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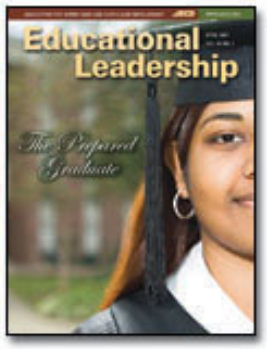

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Boosting Social and Emotional Competence

Only by building relationship skills into high school curriculums can we help graduates prepare for the world of work.

Kathy Beland

Alma, a sophomore at Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Greenbelt, Maryland, is sitting quietly in the lunchroom, observing the social scene that swirls around her. This may seem like standard practice for a 16-year-old, but Alma is actually fulfilling an assignment for health class. Her charge is to identify facial expressions and study behavior in a public setting. Later, she will discuss with her classmates what she has learned about empathizing with multiple perspectives. Like naturalists who painstakingly observe animals in their habitats, Alma and her classmates are becoming trained observers of human nature.

Back in class, Alma expresses surprise at what she hadn't noticed before, such as the number of students who eat alone and how big and overwhelming the school might seem to new students. Other students agree. They often focus on their own concerns; looking outside themselves has opened their eyes to the experiences of others and the challenges of attending a magnet school that draws students from across the county.

Down the hall, a 9th grade English class discusses the effects of labeling and stereotyping. Their point of reference is Sandra Cisneros's novella *The House on Mango Street* about growing up in a Hispanic section of Chicago. Students share how their own feelings about passing through unfamiliar neighborhoods compare with those of Cisneros's narrator. The discussion segues to behaviors and school situations that divide or exclude students. In small groups, students present ideas on how to form a more inclusive school community. Each student will eventually write an illustrated autobiographical novella, based on his or her own life experiences and reflections on these themes.

These students are taking part in a new program that integrates social and emotional learning into the high school curriculum. Social and emotional learning is the process by which people develop the skills to recognize and manage emotions, form positive relationships, solve problems, become motivated to accomplish a goal, make responsible decisions, and avoid risky behavior. Employers have made it abundantly clear that they now expect from high school graduates a level of social and emotional competency as high as—if not higher than—the level

of any technical skill. There is ample evidence that social and emotional skills are crucial to success in school, work, and personal life—and affect a person's quality of life in all three arenas. Students without these skills will be hard-pressed to fulfill their potential, whether they pursue postsecondary education or head straight to the world of work.

The Real Test

Although school districts are now instituting must-pass high school assessments, many employers say the real test for high school graduates is succeeding in the global economy. Passing this test requires a new constellation of skills that enable people to excel within a diverse workforce and a fast-changing marketplace.

In spring 2006, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and other groups who watch employment trends asked more than 400 human resource professionals what skills they believe will be necessary for success in the workplace in this century—and whether new entrants to the workforce display those skills (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). Of the 20 skills respondents cited most, the 5 rated most important for high school graduates were

- Professionalism/work ethic
- Teamwork/collaboration
- Oral communication
- Ethics/social responsibility
- Reading comprehension

Much farther down the list were two skills tested in high school assessments: mathematics and science. A similar top-five ranking for college graduates did not even include reading comprehension. Although survey respondents checked "basic knowledge/skills" as a requirement for most jobs, they said "applied skills" trump these basics in the workplace. Respondents believed high school graduates were largely deficient in applied skills and issued a plea to K–12 educators to further develop students' personal and interpersonal skills.

William Fitzpatrick of Shell Trading and Shipping summed up the prevailing view:

> We're looking for people who can build relationships, have presence, and have intellectual capacity, people who have been involved in the community and in civic activities, individuals who can engage with people both inside and outside the company. (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006, p. 25)

Educators need not view academic learning and social and emotional learning as opposite ends of a tug-of-war. When both support each other, students are more apt to be engaged in learning and develop themselves personally.

Social and Emotional Competencies

In the opening vignettes, students were developing skills in social awareness, one of five competency areas of social and emotional learning delineated by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The

other four competency areas are self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2005). These competencies serve as the curricular framework for School-Connect, the program some teachers piloted at Eleanor Roosevelt High School by integrating it into their English and health classes (Beland & Douglass, 2006). As educators recognize the centrality of social and emotional competence, they have developed programs and curriculums like School-Connect to teach these skills in school.

