotional learning practices for staff and students? This study explores the context, conditions, culture, and competencies (Wagner et al., 2006) for District 321, utilizing qualitative and existing quantitative data. The findings detail the critical role of ongoing professional development to increase culturally responsive social emotional learning practices, build social emotional competencies of all staff, model SEL for students, and embed SEL within all practices and instruction. In addition, moving beyond social emotional learning programs for District 321, the consistent social emotional competency development of every employee is emphasized in consideration of the positive impact on student learning, school culture, and student and staff wellbeing.

## PREFACE

The journey of this program evaluation began with the tangible experience of holding staff and students' pain, experiencing the crushing weight of the deaths of current and former students, and seeing the manifestation of mental health needs when trauma is not addressed. The urgency I feel is driven by losses in both the personal and professional areas of my life, my sincere desire to support others, and by always leading with my heart as a social worker and a mother. Racial disproportionality in academic performance and the school-to-prison-pipeline, student self-injury, fractures among staff that impact school climate, and burnout among staff speak loudly to the need for more to be done. But what more should be done when so many services and programs are already in place? And what more could be done when content at the high school level cannot be replaced with more SEL programming?

This led me to consider a tenet I try to live by, which is to ensure that what I say and do is congruent with how I say it and how I do it. My own conviction has long been that staff must have a positive parallel process to that of students to build a culture of trust. By modeling social emotional competencies, including self-regulation, self-awareness, and decision-making, students will be more likely to emulate us and will be less likely to be frustrated by additional hypocrisies in their lives. If we expect students to engage in restorative practices, taking accountability and repairing harm, then we must model this behavior and engage in it with them and with each other. Showing care and compassion, along with accountability for ourselves and all staff, will create a greater sense of belonging for all members of the school community.

Through this journey I discovered that which was right before me all along; social emotional learning is not just inherent within instruction; it is in all that we do at work, at school,

and at home. I also learned the importance of clarifying our sense of purpose in helping students, in continuous professional development, and in wide stakeholder involvement with organizational change to better support our students and humanize each other. This includes understanding how race relates to SEL, the importance of further developing my own social emotional competencies, as well as that of staff, and embedding culturally responsive SEL within all of our practices and instruction. I firmly believe that together we can make these changes, helping ourselves and our students.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my family, friends, and SCHS staff who have helped me to reflect on my strengths and the ways I can grow. In addition, my mentors and dissertation committee deserve acknowledgement and appreciation for their time and energy. Finally, it is with a full heart that I express my gratitude to my dissertation Chair, Dr. Harrington Gibson, whose knowledge, keen insights, and calm encouragement helped sustain and guide me throughout this process.

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband and our two boys. Every day you teach me to love more deeply, to be better and to do better. It is with your love, support and encouragement that I have finalized this work.

To my parents, siblings, family, friends, students, and staff members who have taught me about support and accountability.

In honor of all the friends, family, and students who have died, I hold onto the message that my step-mom said before she died; love never dies. I will continue to follow Mother Theresa's belief that we must pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living, and will be guided by a wise student, whose spirit is with us, and his desire for "real school."

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## **SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Introduction**

My own personal and professional devotions intersect within both Shoreville Community High School (SCHS) and the act of social emotional learning, illuminating my life's work. More than just a place of employment for me, SCHS has become a family. SCHS is where I continue to challenge myself to grow, working to improve our acts of teaching, support and learning for students, staff, and myself. Shoreville is also my literal home for my family, including my husband and two children. Deeply personal, my commitment to social emotional learning comes from my desire to improve our world, community and school, helping to create a better future for all of us. The professional and personal intertwine for me, as current and former students, as well as students who have passed away, remain in my heart and head, fueling my fire that manifests as a dedication to social emotional learning.

Within this section I first set the context at Shoreville Community High School for this program evaluation centered on social emotional learning (SEL), as well as SEL's relationship to equity. I then discuss the purpose, rationale, goals and research questions for this program evaluation.

Shoreville is a community that prides itself on supporting wellbeing and mental health, a love of ethnic, racial, economic and cultural diversity, excellence in education, being rich in mental health resources, and providing support for the arts and athletics at the secondary and collegiate levels. Carrying great pride in its resources, diversity and performance, Shoreville Community High School is the single school for District 321. SCHS is a leading high school in the state and nation that has been nationally ranked in the top 3% of high schools in the country

and the top 10 in the State of Illinois, with awards including Career and Technical Education, Music, and Google for Education, as well as an increased number of students taking AP courses. In 2019, 28% of all SCHS students took a total of 2,342 AP exams, 7 were National Merit Scholarship Semifinalists and 39 were National Merit Scholarship Commended Students, and 76% of our students continue to college.

Comprising Shoreville and a small portion of a neighboring suburb, SCHS instructs 3,693 students who speak 43 languages. Our racial diversity is reflected in our student population as well: American Indian 0.2%, Asian 5.8%, Black/African American 25.9%, Hispanic/Latino 18.8%, Native Hawaiian 0.1%, two or more races 3.4%, and White 45.8%.

In addition, 37% of our students are considered low-income, while some of our students are considered middle-class and others come from high income families. Our percentage of students who are low income is lower than the state average at 49.4%, and we have 152 students who are considered homeless under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

SCHS has 605 employees, 250 of whom are licensed staff members, and 15 are Nationally Board-Certified teachers. We also take pride in hiring and supporting post bachelor's program education, with 89% of our teachers having advanced degrees, compared with 61% of teachers with advanced degrees within the state of Illinois. After years of concerted efforts to ensure that students of color see teachers of color in the classroom environment, our licensed staff now more closely reflects our student population: American Indian 0.17 %, Asian 4.13%, Black or African American 35.87%, Hispanic/Latino 7.77%, Two or more races 0.99%, and White 51.07%. In addition, out of 11 administrators, 4 identify as African American, 1 as gay, and 4 as women. This is in sharp contrast to the teachers within the state of Illinois when looking at our percent of Black or African American teachers at 35.78% compared to the state at

5.8%, as well as our percent of White teachers at 51.07% compared to the state at 83.2%. Also in direct contrast is the static nature of the percent breakdown by race for teachers in the state of Illinois; there has been little shift in the percent by race of teachers in Illinois, while the percent of SCHS-licensed Latino, Asian, and Black or African American teachers has increased and the percent of White teachers has decreased, more closely reflecting our student population.

Unfortunately this disproportionality still exists within the State between student and teacher, as in Illinois there are 48% White students with 83.2% White teachers, 26.2% Latinx students and only 6.2% Latinx teachers, and 16.8% Black or African American students and only 5.8% Black or African American teachers.

SCHS works closely with our community, staff and students to bring about changes, including a change to detracking, providing greater opportunities for all students to earn honors and Advanced Placement credit, as well as our Transgender Policy and Administrative Procedures and our Student Dress Code that have gained national attention. The commitment to race and equity work is schoolwide; SCHS engages in constant reflection around race, equity and excellence, including professional development and hiring practices, and declaring the last two years as Year of the Black Male given the data that shows that Black males are failing and being referred for discipline at higher rates than any other subgroup in our school. Another example of our commitment to equity and excellence is our social consciousness series that includes Student Summits designed to support student identity, including our Black Student Summit, Latinx Student Summit, Middle Eastern, North African, and Asian Student Summit, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer + (LGBTQ+) Student Summit. We have now also held our first ever Parent/Guardian Summit to reflect on our social consciousness, including examining race and equity in our school, community and larger society. All of these actions are supported

by our Mission: *“Embracing its diversity, SCHS is committed to educating all of its students to their maximum potential.”*

Our School Goal 2 on Student Wellbeing reflects the community and SCHS commitment to wellbeing: *“SCHS will connect each student with supports to ensure that each student will experience social-emotional development and enhanced academic growth.”* This goal is measured by attendance, behavioral referrals, extracurricular participation, maintaining or increasing grade point average, and improved social emotional wellness and access to supports. These supports for students in general education and students with IEPs include school-based crisis intervention, individual and group social work services, support groups, clinical case management, response to school and community crises, consultation with teachers and staff members, collaboration with families, and referrals to community therapeutic resources.

The commitment to wellbeing at SCHS is strong. In the last 17 years SCHS has grown the number of mental health professionals by 4 full-time staff members to a current total of 15 grade level counselors, 4 grade level psychologists, and 9 social workers, who do the primary mental health service provision. We have also created a pre/post hospitalization program to meet the needs of the rising number of students who have been psychiatrically hospitalized, as well as to support pregnant and parenting teens, a population that has decreased significantly over the last 6 years.

As we have worked to shift the mentality of who is responsible for wellbeing to that of every staff member at SCHS, our Principal/Assistant Superintendent named wellbeing and belonging as respective foci for the last two school years, asking staff to pay attention to how we connect with and care for students, each other, and ourselves. Our superintendent has communicated his firm belief that relationships are a prerequisite to learning, and we have

increased a schoolwide focus on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS), focusing more on Tier 1 prevention and intervention steps. In November 2016, our Superintendent shared a message to our entire school community that went viral and continues to ground our work in relation to belonging and identities:

*SCHS is a safe and welcoming place for you. You attend a school where we not only respect differences, we embrace our diversity.*

*We embrace one another's race and ethnicity. We embrace one another's family background, heritage, language and culture.*

*We embrace one another's religion and your right to your own personal customs and beliefs.*

*We embrace your sexual orientation and your gender identity.*

*We embrace your special needs.*

*We embrace you and value you as individual human beings.*

*Never forget: you belong here at SCHS—each and every one of you.*

Reflecting that message of belonging, our graduation rate has increased over the last few years as we have increased our focus on supporting our students through periods of truancy and resistance, rather than dropping them, which would ensure that our state truancy numbers look good. Not only does SCHS have a four-year graduation rate of 92%, but our commitment to supporting students extends beyond that and is reflected in a five-year graduation rate of 94%.

Despite this commitment to many facets of wellbeing, we also know that life is complicated for our students and even for adults in our community; the mental health needs cannot be ignored. One of our students died by suicide in the summer before school began and our community is still grieving. Adults in our community have also died by suicide, with at least

8 adults in the community dying by suicide in the last two years, one of whom was an SCHS parent. In addition, our staff is experiencing losses and mental health crises in their personal lives as they care for students and their own loved ones every day, impacting their personal and professional lives. The fact that current and recent graduates of SCHS have died by homicide, car accidents, and suicide brings more palpable grief that remains in our hearts.

During this program evaluation we also faced two profound struggles that will have long lasting effects; a worldwide pandemic and pervasive racial injustices. The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted our Shoreville community and SCHS with the deaths of parents/guardians and other loved ones, while rendering many under and unemployed, food insecure, and with exacerbated or new mental health conditions. Tragically, racial injustice is not new to our country. However, the wide communication of deaths of Black and Brown people, at times at the hands of police, available via video particularly within the last year, along with the disproportionality of the impact of Covid-19 on Black and Brown communities across our nation, has created even deeper pain in our community (Evans, 2020). We have engaged broad and multi-faceted efforts to address social emotional, academic and basic living needs of our students and families, and to also address the profound grief for our staff, students and families over the many literal and figurative losses that the pandemic and pervasive racial injustices have caused. Yet, just like schools throughout the world, more is needed as reflected in the requests from teachers and parents.

Social emotional learning can be reflected in many efforts and actions at SCHS focused on wellbeing, especially during the pandemic. In Illinois, SEL is guided by the Illinois Social Emotional Learning Standards Framework and consists of 3 goals and 10 learning standards with

accompanying benchmarks and performance descriptors (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.).

The three goals include:

- Goal 1 - Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.
- Goal 2 - Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.
- Goal 3 - Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.

These three Illinois SEL standards were designed to be a guiding force for supporting student skills and growth, and are addressed further in the next section in relation to the purpose of this evaluation.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this work is to explore how to increase support for students and staff wellbeing by examining how schools define successfully embedded social emotional learning. More specifically, this work aims to examine embedded SEL practices within all roles, from leaders to support staff. Similarly, this research examines the need to provide professional development to build staff capacity for SEL and their own social emotional competence, while considering the role of race within SEL practices.

My own awareness of social emotional learning began while in graduate school for a Masters in Social Work. As a school social worker, as a dean and then as an associate principal for student services, SEL has become central to my work, rooted in the Illinois Social Emotional Learning Standards as part of Section 15(a) of Public Act 93-0495 (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.). The Illinois SEL Standards involve:

the processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2010, para 1)

Developed to be relevant and clear to students, staff, parents and the community, reflect needed skills to function in school and the larger society, and be specific enough to monitor progress while moving through stages of SEL, the Illinois SEL standards and their accompanying benchmark and performance descriptors are comprehensive and developmentally specific to age ranges of students (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.).

Social emotional learning as a systemic approach is not simply about a program implemented once a year for a few days, but rather encompasses curriculum and instructional practices, school-wide practices and policies, and family and community partnerships (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2010). CASEL (n.d.) has developed their systemic approach further to intentionally reflect on developing a culture that is focused on equity, caring and participation in order to develop social, emotional and academic learning. “This approach infuses social and emotional learning into every part of students’ daily lives—across all of their classrooms, during all times of the school day, and when they are in their homes and communities” (CASEL, n.d., para. 7).

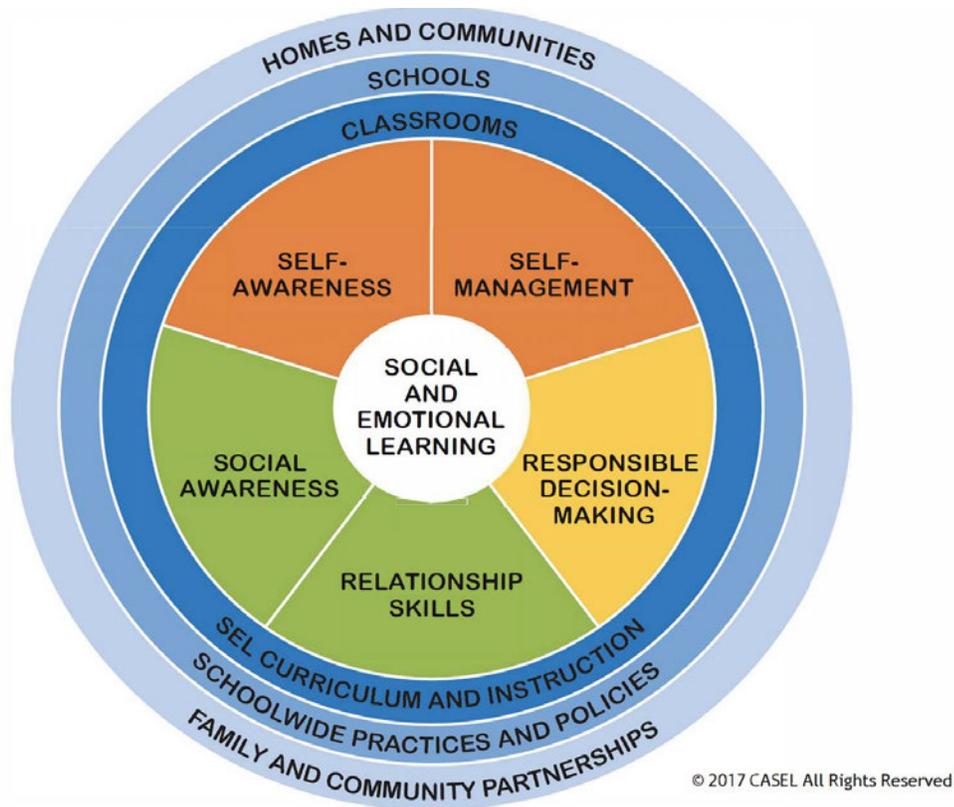


Figure 1. Core SEL Competencies (CASEL, n.d.)

The Five Core SEL Competencies (see Figure 1) as defined by CASEL are:

**Self-awareness:** The ability to accurately recognize one’s emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one’s strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.

**Self-management:** The ability to regulate one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals.

**Social awareness:** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical

norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

**Relationship skills:** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.

**Responsible decision-making:** The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

Indicators of SEL reflect a school wide focus and go well beyond the classroom. CASEL (n.d.) identified 10 indicators (see Figure 2) that act as a guide for successful implementation of SEL from a schoolwide perspective.

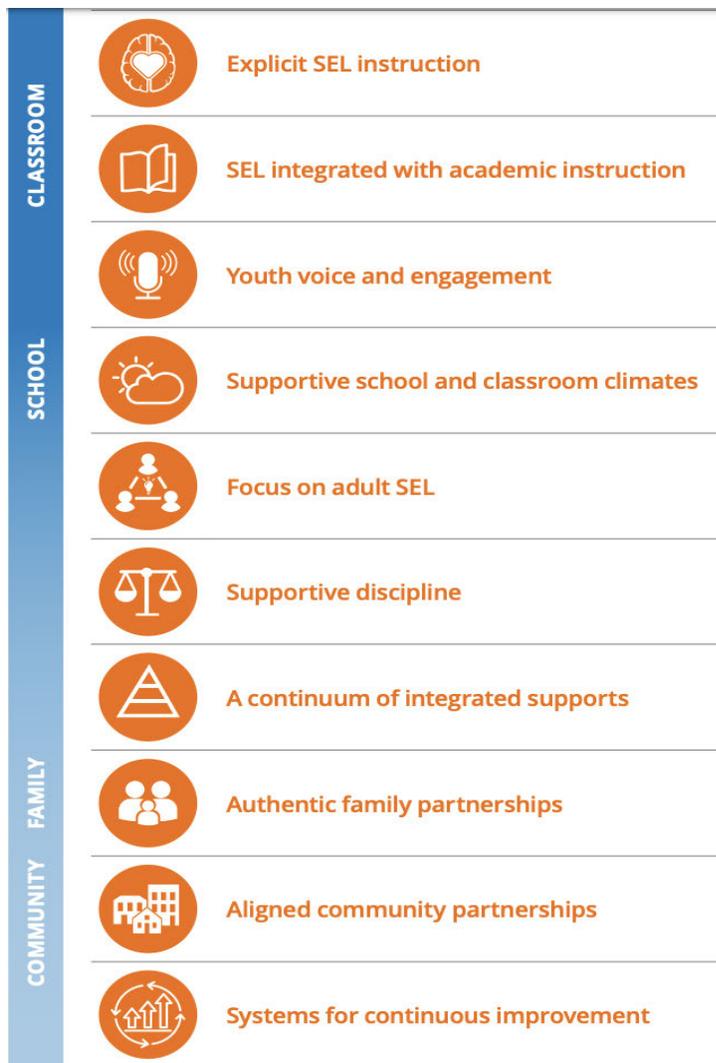


Figure 2. CASEL Indicators of Schoolwide SEL (*The Case for SEL*, CASEL, n.d.)

Our own school’s goal of wellbeing reinforces the importance of social emotional learning, and ultimately focuses on improving student performance and learning. Studies have shown that students who participate in social emotional learning not only improve their social and emotional skills, attitudes, and behaviors but also demonstrate increased levels of achievement (Durlak et al., 2011; Zins & Elias, 2007). Furthermore, support of the importance of SEL in schools comes from Wagner (2008), who focuses on the importance of schools helping

students build 21st century skills, focused on problem-solving, perseverance, coping, and communication, which are rooted in SEL, for successful engagement in school and performance post high school.

In many ways our school is demonstrating a commitment to wellbeing, as seen by the fact that our Principal/Assistant Superintendent dedicated the entire school year to wellbeing and the next year to belonging. We have hired additional mental health professionals through the last 17 years who provide group, individual and crisis intervention, implement myriad alternatives to suspension for positive skill-building, and have also developed our own off-site therapeutic day school.

Through MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports), we have focused on school-wide equity and prevention efforts. Specifically, some teachers have worked to infuse social emotional learning into instruction through project-based learning with the deepening of understanding and relationships, as well as through developing a democratic classroom with shared decision-making, problem-solving, and responsibility.

Moreover, as part of school-wide professional development, staff read and discussed Zaretta Hammond's (2015), *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*. During the book discussion each of us, from secretaries to teachers to administrators, reflected on culturally responsive practices and SEL within our respective roles as educators. Additional professional development has included all-staff meetings, training videos, team and department meetings, and lunch sessions for: Suicide Prevention, Child Abuse, Inappropriate Touch, Substance Use, LGBTQ+ youth (including a student-made staff Professional Development video), Bullying and Harassment, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault, CPR/AED and First

Aid Training, Overnight Trip Planning, and race and equity. During this program evaluation we added even more professional development opportunities for staff and supports for families in response to the pandemic, including Navigating the Emotional Landscape of Covid-19, Grief and Suicide Prevention.

In terms of school-wide messaging to address the culture and climate of our organization, our Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) message of “practice the 3Rs: Respect for Self, Respect for Others and Respect for Community” has withstood the test of time for over a decade, and recently we rolled out the message of “Acknowledge, Care, Tell” to staff, students, and families, to address concerns about mental health, safety, and sexual assault or harassment. In addition, our staff has responded positively to our message of “consult, consult, consult” about all of these issues to reduce the siloed effects of our large school. Our human resources department also made 15-minute massages available to every staff member over the last year, based on the belief that staff deserve support and that our school has an obligation to contribute to staff wellbeing.

In terms of engagement with students, all PE and wellness classes incorporate awareness of mental health, trauma, and substance use, as well as how to access resources in the school and community. A Wellbeing Survey has now been implemented for all grade levels, focusing on facets of wellbeing, including mental health, substance use, sleep, and nutrition. In addition, we initiated Signs of Suicide for our 9th grade students, a worldwide evidence-based suicide prevention curriculum and screening program. Furthermore, sexual assault awareness and prevention is an area of continued growth, as we have developed specific protocols for how deans and mental health providers support disciplinary and student self-reports of sexual harassment and sexual assault, including connecting with community resources and looping back

to students per the original complaint. Within our instructional programming we have incorporated lessons into all grade levels of PE and wellness classes to address sexual harassment and sexual assault prevention and intervention. In the last three years we have also provided workshops for classes to opt-in and for student drop-ins, related to sexual assault and harassment awareness, prevention and disruption during Sexual Assault Awareness Month. We also brought in a psycho-educational theater performance group, working to engage students as critical thinkers to question society, our community and individuals. The staff and student sexual assault awareness committee developed the hashtag #wearethesolution, and it is used for messaging throughout Sexual Assault Awareness Month, and for the sexual assault awareness t-shirts sold at a discount to staff and students.

Finally, the SCHS commitment to wellbeing can be seen through family evening programming that has expanded with events throughout the year, addressing a variety of topics related to wellbeing: Executive Functioning, Mental Health, College Planning, Navigating the Course Request Process, Bullying and Harassment, Career Options, Sexual Assault/Sexual Harassment, Substance Use, and LGBTQ+ youth support and transition to SCHS. In response to the pandemic, evening events for families were also provided specifically to address Suicide Prevention, Navigating the Emotional Landscape of Covid-19, and Grief.

Through this evaluation the intention was to continue to identify ways to ensure that social emotional learning practices can be sustainably implemented through curriculum, instructional practices, schoolwide practices, and family and community partnerships. This included implementation of social emotional learning within both non-instructional spaces and instructional spaces, by all staff members, and in support of staff wellbeing. The intention also included isolating race throughout this SEL journey and reflecting on our equity practices.

The primary purpose of the evaluation is layered and begins with increasing awareness of the needs of our students, the multitude of actions staff are already taking, the social emotional competencies staff already demonstrate throughout our school community, and to name those actions with standardized language around SEL as suggested by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2010) and Elias et al. (2003). A second purpose of this evaluation is to explore the relatedness of SEL and equity, giving consideration to new practices that explicitly state this interlinkage, allowing staff to reflect on how racial and cultural identities and the “authentic, asset-focused interest in the lived experiences of students” can guide their practices (Jagers et al., 2018, p. 13). Lastly, the third purpose is to effect change in school policies to ensure that our educators are not only required to infuse SEL into their daily practices (CASEL, n.d.), but also are required to be supported and provided with the opportunity to develop the social emotional competencies to navigate the instructional world as asserted by Collie et al. (2012).

### **Rationale**

To understand why I chose to identify social emotional learning practices that will better support our students now and in the future, I share my story, emanating from my heart. As a mother, school social worker, licensed clinical social worker, dean, and now associate principal for student services, I have focused on supporting the needs of students for over 20 years, always with an ultimate focus on removing barriers to learning. This work is deeply personal and professional for me, as I am convinced we can do better in supporting our students, families and staff. Students and staff are part of my family, and I feel their pain. The pain of students who carry trauma and many challenges is palpable, as is the weight of the empathy and frustration from staff who try desperately to help our students, and the grief we will always carry from the

deaths of our students. The pain of staff who hold students' trauma while managing crises and curriculum and other educational demands is real, at times resulting in vicarious trauma and medical leaves from work.

The emotional content is compelling enough to take action, and the facts further support this. Some of our students self-injure, hurt others with intention (literally and figuratively), want to kill themselves, have died by suicide, have been repeatedly psychiatrically hospitalized, have killed others, have been killed, experience significant anxiety, depression, and trauma, sexually assault, are sexually assaulted, experience psychosis, use drugs, often as a form of self-medication to ease anxiety and depression, are in-school or out-of-school truants, are suspended from school, and feel disrespected by staff members within our high school. In the last 6 years we have had a 368% increase in social work referrals and have a current quarterly average of 3,000 visits to our mental health providers within our school. During the 2018-2019 school-year, 1 in 8 students were formally referred for social work services, and 100 students were psychiatrically hospitalized, with 10 of these 100 students requiring repeated hospitalizations (10%). Nationwide we have seen increases as high as 32% for anxiety disorders and a rise to 12% of adolescents experiencing at least one major depressive episode in the last year (Child's World NEWS Team, 2019). In addition, suicide is the second leading cause of death for adolescents, and since 2007 suicide has increased 30 percent among boys and has doubled among girls (Child's World NEWS Team, 2019).

As reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide rates for youth have risen significantly in the last 10 years, with a 76% increase for 15-19 year olds and the numbers of deaths by suicide nearly tripling for 10-15 year olds (Curtin & Heron, 2019). Furthermore, rates of homicide increased 30% for 15-19 year olds in a period of 3 years (Curtin

& Heron, 2019). Principals are repeatedly being called upon to make mental health a priority (Child's World NEWS Team, 2019), and many high schools are now considered to be de facto mental health providers (Education Week, 2020).

The call to better meet our students' needs is urgent. The critical components of teaching and modeling social emotional learning to students and establishing policies and practices in non-instructional spaces throughout the school with all staff are critical components of SEL and are a way to meet this urgent call, benefiting students, staff, families and our larger community (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2010). Studies show that school-wide social emotional learning has notable outcomes for students, staff, and our larger communities by focusing on direct instruction, schoolwide practices, and partnerships (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2010). Specific examples include an 11%-point gain in academic achievement, decreases in dropout rates, school and classroom behavior issues, drug use, teen pregnancy, mental health problems, and criminal behavior (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2010). It also benefits our taxpayers when we look at the financial return on investment, with a review of six SEL interventions in evidence-based SEL programs showing that for every dollar invested there was an economic return of 11 dollars (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2010).

Furthermore, attention must be paid to our students of color throughout our nation. Over half of our public school students are students of color (Aspen Institute Education & Society Program, 2018), as is the case at SCHS. And yet racial disproportionality still exists within special education, academic failure, truancy, discipline, and the school-to-prison-pipeline (Gregory & Fergus, 2017), negatively impacting student learning and outcomes in life (Aspen

Institute Education & Society Program, 2018). As a school whose Board of Education Statement on Equity is, “*Raising the achievement of all students while eliminating the racial predictability of achievement*”, we are called to join other districts which are re-examining SEL frameworks that do not address race, power, privilege, and cultural differences and therefore do not address the power of our individual beliefs and structural biases in leading us to have harsh reactions to behaviors that fall outside a White cultural frame of reference (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). The Aspen Institute Education & Society Program’s position is clear about the connection between SEL and racial equity, asserting that “the field needs to identify ways in which equity and social, emotional, and academic development can be mutually reinforcing. To accomplish this requires examining issues of race directly; this can be difficult and uncomfortable, but we cannot avoid race and let the challenges go unacknowledged and, therefore, inadequately addressed” (2018, p. 1). As we reflect on SEL and race, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2017) urges us to examine the effects of historical and racial trauma on students, noting that racism is a contributor to distress demonstrated in the classroom, and giving hope to strategies that support a strengths-based mindset, expression of feelings, and healthy self-development.

## **Goals**

The intended goals of this program evaluation are to ensure realistic development of a multi-faceted and school-wide approach to supporting student and staff wellbeing through social emotional learning (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2010). This includes seeking to understand how SEL is successfully embedded school-wide, to understand the importance of staff SEL capacity building, and to identify the role of race in SEL. It is not enough to say we are doing SEL, but rather we must teach and model it as a school community, making sure we have clarity about what else we need to do in order to be supportive of our staff

members as well. I intend to help each staff member invest in and embody the belief that social emotional learning belongs to all of us as staff, and is not an issue exclusive to social workers. This means modeling good problem-solving and emotional regulation with each other, engaging in restorative justice practices, having “redos” when we make mistakes, which consists of redoing the action or statement, and embedding social emotional learning strategies into instructional practices in all content areas.

If we can help staff grow their own social emotional competence it will benefit students; Jennings and Greenberg’s (2009) model shows that teachers with strong social emotional competence are more likely to create classrooms with effective classroom management, healthy teacher–student relationships, effective social emotional learning implementation, and healthy classroom environments. This relates directly to student learning as seen in Norris’ (2003) statement that, “classrooms where students feel safe to take risks, acquire new knowledge, and know they are valued members of a community are classrooms where learning is optimized” (p. 315).

These goals heavily focus on “how” and “who” we are engaging in each step of SEL implementation, knowing that it is not enough to push into classrooms with varied programs, create a positive discipline philosophy, say we do restorative justice, and pull students out of class for social work services. We must practice SEL with each other and our students every day. Furthermore, these goals relate directly to improving student learning by enhancing student engagement; students who feel safe, can cope, and do not perseverate on problems can concentrate on learning and studying (Smith & Smith, 2015).

## Research Questions

The primary research question driving my evaluation was, *How does the embedding of SEL practices vary within instructional, non-instructional, and leadership roles?* The related questions to embedded school-wide SEL are as complicated as life is: *To what extent does staff capacity building for SEL practices incorporate support for the social emotional competence of both staff and students?* and *How does race relate to social emotional learning practices for staff and students?*

These research questions led to assessing policy implications and exploring our district's obligation to be educational leaders in our nation, while asking the questions:

- What are the policy implications in relation to state and national pre-service requirements training for social emotional learning?
- What are the policy implications for district level policy and state standards to explicitly embed SEL practices within curriculum and instructional practices?
- What are the policy implications for district level policy and state standards to provide SEL professional development, including addressing social emotional competencies for staff?
- What are the policy implications for incorporating the Illinois State Board of Education Social Emotional Learning Standards integrated with an equity lens as part of performance evaluation rubrics?

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the mental health needs of our students have increased in severity and number of students impacted across the United States (Child's World NEWS Team, 2019), which

has created a sense of urgency for us to respond to the impact of mental health needs on students and their capacity to learn. While connecting students with resources for mental health services within SCHS and outside of SCHS has long been an answer that our school has relied upon and is part of our school goals, this has proven to not sufficiently meet the increasing needs of our students. Recognizing the accelerated intense and complicated nature of our student needs, there is a need to develop sustainable prevention and intervention actions by every stakeholder in support of wellbeing and learning (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Zins & Elias, 2007). This includes from a school-wide perspective to understand and honor each other and each student's identity, needs, goals, and strengths.

The time is now for us to fully explore a multi-faceted approach to supporting school-wide social emotional learning (Aspen Institute Education & Society Program, 2019), ensuring that all members of our school take accountability for teaching social emotional and academic learning with every step we take, helping students become even more effective learners. Together we can model and help students continue to build a community of respect, a sense of belonging, problem-solving and coping skills, and relationship skills that will last a lifetime and manifest in post high school education and training environments, workplaces, and our community for years to come. As Zins and Elias (2007) have established, living in the present and keeping an eye on the future, this is work to reform our functioning that will impact our staff and students in this moment and will have a larger community and societal impact in the future.

Connecting a multi-faceted SEL approach to equity and appreciating the urgency of this work, Jagers et al., (2018) support the assertion that understanding and supporting adult social and emotional competencies in and of itself is not sufficient. The development of staff cultural and racial awareness within social and emotional competencies can further help to address “the

fallacies of color-blindness, power-blindness, and humanist-caring, which obscure the sociopolitical realities of youth of color and low-resourced students” (Jagers et al., 2018, p. 13).

The following literature review in section two details the well-researched and imperative nature of acting now on behalf of our students. This includes the myriad pathways for schools to support our staff and students as we act intentionally to provide support, be attuned to issues of equity, and blend social emotional learning with academic learning.

## **SECTION TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Through this literature review I examined the variance of embedded social emotional learning (SEL) practices within instructional, non-instructional, and leadership roles, exploring the related questions of race and staff preparedness for SEL practices as vehicles to support.

We know that the need is great to support wellbeing. Mental health needs of children are growing at Shoreville Community High School (SCHS) District 321 and across the nation. The facts speak for themselves as reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Suicide rates for youth have risen significantly in the last 10 years, with a 76% increase for 15-19 year olds and the numbers of deaths by suicide nearly tripling for 10-15 year olds (Curtin & Heron, 2019). Rates of homicide increased 30% for 15-19 year olds in a period of 3 years (Curtin & Heron, 2019). Principals are repeatedly being called upon to make mental health a priority (Child's World NEWS Team, 2019), and schools have an obligation to respond in myriad ways to this urgent call for student wellbeing. District 321 remains steadfast in our commitment to engaging in practices that grow wellbeing, leading to greater academic, post high school, health, mental health and economic outcomes.

Addressing the Opportunity Gap: The Need for SEL Supports is the first body of literature that I reviewed, including examining the impact of implicit bias on instructional and SEL practices, learning standards based on Whiteness, culturally responsive SEL instructional practices and programs, and school policies as they relate to SEL and equity. I reviewed the next set of literature with a focus on Promising Practices for Addressing the Mental Health Crisis, looking at Benefits (or Return on Investment) of SEL practices for society, learning and employability, instructional and program SEL practices, impact on cultural and climate, and

schoolwide practices. The final body of literature I reviewed was *Building Capacity for Successful Implementation of SEL Supports*. This included examining professional development to build common understanding and capacity to teach SEL, increase social emotional competencies of staff members, and comprehend the benefits (or Return on Investment) of capacity building.

Within a school and community fully committed to wellbeing and equity in order to support learning, questions have persisted at Shoreville Community High School about how we further engage in academic learning supported by our equity work and focus on social emotional learning (SEL). Through this review of literature, I constructed a developmental framework that looked at the whole student and whole staff member to increase support for staff and students' wellbeing through embedded SEL practices, isolating race, social emotional competence, and staff readiness to implement and model SEL.

### **Addressing the Opportunity Gap: The Need for SEL Supports**

#### **The Impact of Implicit Bias on Instructional and SEL practices**

The opportunity gap exists in many facets of education, including low test scores by Black, Native American, and Latinx students in comparison with White students, and highly disproportionate disciplinary practices applied to Black and Brown students (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Gregory et al., 2010; Simmons et al., 2018; Singleton & Linton, 2006). The mere existence of the opportunity gap is a call to action, as we work to take accountability and change institutionalized racism, and systems and practices that we are obligated to dismantle, rather than reinforce, institutionalized racism.

To begin this journey, I see the need to acknowledge “real world” implications for implicit racial biases within instructional settings. Every educator needs to be accountable for an awareness and management of these biases, biases that can result in lower academic performance, increased disciplinary actions, academic failure, and disengagement from school. Despite well intentioned efforts with diversity training, teachers and other educational professionals often demonstrate a lack of understanding of their own racial bias and unintentional racism that can manifest in miscommunication, misunderstanding, and actions taken against Black and Brown students that are pro-White in nature (Sciuchetti, 2017; Staats et al., 2015). As early as preschool, Black and Brown students are disproportionately suspended or expelled versus White students (Gregory et al., 2016). Black students are suspended and expelled at rates of 3 ½ times that of White students and receive more harsh punishment for the same behaviors displayed by White students (Gregory et al., 2010), which contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline for students of color (Singleton & Linton, 2006; Gregory et al., 2010; Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Even within our own SCHS, we engage in this negative pattern of racial disproportionality with regard to school discipline referrals, and the school-to-prison pipeline is seen in the races of students whose names appear in the local newspaper for crimes.

The impact of implicit biases within instruction is also multi-layered, evidenced in the effect on teacher perceptions, expectations, and performance, and thereby student performance. Sciuchetti’s (2017) discussion about differences in teacher expectations and their own self-efficacy, defined as one’s own perception of the ability to exact change in behavior and produce a specific outcome, shines a light on the impact by teachers’ own racial biases and cultural expectations, which can in turn have a negative impact on student motivation and performance. Adding fuel to the fire that behavioral and academic functioning can be negatively influenced by

expectations from teachers is the concept of stereotype threat. Steele (2010) has shown that stereotype threat exists when a student of color believes their performance could be seen as low, and the added stress this creates leads to low performance.

Furthermore, SEL can become focused on students of color needing to better manage their behavior by being calmer and demonstrating more self-control. This reflects the idea that Johnson has dubbed the “failure narrative”, and can result in staff and students internalizing the concept that students of color have inherently deficient behaviors (Simmons, 2017).

Implicit bias exists within SEL practices as well, with most social emotional learning programs relying on a one-size-fits-all universal framework. Most SEL practices do not recognize cultural and racial differences, nor collectivist cultures, but instead are focused on individualistic cultural components and are monolithic in nature (Slaten et al., 2015; Roffe, 2017).

A lack of racially differentiated SEL programming means that students can find themselves challenged to unpack the myriad negative messages hurled at them in the media and at school, both implicit and explicit in their content. Without providing students with contextualized SEL interventions, students may not be equipped to manage the significant impact of their experiences in school and their larger society (Castro-Olivo, 2014; Slaten et al., 2015). Simmons (2019), as well as Gregory and Fergus (2017), charge that if SEL practices do not provide racial or socio-political context, we are not recognizing the inequities and injustices that society presents daily for students of color, nor are we emphasizing students’ capacity to change the world around them. This is particularly relevant given that racial hate crimes are on the rise and comprise 60% of all hate crimes (Simmons, 2019).

We live in a world where implicit racial biases exist in the classroom, and the research shows that society is less safe for Black and Brown people; race has even been noted to influence the speed of a shooter's reaction and the choice to shoot at all (Correll et al., 2007). Asking the questions Simmons (2019) poses reinforces the need to purposefully integrate equity with SEL, "Why teach relationship skills if the lessons do not reflect on the interpersonal conflicts that result from racism?" and "Why discuss self- and social awareness without considering power and privilege, even if that means examining controversial topics like White supremacy?" (para 6).

