

COMMENTARY

Can Social-Emotional Skills Drive Continuous Improvement?

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Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has become a pillar of innovative learning. In California, we have started a thoughtful conversation on how managing emotions, setting positive goals, showing empathy for others, and maintaining positive relationships connects to overall educational success.

California's evolving knowledge and commitment to social emotional learning can be seen in the state's adoption of school climate and parent engagement, as meaningful state indicators. These join the state's new Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards that aim to ensure that students engage in deeper academic learning.

California's new accountability system will require schools to use surveys to measure school climate, but we don't yet know how these surveys can teach us about academic growth. And we're not certain how to connect social-emotional learning to continuously improving schools.

California's CORE districts (Fresno, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco, and Santa Ana) have been measuring four social-emotional competencies: growth mindset, self-efficacy, self-management, and social awareness as a part of their accountability system, under a waiver from No Child Left Behind (NCLB). These social-emotional competencies are measured through student self-report questionnaires and teacher reports on student behavior. Preliminary report findings show that self-management best predicts student performance at elementary and middle school, and growth mindset is the most predictive skill in high school.

However, to be useful for continuous improvement, educators need to know how to take action based on the information that SEL indicators provide. Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) has been studying the CORE districts innovative accountability system through the CORE-PACE Research Partnership.

In the year ahead the CORE-PACE Research Partnership will conduct a study that will help the CORE Districts identify promising policies and practices in schools where students have high levels of social-emotional learning. Understanding the learning environments that produce high levels of SEL, will help us understand how accountability for performance and growth on SEL measures can advance our states commitment to reduce disproportionality across student sub-groups.

CORE's unique focus on students' social-emotional skills in addition to academic skill development has created a renewed interest in research on California schools that has the potential to impact other states and the nation. As the California State Board of Education moves to develop an integrated local, state, and federal accountability system, increased knowledge about SEL and the relationship to local indicators, such as school climate and parent engagement is critical. Continuous improvement will necessity

the ability of California schools and educators to foster SEL competencies.

The true impact of SEL on continuous improvement will require: (1) building the capacity of school leaders and educators to understand school climate data and appropriately respond with policies and practices that promote SEL competencies, and (2) our investment and leveraging of SEL in both the school-day and expanded learning settings.

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