Social Awareness

Social awareness skills—such as recognizing what others are thinking and feeling, empathizing with people different from ourselves, and showing compassion— form the basis for community building. Students need a sense of community to perform well academically. Research correlates school connectedness, a feeling of belonging in school, with academic motivation (Resnick et al., 1997). When students feel safe to speak up in class and take on academic challenges and when they have peers and a caring teacher they can turn to for support, they are more likely to adopt school norms, follow rules, and apply effort in their classes.

Schools can increase social awareness, and school connectedness, by training faculty members in building relationships and creating supportive learning environments. In the School-Connect program, teachers take time to find out about their students and help students find out about one another. Students help create classroom guidelines for behavior, interview and introduce one another to the class, and interview their teachers to find out what they need from students in order to be effective teachers. Students share what they need from their teachers to learn effectively. Teachers foster discussion skills that help students actively and respectfully listen to their peers.

Key topics for discussion include overcoming barriers to empathy, reducing labeling and stereotyping, and improving attitudes toward diversity. These topics naturally fit into an English or health curriculum but can also be worked into history and science classes. For example, students could explore the historical effects of racism and learn about institutions, legislation, and movements that sought to right these wrongs. They might study how science has at times been used to divide people and at other times illuminated people's common needs and experiences.

Self-Awareness and Self-Management

Self-awareness and self-management are also key to building a learning community. Self-awareness includes skills in recognizing our own emotions and cultivating our strengths and positive qualities. Self-management involves managing emotions and establishing and working toward short- or long-term goals. Teachers can discuss and model these skills as part of any class.

Self-awareness and stress-reduction skills are especially easy to integrate into classroom life. Before tests or class presentations, teachers can guide students in practicing positive visualizations, supportive self-statements, and relaxation techniques. To foster self-management, students can set goals at the beginning of a course and monitor their progress throughout the semester.

Students can also explore the importance of these skills through academic content. One English class gave Shakespeare's famous couple, Romeo and Juliet, a stress test and then discussed what factors in the lives of these star-crossed teens produced such high scores. They considered whether the pair might have avoided tragedy if Romeo had tried techniques for reducing anger and controlling his impulses or if Juliet had been more self-reflective. Students drew parallels to their own lives. This helped students see how emotions—and the presence or lack of emotional management—are pivotal in works of literature as well as real-life events.

Relationship Skills and Decision Making

The fourth and fifth competency areas, relationship skills and responsible decision making, relate to the teamwork/ collaboration skills and socially responsible behavior that employers rated as crucial in the 2006 survey of 400 human resource workers.

In the health course at Eleanor Roosevelt, students role-play the skills involved in relationship building, such as apologizing. In one class, a male student balked at apologizing, even in a role-play. Fellow students offered encouragement, reminding him that apologizing is a show of strength, not weakness. These students had discussed how messages promoted through the media—especially those related to gender—maintain a powerful grip on people. They had also analyzed and improved on the actual apologies of public figures and discussed the consequences of these leaders' errant behaviors and the effects of their apologies.

With the class helping him break through these invisible bonds, the student finally delivered his lines. But students and teacher agreed: It takes time and practice to make a social skill like apologizing your own. If this student does learn to apologize gracefully, he will possess a desirable talent. Taking responsibility for one's behavior is a key component of professionalism and workplace ethics.

Teachers can weave practice in responsible decision making into the curriculum by having students apply a problem-solving and decision-making strategy to conflicts found in the study of almost any subject. This strategy includes developing a problem statement that contains opposing viewpoints, generating ideas and solutions, evaluating these ideas and solutions using relevant criteria, and selecting an optimal solution.

For example, students reading *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan might write diary entries for both the main character and her mother, contrasting the way each of these characters would view one of their numerous conflicts. Students could create a dialogue in which mother and daughter arrive at a neutral problem statement. They can practice the same process with historical conflicts once faced by real people, and follow up by applying the strategy to a conflict of their own.

Fostering relationships and making good decisions are also essential elements of the learning strategies many teachers use. For example, cooperative learning and project-based learning require students to work in pairs or teams. Such learning strategies simulate a workplace environment: Students learn to take different roles, plan a project, make decisions, solve problems, and negotiate with one another to achieve a goal. They also build autonomy through

deciding what they want to research and choosing how to display this knowledge to others.

Striking a Chord

After working through the School-Connect curriculum, students reflect on what they learned about themselves and their relationships: What social and emotional skills did they find valuable? Would they like to see social and emotional skill building integrated into other subjects? Students enthusiastically affirm the value of practicing these skills. Clearly, social and emotional skills strike a chord with students in terms of what they believe they need to thrive—in high school and in the future.

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