Handbook on
Family and Community Engagement

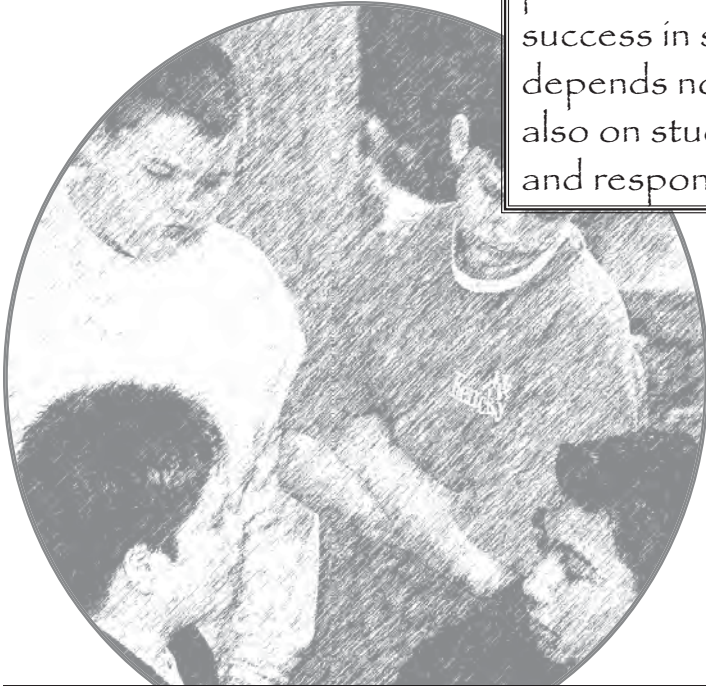*Sam Redding, Marilyn Murphy, & Pam Sheley, Editors*
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Social and emotional learning is an integral part of children's development and their success in school. Educational success depends not only on academic achievement, but also on students' ability to engage respectfully and responsibly with others.

Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning: Complementary Goals for School–Family Partnerships
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Chapter

5

Social and emotional learning is an integral part of children's development and their success in school. Educational success depends not only on academic achievement, but also on students' ability to engage respectfully and responsibly with others (Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Achieving the broad goals of education becomes easier when the focus on social, emotional, and academic learning is consistently reinforced across home and school contexts (Albright & Weissberg, 2010). The purpose of this chapter is to establish the importance of broadening the focus of school–family partnerships to explicitly address social and emotional development and to examine strategies that can support families and educators to collaboratively achieve the most powerful outcomes for students. This perspective grows from an understanding that the ultimate objective is not simply to involve families in supporting academic learning in and out of schools, but also to have schools take a more active and thoughtful role in promoting social and emotional development.

Home and school are among the most powerful environments impacting students' development. Students develop essential social, emotional, and cognitive skills as they interact with key adults in their lives. The traditional view that families are responsible for promoting social and emotional learning while schools are responsible for academic learning can lead to somewhat dichotomized roles for families and educators (Crozier, 1999). However, it has become increasingly apparent that school is also a critical context for social and emotional growth (Greenberg et al., 2003; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010; Zins & Elias, 2006), and home is a crucial context for fostering academic achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). With this realization, the question becomes not one of who should be responsible for which domains of development, but rather how can schools and families work together in coordinated ways to support success in all these areas.

What Is Social and Emotional Learning?

Social and emotional learning is a process for helping children—and even adults—to develop the fundamental social and emotional competencies necessary for success (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003; Elias et al., 1997). Social and emotional learning teaches the skills we all need to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work effectively and ethically. These skills include knowing how to recognize and manage our emotions, develop care and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively and ethically. These skills also are the ones that allow children to calm themselves when angry, make friends, resolve conflicts respectfully, and make ethical and safe choices. The basic definition of social and emotional learning revolves around five broad areas of competence:

- Self-awareness—accurately assessing one's emotions, values, strengths, and capacities.
- Self-management—managing emotions and behaviors; persevering in overcoming obstacles; setting and monitoring progress toward achieving personal and academic goals.
- Social awareness—showing empathy and understanding for others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences.
- Relationship skills—establishing and maintaining positive relationships based on cooperation; preventing and constructively resolving interpersonal conflict.
- Responsible decision making—making constructive choices about personal and social behavior.

Reliable science and hands-on experience have illustrated that social and emotional competencies can be taught and developed in every type of school and in students of diverse backgrounds and ages, and that academic achievement improves when social and emotional competencies are taught. A recent meta-analysis (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011) that aggregated the results of 213 experimental-control group studies of school-based social and emotional learning reported that students receiving high-quality instruction in social and emotional learning demonstrated:

- Better academic performance—achievement scores an average of 11 percentile

points higher than students who did not receive such instruction.

