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## The SEL Implementation Monkey: Identifying Factors that Serve as Barriers to the Successful Implementation of SEL in the Classroom and School Setting

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The SEL Implementation Monkey:  
Identifying Factors that Serve as Barriers to the Successful  
Implementation of SEL in the Classroom and School Setting

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that served as barriers to the successful implementation of social and emotional learning in the classroom and school setting. This study utilized a reflective case study approach concerning USD 417's social and emotional learning implementation journey. The research questions for this study were:

1. What factors or conditions serve as barriers to the implementation of SEL in the classroom and school setting?
2. What resources or supports would lead to increased fidelity amongst teachers in the implementation of SEL in the classroom and school setting?

The reflections and data were used to identify common themes regarding barriers to social and emotional learning implementation. Four domains were conjectured as areas having a direct impact on the self-efficacy of staff members in USD 417. In turn, the low self-efficacy of many staff members initially compromised the fidelity of the implementation process for social and emotional learning programs. These four domains are competing value systems, emotional overload, cognitive deficit, and locus of control/lack of internal motivation.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction	1
Introduction	1
Problem Statement	4
Focus on Instruction and Systemic Issues	5
How SEL Implementation is Directly Observable	6
Actionable	6
Connects to a Broader Strategy of Improvement	7
High Leverage	7
Research Questions	9
Overview of Methodology	9
Positionality	10
Researcher's Role	11
Assumptions	12
Definition of Key Terms	13
Conceptual Framework	15
Organization of the Dissertation	16
CHAPTER TWO: SEL and SEL Programs	18
What is SEL?	18
Components of SEL	19
SEL Program Models	23
SEL and Academic Development	25
SEL and Academic Development, is there a Downside?	27

Conclusion	31
CHAPTER THREE: SEL Implementation, What is the Catch?	32
Teachers’ Social and Emotional Competence – What Role Does it Play?	32
Teacher Self-Efficacy – Does it Play a Factor in SEL Implementation and Beyond?	35
SEL Implementation, Professional Development, and School Leadership	37
Conclusion	41
CHAPTER FOUR: From a Practitioner’s Lens	42
From the Beginning	42
2018 – 2019 School Year	45
Removing the Monkey	49
2019 – 2020 School Year	49
The COVID-19 Pandemic	52
2020-2021 School Year	53
2021-2022 School Year	55
Conclusion	57
CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusions and Implications	59
Looking Back	59
Implementation Barriers	60
Competing Value Systems	61
Emotional Overload	63
Cognitive Deficit	64
Locus of Control and Lack of Internal Motivation	65
Barriers or Insubordination?	66

Keeping the Monkey in the Cage	67
References	70

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1 CASEL Social and Emotional Learning Wheel.	20
Figure 2.2 Social and emotional learning outcomes as a long-term process.	27
Figure 3.1 The prosocial classroom: A model of teacher social and emotional competence and classroom and student outcomes	33
Figure 4.1 The Kansans Can Competency Framework Wheel	44
Figure 4.2 The VIBE Multi-Tiered Support Framework	54
Figure 5.1 Social and Emotional Learning Implementation Barriers	60

## **CHAPTER ONE: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.” (anonymous, n.d.). Exposing students to core academic curriculum aids in building an academic foundation of knowledge, but is that enough? Research has suggested that a shift in educational practice from a purely academic focus to a learning environment that includes a social and emotional learning (SEL) approach has many benefits (Durlak & Mahoney, 2019; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Panayiotou, Humphrey, & Wigelsworth, 2019; Tate, 2019; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak & Weissberg, 2017). Despite what the research says about SEL and the fact that Kansas has adopted SEL standards for public education, some school districts have not yet implemented SEL standards into the classrooms and school environments. Others have attempted SEL implementation yet have not experienced the level of fidelity desired by the organization. Such is the case for USD 417.

I currently serve as the Superintendent of School for USD 417, a rural school district located in Kansas with a population of approximately 850 students. USD 417 is composed of two elementary schools, one junior high school, and one high school. During the 2018-2019 school year, USD 417 had an academic at-risk student population of 48% , while 52% of the student body was at-risk due to qualifying for free meals under the National school lunch program. It is important to note that in Kansas, the term “at-risk” has a dual meaning. In terms of educational funding, “at-risk” is defined as a student who is eligible for free meals under the National school lunch program. Academically, an “at-risk” student is defined predominantly as a student who is not working on grade level in reading or mathematics. Other criteria can also determine the at-risk status of a student, including 1) not working on academic grade level; 2)



not meeting the requirements necessary for promotion to the next grade; 3) not meeting the requirements necessary for graduation from high school; 4) has insufficient mastery of skills or is not meeting state standards; 5) has been retained; 6) has a high rate of absenteeism; 7) has repeated suspensions or expulsions from school; 8) is homeless and/or migrant; 9) is identified as an English Language Learner; and, 10) has social emotional needs that cause a student to be unsuccessful in school. The intent of the Kansas At-Risk Program is to provide additional educational opportunities, interventions, and evidence-based instructional services to help students meet the State Board of Education outcomes (Kansas State Department of Education, 2021).

During the 2016-2017 school year, USD 417 adopted and implemented research based SEL programs in an attempt to transform the schools to create supportive, nurturing, and successful learning environments equipped to help children thrive. However, both elementary schools in the district have experienced increases in office discipline referrals at a rate of 173% and 190% respectively between the 2015-2016 and 2017-2018 school year. The junior high and high school have also experienced increases in office discipline referrals during this same period of time, but not to the extent of both elementary schools. However, the office discipline referrals have increased since the implementation of this program. USD 417 also participates in the statewide Communities That Care survey given to students in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12. Data collected from this survey in the areas of student engagement and student wellbeing suggest the lack of SEL presence in the classroom and school environment in USD 417 as well.

It is stated in the USD 417 core beliefs that: 1) All students are capable of learning and improving to their own levels of academic achievement; 2) Every member of the learning community believes that every child is important and cares about the academic progress of all

students; 3) Every member of the learning community should be held accountable for the learning process to thrive; and, 4) Educators are willing to adapt to meet students' needs in intentional, coherent, and dynamic ways. Furthermore, the mission statement for USD 417 calls for all employees, parents, and patrons through their cooperative efforts to assure district students of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to develop into lifelong learners who respect themselves and others, contribute to their communities, and succeed in a changing world (Morris County Public Schools, n.d.). Without melding SEL practices into instructional strategies to enhance and support academic development, are the core beliefs and mission statement of USD 417 relevant and feasible?

Opportunities for students to cultivate, practice, and reflect on social and emotional competencies in developmentally appropriate ways is the makeup of explicit SEL instruction (CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, 2019). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) states that students participating in SEL programs showed improved behavior in the class, increased ability to manage stress, and better attitudes about themselves and school (Durlak et al., 2011). Given my position as Superintendent of Schools for USD 417, part of my duties are to coordinate school improvement efforts. As the Superintendent of Schools concerned with school improvement efforts, I have observed low levels of SEL in the classroom and overall school setting. Given the observed lack of SEL in the classroom and school setting despite the known positive effects of SEL on academic attainment, this study will explore the factors that act as barriers to the successful implementation of SEL in the classroom and school setting.

## **Problem Statement**

The purpose of this study is to identify factors that serve as barriers to the successful implementation of SEL in the classroom and school setting at USD 417. Since 2016, USD 417 has experienced a significant increase in students identified as at-risk as evidenced with the growing number of students with Section 504 plans, individual education plans, behavior plans, and students assigned to a mental health caseworker. USD 417 administrators have reported an increase in office referrals, loss of instructional time due to disruptive and defiant behaviors from students in the classroom, and declining academic, ACT, and state assessment scores.

USD 417 has provided staff members with professional development opportunities focusing on SEL and adopted SEL programs, but the outcomes have not matched expectations. Office referrals have not decreased, academic and state assessment scores have not improved, and teachers continue to report that disruptive and defiant behaviors from students continue to detract from instructional time in the classroom. During district and building leadership team meetings, teachers and staff members have expressed concerns about the negative school climate that has developed due to the perceived lack of resources, processes, and knowledge to enact a positive change.

