School for the Soul

As the world continues to make significant advancements in technology, science,

medicine, and energy, America feels burdened to keep up. In order to secure the well-being of

the nation's future, the government heavily relies on education to prepare up-and-coming

generations to resolve the many global issues to come. However, data from the Program for

International Student Assessment have shown that the United States underproduces students in

the highest levels of both mathematics achievement and science achievement compared to other

developed countries (National Science Board, 2016, Tables 1-4 and 1-5). Today educators and

parents alike encourage youth to challenge themselves academically by encouraging them to

enroll in more advanced classes or visit tutors for extra help outside the classroom. Though

"being smart" contributes to a child's future success, it does not strictly derive from academic

intelligence. Maurice Elias, psychology professor at Rutgers University, warned, "The one thing

that we don't want to do is turn out very smart kids with very poor character, because they are

very dangerous" (as cited in Boss, 2011, "Maurice Elias," para. 3). Joy Price Lewis, Chicago

kindergarten and social-emotional learning (SEL) teacher at Marcus Garvey School, pointed out

how people often forget that kids "… hurt, they have pain, [and] they have other issues beyond

just school… we have to teach the entire child" (Committee for Children, 2013). Embracing this

idea requires a more human, holistic approach to education.

In 2013, Marcus Garvey School in Chicago reported its number of disciplinary reports

halved, respectfulness among students and teachers improved, eagerness to learn elevated, and

confidence and cooperation levels increased (Committee for Children, 2013). Amazing, yes.

Interesting, without a doubt. But how? Marcus Garvey School owes its thanks to a program

called Second Step, an in-classroom program designed to teach social-emotional skills and reduce aggressiveness while increasing social competence (National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices [NREPP], 2015). Today, only four states (Illinois, Kansas, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia) have adopted comprehensive, free-standing K-12 standards for SEL, while only five other states have comprehensive, free-standing standards for SEL among pre-school through early elementary years (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2015). These small, yet nonzero numbers hold some promise. However, there is still room for further SEL implementation in American schools. Social-emotional skills are essential to every child's education, and expanding their integration into national academic standards provides more students with a higher chance of success in the classroom and beyond.

So what holds policyholders back? Prairie Ridge High School English teacher Jennifer Fuerholzer believes time is a major issue. In addition to their regular classwork, students at Prairie Ridge are encouraged to participate in weekly "challenges" that practice social-emotional skills around the school and at home. Fuerholzer stressed the importance of other materials that need coverage in the classroom stating, "Who has time for feelings? We have the ACT to prepare for" (personal communication, May 21, 2015). Some administrators question whether or not SEL subjects deserve special attention at the expense of less attention focused on other important subjects like standardized test preparation. While an excellent ACT score gets students into college, social-emotional intelligence gets students through everyday life challenges. Knowing how to speed read and answer multiple choice questions only gets students so far. Skeptics, however, believe SEL focuses too much "touchy-feely stuff." But according to Berman, "[SEL] isn't about being nice. [It] is serious work . . . work to create a sense of community . . . to resolve conflicts . . . to create a positive environment in a classroom . . . [and]

to be able to manage [oneself]" in a constructive way (as cited in Boss, 2011, "Sheldon Berman," para. 2). Yet, the negative perception of SEL by students overrides what research says.

Getting youth to learn SEL willingly is a challenge within itself. Lauren Emery, a high school senior at Prairie Ridge, revealed that the negative connotations of SEL have to do with the "learning" aspect. Emery observed, "If the teachers are the ones enforcing it, [then] the students are not nearly as inclined to participate in the generic 'school improvement' idea trying to be installed . . ." (personal communication, April 1, 2015). Prairie Ridge High School math teacher Jamie Buck agrees. Buck admitted to the challenges she faces day to day with her students revealing, "Trying to get students to complete their homework is a hassle . . . so how do you motivate them to do something that has no impact on their grade? How do you convince them that this is something that they should try?" (personal communication, April 1, 2015). Because many students do not fully understand the importance of these lessons and the benefits at stake, they do not feel inclined to take the material to heart. However, emotional intelligence gives youth the critical interpersonal skills to maintain positive relationships with those around them.

Social-emotional learning programs supply children with the means to better resonate with their feelings and act appropriately upon them. According to Goleman (1996), "[E]motional self-awareness is the building block of the next fundamental emotional intelligence: being able to shake off a bad mood" (p. 55). Having control over one's emotions is essential to human adaptation, and emotional intelligence better prepares students for the unpredictability of life. When Principal Bell of Ella Flagg Young School in Chicago asked a group of elementary SEL students how to resolve an argument that previously disrupted the class, one girl replied, "We calm down [and] count to ten" (Committee for Children, 2013). Because students are constantly surrounded by other young peers and respectable faculty throughout the school year, children

must be able to control negative impulses that might bring physical or emotional harm to those they disagree with. The lessons taught by SEL programs encourage students to work out their problems in effective and healthy ways. These ideas of emotional detection and management promote a productive learning environment, providing youth with the means to find control in any difficult situation.