- Improved attitudes and behaviors—greater motivation to learn, deeper connection to school, better classroom behavior, and improved social relationships with peers.
- Fewer negative behaviors—decreased disruptive class behavior, aggression, delinquent acts, and disciplinary referrals.
- Reduced emotional distress—fewer reports of student depression, anxiety, stress, and social withdrawal.

These findings, combined with a host of others, suggest that building social and emotional skills help students from preschool through high school to be engaged and ready to learn (Greenberg et al., 2003; Kress & Elias, 2006; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). In schools, social and emotional learning happens when educators implement strategies that create caring learning environments, explicitly teach social and emotional skills, and provide opportunities for students to use these skills throughout the school day (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003).

School–Family Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning

The idea that schools are taking a proactive role in building students' social and emotional competence is an exciting one. However, social and emotional skills cannot be taught in isolation, either at home or in school. Social and emotional competencies develop in dynamic relationship with others as they are modeled, practiced, and reinforced across contexts (Christenson & Havsy, 2004; Zins et al., 2004). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory reminds us that students' development is influenced not only by characteristics of the home,

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school, and community settings in which they live, but also the relationships between these settings. In their extensive work on factors that support school effectiveness, Bryk and colleagues (2009) emphasize the ways that academic and personal support for teachers interact with parent supports for learning to promote student motivation and participation. Studies suggest that students may be at greatest risk for academic failure when they experience inconsistent expectations across home and school contexts (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998; Pianta & Walsh, 1996). Although creating consistent expectations around academic work is clearly important, creating continuity of goals and expectations around social and emotional behaviors may be just as essential and perhaps more challenging. This may be particularly true in cases where poverty, cultural differences, and other factors create barriers to communication and shared understandings between home and school. The remainder of this chapter outlines a few basic principles that might guide educational leaders in creating the necessary conditions for educators to form true partnerships with families for social, emotional, and academic learning.

Promote a Holistic Vision and Mission

To achieve the full potential that families and schools can have when they join forces, it is necessary to broaden the schools' mission and goals and to redefine roles for families and schools. Many parents, educators, and policymakers share a common goal to promote children's social and emotional development, academic success, and readiness for the future. These complementary goals are reflected in the National Education Goals Panel's (1995) assertion that schools should "promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children" and the National Conference of State Legislatures' (2002) statement that "scholastic achievement must go hand in hand with the acquisition of traits such as honesty, cooperation, fairness, respect for others, kindness, trustworthiness, the ability to resolve conflict, and the insight to understand why such traits are so important" (p. 1). Likewise, a recent survey by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) reveals that parents are eager to work together with schools to promote

whole child education aimed at supporting students' development as "resilient, adaptable, and creative" learners (McCloskey, 2011, p. 80). When schools, districts, and state education authorities formally incorporate this educational philosophy and clearly communicate a broader mission to all stakeholders, they empower families and educators to expand the focus of their work together.

Adopt SEL Programs That Incorporate a School–Family Partnership Framework

The adoption of evidence-based programs to systematically promote students' social and emotional learning at school is an important step toward pursuing this broader mission for education. In 2003, CASEL systematically reviewed 80 social and emotional learning programs and published a guide for educational leaders (available in revised form in fall 2011). This guide helps leaders to identify programs that use high-quality instructional strategies to promote social and emotional skills across settings, have documented positive effects for students, and offer professional development and technical assistance to support implementation. Recognizing the importance of school–family collaboration for social and emotional learning, CASEL also evaluated the quality of family involvement activities in these programs and found that a number of evidence-based social and emotional learning programs explicitly emphasize family engagement.

Similarly, 52 of 209 studies reviewed by Durlak and colleagues (2011) included one or more family components, and these had positive effects on students' social skills, attitudes, and school performance. Social and emotional learning programs may include newsletters that keep families up to date on the social and emotional skills that their children are learning in school or family guides that explain social and emotional learning concepts in family-friendly language. Some programs also include home activities that provide opportunities for families and students to work together on learning activities that promote social and emotional learning (Albright, Weissberg, & Dusenbury, 2011). With support from administrators for quality implementation, these programs can enhance students' social and emotional skills through explicit instruction

while also creating potential opportunities for social and emotional learning at home and providing shared language for students, teachers, and families (Albright & Weissberg, 2010; Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003).

Include Parents in Decisions About Social and Emotional Learning in Your School System

Organizing parents to be involved in decisions about social and emotional learning also demonstrates commitment to making social and emotional development a priority and serves to promote communication and involvement. Participation in making decisions about issues that impact their children is among Epstein's (1995) six types of family involvement, and it is relevant to social and emotional as well as academic learning. Giving families a voice in planning and decision making helps to ensure that leaders make good decisions, and it can enhance families' commitment to supporting new initiatives once they are adopted.

