

Rooting Social and Emotional Well-Being Efforts in Equity

A Reflection Guide

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Introduction

Navigating the crises of a global pandemic and a national reckoning with centuries of racial oppression has left educators feeling disoriented and vulnerable. Each day seems to bring a new twist, often compromising the things we considered to be bedrock in our lives: our economic resources, our sense of community, and our physical safety.

At the Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd (the Center), we see the profound implications that these deeply personal experiences have on how educators serve students in our K–12 education system. We also believe that educators are finding new clarity about the deep connections between equity, excellence, and well-

being in education. In this moment, practitioners can see what research and science have been telling us for some time: The concepts of equity, well-being, and excellence are an interrelated sequence of efforts.¹ When leaders understand these connections, the path toward a better education system becomes clearer.

In this tip sheet for educators, we offer several high-level principles that educators can consider followed by nine self-reflection questions. These allow individuals or teams to consider their practices along a continuum: A high rating may indicate that social and emotional well-being practices are already anchored in equity, whereas a low score may indicate that well-intended practices are actually working at cross-purposes with equity.

¹ Cantor, P., Osher, D., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2018). Malleability, plasticity, and individuality: How children learn and develop in context. *Applied Developmental Science, 23*(4), 307–337; Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2020). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science, 24*(1), 6–36.

Initial Considerations

Create or clarify a vision of excellence.

The Center understands the concept of “excellence” as much more than proficiency in a set of academic standards. Rather, an excellent education also encourages students to be curious about the world around them, gives them the tools they need to explore and discover the things they are curious about, promotes their agency to effect change, builds their sense of self-worth, inspires their personal purpose and place in the community, and equips them with the knowledge and capacity to have economic and social success as adults. We want that for every single child. What is your vision of excellence? Use your notion or vision of excellence to guide your work with students, families, teachers, staff, and community.

Make well-being not just a priority but a prerequisite.

Schools and districts should address the well-being and connection needs of their students and staff *before* academic teaching and learning *and* in an ongoing way throughout every school year. Scientific evidence suggests that well-being and connection are prerequisites for effective teaching and learning.² Children, youth, and adults need to first feel regulated—that is, feel physically and emotionally calm and settled—and then feel emotionally connected in safe and responsive relationships before they can be ready and able to engage effectively in formal instruction.³ Further, rest and recovery are not anathema to excellence and high expectations. Science shows that rest helps humans to be more innovative, more creative, and more productive.⁴ When

we allow ourselves to rest, we invest in our sustainability.

Cultivate well-being for all. But who gets to be well? Leaders at every level should take an unflinching look at which students we serve well and which students are being left behind. Many schools have never been the sanctuaries for some students that they are for others; they have been places that perpetuate the same systems of oppression often found in other aspects of their lives. Working toward well-being in schools must be done hand in hand with the work of transforming schools to be equitable and antiracist. Educators achieve these conditions for successful teaching, learning, and thriving by authentically embracing the values, histories, and relationships of all students, their families, and their communities. They sustain these conditions by setting a clear vision for excellence for every single child; engaging in a continuous cycle of self-reflection; striving for authentic and open partnership with their families and communities that focuses on both strengths and needs; and being willing to share the resources and power to lead and operate their schools. To achieve equity, educators must truly value Black and brown students and their communities and act to dismantle racist, homophobic, xenophobic, and other systems of oppression. They must address their implicit biases and embrace culturally responsive teaching practices so that every child has a sense of agency and belonging in school and knows that their identity is valued.

² Jones, S., & Kahn, K. (2017). *The evidence base for how we learn: Supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development* [Research brief]. The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.

³ Perry, B. (n.d.). *The 3 Rs: Reaching the learning brain* [Infographic]. Beacon House. <https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Three-Rs.pdf>

⁴ Pang, A. S.-K. (2017, May 11). How resting more can boost your productivity. *Greater Good Magazine*. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_resting_more_can_boost_your_productivity

Reflection Questions

Use these questions on your own or with your team to explore whether your social and emotional well-being practices are supporting equity, excellence, and well-being for all students—or perhaps detracting from it.

1. Are your social and emotional well-being efforts about ongoing growth (rather than just a time-bound initiative)?

High rating	Low rating	Evidence-based resources to support your efforts
Your efforts are grounded in continuous improvement and incorporate ongoing self-reflection.	You bought a program and intend to complete the work by a specific time and then move on.	<i>Continuous Improvement in Education: A Toolkit for Schools and Districts</i> , linked here National Equity Project Liberatory Design Card Deck, linked here

2. Are your social and emotional well-being efforts strengths- or asset-based?

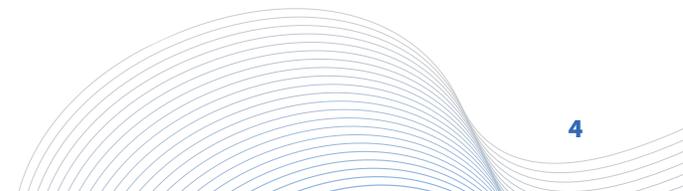
High rating	Low rating	Evidence-based resources to support your efforts
Your processes intentionally identify assets, strengths, and aspirations of your community members—not just challenges or needs.	Your processes focus exclusively or primarily on challenges or needs. Relatedly, processes may jump quickly to solutions before creating the opportunity to more fully understand the assets, strengths, aspirations, challenges, and needs of all those involved.	<i>Learning From Young People About How Safe and Supportive Conditions at Home Can Inform School Climate</i> , linked here <i>Social, Emotional, and Academic Development Through an Equity Lens</i> , linked here Why Asset Framing is Better than Storytelling, linked here