Knowing all of this, how can we not address racial inequities while helping students understand reactions, cope with stressors, and manage the conflicts in their lives? How can we not name race and cultural differences, their impact on power and privilege, and students' sense of agency for the future?

### **Adapting Learning Standards Based on Whiteness; Redefining SEL Standards**

We celebrate that Illinois was the first state to formally adopt Social Emotional Learning as an Illinois State Board of Education learning standard. However, our current SEL standards perpetuate racism and bias with explicit expectations that are normed in Whiteness. Interestingly, I have found a dearth of research giving consideration to redefining SEL standards in order to incorporate race and equity, not just providing an add-on tag about equity, focusing more on policies and procedures than overarching standards.

Gregory and Fergus (2017) stand up and offer that most of the SEL frameworks consist of colorblindness, failing to recognize the solely White perspective that defines behavioral expectations. Their work has called to further develop the five widely recognized social and emotional competencies set forth by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional

Learning (CASEL), moving beyond a lens that is considered to be steeped in Whiteness and compliance to one that is equity-oriented (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). It is up to us to acknowledge that students of color may not experience the same SEL competencies as White students, who carry a higher level of privilege, and to re-examine the SEL standards.

As Gregory and Fergus (2017) have noted, we can also help advance resistance to oppression, support collective wellbeing, and recognize the implicit bias that comes with the unconscious perception of rugged individualism as an inherently White normed behavior. Letting go of the mentality that free will and individualism are the sole determining factors for the future will better honor collectivist cultures and acknowledge that we are more than individuals, requiring us to examine how we can reflect on each of our interactions with students for SEL, rather than situating SEL and the expectations for change wholly on students (Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

An expanded view of the SEL standards with an equity lens has been proposed by Jagers et al. (2018), including rethinking the 5 CASEL competencies “as interrelated, synergistic, and integral to the growth and development of justice-oriented, global citizens” (2018, p. 3), listed below (see Figure 3). However, contrary to my anticipation, race is not explicitly mentioned in this redefinition, covered instead by references to diversity and cultural or sociocultural differences.

<b>CASEL 5 Competencies</b>	<b>Equity Elaborations</b>
Self-awareness	Involves understanding one’s emotions, personal identity, goals, and values. This includes accurately assessing one’s strengths and limitations, having positive mindsets, and possessing a well

	grounded sense of self-efficacy and optimism. High levels of self-awareness require the ability to understand the links between one’s personal and sociocultural identities and to recognize how thoughts, feelings, and actions are interconnected.
Self-management	Requires skills and attitudes that facilitate the ability to regulate emotions and behaviors. This includes the ability to delay gratification, manage stress, control impulses, and persevere through personal and group-level challenges in order to achieve personal and educational goals.
Social-awareness	Involves the ability to take the perspective of those with the same and different backgrounds and cultures and to empathize and feel compassion. It also involves understanding social norms for behavior in diverse settings and recognizing family, school, and community resources and supports.
Relationship skills	Includes the tools needed to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships, and to effectively navigate settings with differing social norms and demands. It involves communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking help when it is needed.
Responsible decision-making	Requires the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to make caring, constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse settings. It requires the ability to critically examine ethical standards, safety concerns, and behavioral norms for risky behavior; to make realistic evaluations of consequences of various interpersonal and institutional actions; and to take the health and wellbeing of self and others into consideration.

*Figure 3. CASEL 5 Competencies with Proposed Equity Elaborations*

The Aspen Institute Education & Society Program (2018) is also actively calling for the use of a racial equity lens when considering social, emotional and academic learning.

Ultimately, the redefinition of SEL standards with the purposeful integration of equity, including naming race, will disrupt the centrifugal force of the power and privilege of Whiteness that does not help, and actually can harm students of color.

## **Culturally Responsive SEL Instructional Practices**

While the literature shows us that SEL and culturally responsive instructional practices are critical to learning, there has been a desert between the two concepts that is starting to disappear. It is through Roffe's (2017) focus on the "how" we engage with students, not just "what" we do in the classroom, that we can use as a vehicle for instruction as we strive to promote SEL through culturally responsive instruction (Castro-Olivo, 2014). Inherent within the concept of culturally responsive SEL instructional practices is the thread of relationships, and I will look specifically at an effective and engaged relationship development that models both SEL and cultural responsiveness.

Students who have an authentic and caring relationship with one adult are more likely to stay in school, have a sense of belonging, be engaged, value school, expend effort, persevere, attend school, experience self-efficacy and perform better academically (Slaten et al., 2015). Slaten, et al. (2015) said it best when noting the importance of the student-educator relationship, firm in the belief that "relationships are a prerequisite to learning" (p. 50).

But what does this type of meaningful relationship consist of? Sciuchetti (2017) notes that the relationship is rooted in seeking to understand the lived experiences and backgrounds of students through personal narratives, and must consist of identifying and building on student strengths, interests and resilience (National Equity Project, n.d.; Simmons, 2017). Building and demonstrating empathy through story-telling and sharing supports relationship development for culturally responsive SEL practices (National Equity Project, n.d.; Slaten et al., 2015). Relationship development can also include perspective-taking and problem-solving, demonstrating care, supporting students' belief in their own sense of agency, support of code

switching, being vulnerable, and recognizing the impacts of institutionalized prejudice (Slaten et al., 2015).

R-E-S-P-E-C-T, as sung by the late Aretha Franklin, applies to all relationships, and the teacher to student relationship is no exception (Slaten et al., 2015; Yeager, 2017). In fact, Staats et al. (2015), found that respect is so powerful as a component of relationships that teachers can use it to mitigate implicit biases in the classroom. All of this relationship development can assist teachers in using their knowledge of the student's race and culture to consider rules and expectations that are mindful of culturally appropriate expectations and experiences (Gregory et al., 2016; Sciuchetti, 2017).

Another element of SEL and culturally responsive instruction is the use of restorative justice (RJ), which involves all members of a situation making a plan about how to repair the harm that has been done (Gregory et al., 2016). Gregory et al. (2016) noted in their work in a large school district that RJ practices and the inherent value placed on respect, collaborative problem-solving, and mending of relationships can result in improved quality of teacher-student relationships and lower disciplinary referrals for students of color.

Paulo Freire's critical consciousness is a framework through which students can learn and understand about current and historical marginalization of oppressed populations, and has been further developed to focus on individual and community agency (Slaten et al., 2015). This involves critical reflection in the classroom, the building of sociopolitical efficacy, and plans for critical action (Slaten et al., 2015), and has been regarded as an "antidote to oppression" given the association with developmental competencies for youth of color and other marginalized youth (Godfrey et al., 2019). In Godfrey et al.'s (2019) work with youth in striving to understand implications for critical consciousness and SEL and wellbeing, they found that

youth's critical consciousness has implications for socioemotional and academic wellbeing, including to integrate SEL and cultural responsiveness into instruction.

In order to engage in culturally responsive SEL practices, courage is required of every educator. Talking about race within the instructional environment is beyond “not easy”, it can be difficult for anyone. Simmons (2019) has spoken across the country to educators who do not feel prepared to address uncomfortable topics focused on inequity, including racism, homophobia or sexism. Culturally responsive SEL instructional practices include acknowledging identities in relation to race, class, gender, orientation, nationality and the relationship to both agency for change and power, as well as normalizing the act of talking about situations and events by centering culture, race and power (National Equity Project, n.d.). Simmons (2019) shares that:

Social-emotional learning (SEL) skills can help us build communities that foster courageous conversations across differences so that our students can confront injustice, hate, and inequity. SEL refers to the life skills that support people in experiencing, managing, and expressing emotions, making sound decisions, and fostering interpersonal relationships. (para 3)

Courage is further required of us to reflect on our own racial identities and social emotional competencies, as well as those of our students (National Equity Project, n.d.). The very act of exploring our social emotional intelligence, racial identity, cultural competence and self-awareness will serve to confront our own actions toward students that do not fit with our values (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; National Equity Project, n.d.). Simmons et al. (2018) summarizes that with an increase in cultural competence for an educator can come an increase in the educators' awareness of their own privilege, myriad biases, and microaggressions that they

may observe or exact upon students. Educators can expand the norms of behavior to encompass the experiences, aspirations and cultures of students of color.

Trauma-informed practices have become a common conversation for educational professionals, and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2017) specifically notes the importance of culturally responsive instructional practices that ultimately support SEL within the concept of racial trauma, calling upon educators to be aware of the impact of trauma and their own biases.

As the multitude of relationship components interplay, it is critical that high expectations be maintained at all times within the context of culturally responsive SEL instructional practices (Sciuchetti, 2017). In fact, providing the message that students are respected can develop competence and opportunities for students to feel challenged through critical thinking and deep learning, leading to greater engagement and fewer discipline referrals (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2015; Yeager, 2017).

### **Culturally responsive SEL programs**

Consistent with my own finding of a lack of focus on culturally responsive SEL programs is Rowe and Trickett's (2018) meta-analysis of SEL programs and diversity characteristics, which demonstrated that many SEL programs have not accounted for diversity. While the large scale meta-analysis by Durlak et al. (2011) shows findings in support of significant effects by SEL programs on social-emotional competencies, attitudes, prosocial behaviors, externalizing problems, internalizing problems, and academic performance, this is contrary to Rowe and Trickett's (2018) findings. Rowe and Trickett (2018) concluded that SEL programming requires caution when considering generalizability to diverse groups of students.

In fact, Rowe and Trickett (2018) share that “Universal interventions are, by definition, intended to have wide applicability across populations; therefore, the heterogeneity of students in the US school system may require a more nuanced understanding of program effects in order to assess the degree to which programs are applicable across different settings and populations.” (2018, p. 564). Considering the importance of social emotional expression in relation to culture, it is warranted that research around SEL programs that intend to do good for others look further at the intersection with diversity (Rowe & Trickett, 2018).

Castro-Olivo’s (2014) study on the culturally adapted social emotional learning *Jóvenes Fuertes* (Strong Teen) program for English Language Learners yielded support for the argument for culturally responsive SEL programming. The results indicated significant intervention effects on SEL knowledge and social-emotional resilience, and the implications for this study are notable for preventive, culturally responsive SEL programs in school settings, rather than assumptions of service provision to White middle-class students (Castro-Olivo, 2014). Within this study the SEL program provided students with valuable skills to address a variety of risk factors and challenges, and school mental health providers can use this specific intervention, or the specific steps for creating cultural adaptations for evidence-based treatments or practices (Castro-Olivo, 2014). While these findings were significant, additional research is warranted to examine SEL programming and the impact of teachers’ cultural competency when teaching culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students (Castro-Olivo, 2014).

A cultural competence theoretical framework and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory were further developed by Garner et al. (2014) into the term sociocultural competence, defined by social, individual and cultural elements that shape one’s identity, including fixed factors such as race, gender and disability, and socioeconomic status. A meta-analysis was

conducted by Garner et al. (2014) and consisted of the review of 23 studies exploring the impact of socioculturally grounded SEL programs on student's social emotional competence. The results emphasize the fact that many current programs are doing excellent work focused on SEL interventions, but they do not consistently work to honor the experiences and expressions of social emotional competence for students of color (Garner, et. al., 2014). Specifically, Garner et al. (2014) concluded that children's social emotional competencies are positively influenced by sociocultural factors and culturally grounded SEL programs. Rather than vilifying groups of students of color with the belief that "minority children's higher prevalence rate for social and emotional problems emerges in the first few years of life" (Garner et al., 2014, p. 170), we can acknowledge the impact of social, cultural and racial factors, and work to redefine what we deem as competence in the social emotional functioning of students of color.

Both Slaten et al. (2015) and Roffe (2017) support the position that while SEL literature has suggested a non-differentiated approach to SEL, findings in their studies suggest that more youth are served when SEL, critically conscious pedagogy, and culturally relevant instructional practices are followed. Slaten et.al. (2015) note that "This critical approach to SEL potentially allows students to grow in their emotional health and social well-being, while also creating an opportunity to determine paths to action. By giving preference to marginalized students' lived experience, calling attention to strengths, and engaging in critical dialogue, school professionals provide opportunities for systemic and individual wellness to emerge" (p. 54). Roffe's (2017) examination of the ASPIRE principles emphasizes SEL programming that is applicable to cultures that lean toward individualism and collectivism with racially diverse populations. Agency, Safety, Positivity, Inclusion, Respect and Equity embody the work of ASPIRE, which has been used to help address diversity across needs and cultures in the classroom and create

structures for youth to explore their needs and sense of agency in their schools and community (Roffe, 2017).

### **School Policies, SEL, and Equity**

In order to disrupt the destructive inertia and the centrifugal force of institutionalized racism we must examine the intersection of SEL and equity, or the lack thereof, within school policies. Diving deep into existing policies that perpetuate racial inequities is a first step for school districts, taking the next step to revise or replace existing policies with new policies focused on SEL and equity.

As noted by Zins and Elias (2007), since 2003 the Children's Mental Health Act (Public Act 93-0495) mandated that social and emotional development be defined as integral to the work of schools and success of students, specifically stating that all Illinois schools must:

- Regard social and emotional development as integral to their mission and a critical component of student academic readiness and school success.
- Take concrete steps to address their students' social and emotional Development.
- Have the flexibility to include social and emotional learning in their school improvement plans.
- Develop a policy for incorporating social and emotional development into the district's educational program, including assessing social and emotional skills.
- Develop a policy for responding to children with social, emotional, or mental health problems that affect learning. (p. 249)

While these were critical steps to emphasize, there is a vacant space where the mandate to incorporate culturally responsive practices within SEL policies should be. In order to address this lack of focus on race and equity, many researchers have started with examining the importance of a healthy SEL climate supported by a change in discipline policies to ultimately work toward more equitable outcomes in education (Gregory et al., 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Simmons, 2018). In addition, there are not yet many culturally responsive SEL policy

examples, nor are there many empirically based, developmentally appropriate school discipline interventions at their disposal (Gregory et al., 2016).

The next step for districts is to incorporate ecologically and equity-oriented SEL policies that acknowledge the dynamics of culture and power that exist, and invite students into the development of these policies. Slaten et al. (2015) stated that “the impact of school professionals engaging youth in these critical conversations has the potential to initiate system change and empower the voices of youth to express their concerns regarding educational practice and marginalization by the school system in urban communities.” (p. 56).

### **Promising Practices for Addressing the Mental Health Crisis**

#### **Benefits (or Return on Investment) of SEL Practices for Society, Learning, Employability Skills**

“More than ever, students are faced with uncertainty in their daily lives and in their futures, and many feel a sense of insecurity, disenfranchisement, disillusionment, and even fear. For all of these reasons, SEL is perhaps more important than ever as an essential component of school reform” (Zins & Elias, 2007, p. 237). Thankfully, the research around embedding SEL into schools is well established throughout the world in understanding the importance of, and benefits to, answering the urgent call to address the myriad issues that students face daily (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak & Weissberg 2017; Zins & Elias, 2007). SEL is grounded in the early work on emotional intelligence by Goleman (1995) and multiple intelligences by Gardner, furthered by a spark of interest throughout the world in the mainstream and research world, including through CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2015; Slaten et al., 2015; Zins & Elias, 2007).

The Zins and Elias (2007) meta-analysis revealed a variety of benefits specific to the learning environment, including influencing student attitudes, that are known to positively impact learning. These include self-efficacy, sense of community, attitudes about school and learning, academic motivation, trust and respect for teachers, and coping with school stressors (Zins & Elias, 2007). Behavioral impact was notable as well, with benefits around attendance, suspensions, conduct problems, classroom participation, and extracurricular activities, as was academic performance in achievement over time and higher achievement testing (Zins & Elias, 2007).

Similarly, Durlak et al. (2011) argue that “extensive developmental research indicates that effective mastery of social-emotional competencies are associated with greater well-being and better school performance whereas the failure to achieve competence in these areas can lead to a variety of personal, social, and academic difficulties” (p. 406). Durlak et al.’s (2011) meta-analysis of 270,000 students supported this position, specifically with a 10% decrease in conduct problems, and a decrease in emotional distress, such as anxiety and depression, improvement in social and emotional skills, a 10% increase in prosocial school and classroom behavior, and an 11% improvement in achievement test scores.

While concerns exist with regard to consistent measurement of SEL and growth in all areas (Fricke et al., 2019), a meta-analysis by Taylor et al. (2017) yielded continued support for the explicit benefits of SEL within schools, from kindergarten through high school. The outcomes evaluated ranged in follow-up from 6 months to 18 years after intervention, with results showing SEL skills, attitudes and wellbeing indicators as positively impacted for students (Taylor et al., 2017). Specific outcomes revealed benefits in relation to graduation from high school, college attendance, drug use, emotional distress, and conduct problems, buoying the

relevance for both promotion and prevention (Taylor et al., 2017). It is notable that the authors highlight the benefits of SEL skill building, rather than simply attitudes, as predicted outcomes in the long-term (Taylor et al., 2017).

In addition to the support for the academic impact of SEL interventions, we also see implications for society as a whole with social emotional learning skills and attitudes; citizenship and health-promoting behaviors impact everyone in our society. In fact, Taylor et al.'s (2017) recent meta-analysis has indicated long-term improvements in safe sexual behaviors, drug use, arrests and clinical disorders, which has implications for costs to individuals and society. Further support comes from research by Zins and Elias (2007) that noted SEL impact on less drug, tobacco, and alcohol use, delinquent behavior, decreases in sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, and suicide. From a financial perspective, a report from Columbia University showed that for every \$1 invested in SEL programming, there was an \$11 return on investment in terms of long-term benefits, including reduced crime for juveniles, higher earnings over a lifetime, and better mental and physical health (Belfield et al., 2015). In addition, there is an estimated economic cost of \$97.3 billion dollars in governmental support and taxes as a result of youth who are not connected to school or later to work (Slaten et al., 2015). This economic cost can be reduced by SEL implementation and the increased connection of students to school (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Zins & Elias, 2007).

The social emotional competencies targeted for development through SEL are the same skills that researchers note are valued by employers (Zins & Elias 2007; Wagner, 2008), what Wagner (2008) calls the 21st century skills, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, persistence, managing stressors, and communication, which can impact career planning and work readiness (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). As employers continue to seek sustainable employees, the

answer is in the fact that “over time, mastering SEL competencies results in a developmental progression that leads to a shift from being predominantly controlled by external factors to acting increasingly in accord with internalized beliefs and values, caring and concern for others, making good decisions, and taking responsibility for one’s choices and behaviors.” (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 406). Research has also just begun to yield information on increased earnings in relation to the long-term impact of SEL (Belfield et al., 2015). Finally, the research that has demonstrated an increased graduation rate and connection to school could have positive long-term effects on current data from the National Center for Educational Statistics, which shows that youth without a high school diploma earn \$200,000 less than youth with a diploma in a lifetime, and earn almost \$1 million less than college graduates (Slaten et al., 2015).

### **Instructional and program SEL practices**

The value of embedding SEL practices within instruction and implementing SEL programs through specific curricula has been reviewed extensively (Zins & Elias; 2007), and yet it is notable to consider Humphrey’s (2013) argument that SEL must not be treated like a panacea. Instead, it can be applied universally but must also be contextualized for individuals and schools. Zins and Elias (2007) also caution educators to note that many SEL programs are focused on differentiating between the need for universal prevention and promotion or addressing specific sets of behavioral concerns with direct intervention. Allbright, Marsh, Kennedy, Hough, & McKibben, (2019) argue that many schools are still challenged to identify the best strategies or programs to develop students’ social-emotional skills, and consideration should be given to myriad and complex factors in this decision-making process.

Characteristics of SEL programming have been laid out clearly through research captured in the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2015) to address SEL

competencies, and it has been noted repeatedly that consistency and sustainability of curriculum, SEL definitions, and implementation is a key for success (Allbright et al., 2019; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2015); Durlak et al., 2011; Zins & Elias, 2007). Durlak et al., (2011) remind us of the research showing that through SEL programs and “systematic instruction, SEL skills may be taught, modeled, practiced, and applied to diverse situations so that students use them as part of their daily repertoire of behaviors.” (p. 406).

Many SEL programs have applicability to ongoing embedded instructional practices in the classroom and schoolwide, as noted in Norris’ (2003), Rivers’ et al. (2013), and Yang’s et al. (2018) research. Zins and Elias (2007) research supports specific actions for embedding SEL within the traditional academic curriculum, altering instruction to include actions such as cooperative learning or the democratic classroom, and engaging students experientially, such as with service learning. Allbright et al., (2019) found that other SEL infused practices could include students being allowed to correct homework assignments and tests, thereby lessening pressure while learning the material to a greater extent, and providing expectations for self-talk and literal statements, such as using “I can’t do it yet” instead of “I can’t do it.”

Bird and Sultmann (2010) also remind us that wellbeing within the instructional environment can be achieved through fostering relationships, and thereby modeling SEL; “a learner will engage readily with learning when in an optimum state of well-being. Relationships establish the platform for human interaction and learning.” (p. 144). Furthermore, Slaten et al.’s (2015) research has indicated that for alternative programs, the individualized and self-paced instruction, low student-teacher ratios, and flexible classroom structure can help meet students’ needs from both SEL and academic perspectives, as can incorporation of community involvement into the school and interventions.

One area that requires special attention is that of students' age in relation to impact of SEL programs, and engaging in consideration of program versus embedding instructional practices, an area of particular interest for my work at the high school level. A meta-analysis of SEL programs by Boncu et al. (2017) on the development of children and adolescents consisted of 37 studies and over 32,000 students, using the CASEL framework. Of great importance is that while the meta-analysis supports previous findings that there is a positive impact of SEL programs on children and that SEL programs should still be seen as a form of prevention of social and emotional problems in children, the observation that the impact of SEL programs on adolescents was statistically insignificant warrants additional questions and research (Boncu et al., 2017).

Similarly, Yeager (2017) takes a strong position in support of universal SEL instruction, but notes that SEL skill-building programs are more effective with children under age 14, finding significant impact with programs that focus on mindsets and climate with adolescents. This is supported by Yeager's (2017) explanation through developmental theory and brain science that adolescents are motivated when given a chance to feel respected and to experience high status, thus creating a sense of acceptance (not to be confused with conformity) by both the staff and classmates in the context of SEL programs, particularly given adolescents' difficulties in managing peer rejection that can be rooted in biological functioning and testosterone as a status-relevant hormone. This fits into University of Wisconsin Professor Brown's four development tasks of adolescents: (1) to stand out (develop identity and move toward autonomy), (2) to fit in (with affiliations that are comfortable and to gain acceptance from peers), (3) to measure up (develop competence and find ways to achieve), and (4) to take hold (with commitments to goals and activities and beliefs) (Yeager, 2017).

Yeager (2017) changes the script of the direction of SEL by asserting that research shows that neither sole focus on skill development (changing the child), nor sole focus on changing climate (changing the environment or staff), meets the needs of students with respect to SEL. “In general, the skills model of SEL seems less effective with adolescents than it is with younger children. The climate model can be powerful, but it doesn’t always translate into positive behavior when children leave the affected climate (for example, when they’re out of school and on their own, or after the program ends). The mindsets model is promising for producing internalized, lasting change, because it’s a mental model that stays with people over time.” (Yeager, 2017, p. 76). Yeager (2017) argues that adolescents can form new mindsets that focus on the capacity for change (incremental theory of personality grounded in the growth mindset) and form new positive social relationships. SEL programs and embedding of SEL practices can harness students’ desire for status and respect, peer influence, and provide a purpose for learning that is relevant to adolescents.

### **Climate and Culture Impact**

Implementation of SEL practices contributes to a strong climate and culture impact within the classroom setting, as well as within the larger school environment. The climate within classrooms where SEL has been implemented shows higher levels of warmth and connectedness between students and teachers, students have more autonomy and leadership, and teachers are more focused on the motivations and interests of students (Yang et al., 2018; Rivers et al., 2013). This serves to both promote the social and emotional aspects of students’ lives and the experience of the school environment, ultimately building the knowledge and skills of students and teachers (Rivers et al., 2013). Furthermore, Norris (2003) specifically argues that SEL impacts climate by increasing the capacity for students to feel safe enough to take risks, learn

new skills over time, and feel valued as part of a community, including colleague to colleague, while Yeager (2017) states that changing the climate to one that is more respectful increases adolescents' capacity to manage frustrations and feelings.

In summarizing the relationship of SEL with culture and climate, Zins and Elias (2018) state that "Ultimately, a reciprocal relationship exists between SEL skills and school climate. A positive school environment promotes SEL, and SEL facilitates a supportive climate. Because social, emotional, and academic growth are interdependent, the result is synergistic progress in all of these areas." (p. 238). Yang et al.'s (2018) research reflects this reciprocity in stressing the importance of establishing a caring social and relationship-based culture that includes positive relationships for all members of the school community. The creation of a safe, respectful and supportive school environment (Durlak et al., 2011; Roffe, 2017; Zins & Elias, 2007) are further examples of the reciprocal relationship of SEL and climate, accompanied by a strengths-based approach, as in McCashen's use of the concept of "power with" instead of "power over" (Roffe, 2017), empowering student voices (Yeager, 2017; Bird & Sultmann, 2010), reinforcement in all settings (including hallways and playgrounds), and the use of SEL tenets with all stakeholders (Zins & Elias, 2007).

### **Schoolwide SEL practices**

Schoolwide practices naturally align with SEL and can be woven into the very fabric of the school. While at times there may be resistance to the intentional integration of SEL as the feeling of one more thing on staff members plates, Zins & Elias (2007) position that SEL should be an organizing framework for the entire school is well supported within the research (Yang et al., 2018), and Norris (2003) stated that SEL is central to the way that we engage with each other and is not simply another add-on. Bird & Sultmann (2010) also reinforced this advocacy for

schoolwide SEL implementation by explicitly taking steps to link SEL to the vision and mission of the school.

Additional forms of strategic planning to ensure consistency and sustainability are key. Oberle et al. (2016) say that schools must consider barriers, funding, commitment to professional development, regular data gathering and review, and systematic ways to infuse SEL into special SEL programs and daily SEL practices within classrooms and the larger school. Furthermore, hiring, evaluation, and training practices, as well as explicit expectations for staff to model student-expected behaviors, are additional areas in which Allbright et al. (2019) noted that SEL should be incorporated.

In addition, interventions and prevention frameworks like MTSS, PBIS and RtI should encapsulate SEL (Allbright et al., 2019; Bird & Sultmann, 2010; Oberle et al., 2016; Sciuchetti, 2017). This includes specific academic, mental health, and disciplinary interventions (including Restorative Justice practices), which should constantly be reviewed for culturally responsive practices.

While integration of SEL is imperative, conveying transparency of expected timelines in planning is also critical, as the full integration of SEL from a schoolwide perspective often takes 3-5 years (Zins & Elias, 2007).

### **Building Capacity for Successful Implementation of SEL supports**

Demonstrating the same level of respect and support to our staff that we expect staff to provide our students through SEL practices and programs can be done through myriad manners, and one of them is building capacity for our staff. The field of education is known to involve

high levels of stress and burn-out (Collie et al., 2015), and it is up to leaders to take action with and for our staff.

### **Professional development to build common understanding and capacity to teach SEL**

There is agreement among researchers, from Zins and Elias (2007) to Brackett and Patti (2016) to Jennings and Greenberg (2009) to Waajid et al. (2013) , that there is a paucity of preparation in the area of SEL for teachers prior to entering the field, despite the increasing and complicated social emotional needs of our students from preschool to high school.

To begin, providing professional development can create a sense of buy-in for defining and implementing SEL (Allbright et al., 2019). Oberle et al. (2016), Poulou (2018), and Elias et al. (2003) also agree that professional development in SEL creates an opportunity for all staff, from the superintendent to the paraprofessional, to consistently address SEL support with expectations, avoiding a “one & done” mentality (Rivers et al., 2013; Brackett & Patti, 2016).

An additional important consideration in professional development is Collie et al.’s (2012) research that shows that job satisfaction, teaching efficacy, and teacher stress are impacted by perceptions of SEL and school climate. Specifically, healthy teacher–student relationships, effective classroom management, a healthy classroom environment, and effective SEL implementation were related (Collie et al., 2012). In addition, Collie et al. (2015) found that middle and secondary school teachers, as well as male teachers, are more likely to report lower comfort with SEL and perceived schoolwide support for SEL, which may be in part because of greater quantity of students, more pressure to address academic content, and structural challenges. These are factors associated with teacher outcomes (stress and satisfaction) that are known to impact teaching effectiveness and student outcomes (Collie et al., 2015). This means that not only do we need to provide professional development to ensure

comfort and capacity to model and teach SEL, but it is also critical that we help support the wellbeing of our staff and demonstrate our own commitment to schoolwide SEL.

In addition, professional development that revolves around culturally responsive SEL can continue to address the opportunity gap (Norris, 2003; Sciuchetti, 2017). Lastly, given the positive outcomes associated with a respectful school and classroom climate, it is critical that we follow Yeager's (2017) assertion that professional development on SEL focus on respect.

### **Professional development to increase social emotional competencies of staff members**

In terms of social emotional competencies, Elias et al., (2003) says that it is imperative that we see the human importance for our human implementers of SEL, as they often deal with uncertainty, high levels of stress, and ambiguity. While there is not yet an overwhelming quantity of research on staff SEL and student outcomes (Poulou, 2018), research tells us that professional development in the area of SEL can help with staff social emotional competencies as well, which supports the wellbeing of teachers and reduces stress and burnout (Collie et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2018).

Social emotionally competent educators demonstrate emotional intelligence that helps with mood management, motivation, emotional resilience and stress regulation (Brearley, 2006). Simmons et al. (2018) noted that half of our teachers experience high levels of stress on a daily basis, and Schonert-Reichl (2017) asserts that teachers' own social-emotional competence and wellbeing strongly influence their students, which is why it is especially important for educators be given the tools to manage their own wellbeing.

Social emotional competence of educators should not be taken lightly. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) assert that teachers with low social emotional competency are often emotionally exhausted and drop out of the teaching workforce, react with rigidity or reactivity in

the classroom, and may be at risk for mental health concerns. Accordingly, Waajid et al., (2013) noted that it is not enough to simply train teachers about their own social emotional competencies, but rather it is critical to also help them understand how their emotions and emotional reactions impact teaching. Teachers with high social emotional competence regulate their emotions, manage conflict and relationships with students and staff members, and engage in culturally responsive practices (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Finally, with increasing demands on educators and more complicated SEL needs from students, it is critical that we support the wellbeing of all educators. This includes providing support for staff with high social emotional competencies, as well as providing professional development and ongoing supports with activities such as yoga and Mindfulness-Based Interventions for all staff (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

### **Benefits (or Return on Investment) of SEL Capacity Building**

The benefits of SEL capacity building are plentiful, and revolve around the staff member's impact, which ultimately benefits the students. Norris (2003) has noted that staff who use SEL as their centerpiece learned to engage in decision-making and problem-solving with students and colleagues by talking, listening, and managing conflicts. Furthermore, Simmons (2018) explained that teachers who are supported with SEL implementation with PD and other supports positively impacted their classroom management, levels of anxiety and depression in relation to the work environment, interactions with their students, and reported greater perceived job control. In addition, Roffe (2017) found that staff who engage in social emotional learning experienced more positive relationships within schools. Furthermore, Yang et al.'s (2018) position that SEL professional development impacts student engagement by establishing a caring social and relationship-based culture is another benefit. Schonert-Reichl's (2017) similar

position is that the benefits to students for SEL professional development for staff revolve around the positive impact for SEL functioning for students, and consequently their academic achievement and success after high school with career planning and work readiness. These assertions culminate in the idea that SEL professional development can enhance both student and staff social emotional competencies and is of the greatest benefit, and should never be underestimated.

### **Literature Review Conclusion**

This literature review provided an opportunity to build a framework that supports the conceptualization of looking at the whole student and whole staff member to increase support for staff and students' wellbeing through embedded SEL practices. At the core of this framework is the importance of isolating race, examining staff social emotional competence, and exploring staff readiness to implement and model SEL.

Within both the literature and in my professional experience there is a demonstrated need for a framework that blends social emotional learning with equity, from a schoolwide perspective and in classrooms with programming and embedded SEL instruction. In addition, further research is warranted specific to social emotional competencies in relation to staff wellbeing and the impact on students and staff alike. The call for action remains urgent, as students need us everyday, as do our staff.

## **SECTION THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design Overview**

The purpose of this program evaluation aligns with the importance of acting now, creating more opportunities for social emotional learning for students and staff members, ultimately striving to ensure we are helping students use awareness, decision-making, and coping skills to lead stable and productive lives (Patton, 2008). Committing to never rest on our laurels in the face of student need, I hold dear Patton's (2008) quote from Halcolm's *Indesiderata* that "Evaluation threatens complacency and undermines the oblivion of fatalistic inertia" (p. 195).

In planning this evaluation I am taking into consideration the context of our school and experiences. This is consistent with Patton's (2008) position that "A successful evaluation (one that is useful, practical, ethical, and accurate) emerges from the special characteristics and conditions of a particular situation - a mixture of people, politics, history, context, resources, constraints, values, needs, interests, and chance" (p. 199). Each of us has a story to tell, including this large school, which is thriving in many ways but has also experienced many losses and trauma. Designing the evaluation to fit our program's situation is a complex act, which includes the need for a framework with which to act intentionally (Patton, 2008). Applying Patton's (2008) utilization-focused perspective means knowing that the right way for evaluation is "the way that will be meaningful, credible, and useful to the specific intended users involved, and finding that way requires interaction, negotiation, situational analysis, and ongoing situational awareness" (2008, p. 200). This includes work with the intended users and participants as part of the decision-making process (Patton, 2008), parallel to decision-making as a central focus of practicing social emotional and academic learning.

The plan to gather data for this study includes information from a variety of sources, using both qualitative methods and existing quantitative data. The intended users are all staff within the school, including the teachers, leaders, and support staff, with indirect and direct implications for our staff's capacity to support the development of our students' social emotional learning skills. The act of gathering data includes: document review of existing public programmatic information, existing public student functioning information with our student information system, existing public student and staff wellbeing survey data, public student and staff climate and culture data from our school's 5Essentials survey, and semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

Patton (2008) noted that “issues of methodology are issues of strategy, not of morals” (p. 425). The strategy for this research is to focus on addressing the research questions at hand by ensuring that the data gathered is meaningful to the research questions and intended users, consistent with Halcolm's statement that “meaningful evaluation answers begin with meaningful questions” (Patton, 2008, p. 197). To understand the choice of qualitative research method, the research questions to be answered by the methodology were:

Primary Research Question:

- How does the embedding of SEL practices vary within instructional, non-instructional, and leadership roles?

Secondary Research Questions:

- To what extent does staff capacity building for SEL practices incorporate support for the social emotional competence of both staff and students?
- How does race relate to social emotional learning practices for staff and students?

Choosing a qualitative method allows for inquiry that Patton (2008) describes as allowing the researcher to develop a closeness to the situations and people being evaluated, sharing in experiences by developing empathy. The qualitative method, supported by quantitative data points, addresses the research questions by matching the design to the situation at our school and nationwide, knowing that success in life is dependent on students' social, emotional and academic learning (Aspen Institute, 2019). This blends the importance of identifying existing quantitative data about social emotional learning in relation to staff and students, as well as striving for the utility of the information by working to deeply understand the relationship of independent and dependent variables and explore staff's narratives and perceptions that influence their daily social emotional functioning, learning, teaching, and perceptions of equity in SEL via qualitative data (Patton, 2008). Variables will include: staff roles (instructional, non-instructional and leadership), gender and race, staff social emotional competence, staff SEL preparedness for practicing, modeling and teaching, embedding of SEL practices, staff perceptions of student SEL, race, and behavior, staff perceptions of support, student functioning, and student self-reported perceptions and behavior.

The use of interviews and focus groups as a means to gather qualitative data will also allow us to explore, interpret and adapt to new information and relationships, including preparing for unexpected results knowing that "high performance organizations are always on the lookout for the unexpected" (Patton, 2008, p. 274), while also asking hard questions and digging deeply into problems, which Patton (2008) noted that Gawande would lead with.

Furthermore, the use of triangulation of sources via individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups supported the consistency of findings from quantitative information from

existing surveys and data points. As Patton (2008) explains, this process of triangulation was effective “in order to check the consistency of findings from different data sources” (p. 442).

### **Participants**

The key participants in this research were intended to represent the entirety of our school by including a variety of roles from the over 600 staff members at Shoreville Community High School (SCHS) District 321. While representing different areas of expertise, our key participants had high stakes in this process of understanding how to better support our students and a tremendous commitment to our students.

Upon final completion of data gathering, the participants were broken down by role, race, sexual orientation, and gender. It was my pleasure to interview 26 SCHS staff members through 19 individual interviews and 3 focus groups. The staff members’ time at SCHS spanned from four years to almost three decades, and the demographic variance for these staff members included ages 20-70, cisgender, male, female, White, Black, Latinx, Asian, and multi-racial.

The below table reflects the various categories of the staff members who participated in interviews and focus groups, and is followed by the interview questions for the semi-structured interviews with individuals and focus groups.

<b>INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS: STAFF ROLES AND IDENTITIES</b>	
<b>Staff Role</b>	<b>Number of Staff Interviewed</b>
Teachers	7
Support & Safety	8
Leaders	11

<b>Total Staff</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Race</b>	<b>Number of Staff Interviewed</b>
Black	11
White	10
Biracial	1
Asian	2
Latinx	2
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number of Staff Interviewed</b>
Female	13
Male	13
Gender nonconforming	0
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	<b>Number of Staff Interviewed</b>
Gay or Queer	4
Heterosexual	22

*Table 1. Participant Demographics*

Table 1 Description: This participant demographics table includes staff roles and identities of staff members who participated in interviews or focus groups. The categories of staff members were disaggregated by role and facets of identity, including race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Staff were invited to participate in focus groups because of the value placed on hearing the voices of all staff, understanding that staff impact and shape students' identities and skills on a daily basis, as all of us ultimately are also the intended users of social emotional learning practices to support our students (Patton, 2008). Each person in the school interfaces with students, while understanding that teachers have significantly greater time spent daily with students. Furthermore, purposeful sampling was utilized to identify individuals to voluntarily

participate in individual semi-structured interviews. I also worked to ensure that there was proportional representation of the entire staff who participated in these interviews (Patton, 2008).

### **Data Gathering Techniques**

Consistent with Patton's (2008) assertion that evaluation processes must be adaptive in nature in order to engage in decision-making and should be based on asking questions and gathering current data, in the below section I describe the steps I have taken to ask questions and gather data. These acts of data gathering were not held in isolation or simply as linear, keeping in mind that "data collection and analysis are an inherently complex interplay of choice-making elements" (James et al., 2008, p. 78). As described below, I began the data gathering process by facilitating 19 individual staff interviews and 3 focus groups, and then gathered and reviewed a wide variety of publicly available staff information and student information.

