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Remus Galvin

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SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING: AN EXAMINATION OF PERSPECTIVES ON  
USING FAITH-BASED SUPPORTS AS AN OPTION IN PUBLIC-SCHOOL  
COMMUNITIES

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SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING: AN EXAMINATION OF PERSPECTIVES  
ON USING FAITH-BASED SUPPORTS AS AN OPTION IN PUBLIC-SCHOOL  
COMMUNITIES

Remus R. Galvin

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of  
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National College of Education

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## ABSTRACT

The present study involved an examination of perspectives on offering faith-based support as an option on an individual basis for social and emotional learning (SEL) within a public-school community. The research consisted of a survey of former and current public-school students and parents ( $N = 26$ ) and a focus group interview of five former and current school administrators to gather their perspectives of their tenure within public schools and the need to provide access to faith-based supports within a public-school community. After analyzing the data, a majority of the survey participants agreed that access to faith-based supports for SEL within a public-school setting with individual consent on an individual basis is needed within the public-school community. Furthermore, the focus group agreed that faith-based supports are needed presently within public-school communities and would have been a welcomed support during their tenures as administrators, current or former. Given the demand for SEL supports, more research is needed to identify, from a cultural and spiritual aspect, the fidelity of providing access to faith-based supports for SEL within a public-school community.

*Keywords:* public school, support, individual basis, needs, survey participants, access, based, research, spiritual aspect, examination, agreed, fidelity, community, social and emotional learning (SEL), faith, perspective, administrators, school administrators, consent

## PREFACE

My journey to becoming an administrator within the public-school system began when I served as a substitute in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) for what some would label an expulsion class. Over the course of 23 years of teaching in multiple schools and two states, I also coached multiple sports. Overall, my 23 years spent in education have been quite a journey. The journey began as a substitute. In that first year of teaching I was faced with many social and emotional challenges. The students I taught were on the brink of being kicked out of school at a very tender age, 10 to 12 years. Before I could gain their trust, I needed to deal with what I know now as their social and emotional learning (SEL) issues. During this first year, I had two students sexually violated on the campus, one student molested at home, and one student shot in the face. Needless to say, I prayed a lot. After spending 2 years in CPS, I began a career at a Christian academy that would span the next 6 years where I taught English and was also in charge of mass. I then journeyed to Mississippi to teach for 5 years in the middle and high school public-school system. I returned to Chicago in 2013 and continued to teach English and Language Arts (ELA) and to coach. In 2014, I had lost two sisters and as a result had three mild heart attacks. I was diagnosed with chronic depression and was medicated. My wife did not like the way the meds made me appear numb and begged me to see a counselor and work out. This was a challenge for me because “Black people don’t do counseling.” Yet, I agreed and it helped me tremendously. I lost 66 pounds and decided to use my kinesiology and coaching master’s degree to coach physical education at Lawndale Community Academy on the westside of Chicago in the hopes of staying healthy. I was then asked to substitute for a sixth-grade class that several teachers proclaimed was

unteachable. My assistant principal walked in and witnessed me teaching. We then had a spirited conversation about data and data-targeted instruction, which led to her recommending that I explore administration. I then enrolled in National Louis University and received my EdS in September of 2019. This would have marked the close of a major chapter had Dr. Gibson not phoned and offered me an opportunity to apply for the Chicago Leadership Collaborative (CLC) residency to become a Resident Principal within CPS. I literally had 48 hours to prove I was worthy of an interview. I ended up being one of only two cohort members to move to the interview phase. Ultimately, I received the residency and served a 15-month tenure at Phoenix Military Academy (PMA) in Chicago.

As the Resident Principal at PMA, I was the supervisor for the English and counseling departments. I also supervised the community partners, Community In Schools (CIS). By being privy to the caseloads and the cadets being serviced, I witnessed first-hand the SEL issues students faced and their need for SEL support. I decided to join the community partners with the counseling department and combine their support. In doing so, I discovered SEL issues had an adverse effect on the cadets' overall success. I also gained insight into the laws surrounding client privilege and guidelines for providing SEL supports. The inclusion of Zen and Peace spaces within school buildings prompted my interest in researching former student and former or current administrators' perspectives of having access to faith-based support within the public-school community.

In this utilization-focused program evaluation, former public-school students, current and former parents of public-school students, and current and former public-school and private-school administrators discussed their perspectives on access to faith-

based support within the public-school community. As leaders within public-school networks are thoroughly investigating culturally relevant SEL supports, the addition of methods such as faith-based supports can have a great impact on the success of public-school community members. Patton (2008) advised that “high quality lessons learned, then represent principles extrapolated from multiple sources and independently triangulated to increase transferability as cumulative knowledge working hypothesis that can be adapted and applied to new situations” (p. 135).

As a former teacher and current administrator, I witness daily the use of SEL strategies to combat deficiencies within the public-school community. Amending the current norms of treating SEL and implementing new strategies that do not take away from instruction time would be of great benefit to public-school community members. Through this study, I am advocating for the opportunity to access faith-based SEL support on an individual basis through individual consent. The results of this study shed light on the importance of providing culturally relevant support to minority stakeholders. This support structure will improve the SEL support offered within the public-school community.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My journey over the last 6 years at National Louis University (NLU) has been nothing short of amazing! Throughout my Educational Specialist and doctoral journey, I am eternally grateful for Sherri Washington, my former Assistant Principal, encouraging me to pursue administration. I was so honored to have been recognized by Dr. Harrington Gibson, the NLU Director of the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Dean's Representative for my dissertation defense, as a future school leader. His countless encouragement and support left a life-long impression on me as an educator. I hope to some day bless other African American males effectively with feedback the way he assisted me on my journey. I would also like to thank Dr. Cheryl Watkins and the entire doctoral staff for encouraging me to be my authentic self. I am eternally grateful to Dr. Christine Nelson for her support, guidance, and ongoing feedback on everything. She's my Rebecca J and I'm her Randall, "This Is Us." We laughed and cried through it all. I am honored to have been chaired by such a great person for my dissertation.

To the Chicago Leadership Collaborative (CLC), with your tutelage and support under the guidance of Dr. Lynda Williams, my forever coach, I was able to navigate my residency with fidelity. I thank the entire CLC staff for generously sharing your time, resources, and expertise in guiding me through it all. Without you I would not have entered NLU's doctoral program.

I wholeheartedly appreciate having journeyed on this mission with each of my doctoral cohort members and I've been pushed and gained a plethora of knowledge from each of your experiences and wisdom. A very special thanks goes to my other two of the three amigos, Dr. Jaya Miller and Dr. Kai Jones, for collaborating, pushing each other,

and ultimately just caring that we all made it. I wouldn't have made through that spring semester of 2020 when I contracted COVID-19 without you all's support. I am honored to be your third amigo!

Finally, I acknowledge and honor my family for being the greatest support team of them all. I am especially grateful to my mother, Lymenda Attaway, and my wife, Katrina Galvin, for always cheering me on and keeping me focused when I was frustrated. Katrina, the sacrifices you made so that I could pursue this dream will forever be appreciated.

## DEDICATION

It is with the utmost honor and genuine regard that I dedicate this work to my amazing family. A special dedication goes to my grandmother Mrs. Lillie C. Galvin whose guidance provided to me as a youngster helped to mold me to be a thinker. She would make me read an encyclopedia page each day and write a one-page report about it before I could go out and play. She'd find old radios for me to fix just to feed my brain. Though she isn't here with us today, her fight for freedom and civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s has now manifested in my destiny of being a Doctor of Education. To my mother, Lymenda Attaway, you never allowed me to settle for mediocrity or quit because things got hard. You made sure prayer and God's words were on my lips day and night. My mother motivated me from a child to look, listen, and learn. To my late Uncle Otis Anthony who always said if I applied myself that books could take me anywhere I want to go. To my Aunt Jeanette and Uncle Autrey, you loved me as if I were one of your own. The education and business guidance is forever with me. To my father, James Attaway, Sr., you showed me how to be a man and never take opportunity for granted. You were never afraid of taking leaps to accomplish something even if it was your first time at it, you tried. To my sisters Lamisha Johnson and Kimberlyn Galvin, no matter what I've done in life, you both supported me through it all and I'm grateful for you both. Finally, to my wife and kids, Katrina, Nalah Christine, Savaughn Ellis, Grant Kennedy, and Brett James, words are not enough to express my adoration of you all. I wake up each day to provide and secure your now and beyond. You are the air in my lungs, the blood in my veins, and the wind beneath my wings. I will love you all unconditionally until I complete this journey the Lord has provided us called life.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Student achievement within public schools is directly affected by the academic instruction and social and emotional learning (SEL) provided by district leaders, school administrators, teachers, and community organizations. Many in-school variables such as access to a positive culture and climate, along with SEL supports, enable students to achieve academic success. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) partners with multiple vendors and community organizations to provide services such as counseling, after-school activities, and career counseling to combat issues that can hinder students' on-track progress. Leaders of school districts across the nation are making a conscious effort to provide equitable and culturally responsive support for students. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, n.d.) defines SEL as,

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. (para. 1)

In my 23-year tenure as a public and private school teacher, I have witnessed the need for SEL supports not only for at-risk students but for all students. Students have depended on me and my colleagues to champion their efforts, and at times ease the SEL blows that accompany everyday life. Students suffer from depression, abusive home environments, and in some cases homelessness. These are just a few the SEL variables that require SEL support for public-school students. With this mind, the graduation rate may be affected

by the different variables present in many districts. I have witnessed students and parents struggle to productively navigate the school year due to home or environment issues. Many administrators and district leaders remedy these variables with proactive planning to increase the graduation rates within their prospective districts. For example, Dr. Jackson, the former CEO of the third largest school district in the United States, CPS, presented her vision for the district as an equitable charge to success.

The district's new Five-Year Vision was developed after an extensive engagement process that incorporated priorities and insights from families, educators, parents and partners in order to develop a truly inclusive and comprehensive Vision for the future of CPS. The ambitious goals outlined in the Five-Year Vision were developed in partnership with the University of Chicago's Urban Labs through a rigorous, data-informed goal- setting process which will offer schools a clear roadmap to success while helping the district meet our collective goals by 2024. (CPS, 2019, para.3)

SEL improvement is one area of focus within CPS as a support that can be used to minimize the social and emotional damage to public-school communities. According to The Chicago Network (n.d.) website,

Dr. Jackson is focused on improving equity and access to high-quality education in all CPS schools. Her Five-Year Vision for CPS, which was unveiled in 2019, is a comprehensive, research-based roadmap that strengthens the district's commitments to academic progress, financial stability, and integrity. Above all, the Vision renews the district's focus on equity. (para. 4)

Leaders of CPS have invested in SEL to further promote equity. The ultimate goal behind the inclusion of SEL is for public-school students to stay on track for a successful graduation. Related to this goal, Friedman (2018) stated,

More Chicago Public Schools students are earning diplomas than ever before, reaching a record-high graduation rate of 78.2 percent, according to new figures from the district. CPS officials say that 2017-2018 graduation rate is part of a steady increase from 56.9 percent in 2011, a 21-percent increase. “This is a far cry from the CPS of the past when students were almost just as likely to drop out of school as they were to graduate,” said CPS CEO Janice Jackson in a call with reporters. (para. 1–2).

The CPS network has seen record-breaking gains during Dr. Jackson’s tenure according to this report. CPS has adopted the 5Essentials Survey in the hopes of identifying culture and climate issues within its public-school communities. Identifying these needs and public-school community members’ perspectives is done in an effort to provide equitable resources of support. The 5Essentials Survey identifies five indicators that lead to positive outcomes for all students, including improved attendance and greater test score gains. The five indicators that positively affect school success are effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environments, and ambitious instruction. Research derived from the five essentials for school success has shown schools that are strong on at least three of the five essentials are 10 times more likely to see improvements in terms of student outcomes (Illinois State Board of Education[ISBE], n.d.-a). Equitable measures, such as the 5Essential Survey, are designed in an attempt to eliminate bias and service public-school communities by giving public-school

community members a voice to assist in identifying culturally responsive opportunities and options for SEL support.

### **Faith-Based Supports**

Faith plays a major role in some public-school communities. Faith within brown and Black communities is an important factor when it comes to combating social and emotional issues among community members (Pew Research Center, 2014). The Pew Research Center reported that Blacks (75%) and Latinos (59%) represented the highest percentages in terms of the importance of religion in one's life. Blacks also dominated the percentage with 83% believing in God by race or ethnicity. CPS has developed partnerships with community and faith-based organizations through Family and Community Engagement (FACE) mainly to support students and teachers in creating positive environments that support learning concerning social and mental well-being. "Family and Community Engagement (FACE) empowers parents/guardians to be active stewards of their child's educational process and facilitates family and community participation in their school community through outreach, events, educational opportunities, and community and faith-based partnerships" (CPS, n.d.-a, para. 2). The opportunity to have equal access to support is meant to ensure each individual student receives SEL services. Though school networks partner with faith-based organizations, the opportunity to support students and staff with faith-based strategies has limitations. Faith-based organizations appear to be limited in providing SEL support because of the 1962 ruling by the Supreme Court in the case of *Engel v. Vitale*. On June 25, 1962, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that school-sponsored prayer was unconstitutional under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment: "It is no part of the business of

government to compose official prayers for any group of the American people to recite as a part of a religious program carried on by government” (Haynes, 2012, para. 11). Public schools, as an arm of the government, must maintain non-biased service and provide support to all members of the public-school community.

With this in mind, you could imagine how amazed I was to discover that CPS has an entire department dedicated to supporting faith-based initiatives. With many camps being run by non-profits and community partners, CPS has broken the mold by partnering with churches. The program CPS champions is called Safe Haven. Though in theory this comes off as amazing, in reality serving the community without a cost to the community presents a barrier and may be detrimental to the effort to support public-school community members.

Certainly, we need more funding. Right now, CPS, we put up \$900,000, we get \$1 million from the city, so it’s a \$1.9 million budget. Right now, we have thirty-seven churches across the city. That’s not a lot of money, but we want to make sure that we’re able to continue offering the program at no cost to our parents. (Chilukuri, 2019, para. 13)

During my research, I connected with Rev. Alan Conley, the current director of the Office of Faith Based Initiatives (OFBI) in CPS. Dr. Conley provided me with a list of faith-based organizations to use in my study. The OFBI manages Safe Haven, which provides after-school programs, extended programs during spring break, and summer camp. He said these services should be available to public-school community members in a public-school setting without interrupting instruction. Safe Haven serves over 12,000 children annually. It is a strong SEL advocate to say the least. “One of the strongest

initiatives that we had was the Safe Haven program” (Chilukuri, 2019, para. 4). The ability to offer access to faith-based SEL support within the public-school community could provide supports and service to many more students that could support Safe Haven’s initiatives.

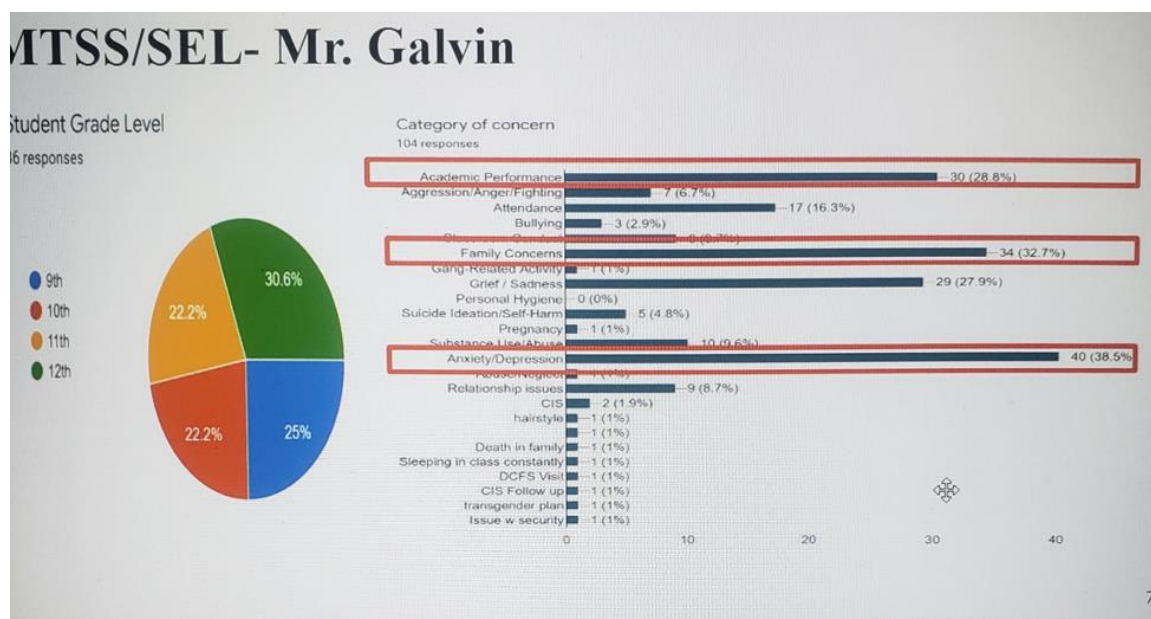
### **Purpose**

Navigating policy change is a daunting task for any individual, let alone an entire school district. Fullan (2006) said, “If theories of action do not include the harder questions – ‘Under what conditions will continuous improvement happen?’ and, correspondingly, ‘How do we change cultures?’ – they are bound to fail” (p. 4). In reflecting on my principal residency for the 2019–2020 school year, I could not find a clear difference between prayer and meditation or emotional and spiritual support. As the Post-Secondary and Service Support (PSE) Lead for the 2019–2020 school year at Phoenix Military Academy, I was tasked with developing a synthesized approach and cohesive strategies that would directly affect the attendance rate, graduation tracking, future programming, social and emotional variables, and record compliance issues. My team’s tasks and action items resulted from my decision to restructure and implement department protocols, meetings, and norms. My teams collaborated with community partners and parents to achieve the goals identified to support students’ SEL outcomes. My role as PSE Lead gave me the ability access data to identify a common cause of student non-compliance in attendance, medical record compliance, and relevant programming. What I found was the common denominator is the lack of culturally responsive individual support.

