

SEL Overall Plan

SEL skills and understanding don't just happen. The ultimate hope is that children come to school with healthy hearts and minds and the skills to communicate and interact effectively. But we all know that this is often not the case. Children come from wildly different backgrounds and experiences, and they bring their diverse skills and struggles to school.

As social, emotional, and academic abilities continue to span a wider spectrum and the pressures of testing and accountability continue to mount, how do teachers ensure that their students are meeting the required standards for the content areas they're covering? In my district, the Anchorage School District, we're implementing standards for social and emotional learning (SEL) side by side with traditional content areas.

When I think about this daunting task, I have to be a realist. Most people I talk with ultimately realize the importance of SEL skills and knowledge but feel overburdened with the sheer amount of content we are expected to teach in a very limited amount of time. A common statement is, "If I am to get through these math lessons, or this language arts curriculum, when am I supposed to teach the SEL skills? That's the parents' job."

I understand this position and have had those thoughts myself, but my question becomes, "Without SEL skills and knowledge, how can we possibly teach and have students learn effectively?" I believe social interaction is a key ingredient to productive and efficient learning environments.

With that said, how do we incorporate SEL into our day and into our lessons?

The ideas here are from years of collaboration, professional development, books and journals, research, and experience. This is a culmination of many people's ideas, and to give credit where credit is due is simply impossible. I think it's safe to say the credit goes to teachers who share their knowledge and experience. I've listed the person responsible for specific rubrics whenever possible. This is in no way comprehensive, and it is simply the way I think about SEL.

I have organized my thinking on this topic into five constructs: professional planning and reflection, Climate and community, direct instruction, infusion, and student reflection and self-assessment. Of course, these continuously overlap, and at times, it is difficult to speak of one without the other. For each construct, I've provided a narrative that explains my thinking, along with a list of lesson ideas and possible rubrics. For a few of these ideas, I have included lesson plans, procedures, and rubrics. See the appendices for these.

Professional Planning and Reflection

Let's face it: The best educators are those who plan. Of course, excellent teachers must know their content, and of course, they must be compassionate and caring. But just as important, the best teachers think about what it is they expect of their students, and they teach their students to meet those expectations. And when students don't meet the expectations, the best teachers ask, "What got in the way of those students being successful with that particular skill?" High-quality lessons don't just happen. So, when I think of social and emotional knowledge and skills and then look at the school district's standards, I have to ask myself a few questions:

- What is it that I expect from my students socially and emotionally in the context of our lesson?
- What skills and traits do I hope they will use during this lesson, during this week, during this unit?
- What social and emotional skills are necessary for the content (math, science, and so on) lessons to be efficient and successful?
- Do the students have the vocabulary to talk about the skills?
- In what ways will I or the students model the skill?

- How will I provide opportunities for the students to practice the skills?
- How will I assess students in regard to social and emotional skills and knowledge?
- In what ways will I give students opportunities to process, reflect on, and assess their own skills and knowledge?

And when my lesson goes down the tubes, and the students don't quite get it, I have to ask myself, "What got in the way? What should I have done differently?" And I have to ask the students, "What got in your way?"

Integrating Content and SEL Standards Planning Guide

This spreadsheet is a planning tool to help you think about integrating SEL standards into content-area lessons. (See "Integrating Content and SEL Standards"; there is a blank version and one with a fifth-grade example filled in.) I would never expect teachers to use it consistently, because it takes too much time. Long forms turn people off. But it's a starting point. I think it's really important for people to recognize that much of this work is done in our heads and on legal pads. With that said, when I first started, going through all of these steps was very helpful to me.

I encourage teachers to do this once or twice and to think about all the social interaction and skills we expect in the course of a simple lesson. Then ask the question "Do my students have the skills to be successful?" If no one has directly shown them these skills, if they have not explicitly practiced them, what do we expect the outcome will be?

Climate and Community:

How does one build community in the classroom? To me, community is a place of shared values, trust, and a common purpose. It is a place where people feel connected. We build communities and must maintain them. Does the community and classroom climate influence academics? Kids who feel disconnected at school are much less likely to share their ideas, ask questions, and invest their time and minds in the pursuit of academic knowledge.