The successful implementation of SEL is dependent upon many factors. To explore the factors that may serve as barriers to the successful implementation of SEL in USD 417, the experiences influencing staffs' perspectives and practices need to be examined. Are there certain biases towards SEL shared amongst staff members? Is the knowledge of SEL instruction amongst staff members at the level necessary for effective integration with academic development? Are the necessary resources available to staff members that enable the successful implementation of SEL? The answers to these questions will allow district administrators to

create meaningful and engaging professional development opportunities, sustainable programs, and beneficial district practices/policies.

### **Focus on Instructional and/or Systemic Issues**

The awareness of the importance of SEL instruction has risen to the point that the Kansas State Board of Education (KSDE) has recognized the importance of SEL by making it one of five board outcomes for the Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA) for public schools. In addition, Kansas was the first state to develop social and emotional standards in 2012 (KSDE, 2018). Despite the fact that SEL standards are in place at the state level and SEL instruction is emphasized in the KESA process, there is little guidance to school districts from KSDE, nor are there any components of accountability on the school district's part to ensure SEL instruction is taking place.

SEL involves learning that enables individuals to develop and use the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors to self-regulate and develop positive relationships. These skills include recognizing and managing emotions, making friends, working well with others, peaceful resolution of conflicts, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively. Too often educators think about social and emotional development in a fragmented manner, either as a contributor to enhancing children's health, safety, citizenship, or as an important end in itself. Although SEL plays an important role in influencing these nonacademic outcomes, SEL also has a critical role in improving children's academic performance by improving school attitudes behavior, self-awareness, and performance (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). According to CASEL (2012):

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and

manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (pg. 4)

Furthermore, the Kansas State Department of Education states, “Social-Emotional learning is the process through which students and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others and establish and maintain positive relationships.” (Kansas State Department of Education 2016 – 2017 Annual Report, p. 12). The attributes gained and the factors addressed through SEL instruction provide students a better foundation for adjustment and academic performance reflected by fewer discipline issues, less emotional distress, increased positive social behavior, and improved grades and test scores (Durlak et al., 2011).

### **How SEL Implementation is Directly Observable**

The struggle USD 417 is experiencing with SEL implementation is directly observable. There are currently neither district policies nor procedures to address practices and expectations of how teachers and staff members of USD 417 implement SEL standards. While there are individual programs in place at the building level that address student behavior, which incorporate some SEL standards, there are not district wide standards or expectations. Furthermore, no program evaluation tools are in place to determine the effectiveness of these programs. During a previous visit from the district’s Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA) outside visitation team, while many resources were put in place and minimal gains were observed in student behavior, the lack of a systemic SEL program was missing and the lack of SEL instruction in the classroom was noted in the USD 417 KESA summary report.

### **Actionable**

This problem of practice is actionable as it can be improved in real-time. As the superintendent

of schools, I have direct contact with staff and administrators to develop a customized plan to allow for continual improvement of teachers, staff, and administrators' practices centered on integrating SEL and academic development. Therefore, the need to identify factors that serve as barriers to the successful implementation of SEL in the classroom and school setting at USD 417 is necessary for this problem of practice to determine the resources and supports that are necessary to provide meaningful professional development and practical policies and procedures district wide.

### **Connects to a Broader Strategy of Improvement**

Goals set by the board of education of USD 417 focus on increasing student achievement. Chapter Two of this study will address the research connecting the relationship between SEL and student achievement. The Kansas State Department of Education, (KSDE), has made social emotional growth part of the school accreditation process. USD 417 has also established a school accreditation goal to implement the behavior SEL standards into the district's multi-tiered systems of support for behavior protocol.

The KESA process will eventually require school districts to measure social emotional growth locally as one of the five KSDE board outcomes. Identifying factors that serve as barriers to the successful implementation of SEL in the classroom and school setting at USD 417 will help the district meet accreditation requirements, address district goals, and provide a catalyst to aid in USD 417's ability to increase student achievement.

### **High Leverage**

The impact of identifying factors that serve as barriers to the successful implementation of SEL in the classroom and school setting USD 417 is high-leverage because effectively

implementing and sustaining SEL components will affect students, staff, administrators, and parents. The USD 417 mission statement calls for all employees, parents, and patrons through their cooperative efforts to assure district students of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to develop into lifelong learners who respect themselves and others, contribute to their communities, and succeed in a changing world. To support this mission, it is important to provide a quality learning environment for all students. The need for creating policies, procedures, and professional development for integrating SEL and academic development is critical to our district in fulfilling the mission statement.

Belfield et al. (2015) state that in addition to academic development, improving SEL has shown that the benefits exceed its costs. In fact, there is a positive return on investments for implementing SEL programming that integrates SEL and academic development. On average, for every dollar invested in SEL programming, there is a return of eleven dollars. This is a benefit-cost ration of 11 to 1 (Belfield et al., 2015). In other words, the economic benefits schools and communities obtain from implementing SEL programs are eleven times greater than the cost to implement the SEL program.

Identifying factors that serve as barriers to the successful implementation of SEL in the classroom and school setting USD 417 is a critical aspect of the school improvement process. If USD 417 fails to successfully implement SEL, we run the risk of jeopardizing the students' ability to reach their full academic potential and limit the ability of our staff to create learning environments where all students can feel safe and secure emotionally. Identifying barriers to the implementation of SEL supports the district's mission statement and can be used to leverage policies and best practices district wide.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study are open-ended and intended to gauge perceptions about the SEL and the implementation of SEL in USD 417. There is a lack of SEL instruction at USD 417; thus, we need to determine why the problem exists and how we might address it. The following questions will guide this study:

1. What factors or conditions serve as barriers to the implementation of SEL in the classroom and school setting?
2. What resources or supports would lead to increased fidelity amongst teachers in the implementation of SEL in the classroom and school setting?

## **Overview of Methodology**

This study utilized reflective case study research methodology. Case studies can be described as embedding oneself into every aspect of a situation or setting to investigate the problem with the intention of providing recommendations for future actions, which is the primary intent of a case study. Depending on the context of the problem within the case study, utilizing theory to apply deductive logic and/or observation to apply inductive reasoning begins the scientific process of a case study providing an individual or a group a methodological technique for analysis (Baron & McNeal, 2019). Reflective thinking provides a researcher the opportunity to identify a problem and form a hypothesis, as well as, analyze and interpret collected data to form a conclusion (Dewey, 1933).

Yin (1984) defines the methodology of case study research “as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p. 23). Flyvbjerg (2006) states that “context-dependent knowledge and



experience are the very heart of expert activity” (p. 222). Flyvbjerg further explains, “it is only because of experience with cases that one can at all move from being a beginner to being an expert” (p. 222).

Hamilton and Corbett-Wittier (2013) describe reflective case study methodology as a reflective learning tool that allows the researcher to examine their own unique past situation to solve problems within one’s profession. In an attempt to better understand the context of a problem or challenge, the researcher can evaluate his or her relationship to, and experience with the problem or challenge, and identify alternative solutions.

### **Positionality**

As the superintendent of schools for USD 417, I have the opportunity to participate and observe the teaching and learning environments within all grade levels and facilities of the school district. Given the leadership role I play as the superintendent of schools, I am an insider to my study. Therefore, I feel I must address my positionality to articulate what roles and assumptions I will bring to my study as well as identify any biases or perceptions that may be present. Likewise, I also recognize the importance my worldview bears on my problem of practice with learners, their families, and educators alike. Although my personal viewpoints have largely been shaped by my rural upbringing, it has also been impacted by diverse educational and life experiences. For example, I am a parent of two adopted girls who were exposed to extreme physical and emotional trauma in their early years. My youngest daughter has fetal alcohol syndrome. I have always focused heavily on the social and emotional component of her education, as I believe it will afford her the greatest opportunity for success as an adult. Her IEP focuses on the core academic side of her education, which is important, but her teachers and support staff tend to focus mainly on the development of the core academic

goals and discount the importance social and emotional components play in her academic attainment. My daughter requires structure and predictability for her to function in a complex setting. In self-contained elementary classrooms, daily routines are established and followed to help students understand the importance of structure that lends to increased time for learning and less time on classroom transitions. As students' progress into upper elementary school and junior high, the focus on structure diminishes somewhat and shifts more to accountability, as students typically have the cognitive awareness to adjust and follow the cue of the teacher. However, students such as my daughter, tend to become emotionally unstable and mentally obstructed as the structure diminishes.