#### ***Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus groups***

I conducted voluntary face to face semi-structured interviews with some probing questions both individually and via focus groups, allowing for follow-up for any vague answers (Patton, 2008). This also provided me with the opportunity to explore and gather more qualitative data related to staff experiences and perceptions around embedding SEL practices in instructional, non-instructional, and leadership spaces, the role of race and equity in SEL perceptions and experiences, and the level of preparedness to practice, learn, model and teach SEL and social emotional competence.

Within the semi-structured interview setting for individual interviews and focus groups I first walked through a pilot interview to fully prepare for the interview process, testing the Otter app for background noise for recording and transcription. As part of the pilot I also ensured a list

of necessary items provided for each interview, including water and tissues for the participant(s), referrals for the Employee Assistance Program as needed should strong feelings be elicited, charged cell phone, pen, paper, interview questions & summary sheets (Appendix F), and typed protocol (Appendix C). After that, within the course of each interview I obtained informed consent from staff, provided copies of the informed consent for staff, used a recorder, took notes on the typed protocol and data collection sheet, asked semi-structured questions, and asked probing questions when relevant that were reflective of the research questions. I also ensured that each interview ended with a question as to whether there was anything further the staff members wanted to share or wanted me to know, additionally noting any questions I did not have the opportunity to ask during the interview. After each interview I captured my initial responses on the interview summary sheet, including interviewees body language.

### ***Staff Information***

As part of gathering data about staff members, existing staff survey data was reviewed from the 5Essentials data gathered from staff previously to identify experiences in relation to capacity building, perceptions of student functioning, culture, climate and social emotional learning. In addition, publicly available staff survey information regarding surveys and wellbeing was also reviewed.

### ***Student Information***

The student-related data that I reviewed included existing publicly reported information, and included information about student functioning that is reflective of SEL levels of functioning. All of this student information already existed within our student information system, including: test scores, free/reduced lunch eligibility, IEP, 504 plan, race, gender, grade

level, grades, discipline, alternatives to suspension, psychiatric hospitalizations, social work referrals, absences, truancy, and school-based interventions. In addition, I examined the existing student wellbeing survey data and the existing 5Essentials Survey student data, as these surveys directly address areas that are reflective of SEL and wellbeing, including perception of climate and culture, and self-reported perceptions of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. I gathered this data in conjunction with the research department at our school, aggregating student data to ensure no identifying student information was conveyed.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

To provide comprehensive data analysis for this qualitative methodology design, I utilized qualitative analysis, supported by quantitative data. As explained in the next subsections, I engaged in qualitative data analysis techniques for staff and student information, focus groups, and interviews. Throughout this analysis I remained focused on the goal of understanding multiple perspectives to effect change that will better staff and students' learning process and lives. This is supported by James et al.'s (2008) statement regarding qualitative data analysis; "Rigorous collection and analysis of the words and pictures, gathered as evidence about a topic, enhance the position of educators to build a convincing body of knowledge on which to improve educational practices" (p. 66).

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus groups***

In relation to my process for qualitative data analysis, I utilized NVivo as a qualitative data analysis tool, identifying themes in advance of importing data, and used this data analysis tool for semi-open selective coding of interviews and focus groups (James et al., 2008). This was followed by rereading the data, looking for new themes while examining individual codes

and possible clusters of data, as well as linkages of cause and effect (James et al., 2008). In addition, I utilized quotes from individual interviews and focus groups to help support my position in relation to the research as I made, supported and summarized a claim. In addition, I reflected on numbers and percentages from student and staff data, consistent with James et al. (2008) assertion that “Qualitative evidence is more descriptive and convincing when reported side by side with numbers and percentages” (p. 81).

As part of the synthesis of each research question I added other emerging unanticipated themes, using semi-open coding. These codes highlight primary ideas, sorting them into categories that allowed me to gain new perspectives (James et al., 2008).

As stated earlier, variables included: staff roles (instructional, non-instructional and leadership), gender, race, staff social emotional competence, staff SEL preparedness for practicing, modeling and teaching, embedding of SEL practices, staff perceptions of student SEL, race and behavior, staff perceptions of support, student functioning, and student self-reported perceptions and behavior. Lastly, the qualitative analysis included assessing findings for how this supported the claim and research question.

### ***Staff Information and Student Information***

As an iterative process (James et al., 2008), I analyzed the qualitative data from interviews and focus groups data, examining how this data interacted with staff information and student information that is publicly available. This included utilizing triangulation to check the consistency of findings through comparing staff and student information, with the data analyzed from the focus groups and interviews (Patton, 2008). Following the recommendation of James et al. (2008) to understand the interaction of data, I used a consistent approach for qualitative data

analysis when comparing data sets, using selective semi-open coding, which resulted in additional resorting and new perspectives on themes.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In keeping with Michael Scriven's quote that "it is truly unethical to leave ethics out of a program evaluation" (Patton, 2008, p. 545), I took steps to provide for ethical considerations with this research. First, I worked to ensure that I would do no harm by including more staff members than those who tend to be "the ones" involved in school-wide efforts through the purposeful sampling process. This was done to prevent identification of those participating in the research, and the potential embarrassment for specific staff members as their experiences and views have been shared through this research.

To staff participants I communicated the purpose of the research and intended benefits, followed by my commitment to respecting and maintaining their privacy, their voluntary participation, and obtaining their verbal and written informed consent via written signature for in-person interviews and focus groups (Patton, 2008). As part of this communication I explained that our school, district and city have pseudonyms, their information would be anonymous by removing names, their confidentiality would be highly regarded and protected, and they would have access to the final report. This is significant in any research and particularly salient given the close-knit nature of our 600+ staff members in one school building.

The importance of the story or narrative to be unfolded through my research is consistent with James et al.'s (2008) quote that qualitative methods extract "the depth and richness of the human experience" (p. 58). These qualitative methods can be as compelling as quantitative data analysis. I also needed to be vigilant as I worked to draw in the reader of my research to

understand the depth of our school and staff's journey. This vigilance focused on maintaining the integrity of my qualitative method research, ensuring that I did not reveal the source of the quotes by including topics or phrases specific to individual staff members, which could be "significant identifiers."

In addition, I planned to include references to staff members as "this staff member", "this teacher", or "this leader." I also analyzed data in aggregate form and combined the interviews together to communicate findings. Furthermore, minors were not observed, and the survey and student information system data that was reviewed was communicated in such a way that all student individual and aggregate information was protected.

As I focused on collecting information ethically and with sensitivity to all individuals, groups, and our school, I worked to ensure that the purposeful sampling did not result in stereotypes or stigma by characteristics of participants in the focus groups (Creswell, 2012). In addition, risks for the loss of privacy were ameliorated by utilizing password protected computers, storing names and numbers to identify respective names separately, and maintaining files in locked cabinets separate from identifying information, and will be followed by destruction of all identifying information.

## **Conclusion**

Patton's (2008) position that "utilization-focused evaluation helps decision makers and intended users stand outside the program and look at what is happening" (p. 471) is consistent with the intention to conduct program evaluation in order to change what we were doing as a school so that we could better serve our students. As detailed in this section, doing this research through a qualitative methodology allowed the use of qualitative data to increase the richness of

the story, looking simultaneously at in-depth details and larger patterns, asking all along what it meant for our situation, how this would be used, and how we would need to adapt (Patton, 2008).

Within the next section I discussed the findings and themes that emerged with respect to Wagner's four arenas of change, all the while remembering that we cannot delay, as students' lives hang in this delicate balance of our complicated lives and world.

## **SECTION FOUR: RESULTS**

### **Introduction**

In preparing to present the analysis, interpretation, judgment and recommendations for evaluation findings in this section, I was grounded by Patton's (2008) assertion that both Zen masters and utilization-focused evaluators follow a similar process to achieve enlightenment. They both review a question, the answer, and the interpretation of the answer. The below results section reflects my own work to act as the consultant, albeit not yet a Zen master, in reflecting on the program to see what is happening, holding close the knowledge that "evaluations can help shake staff out of routine ways of doing things, open up new possibilities, and help programs realize their full potential" (Patton, 2008, p. 471). This results section also reflects what Patton (2008) referred to as an effort to help others understand the results after "long hours of arduous work involved in sifting through the data, organizing it, arranging it, testing relationships, taking the data apart, and creatively putting them back together to arrive at that moment of public unveiling" (p. 479).

The lens I utilized for this process is that of Wagner et al.'s (2006) arenas for change, using the 4 Cs diagnostic tool to understand our district's effectiveness through context, culture, conditions, and competencies in light of current strengths and challenges in this As-Is snapshot. The organizational change I am working on is the act of embedding school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity. Preparing to shake up our current practices, I am first seeking to understand the As-Is landscape (Heifetz et al., 2009) as I draw upon my analysis of data, which will then drive my goals for organizational change that ultimately improve teaching and learning, developing the To-Be

picture of where I aspire for us to be in the future, which I discuss in Section Five (Wagner et al., 2006).

Describing and placing the needed organizational changes for SCHS within the educational context begins with reexamining my primary and related research questions:

- How does the embedding of SEL practices vary within instructional, non-instructional, and leadership roles?
  - To what extent does staff capacity building for SEL practices incorporate support for the social emotional competence of both staff and students?
  - How does race relate to social emotional learning practices for staff and students?

The As-Is Chart below and in Appendix G reflects a snapshot of our district's challenges and strengths as they relate to each other and the identified research questions, helping to gain different perspectives for deeper understanding of the problem within the research questions (Wagner et al., 2006). This As-Is Chart goes beyond defining our Context as described previously in Section One, and expands to our Culture, Competencies and Conditions at SCHS.

#### 4 Cs *As-Is* Chart

##### **Context - *As-Is***

Focused on: Embedding school-wide culturally responsive social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- One school (high school), one district.
- 4,000 students; 605 employees.
- 1.2 million square feet under one roof.
- Student population includes: American Indian 0.2 %, Asian 5.8%, Black or African American 25.9%, Hispanic/Latino 18.8%, Two or more races 3.4%, and White 45.8%.
- Focus on student identity and social consciousness.
- Many social service agencies and licensed mental health providers in the community.
- Desire to quantify and measure social emotional learning, at times with absolutes that are difficult to achieve.
- High student needs, with 100 psychiatric hospitalizations last school year.
- Demonstrated economic support for SEL seen in the increased number of school-based mental health providers (11 social workers, 5 psychologists and 15 grade level counselors).
- Private practice mentality (pull the student out of class to handle issues or “fix” them, rather than support students in the classroom setting).

##### **Culture - *As-Is***

Focused on: Embedding school-wide culturally responsive social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- School is highly committed to race and equity.
- SEL is not infused into, nor explicitly incorporated into syllabus or curriculum.
- Staff have embraced a model of “Consult, consult, consult” to address crises.
- Leadership named belonging and wellbeing as a central focus for the district.
- Staff are overwhelmed with student needs, many initiatives, and things to do.
- Leaders state the intention to eradicate silos, but actions reinforce silos and grow isolation.
- Trust varies among leaders and between leaders and staff, from minimal to moderate levels of trust.
- Programs at times are created without full data upon which to base the decisions.

### **Conditions - As-Is**

Focused on: Embedding school-wide culturally responsive social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- Explicit expectations are communicated for staff responsibilities to address individual student crises.
- Time is allotted to address race and equity, as well as how to handle student crises within all-staff, departmental, lunch-and-learn, professional learning modules, and on-line meetings and trainings.
- No professional development time allotted to learn how to instruct, infuse, and model SEL.
- High mental health provider to student ratio, including creating additional positions in the last 6 years: Student Services Intervention Coordinator, Department Chair for Student Services, 2 additional Psychologists, additional Counselor, and additional Social Workers.
- Currently brand and communicate “Acknowledge, Care, Tell” to staff, students and families.
- Outfacing structures exist on web pages about crisis intervention, but none about SEL.
- Multiple and complex student crises act as a barrier to focusing more fully on prevention within the classroom and beyond.
- All staff and leaders do not yet take accountability for SEL within curriculum and instruction, as well as within office spaces.

### **Competencies - As-Is**

Focused on: Embedding school-wide culturally responsive social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- Mental health and non-mental health staff know what they need to do when a student is in crisis.
- Mental health staff know how to address student crises (such as if a student may be at risk of harming self or others).
- Staff have not built the capacity to support students through preventing crises, building coping skills, and developing problem-solving skills.
- Staff struggle with building their own coping and problem-solving skills.
- Signs of Suicide program has been newly implemented with all freshman, including suicide risk screeners.
- Leadership struggles to provide direction or guidance on blending SEL with instruction.
- Some instructional staff integrate elements of SEL into instruction, such as journaling and mindful moments.

## Findings

With a focus on the research questions focused on the variance of embedding SEL practices, staff capacity building for SEL practices and competencies, and how race relates to SEL practices for staff and students, I analyzed the findings with a systems lens. Specifically, I wove the results of the “Life is Complicated” program evaluation throughout Wagner et al.’s (2006) 4 Cs: context, culture, conditions and competencies.

For the purposes of relating the 4 Cs to our district’s As-Is snapshot, the following titles were used for the subsections:

1. **Context** of Current and Historical Pain and Support
2. **Culture** of Commitment, Relationships, Empathy and Inconsistency
3. **Conditions** When Resources Feel Scarce
4. **Competencies** that Support Social Emotional Learning for Staff and Students

As part of the analysis of results, I also took great care to look beyond the desire to have my own biases and opinions confirmed, consistent with one of the Illinois SEL Learning Standards, by engaging my own level of self-awareness. I was on the lookout for more, following the guidance from Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) “that high performance organizations are always on the lookout for the unexpected” (Patton, 2008, p. 474). As a guide to considering the findings, I utilized Wagner et al.’s (2006) holistic view of processes in order to make sense of how they relate, seeing the various parts fitting together. “More ‘ecological’ than logical, it recognizes that simple, linear cause-and-effect explanations sometimes miss the fact that today’s effect may in turn be tomorrow’s cause, influencing some other part of the system” (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 97).

The clarity I gained from the findings in relation to the 4 Cs are simple yet powerful, with two primary themes: “*Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet*” and “*Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet.*” These themes

are drawn from 19 individual semi-structured interviews and 3 focus groups with 26 support staff, safety staff, administrators, and teachers that inform the state of the district. I triangulated this interview and focus group qualitative data with quantitative information from the student Wellbeing Survey, student and staff information as communicated in Board Reports and in reports to the public, and data from the staff and student 5Essentials surveys. Throughout the findings, I addressed these two primary themes as relevant to the 4 Cs, while also connecting back to the research questions at hand, and relating them to my interpretations, judgments and recommendations.

### **Context of Current and Historical Pain and Support**

In terms of defining our current state of functioning and readiness for organizational change, I use Wagner et al.'s (2006) definition for context: "Referring to 'skill demands' all students must meet to succeed as providers, learners, and citizens and the particular aspirations, needs and concerns of the families and community that the school or district serves" (p. 104). The demands and expectations of larger organizational systems, such as state and national systems, and social, economic, political and historical factors shape Wagner et al.'s (2006) definition of context. While many of the components of context in looking at organizational change may feel outside of our capacity to control, we can use them to understand ourselves and our history and to shape our future. Described in detail in Section One, SCHS is the one school, one district, and the only high school for a City of 75,000. With a commitment to social services, SCHS is looked to as the center of our community. With 4,000 students and 605 employees, and over 1.2 million square feet under one roof; we take up literal and figurative space within the City of Shoreville and are expected to be change leaders for our students and community. Moving through this subsection of context, I bridge the identified problems,

findings, and *“Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet”*, and *“Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet.”*

*“Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet”*

The theme seen throughout the results of the SCHS context is inherently contradictory, as it reflects our strong commitment, and yet how far we still have to go in working for full SEL and equity implementation. Simply stated as “yes, and”; this is a *yes*, we have accomplished many things, *and* we have more to do. This is seen in our district’s commitment to SEL and equity having grown significantly, *and* having gaps, as we are not there yet in terms of SEL, staff capacity building, and equity.

My own journey for the last 17 years as a member of the district, with 9 years as a Social Worker, 2 years as a Dean, and 6 years as an Associate Principal, has included a witnessing of growth with respect to our commitment to SEL and equity, embodying pain and the effort to address this pain. Reflecting on the origin of my journey, 17 years ago many staff narrowly defined mental health needs for those who were internalizing behaviors (crying, cutting their arms, unable to lift their head from their desk). At the same time the students who had experienced trauma and were externalizing these needs and depression as anger or behavioral acting out were dismissed as conduct-disordered or socially maladjusted, and not as having mental health concerns. For our students who received discipline referrals for acting out, or externalizing their pain, many people never recognized the mental health needs nor saw the trauma or the hidden behaviors that also reflected their trauma, anxiety and depression, including cutting their stomachs, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, which Sitler (2009) explains is not uncommon when examining the manifestation of trauma in the school environment. These

externalizing and internalizing differences were delineated upon racial lines, with White internalizing behaviors being more accepted and seen as less disruptive.

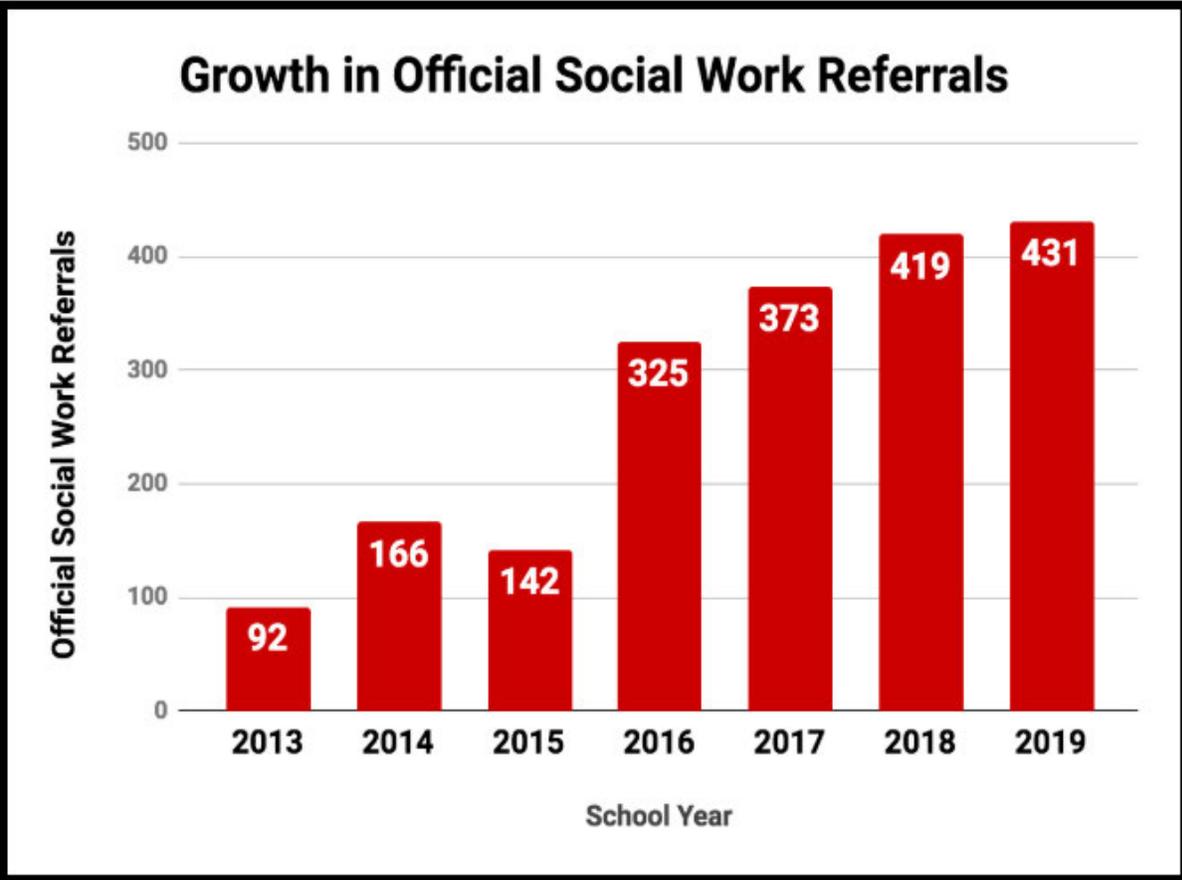
Along this journey, as a district we moved to a recognition that students who are externalizing may have also had significant trauma or have been demonstrating depression or anxiety, and may have a cultural etiology. And we have now arrived at a time when staff request SEL support for students in social work offices, and are requesting support with SEL and trauma-informed practices even in the classroom. As part of a professional development initiative for staff entitled “Navigating the Emotional Landscape of Covid-19”, there was a school-wide focus on reading Zaretta Hammond’s (2015), *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*, and a teacher-to-teacher SEL toolkit that was developed, a focus on SEL with a culturally responsive lens has been developed. While we have made good progress, the following is reported to happen at SCHS as well, as described by one teacher:

When you see a student who's sitting in a room crying, I know what to do about that. But when it shows up in a way that's loud, or maybe angry or belligerent, my own thoughts are: this kid's depressed or something's going on. We're worried about the behavior. So what's really going on? And so I think that piece for me is really challenging, but I've had enough folks here who reminded me that it is different for a lot of kids. Depression shows up differently . . . through their gender and [it] can be racialized with so many different things.

Student need has been demonstrated in a variety of ways, including a 78% increase in social work referrals over a six-year period as noted in Figure 4. In addition, in 2018-2019 student pain and needs, as well as the supports, were manifested through: 100 psychiatric

hospitalizations, 12% of students (1 in 8 students) being referred for social work, 175 Suicide Risk Assessments by SCHS mental health professionals, 152 McKinney-Vento eligible (homeless) students, 403 individual 504 plans, and 73 students receiving homebound instruction due to medical and/or psychiatric needs.

This complex level of need is further demonstrated by the outcome of the 2018-2019 student wellbeing survey. Students experienced stressors and anxiety, and students were actively accessing mental health supports within SCHS, their families and our community. For instance, 37% of students (more than 1 in 3) reported feeling anxiety or stress that impacted their ability to deal with daily activities (such as homework, family, friends, extracurriculars) for 6 or more days in the past 30 days. In addition, 26.2% of students (1 in 4) felt sad or hopeless most days for two weeks or more in a row that resulted in stopping some usual activities in the last 12 months. Encouragingly, it was heartening to see that SCHS students sought out support regarding stress and mental health in the last 12 months from: SCHS staff, parents/guardians, adult family members, hotlines, hospitals, and mental health professionals within SCHS and the community. Specifically, 17% of students (1 in 6) reported seeing an SCHS mental health professional in the last year for social emotional support, and 38% of students (more than 1 in 3) reported seeing a mental health professional outside of SCHS in the last year for social emotional support.



*Figure 4. Growth in Official Social Work Referrals*

In response to high levels of need, we are fortunate to have created 7 positions for mental health and interventionist staff in the last 5 years alone. In the last 17 years, we increased from 6 to 11 social workers, from 3 psychologists to 5, and from 13 to 15 grade-level counselors. In the last 7 years we have also created a Pre-Post Hospitalization Program for students who have been psychiatrically hospitalized, with a teacher and social worker attached to the program, an Alternative School program within our building with 2 teachers for credit recovery and direct instruction, and our own therapeutic day school.

Clearly, SEL has strong economic backing at SCHS, that ultimately could show returns on investment, both social-emotional and fiscal. Not only is the commitment to SEL critical for successful implementation (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2010), but Belfield et al. (2015) noted significant financial and medical benefits from SEL investments, supporting the concept of a return on investment for SCHS.

Educational context for organizational changes related to SEL and equity is important, and has been magnified by recent local, nationwide, and worldwide events. It would be negligent during a time when we are experiencing a pandemic and crying out for racial justice not to explore the impact on education and the implications for staff, students and families. In relation to the pandemic and SEL needs, CASEL states that “SEL offers a powerful means to support one another – children and adults – during this challenging time. Now, more than ever, we understand how important it is to demonstrate empathy and resilience, build relationships across distance, and call upon our collective resolve to strengthen our schools and our communities” (CASEL CARES, n.d., para. 1). Our own SCHS staff, young people and families are struggling with losses associated with the pandemic, including deaths of loved ones, decreased or no income, increased anxiety and depression, remote or e-learning, and anxiety about the future, just as is happening nationwide (Prother, 2020). One federal emergency hotline for mental health reportedly experienced a 1,000 percent increase from last year in April (Wan, 2020).

Dr. Jagers (2020) discusses in the *CASEL CARES: SEL As a Lever for Equity and Social Justice* webinar, “Consistent with our own interest in collective wellbeing, SEL itself is rooted in social justice.” (CASEL CARES, 2020, Introduction section). Dr. Jagers explains that Transformative SEL is justice-oriented, “A process whereby young people and adults build

strong, respectful and lasting relationships that facilitate co-learning to critically examine root causes of inequity, and to develop collaborative solutions that lead to personal, community, and societal wellbeing” (CASEL CARES, 2020, Forms of SEL section). Our SCHS commitment to SEL and equity is evident in accessing mental health services, reflected in the fact that the percentage of students accessing social work services disaggregated by race reflects our student demographics, as noted in Figure 5.

### Student Use of Social Work by Race & Student Enrollment by Race - 1st quarter 2019-2020

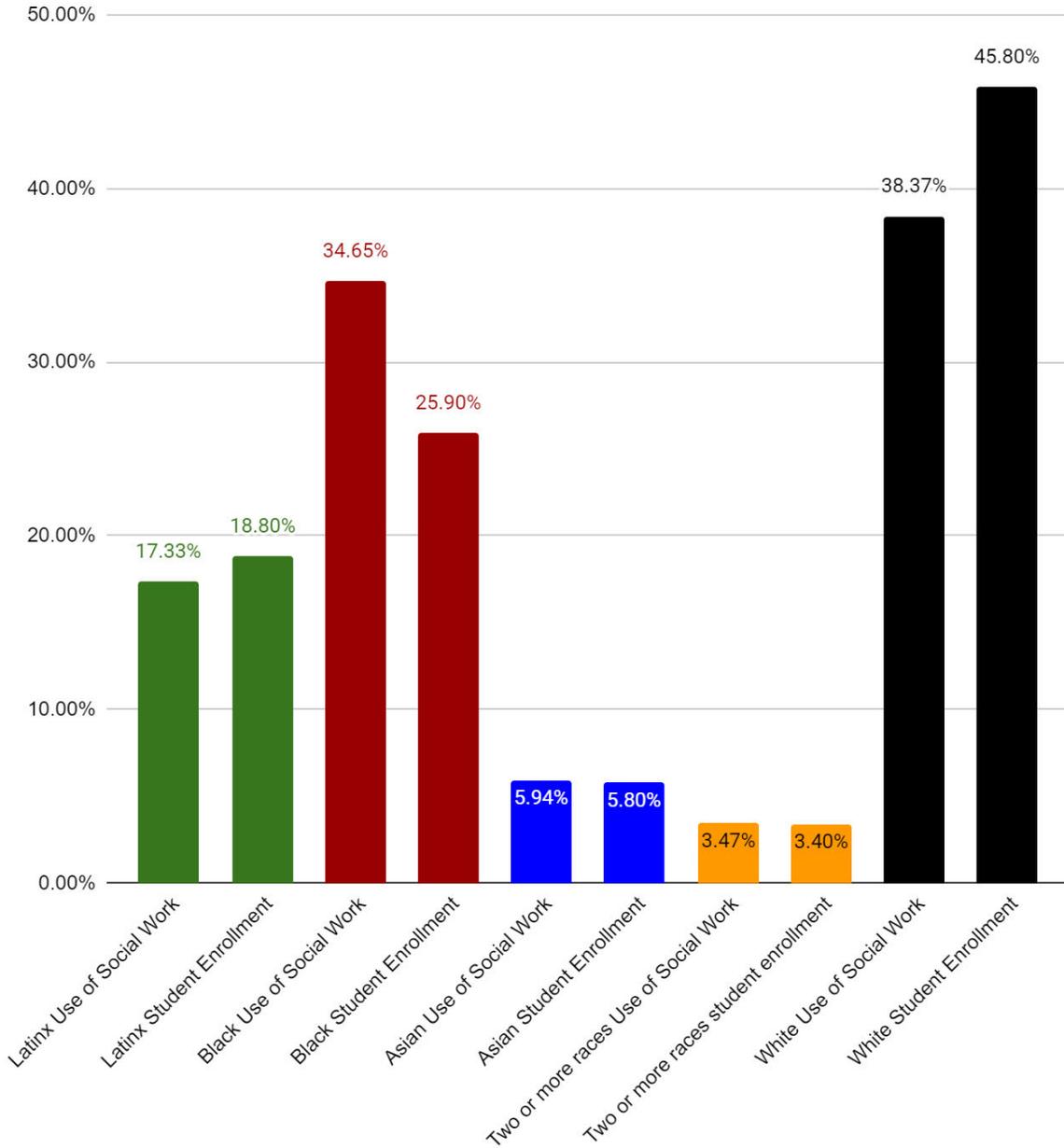


Figure 5. Student Use of Social Work by Race & Student Enrollment by Race – 1<sup>st</sup> quarter 2019-2020

To further understand the educational context as I focus on race and equity in the midst of SEL we can look at racial trauma. Dr. George James explains that racial trauma “is the physical and psychological impact, and sometimes symptoms, on people of color who have experienced racism” (Connley, 2020, para 3). This concept of racial trauma and dehumanization applies to our educational environment as we examine institutionalized racism (DiAngelo, 2018). Our current students and recent graduates see this urgency, and have been driving this forward by organizing protests and rallies in support of racial justice and Black Lives Matter.

What we know is that SEL does not happen consistently by itself, just as we have found that equity work does not happen without structural support. The “yes, and” applies here within *“Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet.”* Our Goal 1 focuses exclusively on Equity and Excellence and Goal 2 focuses on wellbeing, as seen in Figure 6. However, despite this commitment to race and equity, we measure District Goals through outcome measures that are difficult to achieve at 100% completion, which is particularly challenging with such high student needs.

**GOAL 1: Equitable and Excellent Education**

SCHS will increase each student's academic and functional trajectory to realize college/career readiness and independence. Recognizing that racism is the most devastating factor contributing to the diminished achievement of students, SCHS will strive to eliminate the predictability of academic achievement based upon race. SCHS will also strive to eliminate the predictability of academic achievement based upon family income, disabilities and status as English language learners.

- OUTCOME MEASURE: 100% college ready and/or workforce ready, and/or independent.

**GOAL 2: Student wellbeing**

SCHS will connect each student with supports to ensure that each student will experience social-emotional development and enhanced academic growth.

- OUTCOME MEASURE: 100% of students are present 95% or more per school year.
- OUTCOME MEASURE: 100% of students will participate in extracurricular activities.
- OUTCOME MEASURE: 100% of students do not receive a behavioral referral
- OUTCOME MEASURE: 100% of students will maintain or increase their GPA

*Figure 6. District Goals 1 and 2*

SCHS has made considerable gains in supporting our students of color, including instituting student summits in support of student identity and social consciousness and changes to policies and procedures due to student voice. Changing a dress code that vilified students of color and implementing transgender policy and procedures are additional examples. In consideration of Wagner et al.'s (2006) definition of context as seemingly often feeling outside our control, we are working against this mindset to change our world and our responses to the world. And yet the students who are dying while at SCHS and post high school are predominantly students of color, just as is happening in our criminal justice system. A leader of color asked, "how much can we give students the tools to be able to be self-reliant? What are the

things that they can do themselves, and to not feel overwhelmed by all the negativity of the world, because we can't make that go away?" As we look at our students who need support and also need a sense of empowerment, we must isolate race. We see the need to lift our students of color up more than we are, creating a greater network of support while also providing skills for self-sustenance.

*"Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet"*

In addition, as I use a social, economic, and political lens during this pandemic and the uprising of our world against police violence toward Black human beings, SCHS and the City of Shoreville are taking an even stronger position against racism and for race and equity, as well as SEL. And yet the question about trust remains within our community and the larger backdrop of the national dialogue about our nation's commitment to racial equity. As recently as the summer of 2020 our SCHS basketball team, with permission from the City of Shoreville, painted Black Lives Matter on the street in front of the high school, which was immediately followed by an act of hate when someone defaced it with White paint. While this should not be tolerated and many leaders took this seriously, other "well-meaning" community members asked if this was an accident, which unfortunately further minimizes symbolic acts of violence against people of color (Douglass-Horsford et al., 2019).

Reflecting on engaging in SEL in the context of the pandemic, I cannot overlook the current public health and educational context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has closed schools, killed hundreds of thousands of people, rendered many unemployed and underemployed, and left many educators anxious (Prother, 2020). Not unlike many districts and businesses across our nation, Black people are disproportionately dying from Covid-19 and are

2.5 more likely to die than White people (Evans, 2020), and “Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) officials have deemed Black people, Hispanic people, and American Indians/Alaska Natives most vulnerable to Covid-19” (Evans, 2020, para. 5).

The chaos that ensued after the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) developed guidance that allowed each district to decide their mode of instruction in the fall of 2020 (remote, hybrid or in-person), resulted in teachers and districts being compared to each other and being at the mercy of demands from their communities and parents/guardians. As happened to other districts, trust between staff, administration and parents was tested. Many teachers nationwide did not experience empathy from their districts in consideration of the impact on them when reopening schools, while many parents were clamoring for schools to attend to their children’s educational and mental health needs by opening their doors. Even for districts such as our own that decided to remain in remote learning for an extended period of time, staff who had to come into the building to do their jobs as essential workers were largely staff of color, which evoked questions of confidence in who holds the best interest of staff members when racializing the conversation.

Amid the profound impact of the pandemic on SCHS, as well as on students and families of color, along with increased national attention on acts of violence against communities of color, SCHS has sent public and internal statements of support for students and families of color. And yet there is still work to be done to build relational trust and a sense of belonging through intentional and transparent actions and communication that demonstrate our commitment to equity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

## **Culture of Commitment, Relationships, Empathy and Inconsistency**

Wagner et al. (2006) define “culture as the shared values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations and behaviors related to students and learning, teachers and teaching, instructional leadership, and the quality of relationships within and beyond the school” (p. 103), ultimately shaping the behavior of all stakeholders. While not always visible, culture at SCHS is powerful nonetheless, and reflects how work actually is done within an organization, not just as an org chart reflects how work should get done (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Within this subsection of culture, I connect the identified problems and findings within, “*Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet*”, and “*Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet.*”

*“Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet”*

A key component to trust and addressing equity through culturally responsive practices is that of relationship development. Not only has the power of relationships been found to impact implicit biases (Staats et al., 2015), but some SCHS staff have indicated that the lack of time and attention given to relationship development reduces trust for some students. Bryk and Schneider (2002) have asserted that trust not only is foundational for functioning, but is essential for organizational change. And change we must continue to do, as we look at the work we must do for SEL, equity and staff capacity building. As I dove deeper into analysis, it was clear that “*Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet*” and “*Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet*” are not separate, just as SEL and equity work cannot be separated. Within our culture, trust is impacted by the commitment to

SEL and equity by staff and leaders, manifested by our own modeling of SEL, including our inconsistencies.

### **The Why and the Why Not**

It is clear from interviewing SCHS staff members about SEL that the why, or the reason, staff are employed at an educational institution varies by individual, as does their embodiment of SEL. Some staff perceive that there are a few staff members for whom it appears that their role is simply a job that does not include an SEL focus, while for others their work is purposefully centered on students, including an SEL foundation, which helps facilitate educational and organizational change (Wagner, 2008).

SEL variance on past experiences, personalities, and why we are here is reflected in the levels of commitment to their work. The overwhelming focus on students and helping was illustrated in the below quotes from support staff, safety, leaders and teachers in relation to purpose in working with students:

- “I just love kids and . . . it's a lifetime relationship.”
- “I think it is just very simply connecting with kids. I just like kids.”
- “What we're working with is people's lives, and we care so much for the students. We see them every day for a year . . . they're a part of who you are.”
- “Our role is really to help students and staff we're trying to help students and so we are 100% in the service area of the school.”
- “Our role is service . . . there's a lot of SEL skills embedded in that but we don't highlight it. We don't talk about it. We don't elevate it in terms of being meta-cognitive about what we're actually doing.”

- “They've all, in some way, impacted how I live and breathe and exist in this world. I've been really humbled by each of those interactions.”
- “We're here for the kids first.”

I share in common this overwhelming commitment to students in my heart, including how to engage in self-care on this journey while trying to “light the way and lead with love”, as an instructor urged all of us to do.

However, as noted by one staff member, asking the question of some peers out of a sense of frustration, “Why are you here? It's hard to be here. And really be here outside of the fact that I gotta pay bills every month.” Similarly with respect to leaders, a teacher shared the concern that some people become a title and lose some of their humanity, “When you become the job title, you perpetuate [the] institution.” Bryk and Schneider (2002) would interpret this as a lack of relational trust rooted in poor personal regard. The negative impact on relational trust resulted in part from the inconsistencies of “why” staff work at our school, along with variance of the perception staff have of others’ “why”, which also connects to the inconsistent commitment to SEL.

### **Commitment to SEL**

From individual and school-wide perspectives, the commitment to SEL was strong, yet still inconsistent. As one teacher shared, there was a strong commitment to SEL reported by staff interviewed:

People do focus a lot on this [SEL]. . . . You stand up at the beginning of the year and you talk to the entire staff. And those kinds of things, those messages from administrators, those do shape the school environment.

This sentiment is supported by a leader's aim on keeping focus on SEL and creating a sense of belonging as part of SEL:

We need to keep it [SEL] front and center. I think that's the most important thing. That everybody in the school, I'm talking about the adults, need to realize that . . . if we're going to have life success for kids, behavioral success for kids, academic success for kids, just school success . . . we have to address the social emotional learning. Period. . . . belonging is not a result of a good education. It's a prerequisite for great education.

Similarly, reflecting on the relationship of SEL and equity, a leader shared their perspective of building belonging, and doing so through modeling:

That's back to this whole idea of belonging. This whole idea of believing somebody cares. We live in a society that is filled with racial stereotyping, racial microaggressions, racial demeaning, racial injustice . . . is part of our history. And it is part of what young people experience all the time in this society. So we really need to understand that the issues can be very different for somebody who really has received many messages. "I am seen in a deficit model. I am seen as inferior. I'm seen as not being up to the task. I'm seen as not being motivated. I'm seen as my parents don't care." . . . This is the kind of damage that a racist society can do. . . . We're a racist society and we live in a society of White supremacy. The models and messages are constant, that Whites have supremacy in this country, in this community, in this neighborhood, in this school, whatever it may be.

In diving deeper into SEL and equity comes the question of behavior modeling.

Goleman et al. (2013) explain the importance of modeling in that, "By acting from a place of emotional intelligence and modeling the behavior, leaders can help employees embrace an ideal vision for the group" (p. 202).

