



Steilacoom Historical School District's theme this year is "The Science of SEL."

# THE SCIENCE OF Social Emotional Learning

Education must be about focusing on the head and the heart

## Dr. Kathi Weight

Superintendent, Steilacoom Historical School District No. 1

### PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety, Improving Instruction, Engaging Families and Communities, Closing the Gap*

I am a little embarrassed to admit that I kept almost every school artifact from my three daughters' elementary school years.

My very favorite is a writing assignment from when my youngest daughter was a second grader. The sentence prompt was a typical one,

and asked students to share their favorite part of school. In all of her second grade wisdom, Bella wrote, "I love school because my teacher cares about my heart, not just about my brain." Bella is now a senior in college and I still think about her thoughtful reflection and apply it to my work as a superintendent.

Caring about the hearts of those we work with, both students and staff, is the most important thing we do in education. With an intentional focus on social emotional learning (SEL), and through a lens of "school connectedness" and belonging, we can better attend to the hearts of those we serve.



From the first day on campus, students should feel welcomed and valued.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF ENVIRONMENT

With heightened attention to the connection between mental health and academic success, schools are increasingly providing a full continuum of mental health supports to students. Social and emotional development is not just about the skills individuals possess, it is also about the features of the educational setting we provide. Students need to know adults care for them and genuinely believe in their potential.

From the first day on campus, students should feel welcomed and valued, and immediately recognize the unique connectedness of the school community. But when we only emphasize students' social emotional competencies, we may overlook the equally important influences of learning environments which support student belonging and relationship building, with consistent adult modeling of social emotional competencies, mindsets, and skills.

To promote students' social and emotional competence, it's important for schools to simultaneously foster a supportive staff environment that cultivates the social and emotional capacity of the adults in the building. Successful SEL implementation must intentionally nurture a work environment in which staff feel supported, empowered, able to collaborate effectively, build relational trust, and be provided with professional development in support of staff social emotional skills. As the ambassadors of adult SEL, we can design environments where staff collaborate and develop

professionally, while modeling social and emotional competence.

## THE SCIENCE BEHIND SEL

We were extremely intentional about engaging staff with our social emotional learning initiative by emphasizing the interdependence of social-emotional and cognitive development. We took a brain science approach to the work. Understanding how the brain works, what stimulates it and how to harness the connections in a positive way enables staff and students to recognize the relevance of social emotional learning. The neural education approach certainly captured the hearts of the staff who

We care about students' hearts AND their brains!

“ Students need to know adults care for them and genuinely believe in their potential.”

have readily put their new learning into the classroom setting. It energized our learning environments and altered the way we do business in support of the social emotional needs of our students and staff.

**The Science of Social-Emotional Learning** is Steilacoom Historical School District's focus this year. Understanding the science behind why and how the brain is affected by stress, emotions, and trauma helps us develop ways to support students' mental health and well-being, which impacts both readiness to learn and long-term life outcomes. Research in human development, cognitive and behavioral neuroscience, and educational policy and practice has shown how social and emotional development is central to learning. Researchers have found that as children experience social emotional learning, the plasticity of the brain builds new neural networks,

Continued on page 18



Continued from page 17

which enable them to manage their emotional responses and engage their frontal cortex in rational decision-making.

## 'BRAIN CAMP'

This summer, our school district became the first district to be certified by Neural Education, the Institute for Connecting Neuroscience with Teaching and Learning. Over 75 of our district staff members have been trained to translate powerful neuroscience research into accessible classroom practices. We are excited to offer the staff institute (some like to call it "Brain Camp") again this summer for our continued professional learning around neural education and how it works in tandem with SEL development.

Our district has been deliberate about engaging parents in our SEL efforts. We have offered a series of parent workshops entitled, "Parenting Inside the Brain" to share the science of SEL. We have also hosted parent seminars on relevant SEL topics, like anxiety. Parent resources are created to communicate the work around the science of SEL, including a district calendar which highlights a different SEL concept every month. Our social media and weekly principal briefings have evolved with intentionality to create school connectedness for families. Parent SEL events have been very well attended and the SEL resources have created a momentum that is both energizing and productive in our efforts to support students.

## SEL IN THE CLASSROOM

When you visit our "neural educator" classrooms, you see structured learning environments with an intentional focus on relationship-building and activities geared towards cognitive restructuring, neuroplasticity, metacognition and co-regulation. Emotions are discussed and understood through a neural lens. You may hear a fourth-grader discuss "amygdala hijack" or



SEL environments intentionally focus on building relationships.

“ Parent SEL events have been very well attended and the SEL resources have created a momentum that is both energizing and productive in our efforts to support students.”

visit a music classroom working to understand "working memory" and "mirror neurons."

You will see our district "facility dog," Aura, working in partnership with our physical therapist. Aura is a highly trained dog used to enhance the quality of education for students with disabilities and brings joy to the school setting while performing her duties as a facility dog.

I love visiting kindergarten classrooms who are using movement patterns in conjunction with reading, math and handwriting practice. These powerful classroom activities connect kinesthetics with increased engagement and learning, and you can feel the excitement as our students' serotonin increases and oxytocin is released! These meaningful learning activities are designed to challenge our students cognitively, while providing

positive social emotional learning outcomes, within an integrated SEL environment, rather than reliance on a specific curriculum.

We take a systematic, cognitive behavioral approach to learn emotional regulation, model positive mental health, and practice SEL development throughout our school day. These neuroscience findings belong in classrooms to maximize student achievement.

## OUR 'WHY'

SEL is alive and well in our schools and our initiative is based on scientific research, directly linked to student achievement. Why did we take this science approach to social emotional learning? We care about their hearts AND their brains. ■