The Community in Schools (CIS) partnership with Phoenix Military Academy (PMA) was providing counseling to our cadets. I combined their community organizing with the PMA counseling department to collaborate on solutions to PMA's identified SEL deficiencies. I required members of the counseling department and CIS to meet once a week and both to meet with me once a week to debrief and analyze their findings and strategies. This helped to identify the underlying cause that I recognized had affected the attendance rate, graduation tracking, future programming, social emotional variables, reported compliance issues, anxiety/depression referrals (40%), family concerns referrals (30%), and academic performance (30%; see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*PMA MTSS/SEL Category of Concern: First Quarter School Year 2019*



Analyzing these data led me to collaborate with another community partner for counseling students. Erie Family Health collaborated to provide training and professional development to reduce these concerns and referrals. These proposed strategies had a common theme of providing culturally responsive, faith-based support. Each department

often responded with hope and prayer through the many crises that arose and affected each of these department members and students.

SEL is the key to a student's academic success as well as a teacher's well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 illuminated the importance of invoking the First Amendment right to freedom of speech for worship and having the ability to choose SEL support through individual consent and privacy rights, such as options to access faith-based SEL support. I designed my study to examine the perspectives of former public-school students, former public-school parents, and current and former administrators on having the option to use faith-based SEL support in a public-school setting. In reviewing the manual entitled *Community Partnerships: Improving the Response to Child Maltreatment*, I discovered an interesting note, which states,

This manual does not endorse any single community partnership model or specific criteria for partnerships. Rather, it addresses the general concept of building productive relationships among a community's child welfare agency, local organizations, family members, and other individuals or groups on behalf of children and families. The manual describes general approaches to developing, sustaining, and evaluating community partnerships and highlights effective practices that have been found useful in the field. It has information that will be helpful to participants at various stages of a community partnership's lifespan. Additionally, although some resources differentiate between the terms partnership and collaboration, this manual uses them interchangeably. (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2010, p. 6)



The quote, “The manual describes general approaches to developing, sustaining, and evaluating community partnerships and highlights effective practices that have been found useful in the field” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2010, p. 6), further affirms that faith-based support should be an additional method or strategy to contribute to student, staff, and family SEL options for support. As a means of analyzing the systems of support available to public-school students concerning SEL, I designed my study to explore perspectives on access to faith-based supports, cultural relevancy, and the advocacy for faith-based supports to be used for SEL within the public-school community.

### **Rationale**

Leaders of public schools must entertain all SEL supports that are desired by community and parents. In response to identifying SEL barrier to academic success, leaders of CPS networks and districts continue to seek ways to assure equity and improve culture and climate for the entire school community. School leaders are dealing with a variety of SEL dilemmas such as bullying, gender identification, diverse learners, trauma, and cultural bias. Some scholars attribute these variables to the absence of faith-based support within the public-school system. Not everyone supported religion being ostracized from the public-school system. Haynes (2012) explained,

It’s true that in the aftermath of the Engel decision, some school administrators took things too far by prohibiting constitutionally protected student religious expression. Of course, other administrators and school boards practiced civil disobedience by continuing school-sponsored religious practices in defiance of the Court’s ruling. (para. 13)

The absence of school prayer has been credited as the source of many social issues. School shootings and drug addiction, suicide, and depression are presenting new challenges that are being treated with many SEL practices, including meditation and silent reflection. Fruehwirth et al. (2019) indicated,

We find that religiosity has sizeable effects on depression in adolescence, which is understated by OLS estimates that do not deal with selection into religiosity.

For example, a one standard deviation increase in religiosity decreases the probability of being depressed by 11 percent. (Introduction section, para. 8)

These data cause one to consider whether there is a parallel between meditation and prayer. Meditation means to engage in mental exercise (e.g., concentrating on breathing or repeating a mantra) for the purpose of reaching a heightened level of spiritual awareness (Merriam Webster, n.d.-a). Prayer is written and spoken as well when being conveyed to a variety of audiences. The case can be made that prayer can be considered meditation.

SEL competencies such as those presented by CASEL (see Figure 2) reflect the importance of culturally responsive public-school community SEL supports.

**Figure 2**

*CASEL's Five Competencies (CASEL, n.d.)*



In reviewing CASEL's five competencies, I became intrigued and wanted to learn more about the cultural relevance of SEL strategies. The five competencies are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Of these five competencies, two caught my interest—self-awareness and social awareness. As an African American male, I am reminded subliminally daily of how I should present or carry myself. Yet, not many of my friends or contemporaries who identify as Black feel as though we have a sounding board for our frustration. I was taught early on to keep my business to myself, and that Black men cannot show weakness. Above all, I should keep God first and stay prayerful. Basically, “Give it to God.” This seems reasonable if your entire public-school community has culturally

responsive SEL support options that ensure equity. This can be a challenge considering the apprehension of school district leaders to blend church and state. CPS is a public-school district that is attempting to provide its public-school community with equitable support concerning faith.

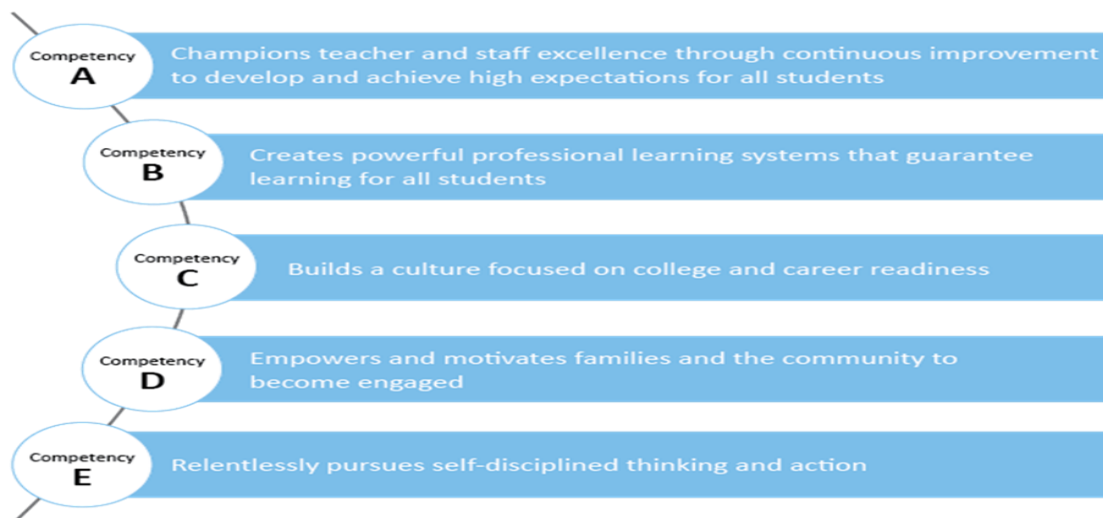
A CPS (2001) policy relating to accommodations for students' religious practices indicates the following:

It is the policy of the Chicago Public Schools ("CPS") to accommodate student religious practices provided that such practices can be accommodated in a manner which does not violate the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and to the extent that the accommodation does not place an undue burden on the school. This policy shall be implemented in a manner that is consistent with: CPS Policy Against Discrimination on the Basis of Race, Color, National Origin, Gender, Sexual Orientation, Age, Religion or Disability; and Board Rule 1-14 which prohibits discrimination or harassment against any employee or student on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, religion or disability. (p. 1)

The policy clearly states that faith-based support and opportunities are protected, yet a divide still exists on how principals and district administrators can offer faith-based SEL options. Public-school principals are evaluated and receive ratings based on five competencies, as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*CPS Principal Competencies (CPS, 2015, p. 17)*



All competencies open opportunities for school administrators to add culturally responsive tools and strategies, including faith-based supports, to their SEL tool kit, especially those that will empower students and families and ultimately lead to academic success for students.

### **Goals**

The reason for taking prayer out of schools was to eliminate the government mandating prayer within schools. Because the Supreme Court's ruling in the case of *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) declared school-sponsored prayer unconstitutional, options for allowing individual access to faith-based supports within public schools should be explored. Faith-based SEL supports are technically not school-sponsored if they are individually selected by students and their parents. Any community partnership that proposes faith-based or any other support must have parental consent, consequently deeming it parent endorsed and voluntary. Many school districts across the United States partner with community organizations and promote counseling through these

collaborations to support students, staff, and families with SEL issues. Many public-school students have faith-based beliefs and have experienced guidance from their churches and family traditions.

The primary goal of this study was to examine how offering an option for access to faith-based support for SEL can benefit students and families in public-school communities. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How have historical and legal influences influenced religious freedoms in schools, and where are we now?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the current SEL practices delivered in public schools, and faith-based supports?
3. To what extent might religious support be offered in public schools and would the option of religious SEL support be a preferred option for students, parents, and staff (administrators and support staff)?
4. How do former students and parents perceive the counseling support they received in school, and would they have chosen religious counseling for themselves or their children if offered?

The goals of this study were to inform public-school leaders on culturally responsive practices that can be used to develop a positive culture and climate for all stakeholders in their school communities and to influence equitable practices by including access to faith-based SEL supports within the public-school community.

## **Conclusion**

On June 25, 1962, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Engel v. Vitale* and declared school-sponsored and mandated prayers unconstitutional. This very declaration

has led to many school districts, including CPS, ignoring or expelling God from school permanently. Yet, school districts such as CPS have made it a goal to promote equity. As the role of public-school districts is to provide equitable supports to combat the social and emotional concerns of the entire school community, their leaders must address the variables that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented as well as the previously-existing social and emotional issues within the public-school community. For example, CPS and the City of Chicago deemed the COVID-19 pandemic an “act of God.” Subsequently, by admitting there is a God, leaders of CPS have admitted there are variables within society and public-school communities that could be addressed with faith-based supports. With equity being the primary focus in supporting various issues within public-school communities, it is very different from providing equality of support. An examination of this effort by CPS has also focused on SEL to further promote equity, recognizing that different situations enable students K-12 across the district from achieving academic success. In my 23-year tenure as an educator, I have recognized that a major part of academic progress is the student’s ability to have a positive culture and climate is the access to SEL supports. CPS partners with multiple vendors that vary from school to school to provide SEL support and counseling. Though equal access to support ensures each individual student has an opportunity to receive SEL support, the equity of options for access in terms of who provides the support needs to be examined. Faith-based organizations partner with public schools but the opportunity to partner and provide faith-based support has been stifled by the 1962 declaration by the Supreme Court in the case of *Engel v. Vitale* (1962). The cultural relevance and noted effort of the public-school system to produce equity when supporting our public-school community has presented an

opportunity to give the option to access faith-based supports for SEL within the public-school community.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of the Literature

This literature review examines the SEL support currently available within public schools to support the idea that other options for SEL supports, such as faith-based support, might be beneficial for public-school communities. Community organizations and school communities are situated within the broader goals of providing equitable and culturally responsive support for students and families in diverse communities. The literature relative to acknowledging and evaluating faith-based support as an option for SEL support within the public-school community is also reviewed from a demographic, culturally relevant perspective. This literature review also presents faith-based supports as a culturally responsive option in diverse communities. Organizations such as the American Counseling Association (ACA) have made statements regarding culturally relevant practices that consider the unique characteristics of students and clients. The ACA's (2014) *Code of Ethics* Section A.2.c indicates the following:

Developmental and Cultural Sensitivity Counselors communicate information in ways that are both developmentally and culturally appropriate. Counselors use clear and understandable language when discussing issues related to informed consent. When clients have difficulty understanding the language that counselors use, counselors provide necessary services (e.g., arranging for a qualified interpreter or translator) to ensure comprehension by clients. In collaboration with clients, counselors consider cultural implications of informed consent procedures and, where possible, counselors adjust their practices accordingly. (p. 4)

I had a glaring question regarding the impact of culturally relevant SEL supports on student achievement and school culture and climate. The question is, to what extent do districts limit equitable opportunities for SEL support without the option of faith-based SEL support for public-school communities? Faith-based supports are not frowned upon yet most educators believe prayer in public schools is illegal. Why is that? Do we not hear the president say, “God bless America?” We, as citizens of America, pray at times of war and conflict. This literature review covers the benefits versus the barriers to this difficult conundrum between church and state laws or rights. An analysis of the laws, current SEL practices, cultural impact on SEL, and faith-based supports presents the pros and cons of the option of providing access to faith-based supports for SEL within the public-school community.

### **Legal Debate of Church and State**

The law is evolving to support the demand for equity in local, state, and federal legislation that requires public-school district leaders to produce more equitable approaches to support the current culture and climates of their public schools in today’s ever-changing society. In the age of technology, social media has a more powerful effect as it enables people to disseminate information more quickly, whereas the court of public opinion in the past began as simply a protest. The National Constitution Center (n.d.) reported,

A group of parents challenged this government-sponsored prayer, arguing that it violated the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause. The Supreme Court—in a six-to-one decision—agreed with these parents and struck down the New York prayer. In his majority opinion for the Court, Justice Hugo Black concluded that

state officials may not compose official state prayers and require that they be recited in public schools, even if the prayer was “denominationally neutral” and students could opt out of reciting it. (Summary section, 2023, para. 1)

With the goal of eliminating bias and prejudice at the forefront of everyday life in the United States, the effort to eliminate obvious bias has led to the passing of legislation designed to avoid individual discrimination. The argument that church and state should be separate has affected the inclusion of faith-based practices within the public-school system. “*In Engel v. Vitale, 370 U.S. 421 (1962)*, the Supreme Court ruled that school-sponsored prayer in public schools violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment” (Hudson, n.d., para. 1). The ruling prohibited mandated or school-sponsored prayer in public schools, which, as a consequence, has limited the support that faith-based organizations can provide to the public-school community. Yet, initially the New York State Supreme Court ruled against Engel and other parents who opposed the 22-word nondenominational prayer recommended to school districts by the New York Board of Regents. It appears everyone initially did not agree with Engel’s viewpoint. Engel and his supporters lost in the state supreme court and the appellate court.

The pendulum of the benefits and barriers to this ruling is at the very fabric of the debate surrounding the right to individually practice faith-based strategies within the public-school community. Though the decades-long struggle has been the catalyst to debate the role of faith within the public-school system, there has been progress in advocating for faith-based supports. As far back as I can remember, I have prayed in school for sports activities, at the beginning of the day, and even for exams. I jokingly recall that many of my graduating class at Jackson State University graduated with the

distinguishments of summa cum laude or magna cum laude. I recall that I graduated thank you laude!

All jokes aside, with the evolving times and increased focus on religion in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, mass shootings, and the unjustifiable deaths of many African Americans, prayer is making a spirited comeback but not without opposition. In 2015, Joseph Kennedy, a high school football coach, was suspended for leading the players in post-game prayers on the field. Dwyer and Winsor (2022) stated:

The First Amendment protects free speech and free exercise of religion, but it also prohibits the establishment of religion by the government. Prior to the ruling in the case of *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, the Supreme Court had long said that public school-sponsored prayer violates the Establishment Clause, even if the prayer is voluntary. (para. 8)

Though the future of faith-based practices in public schools seemed grim, the case of *Good News Club et al. v. Milford Central School* (2001) ruled as follows:

The Supreme Court ruled in favor of a voluntary Christian club which meets during non-instructional time and inside the school facilities. The majority found that excluding the club was unconstitutional discrimination based on the club's views. Letting the meeting take place would not be an unconstitutional government endorsement of religion, the court ruled. (Partner With Schools, Which Organizations Endorse section, 2017, para. 1)

The opportunity to practice prayer during noninstructional times supports my belief that faith-based support should be an available option for SEL support outside of the instructional time within the school community.

The *Good News Club et al. v. Milford Central School* (2001) ruling supports the individual right to express oneself. An individual's right to have privacy for support, such as counseling, protects public-school community members' opportunity for choice in terms of SEL support. Individuals who believe faith can strengthen the educational process, such as Irvin Scott, advocate for the inclusion of faith-based support within the public-school community. "Scott thinks it's important to leverage faith in education, otherwise it's a 'missed opportunity' for educators" (Anderson, 2018, para. 6).

