Pennsylvania Educational Leadership

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Table of Contents

Pennsylvania Educational Leadership

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Social Emotional Learning Leadership

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Today's school leaders face the challenges of addressing the needs of diverse learners, raising the achievement bar for all students, and ensuring proficiency through a model of standardized testing. The importance of integrating social emotional learning with academic content is clear. Outlined in this article is a leadership framework aligned to the competencies put forward by the research of the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning. Confronting those challenges and remaining true to the social emotional learnings at the core of education, leaders must engage in reflection and critical dialogue around the power of emotional connection, the modeling of trust, the analysis and alignment of systems, empowerment and the practice of ethics in our profession as essential tools. Therein lie the keys to discovering our strengths and opportunities within these competencies with our students, families, faculty, our staff and ourselves.

Social Emotional Learning Leadership

James Comer says that "no significant learning occurs without [first] significant relationships"(Comer, 2005). However, through more than forty-five years of educational experience, the authors have seen that schools, now more than ever, are being challenged to address the needs of diverse learners, raise the achievement bar for all students, and ensure proficiency through a model of standardized testing. More is expected of this generation of educational leaders than ever before. The question at hand is can all of this be done while remaining true to the social and emotional learnings that are at the center of education?

A growing number of schools, districts and state systems of education have begun to implement a competency or standards-driven approach to the integration of social, emotional, and academic learning. The Collaborative for Academic Social Emotional Learning has crafted a model that highlights five competencies "that educate hearts, inspire minds, and help people navigate the world more effectively" when integrated across the diverse settings of classrooms, schools, homes and communities (Durlak, 2015).

- Social-Awareness
- Self-Awareness
- Relationships Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making
- Self-Management

Through their research, CASEL has seen that "satisfying the social and emotional needs of students does more than prepare them to learn. It actually increases their capacity for learning. Social and emotional learning has been shown to increase mastery of subject material, motivation to learn, commitment to school, and time devoted to schoolwork. It also improves attendance, graduation rates, and prospects for constructive employment while at the same time reducing suspensions, expulsions, and grade retention" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and

Emotional Learning, 2005). As their work has progressed, they are now seeing "gains of eleven to seventeen percentile points on achievement tests indicat[ing] that SEL programs offer students a practical educational benefit" (Payton et al., 2008).

The power of the integration of social emotional learning with academic learning of our students is clear; but, as leaders, we must be willing to engage in deep reflection and critical dialogue around where our strengths and opportunities lie within these competencies with our faculty, our staff, and ourselves. As we discover our strengths, it is from there that we build into our opportunities.

Embedded between each competency is a leadership behavior. These leadership behaviors offer an access point to enhance and grow the competencies. This framework illustrates the key leadership qualities that create the bridge from our strengths into areas of growth.
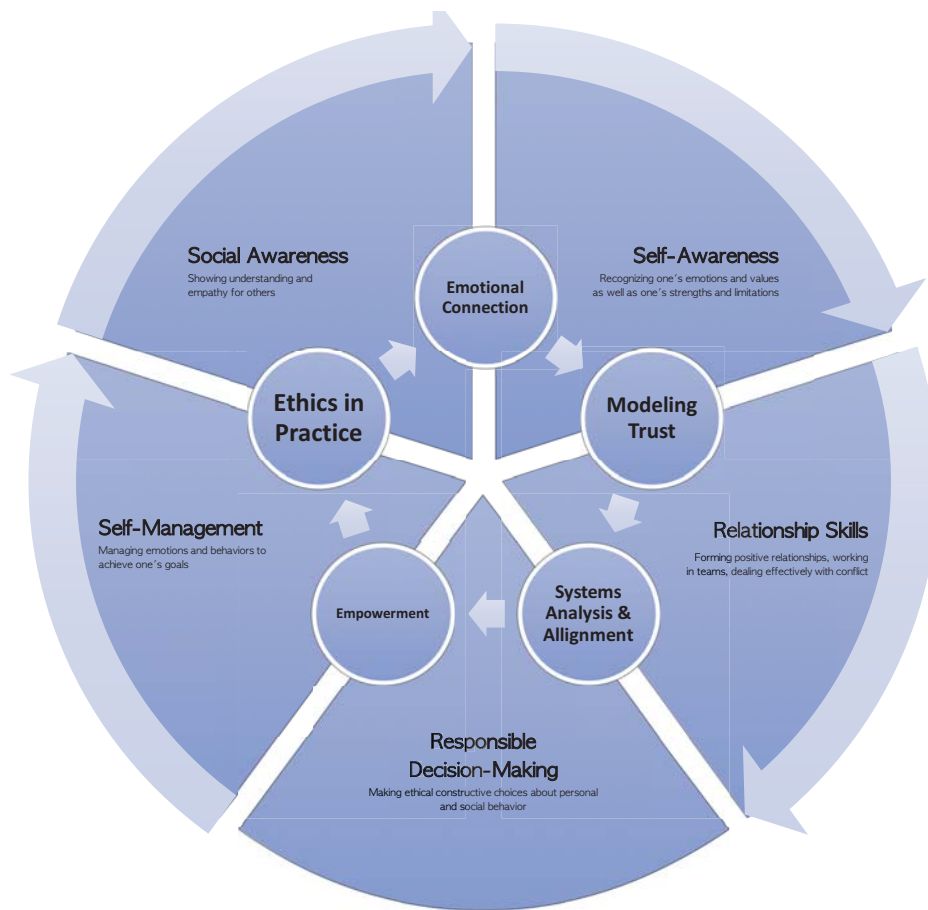