Due to my background in education and the luxury of being able to work within the educational system, I have seen disconnects between social and emotional learning and academic development not just within my own daughter's environment, but in many other settings within the educational system as well. Understanding positionality enables me to be aware of constraints, biases, and subjectivity versus objectivity concerning SEL and academic attainment in regard to my role as the superintendent of schools concerned with school improvement efforts.

### **Researcher's Role**

My current role as superintendent of schools for USD 417 allows me to work directly with every employee within all facilities at USD 417. I lead a team composed of a school improvement administrator, one instructional coach, five building administrators, three social workers, and 145 certified and classified district employees. Members of this team have daily interactions with students and exert some level of influence on the social and emotional learning and academic development of children within the USD 417 school system. Due to my professional position and personal beliefs about SEL, it will be important to empower teachers to

freely share their perceptions and beliefs about SEL without fear of reprimand or retaliation for participating in this study. Using anonymous surveys will help obtain data that is more accurate to the actual beliefs and perceptions of the teachers. Establishing a professional culture that is focused on collaboration and a supportive working environment will help establish trust with teachers to participate not only in the survey, but to participate in the interview process for the study as well.

I am in my second year as the superintendent of USD 417. I previously served as the superintendent of schools in a neighboring school district for five years, served as an elementary and middle school principal for six years, a high school mathematics teacher for 10 years, and a high school basketball coach for 13 years. I am a firm believer in relationships, trust, and establishing a professional culture centered on a growth mindset. Over the past two years, I have worked hard to develop and establish this professional culture in USD 417. The progress made in developing this culture in USD 417 will aid in limiting the barriers to accessing information during this reflective case study.

### **Assumptions**

Serving as both the researcher and a professional practitioner within my problem of practice, there are assumptions and potential biases that may exist within the context of identifying the barriers of effectively implementing SEL in the classroom and school setting at USD 417. The first assumption is that teachers and school personnel desire students to achieve the highest level of academic success that each individual student is capable of obtaining. A second assumption is that SEL is a way to provide a safe, engaging, mutually respectful, and a highly impactful learning environment for all students. However, some teachers may want to provide a safe, engaging, mutually respectful, and a highly impactful learning environment for

all students but do not believe SEL is the means to provide that environment. If these assumptions are not true, then this study must provide a non-evaluative method for them to express their position. This is critical in revealing accurate perceptions of school personnel and the value placed on the integration of social and emotional learning with academic development.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

Providing definitions of key terms will enhance readers' understanding of the problem this study addresses and how the researcher is proposing to study and solve the problem of practice.

- ***Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study:*** A research study conducted by Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The ACE Study is one of the largest investigations of childhood abuse and neglect and household challenges and later-life health and wellbeing. The original ACE Study was conducted from 1995 to 1997.
- ***Best Practices:*** Describes instructional, pedagogical, or systems improvement practices that demonstrate growth and/or achievement when implemented with fidelity.
- ***Curriculum:*** The articulation of what students should know and be able to do at each grade level and within each content area by the end of a defined period.
- ***Engagement:*** Active participation in tasks in which a person feels capable and confident in their abilities and values the outcome expected.
- ***Pedagogy:*** The study, selection, and use of instructional practices that are focused specifically on improving student learning.
- ***Professional Development:*** “Professional development may be used in reference to a wide variety of formal education, specialized training, or advanced professional learning

intended to help teachers, administrators, and other educators improve their professional competence, skills, knowledge, and effectiveness” (Great Schools Partnership, 2019).

- ***Self-Efficacy:*** Refers to an individual’s belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments.
- ***Social, Emotional, and Character Development Standards:*** According to the Kansas State Department of Education (2018), social, emotional, and character development standards were adopted in April of 2012 and revised in July of 2018 by the Kansas State Board of Education. The standards were designed to help keep children safe and successful while developing their academic, social-emotional and post-secondary skills. Kansas was the first state to adopt social emotional character development standards. The purpose of the social, emotional, and character development standards are to provide schools a framework for integrating social emotional growth with character development so that students will learn, practice and model essential personal life habits that contribute to academic, social-emotional and post-secondary success. It is about learning to make healthy decisions, to be respectful and responsible, to be caring and civil, to problem solve effectively, to be good citizens, to value excellence, and to be empathetic and ethical individuals. The standards include topics such as:

1) Character Development - “Developing skills to help students identify, define and live in accordance with core principles that aid in effective problem solving and responsible decision-making” (Kansas State Department of Education, 2018, p. 4).

2) Personal Development - “Developing skills that help students identify, understand and effectively manage and regulate their thoughts, mindsets, feelings and behaviors” (Kansas State Department of Education, 2018, p. 10).

3) Social Development – “Developing skills that establish and maintain positive relationships and enable communication with others in various settings and situations” (Kansas State Department of Education, 2018, p. 16).

- ***Social and Emotional Learning:*** “The process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2019).
- ***Student Learning:*** The acquisition of knowledge or skills through experience, study, or by being taught. Evidenced through multiple measures of data including, but not limited to, formative and summative assessments, teacher perceptions of collective and individual student growth, and a student’s perception of his or her own growth or achievement.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The purpose of this reflective case study is to identify factors that serve as barriers to the successful implementation of SEL in the classroom and school setting at USD 417. There are many factors, some that may be inter-related, that affect the implementation of SEL in the classroom and school setting. Since implementation is the vital link between research and practice, using the theoretical framework of implementation science will frame this study. Eccles and Mittman (2006) defined implementation science as “the scientific study of methods to promote the systematic uptake of research findings and other evidence-based practices into routine practice” (p. 1).

The struggle to translate research findings to the everyday practices of teachers in classrooms and school settings is the underlying caveat of the research-to-practice gap. Fixsen,

Blase, Horner, and Sugai (2009) stated, “choosing an evidence-based practice is one thing, implementation of that practice is another thing altogether” (p. 5). Organizational systems work to maintain the status quo by overpowering any effort to use new evidence-based programs as implementation issues become moving targets that tend to fight back (Fixsen et al., 2005)

Wandersman et al. (2008) state that “understanding capacity is central to addressing the gap between research and practice” (p. 173). Using the conceptual framework articulated by Durlak and DuPre (2008) of organizational and professional capacity, this study will focus on the professional and system capacities in USD 417 to identify factors that serve as barriers to the successful implementation of SEL in the classroom and school setting at USD 417.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

The literature reviewed for this study were obtained using various databases, including ProQuest, JSTOR, Ebsco, ERIC, Google Scholar, and additional text sources. Library specialists at the University of Arkansas also assisted with obtaining print only resources. The majority of resources were located by using key term and phrase searches.

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The first chapter includes an introduction to the study, a problem statement, research questions, an overview of the positionality, definitions of key terms, conceptual framework, and methodology. Each of the sections in Chapter One is intended to provide the context for which the problem of practice is situated in, as well as background information for the purpose of the study. Chapter Two uses the existing literature to define SEL, and to establish the components/elements of effective SEL programs. Chapter Three uses the existing literature to examine what effective implementation and professional development practices for SEL implementation look like, as well as, effective SEL leadership practices. Chapter Four is written from this practitioner’s lens outlining the

successes and failures based on reflections of my experiences and observations of the USD 417 SEL implementation process. Sections in this chapter establish a timeline for the implementation process and the changes made to the process over the included timeline. Chapter Five defines and summarizes the implementation barriers to SEL in regard to the circumstances pertaining to the culture and climate of USD 417, as well as articulates conclusions and implications for further research.



## **CHAPTER TWO: SEL and SEL Programs**

In 2012, Kansas became the second state to adopt social emotional competencies and the first state to integrate social emotional learning and character development (Kansas State Department of Education, 2018). However, having served as superintendent in two different Kansas school districts (currently in USD 417), I have observed a disconnect amongst education practitioners as to the necessity to integrate SEL into the classroom and school setting to improve academic development. My previous district, as well as USD 417, also participate in the statewide Kansas Communities That Care survey given to students in grades sixth, eighth, tenth, and twelfth. Data collected from this survey of student engagement and wellbeing suggest the lack of SEL presence in the classroom and school environment in both districts. To identify barriers to the successful implementation of SEL in the classroom and school setting, we must first define the context of SEL in public school settings, and identify the components of effective SEL programs.