Our conditions for SEL and equity may be in place with some formal practices, procedures, and policies, such as our dress code and equity training, but in some ways our culture has not yet caught up with this commitment. Staff members reflected that students pick up on our culture, and our own incongruencies. Referencing White females wearing spaghetti straps being perceived as different from females of color wearing the same clothing, a leader of color shared, “I know that if my child wears those things the perception is very different than for her White counterparts, or White peers.” Even though we have changed procedures for things such as the dress code, several leaders and staff noted that we have not yet established the norm for everyone, recognizing that one cannot simply flip a switch and erase the historical context and changes that can be slow to make.

In consideration of the act of embedding SEL, a leader likened the act of being prepared to embody SEL to the act of engaging in differentiation in the classroom, recognizing that, “every person needs something different.” Similarly, another leader defined readiness for embedding SEL in the classroom setting as what good instruction already consists of, and also explained the importance of modeling SEL under the watchful eye of our students:

The strongest relationships for teachers, actually come out of having really good boundaries with kids, whether they are instructional boundaries [such as], here's how we do this, here's how we do this in our classroom, here's how we honor voices in our classroom . . . if you do an acknowledgement as part of your class, whatever you do. Ceremonies and things and routines you establish in your classroom communicate to kids it's a safe space and they're watching to see how you deal with things.

The intentionality of embedding SEL for individual students and whole groups was also a focus in relation to establishing high standards, lifting student voices and approaching difficult conversations. This is also reflected in a teacher's explanation of their efforts:

I work very hard to make sure that students feel like they have a space and place in my classroom; that if they have a great day that's great, if they're not having a great day that's great. And we'll work through it together, and sometimes to put your head down is a really reasonable thing to do. . . . There's a lot more overt teaching of self-regulation of freshmen. And there's still some of the seniors for sure. It just looks a little different. But I think it's always taking the moments to pause. And [ask], hey are you okay? And, what's going on right now? And what do you need?

Another emphasis was on the readiness and importance of building community as part of SEL. One leader described a concern that a classroom community is not constructed in some spaces, with some students not knowing their classmates' names even as the year progresses. Similarly, though we have made strong progress in our commitment to SEL, we still have work to do, including for acts of prevention. A support staff expressed concern that situations could be handled differently by staff members to prevent escalation, while still setting limits and expecting engagement.

Furthermore, there was recognition that it is hard to get to where we want to be with SEL in the classroom and our interactions outside of the classroom. The difference between saying we will do it and actually implementing it is highlighted by this leader's statement that:

Just embedding it in practice is really really difficult. I also see meetings that are run where we don't really practice this at all. We talk about self care and we talk about things, but we very rarely do it.

The themes of care, kindness and compassion resounded throughout these interviews, including in relation to accountability, as these teachers shared the importance of authentic relationship development. One teacher confidently asserted that it requires self-reflection by the staff member to build meaningful relationships with students. Another teacher emphasized the importance of meaningful relationships being balanced with empathy and limit-setting and explained that:

I've got kids who get upset and then they ask me to write a pass to go talk to their Dean. That just shows you that even if repercussions are happening or consequences are happening, they're happening in a way where the student knows this is coming from a place of love and support.

In consideration of how race impacts SEL and our actions, a leader provided a reminder that each person should bear in mind that human beings have social emotional needs, and that when you inject race it becomes more complicated. Another leader explained that, “One of the things that can have a real impact on a young person's social emotional situation can be their race and the racial issues that they have to navigate every day of their life.” Another leader explained that:

It's the White supremacy, the White culture, even adults of color will fall into the trap of, of having those expectations that are really from a White supremacist point of view. . . . I think it [race] impacts how people are treated, are perceived and even what's acceptable. This set of expectations is consistent with Bourdieu's construct of symbolic violence that is perpetrated by well-meaning teachers and leaders who have been (or are) “culturally responsive in the sense that they have tended to be congruent with the primary habitus of White, middle-class families” (Douglass-Horsford et al., 2019, p. 175), and are not conscious of their role in

supporting inequality. This relates to lowered expectations and being seen as bad or noncompliant.

As detailed by Gregory & Fergus (2017), racial disproportionality of discipline referrals has been an area of concern nationwide, and SCHS continues to see disproportionality in referrals. Reflecting on the origin of the racial disproportionality, a leader shared, “I think one of the reasons we have a disproportionality of referrals and discipline issues in the schools today is because of the lens with which people in authority see kids of color.” This is consistent with the concept of symbolic violence, including the conscious or unconscious use of White, middle-class behavioral expectations.

Another leader reflected on how equity impacts SEL and perceived behavior, and holding students accountable, sharing that some people think, “I don't want to be perceived as racist so I will ignore behavior . . . And I think that cuts across races in a certain way because I think we're steeped in Whiteness. So I think you see that across adults.” In terms of lowered expectations and accountability specifically around SEL and race, one leader of color shared:

The expectations I feel are higher than what a White staff person would have [for] a student of color. I don't think they always want it to be that way, but I do believe it is that way. I literally just had a conversation less than a week ago with a White male teacher in this building, who was working with me on the jobs program. And I said, if he, the student does not show up as I have instructed him to in the email, you will not have a job. And the White male teacher said, I think you're being really harsh. I think that it's hard, he's got a sister that he has to take care of . . . and it's really hard for him. And I said you are an enabler - you are a White male enabler. And you have low expectations for these kids. They can get to a game on time, they can get to a party on time, they can get to us. .

. . So I understand how to give chances, giving a chance is different than having low expectations and being an enabler. . . . Now, the White male teacher I was talking to was very grateful that I said what I said. And he could hear me because he knew I wasn't being mean about it, I wasn't mean spirited about it. . . . [He said] I never really thought about it that way. And, you know, he came back and said, "thanks again." He said, "you know, I appreciated that conversation."

While this conversation illustrates the work we are engaged in around understanding how race shapes our expectations, it also speaks to how members of our school community can utilize personal regard to build a culture grounded in trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

In further exploring the impact of race on SEL, a leader discussed how perceptions of behavior can impact academics:

The White kid comes in and says hey, I had whatever last night and I didn't get my homework done. Can I kind of have an extra day to get it in? The kid of color comes in and says it, almost says the exact same words. . . There are studies to show this - one is seen as being intense and sincere and wanting to get it made up, and the other is seen as making excuses.

Another leader explained that cultural responsiveness is something we need to continue to work on, given the different expectations we have for White students versus students of color when they are exhibiting the same behavior, which is supported by research including Gregory and Fergus (2017). The concern expressed by another staff member that there is more problem-solving, connections to resources and compassion for White students is a significant one. In addition, a leader described the difference in behavioral expectations and communication about students of color in comparison to White students:

What's the desired outcome for when a kid of color is not in a good space? Is it for them to get back into a good space for them or is it to show up in a tolerable way? White kids and non-White kids can demonstrate the same exact behavior, but we're way more forgiving of the White student. We soften the headline in the news. You can commit the same crime, do the same thing, but we will treat people of color so much worse for doing the same thing. . . . I just think White kids get the benefit of the doubt more. There's more processing, there's more soothing and calming, and even the way we talk to them and about them is so different. I think we're way more patient, way more flexible, way more into problem-solving, and we think about the possibilities of their families getting involved in any particular situation. We are so accommodating or we prepare so much differently for the way we deal with White families and Black families, and we make assumptions about how they're going to show up. . . . I think the expectations of kids of color is to just get in line to be quiet, settle down.

A teacher further explained discrepant expectations for students based on race by emphasizing the importance of the relationship with students, cultural awareness, and not conflating culture with defiance or disrespect. This teacher explained that:

If a White kid does the same thing you overlook that - I just feel like Black kids or kids of color are hypervisible when it comes to acting out behaviors and I think a lot of times it is a matter of misperception.

Additional staff members reported experiences that are consistent with these misperceptions and expectations based on race, and one support staff returned to empathy as part of SEL in the midst of this; "I try to tell my colleagues, you don't know what he or she went through the night before." One support staff described how direct they are with their colleagues, telling them,

“stop labeling them [students of color] as they walk in the door”, instead urging staff to “assist them, guide them, give them an opportunity to prove to you differently.” When isolating the race of Black or Brown students and staff who perceive them as disrespectful, a support staff noted that students will intentionally “do something to get in trouble, and then they get [sent out of class] to the social worker or the dean's office.”

Staff engagement in relation to SEL and race applies to the act of checking in with themselves as well. A teacher shared that sometimes teachers pause and sometimes they do not, neglecting to circle “back to dig deeper [when] you know something's going on [and] they don't normally behave this way.”

Explaining expectations and behavior differences based on race, a support staff of color shared their own experiences for why they hold higher expectations for Black students. This helps us understand each person’s individual story, as this person explained how they were raised:

My parents told me, you represent a race, you represent people. It seems like we're just telling the kids, just do as well as you can. . . . Well, my parents always said, 100% is not going to be good enough. Because they're going to give the job to somebody else who's doing 80%, so you're going to have to do more. I know as a Black person who sees Black students who get embarrassed by the emotional explosion of Black students . . . And I've witnessed teachers in both positions of being afraid of emotions [by] Black students, and also being upset by [the] emotions of Black students.

### **Barriers to SEL Commitment**

While many staff members seem to be engaged in work around both SEL and equity, this is in stark contrast to some leaders and staff who seem to be divorced from this responsibility.

As a teacher explained, “There are the administrators who are in their offices [and] are in meetings all day, who I think are truly . . . distanced from the reality of what [student] experiences are.” In a similar way, a teacher shared how they see the exoneration of responsibility in other teachers, “I think there are inherent problems in that dynamic, because you can watch a teacher, walk right on by a situation that's escalating in the hallway, because they don't think that that's their responsibility.” The fact that our system supports this is not acceptable. As one teacher said, “that doesn't absolve the responsibility to challenge and disrupt that.” This is not unlike the commitment by many staff members to support the designation of Year of the Black Male, while others may see it as, “That’s not my job.” One teacher shared that a few teachers took the messaging around the Year of the Black Male to mean, “I don't have to teach more, that means that I don't have to discipline. . . . Year of the Black Male became the year of people not knowing what to do or not caring to know what to do.”

Liability and fear are additional barriers to SEL, explained by a support staff member that staff are afraid for their jobs if they take the wrong step. They need skills to help students navigate social pressures or they tend to back off, “They're not sure, or they're afraid. How much can they pry into this particular student or situation or even staff.” Or as another support staff explained, “They're scared of what [the] outcome may be [if] it was misunderstood . . . scared of . . . their supervisor.” A leader further explained it as:

Fear of the unknown and fear of how to be here if they're going to do something wrong. . . . How much are they on the hook? So, perhaps fear is driving a lot . . . if you see some kids about to fight, for example or you see a kid having a breakdown. Do you walk by? Where do you engage and how do you engage? It all makes a difference. It can change the entire situation at a moment's time.

Fear appears to take many shapes for staff members, and almost always is not reflected upon in order to use fear as a guide, and therefore fear becomes an impediment to engaging students in emotional learning.

Another form of resistance to SEL commitment appears to come in the form of the perception that it removes accountability. One staff member explained that, “The programs that seemed to have been put in place to address social and emotional learning have actually become almost a pacifier.” Similarly, a teacher shared their perspective that we are failing our Black and Brown students by lowering expectations, including, “by saying that we don't want to tell them to go to class. That to me is the opposite of SEL.” Staff are clearly wrestling with the question as to whether we are perpetuating racism by lowering expectations or removing accountability.

### **Building Relationships**

Trust developed allows staff to build relationships, to learn from their leaders, and to change. As one SCHS leader explained about the relationships developed with her staff:

There's a level of trust with my staff; I think that they don't question that I'm steering them wrong. And so they're more receptive and open to listening to the guidance and the counseling that I provide. I do it for staff outside of my department. Because I'm constantly talking about conflict, helping people navigate conflict, and figuring out how best to talk to others.

The relationship with our institution is another area to examine. Permission from, and trust in, the institution to focus on students' needs as they arise exists and yet needs to be further developed. The pressure to focus on curriculum progression for class, or that the class should be a certain way exists, and can be all-consuming. One teacher reported that even when being attuned to student needs first and adjusting class accordingly, the pressure remains to focus on

the progression of curriculum and there is a fear of repercussions. Despite this fact their focus remains on “human beings are first . . . you have to be prepared to mess up, and apologize and try again.”

And yet the focus on the importance of building trusting relationships persists, as a support staff explained that if, “they don't have that trust with you, they're not going to say much.” A leader expressed confidence that, “we are going to have some individuals in this school who are 100% consistent in how they build trust and how they communicate that with students.” Furthermore, as one teacher explained, these trusting relationships are about the present and the future, consistent with Wagner’s (2008) 21st century skills. The teacher explained the ways the relationship will help students through graduation and beyond:

You're building a really strong relationship with these students but the next step is using that relationship to support them . . . Showing them you are capable of going to your classes . . . you're capable of doing these things. Using that relationship, it's not just about building a relationship and supporting them and creating an environment where they feel safe. It's about using that to help them be successful [and] knowing that they can do this by themselves . . . helping them create that mindset.

Relational trust takes time to build, as Bryk and Schneider have noted (2002). One teacher stated, “If you want to make the connection, then you have to spend the time and the effort to make that connection . . . it needs to start with the adult.” This is also reflected by a support staff member statement, “If I'm just focusing on students, they build trust with you . . . you just gotta take the time.”

Many staff start connections with a positive approach, while others start with a negative approach or don't say anything at all, highlighted by a safety staff member who shared, “It seems

like sometimes the question is asked really quick; Are you okay? Instead of saying, How are you doing?" Considering this deficit approach, a leader explained:

I think so many staff members walk past kids in this school and never say hi to them. I don't understand why you're here. . . . We're all busy, we got places to go and we got stuff going on and, you know, the last thing I want to do is deal with a situation as I'm going from point A to point B, but you got to take some time and just recognize people.

Taking time and acting with intentionality in building relationships helps create trust in others, can facilitate the development of lifelong skills, and can create a sense of belonging.

### **Building Relationships and Belonging**

Research by Slaten et al. (2015) posits that the sense of belonging that relationships create is a part of the commitment to SEL. In the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide Social and Emotional Learning (n.d.), CASEL further explains that a sense of belonging and emotional safety in the classroom environment is foundational for students to focus on learning. Being responsive to student needs helps build this sense of belonging, as described by an SCHS leader:

If they care, if they believe that child belongs, if they are intent on building trust with that child, and if they understand [what] that child's social emotional issues are - [they] are a prerequisite for doing the best they can.

### **Building Relationships - Finding our Humanity Through Seeing and Being Seen**

Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) suggest building trusting relationships through acts that embody social emotional learning, specifically empathetic, culturally responsive and affirming interactions. The importance of this work applies to both staff-to-student and staff-to-staff. In relation to staff members and trust at SCHS, feeling acknowledged and valued for our work and relationship development happens at SCHS, but not consistently.

The importance of feeling valued and being seen for work we do was highlighted by an SCHS leader regarding non-instructional staff:

I don't think they get enough credit . . . for the work that they do to have relationships with kids in non-structured spaces and times, which I think is definitely undervalued. Especially the safety staff who are often the first to have to intervene in tough situations or deal with kids who present [with] a lot of challenges or aggression and the work that they do to calm kids down - the work they do to have relationships that are preventative. I think we put a lot of emphasis on teacher-student relationships, but there are so many other people who are equally, if not more impactful.

The experience of being validated is an element of relational trust for Bryk and Schneider (2002), just as it is for many of our SCHS staff members. This can come in the form of checking in with students and recognizing them. As one teacher explained,

Building relationships is an important piece of . . . welcoming people, greeting people when they come into your classroom, being cognizant of how your students show up every day, paying attention to energy levels . . . being explicit with kids about what you know - what your observations are about. . . [their] energy level. They might be coming into the class or just individually with a student and [I] ask, hey are you feeling alright today? You look like you might be a little - maybe a little sick? I think that's just an important piece of showing kids that you care and you're cognizant of how they show up every day. I think a lot of kids just don't get the impression that somebody is really watching you.

Seeing students' humanity as an act of acknowledgement was further described as building a culture for learning:

I think they're just really important . . . just being able to say, I see you - I acknowledge you. And sometimes . . . it's an opportunity to be able to, just by saying good morning . . . talk to a kid and get to know who they are. But it also is building a culture . . . in a class where people check in with each other and people matter. And I think that's an important thing to learn, especially in a society where you know we're increasingly becoming more isolated from one another . . . being intentional about trying to . . . connect to kids, but also connect kids to each other. You know, it's just part of building a better learning environment, and getting us back in touch with who we are innately, which is . . . social creatures.

Humanizing is even more important for students of color (Reyes, 2016), which can be modeled by staff members. An SCHS teacher captured the importance of their job being first to connect to human beings, enabling the shift in engagement with students and learning that happens.

Describing modeling through the act of humanization as, “Seeing that they're human. Because everyone's gonna have something fall apart . . . whether it's in their job or in their personal life.”

Unfortunately, our inconsistencies come to the surface when considering our commitment to race and students not feeling seen, showing that “we are not there yet.” A support staff member explained that in their experience some teachers are:

Very committed to . . . excellence, to treat the kids as part of their family. I know they are with the kids and how the kids love them. . . . On the other hand, I've heard, because I talked to parents all the time, we still have teachers that are racist. And they told us that there are teachers that put a lot of effort on White students' high achieving. And they don't put any effort on Latinos . . . and have lower expectations. . . for some reason, there's still people that show that they dislike people of color. . . . There are people that

definitely will never say hello back to you [in our building]. Even if you look at their eyes and they will just turn away.

Furthering this is the perspective that not all races are seen at SCHS. A support staff shared that about the pain of not feeling seen and honored as a person of color, noting that despite work on behalf of groups of color, “We don't feel acknowledged. What do you feel like? People feel invisible.” Staff desire to be seen and validated (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), including when feeling treated as part of an institution instead of as a human. A teacher described this as, “how we see our functions. And some people function as . . . I'm a cog in the machine. If you continue to function as a cog in the machine.” The teacher noted that this is different from, “Seeing the humanity [in others] and people seeing humanity in yourself.”

Building relationships that both acknowledge individuals and make people feel seen can be done through acts of humility and sincere listening, as described in this next section.

### **Building Relationships with Humility and Listening**

In relation to building relationships and SEL, a teacher described the importance of listening to others as an act of humility:

If I had to put it in one word it would probably be humility. And I think humility is a skill we don't teach anymore. . . . I think humility is something that we need to teach our kids . . . to be curious about others, and not just be about ourselves. . . . I think that's a component that's missing in connecting, because in order to connect you have to ask about someone else.

Another teacher explained that it is with humility that you can acknowledge what you know and don't know, showing the respect that Yeager (2017) posited helps adolescents grow their own SEL skills:

It's being humble enough to know that we need to learn stuff, and to be open. . . . I'm not just here to deliver content. . . . Be humble enough . . . to hear that and be willing to learn - it is a big deal. And they [students] feel that too. It's such huge respect towards them.

In support of listening, a support staff member explained that the act of listening is their very first step with students, “First I . . . just listen. I don't have all the answers but I will find someone that does have the answers.”

While sharing that some leaders do listen and build trusting relationships, the inconsistency arose again when a leader stated that, “We have to be listeners too. And our leaders don't always listen.” The act of modeling what we say we are committed to applies to leaders and all staff for listening, as well as building relationships through showing care.

### **Building Relationships with Kindness, Care and Compassion**

The importance of building relationships with care, kindness and compassion extends to staff as well as students. A leader described committing to being mindful about interactions with care and concern for each other, including as an act of prevention:

A lot of the things I resolve in conflict [are] around misunderstandings, hurt feelings, expectations that weren't clearly spelled out, and off the cuff kinds of remarks or actions. . . . And you know if we would treat each other with just a little bit more kindness, a little bit more caring. Just a little bit more time . . . it is a time consuming thing. And that's commitment.

Caring does happen at SCHS as suggested by one leader, emphasizing the importance of care and consistency in building trust as pivotal in helping students learn.

While many staff see caring occur regardless of role, a staff member noted that sometimes, “employees who are unionized, who are not high on the pay scale, are much more

nurturing and much more real and closer to what students look for and need and require.” This is an example of not being there yet as a whole school with respect to modeling care for students and each other in order to catalyze healthy development and learning, as supported by the work of Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018).

### **Building Relationships and Restorative Practices**

An important element of building relationships is the knowledge that we make missteps and we can repair them, regardless of our age or role (Gregory et al., 2016). This is exemplified at SCHS by a leader who described engaging in restorative practices with staff members, which includes taking responsibility for causing harm to another person and working to repair that harm. Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) underscore the importance of engaging in restorative practices: “Relationships and trust are supported through restorative practices, including universal interventions such as daily classroom meetings, community-building circles, or conflict resolution strategies” (p. vi), which results in fewer suspensions and discipline referrals, as well as improved relationships and achievement.

Utilizing problem-solving skills in the form of restorative practices is critical, and is developed based on learning how to be attuned to others, fostering positive relationships.

### **Empathy that Builds Relationships and Attunement**

In order to be responsive and help people engage in change, Goleman et al. (2013) describe attunement as “alignment with the kind of resonance that moves people emotionally as well as intellectually” (p. 208). This resonance takes hold with what an SCHS leader described as, “an empathetic, caring, nurturing way.” Developing empathy was described as a central act by SCHS leaders, support staff, safety staff and teachers:

- Specifically in relation to race:

- “As a White guy . . . I can't understand it as deeply as it must be felt by the person of color who experiences it every minute of every day.”
- “Because there's some ethnic and cultural things that other people just don't understand.”
- “But in the end you have to be empathic”
- Seeking to understand each person’s story:
  - “you don't know what the students go through or even the staff on a daily basis . . . that could be a crisis one time [that] we won't know until the breaking point”
  - “Maybe this child came three months ago from Mexico, he's missing his grandparents, his siblings, [or] his cousin.”

While many staff noted the work toward empathy and seeking to understand, demonstrating empathy through care and concern was reported to be inconsistent at SCHS.

### **Culture as Impacted by Mission and Vision**

We are a school highly committed to race and equity, and we are shaped by our SCHS Mission, Vision and Equity Statement. Our Mission, Vision and Board of Education Statement on Equity support the assertion that our commitment to equity is strong, as the focus on equity is explicitly woven throughout, as seen in Figure 8.

#### **Mission Statement**

Embracing its diversity, SCHS dedicates itself to educating all students to their fullest potential.

#### **Board of Education Statement on Equity**

SCHS is committed to equity because excellence for all students requires equity. This commitment will be achieved by:

- Providing all students with access to resources, opportunities, supports and interventions to ensure that they maximize their abilities and potential.
- Giving students what they need, not necessarily equally, to meet their learning and wellbeing requirements.
- Assuring that all SCHS staff members, with deliberate effort, continue to examine and eliminate institutional beliefs, policies, practices, and teaching that perpetuate racial disparities in achievement.
- Preparing all students to succeed in a multicultural, global society by teaching the contributions and viewpoints of all people in culturally relevant curricula.
- Raising the achievement of all students while eliminating the racial predictability of achievement.

### **Vision Statement**

Shoreville Community High School (SCHS) commits itself to excellence and equity in education. Each student will achieve at a high level of academic performance, function effectively in the community, and make contributions to the broader society.

To accomplish this goal, SCHS commits itself to involving school personnel, community members, students, and their families as partners in an ongoing process of educational improvement. We will construct an environment of excellence and responsibility which fosters intellectual, social, physical, emotional, and ethical growth for all. Students, faculty and staff must all continue to learn and grow.

SCHS will design curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment methods to motivate and prepare all students to become skilled and knowledgeable...

- Problem solvers/critical thinkers
- Self-directed learners
- Effective communicators
- Collaborative workers
- Quality producers
- Technology users
- Community contributors

SCHS will guide all students in planning for their progress both during and

after high school. All students will complete an educational program that meets the requirements for admission to an Illinois public college or university. While students' choices will vary, we will prepare students to pursue both a career direction and continued education.

All members of the SCHS community will work together to realize this vision in an atmosphere of mutual respect where the contributions of all are valued.

*Figure 7. Mission Statement, Board of Education Statement on Equity and Vision Statement*

However, it is also apparent that we are not there yet. Staff reports via interviews indicate that many White staff remain silent, which DiAngelo (Family Action Network, 2020), notes as being essentially complicit with racism. Consistent with DiAngelo's (Family Action Network, 2020) assertion that as White people, "We like diversity at doses we can consume", some White SCHS staff have referenced that we have essentially done enough work on race and equity.

As a school we value SEL and wellbeing in relation to students and their learning, with leaders who have named belonging and wellbeing as central tenets of our work. Many staff consistently seek out ways to better engage with students, build relationships, identify interventions, and consult with peers and other staff, embracing our model of "consult, consult, consult" to address crises.

However, SEL is not a consistently shared behavior, as SEL is not infused, nor explicitly incorporated into syllabus, curriculum, vision or mission. In addition, staff wellbeing at times is reported to be compromised as staff report feeling overwhelmed with student needs, too many initiatives, and too many things to do. What we know from our staff and from Yang et al. (2018) and Collie et al. (2015) is that the threat to the wellbeing of teachers from high levels of stress and burnout is real. Wagner's (2008) questions around a "theory of action" and the concern

about having too many priorities as a district have reminded me to look at our proverbial plates. We would do well to remember that SEL is the plate, not that it is one more thing on people's plates, because without good social emotional functioning our students have major barriers to learning. In addition, SEL relates directly to our district's current priorities around equity and excellence.

*“Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet”*

The good news is that many students experience a sense of safety, support and respect at SCHS and that they feel people are friendly and help them, as seen in the below figure. Staff also report feeling that they and students have many trusted connections. However, as described throughout this sub-section, trust is impacted by the inconsistent development of relationships and demonstration of empathy per staff-reported experiences.

**5Essentials Survey 2018-2019 highlights**

UChicago Impact, LLC. (n.d.):

- Students feel safe and respected within our SCHS family
- 94% of our Students Report Feeling Safe and Comfortable With Teachers
- 92% of our Students Report that Teachers Treat Students with Respect
- 92% of our Students Report that People at SCHS are Friendly

**Freshman Advisory Study Hall (FASH) Survey 2018-2019 highlights:**

- 92% of freshman felt their counselor was supportive
- 88% of freshman felt their counselor was helpful

**Senior Graduation Survey Class of 2019 highlights - Making Each Connection Count:**

- 94.2% of graduating seniors reported strongly agreeing, agreeing, or somewhat agreeing that meetings with counselors were helpful:
  - 76.6% reported that they agree/strongly agree that meetings with their counselors were helpful
  - 17.6% reported that they somewhat agree that meetings with their counselors were helpful

*Figure 8. 5Essentials, FASH and Senior Graduation Survey*

A support staff shared the belief that “This is a safe space for these kids. And they do feel like someone cares about them.” Consistent with the idea that our efforts with interventions and relationships do make a difference, a paraprofessional stated about getting mental health supports for students:

I feel like they [staff] need a lot of encouragement about how important it is, because I have to tell you the referrals I've done for social work, even my most troubled ones, it's made a huge, huge difference for them. I am surprised that every kid I've had that's been troubled has turned around.

However, it is important to note that not all students and staff experience this level of respect and safety, just as some staff have reported that they also do not, resulting in inconsistencies, or a trust gap. A leader explained the impact of trust in relation to disappointment when leaders do not address concerns about staff that are expressed by students. This specifically includes allowing a staff to be strong in an area of instruction, but not connect with students with care and concern:

Why do we keep allowing this to happen? We hear kids over and over and over again say things about the same people - Because there's just some who don't have the ability to do the work; you could be great in your content, but you lack people skills or social skills or empathy or compassion.

According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), a cornerstone of relational trust is integrity, which includes evidence of moral-ethical actions within daily exchanges. Inconsistency in maintaining confidentiality, thus lacking integrity, can lead to a lack of relational trust, which a support staff explained as:

They come to you and you tell someone else. . . . Staff are not going to trust you either. And then therefore they're gonna shut down, like the kids to them. There's leaders here that I don't trust. And I would never tell them anything. And that's bad.

Bryk and Schneider's (2002) relational trust cannot be developed if there is an absence of integrity, including when confidence is not held.

### **Conditions When Resources Feel Scarce**

The conditions of SCHS as defined by Wagner et al. (2006) for the 4 Cs will be examined by focusing on the “external architecture surrounding student learning, the tangible arrangements of time, space, and resources” (p. 101), including explicit expectations for roles, responsibilities and policies. Within this subsection of conditions, I interlace the identified problems, findings,, “*Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet*”, and “*Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet.*”

*“Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet.”*

The first condition as described by Wagner et al. (2006) I will examine is that of staff structure. At SCHS our support of SEL in relation to staffing has been augmented by the district's decision to create additional positions in the last 6 years: Student Services Intervention Coordinator, Department Chair for Student Services, 2 additional Psychologists, 1 additional Counselor, and 2 additional Social Workers. In addition, structural expectations have been implemented in relation to SEL. SCHS staff are now aware of and reference “Acknowledge, Care, Tell” as a way to address individual student crisis (noted in the figure below), and professional development time has been established to communicate explicit expectations for staff responsibilities to address individual student crises.

When we look at our structures, we have established many areas for support, including: staff professional development, intentional climate messaging, student and family events, schoolwide post high school planning events, and reporting vehicles for concerns such as LGBTQ+ identity and Title IX, as seen in Figure 9.

### **NEW AND EXISTING STRUCTURES AS OF 2019:**

#### **Professional Development**

This includes our new and sustained **prevention and early intervention** efforts through **professional development**, including for incoming staff members:

1. **MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports)**, focusing on equity and prevention efforts with all students and the use of strategies to help students develop social-emotionally and academically
2. **Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain** by Zaretta Hammond - school-wide learning about culturally responsive and SEL practices for each staff member to apply to their role as educators, from secretaries to teachers to administrators
3. All Staff, training videos, team and department meetings, and lunch sessions for: **Suicide Prevention, Child Abuse, Inappropriate Touch, Substance Use, LGBTQ+ youth** (including student-made staff Professional Development video), **Bullying and Harassment, and Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault, CPR/AED and First Aid Training, and Overnight Trip Planning**

**Acknowledge, Care, Tell (ACT) – Ongoing** messaging to empower ALL members of our school community to ACT:

*As part of Shoreville Township High School's commitment to wellbeing, we have adopted ACT® which means "Acknowledge, Care, Tell." We believe that each of us plays a role in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of our students and encourage every member of our school community to follow the three steps of ACT to help maintain a safe, positive learning environment:*

**Acknowledge** warning signs and anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, worried or frightened. Recognize something is wrong and take it seriously.

**Care** for students/your friends; listen and tell them how much you care about them.

**Tell** a trusted adult if you are worried or have concerns about your

wellbeing or the wellbeing of others. SCHS students who need support may go to the Social Work Office in E123 or the Deans' Office in H109 at any time.

**Incident Reporting Form – NEW online form as of 2019-2020** the Incident Reporting Form is a new vehicle to report Bullying, Harassment, Intimidation, Concerning or Threatening Behavior, Hate Incidents, Retaliation, Sexual Harassment, Unwanted or Inappropriate Touch, and Sexual Assault.

**LGBTQ+ Support highlights: Student Advocacy Form** for school records change for first name, middle name, gender, gender identity (pronouns, including he/him/his, she/her/hers, they/them/their), Gender Support Plans, and NEW option in 2020-2021 for All Gender Freshman PE Course

Increased school-wide opportunities and participation in **Sexual Assault Awareness, Suicide Prevention Awareness, Bullying/Harassment Awareness, and Mental Health Awareness Month** activities, workshops, and resources. This includes workshops, advocacy, community resources, performances, support from Deans and SCHS mental health professionals, as well as **development of the SHAPE (Sexual Harassment and Assault Prevention Education)** student club to support Title IX

**PBIS (Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports)**

**Infusing Our Focus on Equity & Social Emotional and Academic Learning Every Day**



3Rs: Respect for Self, Respect for Others, Respect for Community



#wildkitway



Acknowledge, Care, Tell



Be Kind, Be Human, Be Both

**Family evening programming** expanded with events throughout the year during both the 2018-2019, including **Family Talk Series**:

- a. **Executive Functioning (NEW - Fall Semester)**
- b. **Mental Health (Fall Semester)**
- c. **College Planning Events throughout Fall Semester**
- d. **Navigating Course Request Process** for all families (Fall Semester)
- e. **Bullying and Harassment (NEW – Fall Semester)**
- f. **Career Options Night** (SCHS in collaboration with City and Community organizations – Spring Semester)
- g. **Sexual Assault/Sexual Harassment (NEW - Spring semester)**
- h. **Substance Use** (Spring Semester)
- i. **LGBTQ+ youth** support and transition at SCHS (summer)

**Wildkit Futures Day**, 4,300 staff and students worked together to support the social-emotional development and post-high school planning at all grade levels

10. Counselor Programming throughout the year to support **ICAPs (Individualized Career and Academic Plans) highlights**:

- a. **26% increase for our Black males for Class of 2019 who applied to a 4 year college** (from 45 to 57)
- b. **80% of our Black students from the Class of 2019** planned to attend college
- c. **74% of our Latinx students from the Class of 2019** planned to attend college
- d. FASH cohort activities and interviews - **NEW 2018-2019**
- e. **Senior Transition Workshops** (developed by student request) - **NEW 2018-2019**
  - 1) What If I Don't Go to College?
  - 2) I Got Accepted to College - Now What?
  - 3) Post-High School Life Skills
  - 4) Off-to-College Checklist
  - 5) Growing Up Ain't Easy - Money Matters & Living Away from Home
- f. Additional Post High School Planning:
  - i. **Senior Fall Survey Team Follow Up** - counselor teaming to review students with no plans, community college bound, or work plans

ii. **Senior Transition Meetings - NEW 2018-2019**

Held individual counselor meetings + senior team to support 106 students who reported having no plan, are community college bound, have work plans, or need assistance

iii. **Partnership with Mayor's Employer Advisory Council** to support post high school plans

iv. **Collaboration with the local community college and the local youth employment organization to follow up with graduated seniors - NEW 2018-2019** Met individually with each organization to discuss and review list of seniors to help ensure full implementation of their plans after graduation

*Figure 9. New and Existing Structures*

Within the SCHS conditions in relation to time, comprehensive professional development, and hiring, we again see the theme of strong SEL, and yet we have miles to go before we can rest; *“Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet.”* Time is a common struggle within the school environment (Wagner et al., 2006), and SCHS is no exception. We struggle with the lack of time for professional development to learn how to instruct, embed, and model SEL; similarly leaders do not yet fully integrate the message of “Acknowledge, Care, Tell” nor SEL within curriculum, initiatives, and instruction, as well as within office spaces. And despite additional mental health staff, the increasing number and complexity of student crises acts as a barrier to focusing more fully on prevention within the classroom and beyond.

We also have not yet provided comprehensive SEL professional development and messaging, and as a result staff have noted that we are missing elements necessary for SEL implementation. For instance, we do not have common understanding, working definitions as we have done for race, or language that connects the dots. In considering planning and use of

language, a leader stated, “I feel like you do need to have some type of explicit kind of commitment” beyond “when we talk about wellbeing and we have our principal at the beginning of the year tell the staff that this year we're focusing on wellbeing.” While naming may be needed, there are challenges involved in the explicit rolling out of naming and intentional language, as it can feel inauthentic or like “checkboxes”, as some staff noted.

Considering the progress we have made to convey that we all own SEL, one perspective from a leader was about messaging the shared responsibility, saying that “Everybody has a role. I think we have really been getting better at infusing that into the culture of the school.” Sharing this conviction about shared responsibility, another leader recognized how far we have yet to go in embodying the fact that SEL is not only the superintendent’s, principal’s or student services department’s responsibility. Moreover, multiple teachers reinforced the message of the progress we have made and the need for more professional development for common language, practices, approaches, and behavior, including myriad staff members needing to show the priority of SEL and equity work and embedding it throughout the school. This includes, teachers’ insights:

- The right people who are open minded enough to find the perfect program to do PD and train and teach and reteach and train. We're all speaking a common language and we all have the same practices and approaches and behavior.
- We've talked about social emotional learning . . . in really large spaces. . . . And that to me just seems like an efficient [way] . . . it doesn't strike me as, now this is a priority and this is why we're breaking it down on a smaller level . . . Really sitting down to have conversations maybe in a smaller space about . . . what that looks like in each of our classes. You know, I would imagine there's some artistry to social emotional learning and the practice of it. And assuming that's the case, an opportunity to talk about how that

artistry exists within people's classroom would probably be helpful with people making sense out of what it looks like and how they can implement it in their class . . . and more ways that broaden what they might already be doing.

- Well, I would say if we are intentional about SEL to be woven into the work that everybody does that. I would argue that we have a responsibility. If we're doing a textbook selection, can we weave in an SEL consciousness? If we're teaching an instructional strategy, can we weave in an SEL consciousness? I think what we need to do is we need to be intentional. . . . How about if each department chair, each time there's a meeting coming up has to ask the question; how am I going to lift up the importance of social emotional learning in today's department meeting, regardless of the topic? Because it is so ever present, ever important. . . . We have to literally be conscious of lifting it up every time. . . . All of a sudden it's [SEL] part of every, every meeting, every discussion, every PD activity, because we require [it] of ourselves.
- Regarding how to include a variety of staff in planning SEL professional development, “I think about . . . how support staff and safety staff for those who . . . have the social emotional learning in their hands.”
- We need to have a clear framework that people can follow and I think we need to do the same. We need to embed that in our induction programs. . . . Similar to what we did with equity work where we do Beyond Diversity [training] for every staff member . . . Think about this for a minute. This is so important. We're going to have all the leaders do it. We have all the leaders do it with the school board and the superintendent, and all the associate principals, all the department chairs, [and] a few teacher leaders.

- Beyond frameworks, the question of ensuring that leaders are engaging in SEL: “ I think that, just like we practice and we do diversity [training] . . . . I think that we need to be modeling some leadership qualities and skills so that we can become better leaders.”

In considering the desire to focus on professional development that integrates SEL and race, a support staff member explained the importance of recently teaching a staff member the difference between home and school for some students. This staff member explained that a student was not trying to appear disrespectful or disengaged in class when not looking at the teacher, because “In Latin America, we are taught not to look our parents in the eye, because it's disrespectful.” This reflects the importance of social emotional learning for the perspective taking and culturally responsive teaching to attend to culture and individual student behavior.

As we further consider professional development, some staff are asking for more focus on the strengths of staff, looking for an assets-based approach like we are expected to do with students. A teacher reflected on the fact that staff do not hear from panels of students about what is working about teachers; “Where is the panel on the kids that are doing well here?” No matter what, we must consider our own humanity and work to support each other by seeing what we are doing right. This is supported by a leader who shared that, “I do feel like a lot of people are doing things in their classrooms that they would not name as SEL - that they wouldn't recognize the connection to, but really are intended to support students' development in these areas.” We must ask ourselves the question that Drago-Severson et al. (2013) lead with; how do we persistently celebrate what is going well as part of our resources and structures, which ultimately shapes our culture?