Figure 1. Framework for social emotional learning leadership

Emotional Connection

In the hierarchy of schools, stakeholders want those in leadership positions to see what they have done and to approve of their actions (Sinek, 2014). A leader's ability to emotionally connect is "integral to a culture of sacrifice and service" (Sinek, 2014, p. 7), which connects all

levels of educational systems. Emotional connection, belonging, shared values, and a deep sense of empathy dramatically enhances trust, cooperation, and problem solving (2014).

We must create programs that support understanding and celebrate the differences and commonalities present in the learning community. Students, teachers, families and stakeholders should be able to see meaning and relevance of the work in which we invite them to join. When that is in place, we are motivated and invest in the community we share.

Modeling Trust

The social emotional qualities of self-awareness and relationship skills are connected through and driven by the leadership competency of modeling trust. Leaders are responsible to their staff, colleagues, students, and parents through shared purpose. Forming positive relationships, working in teams, and dealing effectively with conflict allows leaders an opportunity to model and build trust. "The true social benefit of trust is reciprocal. … For trust to serve the individual and the group, it must be shared" (Sinek, 2014, p. 74). In order to celebrate the educators who experiment and take risks in an effort to help students succeed, we must be willing to take that first vulnerable step with them.

This reciprocity of trust begins in self-awareness, the ability to assess one's behavior and make appropriate changes and/or enhancements. When leaders can recognize their own emotions and values as well as practice the relationship skills of authenticity and integrity, they become models of trust. Leaders must lead with their hearts as well as their head.

Systems Analysis and Alignment

Systems analysis and alignment is the discipline where people learn to better understand human interdependency in the process of change (Senge, 2012). The process of systems analysis and alignment invites leaders to effectively connect relationship skills with responsible decision-making as it impacts ethical choices and personal and social behavior. Whether it is creating a consistent language or a set of common core beliefs or values, aligning our systems requires a level of integrity that permeates the culture that we build.

Empowerment

If schools are to reach their fullest social, emotional, mental, and spiritual potential, solutions for social emotional concerns can no longer be sought through old paradigms of standardized testing and prefabricated solutions. Solutions to systemic social emotional problems lie at a deeper level. Successful leaders make responsible and ethical decisions and empower the self-management of their colleagues. This empowerment through interconnectedness helps all staff and students manage emotions and behaviors and achieve both personal and organizational goals. "To do this requires shared conversations, and open mind and heart and thinking creatively at a much deeper level" (Jaworski, 2012, p. 87).

Leaders empower their staff and those served by creating an atmosphere of emotional safety. They encourage others to find their voice and share their story. They find opportunities for their staff and faculty to show their expertise and teach each other.

Ethics in Practice

Connecting the competencies of self-management and social awareness is the ability of leaders to practice personal ethics in their professional capacity. In his book *Ethical Leadership*, professor of education at Boston College, Robert Starratt, defines ethics as denoting "a study of the underlying beliefs, assumptions, principles, and values that support a moral way of life" (2004, p. 5). Authenticity is essential to ethical leadership. The authentic leader always acts with the good of others in view. They work to become aware of the needs and realities of the community they serve and seek to act with consistency, equity and fairness. "Authentic ethical leaders believe deeply in people and their abilities to make ordinary things into great things" (2004, p. 71). "There has never been a greater need for social ingenuity and integrity" (Hargreaves, 2004, p. 203).

Conclusion

Remaining true to the social emotional learnings at the center of education is not done by taking our attention off of the acadmic success of students. Nor is it accomplised by doubling down on a mastery of testing tequnique and data collection. It is done by treating social and emotional learning as not one more thing, but rather as the essential thing that we do for our students, our famlies, our facutly, our staff, and ourselves. Authentic integration begins with courageous leadership. From that place of social and emotional relevance, we empower students to reach for academic success and, more importantly, success beyond the walls of our classrooms.

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