### **What is SEL?**

SEL is a framework for school improvement which includes a process for helping children and adults develop fundamental skills to effectively and ethically handle work, relationships, and oneself - skills that allow children to calm themselves when they are angry, resolve conflicts respectfully, and make safe and ethical choices. These skills recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, and establish positive relationships (CASEL, 2007).

Over time, definitions of SEL have emerged throughout different bodies of work. While each definition may have a slightly different emphasis, they all have common components. Durlak et al., (2011) stated that SEL researchers and program designers developed framework

for SEL from Waters' and Sroufe's (1983) description of competent people as those who possess the abilities "to generate and coordinate flexible, adaptive responses to demands and to generate and capitalize on opportunities in the environment" (p. 80). Goleman (1995) links SEL and emotional intelligence to the ability to be successful in all critical aspects of life, including school.

Elias et al. (1997) defined SEL as the process of acquiring social, emotional, and academic competence through the development of skills such as self-regulation, persistence, and adaptability. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2019).

In collaboration with CASEL, Payton et al. (2008) include in the definition of SEL that children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to handle interpersonal situations effectively. Ultimately, they recognize five distinct components of SEL that include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

While there are multiple definitions of SEL by various authors, they are similar. Schonert-Reichl (2019) summarizes the multiple definitions of SEL stating, "SEL teaches the personal and interpersonal skills we all need to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work effectively and ethically" (p. 223).

### **Components of SEL**

SEL enhances students' capacity to integrate skills, attitudes, and behaviors to deal effectively and ethically with daily tasks and challenges. To promote intrapersonal,

interpersonal, and cognitive competence, CASEL identified five inter-related social and emotional competencies that SEL programs should address. Figure 2.1 illustrates how the five competencies fit into the hierarchy of communities, schools, and classrooms.

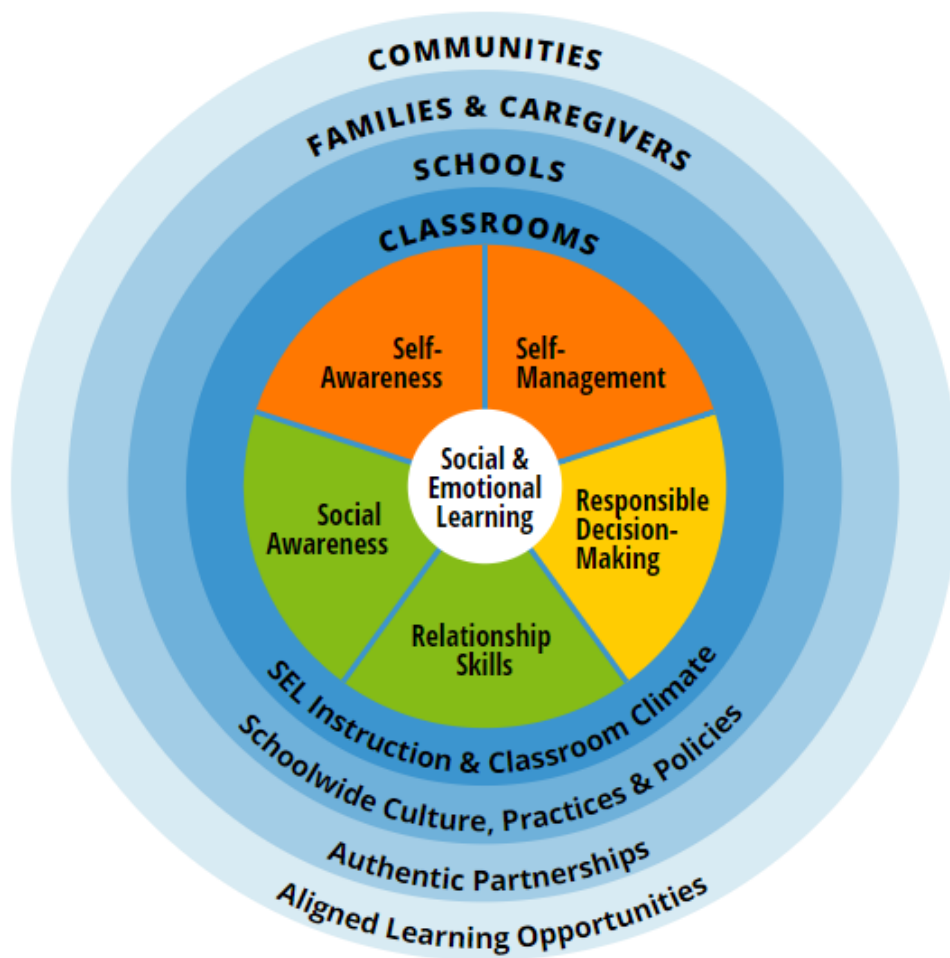


Figure 2.1. CASEL Social and Emotional Learning Wheel (CASEL, 2019).

CASEL (2019) defines these competencies as follows:

**1. Self-Awareness:** The ability to correctly recognize one’s own thoughts, emotions, and values and how they influence behavior. The ability to accurately assess one’s limitations and strengths, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a growth mindset. Key aspects of the self-awareness competency are: identifying emotions, accurate self-perception, recognizing strengths, self-confidence, and self-efficacy.

**2. Self-Management:** The ability to successfully regulate one’s thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in different situations – effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself. The ability to set and work toward personal and academic goals. Key aspects of the self-management competency are: impulse control, stress management, self-discipline, self-motivation, goal-setting, and organizational skills.

**3. Social Awareness:** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports. Key aspects of the social awareness competency are: perspective taking, empathy, appreciating diversity, and respect for others.

**4. Relationship Skills:** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed. Key aspects of the relationship skills competency are: communication, social engagement, relationship building, and teamwork.

**5. Responsible Decision-Making:** The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms. The realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and a consideration of the wellbeing of oneself and others. Key aspects of the responsible decision-making competency are: identifying problems, analyzing situations, solving problems, evaluating, reflecting, and ethical responsibility.

Payton, et al. (2008) summarize the five components of SEL as follows:

Students who appraise themselves and their abilities realistically (self-awareness), regulate their feelings and behaviors appropriately (self-management), interpret social cues accurately (social awareness), resolve interpersonal conflicts effectively (relationship skills), and make good decisions about daily challenges (responsible decision making) are headed on a pathway toward success in school and later life. Thus, the short-term goals of SEL programming are to promote students' social-emotional skills and positive attitudes, which, in turn, should lead to improved adjustment and academic performance as reflected in more positive social behaviors, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and better grades and achievement test scores. (p. 5)

CASEL's five SEL competencies expand on the research connecting self-regulation and academic attainment. Murray and Kochanska (2002) found that the link between self-regulation and academic attainment is effortful control. Effortful control refers to the temperamental aspect that allows an individual to inhibit a dominant response to perform a subdominant response, detect errors, and engage in planning. According to Eisenberg (2012), "Effortful control includes the ability to voluntarily manage attention (attentional regulation) and inhibit (inhibitory control) or activate (activational control) behavior as needed to adapt, especially when the individual does not desire to do so" (p. 1).

SEL has often been an umbrella term for a wide range of competencies from emotional intelligence to social competence to self-regulation. Jones, Bouffard, and Weissbourd (2013) suggest that SEL competencies encompass three areas: emotional processes, social/interpersonal skills, and cognitive regulation. Emotional processes include understanding and labeling feelings accurately, regulating emotions and behaviors for individual situations, accepting another person's perspective, and having empathy for others. Social/interpersonal skills include acting in prosocial ways, correctly interpreting social cues, understanding the intent of others' behaviors, and interacting positively with students and other adults. Cognitive regulation

includes sustaining attention and focus, accessing working memory, inhibiting impulses that are not appropriate to the situation, and being able to try new approaches when one is not working.