When doing my master's-degree research, I anonymously surveyed 120 middle school students and asked them, "What makes you feel connected and cared about at school?" Overwhelmingly, the three most common responses were

- When people know my name.
- When people notice me and say hi.
- When teachers listen to me.

With that said, at the very beginning of the year, I *always* make sure these things happen in one form or another. Of course, there are innumerable variations, some of which follow:

- Conduct student-to-student interviews with introductions to the class.
- Greet every student every day by name all year.
- Notice kids in a neutral way. (See "Noticing Kids.")
- Play student name games. (This step is critical at middle schools with large numbers of students.)
- Take part in trust and dependence activities.
- Do low-stress, high-success cooperative projects.

Countless books and curriculums are written about lessons and activities to build community, and there are an endless number of activities and lessons to choose from. But for me, what's most important is ensuring that at the beginning of the year, I do those three actions the middle school students note: use their names, notice them, and listen to them.

This is an up-front investment that supports a classroom climate in which kids begin to feel more connected to one another, and in my opinion, they become more likely to share their thoughts, which in turn leads to a more efficient and productive classroom down the road.

During the first week, we also begin to form our working-agreements rubrics. (See “Our Working Agreements.”) Every year, this process becomes the backbone for how we will work together, talk to one another, and assess ourselves in our classroom. “Developing Our Working Agreements” and “Implementing Working Agreements” represent the how-to component.

Other Community-Building Activities and Ideas

Here are some more things you can do to build community in your classroom:

- Create a Random Acts of Kindness rubric.
- Have class meetings. (See “Class Meeting Procedures.”)
- Engage in Successes and Concerns meetings. (See “Class Meeting Procedures.”)
- Model the behaviors you want. Don’t underestimate your influence. Students are always learning from teachers.
- Discuss classroom procedures and management. Increase emotional safety and reduce stress in the classroom by ensuring that students know the routines and procedures we expect. Help them be independent by modeling and practicing these behaviors. It may seem mundane, but some kids don’t know they should wait until no one is speaking to use the pencil sharpener. Make sure students fully know what the expectations are for independent routines and procedures.
- Handwrite notes and make phone calls to parents. Personal connections with kids and families go a long way in developing trust.
- Discuss with students how to talk with a teacher. (See the “How to Talk to Your Teacher” lesson.)

Direct Instruction

Imagine you’ve just begun a new unit on decimals with your fourth graders. Would you begin by setting down a math chart in front of them and ask them to convert the decimals to fractions and percents? Of course not. They do not yet have the knowledge, skill, and practice to navigate and complete the task successfully.

To me, asking your students to have a discussion with their team about a given subject, asking them to find a partner to work with, or telling them to be polite in discussions without teaching them how to do those things is the same as asking them to work on decimals without preparation. From experience, I know that many student are wondering, “What does he mean by *polite*?”

You could teach any one of the examples below using the Fishbowl. In “The Fishbowl,” I explain the rationale of the Fishbowl and the specific procedures for facilitating it.

When I think of what I may need to teach, I ask myself whether the students know

- what a discussion is.
- how to begin a discussion.
- how to respond to a classmate’s ideas.
- how to ask a clarifying question.
- how to invite a student who’s not participating into the conversation.
- how to not dominate a conversation.

- how to share materials.
- how to take turns.
- what their body language and facial expressions are communicating.
- how to express their own confusion and ask for help.
- how to be patient when a classmate is confused.
- how to express their confidence without being arrogant.
- how to encourage a peer.
- that it's OK to not understand their classmate's idea and to ask them to explain it again.
- how to show others they are listening.
- how to accept encouragement.
- how to ask a question when they disagree with another student's ideas.
- how to recognize their own personality strengths and how to use them.
- how to disagree with someone without being offensive.
- how to accept that others may disagree with them and not be offended.
- how to ask others to pull their weight without being offensive.
- how to talk about feeling frustrated.
- how to invite themselves into a group.
- how to invite others into a group.
- how to solve a disagreement fairly.
- when to not say anything at all.
- how to give in on an idea even when they think they're right.
- how to hold their ground on an idea when they feel it's important.