SEL has become a major component in public-school efforts to serve and support the whole student. Though the social and emotional state of students is important to support, their privacy must be protected by the law. This may create a conflict when it relates to individual counseling and access to faith-based support because of the individual consent protections by the federal law reported by the Office of Privacy and Civil Liberties. Under this law, individuals have a right to consent to supports and the right to privacy when it comes to the sharing of their personal information.

No agency shall disclose any record which is contained in a system of records by any means of communication to any person, or to another agency, except pursuant to a written request by, or with the prior written consent of, the individual to whom the record pertains [subject to 12 exceptions]. 5 U.S.C. § 552a(b). (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022, para. 1)

With the church and state laws being used as a benefit and a barrier, the examination of current SEL practices is relevant to the recognition of the need to provide faith-based support options for SEL within public schools. No liberties should be violated because of beliefs. Both faith-based groups and nonfaith-based groups have the right to not be

mandated to practice or participate in unwelcomed events. Yet, do current SEL practices provide space for both supporters of and objectors to faith-based practices within the public-school community?

### **A Review of Current SEL Practices**

Many public schools have identified additional options for SEL support such as partnering with community organizations within the school districts. These community organizations use a variety of SEL strategies and supports to support the public-school community. For example, in Illinois, the ISBE (n.d.-b) adopted the SEL policies for school wellness that are shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4***Social and Emotional Learning: School Wellness*

<p><b><i>Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• recognize and manage their emotions;</li> <li>• demonstrate caring and concern for others;</li> <li>• establish positive relationships;</li> <li>• make responsible decisions; and</li> <li>• handle challenging situations constructively.</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Quality SEL instruction in which students learn to process, integrate, and selectively apply SEL skills in developmentally, contextually and culturally appropriate ways in conjunction with a safe, caring, participatory and responsive school climate can result in positive outcomes including:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• promotion of mental wellness;</li> <li>• prevention of mental health issues;</li> <li>• school connectedness;</li> <li>• reduction in student absenteeism;</li> <li>• reduction in suspensions;</li> <li>• adoption, implementation and institutionalization of new practices; and</li> <li>• improved academic outcomes.</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>As a result of the Children’s Mental Health Act of 2003, the Illinois State Board of Education adopted the Illinois Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards. Drafting of the 10 SEL standards, along with goals, age-appropriate benchmarks, and performance descriptors, was a collaborative effort between ISBE and the Illinois Children’s Mental Health Partnership with technical support from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Integration of SEL into systems and practices is highly recommended. Integration can occur by:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• examining existing systems and structures to determine how social and emotional learning efforts can be integrated into them;</li> <li>• embedding SEL instruction into existing curricula;</li> <li>• embedding SEL instruction into existing curricula;</li> <li>• taking advantage of teachable moments that occur naturally throughout the day</li> <li>• promoting students’ feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence; and</li> <li>• providing opportunities for students to practice social and emotional competencies.</li> </ul>

These policies represent a valiant effort to combat SEL issues to an extent. The question of how culturally relevant or successful these policies are in supporting public-school

community members of color remains unknown. For many minorities, especially African Americans, cultural relevance is important in light of the identity crisis of slavery with which we silently suffer. Additionally, the violence within African American inner-city neighborhoods is one of the main reasons for the need for SEL supports in public school for most African Americans. As an African American male, I wonder how do brown and Black public-school community members benefit from the currently available options for SEL?

### **A Comprehensive Discussion of Culturally Responsive SEL Practices**

The current role of equitable support is evolving to meet the demands of public-school community members such as those within CPS. The new SEL support requires district and school leaders to implement a different approach to equity and equality in terms of SEL support. Gender identity, race, and bullying are only a few issues that plague the academic progress of public-school students. These SEL issues need to be examined not only through an academic lens but also through a demographic lens. By identifying the underlying variables that influence the need for SEL support, it was my goal to identify the need for options to the current SEL support provided by the public-school system to add culturally adequate SEL support for minority public-school community members. Growing up in the shadow of Jim Crow, in Mississippi, afforded me a front row seat to prejudice in this country. To be called a boy or cringe when the police stop you can be considered traumatizing. Many young African American boys and girls were taught to be seen and not heard around Whites in the Mississippi Delta. The only thing both races appeared to have in common was the church, though Blacks used the church for praise, worship, and as a meeting place and safe haven. The church is a



building or an establishment for most races, but it is an institution to African Americans. Mohamed et al. (2021) reported,

The findings show that Black Americans are more religious than the American public as a whole on a range of measures of religious commitment. For example, they are more likely to say they believe in God or a higher power, and to report that they attend religious services regularly. They also are more likely to say religion is “very important” in their lives and to be affiliated with a religion, and to believe prayers to ancestors have protective power and that evil spirits can cause problems in a person’s life. (Black Americans More Religious Than the U.S. Public Overall section, para. 1)

For centuries, the church has been the foundation of psychological healing for minorities, especially Black and brown. The civil rights movement of the 1900s saw the remnants of slavery (1600–1800) affect the psyche of their posterity. In turn, Blacks used the church for counsel support to combat their social and emotional issues.

“Most Black worshippers attend predominantly Black congregations and see a role for religion in fighting racial injustice, but generational patterns are changing” (Mohamed et al., 2021, para. 1). It is not common, from my experience, to see Blacks worship at predominantly White churches. Black identity is crucial from my experience. I can still remember being scolded for telling a White store owner he cheated me out of my change. All my life I was taught to be smart and learn how to count, only to be expected to act dumb for fear of violence. I did not understand trauma then. No one referred me for SEL support. No one in my family knew what it was. We were just told to pray about it.

With many African Americans within the nation's public schools being referred for SEL support, the history of how African Americans view therapy as whole is part of the cultural relevance that appears to be ignored within the SEL supports that are available to them within the public-school community. Williams (2011) wrote,

In places like Los Angeles and New York, everyone and their pet has a therapist, yet even among the wealthy and elite, many African Americans continue to hold stigmatizing beliefs about mental illness. For example, a qualitative study by Alvidrez et al. (2008) found that among Blacks who were already mental health consumers, over a third felt that mild depression or anxiety would be considered "crazy" in their social circles. Talking about problems with an outsider (i.e., a therapist) may be viewed as airing one's "dirty laundry," and even more telling is the fact that over a quarter of those consumers felt that discussions about mental illness would not be appropriate even among family. (Stigma and Judgement section, para. 1)

For this reason, African Americans have relied on the church or their faith for support with the many issues they encounter. The premise for any improvement within the public-school system starts with the idea of improving student achievement. The implementation of culturally responsive SEL support is vital to the improvement of public-school community SEL support for its members. The options that are in place need equitable change to improve positive trajectory of public-school members' social and emotional state of being. Wagner et al. (2006) stated, "We suggest historical and cultural reasons why individuals and the organizations that employ them have been and continue to be reticent to tackle issues related to instructional improvement" (p. 59). A

major part of this improvement is how the instructional support for SEL is managed and offered. The question of why faith-based supports should be implemented was at the forefront of the current study, especially regarding unidentified cultural biases that may exist, such as racial trauma. This issue is not just limited to the patient but also the healthcare provider. Often times race is considered when choosing who treats a patient of color or the cultural impacts it may present. Theis (2021) reported,

America's health care system impacts racial trauma too, making it more difficult to find not only help, but someone who understands a patient's experience. A 2015 study found that in the U.S., 86% of psychologists were White, 5% were Asian, 5% were Hispanic, and 4% were Black. (para. 12)

This explains why many churches or faith-based organizations provide counseling services to African Americans at a higher rate than to individuals of other races (see Table 1). So, why is the cultural relevance of SEL options important to minorities when treating their SEL needs within the public-school community?

**Table 1**

*Frequency of Participation in Prayer, Scripture Study, or Religious Education Groups by Race/Ethnicity (Pew Research Center, 2014)*

Racial and ethnic composition	At least once a week	Once or twice a month	Several times a year	Seldom/never
White	22%	8%	8%	62%
Black	39%	14%	9%	38%
Asian	17%	10%	13%	60%
Latino	27%	12%	8%	51%
Other/Mixed	26%	8%	8%	57%

Black and brown racially identified groups often respond to religious support because of cultural factors. African Americans (39%) and Latinos (27%) frequently participate in faith-based studies or groups. Yet, we represent only 4% of the psychologists in the United States (see Table 1). One may wonder, how can minorities access equitable service for their SEL issues without faith-based support as an option?

### **Faith-Based Supports**

Being a teacher and a minister presented a very difficult task during this study. How to remove my own bias became the overarching theme, yet I was not the subject here. Due to the recognition of the need for SEL support, general education teachers are encouraged to embed SEL practices into the classroom curricula. There are curricula to support SEL implementation within a normal classroom setting. According to Elias (2016):

The cornerstone of SEL efforts is the delivery of five essential skills and competencies to students:

- Self-awareness: recognizing and labeling one's feelings and accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations
- Self-management: regulating emotions, delaying gratification, managing stress, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving goals
- Social awareness: showing empathy, taking others' perspectives, and recognizing and mobilizing diverse and available supports
- Relationship skills: clear communication, accurate listening, cooperation, nonviolent and constructive conflict resolution, and knowing when and how to be a good team player and a leader

- Responsible decision making: making ethical choices based on consideration of feelings, goals, alternatives and outcomes, and planning and enacting solutions with potential obstacles anticipated (para. 3)

As I dug deeper into the layers that led me to teaching and preaching, I realized my curiosity was based in the theory that SEL and Christian values are quite similar. CASEL (n.d.) defines SEL as follows:

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. (para. 2)

These attributes are natural to most people who have a conscious mindset to develop life skills. Yet, many of these skills appear to be life guides. Religion is not the only genre that gives pointers to develop into a productive citizen. As much as society attempts to be individualized, the attributes CASEL presents mirror similar lessons in the Bible. One such lesson appears the New Testament Book of Galatians. Teacher Resource Room (2021) stated,

When working to develop a child's emotions and attitudes to compliment the learning process, integrating Biblical principles is essential. The Fruits of the Spirit – Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self Control (Galatians 5:22-23) – align closely with the goals of SEL, including developing relationship skills, forming self-management, and developing responsible decision making. (para. 3)

The Office of Social and Emotional Learning (OSEL) within CPS advocates for equitable supports for public-school students. The OSEL states,

Students learn best when they feel safe and supported in school, both physically and emotionally. OSEL ensures school-based staff use the most effective strategies to foster a safe learning climate and maximize student engagement and achievement. We are committed to teaching students' skills that will help them with school as well as in life.

These skills include:

- Managing and understanding their emotions
- Understanding and being able to relate to others
- Making responsible decisions

These skills are needed to persist with a range of situations—from figuring out a tough math problem or collaborating on a group project to setting goals for college and career. (CPS, n.d.-c, para. 1-3)

Safety and peace of mind are hard to obtain if the three skills above are not mastered.

Sociodemographic is defined as involving a combination of social and demographic factors (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). Social background and demographic surroundings continue to be a theme in my studies of why culturally responsive supports are needed and how the options for who is supported for SEL matter. Additionally, trust is developed through familiarity. African Americans participate when they identify with a process. As mentioned earlier (Theis, 2021), the medical support provided to African Americans plays a major part in the equitable option question. Disabilities of Blacks are important as well when we discuss SEL support. Most Individualized Education Program

(IEP) students are considered as having a disability and 504 plans are a blueprint or plan for any child who has a disability that interferes with everyday life. Why is this important? To understand the answer, you must treat the cause of an injury and not just the injury. This was never more evident psychologically for African Americans than during the COVID-19 pandemic. The nation was rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic and appeared to have no answer. I remember my family and friends saying, “God’s not playing.” Coupled with the closing of businesses and layoffs, the world was in crisis, leaving many citizens with mental health issues such as depression. I speak about this part personally. I can remember vividly pushing through my courses at National Louis University and accepting a B for a course because I was too weak to accept an extension (incomplete), not knowing my fate or mortality. African Americans were not the only minorities affected by the pandemic. Though it was a nationwide crisis, many African Americans were afraid for an entirely different reason. The idea of receiving non-biased health care treatment was an unspoken SEL variable. Pauli (2021) wrote:

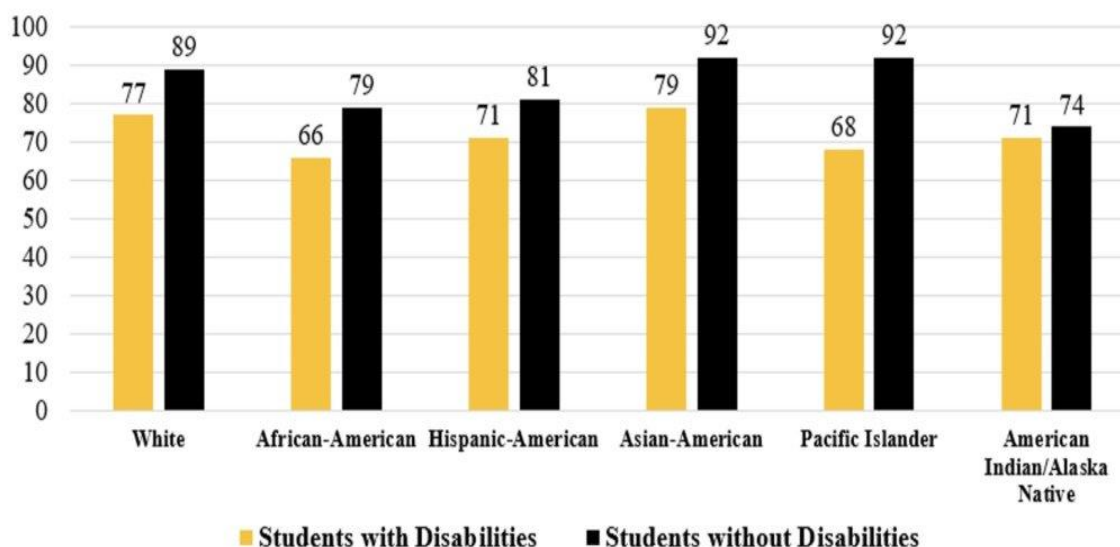
The pandemic has made clear that the nation must transform itself to advance racial justice and make equitable opportunities a reality. Achieving that reality must begin by improving educational outcomes for students of color with disabilities. In public schools across the nation, there are 6.5 million students with disabilities. Out of that number, fully 3.5 million are Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) students with disabilities. In addition, 11.4 percent of students with disabilities nationwide (almost 720,000) also identify as English language learners supports are utilize to support both cases. (Idea #2 – Focus on

Closing Gaps in High School Graduation Rates for BIPOC Students With Disabilities section, para. 1)

With the pandemic causing disabilities within the public-school community, it may become harder to close the gap in high school graduation rates. As shown in Figure 5, graduation rates are already averaging a 10- to 20-point gap between students with disabilities and student without disabilities. Will this increase due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Figure 5**

*Idea #2 – Focus on Closing Gaps in High School Graduation Rates for BIPOC Students with Disabilities (Pauli, 2021)*



Residing in Chicago, I have seen the need for SEL supports in the public-school community. Ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the strain the pandemic placed on all careers, especially teachers. Teachers were openly advocating to use prayer to eliminate the pandemic. Teachers were resigning and retiring at an alarming rate as a result of the global pandemic.



The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) releases key statistics, including school staffing data, compiled from state administrative records through the Common Core of Data (CCD). In 2019, about 48 percent of public-school staff were teachers (3.2 million) and 13 percent were instructional aides (0.9 million). NCES's new School Pulse Panel survey found that in January 2022, about 61 percent of public schools with at least one vacancy reported that the pandemic increased the number of teacher and staff vacancies, and 57 percent of schools with at least one vacancy found that the pandemic forced them to use teachers outside their normal duty areas. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022, para. 2)

This influx of resignations was attributed to the stress of a crisis. Psychotherapists acknowledge the importance of religion or spirituality, as psychological trauma is often treated through faith-based practices or spiritual meditation. Hayden (2020) recognized this when she stated the following:

Spiritual leaders have shown evidence and ways to find the purpose of our lives on earth. It helps us regain one's own powers of thinking, feeling, deciding, willing, and acting. Religion helps to nourish the spirit of human beings and reduces conflict and suffering in the world. The outcome is creating belongingness with others and their acceptance, leading to hope in difficult times. The religious and spiritual way of life helps live life fully. It motivates us to turn our beliefs into action. Counseling helps the individual to gain insight into their inner strength. This allows them to look into and resolve their problems. Keeping in view the role of spirituality and religion in counseling and psychotherapy, there

is a to integrate them up to the clinical level. Although psychotherapists have realized the use of incorporating religious values in their treatment, they move with a note of caution because of the sensitivity of the issue. (Role of Spirituality and Religion in Counseling and Psychotherapy section, para. 4–6)

Leaders in public-school districts like CPS have made some strides to support both teachers and students. Additionally, CPS has a faith-based organization department that provides faith-based initiatives and services. The OFBI sponsors programs, such as Safe Haven, that offer students additional academic support outside of regular school hours primarily through churches. The opportunity to partner with faith-based organizations does not appear to be a problem as long as the in-class instruction is not interrupted.