### **SEL Program Models**

In a meta-analysis of 51 SEL programs throughout 79 different studies, it was concluded that a commonality between SEL program goals to increase children's social and emotional skills by creating opportunities in the classroom using developmentally appropriate teaching methods. However, the analysis concluded that differences in these SEL programs was the methodology used to effect the underlying change in the children's social and emotional skills. Some programs focused on the pathways to improve social and emotional competence. Some programs focused on a broad and interrelated set of SEL skills. While other SEL programs addressed skills that encouraged competencies such as social awareness, conversational strategies, resilience, coping, and mindfulness (Blewitt et al., 2018).

The goal of SEL program models that focus on SEL core competencies to increase skills and knowledge, foster supportive learning environments, and improve attitudes towards school is to reduce problematic behaviors, improve social behaviors, reduce emotional stress, and improve self-esteem contributing to improved academic performance. Therefore, increased social skills foster better engagement in the classroom, leading to better test scores and grades (CASEL, 2015). Corcoran et al. (2018) suggests that while some SEL program models focus on SEL core competencies, other models imply that teaching practices are altered by SEL core competencies therefore allowing for a more engaging classroom environment and increased feelings of security and support, which improves academic skills. Other models differentiate between performance-related skills derived from SEL such as attention, regulation, or grit and pro-social behaviors

(Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). However, SEL performance related skills are theorized to have a greater impact on academic outcomes than prosocial behavior (Corcoran et al., 2018).

Yeager (2017) categorizes SEL programs into three different models consisting of skills, climate, and mindsets. The skills model refers to SEL programs that seek to revise or enhance a child's social and emotional skills in some way. The climate model refers to programs where teachers and school staff members adapt the emotional climate of the school setting to become more supportive and less adverse. The mindsets model lies somewhere between the skills and climate model. Yeager describes the mindset model as, "environments can socialize children and adolescents to hold different belief systems, or mindsets. These mindsets in turn cause them to use (or not use) the skills that they have or are acquiring" (pg. 76). Yeager suggests that the skills model is more effective with younger children rather than adolescents, while the climate model does not always promote positive behavior when children leave the affected setting or the program ends. The mindsets model produces lasting change that is internalized because it stays with individuals over time. Individuals can apply mindsets created by supportive emotional climates when they leave the affected setting.

The pliability of social and emotional competencies can be transformed and encouraged throughout education. Recent research in neuroscience suggests that while the human brain can be transformed by exposures to experiences across the lifespan, meaningful experiences grounded in safe environments have a greater impact on the malleability of the brain at early childhood and early adolescence. This is important to consider when making decisions about SEL programming (Schoner-Reichl, 2019; Osher et al., 2016).

Does the frequency or intensity of the utilization of SEL program models utilized have a correlation with results obtained? This question was answered in a meta-analysis of 50 years of

SEL research. SEL program utilization was categorized into a low intensity category (less than 15 minutes a day or less than 75 minutes a week) and a high intensity category (over 15 minutes a day or 75 minutes a week). Results indicated that improved outcomes are not necessarily associated with increased utilization of SEL programs (Corcoran et al., 2018).

### **SEL and Academic Development**

SEL programming is based on the understanding that optimal learning emerges in the context of supportive relationships that make learning challenging, engaging, and meaningful (Jones et al., 2013). There is a large body of research containing empirical evidence supporting the relationship between SEL and academic development (Brigman, Villares, & Webb, 2011; Durlak et al., 2011; January, Casey, & Paulson, 2011; Mahoney, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2018; Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012; Sklad, Diekstra, Ritter, Ben, & Gravesteyn, 2012; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Fecho, 2004). The impact of SEL on academic outcomes has been tested in large, meta-analytic reviews that showed students who received SEL programming in addition to regular educational classroom curriculum demonstrated improved academic outcomes compared with those who did not receive any additional SEL in their classrooms (Durlak et al., 2011; January et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012). Wilson, Gottfredson, & Najaka (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of 165 published studies of school-based prevention programs which showed that programs focusing on SEL resulted in improved outcomes related to dropout and non-attendance. Caprara, Barbanelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, and Zimbardo (2000) found that achievement could be better predicted around the eighth grade from knowing children's social competence five years earlier than from knowing their academic achievement in the third grade. Elias, Zins, Graczyk, and



Weissberg (2003) found similar results using social competence in the second grade to predict third grade academic achievement.

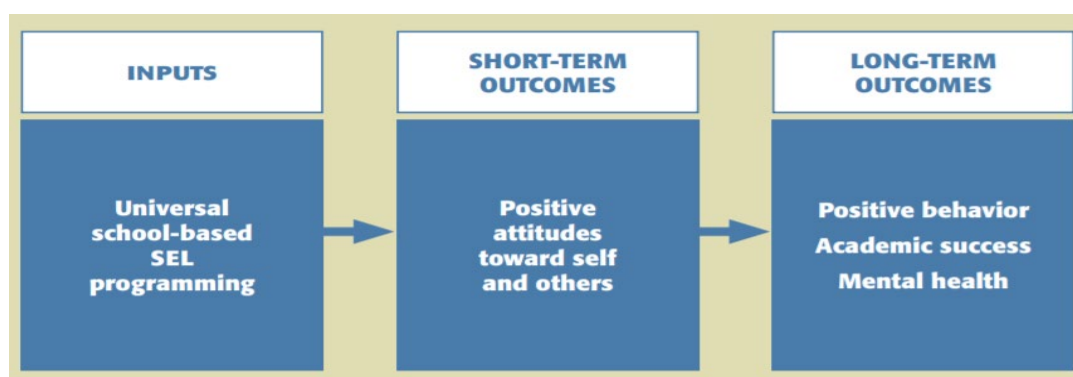
Another extensive study of the long-term impacts of SEL was the meta-analysis of 213 studies on the impacts of SEL completed by CASEL, Loyola University, and the University of Illinois at Chicago. It was determined that students who were part of SEL programs showed 11 percentile-point gains in academic achievement over those who were not a part of such programs. In fact, Durlak et al. (2011) states that,

Extensive developmental research indicates that effective mastery of social emotional competencies is associated with greater well-being and better school performance whereas the failure to achieve competence in these areas can lead to a variety of personal, social, and academic difficulties. (p. 2)

According to Blum and Libbey (2004), many students lack social emotional competencies and become less connected to school as they progress from elementary to middle to high school, and this lack of connection negatively affects their academic performance, behavior, and health. Students who receive social emotional interventions early and throughout their schooling demonstrate measurable benefits later in life. The development of social emotional skills in kindergarten leads to a higher probability of obtaining a college degree, being employed as an adult, and lessens the probability of substance abuse or becoming incarcerated (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015).

Research has shown there is an economic value that stems from the implementation of SEL programming as well. On average, for every dollar invested in SEL, there is a positive return on the investment of eleven dollars. This is a benefit-cost ratio of 11:1. The benefit-cost ratio implies that the economic benefits schools and communities obtain from implementing SEL programs are eleven times greater than the cost to implement the SEL program. Economic benefits are obtained by freeing resources that were previously tied to student discipline,

academic interventions, absenteeism, delinquency, substance abuse, violent behaviors, and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Belfield, Bowden, Klapp, Levin, Shand, & Zander, 2015). As illustrated in Figure 2.2, Mahoney et al. (2018) believed that SEL programming has both immediate and long-term benefits for students both in school and later in life.



*Figure 2.2.* Social and emotional learning outcomes as a long-term process (Mahoney et al., 2018).

### **SEL and Academic Development, is there a Downside?**

A large body of research concludes that SEL programming is beneficial in the classroom and school setting, and increases student achievement. However, Hargreaves and Shirley (2018) maintain that there are proposed weakness and flaws in regard to how SEL and other “wellbeing” efforts work in school districts. They questioned if SEL programs actually get to the root of the underlying issues that put students’ wellbeing at risk, or do SEL programs just provide a temporary fix? Hargreaves and Shirley’s research point to three areas of possible concern in regard to SEL programming.