Other structures that we have worked on but have not yet arrived at a solution for are time to connect with students and staff and to reexamine the structure of the school day.

Connected to the issue of time, or not enough of it, is the structural resource component of the expansive number of initiatives and the desire to reduce initiatives. A leader stated that if we are going to focus on social emotional learning further, we must reduce our number of initiatives:

I feel that we do a great job in this district, but we have way too many initiatives. . . . I don't think that anybody does a whole bunch of stuff really well, all the way through. . . . So if we know we feel like we're drinking from a firehose instead of narrowing it down and drinking out of a teacup, we could finish the tea and never go to drink all the water out of the firehose.

In looking at shaking things up structurally, a teacher suggested considering a different kind of school day that allows for time for staff to talk to each other, thus reducing the sense of isolation for staff in such a large building. This would shift the complacency of perpetuating Whiteness by SCHS, as one teacher explained; “human beings work really hard to maintain [the] institution . . . the rooted nature of tradition and conventionality and the Whiteness that's inherent in that we want these things to continue.”

While staff have reported feeling glad for the many structural supports for students, however the needs of students, and therefore for staff, remain complex and time consuming. A support staff member said, “someone said to me the other day the school could not have any more supports. It's literally not possible.” A teacher explained:

I do think we have really great support systems in place. . . . A lot of students I do think feel supported. And they do feel like they have somebody that you go talk to, whether it is a dean, safety staff, the PHP. . . the social worker. I do think that we do a good job of helping students feel like they're connected.

And yet staff expressed that they are looking for more to manage the intensity of needs. One teacher explained:

In my daily practices currently, I do work with a lot of students who have social, emotional needs. . . . Two years ago . . . we did work with some of the social workers. I know that some select teachers were picked to do a semester-long collaboration with social workers to come in and co-teach lessons once a week. . . . And we worked really hard on it and I did think that the students got a lot out of it. So, in that experience I do feel like in the moment they were able to talk through things and kind of self-reflect on themselves [and] what are the decisions [they] make immediately. [Asking] how do I connect with this concept? What are my opinions on that? And then talking through those things with each other.

Similarly, another teacher noted the appreciation for collaborating on co-teaching lessons, which changed the environment of the classroom, prompting the teacher to ask for more ways to collaborate with social workers for co-teaching or in supporting struggling students.

In terms of managing the intensity of the emotional demands on staff with structures for support, themes of isolation, self-doubt, and the desire to consult further were expressed by teachers through connecting more with social workers and resources in the school. Examples include:

- “Setting up teams of social workers and teachers.”
- Helping staff remember what resources are available, because “I think . . . the people sometimes get so overwhelmed, then they forget to even look at these things that are being provided for us.”
- Gaining perspective to manage emotional stressors, despite the lack of time that exists:

- “A way for us sometimes to check in with each other, and just talk about . . . different things that have happened in our classroom.”
- “I feel like there's the perspective piece, and then there's also the connecting because you're not alone.”
- “They come to my office and they cry. . . . How can you keep . . . your cool? And you can do it maybe, but when the person leaves you.”

Professional development for strategic school-wide implementation, structures for supporting staff members, and hiring practices are necessary steps in the road toward the *To-Be* (Oberle et al., 2016). As yet a final example of efforts put forth and work remaining to be done, our out-facing structures exist on web pages about crisis intervention, but there are none explicitly about SEL, and that is my own to in part be accountable for (Wagner et al., 2006). While I work to help leaders make a shift toward SEL, I could begin to incorporate this little by little, rather than waiting for leaders and staff to be in agreement. Perhaps I have been influenced by a culture that has been reticent to name SEL? And in the end, as one teacher said in reference to our sense of urgency to help students, “How do you make that in a shorter period of time, because the more time you waste? . . . How do you get the buy-in; it's a massive problem.”

*“Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet”*

While traditionally deemed as more relevant to culture, there are elements of developing trust that relate to conditions. SCHS staff have expressed the desire for support with professional development and with the deficit of time, yet we have expected staff to develop their SEL practices and this impacts trust and conveys a lack of empathy. We need to do more than simply

say that SEL is what you need to do. How can staff implement what we have not created structures for to establish readiness?

While many staff feel ready to demonstrate SEL and recognize efforts thus far for professional development, others do not feel ready and still others are concerned about fellow staff members' capacity to engage in SEL. This is supported by support staff, safety staff, leaders and instructional staff. One support staff noted,

My readiness is there. I do have a lot of concerns, my co-workers. I don't feel they know enough in order to assist students, and/or staff. First, staff isn't more educated, not saying that you guys haven't done a great job but if they're not more educated and they don't take it all in. They probably need to be trained and stay current with different things going on with society. . . . We don't know enough so therefore, we're not going to act on it.

Another support staff shared that “we just need to be educated a little bit more . . . on defining the problems, analyzing the situations. And just reflecting.” The desire to learn is present for some, including for a support staff who shared that their readiness is from life experience and the intentionality of learning, “And also my eagerness to keep learning. . . . I want to know exactly that I'm reflecting, you know, all kinds of positive vibes and messages from my body language for the way that I look at people. I want that to be intentional.” A teacher shared the conviction that staff can and need to be taught, even those for whom SEL skills might not seem innate, saying, “I know some very socially awkward people that are phenomenal teachers, and still have made relationships with kids.”

Furthermore, some staff believe we have put forth good effort, but we have more to do to address professional development needs, beyond individual staff characteristics. An example comes from a leader:

I really believe there's been a concerted effort here to train and support and prepare staff to teach and embed, and respond to social emotional issues, no question about it. I would still say that a lot of the preparedness is very much reliant on the individual, who they are and what life experiences they have brought. Just personality characteristics. I don't know that everybody feels as prepared or equipped in this area as we would hope. I really don't fault the training. I think the training has been good. As you know, there's been things incorporated for a large staff, lots of breakout groups and smaller groups, and there's been . . . departmental work. I know in some cases, there's been individual work.

This emphasizes the critical work that has already been done with staff to develop trust and social emotional awareness, and the fact that there is a need for more professional development at SCHS for all levels of staff. Similarly, in the next section I delineate the theme of having a strong commitment to SEL and equity at SCHS, and the acknowledgement that there is more to be done.

### **Competencies that Support Social Emotional Learning for Staff and Students**

The competencies of SCHS are many, defined by Wagner et al. (2006) for the 4 Cs as “the repertoire of skills and knowledge that influences student learning” (p. 99) with impacts to the entire system. Exploring the educational context for change includes understanding the needs, strengths, and trends of individual students, staff and families (Drago-Severson et al., 2013). At SCHS this includes wide-reaching efforts to build staff and leadership capacity through what Drago-Severson et al. (2013) refer to as ways of knowing through acts of reflection and creating holding environments, blending our focus on SEL and race and equity in technical and adaptive ways. This also includes intentional changes to applying the lenses of SEL and race and equity within instruction, curriculum, offices, interventions, meetings, leadership,

hallways, virtual spaces, hiring practices, professional development, support for staff, procedures, and policies. Ultimately I will explore competencies of all stakeholders and the belief that “competencies are most effectively built when professional development is focused, job-embedded, continuous, constructed and collaborative” (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 99). Within this subsection of competencies, I bring together the identified problems and findings; “*Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet*”, and “*Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet.*”

*“Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet”*

The act of developing competencies is a very different concept than simply providing opportunities for professional development (Wagner et al., 2006). SCHS is working toward focused professional development, but it is not yet consistent or job-embedded to integrate SEL within instruction and practices, relate SEL to equity, and generalize SEL skill development. To address competencies that are inherently rooted in SEL and applicable to equity work, I will highlight information from focus groups and interviews, and from publicly available staff and student information. These competencies apply to embedding SEL and equity within our instruction and actions, embedding SEL and equity within curriculum and programming, the impact of committing to social emotional competencies as seen in the outcomes of our District Wellbeing goal and corresponding objectives, and finally, assessing our own social emotional competencies and needs as employees of the district in order to ultimately help students learn.

### **Embedding SEL and Equity within Instruction and Actions**

If I am to look at how others embed SEL and equity in instruction and actions, I must also be vulnerable as I work to build trust as a leader and model SEL (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). I must own my part of this story by naming our progress and our gaps that I have not addressed. This includes fully embracing Lubelfeld and Polyak's (2017) unlearning leader who sees vulnerability as a strength and not a weakness, and that at times I am inconsistent in my own demonstration of social emotional competencies and have to repair harm done to another staff member because of the way I communicated or what I said. This is supported by a leader's statement that this is personal and vulnerable work if we are going to be learning and embedding SEL in our actions.

In terms of competencies, mental health and non-mental health staff know what they need to do when a student is in crisis, and mental health staff know how to address student crises (such as if a student may be at risk of self harm or harming others). In addition, some staff use frameworks that have elements of social emotional learning, such as Project Based Learning, Democratic Classroom and Courageous Conversations. However, some reports from staff indicate that some staff have not built the capacity to embed SEL into their actions and instruction in order to support students through preventing crises, building coping skills, and developing problem-solving skills. The interviews and focus groups also revealed the perspective that leadership struggles to provide direction or guidance on blending SEL with instruction.

The importance of how we interact is as important as what we do, and many of our staff expressed that they are ready to model and embed SEL through their own levels of awareness. As noted in the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL (n.d.), children have always readily imitated what we do even if they do not seem to listen to adults. One teacher reflected on the importance of what and how we engage, particularly with students, describing how to embed SEL by

modeling when having a bad day, “I may be off my game or you may see me get emotional . . . so I just kind of try to name it, and then live it with the kids.” In addition, a leader shared the desire to model SEL with kindness:

I try to be aware of what I'm thinking [and] what am I feeling . . . why I'm thinking and feeling a certain way. When I am having a particular reaction I will name it for the person that I'm with. . . . And so I try to be kind and caring and empathetic, just as a human being. But I realized that's a skill that I have acquired. I used to think it was just my personality. . . . I really try to be kind and model the kind of behaviors that I want students to have, and for staff to have.

Another leader expressed readiness to use the skill of coach teachers for SEL, focusing on raising self-awareness of how they might be perceived by other staff and by students, and how to bring their own insights into lesson planning. While some staff could see the act of leaders embedding SEL in their actions, some noted concerns that this was not demonstrated consistently by leaders and that it would be appreciated to empower staff to engage that way with colleagues and students.

In terms of embedding SEL in interactions while blending support and accountability, one leader noted that this is hard to do and truly is a skill to be expected and developed. A concern also arose with regard to permissiveness, as one teacher articulated that, “we are very attentive to the needs of the kids . . . to a certain degree, there is a permissiveness that only adds to a culture for the students . . . of avoidance.”

Within the classroom conversation about SEL, several teachers expressed that good instruction should have SEL. Another teacher noted the supports like Instructional Coaches pushing into the classroom to coach teachers in addressing student behaviors, “as opposed to

removing the student from the classroom right away because there are things that happened where you, you know, the student needs to leave the room.” Consistent with this position, many staff believe that instructional practices need more attention, particularly when considering SEL.

As one teacher explained, we are focused on so many other things beyond instruction:

I think we need to examine our instructional practices. I think we've neglected our instructional practices for many years and I believe that solid instruction is the base of the pyramid. That handles so many things and handles emotional wellbeing; it handles physical wellbeing. It handles discipline, it handles class management style. I just think that the instructional practices have gone away. The building [of] relationships and connecting with students is the whole game . . . and for discipline for classroom management.

This is an important perspective to consider, and one that points to the critical importance of blending instruction with respectful engagement, culturally responsive practices, and attuning to student needs, never to the exclusion of content delivery and instruction (Hammond, 2015).

When considering embedding SEL within the classroom, respect, multiple perspectives and safe spaces came up as themes. One leader articulated this as:

You have to be intentional about why you're doing things [and] you have to be transparent. We're doing this because we want to honor all voices in this classroom. We're doing this because we want to look at multiple perspectives. We do this because frankly there's trauma that happens. And we want to create a safe space for students and adults in this space. And when we do go off the rails, we need to . . . have restorative conversations.

This becomes more complicated when considering how to embed SEL and equity, as described by leaders and staff interviewed. The individual attunement is critical and can be a challenge, as a leader described:

There is no one size fits all model which is so important in my adaptability to be able to be responsive to different people's needs. . . . I have confidence that I can learn it, and I may be even [able] to teach it. But I have less confidence that I can be consistent in the modeling.

When exploring SEL and race, themes of different expectations for students and staff of color arose repeatedly, noting the expectation of resilience and grit and the Whiteness within these expectations. One staff member asked how resilience is defined and about the weight of it on students of color:

Why do our kids of color have to do these things? Think this way, present this way, exist this way, in order for their humanity to be seen? You know, there's no amount of grit that you want to build into . . . we can talk about resilience as an SEL thing, but . . . what's resiliency? Nothing around us is changing. Right, she's telling me my whole life is going to be about surviving. Because that's what school has been telling me . . . when do I get to live?

Embedding SEL and being culturally responsive within the classroom does not come without the presence of our own biases, surrounded by a long history of White middle-class normed expectations within the classroom (Douglass-Horsford et al., 2019).

While we are working toward self-awareness and being fearless about focusing on equity and social emotional and academic learning, we are also working on how to continue to infuse SEL and Equity into all actions in all spaces, including through building competencies via

professional development. Through interviews it was apparent that there are themes of a desire for continuous professional development opportunities that connect the dots, while avoiding the single approach to SEL, and for flexibility to allow for different staff learning needs and different scenarios, all of which is consistent with Wagner et al.'s (2006) research. Additional themes from interviews and focus groups included asking that breakout groups be with staff who have similar roles, that we encourage staff to engage in new learning opportunities, and that we focus on how to teach advocacy, asking for help, and using the help. Moreover, in centering our students in order to improve our practices, a teacher suggested that:

We lose track of who the real experts are, which are the kids. . . . If we're here for the kids, and we want to make it work for the kids, then we have to listen to them and have them tell us what actually works and what doesn't. . . . And who makes it work, and then . . . visit those classrooms or film the classrooms.

A leader noted that despite training, the culture of the organization allows for inconsistencies, and that makes it even more critical that the professional development make sense to staff and be continuous. Similarly, one teacher offered the perspective that connecting the dots by understanding how kids are suffering is insightful, sharing:

I don't have any clinical knowledge about what is going on with kids. I don't know what anxiety looks like for children. I know what it looks like for me and I think it's a normal thing, so I don't know when people are riddled with problems what that looks like. . . .

Are kids being offered drugs? Are they going to the parties?

In consideration of embedding SEL and equity within the curriculum, many similar themes arose, turning back to the question of professional development, as described in the next subsection.

## **Embedding SEL and Equity within Curriculum**

In terms of incorporating SEL within the curriculum, the Signs of Suicide program has been newly implemented with all freshman within the PE instructional curriculum, including suicide risk screeners and mental health follow-up. The results of the Signs of Suicide 2018-2019 implementation indicated a very positive impact:

- 960 freshman participated
- 220 (23%) were identified as needing follow-up
- 149 (16%) students were ultimately referred for services as a result of the program
  - 81 of 149 (54%) students who were referred for services were recommended for a new service, reflecting new identification of student needs

Additional curriculum related to SEL was incorporated into varied classroom settings, including all grade levels in PE and Wellness classes, to address physical wellbeing, sexual assault awareness, anxiety, depression, substance use, and suicide prevention, including the Clothesline Project and Building Healthy Relationships with a community partner, executive functioning lessons within Freshman Advisory Study Hall, and emotional regulation lessons and progress monitoring in PE.

However, the need to further develop a variety of curriculum that embeds SEL is apparent from the interviews' emerging themes, including providing professional development that addresses what role SEL plays in the performance of each content area, and helping staff understand the relevance. Similarly, helping teachers understand what we are preparing students for in terms of learning and post high school college and career

plans will be helpful as well. Wagner's (2008) 21st century skills, in which SEL is inherent, are in alignment with Zins' and Elias' (2007) findings that these "soft skills" are what employers are looking for and can impact career readiness and success in the work environment. We are better positioned now more than ever to explicitly state the role of SEL within the development of soft skills with our focus on post high school planning while honoring the variety of successful paths through our work with Portrait of a Graduate and College and Career Readiness Indicators.

### **Competencies as measured by District Goal 2 Wellbeing**

What we know from our work with District Goal 2 of Wellbeing is that the outcome measures reflect culture, specific services and competencies as demonstrated by our staff. The first of these looks at 100% of students being present at 95% or more per school year, as seen in Figure 9, as we had focused on building a sense of belonging through demonstration of SEL within the classroom and throughout the school. The average daily attendance rate was 92% and our focus on Black males reflected positive changes in their attendance at 87%. Our overall 4-year graduation rate was strong at 92% compared to the state at 86%, while the SCHS 5-year graduation rate was notable at 94% compared to the state at 88%. These reflections of attendance and belonging were supported by staff competency efforts, with 887 steps taken to address truancy.

## **CONNECTEDNESS TO SCHOOL – OUTCOME MEASURE ATTENDANCE**

OUTCOME MEASURE: 100% of students are present 95% or more per school year.

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- **Our 2018-2019 average daily attendance rate was 92%**, all the while building relationships and providing myriad supports inside and outside of the classroom.

In 2015 we intentionally shifted our truancy philosophy, redefining truancy as a behavior to be understood and as individual students who need understanding and multidisciplinary support. As a school, our message of belonging is congruent with our actions of holding onto our students, strengthening relationships and creating interventions to support them through periods of truancy and challenges, ultimately working toward graduation and post high school plans.

Our teachers, truancy officer, student support team members, case managers, and administrators work together to address attendance concerns. This begins with building relationships and is followed by a variety of steps, including early-identification systems, truancy/attendance meetings and plans, mental health services, academic plans, attendance contracts, community resources, and home visits.

Our message continues to be that **our students belong at SCHS**, as together we:

1. Work on **interventions based on our tiered systems of support**, focusing on **creating a sense of belonging** to help our students re-engage fully in school rather than dropping out, or even returning to SCHS after withdrawing or dropping out:
  - a. Our **SCHS 2019 Chronic Truancy Rate was 12.4%**, while the State 2019 Chronic Truancy Rate was 13.4%
  - b. Chronic Truancy is defined by the State of Illinois as students who miss 5% of school days without a valid excuse
  - c. 887 steps taken for truancy interventions
  - d. 45 Black males engaged in truancy interventions
2. Support and sustain students through challenges and trauma, helping students move to graduation and beyond:
  - a. **Our four-year graduation rate is 92% (Class of 2019)**, while the State four-year graduation rate is 86%.
  - b. Our **five-year graduation rate is 94% (Class of 2018)**, while the State five-year graduation rate is 88%.
3. Develop our **students' sense of belonging** and communicate that **attending class is**

**critically important every day:**

- a. Our SCHS 2019 Average Daily Attendance Rate was 92%, while the State 2019 Average Daily Attendance Rate was 94%. This reflects excused student absences related to varied concerns, including doctor's appointments, funerals, medical services, and social emotional needs.
- b. Progress in relation to our focus on Black males and attendance:
  - i. **87% of our freshman Black males had fewer than 9 days of absences**

*Figure 10. Outcome Measure Attendance*

In terms of staff competencies, as stated earlier in this report, school staff who demonstrate the capacity to focus on students' interests and motivations create a greater sense of connectedness (Yang et al., 2018; Rivers et al., 2013). Staff competencies focused on extracurricular engagement in turn lead to the development of academic, social and leadership skills for students, all of which positively impact attendance (Shaffer, 2019). At SCHS, Figure 10 highlights the outcomes with 73% of student participation in one or more extracurriculars with additional outcomes of strong GPAs of 3.72 and 3.69 for 2 semesters and an increase in Black male participation.

**CONNECTEDNESS TO SCHOOL**  
**OUTCOME MEASURE EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

OUTCOME MEASURE: 100% of students will participate in extracurricular activities.

- **73% of our students participated in one or more extracurricular activities** (clubs, fine arts and/or sports) in 2018-2019
- **80% of our students from the Class of 2019 participated in one or more extracurricular activities** during their junior or senior years of high school
- **Increase from 57% to 66% Black Male participation in extracurricular activities**
- **Student-athletes earned 3.72 GPA 1<sup>st</sup> semester, and 3.69 GPA 2<sup>nd</sup> semester**

We sustain our commitment to work together to engage all students in and at school as we:

1. Identify new ways to personalize connections for students to SCHS' extracurricular activities
2. Maintain high expectations for academic performance
3. Connect students to new schoolwide and individualized supports through early identification
4. Identify traditional and non-traditional extracurricular programming
5. Define current and new opportunities that serve as unofficial activities and create belonging and connectedness
6. Assist with re-engagement in academics and school life through the arts, sports, and various clubs and activities

*Figure 11. Outcome Measure Extracurricular Activities*

Figure 11 reflects the efforts of staff to engage students of all races, as well as students who may be in higher risk categories, including students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs), students enrolled in ESL classes (English as a Second Language), and students who are eligible for Free and Reduced lunch Programs (FRP). The percent of participation by race still reflects disproportionality in comparison to our school demographic, with 83% of White students engaging in extracurricular activities and 61% of Black students participating in extracurricular

activities. This accentuates the fact that we have come a long way, but we are not there yet in terms of equity and engagement that supports social emotional and academic development.

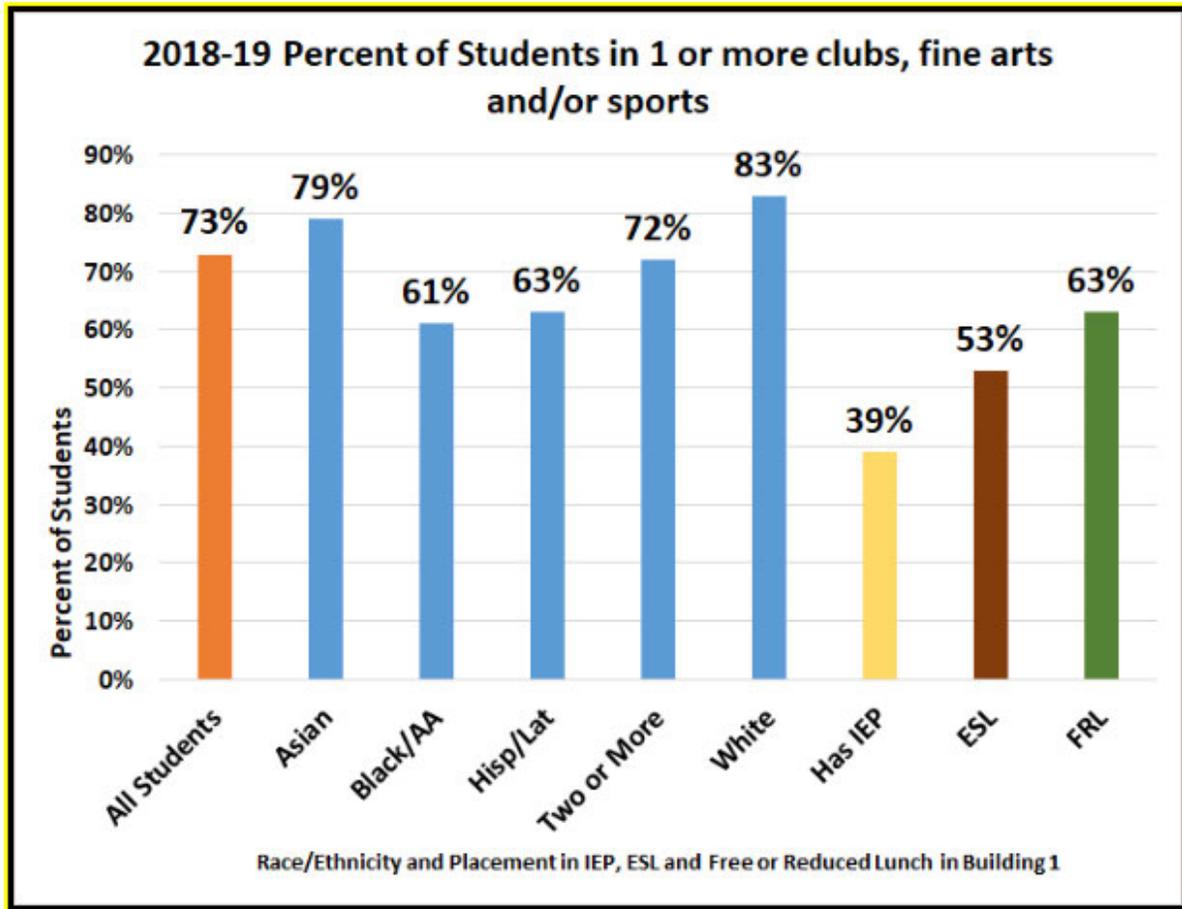


Figure 12. One or more sports, clubs or extracurricular activities

As we look at staff and student social emotional competencies, Figure 12 articulates a variety of structures and services in place to help students build social emotional skills to prevent behavior that results in a behavior referral and to prevent recidivism. This includes staff teaming, alternatives to suspension, restorative practices, and a variety of mental health interventions. These efforts resulted in 83% of students earning zero or one behavior referral, a

strong outcome measure that does not yet measure up to the district outcome measure of 100% of students earning no behavior referral.

### **SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL WELLNESS – OUTCOME MEASURE BEHAVIOR**

OUTCOME MEASURE: 100% of students do not receive a behavioral referral

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➤ **81% of all students did not earn a behavior referral in 2018-2019**

Behavior referrals are defined by the District as referrals by a staff member to the Dean to address conduct concerns that may or may not result in interventions or consequences.

Additional data regarding behavior referrals:

- Our larger student population made progress toward this outcome measure for behavior referrals (not suspensions), while we respond to a small number of students who demonstrate higher needs
- **83% of our students earned one or zero behavior referrals**
- 81% of all students did not earn a behavior referral
- **1% of ALL SCHS students earned over 38% of ALL behavior referrals**
- 7% of our students (50 students) who earned behavior referrals account for 38% of the total behavior referrals
- 59% of all Black males did not earn a behavior referral

Teaming is key as we work to take prevention and intervention steps, working to build upon student strengths, interests and decision-making skills:

1. Examining our engagement in classrooms, hallways, study centers, offices, and cafeterias, and curriculum across grade levels to establish awareness and behavioral expectations
2. Come together for problem-solving with Safety personnel, Teachers, Dean, Social Worker, Psychologist, Counselor, Truancy Officer, Academic Intervention Team Advisor and administrators
3. Develop our restorative practices framework, including restorative conversations and problem-solving
4. Provide mental health individual and group interventions, and engage students in alternative suspension programs (Student Empowerment Program, Students Understanding Impact to address substance use, the Alliance, Peer Conference, individual Social Work Referrals, and Dean interventions)

*Figure 13. Outcome Measure Behavior*

While these efforts resulted in notable percentages of students with no behavior referrals, there is more work yet to be done to address the disproportionality by race, as seen in Figures 13 and 14. With 67% of Black students and 89% for White students with no behavior referrals, and 69% of Black Students and 91% for White students with zero or one behavior referral, it is clear that we must address our own competencies and those of students and that we are not there yet in terms of race and equity.

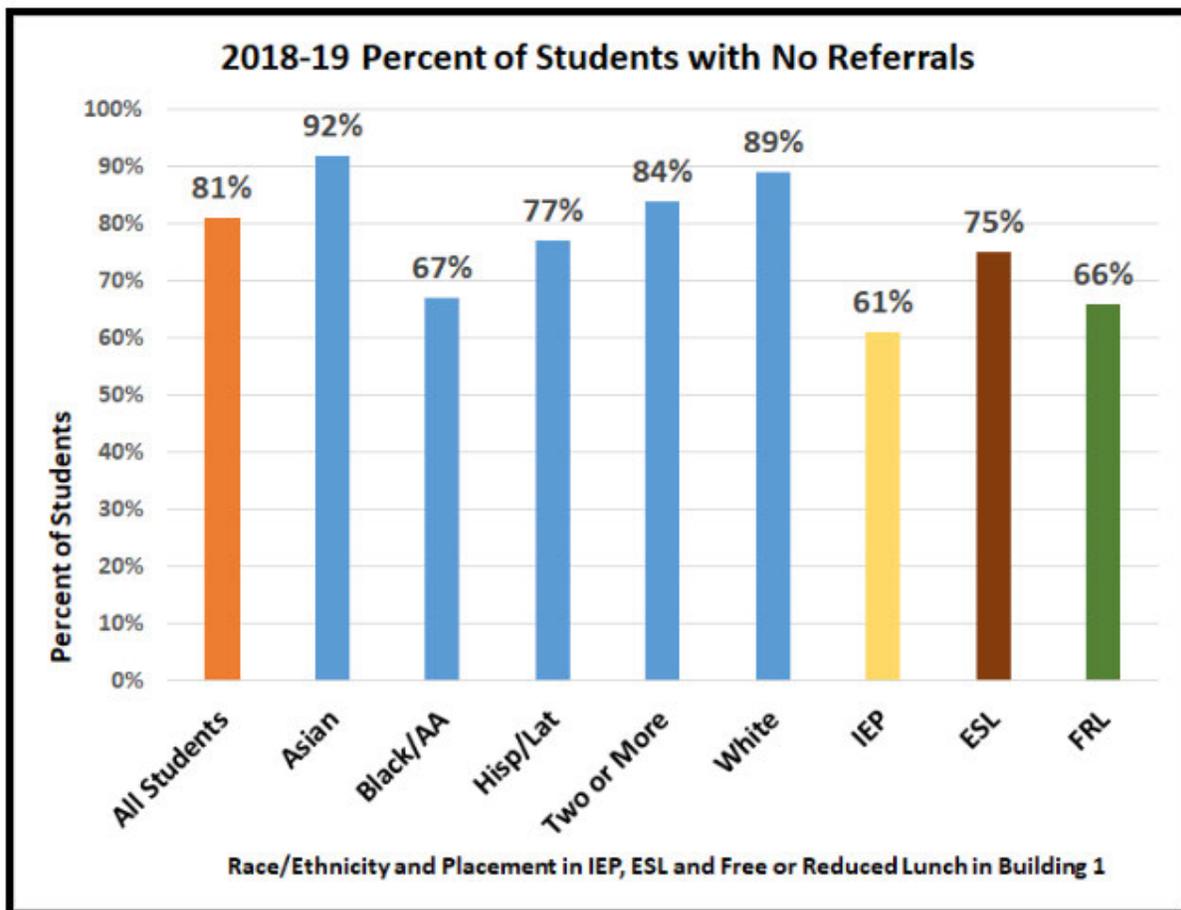


Figure 14. Percent of Students with No Discipline Referrals

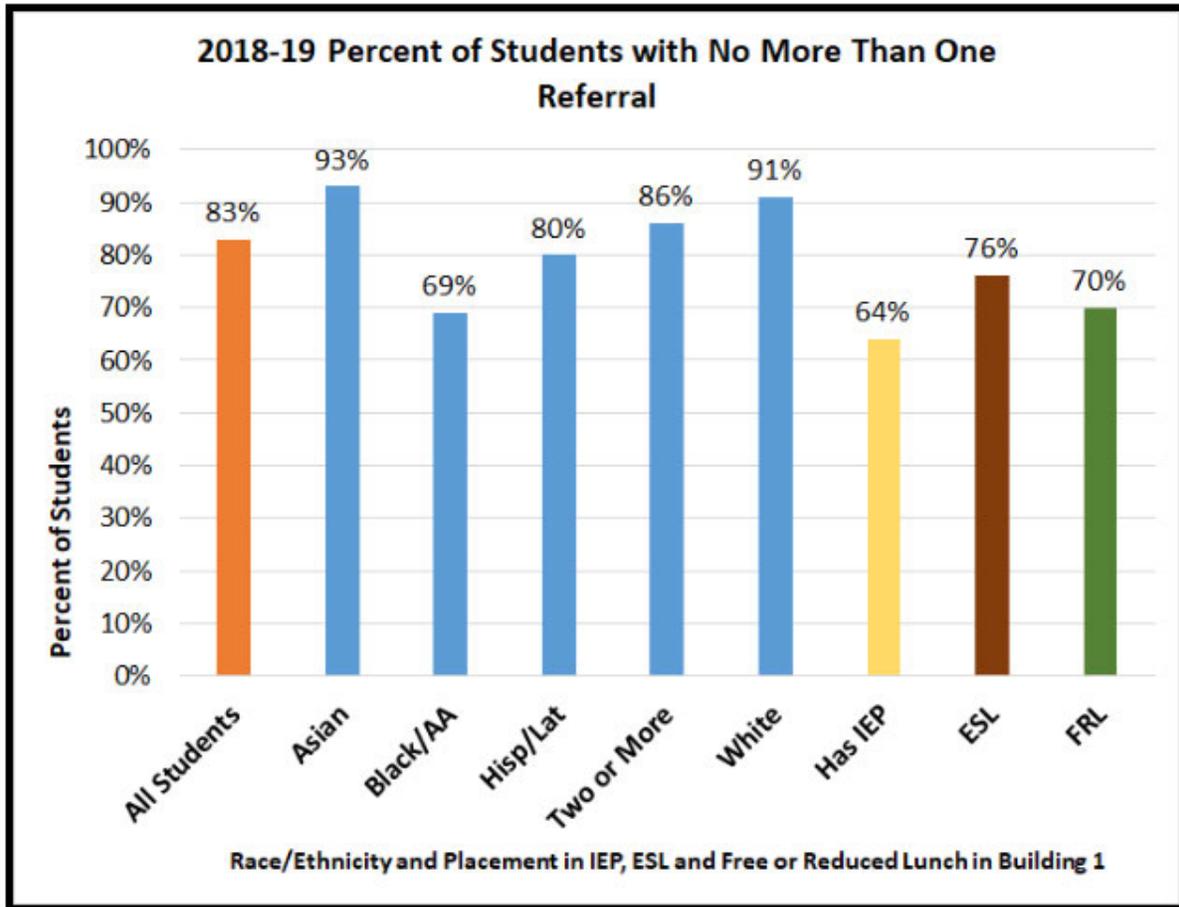


Figure 15. Percent with no more than one referral

Staff demonstrating the capacity to help students build academic growth is seen in Figure 15 via notable accomplishments that support the GPA outcome measure. These accomplishments include 972 students (28% of the student body) who took 2,342 AP exams, as well as 7 Semifinalists and 39 Commended Students in the National Merit Scholarship Program for the Class of 2019. The fact that 93% of our freshman Black males earned 12 credits or more during freshman year, which keeps them on track for graduation and post high school planning, is positive as we center race and support our Goal 1 around Equity and Excellence. However, the fact that 56% of our Black males earned a cumulative unweighted GPA of 2.5+ means that

we have substantial remaining work to build our own and student competencies around social emotional and academic learning that will help eradicate the racial disproportionality that continues to exist in all of our outcome measures.

### **ENHANCED ACADEMIC GROWTH – OUTCOME ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

OUTCOME MEASURE: 100% of students will maintain or increase their GPA

- 75% of the Class of 2019 met at least two of the college-ready standards (GPA, Attendance, English/Language Arts, and Mathematics), as analyzed in the annual achievement report

This demonstrates a combination of mastery of learning and perseverance in the face of varied challenges. This is also reflected in varied facets of academic performance and relevance to post high school career and college plans.

As we work with all students we are continuing to look at ways to unite students, teachers, case managers, grade level team members, administrators, Safety, and families to strengthen current supports, including: classroom interventions, social emotional learning-based, relationship development, Student Support Team (SST) identification of risk factors, individualized Student Success Plans (SSPs), A.M. support, Wildkit Academy, Study Centers, tutor referral system, program-specific supports (STAE, AVID), and Executive Functioning groups for students in FASH, before/after school and at Wildkit Academy.

Additional data related to academic performance:

- **93% of our freshman Black males earned 12 credits or more during freshman year**, keeping them on track for graduation and post high school planning
- **56% of our Black males earned a cumulative unweighted GPA of 2.5+**
- 972 students (28% of the student body) took 2,342 AP exams
- 7 Semifinalists and 39 Commended Students in the National Merit Scholarship Program for the Class of 2019

*Figure 16. Outcome Measure Academic Performance*

### **Competencies that Support Social Emotional Learning for Staff**

This subsection focuses on staff social emotional competencies while considering the research question of *How does the embedding of SEL practices vary within instructional, non-*

*instructional, and leadership roles? and the related research questions of To what extent does staff capacity building for SEL practices incorporate support for the social emotional competence of both staff and students? and How does race relate to social emotional learning practices for staff and students?*

As a district we recognize that social emotional competencies can be grown in adults and modeled by staff when their wellbeing is also intact. This is one of the reasons we have done a variety of Staff Appreciation Week activities, have provided brief massage appointments for staff, have done wellbeing raffles at all staff meetings, and encourage the use of the Meditation room and Wellness facility. We must be intentional with our steps because, as part of our human condition we have an obligation to answer the question that one teacher posited about the need for change within our system and ourselves, “how do we survive versus live?”

Developing the capacity of mindfulness that can be applied to ourselves and in helping students means recognizing the importance of the work of our staff; constantly contributing to wellbeing with every action and statement. As we focus on every student, we must particularly focus on the fact that:

The silence of the marginalized may be an uncovered desire for an encounter to inspire; it may be a need to engage, but kept still for fear of rejection; it may be wanting to understand, but not knowing how to use the tools that the teacher has provided. The voice of the marginalized seeks someone, or something, to magnify the message(s) they have to tell the world. (Reyes, 2016, p. 342)

Acting with and on behalf of students, including students who have been marginalized, requires us to be mindful of our own social emotional skills and what we need to develop. Staff interviews reflected both strengths and needs in coping and problem-solving skills.

Reflecting on readiness to engage in our own social emotional work and seeing this as a journey, some staff have realized that they are more ready now to demonstrate SEL: “When I started here I think I felt more prepared than I actually was.” Another staff emphasized learning the act of perspective-taking or empathy as part of their readiness journey;

I realized after being here . . . that it's not always with the same heavy hand that you could deal with everybody. . . . I think now I'm more prepared. So understand that I've got to deal with as many backgrounds, as many starting points, as many origin stories. . . . I always think about the fact that the kids don't know my story.

This point of blending empathy and reflection based on life experiences was underscored by teachers who noted that they took the time and space they created to reflect on their experiences. Yet another teacher shared that the district has a choice to build;

A culture where folks have the space to think about their own agency and being open to . . . stepping into spaces where you can build that empathy. I think that's the choice that folks have to make. And there also has to be space for that.

The need for acts of intentional reflection for accurate self-assessment also relates to a culture where conflict can occur, and building staff competency to build skills. As one leader stated:

When you are conflict averse you cannot manage others and you cannot manage others' conflict, because you can't handle it yourself. That creates a trickle down effect because it weakens the structure that you're trying to use and to model. And so I think that there needs to be more self reflection . . . people need to be more honest with themselves about where they're weak and where they're not. And then shore up those areas of opportunity, and be open and vulnerable to actually hearing what those are, and then working on them . . . with some intentionality.