Educate Parents and Families on How to Promote Social and Emotional Development

Schools can help equip parents and other caretakers with the knowledge and skills they need to manage difficult behavior, reinforce social and emotional skills, and build positive relationships with their children in the home by providing workshops and informational sessions on topics related to social and emotional learning. Sessions might focus on understanding normal child development or approaches to promoting healthy development at home such as: establishing limits and consistent discipline, increasing use of praise, and modeling socially and emotionally competent behavior. Durlak and colleagues (2007) found that school-based parent training programs that addressed these topics had a significant effect on positive youth development. Of all the interventions they examined—which included a variety of school-, family-, and community-focused programs—parent training programs were the only category for which significant, positive impact for students was sustained over time. Although these were universal programs, made available to all families regardless of their students' previous behavior or level of risk, parent training may be especially helpful for families of students who experience difficulty managing their behavior in

school or at home.

Encourage Two-Way Communication With Families About Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

Sebring and colleagues (2006) suggest that: "(1) teachers need to be knowledgeable about student culture and the local community and draw on these in their lessons, and (2) school staff must reach out to parents and community to engage them in the processes of strengthening student learning" (p. 11). To do so, educators must regularly share information with families and create opportunities for families to communicate their insights, concerns, and hopes. This two-way communication informs and empowers families to support their children's education, and it helps teachers to better understand external factors that influence students' learning and engagement. By focusing school–family communications on social and emotional as well as academic development, educators convey respect for students' inner lives and an understanding of students as complex and multifaceted. This attention to social and affective concerns can build trust and deepen communication with families (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009).

It is not our intention to overburden teachers with the responsibility for constant communication with families about social and emotional development. In fact, quality of school–family interactions, rather than quantity, seems to predict student achievement and behavior (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Patrikakou & Weissberg, 1999). Brief surveys at the beginning of the year may be an efficient way for educators to learn more about students' home lives and their families' goals and concerns and to establish an emphasis on social and emotional learning. Guidance for teachers should encourage them to be flexible and creative with these communications to find what works for different families. Some families may respond to written or electronic communications. Other families may have literacy or language barriers or may not have access to a computer, so in-person modes are more effective. The following four key characteristics of effective school–family communication serve as a useful framework for supporting teachers in communicating with families about social and emotional learning (Albright,

Weissberg, & Dusenbury, 2011):

- *Child-centered* communication that is highly individualized is of most interest to families (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 1999, 2007). While it may also be helpful to provide some general information, discussion that focuses on a child's specific strengths and struggles allows both teachers and family members to better support the child's development.

- *Constructive* communication and information is meaningful and useful because it provides families with practical suggestions. Positive language that focuses on solutions helps families remain optimistic (Ames, 1993; Christenson, Weissberg, & Klein, 2007).

- *Clear and concrete* communication is most beneficial to families in supporting children's actual learning. This is particularly important when communicating about issues of social and emotional development for which parents and families may not share a common vocabulary. Communication with families should give specific examples and clear guidelines using simple language and minimal text. Keeping this principle in mind may help minimize miscommunications resulting from differences in literacy, language, and culture.

- *Continuous* communication keeps families informed about their child's development and in sync with classroom practices and policies. Teachers should reach out to families as early as possible to establish a collaborative tone (Rubenstein, Patrikakou, Weissberg, & Armstrong, 1999) and maintain regular contact throughout the school year.

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Make Social and Emotional Learning a Focus of Student Learning Standards and Report Cards

To further contribute to clear, timely communication about social and emotional learning, educational leaders might consider incorporating social and emotional competencies into student learning standards and report cards. Learning standards provide an objective basis for discussion of students' social and emotional development, and they provide a common language for these discussions. In the absence of learning standards, teachers may have difficulty conveying their insights about a student's social and emotional development, and parents have no basis for understanding what to expect from their child at a given developmental period. Standards that outline what a child should know and be able to do in social and emotional domains provide a starting point for shared understanding of a student's strengths and challenges and a guide for collaborative work (Dusenbury, Zadrazil, Mart, & Weissberg, 2011).

When standards for social and emotional learning aligned with assessments are meaningfully reflected on "the other side of the report card," schools send a message about the importance of these competencies and provide structured opportunities for teachers, families, and students to discuss social and emotional development. Report cards are a powerful tool for communicating with families—perhaps the single most impactful tool that educators have—and often serve as the basis for parent–teacher conferences. Modifying them to reflect the complementary goals of social, emotional, and academic learning will be an important step toward promoting holistic school–family partnerships (Elias, 2009; Elias, Wang, Weissberg, Zins, & Walberg, 2002).

Summary

As evidence builds for the idea that social and emotional skills support academic learning and foster healthy outcomes in their own right, schools are beginning to focus on social and emotional learning as a means of promoting students' success. The full potential of these efforts, however, cannot be realized if schools and families continue to engage in separate, parallel efforts. Students succeed best when all the key adults in their lives work collaboratively to support them in all developmental domains. We believe that when schools and school systems make a concerted effort to act based on the principles outlined above, they are best positioned to support coordinated school–family partnerships that support social, emotional, and academic learning.

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