These are all fluid ideas with many variables, but we have to think about them out loud with kids.

These questions apply to any situation in which we want kids to work together. With so much to think about as educators, how do we prioritize where to begin? We often say to ourselves, "There's just too much. I don't know where to start." I say, choose one area you believe is important and dive in. We have to start somewhere. The beauty is that once we begin this process, we'll better understand where we need to focus our energy.

Every one of the ideas listed above could be the basis of a direct-instruction lesson. Some might consist merely of a one-minute demonstration, others might involve a five-minute role-play with comments, and others could take an entire period. In any case, we must provide some element of direct instruction. Of course, once we begin, we'll see they all overlap. For sure, we want it to be a fluid process, but they're kids! And just as in sixth-grade band, when a student toots on his or her horn for the first time, it's awkward, confusing, and a bit embarrassing. It's about the process. People develop these skills over time, throughout their lives.

Think about what it's like when you first start a new hobby: It feels unnatural and forced, but as you practice and learn the intricacies, the activity slowly becomes second nature. And then, one day, you're doing it without even thinking about it. At this point, you begin to enjoy the activity more and are much more efficient and productive.

If we want our classrooms to run efficiently and be a place where students are on task and on topic, we must help them develop the skills to communicate, interact, and self-monitor. It takes modeling, practice, reflection, assessment, and more practice. It's a process.

Infusion

Once we've made the investment in direct instruction and students have had the opportunity to practice their social and emotional skills, we will be more able to infuse those skills into our school days. This stage is when the benefits of SEL will be most apparent, when lessons and activities will seem to flow, and when your students will be "on." Of course, there will always be those days and those lessons when it feels like you're banging your head against the wall. We're human, and we're working with humans.

For me, *infusion* means SEL is happening all the time, whether we like it or not. So, what are some ways to promote positive social and emotional learning each day?

The Teacher Is the First Model

Simply stated, what we say and do, and how we do it, makes a difference in the social and emotional climate of the classroom. This topic could fill a whole book. All of the social and emotional lessons we are teaching also apply to us teachers. We must take a long, hard look at our own practices and have the courage to be honest with ourselves. Today, for instance, I nagged some kids in class, and it just didn't feel right. I wrote down their names, and I'm going to have a conference with them first thing tomorrow. I'm going to apologize for the manner in which I spoke to them, and then I'm going to hold them accountable for their actions during class. I won't beat myself up, but I will take responsibility.

We must strive to model the behaviors and skills we hope and expect our students to demonstrate. But, just like kids, we screw up and must take responsibility for our words and actions if we expect students to be responsible for what they do and say.

There are many things to consider when thinking about social and emotional skills and motivating students to meet our academic and social expectations. We need to think about what we will say to students under many circumstances:

- A student working in a group is not contributing.
- A student makes a disrespectful face at us while we're talking to them.
- A student threatens another student.
- A student makes fun of another student's work.
- A student is always on task and respectful.
- A student continually does not turn in his or her homework.
- A student won't respond to our questions.
- Two students are continually chatting while we're giving directions.
- A student often comes to class smelly and dirty.
- A student doesn't understand a simple math problem after we've explained it multiple times.
- A student destroys class supplies.
- A student tells us to shut up.
- A student always wants to work alone.

There are no easy answers to how we should respond, and there is no magic bullet. But I can say confidently that as we consider what we really want and expect from our students in the arena of social and emotional skills, we will be more likely to model a response that will allow students to learn from us and grow with us.

The Redo

Students are going to screw up. They're supposed to screw up. How we react to that in the classroom is a critical component of the SEL environment.

One intervention I believe in is the redo: When students say or do something that does not support the climate we are striving for, a powerful response for me has been, "Please try that again" or "Could you rephrase that?" I'm not asking them to change their point of view. I am asking them to express themselves in a way that is conducive to a positive and productive learning environment. This means they can still disagree and defend their position, but the expectation is that they do it in a way that promotes an emotionally safe climate.

