

March 15, 2022

To the Hampton Elementary School Board of Education,

A significant component of my professional responsibilities as a school counselor is to provide Social Emotional Learning (SEL) for all students. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) 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.” My training prepared me to support this process with full classrooms, small groups, and individual students, depending on the need. Classroom lessons are of great importance because I can target the school counseling standards and competencies with all students. I also utilize the time to build connections with each student so that if they need additional support, they know who I am and how I can assist them.

The Connecticut State Department of Education publishes the “Connecticut Comprehensive K-12 School Counseling Framework Guide,” which includes Student Standards and Competencies in Academic, Career, and Social-Emotional Domains. The most recent publication in November 2020 breaks each of the three domains into 6 standards that are then further refined into competencies students should master by grade level. Some example competencies that I target in my classroom lessons are that students will be able to “describe the relationship between goals and success,” “discuss choices and consequences,” and “identify what personal information is safe and appropriate to share online.” Students need direct instruction in social-emotional skills, just like they need direct instruction in academics.

Not only is it important for me in my role as counselor to provide this instruction, it is important for SEL to be embedded in our classrooms and in the school policies. Research completed by CASEL shows that systemic implementation of SEL results in improved academic performance, improved behavioral outcomes, and improved school environments. Systemic implementation can look like teachers genuinely modeling how to deal with frustration, allowing students time to self-regulate emotions before attempting the academics, and allowing students to take responsibility for their actions, their classroom, and their own learning.

Our implementation of SEL needs to be at its strongest now more than ever.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a potentially traumatic event, or Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), that is likely to have a large impact on children and their mental health. ACEs can range from physical or sexual abuse, to economic hardship or separation from a caregiver. According to Dr. Melissa Goldberg, ACEs can lead to disrupted neurodevelopment, which can lead to social emotional and cognitive impairment (including impairing the ability to regulate emotions and deal with typical stressors), and the adoption of health risk behaviors, like smoking and drinking. According to the CDC, in 2018, 36% of children ages 6-17 with three or more ACEs

had one or more mental, emotional, or behavioral disorders, versus 11% of children ages 6-17 with zero ACEs. A higher number of reported ACEs is correlated with a higher rate of disorders. Unfortunately, emerging data around the pandemic supports this prior research and suggests that COVID related disruptions will continue to negatively impact behavioral and emotional functioning in the years to come.

Statistics around children's mental health already show concerning numbers. The Children's Mental Health Data and Statistics published by the CDC state that between 2016 and 2019, that among students ages 3-17 years, an estimated 9.4% were diagnosed with anxiety, 8.9% with behavior problems and 4.4% with depression. In 2018-2019, among adolescents aged 12-17 years, 36% reported they had persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, 18% reported they had seriously considered attempting suicide, 15% reported they had made a suicide plan, and 9% had attempted suicide.

This February at H.E.S., I surveyed 16 students in Team C. Six students reported having anxiety regarding COVID (Will I catch it? Will someone I know die from it? Am I being careful enough?); 5 students reported having troubles at home; 3 students reported having difficulty handling changes due to COVID (can't visit a family member, social distancing, mask wearing); and 3 students reported feeling emotional (sad, lonely, mad, or anxious) all of the time. These survey results indicate that our students are being impacted negatively by the pandemic as well. We must be proactive in supporting our students through the pandemic and its aftermath.

Fortunately, the research and data also suggests that students with certain protective factors have stronger resilience and can overcome the negative effects of ACEs. Protective factors include self efficacy and positive self perception, close relationships with other prosocial students, and self-regulation skills. Social Emotional Learning promotes these protective factors and will continue to be vital in protecting our students from the potential negative effects of the COVID pandemic. Developing and increasing time dedicated to our SEL program for the 2022-2023 school year is essential to support improved academic performance, behavioral outcomes and a positive school climate.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Laura Sorel, National Certified Counselor
Hampton Elementary School Counselor