### **Family and Community Engagement (FACE)**

A division within CPS called FACE supports the academic and SEL success of public-school community members with their work anchored in increasing student achievement, building partnerships with parents and community, effectively communicating district initiatives, empowering families and community, closing the communication gap between families and the school communities, and establishing a pipeline to resources/services (CPS, n.d.-a). In considering that this SEL service mainly occurs outside of the school through community engagement, how is FACE making an impact or imprint on the students of Chicago? In examining these public-school organizations and analyzing the common workstream that these organizations are built on, I theorized it was prayer. Hovind (2023) argued the following:

Since prayer was removed from public school classrooms in 1962, we have had a six-fold increase in violent crime, our divorce rate has tripled, births to single mothers have increased five-fold, the teenage suicide rate has tripled, and SAT scores (standardized college entrance test) have dropped 80 points (approximately 10%). The removal of prayer may not be the only cause of social ills, but the negative trends are certainly a symptom of the spiritual decline which is at their root. (Morality Declines Without Prayer section, para. 1)

School shootings and bullying are often at the forefront of either SEL neglect or SEL nonacceptance by the aggressors. I have experienced discovering a student's journal that blamed the bullying he experienced on the neglect of the school administration and staff for not addressing it, causing him to plan a retaliation as a result of the bullying. I reported him for safety reasons and threats. Though my action to report him was important for one particular case, it prompted me to think of what overshadows a bias that is not always advocated for within the public-school system, religious equity. As Johnson (2018) said, "Nevertheless, when bullying based on religion occurs in a severe, pervasive or persistent manner, it can be considered harassment under Title IV of the Civil Rights Act (AERA, 2013)" (Religious Diversity as a Civil Rights Issue section, para. 1). This civil right could be used to advocate for faith-based supports. Many SEL issues that hinder the public-school system need support. The question of whether leaders in public-school systems understand how to use the available faith-based supports is yet to be determined.

## **Conclusion**

This examination of the perspectives of public-school community members on having access to the option of faith-based support within the public-school community focused on the equity of choice for this literature review. In examining the public-schools attempt to give equitable social and emotional supports that focus on student progress, SEL supports, and safety, I will advocate for cultural relevant support choices.

Advocating for the selection of a framework that is sensitive to the demographic backgrounds of their public-school community members will produce equity in choosing SEL supports. All aspects of the review should ultimately relate back to student SEL and the impact of instruction, rather than the mechanics of teachers' practices and actions.

Teachers must constantly learn new methods to convey knowledge and the district should convey the same in supporting staff and students with equitable SEL options.

Administration should provide professional development on data analysis of SEL and the importance of maintaining equality with equity when providing SEL support. It is important to peel back the layers of unknown when asking the question, "Why are there no faith-based options to choose from for SEL supports, if it is for my private and personal SEL issues?" This debate may go on for decades, but the reality is, it must be researched with the utmost goal of serving the students.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to investigate perceptions about the option to access faith-based support for SEL needs within the public-school community. Additionally, I examined and analyzed the historical and legal influences on the individual rights that support client privilege to be offered faith-based SEL support within the public-school community. In the process of evaluating the current SEL practices and supports provided by public school districts, I explored whether former students, former parents, and current and former administrators who received SEL supports in school believed they would have benefitted from access to faith-based support, and if they would advocate for their children to have access to faith-based support in the public-school community. Public schools offer students counseling through staff, counselors, and community partners. Through my study, I reviewed how the principles of faith-based support compare and contrast with SEL strategies and techniques to support public-school communities with social and emotional issues.

### **Research Design Overview**

I designed my study to explore how former parents, former students, and current and former administrators perceive the benefit of having the option to access faith-based supports within public-school communities. I adopted the utilization-focused program evaluation as presented by Patton (2008), which is “an evaluation done for and with specific intended primary users for specific, intended uses” (p. 39). My primary questions were as follows:

1. How have historical and legal influences influenced religious freedoms in schools, and where are we now?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the current SEL practices delivered in public schools, and faith-based supports?
3. To what extent might religious support be offered in public schools and would the option of religious SEL support be a preferred option for students, parents, and staff (administrators and support staff)?
4. How do former students and parents perceive the counseling support they received in school, and would they have chosen religious counseling for themselves or their children if offered?

My first priority was to identify participants or stakeholders who were former students, parents, and staff of school communities who directly received counseling through the school system to gather their perspectives on faith-based supports versus counseling received within the school community. These participants were designated to two groups: former public-school parents and students (survey participants) and current and former administrators (focus group participants). I also used data from various categories to identify race-related trends, SEL themes, current SEL competencies and policies, faith-based support benefits and barriers, and the ACA bylaws. The research was driven by advocacy for public-school community members to have the option to access faith-based supports.

### **Data Gathering Techniques**

I interviewed a focus group of former and current administrators ( $N = 5$ ) of public and private school districts using a series of 13 predetermined questions that allowed

access to open questioning and prompt responses to further the discussion as particular themes emerged concerning access to faith-based SEL supports in the public-school community. The focus group discussed and determined the benefits and barriers to including faith-based SEL support in public-school communities during their tenure.

Additionally, I surveyed former and current school community members ( $N = 26$ ) to categorize the data. Each member completed a 15-question survey examining their perception of the option to have access to faith-based SEL supports versus the current district-provided supports within the public-school community. I accessed the data through surveys and interviews of former students, former parents, and current and former school administrators (public and private schools).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The ethical considerations in this study were substantially rooted in implementing consent protocols that ensured no damage was initiated to any of the participants during the study. The process by which I conducted my research clearly reflects the guidance of obtaining consent through the requirements offered by the Institutional Review Board. Complete disclosure was required to complete the data collection methodology, consent forms, and research design and purpose that catapulted the final phase to move forward with the research analysis.

Using systematic purposeful sampling, I began by identifying faith-based and community organizations that partner with CPS. Upon beginning my research, I discovered that CPS partners with more than 200 faith-based organizations or community organizations. According to Patton (1990), “The purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p.

169). It was recommended that I contact Rev. Alan Conley, the director of the OFBI within CPS, to inquire about the faith-based organizations that partner with CPS. To my surprise, Rev. Conley phoned me and provided a list of over 200 supervisors of faith-based and community organizations. He then invited me to a Google Meet with the OFBI cohort to explain what my research and study would entail. Next, I systematically selected one out of every 10 organizations, as a means of eliminating bias, to contact their leadership representative and solicit their assistance, permission, and support in disseminating the survey for my research. I selected every 10th organization so the data would be authentic as I had no knowledge of who would participate. In all, I chose 25 organizations. The leaders then sent the surveys out to their members. Figure 6 represents a model of the framework I created and used for my study.



**Figure 6**

*Galvin's 4 Es: Education Comprehensive Needs Assessment Model for Faith-Based SEL*

*Support*

<p><b>I. EXAMINE</b></p> <p><b>A. Social and Emotional Learning Analysis and Alignment</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Demographic analysis</li> <li>2. Analyze and identify school community ethnicity/race</li> <li>3. Administer a needs assessment (disciplinary, emotional, attendance, etc.)</li> </ol> <p><b>B. Data Collection</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Surveys (parents and students)</li> <li>2. Focus group interview (current and former administrators)</li> <li>3. Code the data of surveys and focus group interviews to support needs analysis</li> </ol> <p><b>II. ELIMINATE</b></p> <p><b>A. Support for Student Achievement</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Data analysis of benefits/barriers of policy change</li> <li>2. Student support services options</li> <li>3. Instructional time versus support</li> </ol> <p><b>III. EXCEL</b></p> <p><b>A. Leadership Capacity</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strategic planning, mission, and vision from data analysis</li> <li>2. District and community partner collaboration</li> <li>3. Tiering students and providing equitable and culturally responsive SEL support</li> </ol> <p><b>B. EVALUATE</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Professional capacity</li> <li>2. SEL support quality and experience</li> <li>3. Quality of SEL professional development</li> </ol> <p><b>C. Culturally Responsive Recruitment and Retention</b></p> <p><b>D. Planning and Operational Effectiveness</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Resource allocation</li> <li>2. Support and instructional scheduling</li> </ol> <p><b>E. Families and Communities</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Family engagement</li> <li>2. Community engagement</li> </ol>
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## **Data Analysis Techniques**

The leadership of these 25 organizations secured 26 participants for my research. I checked daily for responses. The survey was available for 3 months. Once the data were collected, I analyzed the responses to the 15 questions. Ten of those responses were converted to tables and figures using Google Forms. I then analyzed and grouped the five open-ended answer responses by association and similarity. I later coded these and grouped them with the focus group responses by theme and familiarity. There were 15 questions presented in the survey, both multiple choice and open-ended. All survey participants were anonymous. In parallel, I interviewed a homogeneous group of current and former African American administrators. I originally solicited 16 former and current administrators to interview through email and phone calls. In the process, I surveyed which months, weeks, days, and times would be cohesive to interview the former and current administrators. I discovered it may be more beneficial to have an open discussion about my study, which led me to use the focus group approach. Out of the 16 administrators, five chose to participate in the focus group. Three members were working in administration in the public-school system and two had retired. Equity of voice was intentional as participants were encouraged to listen to and examine each other's responses, and were granted the opportunity to interject responses as they examined the other participant's viewpoint without being mandated to agree or disagree. I interviewed the focus group for 52 minutes. There were four female participants and one male participant. I initially began with 13 questions but asked further questions as the focus group discussion expanded.

I transcribed the interviews and analyzed the responses. After analyzing the responses, I categorized the responses by coding the interview responses by similarity and difference in the evidence discovered. The process was designed to get high-quality data in a social context where participants could consider their own views in the context of the views of others (Patton, 1990, p. 63). Although participants were visible ( $n = 3$ ) and not visible ( $n = 2$ ) during the focus group session, their personal information was kept confidential and pseudonyms were assigned in the final report to ensure anonymity.

### **Conclusion**

My goal in this study was to measure perspectives of having the option of access to faith-based support within the public-school community for SEL to ensure and promote equity. A contributing factor in academic progress is a student's ability to access elements that support identified and unidentified social and emotional deficiencies. Public schools partner with multiple vendors that vary from school to school for SEL support and counseling. In amending the ideology that faith-based support equals school-mandated religious practices, school districts, such as CPS, can offer an equitable opportunity for individuals to access faith-based SEL support within the public-school community without constitutionally mandating the practice to each student without consent.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

#### Arenas of Change

At every level of education there is a need to improve systems of teaching and learning. Wagner et al. (2006) called these systems the 4 Cs. The 4 Cs are competency, conditions, culture, and context. Wagner et al. stated “improving teaching and learning-remains at the center of the work. As we discuss the 4 C’s, we ask, what do leaders need to think about to achieve this goal throughout their school or district” (p. 98). This examination of perspectives on using faith-based support as an option in public-school communities was encouraged by an agenda to provide academic, social, and emotional supports to Black and brown public-school students. I chose to examine perspectives on faith-based support in public-school communities as an option for SEL. This qualitative study was informed by Patton’s utilization-focused evaluation with the premise that “evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use” (Patton, 2008, p. 37). The evaluation’s premise was to gather the perspectives of former public-school parents, students, and administrators on the need for and value of providing faith-based support in the public-school setting. The study was guided by four questions:

1. How have historical and legal influences influenced religious freedoms in schools, and where are we now?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the current SEL practices delivered in public schools, and faith-based supports?

3. To what extent might religious support be offered in public schools and would the option of religious SEL support be a preferred option for students, parents, and staff (administrators and support staff)?
4. How do former students and parents perceive the counseling support they received in school, and would they have chosen religious counseling for themselves or their children if offered?

### ***Context***

Wagner et al. (2006) defined context as “larger organizational systems within which we work, and their demands and expectations, formal and informal” (p. 104). Public schools are directly affected by the academic instruction and SEL provided by the district leaders, school administrators, teachers, and community partners. On June 25, 1962, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) that school-sponsored prayer was unconstitutional. Leaders of school districts across the nation are making a conscious effort to provide equity and culturally responsive support to their students in a safe culture and climate. Though prayer has not technically been taken out of schools by the Supreme Court, subsequently, churches have been delegated to partner as community outreach rather than spiritual support. The Court, technically, has never banned prayer in schools; instead, the Court ruled that under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, “it is no part of the business of government to compose official prayers for any group of the American people to recite as a part of a religious program carried on by government” (Haynes, 2022, para. 11). CPS network and district leaders continue to seek ways to ensure equity and improve the culture and climate for the entire

school community and entertain all supports that are welcomed by the community and parents.

The lack of faith-based supports within the public-school community has been credited for many social and emotional issues. Social and cultural backgrounds play a huge role in African Americans' production or SEL deficiencies. Providing support related to the mental health of African American males is critical especially in relationship to a major SEL issue—stress. Balis and Postolache (2008) stated, “Young African American males are more exposed to such stresses and the usual social institutions that provide support in the African American culture have been unable to be as effective in maintaining that support currently” (African American Adolescents and Suicide section, para. 4). They went on to argue that African Americans have well-documented problems with underdiagnosed depression. Yet, they reported on a study by Walker and Bishop that showed religiosity was related to lower suicidal thoughts for both African American and Caucasian college students and another study that found reduction in suicidal behavior to be associated with religious coping; this association was prevalent only when also associated with decreased fatalism (African American Adolescents and Suicide section, para. 7). So, if the cultural links to church are obvious, the SEL support available needs to be culturally responsive and equitable for all public-school community members. This identified trend of positive faith-based support was shocking to say the least.

### ***Conditions***

Wagner et al. (2006) defined conditions as “the external architecture surrounding student learning, the tangible arrangement of time, space, and resources” (p. 101). Many

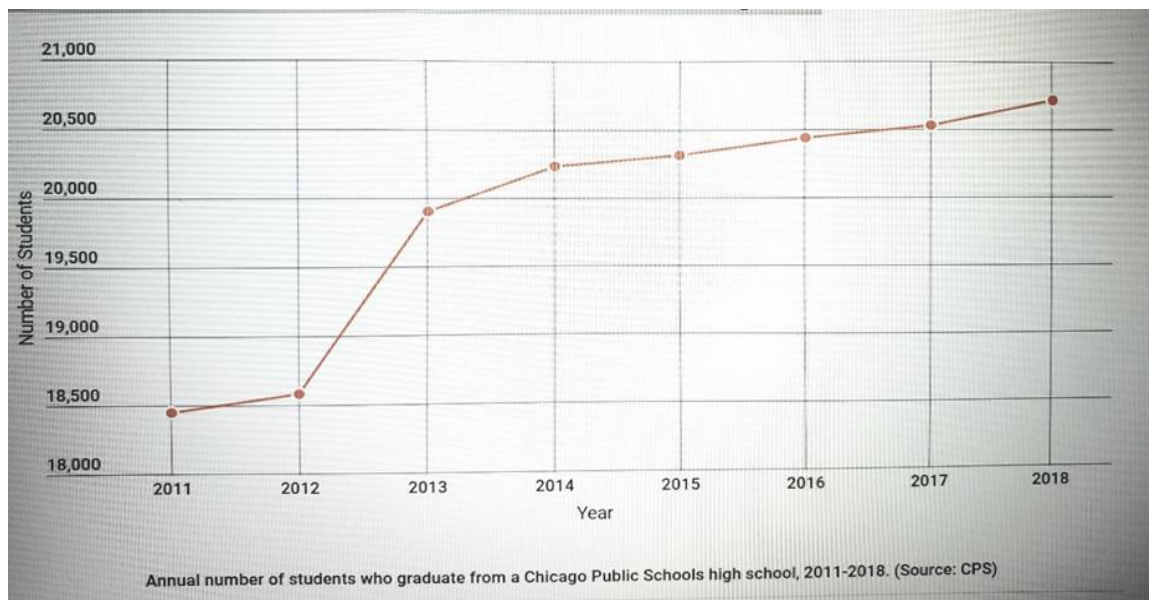
variables will affect the graduation rate or success of public-school students. School conditions is one area that affects the on-track graduation rate. The question of whether the available SEL supports directly influence the rise or fall of the graduation percentage is valid. Friedman (2018) said,

More Chicago Public Schools students are earning diplomas than ever before, reaching a record-high graduation rate of 78.2 percent, according to new figures from the district. CPS officials say that 2017-2018 graduation rate is part of a steady increase from 56.9 percent in 2011, a 21-percent increase. “This is a far cry from the CPS of the past when students were almost just as likely to drop out of school as they were to graduate,” said CPS CEO Janice Jackson in a call with reporters. (para. 1–2)

The CPS network saw record breaking gains during Dr. Jackson’s tenure as shown in Figure 7.