While other leaders noted that we may have the skills, sometimes we must give ourselves grace, noting that it is how we deal with our own natural emotions that makes the real difference.

Another leader shared vulnerability in self-assessment, while feeling ready to support others:

Sometimes I am not my best self. I recognize the need to build positive relationships. I recognize the need to repair. . . . I don't always do my best, but I try. And I think that in terms of my role in the areas that I supervise, I'm very comfortable in terms of helping my colleagues and the staff who work with me to think about this.

Our students' situations are getting more complicated which means what we're carrying is more complicated. That means empathy has more power, and what employees must manage on the emotional end is greater as well. Several teachers noted the importance of empathy, while also noting the level of stress and feeling overwhelmed. One teacher noted:

I do feel like the staff is struggling . . . with social emotional . . . people are struggling to a point where they're having physical health issues. . . . This year I've been pretty good, but it's because I really started to try to get some more help for myself and have been prioritizing that.

Staff continue to be concerned about students in the midst of their own struggles, and expressed concern about students not caring about their own social, emotional and academic functioning.

The parallel process may be occurring for staff, which reinforces the importance of reflection and learning for staff, as one leader pointed out, "We know we have to support those same teachers and support and teach them. Encourage them to be reflective." This reflection can include what a support staff described as building, "the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. And they need some more than

others. The ability to communicate clearly and listen.” It also includes using empathy to improve relationships, as described by one teacher:

If you can put yourself in somebody else's shoes, that instantly is going to improve personal relationships. . . . Think twice about what you say. If we can teach kids how to do this and what empathy actually means, they'll understand bullying better. . . . Empathy is the thing that can make so many other . . . competencies within SEL.

In considering how the act of embedding SEL varies within various roles in a building, it appears that there are many strengths and commonalities of the demonstration of SEL competence across roles from teachers, to non-instructional and support staff, leadership, and safety, and yet there are many needs. Several staff members noted that it may be more our own individual experiences that shape our SEL than our roles, including how SEL was modeled in our own educational journeys, which can create resistance to seeing the importance of SEL, as noted by one leader;

If you had a teacher who was . . . open and honest and had good boundaries with kids, then you're open to that. But if you went through school as a grinder . . . you got a hell of a climb to get to the point where you can embrace social emotional learning because . . . you're a number one example . . . you bootstrapped all your way through - hard work gets you to where you are.

Similarly, a leader described the resistance to SEL that can not only come from our experiences as students, but from our own cultures. This concept was problematic for many staff interviewed, particularly in consideration of only valuing content taught, noting that then, “you're not factoring in how the social emotional piece and those skills and learning . . . contribute to the academics.” In the same way, a staff member noted that it shapes how students are perceived

and our willingness to help them, “if a student is struggling with social emotional needs, teachers might just say like this person is lazy . . . as opposed to feeling the student is struggling, how can I help them.” Leaders and teachers summarized the central component for SEL as how we show up with each other.

Some staff noted the importance of leaders also engaging in intentional reflection, supported by Brene Brown’s (2018) position that we need leaders who do not lead from pain and fear, but instead lead from their hearts. Related to leading from our hearts, some staff described a desire for more support, explicitly stating, “the only thing I need is support from my superiors.” Another staff member stated that we must shift our mindsets to focus on how we show care and not seeing staff as dispensable. Noting that some administrators need to increase their capacity to show sensitivity to staff and students, one support staff emphasized the need to first, “assess the situation and see what’s going on.” This includes the need to seek to understand first, with staff noting that, “administrators are better at . . . asking more questions than making assumptions that help to inform their scope and help to be stewards of . . . trying to solve problems, rather than being rigid and creating more problems.” This concern about the lack of embedding SEL in administrator actions relates to building staff competencies, and the importance of training leaders and deepening our SEL work. One leader asked about other leaders, “what have we done to prepare them? The answer to me is no, they’re not [ready] and we have done nothing.”

In response to considering how race relates to social emotional learning practices for staff and students, the consistent response from staff members was that race impacts perceptions of SEL. The importance of building self-awareness as an SEL skill is described as inherent to work around race and equity, as one teacher explained, “being able to talk about race in those ways in

every space . . . has to be central to what we do. And . . . there are folks that just don't know . . . have an awareness of even where to start.” Similarly, teachers expressed that as we build our self-awareness, we are more aware of our own biases and narratives that impact our students' wellbeing. In turn, this impacts how we expect students to behave. As multiple staff members stated, race has everything to do with SEL. One staff member described the difference between a Black girl and a White girl. The Black girl was demonstrating social emotional needs that included externalizing behaviors and was psychiatrically hospitalized. The teacher wanted the student moved out of the classroom, which did not happen when a White girl was psychiatrically hospitalized and incomplete grades, grace, and interventions were offered to help finish their work.

Additional perspectives about race impacting expectations further relate to White norms and behavior. This includes the perception that staff demonstrate more patience when supporting a White student who is escalated than a Black student. One leader explained this as even the term “self-regulation” in application to Black males has negative connotations for fights, and that it is about being triggered and upset and the need for de-escalation. The question arose as to the end goal of self-regulation, with a leader asking if it is, “really calming, is it self soothing, is it being aware of the intensity of some emotions and trying to get back on track, or is it so you can conform to some social norm?”

Furthermore, White girls were described as eager to talk about mental health, and one leader explained that they feel like White families have normalized mental health so their children have the language for SEL. One teacher described the impact of race and SEL expectations in terms of behavior and special education and the overrepresentation of students of

color in special education in relation to behavior, sharing that, “It's a very very powerful and scary thing to think about how race plays into our social emotional expectations.”

In fact, interviews with staff of color underscored the expectation that people of color maintain higher thresholds to survive and even thrive. As one leader stated about pain as being both physical and emotional, “you should be able to tolerate a certain level of pain or discomfort, and that you do . . . even though you have the right to complain if it goes past that, there's sort of this ‘suck it up and take it mentality’.” The concept of a threshold of pain that is expected to be tolerated is inconsistent with our focus on SEL and speaks to the inequities that people of color experience throughout a lifetime, including how to navigate spaces, even like our district, that were not necessarily designed to welcome people of color, as well as the intersection of race and gender expectations. One leader recounted this personal and professional experience as a Black female

I don't get the same level of care as a White woman. . . . I don't get to be emotional. I don't get to be any number of things. I don't get to be human. I cannot make mistakes. I cannot show how I feel. . . . I make a mistake, I'm incompetent. I show how I feel, I have an attitude. . . . And if you don't show how you feel, then you're closed off.

Many, but not all, staff shared the opinion that SEL and race are intertwined. This is in much the same way that SEL and academics are intertwined, including perceptions and expectations and that understanding our implicit biases means being vulnerable about the work the person is doing to address these biases.

*“Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet”*

As articulated in the Conditions subsection, the issue of trust is typically related to culture. However, I posit that trust is also relevant to our SEL competencies for all staff. If we do not lead each other and our students by example, and engage with each other by using SEL competencies, trust erodes. Many of the criteria for discernment for relational trust as described by Bryk and Schneider (2002) relate to SEL competencies, starting with respect as being developed with: “A genuine sense of listening to what each person has to say marks the basis for meaningful social interactions” (p. 23). While this happens at SCHS as described in the interviews there is more work to be done, just as the act of being vulnerable about biases and expressing concern about each other’s lives is also an area for further development (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

### **Interpretations**

In considering the purpose and intentionality of this program evaluation I am bearing in mind Patton’s (2008) assertion that, “Use of the evaluation findings and processes is the desired outcome, not producing a report” (p. 509). This connects with interpretations of the program evaluation as I work to understand what is striking; Patton (2008) urges us to “Look for interocular significance” (p. 487).

As mentioned previously throughout Section Four, the data gathered from focus groups, interviews and publicly available data about staff and students reflects “*Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet*” and “*Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet.*” This data is threaded throughout the As-Is in Section Four and the To-Be in Section Five. The juxtaposition of data that supports our district's commitments as strengths and the fact that we have a long way to go is explained as significant for identifying what we are doing right and what more we can do. While Butin (2010) may see

this as being in conflict, I see this as yet another “yes, and” opportunity: “The Triangulation of data does not mean that there has to be agreement across data sources. In fact, some of the most fruitful and important findings may occur when data sources actually conflict with each other” and “different research tools reveal different perspectives” (Butin, 2010, p. 121).

While the majority of the information gathered for this program evaluation occurred prior to the pandemic, racial injustices have permeated our nation before and during the pandemic. Both the focus on SEL within a pandemic and racial injustices related to the pandemic are concerns that have implications for the change plan in Section Six and future research discussed in Section Eight, and relate to the significant amount of work yet to be done in relation to SEL and equity.

SEL addresses a societal concern and the President of CASEL, Niemi (McNeel, 2019, para. 13) explains that this is a process to be developed in many parts of our society, just like at SCHS:

If people learned how to listen to each other more, understand themselves and each other better, it would lead to a society that would get along better. It sounds very simple, but when you look at what’s happening and you look at how adults are behaving, [clearly it’s not]. Sophisticated societies depend upon individuals who know how to listen, communicate and work together to solve problems that ail not only their own society but the world. Whether you’re on the red or blue side of the spectrum, whether urban, rural or other — these skills are common to human development and I think are crucial to getting us through where we are politically at this moment in time.

It is the what and the how for SEL, as Niemi (McNeel, 2019) explains; “An educational *model* that prioritizes all aspects of human development and the environment in which kids learn —

that's a game changer. *Again, it is not only what they're learning, but how they're learning*" (para. 17).

### **Judgments**

The act of facilitating judgments is what Patton (2008) has referred to as the central component of evaluations. "Rendering a judgment involves applying values to the data and interpretation of the findings" (Patton, 2008, p. 500). As such, the primary research question driving my evaluation of "How does the embedding of SEL practices vary within instructional, non-instructional, and leadership roles?" revealed that while many of those interviewed did not see a difference of SEL practices among most roles, there was a focus on expectations and divergence from perceptions of leadership SEL practices. This clarity in the data is notable within the context of SCHS and relates to the concept that CASEL (2020) describes as a journey for SEL implementation, and the need for explicit schoolwide expectations; essentially the importance of leading by example to build trust. Herein lies the importance that leaders can do more through daily exchanges between staff to impact the culture, and consequently to impact students (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), supporting "*Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet.*"

In judging the data related to the secondary research questions of *To what extent does staff capacity building for SEL practices incorporate support for the social emotional competence of both staff and students?* and *How does race relate to social emotional learning practices for staff and students?*, more valuable clarity became apparent. This was borne out in both "*Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet*" and "*Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet.*" As an iterative process,

developing SEL competencies and SEL with equity awareness is a process that cannot simply be expected to occur without ongoing structure and support, including through professional development and support (Collie et al., 2015; Jagers et al., 2018; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). This is grounded in Bryk and Schneider's (2002) assertion that relational trust is essential for school improvement, and the important core consideration of understanding the "primary purpose of the public school: Why are we really here?" (p. 137). The answer to this question for me is to create a shared obligation to model and teach the necessary social emotional learning skills and racial awareness to cope daily, engage in learning in many content areas, and apply these skills to future social networks, careers and education. Existing challenges around mental health needs are now combined with a pandemic that has exacerbated these needs as students struggle with new, historical, and long-term mental health needs (Prother, 2020). Covid-19 has brought SEL to the forefront of many educators' minds and yet we have not made significant progress in considering how to blend or infuse SEL with instruction from a school-wide perspective, as we still focus more on "either/or" conversations in planning for SEL work rather than "yes, and" conversations about how to embed SEL within the acts of teaching and learning.

Furthermore, exacting these organizational changes specific to SEL will help us focus on the organizational change needed for each of us to "own" our own social emotional learning. This will build staff and student resilience and self-care as we learn to understand ourselves and each other, ask for help, help others, focus on learning, and develop post high school plans and skills (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2015).

The reason that I am so committed to organizational changes that support race and equity has been reinforced by the significant impact of both the disproportionate numbers of Black and Brown individuals being diagnosed with and dying from Covid-19, and the racial injustice seen

in police violence and killing of Black people, largely Black males, on the mental health of adults and young people being referred to as a double pandemic (Stolberg, 2020).

Wagner's (2008) examples that making changes can be overwhelming for educators has been a good reminder for me to prioritize next steps. As Wagner (2008) says, the "major problem in education is the adults, not the students. They came through the system, and they were successful. . . . It's all they know" (p. 144). Not only is it what they know, but for many educators the system actually worked for them and they did not have the same challenges, concerns and traumas that students are experiencing today. It is hard to build empathy around this so we must clearly define the problem, the urgency and our accountability for it, and include stakeholders in defining the SEL problem we are trying to solve and why it is important (as demonstrated by significant student needs for coping, social skills, and problem-solving). Additional steps must include the strategy for solving the SEL challenges (climate and curriculum), naming who is accountable for actions (all of us), and the method for measuring SEL growth (discipline referrals, access and use of referrals through student surveys).

### **Recommendations**

In reflecting on the data I analyzed using Wagner's As-Is frame in relation to context, culture, conditions, and competencies, my next step is to develop recommendations that will feed into the To-Be framework, and ultimately my strategies and actions. Holding at the center of developing the To-Be framework to make meaning and relevance, I strive to refocus on not just my "why", but also on our "collective why" for this work. As Wagner et al. (2006) explained, "to generate the much needed momentum and urgency for change, people need to fully understand the why behind the journey they are beginning" (p. 138). Working to develop urgency and understanding applies to students, staff, families and community stakeholders as we

strive to build ownership. I will work to improve teaching and learning, and to incorporate our SEL work into our management team's work, instructional environments, and our existing systems steering committee (Wagner et al., 2006).

The myriad reasons that I have chosen these organizational changes are complex. Yet, I must push to understand myself and my own journey in more profound ways, just as I urge others to know themselves. My intent is to tell my own and my district's story of growth and valuing SEL, the role it plays within teaching and learning, equity, and our functioning as adults within our personal and professional lives. This includes from whence we came, where we have arrived, and what the future can hold for our school, students and community. Making this program evaluation meaningful in application is the ultimate purpose (Patton, 2008); I am driven to attend to the stories of staff and students to understand our whole story, helping to bring value to the citizens of the world that our youth will become.

Secure in the belief that, "The best guideline may be Einstein's dictum that 'the important thing is to keep on questioning'" (Wagner, 2008, p. 487), questioning myself and our planning will help me move forward with recommendations. Upon reflection of my unanswered questions, I face uncertainty in a world that is dealing with a pandemic, continued racial injustices, and myriad versions of learning structures in the next school year and years to come. As I consider all of the needs in terms of SEL, I wonder what does the future hold with Covid-19? Will funding be sustained? And therefore will leadership and staff commitment stay firm in their increasingly strong commitment to SEL? Have I identified and considered all of the current strategies (Wagner et al., 2006)? What am I avoiding? Have I reflected on my personal learning challenges? And what else do staff and students need?

In answering these questions I look at the act of organizational change that is built upon social emotional learning to lead to recommendations. In fact, relational trust that supports organizational change is itself an act of social emotional learning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Moreover, Bryk and Schneider's (2002) explanation of why relational trust is so important as part of the fabric of each day parallels the importance of why we must all be obligated to weave SEL into the daily fabric of our schools so that we can grow it constantly:

Relational trust thus is not something that can be achieved simply through some workshop, retreat or form of sensitivity training, although all of these can be helpful. Rather, relational trust is forged in daily social exchanges. Through their actions, school participants articulate their sense of obligations toward others, and others in turn come to discern the intentionality enacted here. Trust grows over time through exchanges where the expectations held for others are validated in action. Even successful simple interactions can enhance collective capacities for more complex subsequent actions; in this regard, increasing trust and deepening organizational change are reciprocal. (pp. 136-137)

Part of the reason to focus on organizational changes that support SEL and equity is the fact that SEL teaches us to be better humans. We need to humanize each other now more than ever, when even during a pandemic and with social media overflowing with messages of “we are in this together”, “stronger together”, and amid calls for “compassion” and “grace”, it is not safe to be a Black male in the U.S., with unarmed Black men and women being killed based on the color of their skin. These facts scream for the need for SEL, including intentionally developing more empathy and perspective-taking given what researchers have found in relation to reduced

empathy by White people when observing that Black people are in pain (Forgiarini et al., 2011). Furthermore, Dr. Marcus Campbell offers hope in his interview with Dr. Robin DiAngelo with the reminder that when White people dehumanize Black people they dehumanize themselves too; conversely, when we humanize each other we also become more human (Family Action Network, 2020). As a White woman my work is not to be silent, but rather to humanize through directly addressing racism and SEL.

It is my job to envision SEL within various parts of our district, working to deepen respect for staff and their roles, and capturing hearts and minds for this work (Wagner et al., 2006). As Wagner et al. (2006) state, as part of the:

envisioning phase, trust and respect must deepen, as the success of the improvement work depends on the quality of the conversations among individuals and groups. Vital conversations about the nature of the problem, different visions of the solutions, and assignment of responsibility for the improvement effort require a commitment and ability to actively listen, especially when there is disagreement. (p. 149)

By stating that as we value SEL we are also valuing relational trust, we are also working to engage in organizational change as a meta experience; part of the fabric of our daily lives and our connective tissue:

Relational trust constitutes the connective tissue that binds these individuals together around advancing the education and welfare of children. Improving schools requires us to think harder about how best to organize the work of adults and students so that this connective tissue remains healthy and strong (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 144).

My recommendations and actions will be supported by strategic plans for incorporating

culturally responsive SEL practices, including through the use of CASEL's (n.d.) school-wide recommendations to build foundation support, create a plan, strengthen adult SEL, promote SEL for students and practice continuous improvement. As further evidence, it has been found that:

By systemically integrating SEL across classrooms, schools, homes, and communities, adults and students work together to develop and apply five core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making. These competencies are needed generally throughout our lives and particularly in this moment to manage our own stressors, anxieties, and joy; understand how the pandemic is influencing others (often in inequitable ways); and build relationships and make decisions that best support our communities. (CASEL, 2020, p. 4)

In addition, as a framework for guiding SEL, equity and staff capacity building, I will follow myriad guidance, including from Dr. Jagers (CASEL CARES, 2020) to expand concepts of SEL at SCHS with an equity framework, including:

- Personally responsible SEL
- Participatory SEL
- Transformative (justice-oriented) SEL

Ultimately, I will identify action steps to support staff in their capacity to develop their own social emotional competencies, embed SEL within instruction, and integrate equity work and culturally responsive practices into our daily engagement with students.

## **Conclusion**

The As-Is portrayal of Shoreville Community High School shows significance in the

assertion that we have come a long way in terms of SEL, equity and trust, AND we are not there yet. This has tremendous meaning for building upon our strengths in consideration of our efforts as we consider how far we have come in the name of doing the right thing for our students, and shows the vital need for additional next steps. Students' lives continue to hang in the balance; it is imperative that we not stop now with improving students' school experiences; as Lubelfeld and Polyak (2017) said, "students don't deserve the education their parents had" (p. 97), they deserve better. Using the As-Is framework and the stated recommendations, in the next section I will explain in detail the To-Be framework, examining steps to take us beyond the "yes, and we are not there yet", to an ideal state.

## **SECTION FIVE: TO-BE FRAMEWORK**

### **Introduction**

My vision of organizational change is to embed school-wide culturally responsive social emotional learning (SEL) practices while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity. As I reflect on the components that represent our As-Is framework, hope comes into play in defining the ideal To-Be framework. Supporting the shift from a focus on the As-Is framework to the To-Be framework includes the movement within the district from “*Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet*” and “*Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet*”, to the ideal “*Theme One: Strong Commitment to SEL and Equity*” and “*Theme Two: Strong Trust.*”

Work by Wagner et al. (2006) and Heifetz et al. (2009) supports the act of change leadership by focusing on oneself as a leader as well as on the system as a whole, with the constant reflection and emotional intelligence that Goleman et al. (2013) state will sustain changes. This focus is on changes within myself as a component within the system, because “When we have the courage to walk into our own story and own it, we get to write the ending” (Brown, 2018, p. 240). The ending is the ideal, or to-be, vision.

Consistent with these concepts, within this section I will detail the specific components of the ideal “end” vision for embedding school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity, identifying the ways in which the ideal will manifest for myself and our system. Similarly, the use of Heifetz et al.’s (2009) assertion that reflection must come from being on the dance floor at times for close-up scrutiny, while at other times being on the balcony to understand the larger systems functioning, will be utilized in

identifying the ideal vision. This culminates in the identification of the ideal by focusing on understanding my leadership, other leaders, and the district as a system.

The critical concept of collaboration and building trust with various stakeholders (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) will be another area of focus, identifying specific information to analyze and sustain the change plan. And lastly, but most importantly, Wagner et al.'s (2006) 4 Cs will be discussed throughout this section in reference to what will be. I will draw from my research findings as I discuss future features of context, culture, conditions, and competencies, interwoven with cultural responsiveness in programs, curriculum and instructional practices.

### **Envisioning the Success To-Be**

#### **4 Cs *To-Be* Chart**

<p><b><u>Context - <i>To-Be</i></u></b> Focused on: Embedding culturally responsive school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● One school (high school), one district.</li><li>● 4,000 students; 605 employees.</li><li>● 1.2 million square feet under one roof</li><li>● Student population includes: American Indian 0.2 %, Asian 5.8%, Black or African American 25.9%, Hispanic/Latino 18.8%, Two or more races 3.4%, and White 45.8%.</li><li>● Focus on student identity, social consciousness, race and equity and social emotional learning for lifelong skill and identity development.</li><li>● Many social service agencies, licensed mental health providers in the community, and city service providers integrate support for social emotional learning as life skills.</li><li>● Save lives and costs by preventing additional stress on social service networks post high school.</li><li>● Value the measurement of social emotional learning through academic, climate and culture, and behavioral qualitative and quantitative means, including student voice.</li><li>● Decreased student needs, with fewer psychiatric hospitalizations.</li></ul>

- Demonstrated economic support for SEL seen in the increased number of school-based mental health providers (eg=11 social workers, 5 psychologists and 15 counselors).
- School-wide accountability for helping students develop social emotional skills, helping them practice skills and engage in the classroom.

### **Culture - To-Be**

Focused on: Embedding culturally responsive school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- School is highly committed to race and equity.
- SEL is infused, and explicitly incorporated into syllabus or curriculum.
- Staff have embraced a model of “Consult, consult, consult” to address crises.
- Leadership identifies belonging and wellbeing as a central focus, grounding race and equity work.
- Staff enjoy increased time for and focus on needs and blended initiatives with increased implementation of SEL and equity, with a reduction of the number of initiatives.
- Leaders state the intention to eradicate silos, and reflect on their actions to prevent silos and a sense of staff isolation.
- Leaders and staff provide examples of SEL, including owning mistakes, listening and caring.
- Trust is high among leaders, leaders to staff, and staff to students.
- Programs and structural changes are evidence-based.

### **Conditions - To-Be**

Focused on: Embedding culturally responsive school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- Explicit expectations are communicated for staff responsibilities to address individual student crises.
- Time is allotted to address race and equity, as well as how to handle student crises, within all-staff, departmental, lunch-and-learn, professional learning modules, and on-line meetings and training.
- Professional development time is allotted to learn how to instruct, infuse, and model SEL and support staff wellbeing.
- Time is provided to engage in reflection, monitoring, and outcomes to sustain commitment to SEL and equity work.

- High mental health provider to student ratio, including creating additional positions in the last 6 years: Student Services Intervention Coordinator, Department Chair for Student Services, 2 additional Psychologists, 2 additional Counselors, and 2 additional Social Workers.
- Brand and communicate “Acknowledge, Care, Tell” to staff, students and families.
- Outfacing structures exist on web pages about crisis intervention and SEL commitment, benefits and actions.
- Multiple and complex student crises are addressed, along with increased focus on prevention within the classroom and beyond.
- All staff and leaders take accountability for SEL within curriculum and instruction, as well as within office spaces.
- Culturally responsive SEL is integrated into all evaluation frameworks, including for leaders.

### **Competencies - To-Be**

Focused on: Embedding culturally responsive school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- Create continuous professional development focused on embedding SEL within the classroom and all spaces, connecting the dots with equity.
- Mental health and non-mental health staff know what they need to do when a student is in crisis.
- Mental health staff know how to address student crises (for example, if a student may be at risk of harming self or others).
- Staff have developed the capacity to support students through preventing crises, building coping skills, and developing problem-solving skills.
- Staff develop their own coping and problem-solving skills.
- Signs of Suicide program is implemented annually with all freshman and seniors, including suicide risk screeners, preparing for all of high school and post high school plans.
- Leadership provides direction or guidance on blending SEL with instruction.
- All staff integrate culturally responsive SEL into instruction and practices as guided by respective evaluation frameworks.

## **Future Contexts with Trust and Respect**

While many aspects of the As-Is context will remain the same, some context will change in the future To-Be, reflected in *“Theme One: Strong Commitment to SEL and Equity”* and *“Theme Two: Strong Trust.”*

### *“Theme One: Strong Commitment to SEL & Equity”*

The first shift for the future context is the change from a focus on learning, student identity, social consciousness, and race and equity as separate concepts from social emotional learning. The analysis of the As-Is context of Shoreville HS revealed the need for an additional concept of “yes, and,” rather than a perception of separate or co-existing frameworks. This is seen in the enumeration of the ways that there is a need to focus on student identity, social consciousness *AND* social emotional learning for lifelong skill and identity development, understanding that these are inherently intertwined.

For many professionals it is easier to value mental health when the client is seen as passive, internalizing and desiring support, as in the As-Is picture of Shoreville Community High School. Our future context values the mental health of our students, manifested as internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Seeking to understand externalizing or disruptive behavior that may be a result of trauma is an important act of inquiry in the To-Be picture, which replaces assumptions that a student’s acting-out behavior is simply being disruptive or is conduct disordered (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017). This includes significant mental health interventions for students with conduct referrals at varied corresponding levels of need. In the future To-Be picture we also reduce the school-to-prison-pipeline, a critical product of

enhancing our cultural responsiveness within instruction, practices and programming (Singleton & Linton, 2006; Gregory et al., 2010; Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

Within the To-Be picture of Shoreville Community High School there exists continued demonstrated economic support for SEL seen in the number of school-based mental health providers. It also reflects a shift to increased focus on school-wide prevention and early intervention, as well as access to resources and mental health services. This includes a move away from the As-Is picture where the concept exists that the school mental health provider will pull the student out of class to handle issues or “fix” them, rather than support students in the classroom setting. School-wide accountability for helping students develop social emotional skills and helping them practice these skills and engage in the classroom is where the To-Be concept of mental health will thrive. This includes focusing on both the importance of our accountability of supporting students in crisis and emphasizing the importance of all of us helping students learn to cope now and for the rest of their lives. Johnson and Weiner’s (2017) work supports the assertion that social emotional learning within academic learning helps see the whole student in developing skills for the present and future, noting that “one holistic package—rather than treating it as an add-on, siloed initiative with separate offices and stand-alone interventions—can streamline and strengthen the work of teachers, principals, and district leaders” (p. 6). Culturally relevant pedagogy is inherent within this concept of seeing the whole student’s identity (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Similarly, in our To-Be world, social service agencies, licensed mental health providers in the community, and city service providers integrate support for social emotional learning as life skills for success. This accompanies the act of shifting from pathologizing experiences that have happened to students and families, particularly students and families of color, to engaging

in a concept of healing-centered engagement that honors students of all racial identities (Ginwright, 2018).

In our To-Be picture, reducing the cost in terms of human lives and finances is a hopeful reality, with additional prevention work at SCHS, while reducing the number of psychiatric hospitalizations, discipline referrals, stress on the social service network, and the number of students involved in the criminal justice system during and post high school.

A review of the measurement of social emotional learning in our As-Is picture revealed challenges consistent with most high schools with a strict numerical value of measurement of important and yet lofty goals that have seemingly unattainable levels of achievement. In our To-Be picture we value the measurement of social emotional learning through academic and behavioral qualitative and quantitative means, building a climate focused on relational trust and respect. This includes student voice, supported by the belief that “we promulgate student agency through impactful and sustained leadership” (Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017 p. 89).

### **Future Culture with Consistent Commitment, Relationships and Empathy**

#### *“Theme One: Strong Commitment to SEL and Equity”*

In using an equity lens to define instruction and SEL, we can draw an analogy to what is on our plates and what comprises the table at which we sit. Equity is the entire table on which our plates are placed, and SEL is the plate, which helps facilitate the instruction of students who thrive. This mindset replaces the mindset that SEL and equity are separate concepts, and counters the myth that SEL is one more thing on staff’s plates. The To-Be culture consistently shapes the behavior of all staff members, including those who previously may have demonstrated resistance or were dismissive of the need for a focus on equity or a focus on SEL. In the future culture, SCHS’ White staff speak up and take action when courageous conversations are required

to address inequitable practices and when changes are needed, ensuring that staff of color are not the sole arbiters of change. This will facilitate the sense of safety for staff and students of color to build trust between staff, and among students with staff, addressing biases honestly and openly (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

As a school we will also be positioned as leaders among schools, demonstrating our commitment to SEL and equity through the ongoing development of our own awareness, as well as reviewing policies and our mission statement (Hammond, 2015). We will reflect the value of SEL and equity as intertwined through our relationships with students, curriculum, recognition of identities, and empowerment of student voice as part of instruction (Gregory et al. 2016; Hammond, 2015; Sciuchetti, 2017; Simmons et al., 2018). As one district leader stated, “we need to keep this concept in front of people all the time, and if the concept of belonging is one of the ways to do it, we need to continue to find ways to communicate.” And as long as we have a clear definition of SEL and equity and show staff what it looks like, we are more likely to transform our classrooms and school culture.

### *“Theme Two: Strong Trust”*

Strong trust in the future exists for the staff and faculty at SCHS, including the trust that the front-loading required to contextualize a full focus on SEL and equity yields tremendous gains in achievement and relationships for students, with empathy for student and staff experiences (Goleman et al., 2013). In the To-Be picture we see almost all of our staff, not just some, consistently embracing the embodiment of SEL and equity work within every step we take, well beyond their content area.

This relational trust among leaders, between leaders to staff, and between staff to students will be the foundation for even greater organizational changes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). SEL is

infused and explicitly incorporated into syllabus or curriculum, and staff consistently demonstrate the trust necessary to fully engage in a model of consult, consult, consult to address crises.

Leadership not only will name belonging and wellbeing as a central focus, grounding race and equity work, but they will also follow through with a consistent focus on acts with integrity to ensure that barriers to implementation do not rise up (Oberle et al., 2016). In the To-Be picture, staff have increased time to focus on needs and blended initiatives with increased implementation of SEL and equity, with a reduction in the number of initiatives. In addition, programs and structural changes are developed with evidence-based structures, using both qualitative and quantitative data. Stating their intention to eradicate silos, leaders reflect on their actions to prevent silos and a sense of staff isolation, and publicly correct their courses when new silos are developed, ensuring that follow-through is publicly presented at all times (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Similarly, leaders and staff alike provide examples of SEL, including owning mistakes, being vulnerable, listening and demonstrating authenticity for each other (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017).

Central to our functioning in the To-Be environment, leaders' connections and emotional attunement includes a focus on how they engage and what they do to engage with staff (Goleman et al., 2013). No different than any other leader, my own leadership will include the level of self-reflection and awareness, as part of growing my own emotional intelligence, that Goleman et al. (2013) notes is needed to be attuned to my own and staff needs. This creates greater emotional stability among staff, as Goleman et al. (2013) have asserted happens with an open-loop in our limbic systems, resulting in positive physiological functioning.

## **Future Conditions with Supportive Resources**

### *“Theme One: Strong Commitment to SEL and Equity”*

In the To-Be version of SCHS, structured time is scheduled to grow the capacity to embed SEL and equity in our daily work. We have reviewed the SEL standards and integrated our commitment to equity, identifying a consistent structure for expectations of performance, avoiding what one SCHS leader described as a pitfall with “students experiencing in one department a totally different experience than they get in another department, and that leads to more confusion.” This is in addition to how to handle student crises, within all-staff, departmental, lunch-and-learn, professional learning modules, and on-line meetings and trainings. Time is also provided to engage in reflection, monitoring, and outcomes to sustain commitment to SEL and equity work. This work is consistent, and not a mic-drop approach, but rather is threaded throughout the school year, from hiring to mentoring to professional development, even for experienced staff (Rivers et al., 2013; Brackett & Patti, 2016). These conditions create what Hammond (2015) refers to as, “a sense of community and connection in the classroom so that it supports the social, emotional, and intellectual safety of all students of color and English learners, but especially those dependent learners who have yet to create for themselves a strong learner identity and sense of confidence” (p. 142).

### *“Theme Two: Strong Trust”*

Within the To-Be picture of SCHS, staff continue to be clear that they can trust that leadership’s explicit expectations are communicated for staff responsibilities to address individual student crises, and that there are no “gotcha” moments, connecting back to integrity as one of the central tenets of Bryk & Schneider’s (2002) concept of relational trust. These

expectations are for every staff member and will also be found within the commitment to mental health and the number of mental health providers and infrastructure for interventions.

Buoying the concept of “strong trust” in the To-Be version is the consistent provision of professional development time that is allotted to learn how to instruct, infuse, and model SEL and support staff wellbeing. Even when a pandemic is not looming large and our world is not afire with unrest due to racial injustices against people of color, the needs of our students have grown and therefore the support of our staff must increase as well (Collie et al., 2012). Similarly, creating structured time to plan for prevention within the classroom and beyond, as well as addressing multiple and complex student crises, are additional components of the To-Be version.

Programs are continued that focus on awareness, prevention, early intervention and ongoing skill development, such as the Signs of Suicide program that is implemented annually with all freshman and seniors, including suicide risk screeners, preparing for all of high school and post high school plans.

In terms of structured communication, in the future all departments will emphasize and communicate components of SEL, including “Acknowledge, Care, Tell” to staff, students and families. This is in contrast to the siloing effect of these concepts being communicated by the Student Services Department. Within a school and district as large as ours, it is critical that we communicate the interconnected nature of social emotional learning to academics, with each department emphasizing SEL. In addition, our web pages will explicitly reflect our SEL commitment, benefits and actions. Lastly, ongoing structures will be in place to ensure that all staff and leaders take accountability for SEL within curriculum, engagement and instruction, as well as within office spaces.

## **Future Culturally Responsive Competencies that Support Social Emotional Learning for Staff and Students**

### *“Theme One: Strong Commitment to SEL & Equity”*

Traveling down the road to the future brings SCHS to a place where staff demonstrates social emotional competencies and a commitment to equity. “How” we arrive at these skills is through the creation of continuous professional development focused on embedding SEL within the classroom and all spaces, with constant reflection and intentionality to connect the dots with equity (Hammond, 2015). In the To-Be world, leadership provides direction and guidance on the skills necessary to blend SEL with instruction, identifying ways in which SEL and equity constantly interact, thereby eliminating silos that previously lived within the district.

### *“Theme Two: Strong Trust”*

Moving from an As-Is picture, where the mental health and non-mental health staff know what they need to do when a student is in crisis, and mental health staff know how to manage student crises, to the To-Be world of skill development around culturally responsive SEL, is again predicated on trust. It is further constructed through professional development focused on insight and skills or competencies, and sustained through clear expectations set forth within new evaluation frameworks (Danielson, 2009) that incorporate culturally responsive SEL instruction and practices.

Within the To-Be world, leaders demonstrate the emotional intelligence and attunement (Goleman et al., 2013) necessary to provide direction or guidance on blending SEL with instruction, modeling SEL each day while utilizing SEL competencies to support students and their own wellbeing. Respect, as Yeager (2017) identified as central to adolescents’ learning and

SEL growth, is exhibited daily by leaders with each other, other staff, and students, thus having constructed a culture of reciprocity. Staff have developed the capacity to support students through preventing crises, building coping skills, and developing problem-solving skills. As importantly, staff have developed their own capacity to model coping and problem-solving skills, and see their own journey of developing social emotional competencies as lifelong, as supported by the research of Collie et al. (2015) and Yang et al. (2018). All staff integrate culturally responsive SEL into their instruction and practices.

### **Conclusion**

Knowing that the ideal “end” vision of “*Strong Commitment to SEL and Equity*” and “*Strong Trust*” in and of itself is a powerful motivator, I also embrace that the real work is in the steps and actions to arrive at this ideal. Having articulated the myriad components of the To-Be vision, in the following section I identify how to interweave the strategies and actions to move our district from the As-Is to the To-Be, grounded in the knowledge that “what got you here won’t get you there” (Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017, p. 96)

## **SECTION SIX: STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS**

### **Introduction**

Some leaders believe that true leadership is embodied by being an “ideas person.” Wagner et al. (2006), and those of us who know the power of successful change leadership, know that change consists of both vision, or ideas, and process. Throughout this section I articulate what Brown (2017) describes as being both messy and where the magic is, which is the journey to get from here to there. A journey of this kind that aims at reshaping culture can be challenging and requires what Drago-Severson et al. (2013) noted as persistence, dedication and a commitment to celebrating small successes. This level of persistence will be necessary to support the changes required to support the purpose of this program evaluation: increase support for students and staff wellbeing by examining how schools define successfully embedded social emotional learning within all school roles, while building staff capacity for SEL and social emotional competence, while considering the role of race within SEL practices.

Naming beliefs, strategies, and actions is fundamental to exact organizational changes; as Anatole France said, “To accomplish great things, we must not only act but also dream, not only plan but also believe” (Drago-Severson et al., 2013, p. 184). The five strategies and actions for engaging our district in organizational change are focused on SEL and equity and encompass the acts of dreaming, acting, planning and believing. Each strategy and supporting action connect directly to a consistent focus on improving student learning and at least one of Wagner et al.’s (2006) 4 Cs: culture, competencies, conditions, and context. The strategies are listed below, and are described further within this section:

1. Support for Staff and Trust Development
2. Shifting, defining and measuring SEL & Equity
3. School-wide Implementation via Shared Leadership and Vision

4. Professional development to embed SEL & Equity
5. Increased access to culturally responsive SEL via embedding within the classroom and through programs inside and outside of the classroom

The strategies and action chart in Appendix I supports our district's further development of a *“Strong Commitment to SEL and Equity”* and *“Strong Trust.”*

## **Strategies and Actions**

### **Strategy 1 - Support for Staff and Trust Development**

As we work to continue to humanize ourselves and each other, the strategy that focuses on support for staff and the development of trust is a pinnacle one, and embodies conditions, competencies and culture. Focusing on the value of our relationships (Goleman et al., 2013; Hammond, 2015; Slaten et al., 2015; Wagner et al., 2006) and our acts of reflection (Akinbode, 2013) will help us engage with each other and fully actualize our work as educators. This is where we embrace the opportunity to do more than just talk about theories by engaging our own social emotional competencies to benefit staff and students as we build relationships and trust. Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey's (2018) educational approach to the whole child is supported by building a positive school climate. Rooted in relational trust, culture climate changes and reform initiatives are ultimately about student commitment, built upon respect, personal regard, competence, and personal integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Action items that grow support and trust through exchanges (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) include implementing a steering committee that includes staff, leader, student and community stakeholder voices, staff wellbeing surveys, peer to peer groups for support (some specific to pandemic and nationwide racial injustice), and group counseling development opportunities. Mindfulness and reflective practices are additional action items through which we can engage in

the self-reflection that Reeves (2016) recommends for increasing resilience and continuous improvement. As we each make missteps, engaging in restorative practices with each other and students will help us to provide support and build trust (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Moreover, as many educators seem to be depleted of resources with the uncertainty related to a pandemic and racial and social injustices occurring every day, now is the time to engage in this source of sustainable self-care.