3. Do your social and emotional well-being efforts share power with members of the community?

High rating	Low rating	Evidence-based resources to support your efforts
<p>Your efforts consistently seek opportunities for young people to design, lead, implement, and refine the work. They own or co-own efforts and power with adults (including family members), promoting their agency and positive self-identity.</p>	<p>Youth and family “voice” and “engagement” stop short of authentically sharing power. Only adults review data and make decisions. Youth and families may experience these efforts as disingenuous box-checking.</p>	<p><i>Co-Creating an Equitable School Climate With Students (Forest Park Middle School): Beyond SEL Audio Gallery</i>, linked here <i>Elevating Student Voice, Agency, and Co-Creation</i>, linked here</p>

4. Do your social and emotional well-being efforts consider both the individual/personal needs *and* the community/collective needs?

High rating	Low rating	Evidence-based resources to support your efforts
<p>Your efforts integrate both individual and community well-being. These efforts promote inner health and well-being as well as responsive relationships, belonging, community, connection, and other attributes of safe and supportive environments.</p>	<p>Your efforts are disconnected from—or worse, in conflict with—efforts to improve school climate and community.</p>	<p><i>The Toolkit Before the Toolkit: Centering Adaptive and Relational Elements of Restorative Practices for Implementation Success</i>, linked here <i>Community-Care Strategies for Schools During the Coronavirus Crisis: Practical Tips for School Staff and Administrators</i>, linked here Relationship Mapping Strategy, linked here</p>



5. Do your social and emotional well-being efforts include adult well-being?

High rating	Low rating	Evidence-based resources to support your efforts
<p>Your social and emotional well-being efforts attend to the sustainable well-being of all members of the community. This includes young people as well as their caregivers and loved ones and their teachers and other educators.</p>	<p>Your social and emotional well-being efforts neglect the well-being and sustainability of adults.</p>	<p><i>Connecting Teacher Practice With Social and Emotional Learning</i>, linked here</p> <p><i>Strategies for Districts to Support Self-Care for Educators During the COVID-19 Pandemic</i>, linked here</p> <p><i>Connecting the Brain and Body to Support Equity Work: A Toolkit for Education Leaders</i>, linked here</p>

6. Are your social and emotional well-being efforts connected to all areas of learning and development?

High rating	Low rating	Evidence-based resources to support your efforts
<p>Your social and emotional well-being efforts are foundational to and integrated with academic teaching and learning.</p>	<p>Your social and emotional well-being efforts include an isolated SEL curriculum and little else.</p> <p>Further, such curricula is only taught by mental health clinicians during scheduled times.</p>	<p><i>Instructional Practices That Integrate Equity-Centered Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning: Updated Research-to-Practice Brief</i>, linked here</p> <p><i>Integrating Social, Emotional, and Academic Development: An Action Guide for School Leadership Teams</i>, linked here</p>

7. Are your social and emotional well-being efforts connected to your equity efforts?

High rating	Low rating	Evidence-based resources to support your efforts
<p>Your efforts promote cross-racial and cross-cultural celebration.</p>	<p>Your efforts do not include authentic efforts to bridge racial and cultural chasms among the community.</p>	<p>Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE) Network Library, linked here</p>

8. Do your data reflect long-term, sustainable, and equitable impact rather than just outputs?

High rating	Low rating	Evidence-based resources to support your efforts
Your social and emotional well-being indicators measure shifts in mindsets, beliefs, relationships, and/or environments, as well as inputs and outputs.	Your social and emotional well-being indicators only measure inputs and outputs (such as dollars and time spent or student and adult participation in programs) rather than shifts in mindsets, beliefs, relationships, and/or environments.	<i>Integrating Social and Emotional Learning Throughout the School System: A Compendium of Resources for District Leaders</i> , linked here Turnaround for Children Measurement Toolbox, linked here

9. Do your efforts prioritize individual and community development and well-being over adult comfort?

High rating	Low rating	Evidence-based resources to support your efforts
Your social and emotional efforts for young people prioritize their development and well-being over adult comfort. For example, you are focused on “agency” or “positive self-identity.”	Your social and emotional efforts for young people focus on competencies or goals that prioritize adult comfort over student well-being. For example, you are focused on “self-regulation,” “behavior management,” or “grit” that serves adult purposes rather than on youth agency or identity that fosters the social and emotional well-being and development of individuals and communities.	<i>Integrating Identity Affirmation With Teaching and Learning (NACA): Beyond SEL Audio Gallery</i> , linked here

Conclusion

What if, years from now, we look back on this time as the pivotal moment when K–12 education took the first real steps toward becoming a truly equitable, sustainable system that gives each and every child the education and care they need to develop a sense of personal purpose, the ability to sustain healthy relationships, a sense of place in the community, success in school and the workplace, and engaged citizenship?

The benefit of so much contextual uncertainty is that so much more looks possible. Despite our chaotic context, it is important to stay focused on our aspirations. This moment brings with it an opportunity to set ourselves on a path toward creating the conditions for every person in the school community to teach, learn, and thrive.



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