## Figure 7

*Annual Number of Students who Graduate Chicago Public School High School, 2011–2018 (Friedman, 2018)*



One area in need of change is the rate at which children of color, Blacks especially, are suspended versus other races. Graduation rates can also be affected by SEL variables. Disenfranchised neighborhoods have high crime rates with failing schools. Some argue that this economic segregation was intentional. “White students are 2.3 times more likely to be enrolled in at least one advanced course as black students” (Coffey, 2021, para. 9). Select enrollment is another variable that affects when and where students graduate. I myself have sent my kids to private schools, though the commute is very difficult at times. Styles Avant-Pinkston, a University of Illinois-Chicago junior, blamed the public-school system’s systematic segregation as the culprit. He says,

If you’re not in a good elementary school, you’re gonna most likely go to a middle school that’s not good and then when it’s time to take a test to get into



these good schools in Chicago, you haven't been trained for this. (Coffey, 2021, para. 6)

The CPS graduation rate was reported to be 82.5% as of September 4, 2020. This was accredited to the academic progress of Latinx students. The largest percentage of growth came from African Americans and Latinx students. Each group saw a percentage increase for the 2019 school year. CPS reported,

Over 2019 with a 2.2 percentage point increase (from 82.3 percent to 84.5 percent) for Latinx students and 1.2 percentage point increase (from 76.8 percent to 78 percent) for African American students. Since 2017, the percentage of African American students earning a diploma has increased by 4 percentage points, which is the highest increase among all major racial groups in the district during that time period. (CPS, 2020, Major Improvements Among Latinx and African American Students section, para. 1)

Granted, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed these gains tremendously. I did not realize, as a survivor of COVID-19, how the pandemic influenced the SEL and graduation track of the public-school community. "The pandemic and 17 months out of the classroom appear to have seriously aggravated absenteeism in the district and declines in proficiency" (Max, 2023, The Pandemic Exacerbated Downward-Spiraling Trends in CPS section, para. 1). This within itself was an SEL issue.

### ***Competencies***

Any initiative that is implemented within any public-school district should be rooted in data analysis. CPS holds leadership summits at the beginning of each fiscal school year to train teachers and introduce new guidelines, bylaws, and new agendas for

the district. SEL was no different. The three main principles or learning goals that were articulated by the ISBE in 2004 were the following:

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. (Community Consolidated School District 181, n.d., para. 2)

Are these skill sets similar to faith-based attributes? The argument that Hovind (2023) made is that there is no difference between faith-based principles and SEL principles. Though there may be similarities, the standards are clear that the main goal is to provide students with the skills to equip them for successful SEL development. CPS states,

The District's initiative to address Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) preceded the State of Illinois' Children's Mental Health Act of 2003. This law stipulates that "every Illinois school district shall develop a policy for incorporating social and emotional development into the district's educational program. The policy shall address teaching and assessing social and emotional skills and protocols for responding to children with social, emotional, or mental health problems, or a combination of such problems, that impact learning ability." The district's Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum is aligned with the Illinois Social and

Emotional Learning (SEL) Goals, Standards and Performance Descriptors.

(Illinois SEL Standards & Policy section, 2004, para. 1)

Though the initiative appears to be clear, the heavy lift is on the teachers to embed these principles into everyday lessons. Illinois has developed descriptors for each grade level. The Performance Descriptors are divided into two bands: Grades 1–5 and Grades 6–10. The Skyline curriculum that some CPS teachers use has some relevant components. For example, a Beyonce song may be used for poetry at times. With the policies being so broad, the question of how the culture and climate will be affected is valid. Will professional developments surrounding culturally relevant SEL practices be introduced to staff in the public-school community? Will culturally relevant intentionally be part of policy change? Is culture viewed as an important option in selecting the provisions for SEL support?

### ***Culture***

The racial and ethnic composition of a student has a tremendous effect on how important environment and experiences are to that individual. With the implementation of SEL strategies, meditation has been heavily endorsed. The frequency with which meditation is used among adults by race does not differ much. Whites meditate seldomly or never (50%). Of the races that meditated the most, Blacks (52%) meditated at least once a week as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Frequency of Meditation Among Adults by Race/Ethnicity (Pew Research Center, 2014)*

Racial and ethnic composition	At least once a week	Once or twice a month	Several times a year	Seldom/never	Don't know	Sample size
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White	36%	8%	4%	50%	2%	24,900
Black	52%	8%	4%	34%	2%	3,394
Asian	31%	11%	7%	49%	2%	937
Latino	49%	10%	4%	35%	2%	3,814
Other/Mixed	47%	9%	4%	40%	1%	1,504

Why is this important? This particular cultural habit is relevant in choosing which SEL support can best suit the school community. Wagner et al. (2006) stated, “We define culture as the shared values, beliefs, assumptions expectations, and behaviors related to student and learning, teachers and teaching, instructional leadership, and the quality of relationships within and beyond the school” (p. 102). This SEL support can often mirror prayer as a parallel. Table 3 provides data reflecting the frequency of participation in prayer, scripture study, and religious education groups by race/ethnicity.

**Table 3**

*Frequency of Participation in Prayer, Scripture Study, or Religious Education Groups by Race/Ethnicity Among Adults who Attend Prayer Group (Pew Research Center, 2014)*

Racial and ethnic composition	At least once a week	Once or twice a month	Several times a year	Seldom/never	Don't know	Sample size
White	22%	8%	8%	62%	< 1%	24,900
Black	39%	14%	9%	38%	1%	3,394
Asian	17%	10%	13%	60%	< 1%	937
Latino	27%	12%	8%	51%	1%	3,814
Other/Mixed	26%	8%	8%	57%	1%	1,504

Prayer (39%) and meditation are both dominated or used more by adults who identify as Black. Blacks also use prayer 14% more than (a majority) all other races identified. I was interested in examining Black and Latinx faith-based community members' perspectives

about and interest in having access to faith-based supports within the public-school system (see Table 3). According to Shafer (2017),

Populations at risk of adverse academic outcomes, especially black and Latino students, tend to have strong ties to faith communities. Religion provides stability, support, and guidance to millions of young people in the United States. Churches, mosques, temples, and other religious centers often take the lead in giving at-risk kids academic assistance, mentorship, and lessons in resilience and self-control. Can schools leverage the support these institutions provide, in order to enhance achievement for children? (para. 1–2)

The race and ethnicity data (see Table 2) illustrates the significance of religion in one's life based on race and ethnicity. The data reflect a need to investigate further the influence of faith-based history and social surroundings. CPS established the Office of Equity in 2018 in an effort to advance educational equity throughout the district. With regard to equity, CPS states,

Equity means championing the individual cultures, talents, abilities, languages, and interests of every CPS student by ensuring they receive the necessary opportunities and resources to meet their unique needs and aspirations. Our top priority of racial and educational equity aligns with the CPS Five-Year Vision, which outlines our district's values and goals, and affirms that every decision we make must be filtered through an equity lens. (CPS, n.d.-b, para. 3)

Districts typically monitor school environments by using student, teacher, and parent climate surveys. The 5Essentials Survey is commonly used for this purpose. Network and district leaders continue to seek ways to ensure equity and improve culture and climate

for the entire school community. CPS measures culture and climate with the 5Essentials Survey, which identifies five indicators that lead to improved outcomes for all students, including in the areas of attendance and test score gains.

The five indicators that positively affect school success are effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environments, and ambitious instruction. Research derived from the five essentials for school success has proven that schools strong on at least three of the five essentials are 10 times more likely to see improved student outcomes. (ISBE, n.d.-a, para. 2–3)

The surveys help to give a voice to all with no bias or malice intent.

One example of how faith-based SEL supports can be provided was given by Chavez (2017) when she stated,

A classroom used as a prayer room at Liberty High School in Frisco got the attention of the Texas attorney general’s office last week. The office sent a letter raising constitutional concerns about the room. The Frisco superintendent called the letter a “publicity stunt” and said the prayer room has been in use for several years without complaints. Prayer rooms are just one way public schools in Frisco and across Texas accommodate students and religion. (para. 1–2)

Equity in support is present in most public schools, yet access to culturally relevant support such as consideration of religious background or race is not in many cases representative of minorities. Avent and Cashwell (2015) stated,

Kuczewski (2007) asserted that helping professionals often are charged to care for “vulnerable persons facing difficult situations and tragic choices” (p. 9). Often, within the counseling context, client spirituality is an important part of the healing

process. There is substantial evidence that one's religious life is a critical feature of the developmental process and can serve to improve one's overall well-being (Cashwell & Young, 2011). Further, researchers have found positive benefits to incorporating spirituality and faith into one's life, including improved physical (Matthews et al., 1998) and psychological (Joubert, 2010) health. Therefore, counselors are expected to assess the impact of a client's spirituality and religion on his or her mental health and overall well-being (Cashwell & Watts, 2010). Moreover, attending to the spiritual needs of clients is an essential part of developing culturally sensitive treatment plans and recommendations. (para. 2)

Spirituality is an integral part of the mental and cultural make-up within minority communities. African Americans have embedded faith-based supports within their communities for decades. Avent and Cashwell explained this by stating,

Similar to African American communities, the Black Church has experienced change, progression, challenges, struggle and resilience. Counselors must understand the historical role and relevance of the Black Church in African American communities in order to better understand African-American mental health help-seeking behaviors. This section will provide an overview of the Black Church's inception during slavery, its role in the Civil Rights Era and its relevance in the lives of many African Americans in the 21st century. This history will provide counselors with a context for understanding the Church's salience in the lives of many of their religious African American clients. (History of the Black Church section, para. 1)

With 649 schools in CPS and a total enrollment of 341,342 students (U.S. News & World Report, n.d.), of which 82.5% are minority, it is no surprise that the question of equity or bias may be raised with regard to access to SEL resources that are culturally relevant. Sample demographic data show a summary and the need for advocacy for equitable SEL supports due to the demographics of the clients within the school community. As shown in Table 4, within CPS, the numbers are substantially higher for people of color with regard to enrollment.



**Table 4***Enrollment by Diversity (U.S. News & World Report, n.d.)*

Enrollment by diversity	
Hispanic/Latino	46.7%
Black or African American	35.8%
White	11.0%
Asian or Asian Pacific Islander	4.4%
Two or more races	1.7%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.3%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.2%

With the premise of supporting the whole student with regard to SEL, I wanted to research whether the history of the student's culture was examined or considered when implementing SEL support within public-school communities. As an African American male who has experienced prejudice and bias over my 48 years on this earth, I have had the unfortunate experience of being taken for granted culturally within society. Due to my faith and belief in a higher power, my main experience with SEL support came primarily through the church. Faith as a foundational SEL tool was instilled in me to combat centuries of family obstacles and oppression. The goals of this study were to discover why faith-based support is not offered and whether faith-based supports in a public-school community are desired by students and families from similar backgrounds as myself. My cultural identity consists of a mixed background of African American, Italian, and Indian with an Irish last name, and these questions prompted me to examine why faith-based supports are underutilized or not promoted to support SEL needs.

### **Survey Participants Overview**

The participants in this study's survey, which consisted of 10 Likert scale questions and five open-ended questions, were 26 members of 25 faith-based and community-based organizations in Chicago. The organizations were systematically selected to disseminate the survey to prospective participants within their organizations to examine their perspectives on the SEL supports provided in public schools and whether faith-based SEL supports would be chosen if given access on an individual basis. According to Patton (1990), "The purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (p. 169). All survey participants were former public-school parents and students. The survey data identified a need for the option to access faith-based SEL supports in a public-school setting. All participants were randomly selected from a third party (their supervisor) and all participants were anonymous.

### **Focus Group Participants Overview**

Participants in the focus group were selected from a list of current and former public and private school administrators. Focus group participants participated in an unstructured focus group session to gather their perspectives about the extent to which faith-based support can be implemented or used within a public-school setting. Patton (1990) stated "a focus group interview is an interview with a small group of people on a specific topic" (p. 19). The five African American former and current administrators were interviewed to obtain high quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others (Patton, 2008). Although three

participants were visible during the focus group session, their identities remain confidential, and pseudonyms were assigned to ensure anonymity.

## **Findings**

In this section, I report the findings from the qualitative data analysis regarding the need for access to faith-based SEL support within public-school communities. When coding and analyzing qualitative, a researcher has to decide what data to code. The University of Illinois Library (2023) led me to decide to view my data inductively, attempting to develop codes entirely from the survey and focus group responses, ignoring as much as possible previous knowledge of the topic under study, and developing a scheme grounded in my data. Regardless of the coding method, the research should be clearly communicated, yet that is not always the case (Deterding & Waters, 2021). Analyzing the data from a nonbiased lens was a daunting task as a minister of the gospel. Yet, removing myself from the equation allowed me to identify reoccurring themes that support the validity of having access to faith-based supports in a public-school community to support SEL. I identified themes in the data using both my own observations as well as analysis of the survey results and focus group transcriptions (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

The survey was completed by 26 anonymous former public and private school parents and students. Participant selection was non-biased and random. Survey participants voluntarily took the survey after it was disseminated by faith-based or community organization leaders who were chosen out of 200 organizations, systematically choosing every 10th organization. The first section provides the findings from the survey's Likert scale questions, open-ended responses, and the focus group

responses to answer the following: (a) Who received SEL support in school (i.e., demographics), (b) SEL supports in and out of the school setting, (c) benefits and affirmation of SEL supports, and (d) perspectives on faith-based supports. Interpretations and judgements of the data follow, and a summary of recommendations for educators and policymakers is provided based on the study's findings.

### ***Demographics***

A total of 26 individuals (24 Blacks, 2 Whites) were surveyed for this study. The data indicate the participants' demographics represented the minimum requirements as described in Chapter III. All 26 participants are represented in the sample. All participants were parents of former or present public-school students or former public-school students themselves as shown in Figure 8. The chosen participants were former students, parents, and staff of school communities who directly received counseling through the school system and the survey was designed to gather their respective opinions on the lack of access to religious counseling versus received counseling within the school communities. I used the participants' responses to the demographic questions to analyze and measure the data. The demographics for the focus group varied from inner-city, to southern, to suburban. All focus group participants ( $N = 5$ ) were of African American descent. Each administrator were veteran administrators. Three administrators were currently working and two were retired. I accessed these data points through the surveys and interviews of former students, former staff, current staff, current and former parents, and school administrators (public and private schools).

Figure 8 shows that of the 26 respondents, 68% attended public school and 9% had a child/children who attended public schools. Of the 26 respondents, 20% received or

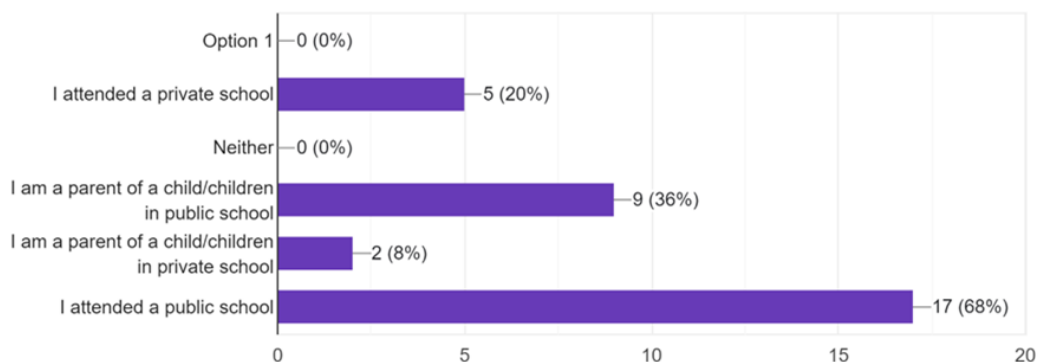
attended private schools. Only 2% of the respondents had a child/children who attended private schools.

## Figure 8

### *Yourself and Your Experience*

1. How would you describe yourself and your experience (s) while in education? Check all that apply.

25 responses



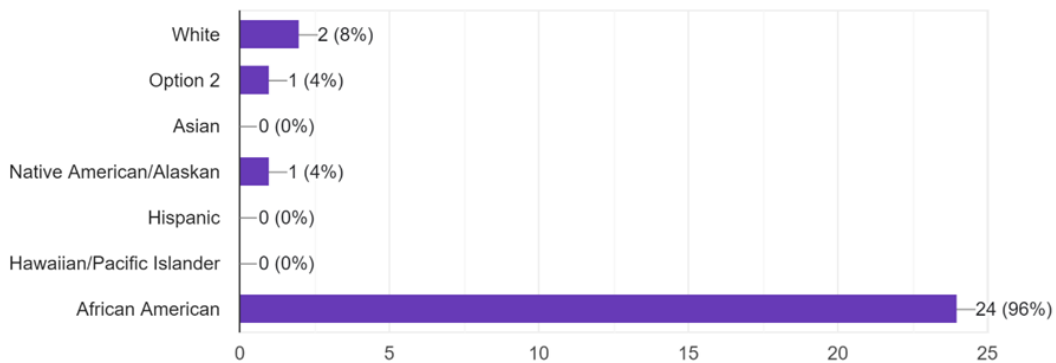
Of the 26 respondents, only 25 responded to the race identification inquiry (see Figure 9). In reviewing the data related to race, 96% of the participants were African American, 8% were of White descent, and 1% were Native Americans. An additional 1% preferred to not answer. Culturally, it may be considered inconsiderate to limit access without consideration of religious preference with my research proving that African Americans are more dependent on faith-based supports versus traditional counseling. A vast majority of the participants identified as African American (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9**

*Identity*

15. What race do you identify with? Please check the appropriate box.

25 responses



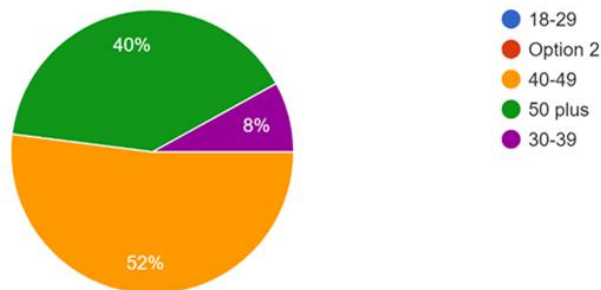
The same 26 respondents responded to the age range inquiry. The data show 52% of the participants were 40–49 years of age, 40% of the participants were 50 and older, and 8% were 30–39 years of age (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10**

*Age Range*

What age range are you?