Yes, we could have a discussion right then and there, and we could go round and round about the right and wrong way to talk and act. But by firmly asking them to try again, and in a way that is not offensive or off track, we are communicating that we believe they can do a better job, that we believe in their ideas, and that we expect them to take responsibility for their words and actions.

Private Conversations and Dignity

Have you ever had someone come up to you during class, at the club, in the grocery store, in the office, in the break room, or in some other public place to complain to you about someone or something? The whole time, you're thinking, "This is not the time and place for this."

We, as teachers, need to maintain that perspective when speaking with students about their behavior and work ethic.

I have always found that a private conversation is so much more effective in changing behaviors. Ultimately, we are talking about the dignity of kids. I can hear it now: "Teachers are way too busy to have private conversations." Hogwash! A private conversation may be a twenty-second whisper as you're walking around the room. It might take a minute as students are transitioning to another class or activity, or it might be a ten-minute sit-down before or after school for something more serious. Private conversations build trust between the student and the teacher, and they communicate that we care enough to talk to them privately.

Vocabulary Cues

As we plan direct-instruction lessons, I find it helpful to build in vocabulary cues. Cuing systems are a way for students to access prior knowledge and experiences so that they can be more successful during the current activity or lesson. I have found that if I build in vocabulary associated with certain expectations, I can use that vocabulary to cue students into social expectations.

For example, if I say to students, "Remember, this is a discussion," the students will hopefully have a framework in their memory that cues them into the expectations of a discussion. We have defined, practiced, and reflected on those expectations previously during direct instruction.

Here are some of the words and phrases I use as cues:

- Discussion
- Homework review
- Coaching
- Partner work
- Table jobs

- “What’s your job?”
- “Please rephrase that.”
- Private think time
- Working agreements
- Remember your goal
- Fishbowl
- Observations

Each of these phrases has been developed through direct-instruction lessons and serves to cue students into a set of social expectations. Often, we have charts and rubrics for these, which the students have made, hanging around the room so they can consult them for a reminder. We might make a quick social rubric on the fly right then and there. It could be as simple as “Remember, students, here’s what we expect during partner work.” I then write two to four social expectations on the board so students are cuing into them and thinking about their roles during the activity. It can also serve as a quick assessment at the end.

For example, I can tell students, “When you think of how you did today and you consider the expectations we have on the board, I’d like you to assess yourself in your mind on our scale and be ready to explain your reasoning.” This can be a powerful tool that puts the ownership squarely on the students’ shoulders, where it should be.

That’s one way to infuse social and emotional skills into our day.

Student Reflection and Self-Assessment

This is the meat and potatoes of it all. When I think about what it takes for students to manage themselves socially and emotionally, I ask, “Who owns their behavior? Who owns their emotions?” If it’s not the individuals themselves, we have a problem. Of course, the teacher provides the structure and framework, but the student must do the work. Students need the opportunity to assess themselves and provide specific evidence and explanations for their assessment and thinking. We have to hold them accountable. They don’t have to do this formally. It doesn’t always have to be in depth. But it does need to happen.

I suggest that you employ many forms of reflection and self-assessment, from an end-of-the-quarter formal assessment to an on-the-fly, thumb-up, thumb-down, tell-your-neighbor two-minute assessment. Below are many examples of rubrics and assessments we use. We use more extensive rubrics and make more in-depth self-assessments at the end of units and quarters. On a daily or weekly basis, we use very quick, check-in types of assessment:

- Short-term goals or daily goals
- Long-term goals
- Working agreements (see “Developing Working Agreements,” “Implementing Working Agreements,” and “Our Working Agreements”)
- Fishbowl (see “The Fishbowl”)
- End-of-quarter self-evaluation (see “Student/Teacher Evaluation”)
- Teamwork reflection (see “Teamwork Reflection”)
- Teammate reflections
- Self-evaluation as a team member
- Personal-improvement plan
- Discussion goals and observations
- Community service self-assessment

Self-assessment and student reflection can take place in so many different ways. My advice is, keep it simple, but don’t ignore it.