First, they claim that systems should not only promote wellbeing, but also eliminate the causes of ill-being for which they are responsible. For example, one particular school system administered high-stakes testing in grades 3, 6, and 9. They found that situations like high-stakes

testing brought about stressful situations where kids that suffer from anxiety do not do well. In addition, questions that are culturally bias can be insensitive and unfair to some children. Students with disabilities or other disadvantages are unlikely to succeed on high-stakes tests, but they would still have their scores counted in the school's final profile. Such students could possibly face anxiety in taking the test or significantly lower schools' final scores if they were excluded and counted as a zero.

Secondly, there is more than one way to be well. SEL programming that includes emotional self-regulation emphasizes emotions that can be easily regulated and that make the work of the teachers or administrators less difficult, often in disregard of other emotions. For example, a widely used book in many districts that Hargreaves and Shirley included in their research was *The Zones of Regulation: A Curriculum Designed to Foster Self-Regulation and Emotional Control* (Kuypers, 2011). The idea of zones was developed by the authors to prevent students from being punished for misbehavior without the teachers attempting to understand what the triggering events were that lead to the certain behavior. This program taught students to identify and regulate their emotions in regard to four zones represented by the colors of red, yellow, blue, and green. The red zone represented intense emotions such as anger, rage, or elation; yellow zones represented stress, anxiety, frustration, excitement, nervousness, or silliness; blue zones represented emotions related to feeling sad, sick, tired, or bored; and the green zone represented emotions related to students feeling calm, alert, and ready to learn. While these emotions are important for students to be able to identify and regulate, students need to address emotions that are not easily regulated such as disgust, exhilaration, and fear (Hargreaves, 2004). If the wellbeing of the child is the desired outcome, the learning environment may need to adjust to the broad range of the students' emotions rather than trying to

fit children's assorted emotions into traditional classrooms. SEL programs often promote calmness, but is calm always the best way to be, or is its appeal that it makes teachers' classrooms more manageable (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2018)?

Lastly, to solve systemic social problems, there is a tendency to over-rely on individual psychological solutions. Hargreaves & Shirley (2018) state:

We have to believe we can promote children's well-being whatever their circumstances, but also not give up on attacking the existence and persistence of poverty and other causes of ill-being outside the school. Schools should not be expected to solve all the problems that are thrown at them by a society that isn't investing sufficiently in other public services. (p. 61)

Concepts associated with SEL such as mindfulness and resilience endanger teachers and administrators to focus so inwardly on the students that they stop looking outward at the issues causing the problems in the first place (Cederstrom & Spicer, 2015).

In contrast to the research that suggests SEL is not to be the answer to increasing academic development, the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE Study) conducted by the Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published in 1998 laid a different foundation for SEL. This study uncovered a stunning link between childhood trauma and the chronic diseases people develop as adults, as well as social and emotional problems (Felitti et al., 1998). Recent studies suggest that children's exposure to adverse childhood experiences is associated with academic success (Bethell, et al., 2014). As known adverse childhood experiences increase, the potential for school related problems also increases. Therefore, knowledge of adverse childhood experiences by school personnel can be used to understand and respond to vulnerable children (Blodgett, C., & Lanigan, J.D., 2018). Specific strategies and training for educators to address students with adversity are necessary. While awareness is an important first step, to enact change in student performance, specific skills

development and a focus on implementation are necessary. Overall, educators are trained in classroom management and curriculum, but not effectively trained in understanding and managing the behavioral and developmental needs resulting from adverse childhood experiences (Blodgett, C., & Houghten, M., 2018).

Books such as *Help for Billy*, by Heather Forbes, and *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook – What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love, and Healing*, by Bruce Perry and Maia Szalavitz, shed light on the understanding of children who have been impacted by trauma and the disadvantage that stress has on brain development. They address topics such as the concept of regulatory rather than behavioral dysfunction in a disruptive child (Forbes, 2012).

Jim Sporleder, retired principal of Lincoln High School in Walla Walla, WA, gained national attention when under his leadership the school increased graduation rates, increased the number of students going on to post-secondary education, and experienced a dramatic drop in out-of-school suspensions. There was a change in the culture and climate at Lincoln High School when staff members embraced the belief that adverse childhood experiences can create learning difficulties and behavioral challenges for students in a school setting (Sporleder, J. & Forbes, H.T., 2016). As a result of Jim's efforts, a documentary film, *Paper Tigers*, was created to tell the Lincoln High School story and was released at the May 2015 Seattle International Film Festival by Jamie Redford. In 2016, Jim Sporleder and Heather Forbes published the book, *The Trauma-Informed School: A Step-by-Step Implementation Guide for Administrators and School Personnel*. The guide outlines Jim's approach to transforming a school into a trauma-informed school. While this is not a one-size-fits-all approach, the work at Lincoln High School provides evidence of the importance the social and emotional component has on academic success.

Many students who enter a school system have been exposed to trauma. The basic principles of SEL coincide with the principles of a trauma informed school. For students who experience trauma, common social and emotional skills can be superseded by trauma-responsive survival skills (Pawlo, Lorenzo, Eichert, & Elias, 2019). Exposure to trauma can induce chronic stress and fear in students that triggers the survival part of the brain to activate the limbic system and the fight or flight response, which decrease the part of the brain responsible for planning, processing information, and other executive function. When this happens, students are incapable of learning new information, as the brain is limited in its capacity to receive and incorporate new information (Van der Kolk, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

While the overarching definition, as well as the underlying components, of SEL appear to be widely agreed upon by many researchers and experts in the field, there appear to be variations in the determined program methodology or “approach” to SEL that school systems should take in the classroom and school setting. While there is not a “one size fits all” approach to SEL across all age groups, it is evident that SEL programming can prepare students to successfully navigate through school, be productive workers, and become better citizens (Taylor et al., 2017).

## **CHAPTER THREE: SEL Implementation, What is the Catch?**

What does effective implementation of SEL programs look like? Implementation of SEL programs into a school wide system is categorized by Jones and Bouffard (2012) into four principles. First, efforts should be school wide to ensure activities and competences are developed and consistent within the subsections of the educational system (e.g., lunchroom, library, playground, classroom, hallways, supplemental rooms). Second, SEL skills should be interrelated with academic skill development. Multiple skills can be developed and practiced concurrently when SEL strategies and programs are integrated with educational practices, which helps teachers better navigate the time limitations in the classroom. Third, SEL skills are best established in social environments. Peer relationships, teacher-student relationships, and student-staff relationships provide the foundation for establishing and practicing SEL skills in the school setting. Lastly, a school building is like an ecosystem with many interconnected parts. Nurturing a school wide effort to promote SEL competences throughout all aspects of these interconnected parts can promote a more positive school climate and culture.

To take a deeper dive into SEL implementation, let us first look at the social and emotional competencies of school staff members. While there has been abundant research focusing on students' social and emotional abilities and skillsets, and the outcomes associated with such, there has been minimal research on school staff members' perceptions of SEL and emotional intelligence. This is concerning since school staff members are the primary individuals responsible for the implementation of SEL in the classroom and school buildings (Poulou, 2017).

### **Teachers' Social and Emotional Competence – What Role Does it Play?**

SEL is not just about the students. SEL begins with the teacher in the classroom and

other support staff members. According to Jones et al. (2013), “teachers with stronger SEL competencies have more positive relationships with students, manage their classrooms more effectively, and implement SEL programs targeted to students with greater fidelity” (p. 63). Cain and Carnellor (2008) suggest that while much of the research focuses on the benefits SEL brings for students, benefits of SEL may also extend to teachers. Teachers who implemented a SEL program with a model that supported positive behavior not only spent less time on classroom management, but also reported higher levels of efficacy and personal accomplishment at the end of the year compared with teachers who just implemented positive behavior programs alone (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Domitrovich et al., 2016). Having teachers who feel knowledgeable in SEL programming leads to a less disruptive and more positive classroom climate, lower stress levels, higher job satisfaction, and higher teaching efficacy (Collie et al., 2012). Jennings and Greenberg’s (2009) Prosocial Classroom Model (Figure 3.1) suggests