A significant focal action will be that of setting expectations for leaders to engage in attunement with staff members and modeling emotional intelligence, effectively walking the walk, as Heifetz et al. (2009) and Goleman et al. (2013) emphasize for continuous improvement. This includes engaging in self-reflection for our personal and professional actions as leaders, and modeling this for staff members, focusing on wellbeing for teachers and administrators (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

Furthermore, leaders will listen carefully to staff members, their feelings and perspectives, working on “listening from the heart” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 266) to help understand the losses associated with stressors and changes. Demonstrating the integrity that consists of following through with stated intention is defined by Bryk and Schneider (2002) as a key ingredient for relational trust and is an action item to be prioritized for SCHS (if we say we will give grace and compassion, we must give each other grace and compassion). Lastly, consistent with Goleman et al.’s (2013) recommendations, there will be stated expectations that as leaders we are attuned to what we do and say, and how we say and do it.

## **Strategy 2 - Shifting, Defining and Measuring SEL & Equity**

The second strategy consists of shifting, defining and measuring social emotional learning and equity, and corresponds to all four of the 4 Cs by Wagner et al. (2006); context,

conditions, competencies, and culture. While change is the only constant in this world, this work is focused on building capacity for our district to develop a vision and plan for culturally responsive SEL (CASEL, n.d.) and support ongoing improvements in a realistic and sustainable way (Drago-Severson et al., 2013).

This applies to the emergent actions of defining social emotional learning and equity indicators and identifying a framework for SEL and equity, and inviting staff and leaders into this action, so as not to surprise stakeholders by upcoming changes (Patton, 2008). Wagner (2008) references agility and adaptability as a requirement for districts to sustain improvement and grow with this ever-changing world. However, it is now more critical than ever, as we have had to pivot during a pandemic with an increased awareness by our entire world of the racial injustices that continue to perpetuate, and their impact on students and human beings everywhere. For instance, while the Illinois State Board of Education was a bit delayed in updating guidance that came out a week after we started school in August, they published guidance with prioritization of learning standards for this school year during a pandemic (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020). This is an example of how to engage in continuous improvement and is guidance we can incorporate into our SEL planning, including focusing on priority standards, critical concepts and instructional guidance about embedding SEL within instruction, a new approach for ISBE.

Engaging our Equity Analyst and our Director of research in the planning of the definition and plans for measure will help sustain this work. This focuses on the act of connecting our dots even as we assess effectiveness through qualitative and quantitative data (Patton, 2008), to engage in what CASEL (n.d.) refers to as asset mapping and resource identification, to identify strengths and needs (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). The

“5Essentials” climate and wellbeing surveys, as well as data on discipline, achievement and mental health provision of services and focus groups will be included as part of this process.

The planned review of data will help create structures that also sustain this change with stakeholders in the building, as we continue to build trust and transparency (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). It also incorporates Patton’s (2008) active-reactive-interactive-adaptive concept that the real world is ever-changing, and requires us as educational leaders to be flexible, creative, responsive and versatile, which readily applies to the procedures for the review of data that supports the organizational change and goals. Engaging in the review of data, we will rebuild our evaluation frameworks for staff, emphasizing culturally responsive SEL practices and instruction.

In addition, the action steps of identifying a school-wide mindfulness program and reviewing and redeveloping our Mission and Vision to incorporate SEL have some components in common. These actions will establish procedures and expectations that will increase transparency of intent for long-term goals and follow-through that helps build trust and sustainability (Drago-Severson et al., 2013; Bryk & Schneider, 2002), and will require what Lubelfeld & Polyak (2017) refer to as unlearning a previous focus exclusively on equity. During a time when we are faced with insurmountable pressures and yet no one has the time to engage in mindfulness, as leaders we must attune to emotional functioning and deficits (Goleman et al., 2013). Inserting mindfulness into the day as a programmatic procedure will build staff capacity for wellbeing. This is in alignment with Goleman et al.’s (2013) assertion that when people feel good, they work at their best, meaning that students are even better served in the learning environment.

### **Strategy 3 - School-wide Implementation via Shared Leadership and Vision**

Wagner et al.'s (2006) features of context, conditions, and culture are encapsulated within the next strategy of school-wide implementation via shared leadership, featuring a wide variety of student voices. The action items that will support this strategy focus on building capacity for change through structures, myriad stakeholders and procedures (Heifetz et al., 2009).

As Fullan notes from Archimedes, "If a system is to be mobilized in the direction of sustainability, leadership at all levels must be the primary engine. . . . We need a system laced with leaders who are trained to think in bigger terms and to act in ways that affect larger parts of the system as a whole" (Reeves, 2016, p. 99). This begins with the act of incorporating the SEL framework into the Building Leadership Team, Prevention Committee and MTSS Committee for what Wagner (2008) describes as shared leadership and cross cultural collaboration. This supports Patton's (2008) focus on incorporating power of individuals and groups and recognizing the role of politics, while staying grounded in our ethical decision-making.

Similarly, integrating community stakeholder involvement will help build trust in our long-term goal of embedding SEL throughout our district (Bryk & Schneider, 2002); seeking input is what Drago et al. (2013) note as modeling true collaboration. Stakeholders to be invited into our planning will include: the SCHS feeder district, the City of Shoreville and the Mayor's Employer Advisory Council, SCHS serving schools (off-campus therapeutic day schools, safe schools and ombudsman), parents and guardians, students (Student Union, Students Organized Against Racism, students who have been suspended/disciplinary action and more), businesses, and social service organizations (mental health, social justice, and employment related), including our community-wide cradle to career initiative.

Incorporating SEL and a focus on equity into existing guidance and procedures will help in further assessment of effectiveness and ongoing improvement, including incorporating into the Portrait of a Graduate planning & implementation, College & Career Readiness Indicators, and SchoolLinks (post high school planning) implementation, and youth leadership opportunities (CASEL, n.d.). This also includes shaping our culture and promoting SEL (CASEL, n.d.) by creating an expectation of integrating SEL into hiring and training procedures and practices to set clear expectations for what Murphy (2016) describes as consistency in our talent development vision.

Heifetz et al.'s (2009) framework of adaptive leadership as an iterative activity takes hold in the action item of making changes to our webpages to reflect our district's commitment to SEL, which will support CASEL's (n.d.) recommendation to focus on continual improvement while promoting SEL. Similarly, establishing the expectations that each team/department embed SEL & equity within their messaging and planning will create the consistency necessary for sustainability.

#### **Strategy 4 - Professional development to embed SEL & Equity**

Strategy 4 hones in on the importance of professional development to embed SEL and equity, and is impacted by context, conditions, competencies, and culture. Drago-Severson (2013) indicates that the isolation of inconsistent professional development opportunities is not only a barrier to best practice for students in need, but it is also a barrier to building trust and collaboration. Consistent professional development will also ensure the development of social emotional competencies through the action of providing time and space for staff ongoing skill development, practice, reflection and expectations.

CASEL (n.d.) recommends building adult capacity with self-assessments to review adult

strengths and areas of development. This will help guide the development of relevant training for specific skill development for staff and leaders to teach and model social emotional learning and competencies, including mindfulness, coping, problem-solving, communication, and social skills (Collie et al., 2012; National Equity Project, n.d.; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Waajid et al., 2013). Ultimately these actions that help manage stress will help with teacher retention and will benefit both adults and children in our school community (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Incorporating SEL and our continued focus on equity into syllabus, curriculum, and instructional practices such as project based learning, academic discussion, cooperative learning, self-reflection and self-assessment, will create the capacity for staff to continuously embed SEL in their work (Yoder, 2014). Developing procedures to review the effectiveness of this work through measures of engagement and achievement, while accounting for biases, will also support this long-term work. Similarly, explicit professional development for embedding SEL within meetings with staff, students and parents, and assessing effectiveness will be critical in supporting the social emotional competencies of staff that can lead to greater wellbeing of teachers and administrators (Jones et al., 2013). Embedding SEL within our actions connects Bryk and Schneider's (2002) emphasis on the importance of building a collective capacity to utilize professional development in a meaningful and ongoing manner.

Thinking of Drago-Severson et al.'s (2013) emphasis on the importance of teacher voice in all changes and professional development, we will work to implement a teacher-to-teacher SEL toolkit as a form of professional development, and identify internal procedures to structure ongoing PD development and provision. In conjunction with this effort we will take actions to centralize staff access to SEL toolkits and resources for continuous improvement.

Lastly, we will take steps to define several additional roles for SEL implementation within the school, some of whom will have supportive development and accountability for those they supervise (Drago-Severson et al., 2013). This includes identifying leader, Instructional Coach, Department Chair and Student Support Team roles in relation to SEL commitment and implementation. Paired with this action is defining and communicating with extracurricular and athletics expectations (coaches and sponsors roles) for SEL implementation, many of whom are often community stakeholders.

### **Strategy 5 - Increase access to SEL via Embedding within the Classroom and through Programs Inside and Outside of the Classroom**

Increasing access to social emotional learning via embedding SEL within the classroom and through programs inside and outside of the classroom is a strategy that embodies conditions, culture, and competencies. The action items to support these SEL efforts should be reviewed for reflections on equity and biases that may exist within events, curriculum and surveys to ensure that we are creating sustainable and equitable practices (Rivas-Drake et al., 2018).

The specific actions include: culturally responsive SEL lessons, surveys, and booster/check-ins in PE/Wellness (universal intervention throughout the school year), Signs of Suicide program & screenings, Clothesline Project for sexual assault awareness, Annual Wellbeing Survey, Pandemic/Remote Learning Wellbeing Survey, Restorative Practices in Freshman Advisory Study Hall, Restorative Practices in PE/Wellness, Restorative Practices in Alternative to Suspensions, Online schoolwide SEL program (identify and implement), Mindfulness Coaches, Mindfulness Center (Room), Family Talk Series (Recordings) and post high school planning lessons and events with community partners.

As I consider this strategy and corresponding action items, I see an entire village of

stakeholders with many strengths to offer each other and our students to build a better future. Simultaneously I see the need to identify a procedure for tracking and centralizing culturally responsive SEL implementation efforts throughout our large system. This will include opportunities to share experiences, missteps, successes, practices, programs, surveys, and stories as recommended by CASEL (n.d.) for ongoing review and improvement. The steering committee for culturally responsive SEL will work to identify how to incorporate this work within existing structures and not add more to staff, teachers' and administrators' plates with yet another committee or task force.

### **Conclusion**

Having identified 5 strategies and corresponding actions to implement the monumental organizational changes related to SEL and equity, I now better understand myself and my role within this change. As I have grown my awareness of our district's culture, contexts, conditions and competencies, I am also more keenly aware of when I should step closer and when to step back, or as Heifetz et al. (2009) would say, when to be on the dance floor and when to be in the balcony, to reflect and sustain change. Deeper reflection of myself as what Goleman et al. (2013) describe as a primal leader as I strive to be attuned to my own emotions in relation to our staff, district, district leaders, and our system as a whole is giving me hope and clarity about the future To-Be picture of Shoreville Community High School. Within the next section I will focus on policy considerations, recommendations, and a thorough analysis of needs related to SEL and equity.

## SECTION SEVEN: IMPLICATIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

We are no exception as a district that has experienced an increase in student mental health needs (Taylor et al., 2017) and staff members' challenges with their own wellbeing while navigating the expectations for their work performance and student needs and wellbeing (Collie et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2018). There is also no denying the constant flood of racial injustices across our country and locally that impact our students every day (Aspen Institute Education & Society Program, 2018; Connley, 2020; Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

In reflecting on the research question of *How does the embedding of SEL practices vary within instructional, non-instructional, and leadership roles?*, with the related questions of: *To what extent does staff capacity building for SEL practices incorporate support for the social emotional competence of both staff and students?* and *How does race relate to social emotional learning practices for staff and students?*, the results of the program evaluation reflect strengths, as well as needs in relation to inconsistencies of our own SEL and equity practices.

The findings point specifically to the importance of consistently centering SEL and equity for both staff and students, informing equitable practices inside and outside of the classroom. In addition, the results reflect the need for greater consistency in relation to social emotional competencies, as seen in the need to help build social emotional competencies for staff and students. Another part of the findings is the obligation to develop consistency as staff members within our district, regardless of role, to exemplify social emotional learning within our actions and interactions.

In order to transform the way we engage students and address our inconsistencies, we must change first, developing our social emotional competencies and culturally responsive

practices (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Simmons, 2019) and understanding SEL as inherent within our actions and instruction, not as a separate program or part of the day. As Cierra Kaler-Jones (2020) stated:

True SEL is about understanding our relationships with ourselves and with others. It's to know ourselves as holistic human beings, and to be able to see the humanity in others to fight, together, for the world we deserve, which is rooted in equity and justice. We can't do this or do this well if we compartmentalize SEL to being just a portion of our day. (para 7).

In considering these needs and inconsistencies specific to our commitment to SEL and equity versus the full implementation that embodies this commitment, I utilized Patton's (2008) user-focused evaluation framework to consider the implications and policy recommendations for this program evaluation. As part of ensuring that the recommendations and analysis are a helpful guide in responding to student and staff need to implement SEL standards while focusing on equity, I have accounted for the administrative decision-makers who will face the decisions and the importance of the utility to the intended users, all SCHS employees, from leaders to teachers to support staff.

These needs and inconsistencies will be addressed through a multi-faceted change plan, as identified in Section Six for the change strategies. To support organizational change, my policy recommendations will focus on clear expectations through performance evaluation frameworks (Danielson, 2009), supported through what Wagner et al. (2006) describe as focused, job-embedded, collaborative, and continuous professional development. These are keys to beginning and sustaining new practices (Oberle et al., 2016).

While these changes will require time and persistence in the face of resistance to change

(Drago-Severson et al., 2013), and may even feel extremely challenging at times, we must directly face the need for actions to do right by our staff and our students. We must remember that our 21st century learners are our future leaders of the world (Wagner, 2008; Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017). And we will hold steadfast in our actions and sense of purpose with the words of racial justice leader Rep. John Lewis in June of 2018, even when we meet resistance from stakeholders that feels like “trouble”:

Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble. (Six Seconds, the Emotional Intelligence Network, n.d., para 2)

We have work ahead of us that is worth the time and effort, and this work begins with policy change.

### **Policy Statement**

The policy I am recommending is a revision of the current SCHS staff and leader evaluation rubrics to incorporate equity-centered social emotional learning through the explicit expectation of embedding the Illinois State Board of Education’s Social Emotional Learning Standards and an equity focus within instruction, service provision, and leadership. The implementation of this policy change for performance expectations will be supported by training and stakeholder input, focused on building staff social emotional competencies that encompass culturally responsive practices and the ISBE Social Emotional Learning Standards, and as reflected in our district’s commitment to bring to life our mission statement: *Embracing its diversity, SCHS dedicates itself to educating all students to their fullest potential.*

This policy change applies to all staff evaluations, not singularly focused on teachers,

including leader evaluations, licensed staff evaluations, and support staff. Performance evaluations will be used to align us with our vision and mission, set expectations for performance, and even more importantly as a tool for staff training (Danielson, 2009). The act of changing the evaluation frameworks will be intensive and worthwhile, just as the comprehensive professional development to support expectations of staff will be. The training will focus on embedding SEL and equity within instruction, service provision, and actions, while also building social emotional competencies of staff.

These recommendations are driven from the knowledge that SCHS, like most schools across the country, has work to do in order to embed SEL and equity while building staff social emotional competencies to meet student needs. The consequences of not attending to these concerns are significant, starting with racially disproportionate achievement and discipline records (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Gregory et al., 2010). We also cannot look the other way when implicit biases are negatively impacting our students and while racism continues to result in more deaths locally and nationally, impacting our students' mental health. Rising mental health needs have an impact on student physical and social emotional wellbeing, as well as a long-term impact on post high school plans (Taylor et al., 2017). With this increase in mental health needs, our staff need to not only have the skills to support our students, but to develop our social emotional competencies to support staff's own functioning. Changing our performance evaluations for every staff member, supported by professional development, will be effective in addressing these concerns in many ways.

As a nationwide leader in equity work, SCHS will use this policy change in powerful ways to embody empathy, compassion and social and racial justice. CASEL's Collaborating States Initiatives (2020) described unintentional acts of reinforcing implicit power and inequities

by privilege, the power of policy change, the power of social emotional competencies and the importance of policy change:

Equal access, awareness of implicit bias, and responsiveness and sensitivity to culture are critical considerations for policymakers, and approaches to SEL can themselves be helpful in promoting equity directly. Specifically, when students and adults themselves have social and emotional competencies—including self- and social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills—they are better equipped to be resilient in the face of adversity and better able to advocate for themselves and others (p. 9).

Just as Freire framed literacy as reading the world, not just the word, this change in performance evaluation supported by training will guide us to embed SEL and demonstrate social emotional competencies as a foundation for understanding and dismantling systems of power which perpetuate inequities (Douglass-Horsford et al., 2019).

The time for change is now, as there is a significant return on investment on social emotional learning. As previously noted, this results in job satisfaction for teachers (Collie et al., 2012), increased academic performance, enhanced engagement, decreased behavior referrals, long-term effects on students' functioning in college and jobs, increased earning potential, and decreased involvement in our penal system (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Zins & Elias, 2007).

In the next subsection I address the analysis of needs relevant to this policy change, including for the areas of educational, economic, social, political, legal, ethical and moral analysis.

## **Analysis of Needs**

In analyzing six disciplinary areas to better understand the inherent needs and problems driving forth the policy recommendation, it is apparent that the needs are profound, the implications complex, and the choices to make are wide reaching. As stated earlier in this document, there is a dearth of available culturally responsive SEL policy examples (Gregory et al., 2016). Yet the needs are marked in multiple areas of analysis and implications, including: educational, economic, social, political, legal, ethical and moral. In order to affect change in school policies to ensure that our educators are not only required to infuse SEL into their daily practices (CASEL, n.d.), staff are also required to be supported and provided with the opportunity to develop the social emotional competencies to navigate the instructional world as asserted by Collie et al. (2012), in addition to centering equity.

### **Educational Analysis**

The Illinois State Board of Education's expectation is that schools should strengthen professional development in conjunction with the evaluation process, with an ultimate aim to help students improve performance (Illinois State Board of Education, 2010). As Danielson (2009) suggests, we will use the evaluation framework for many purposes that align with our school-wide goals of excellence, equity and wellbeing, including hiring, professional development, mentoring and induction, and performance evaluation.

This policy change of using SEL as an organizing framework for the entire district through the evaluation process is linked to our vision and mission and is well supported within the research as previously noted in section two (Bird & Sultmann, 2010; Norris, 2003; Yang et al., 2018; Zins & Elisa, 2007). Social emotional learning, when defined as self-awareness, self-management, engagement with each other, and decision-making (CASEL, n.d.) already exists

within the acts of self-assessment, reflection and professional conversations in Danielson's (2009) evaluation framework. In addition to using evaluations as a growth opportunity in response to observed performance, we will position ourselves to focus on acting preventively with professional development as part of our shared commitment to students (Drago-Severson et al., 2013), just as we are expected to do for our students with models of proactive prevention.

SCHS has already explicitly incorporated equity into our adapted version of the Danielson framework and our next step is to incorporate social emotional learning, giving greater space to see and treat students and each other as human beings. Considering readiness for change while focusing on our intention to enhance student learning will help to create buy-in for the process of change (Reeves, 2016; Smith & Smith, 2015).

Our sense of purpose will drive this change by gaining a deeper understanding of the severity of mental health needs and corresponding negative outcomes, including substance abuse, truancy, drop-out rates, conduct problems, involvement with the criminal justice system, homelessness, unemployment, and psychiatric hospitalizations (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Furthermore, as referenced in section two, as educators we often struggle with understanding our own racial bias and unintentional racism that can manifest in perpetuating racial disproportionality in relation to behavior, grades and post high school planning (Gregory et al., 2016; Sciuchetti, 2017; Staats et al., 2015), which can be further addressed by building our own social emotional awareness. The power of staff members to change the trajectory of students to a positive one is an accompanying focus (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Zins & Elias, 2007). As Jones and Kahn (2017) clearly state in the *Evidence Base for How We Learn*, "the success of young people in school and beyond is inextricably linked to healthy social and emotional development" (p. 4) and schools play a central role in developing those skills.

Following Heifetz et al.'s (2009) recommendation to know our landscape before moving forward with change, we will seek to understand staff perspectives and experiences up-close and from a distance to inform the decisions ahead of us and truly embrace multiple perspectives as an iterative process. A clear time-frame for implementation of the adapted evaluation and professional development will include ongoing culturally responsive SEL professional development for all staff members (Brackett & Patti, 2016; Norris, 2003; Rivers et al., 2013; Sciuchetti, 2017) and will focus on acts of respect to build our classroom and schoolwide culture and climate (Yeager, 2017), which will help build staff buy-in (Allbright et al., 2019; Oberle et al., 2016; Poulou, 2018; Elias et al., 2003). Furthermore, I will work to ensure that administrators listen carefully to any resisters, their perspectives, and their feelings of loss that can accompany change (Heifetz et al., 2009).

### **Economic Analysis**

The economic analysis yields a clear cost/benefit consideration; the impact from a minimal amount of financial investment to build SEL practices through an evaluation framework and providing accompanying professional development can yield tremendous gains from a cost-savings perspective. Not only does every change matter when focusing on human beings, but as has been communicated earlier in this report, SEL has been shown to have a \$1 to \$11 return on investment in terms of long-term benefits, including reduced crime for juveniles, higher earnings over a lifetime, and better mental and physical health (Durlak et al., 2011; Belfield et al., 2015). In addition, the opportunity to save an estimated \$97.3 billion dollars in governmental support and taxes as a result of youth who are not connected to school or later have sustained employment (Slaten et al., 2015) would be valuable not just to our district, but to our society.

Furthermore, investment in SEL yields tremendous outcomes for myriad facets of post high school success locally, nationally and globally. Enhanced college readiness, career success, positive relationships, better mental health and engaged citizenship, as well as decreased substance use and criminal activity in connection to SEL practices has a positive financial impact on our municipality, state and country (Taylor et al., 2017). The domino effect of SEL skills and social emotional competencies was discussed in section two and is seen in increased earning potential for youth with a high school diploma earning \$200,000 more in a lifetime, and college graduates earning almost \$1 million more (Slaten et al., 2015). In fact, SEL skills are foundational for employability skills, such as self-management for strategic planning and reliability, relationship skills for the capacity to listen and engage in conflict resolution (Yoder et al., 2020), and calls for schools and employers to embed SEL to build future workers who can adapt readily as the global workforce further modernizes and embraces its multi-cultural position (Wagner, 2008; Yoder et al., 2020).

Lastly, economic analysis includes the focus on sustaining our staff human capital and a positive financial impact to the district. As we continue building staff social emotional competencies we can increase employee satisfaction and decrease staff turnover (Collie et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2018).

### **Social Analysis**

As we face more mental health needs than ever before within schools and for adults nationwide, the opportunity gap persists within schools, racial injustices continue to occur, and as the pandemic has heightened all of these concerns, now is unquestionably the time to answer the call for policy change. The policy change of incorporating SEL into our evaluation framework, supported by culturally responsive SEL professional development, will have a

positive impact on social relationships within our district in terms of relational trust, social emotional competencies for self, and our obligation to erase the predictability of disproportionality by race.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) assert that social relationships are central to school functioning, fueling both daily actions and the capacity for change through compassion and empathy. Building our capacities to demonstrate genuine listening and personal regard for others will consistently support the tenets of relational trust and SEL, and can help move the mission forward to do the work that is in the best interest of students, which makes taking action not seem so risky (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). We will invite staff into the planning process early for input, focus on our strengths, and find common ground (Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017). With the act of listening to understand we will be able to even better lift staff voice, as well as student voice. Embracing Lubelfeld et al.'s (2018) ask, support, know, empower and monitor framework for engaging students and their voice, we will address myriad staff and leader fears that may exist about folding valuable student voice into the development of a new evaluation framework. There is also the need to bear in mind Heifetz et al.'s (2009) frame that "the conflict is structural, not personal, even if it's taken on a personal tone" (p. 8) as we adapt the evaluation framework and build professional development.

From a social analysis perspective there is a need to build social emotional competencies for self, modeling, teaching, culture and climate. As a teacher and leader shared, when emphasizing the importance of a commitment to modeling SEL, one has to think about SEL for self or students and be prepared to hold others' pain and trauma to avoid burnout (Collie et al., 2015). This will also support our culture and climate, supported by Yeager's (2017) research on SEL and the positive impact on a respectful climate, and the key role that respectful instruction

and classroom environment can play in developing necessary resilient mindsets. Furthermore, connected to our capacity to develop and utilize our social emotional competencies is the research that resistance to social justice and equity work wears down leaders, as well as staff, showing the need to develop and sustain coping strategies as part of social emotional competencies (Pollock, 2017; Theoharis, 2007). Racial equity work cannot be abandoned, and yet in order to sustain this focus we must further develop our own capacities for awareness and coping.

As a critical component of SEL, there is clearly a need to address wide disparities based on race. This policy change is another opportunity to embrace social justice as a foundation of the education profession (Brown, 2004), embodying Freire’s commitment “to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (as cited in Brown, 2004, p. 77). Moreover, both SEL and social justice support “a process built on respect, care, recognition, and empathy” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223), which contributes to a welcoming climate.

As part of our policy change process, we are obligated to decouple SEL from its historically White norms to avoid further perpetuating institutionalized racism (Kaler-Jones, 2020). Similarly, the social analysis yields the need to ensure that we are not repeating cycles of well-meaning cultural responsiveness that simply sustains White privilege by being “congruent with the primary habitus of White, middle-class families” (Douglass-Horsford, 2019, p. 175), while not being conscious of our roles in supporting inequality.

### **Political Analysis**

The commitment to build culturally responsive social emotional learning through the evaluation framework as acts of universal prevention and early intervention (Hammond, 2015;

Rowe & Trickett, 2018) is likely to have considerable support from stakeholders, particularly with the knowledge of the severity of social emotional needs and the daily news coverage of children and adolescents' mental health needs. Within our own community there have been increased expectations and support from community stakeholders for the district to meet the social emotional needs of students. This is consistent with research and recent surveys, as the SEL report by Civic (2019) explains:

the movement to embed social and emotional learning into every classroom in America has reached a tipping point. Principals stand ready to bring systemic, school-wide SEL to their schools, but they need greater support from leaders at the state and district levels to ensure every student has access to a high-quality education that nourishes their social and emotional skills along with their academic learning. Now is the time for policymakers to heed the calls of educators and provide the necessary supports for a student-centric, whole child education that develops the leaders of tomorrow. (p. 4)

There is also a strong emphasis on the importance of emotional intelligence for leaders and teachers, supporting the development of social emotional competencies of leaders and staff. As noted previously, Goleman et al., (2013) describe how resonant leaders handle their relationships and themselves with emotional intelligence, being attuned to the needs of staff and guiding them in positive directions. This is modeling social emotional competencies for all staff (Goleman et al., 2013).

Polemic challenges will abound however, some of them anticipated, such as navigating the input, development, review and monitoring of evaluation frameworks with six different unions. In addition, the commitment to continuous improvement of SEL may be met with resistance around time, capacity to allow more to be added to the list of expectations, and the

desire to focus solely on curricular content. Helping staff understand that SEL will bring value to their students' learning, enhance their content knowledge, and ultimately save behavior management time for teachers (CASEL, n.d.), will be guided by Wagner et al.'s (2006) 7 disciplines for strengthening instruction.

As we continue to work to embody social emotional competencies as leaders, build relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and build clear expectations, we will work through any conflict or mistrust that may occur, listening and inviting perspectives and moving along the journey that is social emotional learning for any age (Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017).

### **Legal Analysis**

In consideration of incorporating social emotional learning that is culturally responsive into staff evaluation rubrics, staff with their Professional Educators License (PEL) will follow the Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA) prescribed expectations for professional practice, student growth, evaluator requirements, observations and pre and post conferences (Illinois State Board of Education, 2010). SCHS engages a joint evaluation committee for licensed staff, and will gather staff input and recommendations for the other five unions at SCHS as well as part of the development and review process for this policy change.

Another component of legal analysis starts with the Children's Mental Health Act of 2003, which led to the adoption of the Illinois Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards (Illinois State Board of Education, n. d.). ISBE has published their recommendation of the below:

*Integration of SEL into systems and practices is highly recommended and can occur by:*

- examining existing systems and structures to determine how social and emotional learning efforts can be integrated into them;

- embedding SEL instruction into existing curricula;
- taking advantage of teachable moments that occur naturally throughout the day
- promoting students' feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence; and
- providing opportunities for students to practice social and emotional competencies (para 6).

The Illinois Social Emotional Learning Standards have not yet been changed to explicitly incorporate equity and culturally responsive practices, hence that is incumbent upon our district to set forth as an expectation.

There are several legal requirements that are in alignment with infusing SEL into the evaluation rubrics, as we ensure that we carefully assess each step that we take on behalf of students. Some of these include: Illinois Student School Records Act, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, Department of Children and Family Services, Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Mandates, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 under the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, Sexual Abuse and Assault reporting and education requirements under Erin's Law, and Suicide Prevention instruction and professional development requirements under AnnMarie's Law (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.).

Specific to SCHS, there are two Board policies that address social emotional learning and will support the school-wide efforts to incorporate SEL into staff evaluation rubrics, accompanied by professional development. These two policies are 6:50 Wellness and 6:65 Student Social and Emotional Development.

## **Moral and Ethical Analysis**

Given our knowledge of the severity of mental health needs for students and our nation's awakening to systemic racism (Evans, 2020; Prother, 2020; Wan, 2020), we have a moral imperative to act now on behalf of our students and our staff. As noted earlier, the return on investment for SEL is remarkable for students, staff and the community, even in terms of implications for taxpayers related to crime, substance use and hospitalizations for youth and adults (Taylor et al., 2017). In addition, many staff are struggling, and building social emotional competencies will help students and staff alike (Collie et al., 2012). SCHS can take this stand, along with CASEL's Collaborating States Initiative (2020) focusing on helping "state education agencies (SEAs) create statewide conditions that will encourage and equip educators to promote integrated, equity-focused, academic, social and emotional learning (SEL)" (p. 2).

As noted earlier in this report, Robert Jagers and his colleagues have identified how to revise the CASEL Social Emotional Learning framework to address inequities, privilege, and the disruption of power that is rooted in acts of social justice (CASEL Collaborating States Initiatives, 2020). Their actions were rooted in many reasons, including the impact on students. As Kaler-Jones (2020) explains, SEL and equity are intertwined and youth are using their voices to disrupt systemic racism, even within SEL:

Young people are angry about this, and under the guise of capitalism, the dominant workforce development framework of SEL encourages young people to stifle the very emotions that have long contributed to a history of resistance, so that they can contribute to society as a worker. SEL has long been about decreasing 'problem' behavior. Even the terms 'manage' and 'regulate' are words commonly associated with transactional business tactics (para. 12).

With this knowledge of pain we consciously or unconsciously inflict upon our youth, our ethical compass guides us to action.

### **Implications for Staff and Community Relationships**

As I reflect on our community partners, our community's fierce pride and investment in our students to become citizens and leaders of tomorrow, I ask myself, what are the implications for this policy change and are they enough to impact our students, staff, families and community members? One of the implications of this policy change is an opportunity to connect more deeply with parents, students and community members, as we work to build our social emotional competencies. This includes positive implications for building greater relational trust, creating an even more respectful culture that emanates to the community from the school (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In addition, this suite of competencies complements academic learning and meets many of the employability needs identified by business leaders, benefitting our community further (Yoder et al., 2020).

Heifetz et al.'s (2009) perspective that as human beings we do not resist change, but instead we resist loss, can be seen as one of the key implications for our staff. This may be for reasons of fear of loss of identity, competence, power or control, among others (Heifetz et al., 2009). Regardless, we must commit to supporting them through this journey, helping staff to see what we will maintain and gain in the midst of perceived losses.

In considering our need to base educational leadership on justice, equality and liberation, Douglass-Horsford et al., (2019) assert that "The field of education leadership is being left behind when it comes to its ability to be nimble and responsive to the needs of today's students, families and communities" (p. 226). It is critical to understand and genuinely explore differences and hear the voices of parents who have been marginalized, working to build relationships that

respect race, culture, and identity within the classroom and the larger school community (Brown, 2004; Hammond, 2015). Furthermore, focusing on assets, Anderson (2007) recommends building upon the strengths of the community. Douglass-Horsford et al. (2019) point out the cultural reproduction and production illustrating cultural resilience via Afrocentric education, and seeing the multiple intelligences of children.

An equity-centered SEL framework through our evaluation rubrics is a way to build the society we want for our schools, families, and world (Six Seconds, the Emotional Intelligence Network, n.d.).

### **Conclusion**

As discussed throughout Section Seven, the needs of students and staff alike are significant, and research supports policy development to address “social, emotional, or mental health problems that affect learning” (Zins & 2007, p. 249). Meriting reflection as part of this process are the research questions of embedding SEL practices and the need for staff capacity building for SEL, supporting the concept of building social emotional competence of both staff and students and the importance of race regarding social emotional learning practices for staff and students. What we see is the power of consistently applying equity-centered SEL to dismantle power. In addressing these needs we can answer the question, “If all change starts within, then how can we grow the emotional intelligence skills needed to shift the systems and build communities of equity?” (Six Seconds, the Emotional Intelligence Network, n.d., para. 1). Using policy as a vehicle for change, SEL and equity will help humanize each other and create long-lasting change for students and staff. This policy change is highlighted again in Section Eight and within a summarized discussion of the program evaluation and leadership lessons.

## **SECTION EIGHT: CONCLUSION**

### **Introduction**

Heeding Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's call to action by joining empathy and empiricism as both ethical and relational work (American Educational Research Association, 2017), I bring a resistance to the grief-driven powerlessness that can settle into the corners of my mind at times and a desire to honor the struggle within the journey. I carry an intense concern about many of our students' capacity to regulate their emotions, cope with challenges, and navigate problems currently and in their future. This concern is compounded by the impact of secondary and vicarious trauma and tremendous loads on our educators (Collie et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2018), along with racial trauma through the violent and repeated racial injustices that pervade our systems and our nation (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017). For me this work continues to be both a personal and professional journey led by my heart, driving my desire to gain a deeper understanding of narratives and synthesize data that ultimately can provoke change. Even as I typed these words I was notified that one of our recent students was shot and killed; my heart wept again, and again I am emboldened to bring about change.

The impact of social and emotional challenges has negative implications for learning and achievement, as well as poor outcomes for employment, independent living, involvement in the juvenile and adult justice systems, inpatient, residential and institutional settings, and post high school education completion (Cannon et al., 2013; Jagers et al., 2018). Myriad mental health challenges are on the rise, including self-injury, eating disorders, and death by homicide and suicide, which can create immense barriers to student learning (Child's World NEWS Team,

2019). The sense of urgency has only grown through a pandemic during which mental health needs have grown (Prother, 2020), awareness has grown about chronic stressors for people of color (Evans, 2020) and about the racial injustices that continue to be perpetrated across our nation (Stolberg, 2020).

All of this happens at SCHS despite intervention after intervention for individuals and groups by teams of staff and supportive teachers connecting with students. This happens despite a shift in our thinking and messaging that social-emotional functioning is intricately interwoven with academic performance and post high school success. This happens despite the fact that our principal named wellbeing as our focus for this year, encouraging us to care for our students, ourselves and each other. This happens despite hiring additional mental health staff through the years in response to student need, and the fact that we have social emotional learning (SEL) programming in place of suspension programs and SEL programming for all students through PE and wellness classes. This happens despite the fact that we are moving toward a schoolwide prevention focus by looking at our Tier 1 actions. This happens despite no longer naming social emotional learning as solely a Student Services or social work issue, but rather as a collective responsibility. This happens despite the message to students that they have agency and are encouraged to use their voices to effect changes in our school, and are encouraged to make changes themselves. This happens despite myriad new mindfulness programs to support staff and students. As Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (Moyers, 1988) points out, this should not come as a surprise considering the tremendous expectations that have historically been heaped upon schools to address societal ills and needs. This is an opportunity to look at the broader educational context to address concerns, explained by Lawrence-Lightfoot:

My feeling is that we have expected far too much of schools, that we have had very high aspirations for the ways in which schools will in some sense solve all of our cultural and social crises, and economic crises, laid on schools just an extraordinary set of agendas . . . part of what we have to look at is the sort of broad ecology of education, the other institutions that educate, and have a more sort of realistic view of the roles that schools can play, and a more discrete view of the roles that schools can play in our society.

(Moyers, 1988, Para 24)

The purpose of this program evaluation was to explore how to increase support for student and staff wellbeing by examining how schools embed social emotional learning within all roles, from leaders to support staff. This included addressing the need to provide professional development to build staff capacity through social emotional competencies, while considering the role of race within SEL practices.

Evidence delineates the positive impact of SEL programming on increased academic performance, job satisfaction for teachers, enhanced engagement, decreased behavior referrals, and long-term effects on students' functioning in college and jobs with decreased involvement in our penal system (Collie et al., 2015; Durlak et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2018; Zins & Elias, 2007). While these findings are important, even more promising is research that has focused on the impact of embedding social emotional learning within instruction and engagement with students in all spaces (Allbright, 2019; Civic, 2019; Zins & Elias, 2007). Markowitz and Bouffard (2020) also note that infusing SEL within instruction is easier to sustain in an educational world where turnover, leadership changes, and program funding can halt SEL programming. Attending to the development of social emotional competencies for staff and students occurs:

within a complicated context of relationships, past experiences, and beliefs, all of which are strongly influenced by race, class and culture. Both children and teachers live within a society of structural racism, defined by the Aspen Institute Community Roundtable for Change as “a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various ways, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity.” Any attention to teaching social and emotional competencies must integrate attention to the sociopolitical, cultural, community and individual contexts that influence the thinking and actions of both adults and children. (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020, p. 9)

While changing systems and structures to further develop culturally responsive social emotional learning and competencies takes time, persistence, and the development of more trust (Drago-Severson et al., 2013; Wagner, 2008), this can be realized, and it helps me to return to my own sense of purpose as well as to the voices from SCHS. One leader described their purpose as focusing on the act of showing you care as an educator, explaining that:

A student is not going to learn until they know how much you care . . . and being there at all times, and having your antenna up to see where there's a need, I think it requires a huge amount of caring.