Mastering emotional intelligence early on in life not only helps students manage negative emotions in healthy ways, but also encourages them to express their feelings openly rather than bottle them up inside. According to Dunn and Brown (1994), children who often feel "angry or upset not only [do] poorly on the emotion-understanding task, but [are] also unlikely to conciliate and negotiate and likely to fail to reason" during conflict (p. 133). Thus, it is in the nation's best interest to help youth release their loneliness, uncertainty, or fear, for having an outlet for expression is essential to every child's emotional stability. On the other hand, the same negative effects hold true when positive emotions. According to Hochschild (1983), expressing false happiness or excitement threatens one's well-being because it causes estrangement between what is felt and what is expressed (as cited in Rafaeli & Satton, 1987, p. 31). Thus, it is important to create an environment in which students feel comfortable enough to let their genuine emotions known. The goal is not to have positive emotions all the time, but rather to understand the impact both negative and positive emotions have on oneself and on others. Being able to share true thoughts and feelings is a liberating experience, and having the social-emotional skills to do so will help youth find more certainty and confidence in their daily interactions.

This ability to recognize and control emotions within oneself goes hand in hand with the ability to detect them in others. Successful individuals know how to cooperate with others and manage tough situations. Matsumoto and Hwang (2011) pointed out the importance of

effectively dealing with emotional information about others explaining, "Knowing when and how to intervene, to adapt one's behaviors and communication styles, or engage the support and help of others" promotes trust, rapport, and understanding ("Conclusion," para. 2). However, reading emotional signals proves especially difficult for the current tech-savvy iGeneration. The ever-increasing rate of electronic communication suggests a decline in face-to-face communication skills, endangering our world's crucial emotion detection intelligence. Goleman (1996) explained, "People's emotions are rarely put into words; far more often they are expressed through other cues. The key to intuiting another's feelings is in the ability to read nonverbal channels: tone of voice, gesture, facial expression, and the like" (p. 96). Because the majority of today's population reverts to electronic conversation, fewer people are getting enough practice in interpreting these cues. The nonverbals mentioned by Goleman go deeper than the actual words used in an interaction, and fully understanding them takes emotional detection skills. The ability to read such signals is vital to youth's interpersonal and overall effective communication techniques. Integrating SEL into American school systems allows students to practice and develop these dying skills early on, for without such intelligence, students will lose their sense of empathy.

Once youth can detect emotions, they start to understand how certain feelings affect their peers and begin to develop a sense of understanding. During an interview with TVOParents (2010), Mary Gordon, founder of Roots of Empathy, emphasized empathy's importance in a child's life, calling its absence "alienating." Gordon stated, "Empathy is the first stage of conflict resolution. If we want children to know how to handle their squabbles, if we want nations to handle situations at the war rooms and in the boardrooms of the country, they have to be able to take the perspective of the other." Expanding their viewpoints allows youth to better resonate

with complex emotions and find more ethical solutions to conflicts. A lack of understanding frequently leads to pre-judgments and false conclusions; however, empathy teaches children the value of compassion and perspective. When asked how SEL changed her students, freshman English teacher Trudy Keller at East High School in Anchorage described a class activity in which a student was asked to interview one of his classmates whose parent was a drug addict and who had previously dealt with a great deal of trouble at home. Keller recalled, "His partner was someone the student had sort of looked down on before. At the end of the project, he wrote, 'I have a great deal of respect for what this student has been through'" (Boss, 2011, "Anchorage School District [ASD], Trudy Keller, How Has SEL Changed Your Students," para. 1). Empathy puts situations into context so that students can get a better sense into how and why their peers act the way they do. Empathetic students know how to change their outlooks and reevaluate their positions, allowing for greater understanding and more meaningful relationships.

Over the past decade, what it means to be a "smart student" has been redefined. Yes, a smart student participates in class, turns in homework on time, and aces tests, but a smart student also engages effectively with his or her peers, knows how to manage conflict, and identifies well with others. The public can entrust this type of student with the responsibility to carry these skills from within the classroom to the streets of the world, working to lead by example and practice compassion in whatever field he or she chooses. Arthur E. Poropat, an Australian psychology professor, explained, "We probably need to start rethinking our emphasis on intelligence . . . This isn't to say that we should throw intelligence out . . . but we need to pull back on thinking that this is the only game in town" (as cited in North, 2015). This elevated approach to learning focuses on the entire student, and SEL's integration into public American school systems will prove that there is more to education than just numbers and letters. Teaching children to detect,

decide, and delegate emotions on a small scale in the classroom will prepare them to do so with their future bosses, friends, and families in the real world. Incorporating SEL into national academic standards ensures each child will have same opportunity to learn these valuable life skills, for doing so not only seems right, but, much like the ability to identify and empathize with others, proves necessary.

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