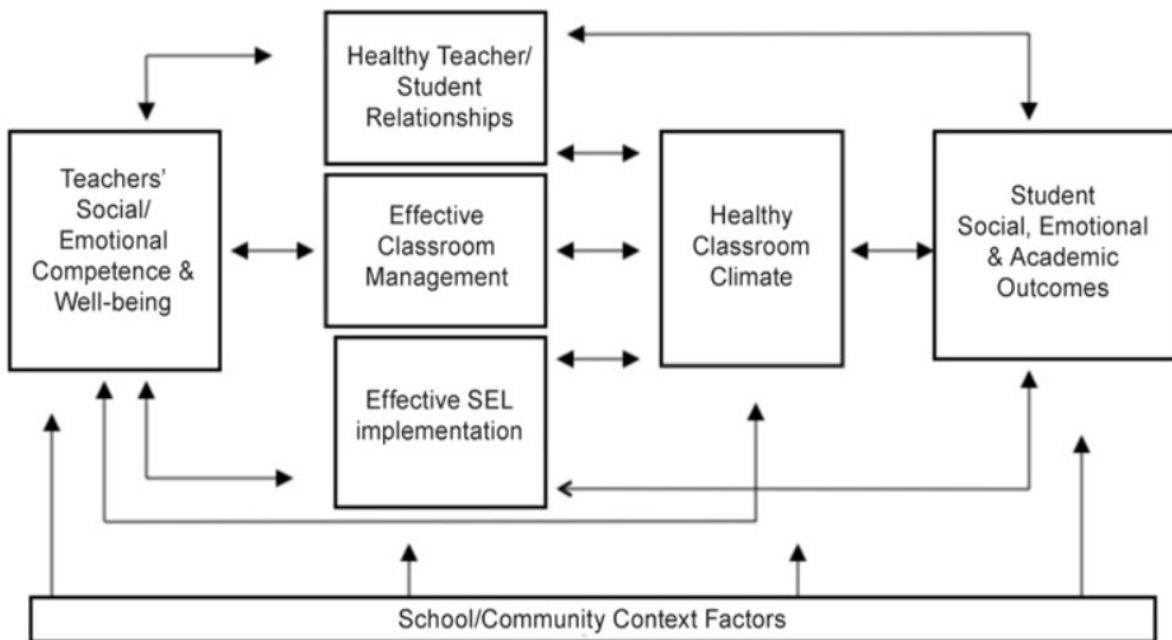


Figure 3.1. The prosocial classroom: A model of teacher social and emotional competence and classroom and student outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).



that the teachers' social and emotional competence and wellbeing can contribute to a healthy classroom climate that can contribute to students' academic and SEL success. Furthermore, teachers' social and emotional competence and wellbeing affect the relationships they form with students, affect the strategies used for classroom management, and ability to implement SEL programs (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

In contrast, teachers who cannot effectively manage social and emotional challenges in the classroom have classroom climates that tend to show lower levels of on-task behavior, increased disruptive behaviors, and are inclined to be more reactive and punitive towards students. In addition to the deteriorating classroom climate, without SEL programming in the classroom, teachers often become emotionally exhausted and can find themselves stressed and burned out (Oberle et al., 2016).

Teachers' SEL competencies influence the school environment and classroom climate in multiple ways. First, SEL influences the value of teacher-student relationships. Teachers who can appropriately regulate their own emotions are more likely to display positive affect and higher job satisfaction (Brackett, Palomera, Mojsa-Kaja, Reyes, & Salovey, 2010). Teachers with a positive, calm, and content demeanor are better equipped to be sensitive to students when they display challenging behaviors. When high-quality relationships are established between students and teachers, students have better social adjustment and higher academic achievement. On the other hand, when there is a negative relationship between students and teachers, students are less likely to be engaged in school and have lower academic achievement (Jones et al., 2013).

Second, intentionally or not, school personnel model SEL competencies for students. Students learn from the way teachers and administrators cope with negative emotions, regulate themselves, maintain control of the classroom, deal with distractions, and redirect student

behavior and learning. Roser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings (2012) suggest that students learn from the way teachers handle students who need improved SEL skills, therefore, teachers need to possess certain dispositions, such as flexibility, intentionality, awareness, and attention.

Finally, teachers' classroom organization and management are influenced by their SEL capacity. In order to build effective classroom learning environments, a well-regulated classroom setting is crucial. Elements such as student choice, autonomy, creativity, and reflection contribute to effective classroom learning environments (Mashburn et al., 2008). Carlock (2011) maintains that to build and maintain effective classroom learning environments, teachers must sustain a calm demeanor, maintain composure in the classroom, be organized, and develop trust with families and students who may be different from themselves. Interventions to improve teachers' social and emotional competence are critical. Programs such as CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education) and SMART-in-Education (Stress Management and Resiliency Training) target increasing teachers' mindfulness to boost job satisfaction, compassion and empathy for students, and efficacy in regulating emotions helping to reduce stress and burnout (Jennings et al., 2013). According to Schonert-Reichl (2017), "mindfulness means an attentive, nonjudgmental, and receptive awareness of present-moment experiences in terms of feelings, images, thoughts, sensations, and perceptions" (p. 143).

### **Teacher Self-Efficacy – Does it Play a Factor in SEL Implementation and Beyond?**

Self-efficacy refers to how one's beliefs about their capacity to perform certain tasks can influence how much energy they put forth, how long they will persist when faced with challenges, the level of stress they experience when managing challenging situations, and their resilience in dealing with failure and difficulties (Bandura, 1997). A teacher's perceived self-efficacy is encompassed with their beliefs in their capabilities to function in ways that give them

a degree of control over events that affect their lives (Bandura, 1999). Teacher self-efficacy is comprised of two beliefs. First, personal teaching efficacy is the teacher's confidence in his or her own teaching ability. Secondly, general teaching efficacy is the teacher's confidence in the power of teaching (Bandura, 1997). This is critically important as part of the cognitive and affective processes among teachers and administrators that inform decision-making around SEL and academic development. Pajares (1996) states:

Efficacy beliefs help determine how much effort people will expend on an activity, how long they will persevere when confronting obstacles, and how resilient they will prove in the face of adverse situations—the higher the sense of efficacy, the greater the effort, persistence, and resilience. People with low self-efficacy may believe that things are tougher than they really are, a belief that fosters stress, depression, and a narrow vision of how best to solve a problem. High self-efficacy, on the other hand, helps to create feelings of serenity in approaching difficult tasks and activities. (p. 544-545)

Teachers who have a higher level of self-efficacy are more likely to invest in new strategies and be open to methods outside of their current depth of knowledge to meet the needs of all their students. They are more likely to spend more time developing lessons and planning units, are less critical of students when they make mistakes, create mastery experiences for their students, and believe that the most difficult students can be reached with added effort and using a multitude of strategies. Teachers with high self-efficacy tend to guide and encourage students having difficulties and celebrate students' successes (Bandura, 1997).

In contrast, teachers with low self-efficacy create classroom climates that can undermine the students' judgments of their abilities and cognitive development. They believe it is out of their control and there is nothing they can do to motivate difficult students. They are more likely to criticize students and give up on them (Bandura, 1997).

In a meta-analysis of achievement goals and self-efficacy, Huang (2016) analyzed the correlation between an individual's self-efficacy and performance/mastery goals. Huang

clarified the relationship of goal valence and goal definition in accordance with an individual's level of self-efficacy and the relationship between approach and avoidance motivations. His findings support the idea that goal valence is profoundly related to self-efficacy and that there was a significant correlation between performance approach goals and high self-efficacy. The correlations of self-efficacy with mastery avoidance and performance avoidance goals were also similar. Huang's findings support the implication of how teachers' self-efficacy can drastically influence the implementation of SEL in a school system. In addition, it appears that higher levels of self-efficacy would allow for a better attitude and acceptance amongst more veteran teachers when shifting from current teaching practices to drawing on evidence-based pedagogies for effective teaching of SEL (Noble & McGrath, 2017).

### **SEL Implementation, Professional Development, and School Leadership**

Similar to how Jones and Bouffard (2012) used four guiding principles to categorize the implementation of SEL into a school wide system mentioned in the opening paragraph of this chapter, Durlak et al. (2011) states that effective SEL approaches follow the four recommended practices that form the acronym SAFE:

*Sequenced:* Does the program use a connected and coordinated set of activities?

*Active:* Does the program use active forms of learning to help students learn new skills?

*Focused:* Does the program have at least one component devoted to developing personal or social skills?