Furthermore, the importance of our own social emotional competencies was captured by a SCHS staff member who shared, “I think people who are self-aware, can talk about self-awareness with other people, who can regulate their emotions, can really help others regulate their emotions, whether that's a teacher or leader.” Together we can help each other, show we care, build trust, and bring about change.

## Discussion

### *Purpose and Process*

The purpose of this work was to explore how to increase support for student and staff wellbeing by examining how schools embed social emotional learning within all roles, from leaders to support staff. Professional development to build staff capacity through social emotional competencies, while considering the role of race within SEL practices, was also a part of this purpose. Focusing on the importance of the integration of SEL and effective learning has guided this process, supported by research, including as Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey (2018) assert:

New knowledge about human development from neuroscience and the sciences of learning and development demonstrates that effective learning depends on secure attachments; affirming relationships; rich, hands-on learning experiences; and explicit integration of social, emotional, and academic skills. (p. v)

Similarly, gaining clarity about the relationship between culturally responsive practices and social emotional learning for staff and students has been a part of this process supporting the purpose (National Equity Project, n.d.; Sciuchetti, 2017; Simmons, 2019).

While considering how to bring about school-wide organizational change that supports the act of embedding culturally responsive social emotional learning practices throughout our District, this process facilitated my own social emotional learning as I considered more breadth than our overall school experience and more depth than simply naming stakeholders, looking at both the forest (our school community) and the trees (our students and staff). I needed to humanize every individual connected to our school, search for social emotional learning practices, consider how race relates to social emotional learning, and ensure that I am also

working to embed my own development of empathy and perspective-taking as part of my own social emotional learning process. This is consistent with Akinbode's (2013) assertion that the social emotional act of reflection as educators guides our being and becoming, and serves to avoid dehumanization. Reyes (2016) explains that:

Dehumanization is a distortion of what it means to be fully human, while those who dehumanize become dehumanized themselves in the process. To be more fully human is to act, think, and reflect on one's presence and position in the world, and to be allowed to do so. (p. 339)

Ultimately this reflection helps us and helps students to humanize ourselves and each other to utilize the Illinois Social Emotional Learning Goals of self-awareness, self-management, engagement with each other, and decision-making (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.), furthering our efforts with isolating race in relation to SEL via culturally responsive practices.

### ***Goals, Organizational Change Plan, and Policy***

The goals for this program evaluation were to develop a school-wide approach to support staff and students through SEL, including to embed SEL within all practices, to develop SEL competencies, and to identify the role of race within SEL. Addressing these goals included working directly on the act of embedding school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity. Fulfilling these goals occurred through the development of an organizational change plan focused on Wagner et al.'s (2006) 4 Cs features of context, culture, conditions, and competencies. This started with Wagner et al.'s (2006) As-Is snapshot of our district and moved into the To-Be articulation for our district with specific strategies for change. This journey arrived at a policy recommendation that builds staff

and student culturally responsive social emotional competencies through professional development (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Kaler-Jones, 2020; Simmons, 2019), integrating clear expectations of these culturally responsive SEL practices into the evaluation frameworks (Danielson, 2009).

“Life is Complicated” lives up to the name of the program evaluation, with the As-Is assessment of SCHS revealing many strengths as well as weaknesses that show we have work yet to do. Wagner et al.’s (2006) 4 Cs within this program evaluation include:

- **Context** of Current and Historical Pain and Support
- **Culture** of Commitment, Relationships, Empathy and Inconsistency
- **Conditions** When Resources Feel Scarce
- **Competencies** that Support Social Emotional Learning for Staff and Students.

The two primary themes throughout the 4 Cs reflect the complicated paradox of “yes, and” to indicate strengths and vulnerable areas to develop: *“Theme One: The Commitment to SEL and Equity is Strong, AND We Are Not There Yet”* and *“Theme Two: Trust is Strong - AND We are Not There Yet.”* I intend to follow Wagner et al.’s (2006) guidance to envision change and capture the hearts and minds of stakeholders, reflecting on these themes and using the below 5 strategies and accompanying actions to build upon our current strengths as we aspire to move to the To-Be picture of SCHS through implementation, management, and continual improvement.

- Strategy 1 - Support for Staff and Trust Development
- Strategy 2 - Shifting, Defining and Measuring SEL & Equity
- Strategy 3 - School-wide Implementation via Shared Leadership and Vision
- Strategy 4 - Professional development to embed SEL & Equity
- Strategy 5 - Increase access to SEL via Embedding within the Classroom and through Programs Inside and Outside of the Classroom

Focusing on support for staff and trust development, Strategy One embraces acts of reflection that are SEL (Akinbode, 2013), as well as the importance of learning how to traverse relationships (Goleman et al., 2013; Hammond, 2015; Slaten et al., 2015; Wagner et al., 2006), as we continuously work to remain student-centered while focusing on the entire child (Darling-

Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Building trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) will take place through a steering committee that includes various stakeholder voices, staff wellbeing surveys, peer to peer groups for support, and group counseling development opportunities. Action steps within Strategy One include mindfulness and reflective practices to build resilience (Reeves, 2016), mistakes buoyed by learning how to engage in restorative practices to build trust and sustain our self-care (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018), leading by example to be attuned emotionally to staff members (Heifetz et al., 2009; Goleman et al., 2013), and “listening from the heart” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 266).

Strategy Two focuses on shifting, defining and measuring SEL & equity by developing a vision and plan for culturally responsive SEL (CASEL, n.d.) and supporting ongoing improvements in a realistic and sustainable way (Drago-Severson et al., 2013). As we work to connect our dots with qualitative and quantitative data as suggested by Patton (2008), we will also engage in asset mapping and resource identification, to identify strengths and needs (CASEL, n.d.; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). A school-wide mindfulness program and review and redevelopment of our Mission and Vision to incorporate SEL are steps that will help build trust and sustainability (Drago-Severson et al., 2013; Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Implementing school wide changes through shared leadership and vision as part of Strategy Three lifts many voices (Heifetz et al., 2009), beginning with integrating a culturally responsive SEL framework into existing leadership committees to embody Wagner’s (2008) description of shared leadership and cross cultural collaboration. Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) foundational elements of relational trust focus on building trust with community stakeholders, and we will also embrace this.

Professional development that focuses on embedding culturally responsive SEL practices is Strategy Four, and will be driven by Drago-Severson's (2013) concept of consistent and connected professional development. This includes self-assessment to build adult SEL (CASEL, n.d.), as well as mindfulness, coping, problem-solving, communication, and social skills (Collie et al., 2012; National Equity Project, n.d.; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Waajid et al., 2013), helping to manage stress, which will benefit everyone in the school community (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Yoder (2014) notes the power of creating the capacity for staff to continuously embed SEL in their curriculum, syllabus and instructional practices. Focusing on teacher and staff voice for professional development, we can empower teachers and educational service providers to provide ongoing professional development (Drago-Severson et al., 2013).

Strategy Five increases access to SEL via embedding within the classroom and through programs inside and outside of the classroom, carefully examining for potential biases that may exist so that we create sustainable and equitable practices (Rivas-Drake et al., 2018). These action steps include lessons, surveys, self-assessments and progress monitoring for students, mental health and suicide risk screenings, sexual assault awareness programming, and evening events.

The recommended policy to create clear culturally responsive SEL embedded practices as part of all performance evaluations (Danielson, 2009) simultaneously addresses the organizational change plan and original program evaluation. In order to support both the technical and adaptive elements of the policy change (Heifetz et al., 2009), we must begin and sustain new practices through focused, job-embedded, collaborative, and continuous professional development (Oberle et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2006). Through each step we will maintain focus on race through our mission statement as leaders and staff members: *Embracing its*

*diversity, SCHS dedicates itself to educating all students to their fullest potential, as well as our Statement on Equity: SCHS is committed to equity because excellence for all students requires equity.*

### **Leadership Lessons**

Through this process I have encountered many leadership lessons, sometimes stumbling upon them, sometimes intentionally seeking them out, and other times finally seeing them as a revelation. Life truly is complicated, and this process has been made more so by more deaths of loved ones, including students and staff, a pandemic, and a nation whose awareness has grown about disproportionate violence against people of color and racial injustices that persist in all facets of our society. This process has provided me with many opportunities to deeply feel pain, joy, empathy, and the need for persistence and to pause for reflection and accountability.

What I have been most surprised about was the obvious; SEL is connected to everything we do as educators. SEL is inherent within and prepares us for our race and equity work, culturally responsive teaching and services, a culture that creates feelings of trust and respect, engagement with each other and students, developing future citizens of the world with powerful post high school plans, and is the foundation of adaptive leadership. Why had I not seen this before? Why had I not previously spent more time shoring up coping strategies so that leaders and staff members have greater capacity to do tremendously hard work as we guide, support and instruct students? Why am I not more actively reflecting with leaders on our SEL-related actions, inactions and missteps? Asking and answering these questions has been yet another call to action for me as evidenced in the below summary of leadership lessons:

1. SEL as Preparation for Capacity and Competency Building
2. Modeling Emotional Attunement as Educators: Building Relational Trust
3. The Power of Persistence and Distributive Leadership

#### 4. Responding to the Invitation, Obligation & Opportunity to No Longer Accept the Status Quo

Realizing that SEL is itself preparation for all facets of students and staff members' lives, and that building staff and student capacity and social emotional competencies to navigate learning, life outside of school, racial injustices and the future, is just the beginning for me. This awareness has helped me grow by looking at the whole staff member's identity first, in the same way that Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) suggest looking at the whole student's identity. In the same way that we help a client in a therapeutic relationship develop skills before unpacking their trauma, we can better prepare students and staff to hold students' trauma, look deeply at racism and racial trauma, consider our own racialized perceptions and actions, and develop culturally responsive instruction and practices, strengthening students and staff by first building our self-awareness, coping strategies and decision-making (Hammond, 2015; Johnson & Weiner, 2017), rather than leaving staff feeling exhausted from the journey or depleted from the resistance from stakeholders about our commitment to racial justice. Building our social emotional competencies will increase our capacity to self-reflect, empathize, humanize, and take accountability for our own actions.

Leadership lesson number two revolves around the importance of building relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) through modeling emotional attunement as educators (Goleman et al., 2013). Through this process I was reminded that everything we do impacts culture, including caring and compassion shown by staff and leaders, as well as the culture that can result when staff do not feel cared for, trusted or respected and therefore have fewer reserves to engage in the needed actions to support students.

Working to build and utilize my own culturally responsive SEL skills means I have to consistently be attuned to myself, others and those I lead. I must demonstrate consistency of

self-awareness, self-regulation, use of coping techniques, problem-solving with others and circling back to difficult conversations, taking accountability for mistakes, as we don't always get it right, taking responsibility for self-care and asking for help when I need it, listening carefully and pausing. Demonstrating empathy, accepting feedback with humility, and being vulnerable are skills to be practiced, not innate traits (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Goleman et al., 2013). Not only does this help each of us to engage in what Drago-Severson et al. (2013) describe as a way to make sense of the world through understanding experiences, it also helps us embrace authenticity and integrity as part of attunement. All of this contributes to the development of what Bryk and Schneider (2002) describe as foundational for a school culture; relational trust.

Remembering that the investment in people and relationships changes even how we receive facts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), and recalling that the commitment to demonstrating flexibility, compassion and building relationships is central to SEL and leadership (Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017), I reflect on the words of our staff members. A teacher said in terms of listening and showing respect and interest in students with humility: “there's a leadership role there, but it's also [that] I have respect for you and your opinions and I'm learning from you, just like you're learning from me.” In thinking about self-reflection, a leader shared that:

We could probably help each other a lot better if we did some . . . of our own soul searching, much like they ask us to do when we do the training with diversity. There are some of those exercises that I think we could certainly use just as leaders to just reflect on leadership. . . . And so maybe what we need to do is to engage our leadership team in that way.

Another leader explained the significance of how we engage with each other, stating that:

I really believe how things are done matters. And what you think about me, how it means . . . you show up as the leader, how you communicate. And in order to do those things you need to have self-awareness, you need to think about how you can regulate your emotions in the moment, how that impacts decision making, [and] what are the relationships like amongst the people.

This emphasizes the importance of self-awareness, including how and what we do and say with each other.

The power of persistence and distributive leadership is the third leadership lesson I have learned and grown from through this process and the pandemic. As SEL became an even greater focal point for schools across our nation during the pandemic, many staff members, both leaders and teachers, have taken initiative that is helping us grow together as a district with relational trust and with structures that support SEL and culturally responsive practices. As I have developed my capacity to assess our district's strengths and needs, I am building my awareness of when to do what Heifetz et al. (2009) describe as stepping onto the balcony to pause to sustain change, and when to be on the dance floor in the midst of the work. This includes stepping out of the way to ensure that the voices of inspired staff members and leaders continue to grow in ownership of SEL, celebrating that many of us must tend to the fire in developing this work. Finally, while tenacity is often a strength of mine, I plan to remain focused on my sense of purpose with an unwavering resolve, continuing to build relationships, empathy and validation of our staff's hard work (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Lastly, responding to the invitation, moral obligation and opportunity to no longer accept the status quo of how we see SEL and culturally responsive practices is invigorating; in the end we are helping students and ourselves. It is time for me to have a role in ensuring that our

systems are in place to improve student and staff social emotional learning, not maintaining the status quo (Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017; Wagner, 2008). My commitment to relational trust connects to the moral obligation of school improvement that Bryk and Schneider (2002) assert is demonstrated through words and actions. As such, I will work to model increasing my awareness and steps for change, consistent with the concept of Praxis being the movement between reflection and action (Brown, 2004). Continuing my own journey with race and needing to change my own practices will support this as we grow culturally relevant pedagogy that is supported by SEL (Hammond, 2015). I have also learned the importance of staying alert to the ways that the field of education is shifting and embracing the increased emphasis on the importance of SEL and equity being published recently. In fact, CASEL has updated their position to be even more integrated with equity, asserting that:

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. SEL advances educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation. SEL can help address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities. (Niemi, 2020, para. 3 and 4)

Seeing this as an opportunity, my commitment has never been stronger to build upon this shift, building structures that will help develop and sustain caring adults who model and practice culturally relevant SEL, CASEL (n.d). We have an obligation to help students become more successful during their time with us and beyond, and we have an opportunity to learn and practice SEL with each other, ourselves, and our students every day and to understand how race relates to each of our actions, including within the context of SEL. As is the SCHS way, we have the opportunity to become a model for the state and the nation in leading SEL and equity.

### **Conclusion**

As an ever-changing and demanding profession, the field of education essentially requires that each educator often revisit their commitment to students in order to sustain the work. My own commitment to education connects to a commitment to supporting students and staff members. Seeking to understand each person's experiences, I hold the pain of loss and trauma and the joy of small and large successes, remembering that "The stories, the faces, and the voices remain with us with an insistence that numbers can rarely inspire" (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 135).

Life continues to be complicated; the intensity of student needs is greater now than ever. Pervasive trauma, mental health needs, an opportunity gap, and racial trauma impact student learning, and schools are called upon to act as de facto mental health centers (Child's World NEWS Team, 2019; Education Week, 2020). Now is the time for each of us to answer the urgent call to action by building our own social emotional competencies that will grow relational trust, enhance our school culture, and sustain our work as employees. Seizing this opportunity to model care and support, we can embed SEL within all of our culturally responsive instruction

and practices for students, building lifelong skills and creating personal, professional, and organizational change.

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## **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT**

Reaching out to specific support staff, teachers, and leaders via email:

Subject: invitation from Taya (or research interview with Taya)

Greetings,

As a National Louis University Doctoral Candidate I would like to invite SCHS staff members to participate in a 60 minute interview as part of my research. The purpose of this research is to explore how to increase support for students and staff wellbeing through social emotional learning (SEL) practices within staff roles in schools, including teachers, support staff and leaders.

This research has been approved by SCHS , and is voluntary and confidential. Attached is the informed consent form for your review in advance of any participation.

If you are interested in sharing your experiences, perspective, and journey about social emotional learning and wellbeing through an interview, please email me by [fill in the date] at [REDACTED]. More background information will be sent once you confirm your interest.

In the meanwhile, if you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [REDACTED] or my cell at (phone number deleted for privacy for publication).

Sincerely,  
Taya Kinzie  
NLU Doctoral Candidate  
Shoreville Community High School Associate Principal for Student Services  
Cell (phone number deleted for privacy for publication)  
[REDACTED]

## APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP RECRUITMENT

Email to department chairs and school leaders sent from my NLU email address at [REDACTED]:

Greetings,

As a National Louis University Doctoral Candidate I am writing to ask if you would forward this to your respective departments and teams.

I would like to invite you to participate in a 60 minute focus group (small discussion group) as part of my research as an NLU Doctoral Candidate. The purpose of this research is to explore how to increase support for students and staff wellbeing through social emotional learning (SEL) practices within staff roles in schools, including teachers, support staff, and leaders.

This research has been approved by SCHS, and is voluntary and confidential. Attached is the informed consent form for your review in advance of any participation.

If you are interested in sharing your experiences, perspective, and journey about social emotional learning and wellbeing in small focus groups, please email me by [fill in the date] at [REDACTED]. More background information will be sent to those confirming attendance before the focus group is held.

In the meanwhile, if you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [REDACTED] or my cell (phone number deleted for privacy for publication).

Sincerely,  
Taya Kinzie  
NLU Doctoral Candidate  
Shoreville Community High School Associate Principal for Student Services  
Cell (phone number deleted for privacy for publication)  
[REDACTED]

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL**

### **Prior to Interview and Focus Group:**

1. An email invitation was sent to staff members via the leaders of their department, and emails were sent directly to leaders using purposeful sampling. The recruitment email included the purpose of the research, that the research had been approved by SCHS, the voluntary and confidential nature of the research, and the request for volunteers for one in-person 60-minute interview, or for one in-person 60-minute focus group.
2. A confirmation email was sent in response to staff members who were volunteering to participate. The confirmation included meeting details, an invitation to ask any questions in advance, and the informed consent form and the interview questions were attached for review in advance of the interview.

### **Interview and Focus Group Process:**

1. The informed consent form was reviewed verbally, participants given an opportunity to ask any questions about the informed consent, and the two written informed consent forms were signed by myself and the participant prior to the start of the interview. A copy was retained by the participant and I retained the original.
2. The interviewees or focus group participants were thanked for participating, encouraged to openly participate with no judgment, as well as reminded of the purpose of the study, the process for the interviews or focus groups, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the ability to stop their participation at any time.
3. Due to the highly sensitive nature of the topics of staff and student race and wellbeing, special attention was given verbally to interview and focus group participants regarding the significance and requirement of confidentiality by this researcher, as well as the confidentiality of each participant as a central component to this research in order to protect staff and students wellbeing and privacy.
4. Specific to focus groups, the requirements of confidentiality for focus group participants were noted as a condition for participation in the focus group on the informed consent documents. This included the explicit expectation in the informed consent document that the participant will not repeat in writing or verbally what is shared by staff members within the focus group.
5. The recording device was explained via the Otter app on my cell phone, as well as my note taking throughout the interview and focus group, and the confidentiality within those processes.
6. In consideration of psychological wellbeing, one risk that participants may experience is feeling triggered by examining the challenges around social emotional learning for staff

and students. This will be addressed by providing staff members with the Employee Assistance Program information in advance of participation.

7. Interview and Focus Group questions were provided in writing and asked verbally, and were thanked at the end.

## **APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT INTERVIEW FORM**

My name is Taya Kinzie, and I am a National Louis University Doctoral Candidate. I am asking you to participate in this study, “Life is Complicated: The Urgent Call to Support Student Wellbeing through Social Emotional Learning”, occurring from November 2019 to May 2020.

The purpose of this research is to explore how to increase support for students and staff wellbeing through social emotional learning (SEL) practices, which can guide professional development, as well as staff and teacher development programs. This research will help educators develop a deeper understanding of the variety of SEL practices within different staff roles, professional development for SEL practices and social emotional competence skills, and how race relates to SEL practices.

This form outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant.

By signing below, you are providing consent to participate in a research project conducted by Taya Kinzie, Doctoral Candidate at National Louis University, Lisle.

Please understand that the purpose of the study is to explore social emotional learning practices within the context of staff and student wellbeing, not to directly assess individual staff mental health status within the school setting.

Participation in this study will include one interview for approximately 60 minutes during the time frame of November 2019 through May 2020.

Your participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time without penalty or bias. The results of this study may be published or otherwise reported at conferences, and employed to inform social emotional learning practices at Shoreville Community High School, but participants’ identities will in no way be revealed (data will be reported anonymously and bear no identifiers that could connect data to individual participants). To ensure confidentiality the researcher(s) will secure the completed interview information in a locked cabinet in their private office, separately storing names and numbers to identify respective names; the data file of compiled results will be kept in a password protected folder in a private workspace; followed by destruction of all identifying information. Only Taya Kinzie will have access to the data.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits, no greater than that encountered in daily life. However, in consideration of psychological well-being, one risk that participants may experience is feeling triggered by examining the challenges around social emotional learning for staff and students. Staff members may seek support through the Shoreville Community High School's Employee Assistance Program ComPsych Guidance Resources at 800-272-7255 in advance of participating in the interview, as well as following participation in the interview.

Further, the information gained from this study could be useful to Taya Kinzie, Shoreville Community High School and other schools and school districts looking to increase support for staff and students through social emotional learning.

Upon request you may receive summary results from this study and copies of any publications that may occur. Please email the researcher, Taya Kinzie at [REDACTED] to request results from this study.

In the event that you have questions or require additional information, please contact the researcher, Taya Kinzie, [REDACTED], phone # (deleted for privacy for publication).

If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that has not been addressed by the researcher, you may contact:

- Dissertation Chair and the EDL Program Chair, Dr. Harrington Gibson, [harrington.gibson@nl.edu](mailto:harrington.gibson@nl.edu), phone # (deleted for privacy for publication), National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.
- NLU IRRB Co-Chair, Dr. Shaunti Knauth, [shaunti.knauth@nl.edu](mailto:shaunti.knauth@nl.edu), phone # (deleted for privacy for publication), National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.
- NLU IRRB Co-Chair, Dr. Kathleen Cornett; email: [kcornett@nl.edu](mailto:kcornett@nl.edu); phone # (deleted for privacy for publication), National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

Thank you for your consideration.

*Consent:*

I understand that by signing below, I am agreeing to participate in the study "Life is Complicated: The Urgent Call to Support Student Wellbeing through Social Emotional Learning."

My participation will consist of the activities below during November 2019 through May 2020 time period:

Completion of one interview, with the interview taking approximately 60 minutes to complete.

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

NLU Doctoral Candidate

Shoreville Community High School Associate Principal for Student Services

## **APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT FOCUS GROUP FORM**

My name is Taya Kinzie, and I am a Doctoral Candidate at National Louis University. I am asking you to participate in this study, “Life is Complicated: The Urgent Call to Support Student Wellbeing through Social Emotional Learning”, occurring from November 2019 to May 2020.

The purpose of this research is to explore how to increase support for students and staff wellbeing through social emotional learning (SEL) practices, which can guide professional development, as well as staff and teacher development programs. This research will help educators develop a deeper understanding of the variety of SEL practices within different staff roles, professional development for SEL practices and social emotional competence skills, and how race relates to SEL practices.

This form outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant. By signing below, you are providing consent to participate in a research project conducted by Taya Kinzie, Doctoral Candidate at National Louis University, Lisle.

Please understand that the purpose of the study is to explore social emotional learning practices within the context of staff and student wellbeing, not to directly assess individual staff mental health status within the school setting.

Participation in this study will include one focus group for approximately 60 minutes during the time frame of November 2019 through May 2020.

Your participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time without penalty or bias. The results of this study may be published or otherwise reported at conferences, and employed to inform social emotional learning practices at Shoreville Community High School, but participants’ identities will in no way be revealed (data will be reported anonymously and bear no identifiers that could connect data to individual participants). To ensure confidentiality the researcher(s) will secure the completed focus group information in a locked cabinet in their private office, separately storing names and numbers to identify respective names; the data file of compiled results will be kept in a password protected folder in a private workspace; followed by destruction of all identifying information. Only Taya Kinzie will have access to the data.

Furthermore, in recognition of the highly sensitive and complex nature of the topics of race and wellbeing, a requirement of participation in this focus group is to maintain confidentiality of information shared by all participants. In order to protect the wellbeing, privacy and confidentiality of staff and students, your consent indicates that you are committed to ensuring

the confidentiality of all information shared by staff members during your focus group. This means not repeating in writing or verbally what is shared by staff members within the focus group.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits, no greater than that encountered in daily life. However, in consideration of psychological well-being, one risk that participants may experience is feeling triggered by examining the challenges around social emotional learning for staff and students. Staff members may seek support through the Shoreville Community High School's Employee Assistance Program ComPsych Guidance Resources at 800-272-7255 in advance of participating in the focus group, as well as following participation in the focus group.

Further, the information gained from this study could be useful to Taya Kinzie, Shoreville Community High School and other schools and school districts looking to increase support for staff and students through social emotional learning.

Upon request you may receive summary results from this study and copies of any publications that may occur. Please email the researcher, Taya Kinzie at [REDACTED] to request results from this study.

In the event that you have questions or require additional information, please contact the researcher, Taya Kinzie, [REDACTED] phone # (deleted for privacy for publication).

If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that has not been addressed by the researcher, you may contact:

- Dissertation Chair and the EDL Program Chair, Dr. Harrington Gibson, [harrington.gibson@nl.edu](mailto:harrington.gibson@nl.edu), phone # (deleted for privacy for publication), National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.
- NLU IRRB Co-Chair, Dr. Shaunti Knauth, [shaunti.knauth@nl.edu](mailto:shaunti.knauth@nl.edu), phone # (deleted for privacy for publication), National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.
- NLU IRRB Co-Chair, Dr. Kathleen Cornett; email: [kcornett@nl.edu](mailto:kcornett@nl.edu); phone: phone # (deleted for privacy for publication), National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

Thank you for your consideration.

*Consent:*

I understand that by signing below, I am agreeing to participate in the study "Life is Complicated: The Urgent Call to Support Student Wellbeing through Social Emotional Learning."

My participation will consist of the activities below during November 2019 through May 2020 time period:

Completion of one focus group, with the focus group taking approximately 60 minutes to complete with approximately 10 staff members present.

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

NLU Doctoral Candidate  
Shoreville Community High School Associate Principal for Student Services

## **APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

### Identity:

1. Tell me about your background, identity, role, and years in your current professional role.

### Staff Preparedness:

2. Thinking about staff preparedness for practicing, modeling and teaching social emotional learning (SEL) skills, including embedding SEL practices within your daily work, how ready do you feel? (What are you feeling most confident in? Least?)
3. What do you need more of to feel prepared to practice social emotional learning for yourself in the school environment, including modeling SEL practices?

### Variation of SEL practices:

4. From your perspective, how do current SEL practices of modeling SEL vary within instructional, non-instructional (eg=support staff, safety) and leadership roles?
5. What attributes or characteristics may contribute to differences in SEL modeling among staff members based on roles (instructional, non-instructional, and leadership)?
6. How does race relate to social emotional learning practices for staff and students?
7. From your perspective, how does race of a student and race of a staff member impact:
  - a. Staff expectations of behavior or SEL?
  - b. Staff perceptions of behavior or SEL?

### Challenges and Suggestions for Improving SEL Practices:

8. What questions or concerns do you have about SEL?
9. What challenges do you think about SEL modeling and implementation?
10. What improvements need to be made to ensure implementation of SEL practices (modeling and teaching) among:
  - c. Instructional
  - d. non-instructional (eg=support staff, safety)
  - e. leadership roles
11. Is there anything else you would like me to know?

## APPENDIX G: 4 CS *AS-IS* CHART

### **Context - *As-Is***

Focused on: Embedding culturally responsive school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- One school (high school), one district.
- 4,000 students; 605 employees.
- 1.2 million square feet under one roof
- Student population includes: American Indian 0.2 %, Asian 5.8%, Black or African American 25.9%, Hispanic/Latino 18.8%, Two or more races 3.4%, and White 45.8%.
- Focus on student identity and social consciousness.
- Many social service agencies and licensed mental health providers in the community.
- Desire to quantify and measure social emotional learning, at times with absolutes that are difficult to achieve.
- High student needs, with 100 psychiatric hospitalizations last school year.
- Demonstrated economic support for SEL seen in the increased number of school-based mental health providers (11 social workers, 5 psychologists and 15 grade level counselors).
- Private practice mentality (pull the student out of class to handle issues or “fix” them, rather than support students in the classroom setting).

### **Culture - *As-Is***

Focused on: Embedding culturally responsive school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- School is highly committed to race and equity.
- SEL is not infused into, nor explicitly incorporated into syllabus or curriculum.
- Staff have embraced a model of “Consult, consult, consult” to address crises.
- Leadership named belonging and wellbeing as a central focus for the district.
- Staff are overwhelmed with student needs, many initiatives, and things to do.
- Leaders state the intention to eradicate silos, but actions reinforce silos and grow isolation.
- Trust varies among leaders and between leaders and staff, from minimal to moderate levels of trust.
- Programs at times are created without full data upon which to base the decisions.

### **Conditions - As-Is**

Focused on: Embedding culturally responsive school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- Explicit expectations are communicated for staff responsibilities to address individual student crises.
- Time is allotted to address race and equity, as well as how to handle student crises within all-staff, departmental, lunch-and-learn, professional learning modules, and on-line meetings and trainings.
- No professional development time allotted to learn how to instruct, infuse, and model SEL.
- High mental health provider to student ratio, including creating additional positions in the last 6 years: Student Services Intervention Coordinator, Department Chair for Student Services, 2 additional Psychologists, additional Counselor, and additional Social Workers.
- Currently brand and communicate “Acknowledge, Care, Tell” to staff, students and families.
- Outfacing structures exist on web pages about crisis intervention, but none about SEL.
- Multiple and complex student crises act as a barrier to focusing more fully on prevention within the classroom and beyond.
- All staff and leaders do not yet take accountability of SEL within curriculum and instruction, as well as within office spaces.

### **Competencies - As-Is**

Focused on: Embedding culturally responsive school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- Mental health and non-mental health staff know what they need to do when a student is in crisis.
- Mental health staff know how to address student crises (eg=if a student may be at risk of harming self or others).
- Staff have not built the capacity to support students through preventing crises, building coping skills, and developing problem-solving skills.
- Staff struggle with building their own coping and problem-solving skills.
- Signs of Suicide program has been newly implemented with all freshman, including suicide risk screeners.
- Leadership struggles to provide direction or guidance on blending SEL with instruction.
- Some instructional staff integrate elements of SEL into instruction, eg=journaling and mindful moments.

## APPENDIX H: ENVISIONING THE SUCCESS: 4 CS *TO-BE* CHART

### **Context - To-Be**

Focused on: Embedding culturally responsive school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- One school (high school), one district.
- 4,000 students; 605 employees.
- 1.2 million square feet under one roof.
- Student population includes: American Indian 0.2 %, Asian 5.8%, Black or African American 25.9%, Hispanic/Latino 18.8%, Two or more races 3.4%, and White 45.8%.
- Focus on student identity, social consciousness and social emotional learning for lifelong skill and identity development.
- Many social service agencies, licensed mental health providers in the community, and city service providers integrate support for social emotional learning as life skills.
- Save lives and costs by preventing additional stress on social service networks post high school.
- Value the measurement of social emotional learning through academic and behavioral qualitative and quantitative means, including student voice.
- Decreased student needs, with fewer psychiatric hospitalizations.
- Demonstrated economic support for SEL seen in the increased number of school-based mental health providers (eg=11 social workers, 5 psychologists and 15 counselors).
- School-wide accountability for helping students develop social emotional skills, helping them practice skills and engage in the classroom.

### **Culture - To-Be**

Focused on: Embedding culturally responsive school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- School is highly committed to race and equity.
- SEL is infused, and explicitly incorporated into syllabus or curriculum.
- Staff have embraced a model of “Consult, consult, consult” to address crises.
- Leadership identifies belonging and wellbeing as a central focus, grounding race and

equity work.

- Staff enjoy increased time for and focus on needs and blended initiatives with increased implementation of SEL and equity, with a reduction of the number of initiatives.
- Leaders state the intention to eradicate silos, and reflect on their actions to prevent silos and a sense of staff isolation.
- Leaders and staff provide examples of SEL, including owning mistakes, listening and caring.
- Trust is high among leaders, leaders to staff, and staff to students.
- Programs and structural changes are evidence-based.

### **Conditions - To-Be**

Focused on: Embedding culturally responsive school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- Explicit expectations are communicated for staff responsibilities to address individual student crises.
- Time is allotted to address race and equity, as well as how to handle student crises, within all-staff, departmental, lunch-and-learn, professional learning modules, and on-line meetings and training.
- Professional development time is allotted to learn how to instruct, infuse, and model SEL and support staff wellbeing.
- Time is provided to engage in reflection, monitoring, and outcomes to sustain commitment to SEL and equity work.
- High mental health provider to student ratio, including creating additional positions in the last 6 years: Student Services Intervention Coordinator, Department Chair for Student Services, 2 additional Psychologists, 2 additional Counselors, and 2 additional Social Workers.
- Brand and communicate “Acknowledge, Care, Tell” to staff, students and families.
- Outfacing structures exist on web pages about crisis intervention and SEL commitment, benefits and actions.
- Multiple and complex student crises are addressed, along with increased focus on prevention within the classroom and beyond.
- All staff and leaders take accountability for SEL within curriculum and instruction, as well as within office spaces.
- Culturally responsive SEL is integrated into all evaluation frameworks, including for leaders.

### **Competencies - To-Be**

Focused on: Embedding culturally school-wide social emotional learning (SEL) practices, while building staff capacity for SEL and race and equity.

- Create continuous professional development focused on embedding SEL within the classroom and all spaces, connecting the dots with equity.
- Mental health and non-mental health staff know what they need to do when a student is in crisis.
- Mental health staff know how to address student crises (eg=if a student may be at risk of harming self or others).
- Staff have developed the capacity to support students through preventing crises, building coping skills, and developing problem-solving skills.
- Staff develop their own coping and problem-solving skills.
- Signs of Suicide program is implemented annually with all freshman and seniors, including suicide risk screeners, preparing for all of high school and post high school plans.
- Leadership provides direction or guidance on blending SEL with instruction.
- All staff integrate culturally responsive SEL into instruction and practices as guided by respective evaluation frameworks.

**APPENDIX I: STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS CHART**

STRATEGIES & ACTIONS CHART for SEL & Equity	
STRATEGIES & Corresponding 4 Cs	ACTIONS
<p><b>STRATEGY 1</b>  <i>Conditions, Competencies, Culture:</i>  <b>Support for Staff and Trust Development</b></p>	<p>Implement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Stakeholder voices as part of steering committee</li> <li>● Staff wellbeing survey(s)</li> <li>● Peer to peer groups for support (some specific to pandemic and nationwide racial injustice)</li> <li>● Counseling group development</li> <li>● Mindfulness, restorative and reflective practices</li> <li>● Attunement and modeling by leaders (walking the walk)</li> <li>● Do what we say as staff and leaders (say we will give grace, and give grace)</li> </ul>
<p><b>STRATEGY 2</b>  <i>Contexts, Conditions, Competencies, Culture:</i>  <b>Shifting, defining and measuring SEL &amp; Equity</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Define SEL &amp; Equity Vision and Plan</li> <li>● Identify framework and indicators for SEL &amp; Equity</li> <li>● Identify school-wide mindfulness program</li> <li>● Engage Equity Analyst and Director of Research in planning</li> <li>● Engage in data review (quantitative data from discipline, achievement and mental health to focus groups for student voice)</li> <li>● Asset Mapping and Resource Identification (Needs Assessment)</li> <li>● Review and redevelop Mission &amp; Vision with focus on SEL &amp; Equity</li> <li>● Incorporate into evaluation frameworks for all staff</li> </ul>
<p><b>STRATEGY 3</b>  <i>Context, Conditions, Culture:</i>  <b>School-wide Implementation via Shared Leadership</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Incorporate into Building Leadership Team (shared leadership), Prevention Committee and MTSS Committee</li> <li>● Integrate community stakeholder involvement:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Feeder district</li> <li>○ City of Shoreville</li> <li>○ Serving schools (off-campus therapeutic day schools and safe schools)</li> <li>○ Parents/guardians</li> <li>○ Students (Student Senate, Students Organized Against Racism, students who have been</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>suspended/disciplinary action) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Businesses and social service organizations</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Incorporate into Portrait of a Graduate planning &amp; implementation</li> <li>● Incorporate into College &amp; Career Readiness Indicators</li> <li>● Incorporate into new SchoolLinks (post high school planning) implementation</li> <li>● Integrate focus on SEL into hiring &amp; training practices</li> <li>● Change Webpages to reflect SEL framework and district commitment</li> <li>● Embed SEL &amp; equity within each team/department communication via messaging and planning</li> </ul>
<p><b>STRATEGY 4</b>  <i>Context, Conditions, Competencies, Culture:</i>  <b>Professional development to embed SEL &amp; Equity</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide time and space for staff ongoing skill development, practice, reflection and expectations</li> <li>● Create and lead training for specific skill development to teach and model (empathy, mindfulness, coping, problem-solving, communication, social skills, etc.)</li> <li>● Incorporate into syllabus</li> <li>● Incorporate into curriculum</li> <li>● Incorporate into instructional practices (project based learning, cooperative learning, etc.)</li> <li>● Incorporate into meetings with students, families and/or staff</li> <li>● Define Management Team leader, Instructional Coach, Department Chair and Student Support Team roles in relation to SEL commitment and implementation</li> <li>● Define and communicate extracurricular and athletics expectations (coaches and sponsors roles) for SEL</li> <li>● Implement teacher-to-teacher SEL toolkit as a form of professional development</li> <li>● Centralize toolkit and resources</li> </ul>
<p><b>STRATEGY 5</b>  <i>Conditions, Culture, Competencies:</i>  <b>Increase access to SEL via embedding within the classroom and through programs inside and outside of the classroom</b></p>	<p>Implement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● SEL lessons, surveys, and booster/check-ins in PE/Wellness (universal intervention throughout the school year)</li> <li>● Signs of Suicide program &amp; screenings</li> <li>● Clothesline Project</li> <li>● Annual Wellbeing Survey</li> <li>● Pandemic/Remote Learning Wellbeing Survey</li> <li>● Restorative Practices in Freshman Advisory Study Hall</li> <li>● Restorative Practices in PE/Wellness</li> <li>● Restorative Practices in Alternative to Suspensions</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Online schoolwide SEL program</li><li>● Mindfulness Coaches</li><li>● Mindfulness Center (Room)</li><li>● Family Talk Series (recording)</li><li>● Post high school planning lessons and events - greater incorporation of SEL &amp; equity</li></ul>
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