25 responses



### *SEL Supports in and Out of the School Setting*

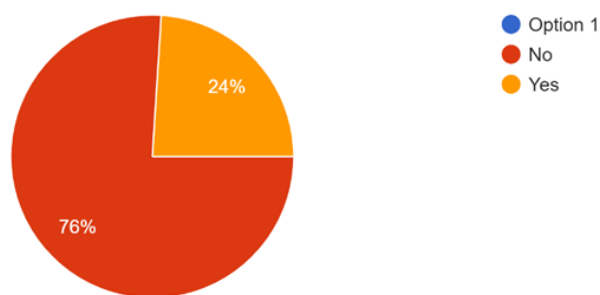
Of the respondents, 24% received SEL support such as meditation, counseling, or mentorship while attending public school and 76% did not receive SEL supports within the public-school system (see Figure 11). In contrast to the 76% of respondents who did not receive SEL supports within the public-school system, 72% received SEL supports through faith-based strategies such as prayer, counseling, and mentorship outside of the public-school setting (see Figure 12).

### **Figure 11**

#### *SEL Support Service*

2. Have you ever received SEL support such as meditation, counseling, or mentorship within the public school system?

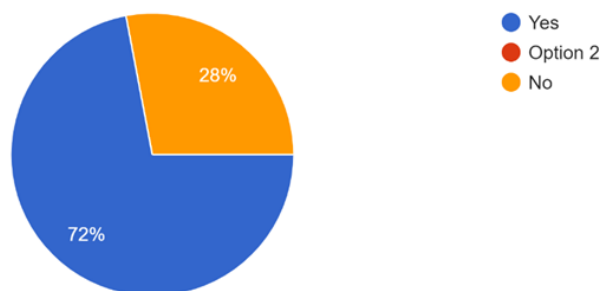
25 responses



**Figure 12***SEL Service Out of Public School*

8. Have you ever received faith-based support such as prayer, counseling, or mentorship outside of the public school system? \*

25 responses

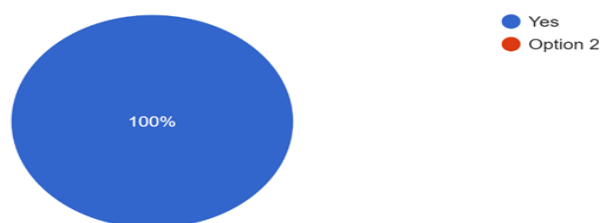
***Benefits and Affirmation of SEL Supports***

Participants were asked, “With the growing focus within the public-school system surrounding the topic of SEL, do you feel it is important to address the individual SEL needs of each student to develop success in the classroom and school community?” All of the respondents agreed it is important to address the individual SEL needs of each student to develop success in the classroom and school community (see Figure 13).

**Figure 13***SEL Importance*

4. With the growing focus within the public-school system surrounding the topic of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), do you feel it is impor...p success in the classroom and school community?

25 responses





All of the respondents were advocating for SEL support and the inclusion of SEL supports for the overall success of the student as shown in Figure 13. The reasons ranged from helping students become great adults, to every child needs support. Though the participants provided a variety of reasons, the data showed one thing—SEL supports are desired by parents and students. This desire was also discovered during the focus group. Speaker 5 elaborated on not only the need for SEL supports but also the need to support the whole child's development a productive citizen. Speaker 5 said,

If these types of things, as you all have mentioned, I'm just listening here. Best when the buildings happen to work with students in such a way that they will be able to deal with real-life situations, they needed to manage the motions. But these you have to have a foundation of basic and getting to them to make sure that the goals are being met. It's like stepping from step one, maybe to step five, and we are eliminating the things that are necessary to identify these students as students who are having not only emotional problems, but also having academic problems as well. And unless that is addressed, you're really, we're really missing the point of getting to these students. They are children, they are not adults, and they are in the learning stage, but how to deal with problems that they are having, whether they are social, emotional, and really many, many times we just looking at the academic card. But that's way down the road, if we don't deal with these other problems exist and problems, and then we can zero in on the knowledge, the skills and, and, and other things. And then this can be an outgrowth into the community.

When asked if it is important to address the individual SEL needs of each student to develop success in the classroom and school community, 100% of the respondents agreed that it is important. The respondents advocating for SEL supports had a variety of reasons to support the inclusion of SEL supports for the overall success of the student. The reasons ranged from helping students become great adults, to every child needing support (see Figure 14).

## Figure 14

### *Benefits of SEL*

5. If you answered yes to question 4, please provide a detailed explanation using the following prompt: The SEL supports will be productive and beneficial to each student because...., 25 responses



One survey participant explained it being beneficial, stating,

My early education in late 60s we started our school day with the pledge of allegiance and prayer, along with singing America the Beautiful and Lift Every Voice. Then when prayer was taken out, we were left with the Pledge and singing. Then as the years passed, to high school, we had guidance counselors and there were school psychologists along with nursing staff who were great at the public schools I attended. Their doors were always open and they genuinely were a place

to help students, to discuss whatever issues a child was having, personal or academic. They were trusted persons who had compassion and wisdom.

In contrast, one respondent said, “I unfortunately did not receive any support while in public school” or “No. It was not offered.”

The focus group participants agreed from an administrative perspective on many issues concerning SEL and the need for support in this area. Speaker 4 explained,

We have always been administrators for a long time. And I feel like you know, there’s always opportunities, you know, to, to address a student on social emotional issues, but at the same time, like, and I just keep coming back to identifying part of it, we have to make sure that we can identify, and once we identify them, we can’t address it. But there’s been several instances where a student has come to the office, maybe you know, what, what a teacher thought was a disciplinary problem. But at the same time, when you sit down and start talking to the child, you understand now, this is a behavior problem, behavior issue. And now we have to just address this policy book here. Now, we got to just use a professional, you know, a personal professional asked me, “Do we get opportunities all the time to do it?”

There was a reoccurring theme within the focus group of allowing time to access SEL support. Speaker 2 implied that the size of public schools hinders the ability to grant access for supports. Speaker 2 said,

I feel that because I was always in a faith-based school and a small school at that, that the kids were given more opportunity of learning how to cope with their many behavior problems, because we’re more hands on and had the staff to be

able to work more on a personal basis with a student. And I think that's what you need to even get access in the public-school system.

There is a demand with 100% of the survey participants agreeing that SEL support will be productive and beneficial to public-school students. The access to these supports appears to be a variable.

### ***Perspectives on Faith-Based Supports***

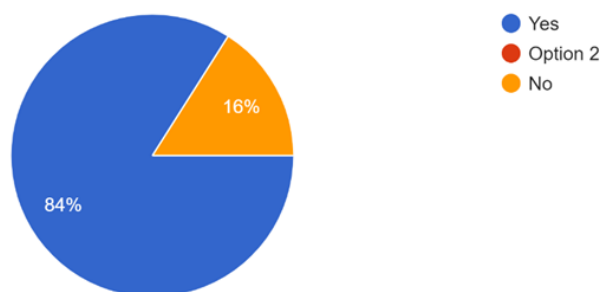
The data show 84% of the respondents' child/children received SEL support through faith-based strategies such as prayer, counseling, and mentorship (see Figure 14). Faith plays a major role in the lives of students of minority races. Another 16% of the respondents answered no to having received faith-based support through prayer, counseling, or mentorship outside of the public school. Participants' children, once again, received faith-based supports at a higher rate than their predecessors which was 72% (see Figure 12). This appears to suggest that the parents benefitted from the faith-based support received, in turn trusting their children with the same process of support..

### **Figure 15**

#### *Children who Receive Faith-Based Support*

10. Has/Have your child/children ever received faith-based support such as prayer, counseling, or mentorship outside of the public school system?

25 responses



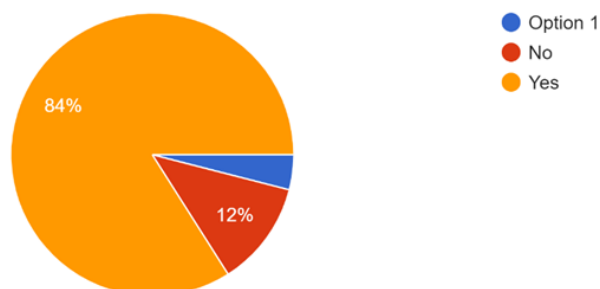
With 100% of respondents agreeing with the need for SEL supports, a majority, or 84% of the respondents, supported the addition of faith-based supports on an individual basis. Though 26% of respondents did not receive faith-based support, only 12% were against it in public school, with 4% being undecided. Though only 72% of the respondents received faith-based support, 84% of the respondents supported their child or children having access to faith-based SEL support on an individual basis in a public-school setting if it was offered. That the school community does not desire faith-based supports is simply not the case. With only 12% against it, it could be debated that they would not be affected on an individual consent basis of non-sponsored mandated faith-based support (see Figures 16 and 17).

### Figure 16

#### *Support of Faith-Based Option*

12. Would you support public schools offering faith-based Social and Emotional Learning support for students, staff, and administrators on an individual basis in a public-school setting?

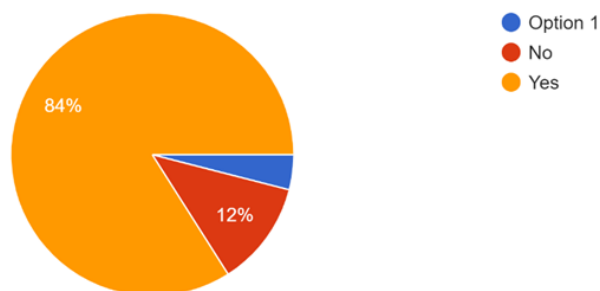
25 responses



**Figure 17***Support of Child Receiving Faith-Based Support*

13. Would you agree for your child or you to receive faith-based SEL support on an individual basis in a public school setting if offered?

25 responses



A clear majority of the survey participants desired to have access to faith-based supports. The focus group participants also advocated for its inclusion. When asked whether faith-based supports were needed from an administrative lens, Speaker 5 said the following:

I think it goes back to religion. The answer is yes. There is definitely a plus in having faith-based support. And I think it goes back to that idea that sometimes our teachers, our counselors, our social workers aren't fully equipped. And when we have additional support, then that's a plus for the child. And it's a plus for the faculty because it helps to alleviate some of the burdens that we sometimes put on educators.

### **Interpretations and Judgements**

Data from the participant survey show 68% of the respondents attended public school, 36% of the respondents had a child or children who attended public school, only 5% attended private school, and only 2% of respondents had a child or children who attended private school. The data show that 70% of the respondents were subjected to the

laws and bylaws of the federal and state SEL supports for them and their children. The equitable choice to have access to faith-based supports overwhelmingly was decided by the school districts and not the families, in turn eliminating the respondents' voice in the supports they received.

The support provided by public schools is a positive support for families and school communities. Surprisingly, only 24% of the respondents said they received SEL supports such as meditation, counseling, or mentorship while attending public school. This number can be skewed due to the backgrounds of the 76% of the respondents who did not receive SEL supports. Studies show (Hill, 2021) minorities do not use or trust supports such as counseling to support SEL issues outside of family and faith. Anthony Hill of ABC Action News reported,

In fact, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, racial and ethnic minorities are less likely to receive mental health services than Whites. Mental health services are used by about 17% of Blacks, 15% of Latinos, and about 10% of Asians. Some of the reasons why are lack of access to counseling, historically a strong dependence on religion to help with trauma, and a sense of taboo that has prevailed in many of these communities. (Hill, 2021, para. 5)

The 25% of respondents who received SEL support from the public school were divided on the benefits of the experience. Yet, one survey respondent stated, "I believe it could be successful." Many agreed, as one participant explained it being beneficial, stating,

My early education in late 60s we started our school day with the pledge of allegiance and prayer, along with singing America the Beautiful and Lift Every Voice. Then when prayer was taken out, we were left with the Pledge and singing.

Then as the years passed, to high school, we had guidance counselors and there were school psychologists along with nursing staff who were great at the public schools I attended. Their doors were always open and they genuinely were a place to help students, to discuss whatever issues a child was having, personal or academic. They were trusted persons who had compassion and wisdom.

In contrast, some participants responded, “I unfortunately did not receive any support while in public school” or “No. It was not offered.” SEL support has been in demand and it has been a decades long struggle according to the data collected in my research.

There is an obvious demand for SEL support, as an overwhelming 100% of the respondents stated it is important to address the individual SEL needs of each student to develop success in the classroom and school community. With such a high demand of need, one should have a plethora of information and access to multiple sources of service, including faith-based support on an individual basis. The respondents (100%) advocating for SEL supports had a plethora of reasons to support the inclusion of SEL supports for the overall success of the student. The reasons ranged from helping students become great adults to every child needing support. Though there were a variety of reasons, there was one thing that the data showed—SEL supports are desired by parents and students. The data show 28% of students of the parents (see Figure 12) who responded had received meditation, counseling, or mentorship outside the public-school system. This was 4% higher than the 24% (see Figure 11) of the parents who received SEL support while in public school. This increase could be due to the 100% in support of these supports not having it but needing access or options to it.



In contrast to the 76% of respondents who did not receive SEL support within the public-school system, 72% received SEL supports through faith-based strategies such as prayer, counseling, and mentorship. Faith plays a major role in the lives of students of minority races. Yet, faith-based support is not offered nor accessible through the public-school system. Participants' children, once again, had received the faith-based supports at a higher rate than their predecessors. Could this be due to the fact that the parents benefitted from the faith-based support received?

With 100% of the respondents supporting SEL supports, a majority 84% of the respondents supported the addition of faith-based supports on an individual basis. Though 26% of the respondents did not receive faith-based support, only 12% were against it in public school, with 4% being undecided. This appears to indicate respondents support faith-based support for the public-school community. Though only 72% of the respondents received faith-based support, 84% of the respondents supported their child or children having access to faith-based SEL on an individual basis in a public-school setting if it was offered. The suggestion that the school community does not desire faith-based supports is simply not the case. With only 12% against it, it is could be debated that they would not be affected on an individual consent basis of non-sponsored mandated faith-based support.

The data show 24% of the respondents were subjected to federal and state SEL supports within the public-school community (see Figure 11). The equitable choice to have access to faith-based support overwhelmingly was decided by the school districts and not the families, in turn eliminating the respondents' voice in the supports that they received. The survey results also indicated 68% of the respondents attended public

school. In addition, 36% of respondents had a child or children who attended public school, whereas only 5% attended private school and only 2% of respondents had a child or children who attended private school. Studies show minorities do not use or trust SEL support such as counseling to support SEL issues outside of family and faith.

African-American clients active in churches with particular theologies (e.g., alternate society theology and other-worldly theology) may be disinclined to seek counseling services outside the church. Congregants may receive messages that the church can take care of all of their concerns, including mental health issues.

(Avent & Cashwell, 2015, Recommendations for Counselors section, para. 2)

Faith plays a major role in the lives of students of minority races. Yet, faith-based support is not offered nor accessible through the public-school system. The school community not desiring the option to access of faith-based supports within the public school is simply not the case. As Figures 12 and 15 show, parents (72%) trusted their children (84%) to receive faith-based support on an individual basis.

### **Recommendations**

I have identified through my research and data analysis that there is a desire to have access to faith-based SEL support within the public-school community. The district's first priority should be to examine the school community population's culture and how trauma and the community environment contribute to the need for SEL support. After identifying the common variables or contributors to the SEL issues, a plethora of supports and access to strategies and tools should be made readily available. With 84% of the research participants agreeing that faith-based supports should be offered and 84% stating they would like for their children to have access to faith-based supports for SEL,

the support should be offered on an individual consent basis. The mere fact that this implementation would not be sponsored nor mandated by the public schools supports that public-school community members should have access to faith-based support.

Local school districts should research the parallels between state-based counseling and faith-based counseling. Once the competences and alignment have been identified, intentional policy changes can be made to eliminate bias by providing the option of faith-based support for SEL.

### **Conclusion**

In all, the law protects citizens from having no choice of being subjected to or involved in prayer due to mandates and sponsorship. Counseling is protected by client privilege under the law. Therefore, the data collected identified a need for culturally relevant decision making with regard to the option to provide access to faith-based supports for SEL within the public-school community.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Recommendations and Strategies and Actions

In the process of revitalizing or creating a new norm, one must carefully consider the change model applied. Effective school improvement planning models emphasize three main targets: needs assessments, strategic prioritization of needs, and data-driven decision making. Leaders of public-school districts that appear to have a need for improvement need to initiate school improvement planning. The planning should include a comprehensive needs assessment to systematically determine high-need areas. Not only should each school and the entire student body be targeted but the public-school community and deficiencies must be considered as well. SEL deficiencies need to be analyzed and areas of need identified to combat those deficiencies. Teaching the whole student is key, yet knowing what to target is genius. Fullan and Quinn (2016) wrote that:

In short, coherence making is an ongoing conundrum, but we are finding that leaders who want to make a difference are drawn to the challenge. Focusing direction gets you into the game, cultivating collaborative cultures provides the pathway for change, deepening learning is the core strategy for affecting student results and securing accountability is essential to measure growth and be accountable to ourselves and the public. (p. 34)

Attempts to initiate a systemwide adjustment in service and support implementation can be viewed as genius or give a sense of betrayal. Mission and vision changes for elementary through high schools, community organization compatibility, and the infusion of new SEL support options may receive a very mixed reaction from the school

community when proposing a policy change that gives the option to access faith-based supports for SEL within the public-school system.

### **To-Be Vision of Public Schools**

#### ***Context***

First, data reflecting the school's measurement of SEL should be compared to district, state, and national standards. Once this is meticulously done, a culturally responsive goal can be established. Administrators do not have the luxury of establishing a 3- to 5-year timetable because the demographics of each public-school neighborhood are fluid and culturally different. A needs assessment should include analyses of both internal and external variables as well as quantitative and qualitative data that explicitly link results with student learning in relation to the SEL issues that are affecting student progress. It is productive in some investigations to use a third party to conduct a data analysis and findings assessment to ensure objectivity is not uncommon.

Though I agree with the third-party analysis, I am not convinced that the option to provide faith-based support will need that broad of a wait. Most counseling is done one-on-one within public schools and confidential. The option to include faith-based supports would be an addition to the current SEL supports offered. The goal is to not sponsor or mandate faith-based supports on public-school community members.

To support SEL at your school, consider starting with a series of seven interrelated activities best organized within eight-week planning cycles that will most likely require three years to bring to fruition, depending on the starting point. There is no blueprint for the order in which these activities should be carried out, which is why the seventh one -- learning from others -- is so

important. Factors such as the history and present status of SEL-related programming, staff knowledge of SEL, school climate, sociodemographic factors, leadership style and history, and current mandates and priorities, as well as the school's capacities, will determine the timing and sequencing of these activities. (Elias, 2016, para. 4)

An in-depth diagnostic of the effects of race, religion, and demographics must be conducted for each referral for SEL supports. This will help to determine which line of support will be issued.

### ***Culture***

School district leaders should create SEL teams to design, implement, and track the improvement efforts for SEL supports and determine whether they have selected SEL options of support without bias and inclusive of cultural consideration. These teams should include high school and elementary administrators at all grade levels targeted for high-needs improvement efforts as an alternative to the entire district changing at once. This will allow for developing smart, measured, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals that will not interrupt an entire district's school culture and climate. Administrators, teachers, and curriculum directors should be included within these teams. Teams should be no larger than five to 10 people. At the grade level, it should be emphasized that the primary focus of network leaders should be on supporting the school community in their efforts to provide SEL supports, rather than on compliance. School district leaders must introduce a comprehensive action plan guided by a third-party partner to present a SMART goal. The district must establish culturally relevant and equitable SEL options of support, along with attainable goals. Setting unrealistic goals

may ultimately demoralize key players, parents, and stakeholders in the school community. Starting slowly and leaving room for goals to be adjusted upward later is the most effective method. Goals should be aligned with the district's equitable agenda and divided into small increments that recognize the individual SEL needs of all public-school community members. This will enable district leaders to effectively designate and track the progress of identified SEL support options and determine what should be available and why.

The SEL district teams should use four primary types of data to evaluate school improvement needs: student learning, demographics, school environment, and implementation fidelity. To assess student learning versus SEL variables, the teams should examine data on standardized tests, incidents and suspension rate, SEL, attendance, and other variables such as demographics that may guide or identify the form of support needed for a particular race. Additionally, demographic data allow for a thorough understanding of school subpopulations (e.g., Black and brown) who may benefit from culturally relevant supports such as faith-based SEL supports. District leaders typically monitor school environment by using student, teacher, and parent climate surveys. The 5 Essentials Survey is commonly used for this purpose.

### ***Conditions***

The purpose of this examination of perspectives was to move from an analysis of the current SEL support system and the current state of SEL support options within the public-school community to ultimately provide faith-based options for SEL supports within the public-school community. Providing faith-based support on an individual basis or the option to include faith-based supports for SEL is not considered a mandate or

school-sponsored prayer as outlined in the case of *Engel v. Vitale* (1962). The analysis of this area of concern captures the inequitable options for school community members to choose faith-based support for SEL in a normal public-school setting. This research should ultimately enable school district leaders to design a new system of supports from the interpretations of the results. This research was ultimately informed by the judgements and recommendations to provide faith-based supports for SEL within the public-school community that are culturally relevant and non-biased. This will shine a light on what needs to be in place to create policy change. Fullan's (2014) design can move the public-school system to create policy change that provides access to faith-based supports for SEL within a normal school setting. To evolve from an As-Is state to the To-Be vision, public-school leaders should create a new policy through data analysis and data-driven identified needs of the school community concerning SEL support options by including faith-based supports.

Some Americans are troubled by what they see as an effort on the part of federal courts and civil liberties advocates to exclude God and religious sentiment from public schools. Such an effort, these Americans believe, infringes on the First Amendment right to free exercise of religion. (Pew Research Center, 2019, para.

2)

With Americans advocating for faith-based supports, the district should have a standard non-biased option to offer faith-based supports within the public school to address SEL needs on an individual basis.



### *Competencies*

Last, tracking the fidelity of adopting new norms enables district leaders to determine whether the planned processes and goals materialize. Throughout the district's SEL support improvement process, district leaders should communicate objectives, progress, and the results of data-driven needs for faith-based options for SEL within the public-school community with all relevant school community members to provide equity of voice. Districts can build momentum by announcing "quick wins" when data indicate there is a possibility for better support that may produce early success. Therefore, it is important to target attainable goals that will be stepping stones to policy change. However, administration should expect initial improvement declines and should be meticulous when adjusting original objectives and strategies. To counteract this potential variable, administration must advise the designated teams or coordinators to draft highly specific action plans that focus on what tasks will be accomplished by a policy change and who will benefit from the implementation. Therefore, SEL strategy improvement involves integrating culturally responsive strategies into the daily work of individuals within providing the data targeted measures for SEL supports. The students must then be assessed by grade level to identify the category or sub-category that is projected to benefit the most according to their cultural backgrounds and demographics. These are students who can be provided culturally relevant support to which they can relate as the descendants of a particular racial group. This can produce equity in SEL support. Next, district leaders must analyze individual student social and emotional deficiencies that will allow targeted SEL support needs and eliminate unnecessary wasted time that is not differentiating each student's primary high needs areas of SEL support. This is an

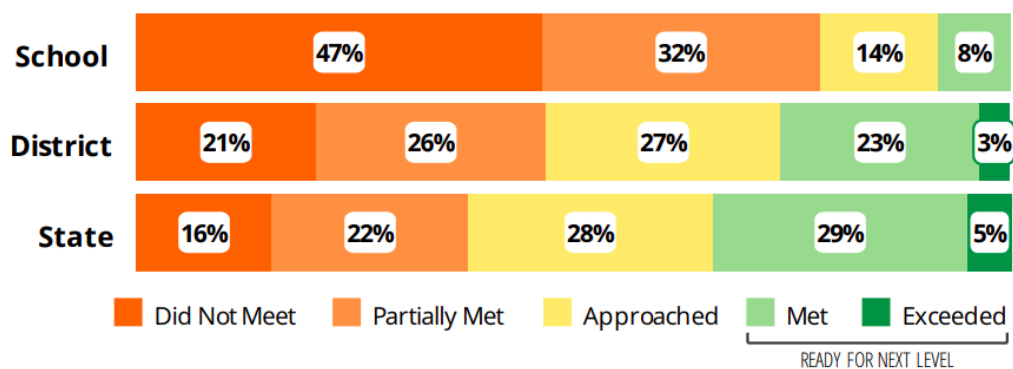
immediate need to be considered when analyzing districts such as CPS. For example, Figure 18 details that 68% of the students at Lawndale Community Academy with IEPs did not meet expectations on the PARC assessment in 2017 and another 27% partially met PARC expectations (CPS, 2020). Lawndale Community Academy, as shown in Figure 18, had 92% of students not meeting or exceeding the state goals for standards.

### Figure 18

*Lawndale Community Academy PARCC Assessment (CPS, 2020)*

#### Academic Success

Middle All Illinois students in grades 3-8 take the PARCC assessment each year. High school students take the SAT in Math and English Language Arts.



This clearly shows the importance of individual student analysis and demographic awareness. Attention to culturally relevant SEL supports as an option could help reduce the percentage from a raw 92% to a targeted 68% of students with IEPs within a predominately African American public school. Minorities have a higher connection to the religious community. As reported by the Pew Research Center,

Also, predominantly Black places of worship continue to have a considerable presence in the lives of Black Americans: Fully 60% of Black adults who go to religious services – whether every week or just a few times a year – say they

attend religious services at places where most or all of the other attendees, as well as the senior clergy, are also Black, according to a major new Pew Research Center survey. (Mohamed et al., 2021, para. 2)

Most African Americans attend religious functions with familiarity (see Figure 19).

### Figure 19

*Among Black Americans who Attend Religious Services at Least a Few Times a Year*

*(Mohamed et al., 2021)*

---

## Most Black Americans who attend religious services go to Black congregations

*Among Black Americans who attend religious services at least a few times a year, % who attend a ...*



Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.

"Faith Among Black Americans"

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

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Minorities, as mentioned earlier in Chapter 4, primarily receive counseling through churches. The cultural relevance of the options of SEL supports from which a school community member may choose could, in this instance, be considered biased due to the fact that counseling in SEL cases protects a client's right to privacy and individual consent. "School counselors recognize their primary obligation regarding confidentiality is to the student but balance that obligation with an understanding of the family or guardians' legal and inherent rights to be the guiding voice in their children's lives"

(American School Counselor Association, 2018, para.1). If an individual prefers faith-based support as an option for SEL support in a public-school community, they should they be offered the option to receive such support.

### **Conclusion**

Everything outlined in the plan is necessary measures to take to ensure collaboration and buy-in for SMART goals. These plans and indicators should take place a year prior to a district's final proposal for a district SEL improvement plan. This will arm school communities with concrete data and projections to support said change and improve the culture and climate of public-school districts by not alienating particular groups from receiving the option to choose faith-based supports within a public-school community. Public schools are dedicated to teaching the whole student with more individualized diagnostic support, which includes SEL components. The public-school system faces a daunting hurdle that aligns to Wagner et al.'s (2006) idea that

a system runs on its own momentum and all its natural parts work together to keep it going. The interactions of these parts naturally create some kind of product or result. In fact, your system-any system-is perfectly designed to produce the results you're getting. (p. 106)

Additionally, in an effort to evolve and improve the current methods that public-school districts use to combat SEL issues and the current structure for SEL options of support, the availability of culturally appropriate supports should be evaluated and considered.

The proposed policy change, due to the interwoven elements, will require a strategic alignment of state-provided counseling options with faith-based counseling options to develop or identify focus targets that will provide the necessary improvements

in the option-based treatment. There should be no bias in individual consent-based treatment plans.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Implications and Policy Recommendations

The results from my focus group and survey data appear to indicate that faith-based support for SEL within public schools should be a viable option on an individual consent basis. The issues within the current practice of SEL supports are the absence of (a) access to faith-based supports on an individual basis, (b) the opportunity to choose from a plethora of resources, (c) a non-biased system that supports the individual with familiar cultural and compatible resources, and (d) the opportunity for faith-based community partners to use all their resources to support students and families without bias.

#### Policy Statement

According to Rhames (2019), the core values of SEL are empathy, love, and building healthy relationships. “In fact, most effective SEL curricula that achieve positive results in children’s lives have simply rephrased and repackaged the Bible using secular terms” (Rhames, 2019, p. 3). Bullying, according to Rhames, is no different from the Bible instructing us to love thy neighbor as thyself, as one of the Ten Commandments. Yet religious-based SEL is often not considered in school-sponsored interventions. SEL support in public schools is traditionally offered through student engagement with staff, counselors, and community partnerships. According to Cressey (2019), individual backgrounds are not considered and SEL interventions do not necessarily address the individual needs of students. The push to support the whole student is great in theory, yet the path to culturally responsive supports requires educators to use every tool available to meet the individual needs of students, including the possibility of including religious-

based support for SEL. “Schools are missing a golden opportunity to leverage this asset of faith to improve outcomes for kids, particularly in the much-discussed area of SEL” (Rhames, 2019, p. 1).

In all, public-school districts’ attempts to provide equal SEL support have inadvertently shown implications of inequitable practices by not providing culturally responsive support for minority public-school community members by providing the option to access faith-based SEL support.

### **Analysis of Need**

#### ***Educational Analysis***

The educational barrier this policy change exposed is the lack of equity in the choice of supports provided for SEL to public-school community members. This study has provided evidence that minority students (i.e., African American and Latin X) are not receiving culturally responsive SEL supports in a regular school setting. The ideology that religious supports and strategies are mandated and sponsored by public schools does not apply in the advocacy of this policy change. The bylaws by which the Affordable Care Act (ACA) reveres and advocates for clients’ right of privilege and religious identification appear to be ignored when it comes to the social and emotional support selected for public-school community members. “These rules expand exemptions to protect religious beliefs for certain entities and individuals whose health plans are subject to a mandate of contraceptive coverage through guidance issued pursuant to the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act” ACA (Federal Register, Summary section, 2018, para.1). This being the case, not providing faith-based supports for SEL neglects the cultural influence that ultimately could produce the comfort and familiarity needed to

ensure public-school community members' SEL progress. The cultural influence, in turn, influences the overall success, growth, and development of the public-school community member by providing all available means to treat any SEL deficiencies. The main goal within any school is to not disrupt instruction time. Adding faith-based support would not disrupt the educational instruction time because the SEL support would not have to happen during core subject classes. The mandate does not apply here because the student or public-school community member's sessions or supports are legally sealed and protected by law. Therefore, the addition of the option to have faith-based supports for SEL has more benefits than barriers and will apply culturally responsive strategies of support for individual public-school community members that may drive the graduation rate for public schools.

### ***Political Analysis***

Though religious-based supports are endorsed and promoted by the political and historical events such as the case of *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) received a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that declared school-sponsored prayer unconstitutional. The reaction from this ruling prompted public schools to eliminate or ignore faith-based support for students.

The goals of this research were first to gather perspectives from former public-school students and parents on having the option to receive faith-based SEL support within the public-school community and to gather the perspectives of former and current public-school administrators on the pros and cons of having versus not having faith-based SEL supports during their tenures in public school. The second goal of this research was to examine barriers to and ways in which religious-based SEL support might be advocated for and implemented in public schools through the perspectives of former



teachers and administrators. With the Supreme Court ruling that citizens have the right to public assembly as long as the assemble does not interrupt instruction time, this opens the door to using one-on-one sessions to have an equitable use of individual time and space. These sessions will not interrupt instructional time, therefore lending credence to the possibility of offering individual options for faith-based SEL supports. The perceived barriers are simply non-explored options that are advocated for in this policy change.

### ***Legal Analysis***

With the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overturn the 1962 case of *Engel v. Vitale* in support of a football coach's ability to pray on the field lends credence to the idea of a policy change concerning the option to have access to faith-based support for SEL within the public-school community. The court has ruled consistently for 60 years against this type of practice. The Constitution's language opposing governmental establishment of religion had prohibited prayer in class, school functions, and other ceremonies. The argument has been that students are vulnerable.

Students are captive and impressionable audiences; proselytizing on behalf of any religion devalues other religious beliefs. Their teachers and administrators hold sway over many aspects of their lives. Will they get a good grade? Make it on the team? It's not enough for school staff not to impose obvious consequences on students who don't join their prayers. Students and their parents should never be made to feel as though this is a possibility, nor should they be encouraged to join a teacher's prayers. The actions of former coach Joseph Kennedy in Bremerton, Wash., wasn't as clear a violation of the separation of church and state as when prayers were blasted through schools' sound systems. But it clearly flunked the

test of making all students' beliefs seem equally valid. The prayers occurred just after school games, on school property, while Kennedy was on the job. Kennedy invited students and others to join him. (The Times Editorial Board, 2022, para. 2–4)

The ACA's (2014) *Code of Ethics* acknowledges religion and spirituality as components of culturally relevant and equitable SEL supports and mandates that client privileges as well as individual consent are protected. Though religion and spirituality are included in the counseling ethical guidelines, schools are not incorporating religious (e.g., counseling, prayer) support for students in public-school settings. The Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) is an organization of counselors and human development professionals whose belief is that spiritual, ethical, and religious values are essential to the overall development of the person and are committed to integrating these values into the counseling process. ASERVIC empowers and enables the exploration, development, and expression of spiritual, ethical, and religious values relating to the person, society, and counseling professional. They reinforce this advocacy through research and practice. Revised and approved, the ACA has now endorsed The Spiritual Competencies (Robertson & Young, 2011).

The competencies are descriptions of what we believe the effective counselor needs to possess to ethically and successfully work with clients on spiritual and religious issues. The 14 competencies in this chapter challenge counselors, as does Guru Nanak, to recognize the essential unity of humankind and humans' common attempts to understand their relationship with the higher power. The competencies are tools to help counselors maintain a relationship with a client

even when the client's beliefs are contrary to their own. In essence, the competencies ask counselors to see through the client's lens while being fully conscious of their own spiritual or religious viewpoint. They ask counselors to sacrifice their sectarianism for a while and go beyond mere toleration so that they can truly understand their clients' spiritual and religious lives. Initially, we note the growing trend connecting spirituality and mental health. (Robertson & Young, 2011, p. 25)

In reviewing public-school community members' access to and need for various SEL supports, the base of the issue is a dictated system of supports and access for providing equity within the supports for individual consent of faith-based supports within SEL on an individual basis. In analyzing the data, though many parents did not receive SEL support in school, most of them agreed that they would welcome faith-based supports for their children. To ensure equity within the SEL support offered to students, leaders of public schools must ensure each individual student has access to supports.

### ***Economic Analysis***

In the argument that equity is not equality, one must consider the influence of a public-school community member's economic background. I have found during my 23-year educational tenure that many low-income and minority students disproportionately lack social and emotional skills. "Low-income and minority children are more likely than their economically advantaged white counterparts to exhibit the academic indifference and behavioral difficulties associated with social and emotional deficits" (Burke, 2015, Social and Emotional Skills Also Matter in the Workplace section, para. 3). According to Economic Studies Nonresident Senior Fellow Hugh B. Price, demographic trends

indicate the U.S. economy will increasingly rely on African Americans and Latinos to fill a growing portion of the workforce. Price insisted “these economically indispensable groups, along with the overlapping population of low-income students, consistently lag farthest behind academically” (Burke, 2015, Social and Emotional Skills Also Matter in the Workplace section, para. 3). The option to have access to faith-based SEL support will improve SEL supports, educational outcomes, and ultimately the future workforce, leading to improved economic outcomes.

### ***Social Analysis***

Recognizing that many variables hinder K-12 students within public schools from achieving success, I hoped at the beginning of my study to gather enough information to determine that due to demographic conditions, faith-based supports should be considered as an option for SEL. Additionally, I am advocating that faith-based support options be made available to school communities on an individual basis to support SEL. The individual basis is important because each individual should have the right to pray or not pray, worship or not worship, assemble at will, or have the option to do any of them. Socially it is biased to mandate one group not to pray within the public-school community to appease another group who felt violated by the public prayer. One cannot trade one pain for another. Equality is not always equity. In this study, the social barrier is the opportunity for minorities to receive SEL supports that reflect their culture and interest.

### ***Moral and Ethical Analysis***

In June 25, 1962, the U.S. Supreme Court declared in the case of *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) that school-sponsored prayers were unconstitutional. This very declaration has

evolved to many school districts, including CPS, being viewed as ignoring or expelling God from school permanently. Yet, public schools push for equity and inclusion. The role of public-school districts to give equitable support for SEL is concerning for the entire public-school community. Districts must address the variable that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented. For example, CPS and the City of Chicago deemed the COVID-19 pandemic an “act of God.” Subsequently, by admitting there is a God, CPS has admitted there are entities that need faith-based support. With equity being championed within public-school districts, access to faith-based supports can help the quality of equality to support SEL. A major part of academic progress is a student’s ability to have a positive culture and climate, can benefit public-school community members. For example, CPS partners with multiple vendors that vary from school to school for SEL support and counseling. Though the opportunity to have equal access to the support ensures each individual student receives an opportunity for SEL support, the survey and focus group participants argued that there is no equity for who provides the SEL support. Faith-based organizations have little to no opportunity to use faith-based strategies as an SEL support due to the 1962 declaration by the Supreme Court. In amending the public-school district’s idea that faith-based support equals school-sponsored religion, the district can give an equitable opportunity for individuals to voluntarily receive faith-based SEL supports within the public-school community.

### **Implications for Staff and Community Relationship**

Leaders of public-school districts believe all classrooms in the nation’s school buildings should be safe, caring communities where children are free to speak their minds and blossom and grow on a daily basis. Most attempt to support their leaders, educators,

and staff in the use of strategies to ensure the classroom community will flourish by incorporating morning meetings, positive versus negative discipline, and problem-solving skills. The aim is to bring an open mind, a positive attitude, and high expectations to the classroom each day. SEL has a direct effect on these values, whether accepted or not.

Teaching is a process of learning from students, colleagues, parents, and the community. This is a lifelong process of learning new strategies, new ideas, and new philosophies. I believe a teacher is morally obligated to enter the classroom with only the highest of expectations for each and every one of their students. Thus, the teacher maximizes the positive benefits that naturally come along with any self-fulfilling prophecy. With dedication, perseverance, and hard work, students will rise to the occasion. I believe we owe it to our students, as well as the community, to bring consistency, diligence, and warmth to our job in the hopes that we can ultimately inspire and encourage such traits in children every day. Yet, morally this can be a challenge and ethically it can be unintentionally ignored. Public-school children are unique and bring dynamic talents to their own education in addition to the rigorous educational curriculum programs that educators attempt to provide. Encouraging students to express themselves and accept themselves for who they are, as well as embrace the differences of others, will show the public-school community members that bullying of any sort is not acceptable or tolerated in public-school districts, especially mandating how one praises or receives SEL support. It is unconscionable to force any public-school member to praise or not praise individually if it does not take away from or disrupt instructional time. We expect each classroom to share in the efficacy that all children can learn and thrive in its own unique community; the district's role as the leader will be to assist each educator to assist each

student in developing their own potential and learning styles. With that in mind, if the SEL supports are limited for public-school community members, we do the disenfranchised public-school community members in need a disservice.

A focus on student learning while attempting to teach the whole student and having the option to access faith-based SEL support will spearhead an equitable policy change. All aspects of the proposed policy change should ultimately relate back to student learning, SEL state, and the impact of instruction, rather than the mechanics of teachers' practices and actions. Teachers must constantly learn new methods to convey knowledge, SEL included. Public-school district leaders should provide professional developments on curriculum and SEL research and data analysis for team leaders to promote buy-in to address the benefits and barriers of the proposed policy change. "The change process is about establishing the condition for continuous improvement in order to persist and overcome inevitable barriers to reform. It is about innovativeness, not just innovation" (Fullan et al., 2005, p. 55). How can we improve morally or ethically if public-school districts lack the ability to continuously improve by identifying and eliminating barriers?

### **Conclusion**

Advocacy for a change in policy will always a challenge of ideas. The main barrier in policy change for this study is the unwillingness to buck the status quo. There are no laws prohibiting this proposed change. There will not be any disruption to the conducive learning environment during the regular school day by granting public-school community members access to options for faith-based supports. We often require the absolute best effort from our students and staff. To paraphrase President John Fitzgerald

Kennedy, I ask public-school administrators, “Ask not what faith-based support will do to your public-schools, but what faith-based supports can do for your public-school community members.”



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, student achievement within public schools is directly influenced by the academic instruction and SEL provided by district leaders, school administrators, teachers, and community organizations. Many in-school variables enable students to achieve academic success, such as access to a positive culture and climate and SEL supports, and culturally responsive supports are important in serving the public-school community. Although public-school districts have made strides in supporting the whole student, their inability to provide equity in the selection of SEL supports has a direct and significant impact on student achievement and the culture and climate of public-school communities. Presently, in addition to being SEL support providers, school district leaders are faced with the daunting tasks of providing equity in the types of SEL support, ensuring there is equity in the types of support selected, and maintaining client privilege and privacy. The resources must be culturally responsive and relevant in order to have a positive impact on student growth.

Just as a subject area teacher needs professional development in their particular subject area to assist in their constant growth toward being a distinguished instructor, public-school community members need access to all available supports to treat their SEL deficiencies. With the ever-changing focus on SEL and equity, multiple states have become aware of the biases that can be attributed to argument of church versus state. The ruling in the case of *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) led to many school districts banning prayer from public schools completely. Yet, in recent decades there have been rulings that are in opposition, such as the ruling that Bremerton School District's discipline of high school

football coach Joseph Kennedy for praying after football games violated Kennedy's rights to free exercise and free speech under the First Amendment.

Currently, public-school districts in cities such as Chicago, Illinois, have created departments to use faith-based partnerships, but the cost is another hurdle to working with the church community.

Certainly, we need more funding. Right now CPS, we put up \$900,000, we get \$1 million from the city, so it's a \$1.9 million budget. Right now, we have thirty-seven churches across the city. That's not a lot of money, but we want to make sure that we're able to continue offering the program at no cost to our parents.

(Chilukuri, 2019, para. 13)

Rev. Alan Conley is currently the director of the OFBI at CPS. As a result, CPS and Conley's group Safe Haven have sponsored and supported neighborhood families that could easily be supported in a normal school setting without interrupting instructional time. Leaders of public-school districts are charged with supporting students and school community members with every tool to be on a successful track to success. To accomplish this effort, the SEL support must be amended and the option to access faith-based support within the public-school community must be implemented.

To better examine the extent to which faith-based support may provide SEL supports to public-school communities, I completed this program study and evaluation to answer the following questions:

1. How have historical and legal influences influenced religious freedoms in schools, and where are we now?

2. What are the similarities and differences between the current SEL practices delivered in public schools, and faith-based supports?
3. To what extent might religious support be offered in public schools and would the option of religious SEL support be a preferred option for students, parents, and staff (administrators and support staff)?
4. How do former students and parents perceive the counseling support they received in school, and would they have chosen religious counseling for themselves or their children if offered?

Overall, leaders of public-school districts across the country could benefit from revisiting the ways in which faith-based support can be infused within the school day without disrupting or taking away from instructional time. Strategic planning around counseling and respecting individual consent and privacy can be the catalyst to build the capacity to advocate for the option to have faith-based support within the public-school community.

The analysis of the data demonstrated a clear need for the option to choose faith-based support to combat SEL issues within the public-school community. This action plan would drive the agenda of equity versus equality with regard to culturally responsive supports for all members of the public-school community, especially people of color.

Mohamed et al. (2021) reported,

The findings show that Black Americans are more religious than the American public on a range of measures of religious commitment. For example, they are more likely to say they believe in God or a higher power, and to report that they attend religious services regularly. They also are more likely to say religion is “very important” in their lives and to be affiliated with a religion, and to believe

prayers to ancestors have protective power and that evil spirits can cause problems in a person's life. (Black Americans More Religious Than the U.S.

Public Overall section, para. 1)

Additionally, systematic neglect of an individual's cultural history is an SEL issue within itself but can be addressed with the inclusion of faith-based SEL supports that are culturally responsive and relevant.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to measure to what extent having access to faith-based SEL support is desired by the public-school community. Public-school leaders are trying to support public-school community members by equitable means, including SEL support. Through focus group interviews, survey results, research of landmark religious versus state court cases, culturally responsive data of minorities and religious influence, public-school data and trends, and assessing the implication of bias toward the existence of cultural influence on the overall performance and student's progress, I have become convinced of the need to advocate for a policy change to include faith-based supports for SEL within the public-school community. It was of major importance to evaluate how counseling was viewed by the survey and focus group participants. By taking this approach, I was guided to research whether individual consent would play a factor in implementing the option to access faith-based supports for SEL within the public-school system. Noteworthy considerations were given to the essential factors of an individual's cultural and religious backgrounds, trust, client privilege, right to individual consent, and vulnerability that are protected by the ACA and the public-school's bylaws. For example, a client has the right for a counselor to explain any language or barriers that may

negatively influence the client's treatment. Religion and cultural biases are attempted to be avoided as a result of these measures. According to the Preamble in The Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling (ASERVIC),

The competencies are guidelines that complement, not supersede, the values and standards espoused in the ACA Code of Ethics. Consistent with the ACA Code of Ethics (2005), the purpose of the ASERVIC Competencies is to recognize diversity and embrace a cross-cultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts (p. 3). These Competencies are intended to be used in conjunction with counseling approaches that are evidence-based and that align with best practices in counseling. (Robertson & Young, 2009, p. 25)

By amending the public school's structures and perceptions on faith-based, culturally responsive supports, members of the public-school community can benefit and proficiently tackle the SEL problem within the public-school system. As schools practice these methods and the results benefit students' overall capacity to produce positively, the public-school community will become more conducive for learning. If the SEL departments and public-school districts intend to authentically leverage all available SEL supports, the feedback from the data monitoring and evaluations of this study will be a great opportunity to build the capacity of diligent SEL support.

Wagner et al.'s (2006) To-Be framework, the 4 Cs, was not only analyzed but used to evaluate and gain an understanding of the current practice of SEL support and develop a hypothesis on the positive effects of implementing faith-based SEL supports. Although the data did not produce a clear picture of to what extent the inclusion of faith-

based supports would affect the public-school community, they did offer insight on the participants' perspectives of having the option to access faith-based supports within the public-school community. The first outcome was the fact that parents who did not receive faith-based counseling (84%) agreed that they would allow their children to receive faith-based counseling. The next major finding was that 100% of the former and current school administrators ( $N = 5$ ) agreed that they could have benefited from the use of faith-based supports during their tenure as administrators. Ultimately, this plan provides the foundation for a framework in which all public-school community members will have access to all available SEL supports, including faith-based supports, that are culturally responsive.

### **Leadership Lessons**

Reflecting on and examining this system of SEL support has prompted me to take a closer examination of how my administration could be a trailblazer in practicing faith-based supports within my school community. As an assistant principal, there are many students who authentically garner my support in many aspects of their school day; however, there are foundational biblical values that parallel many SEL competencies. I have discovered that as long as instruction time is not deprived, faith-based supports can be an extra tool of support for SEL and ultimately influence student achievement.

The initial lesson I learned is the importance of examination. Examining a situation thoroughly will give you the greatest perspective. I discovered there can be bias in the attempt to eliminate bias. For example, though parents advocated in 1962 to ban mandated prayer, the public-school system eliminated all faith-based students'

opportunity to voice their free speech and to assemble. Also, I discovered having a sample size to code helps to identify trends that drive the data.

Second, I learned that eliminating the negatives helps to identify the common benefits and barriers for the proposed change agent. By eliminating the common argument of God being promoted or expelled from public school, I identified the parallel actions that would not be a barrier to either side of the argument.

Consequently, culture played a bigger role than expected in advocating for public-school community members to have the option to access faith-based SEL supports. In my tenure as an educator, I have seen both the benefits and barriers of blending church and state. With the ever-growing demand to provide equity as well as equality, it would be a great benefit to public-school community members to have access to faith-based supports within the public-school community.

## **Conclusion**

In a nation advocating for inclusion and individual rights, we are charged with the task of not shunning one group by appeasing another. Change is inevitable in a growing society, but we must do the work to properly implement change. “Change knowledge does matter. Ignore it at your peril” (Fullan, 2006, p. 13). Change theory is one thing, but action change needs to be discovered via reflective action (Allison & Schumacher, 2011). This ideology forces us to look at our own biases in studies such as the one I just examined. Similar to the push to have prayer removed from schools, there appears to be a parallel injustice being applied to public-school students who would voluntarily access faith-based SEL supports.

In reviewing the data collected from the survey and focus group, the findings project a desire for faith-based supports within the public-school community. What remains unclear is to what extent administrators and district leaders will work to ensure there will be no bias in considering the proposed change. It has already been concluded for decades that it is common practice to just avoid mixing faith and public school together. Yet, the rise in SEL issues may catapult the discussion.

My eagerness and motivation to advocate for this policy change are quite simple: “As Martin Luther King said, ‘The time is always right to do what is right.’ You could start right now by doing a small part to treat people with dignity, courtesy and respect” (Kelly, 2019, para. 11). This very thought drove my desire to use my Lord and Savior’s faith-based morals and guidance to address the SEL variables that are hindering public-school community members’ ability to successfully complete their public-school education.



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