*Explicit:* Does the program target specific SEL skills?

Effective implementation and promotion of SEL requires that particular needs and challenges of an individual school are taken into account, and the researched based SEL program is embedded into the school's practices so that the students' social and emotional competences are

priorities and supported with fidelity. The accountability placed on the public school systems in Kansas for increasing students' academic achievement is higher than ever. For this reason, various teachers have expressed concerns that time assigned to SEL would be better utilized focusing on core academic skills. On the other hand, many teachers communicate a strong interest in integrating SEL into their classroom practices and procedures, but they need the support and resources to do so (Oberle et al., 2016).

Weissberg et al. (2015) created a conceptual model of systematic SEL that suggests students' social, emotional, and academic competencies are enriched through coordinating strategies at four different levels: classroom, school, family, and community. At the classroom level, the emphasis is placed on teaching and modelling social and emotional competence, interpersonal skills, and safely practicing social and emotional skills. Professional development is crucial for training teachers to integrate social and emotional skills in the classroom, as well as, how to provide opportunities for students to reinforce the use of those skills. Professional development should also include training teachers to naturally foster positive teacher-student relationships and develop practices that promote classroom environments where students feel engaged through emotional support, students have autonomy, and students have a voice in the educational process. Changing teacher practices and the classroom environment to promote students' social and emotional skills development is a significant shift in the pedagogical approach for many teachers.

The school level of the Weissberg et al. (2015) conceptual model of systematic SEL in educational settings focuses on policies and practices. Promoting safe and positive school climates and cultures can have a positive effect on the outcome of the students' behavior and mental health, which can be accomplished through developing clear norms and expectations for

staff and students. Building leaders should develop practices that cultivate positive relationships and nurture a sense of community through activities that provide staff and students with opportunities to connect with each other. Since the social and emotional competence and pedagogical skills of educators have a significant influence on the climate and culture of the school and classroom, it is imperative that building and district leaders allow for ongoing professional development that address the development of school staff members' social and emotional competencies. Professional development must also incorporate components that address the theoretical knowledge and pedagogical strategies required to teach social and emotional learning competencies, and allow for collaborative feedback from building staff members (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

The final two levels of the Weissberg et al. (2015) conceptual model of systematic SEL in educational settings addresses the family and community partnerships/programming. Creating relationships emphasizing equality, creating common goals, and developing meaningful roles for family and community partners will only strengthen the impact of the school approach to SEL by extending opportunities into the home and neighborhood (Fagan et al., 2015; Garbacz et al., 2015). School leaders should advocate for the development of after school activities and programs providing opportunities for students to have meaningful connections with caring adults and supportive peers. In addition, these settings provide students with additional opportunities to apply and practice the learned SEL competencies in real time situations (Gullota, 2015).

In many cases, the lack of infrastructure and the ability to support a school wide implementation is missing, preventing SEL programs from successfully being integrated into practice and creating sustainability concerns over time (Spath et al., 2013). In response to this concern, CASEL developed a comprehensive program outlining the necessary infrastructure and

supports to implement a school wide SEL program. The CASEL process for school wide SEL is organized into four focus areas and summarized as follows (CASEL, 2021):

Focus Area 1: Build Foundational Support and Plan – School leaders help to establish a shared vision for SEL with staff members that is clear and convincing. Staff members have ownership in the process and are engaged in collaborative planning to ensure awareness and establish commitment.

Focus Area 2: Strengthen Adult SEL – School leaders provide professional development to develop staff members’ capacity for to recognize and understand their own social and emotional competencies. Staff members need to understand how to model SEL and learn how to build collaborative and trusting relationships.

Focus Area 3: Promote SEL for Students – School systems should adopt and coordinate evidence-based programs and practices allowing for the development of a welcoming climate and culture where opportunities for students exist to cultivate and practice their SEL competence throughout and beyond the school day. Ongoing professional development and activities should focus on matters such as: evidence based SEL programs and approaches, explicit SEL instruction, integrating SEL into academic instruction, student voice and engagement, family and community partnerships, and integrating SEL into school systems and policies.

Focus Area 4: Reflect on Data for Continuous Improvement – School systems should collect, analyze, and use implementation and outcome data to make decisions about SEL implementation. School leaders should utilize tools such as implementation rubrics, staff surveys, walkthrough protocols, and student data analyses.

## **Conclusion**

To implement lasting SEL programs with fidelity, it is clear that a school system must not put the proverbial “cart before the horse” by expecting staff members to integrate new SEL pedagogy into a school building without first helping staff to better understand their own social and emotional competence. Leaders of school systems must first understand what the current level of staff members’ emotional intelligence and self-efficacy are before asking them to develop strategies and practices to increase the students’ social and emotional competence. This understanding is also critical in determining the appropriate amount of, as well as the appropriate content for, professional development for staff members throughout the process of implementation. In addition to training school staff members in the SEL program, it is critical to engage family members and the community in some aspect of the SEL model as well. This will ensure opportunities for students to practice their social and emotional competence outside of the school setting allowing students to retain their social and emotional skills once they graduate from the school system and move on to the next phase of life. The research presented in this chapter clearly demonstrates that there is a systemic process with key components that must be followed with fidelity to effectively implement a lasting and sustainable SEL program.



## **CHAPTER 4: From a Practitioner’s Lens**

This chapter is written from the lens of this practitioner and captures reflections of my experiences of the SEL journey for USD 417 to date. I will discuss what I feel were the pitfalls of the SEL implementation process USD 417 experienced in the past, as well as, how we have adjusted for those pitfalls. In full disclosure, as a person with a mindset that always approaches a situation with a “the glass is half-full” view, I believe there is always something that can be learned from the setbacks and failures we experience. I greatly appreciate the quote, “Failure is a part of life. If you don’t fail, you don’t learn. If you don’t learn, you’ll never change.” (anonymous, n.d.). I share this mindset as I feel it is important to begin this chapter with what USD 417 did wrong in the beginning stages of their SEL implementation process. I share the perceived failures not to be negative and judgmental; I share them as they provided opportunities for reflection and growth. This chapter will outline how we retooled our SEL implementation process based on what we learned from the perceived setbacks, and the chapter will end with how USD 417 plans to proceed into the future.

### **From the Beginning**

For context, I joined the USD 417 team in the summer of 2018 as the superintendent of schools. Due to the growing behavior concerns communicated by staff and supported by the data collected, the district utilized the 2015-2016 school year to create a multi-tiered system of support action plan with intentions to implement SEL into the buildings starting with the 2016-2017 school year. Each building formed SEL teams that worked to create classroom and building wide behavior expectations.

In the elementary schools, the district adopted the CHAMPS program by Safe & Civil Schools. CHAMPS is an acronym for conversations, help, activity, movement, participation, and

success. It is a proactive and positive approach to classroom management that empowers teachers to improve student behavior and motivation. The goal is to reduce misbehaviors allowing teachers to focus more time and energy on instruction and student success. CHAMPS helps teachers and other school staff members create a positive school community to develop the social and emotional skills for life (Sprick, 2009). To implement the CHAMPS program, time during the 2015-2016 school year, as well as, during the summer of 2016 was utilized for a school wide CHAMPS book study followed by professional development to train the staff to use the CHAMPS program. The CHAMPS program was implemented at the start of the 2016-2017 school year in kindergarten through sixth grade throughout the district.

After the implementation of the CHAMPS program, the district adopted the Second Step curriculum for kindergarten through sixth grade and began the training and professional development focusing on the implementation of the Second Step curriculum throughout the 2016-2017 school year. The Second Step program is a universal, classroom based, SEL curriculum that utilizes age-appropriate classroom kits, which contain lessons and activities that are easy to teach. In addition to classroom teacher kits, there are Second Step principal toolkits that reinforce Second Step skills in and out of the classroom, encourage positive behavior with consistent language, and strengthen efforts to create a safe and supportive school environment (Second Steps, n.d.). The Second Step program was fully implemented at the start of the 2017-2018.

To address the need for SEL at the junior/senior high school, the district adopted the Kansans Can Competency Framework during the 2016-2017 school year. The Kansans Can Competency Framework provides a systematic process for developing socially and emotionally

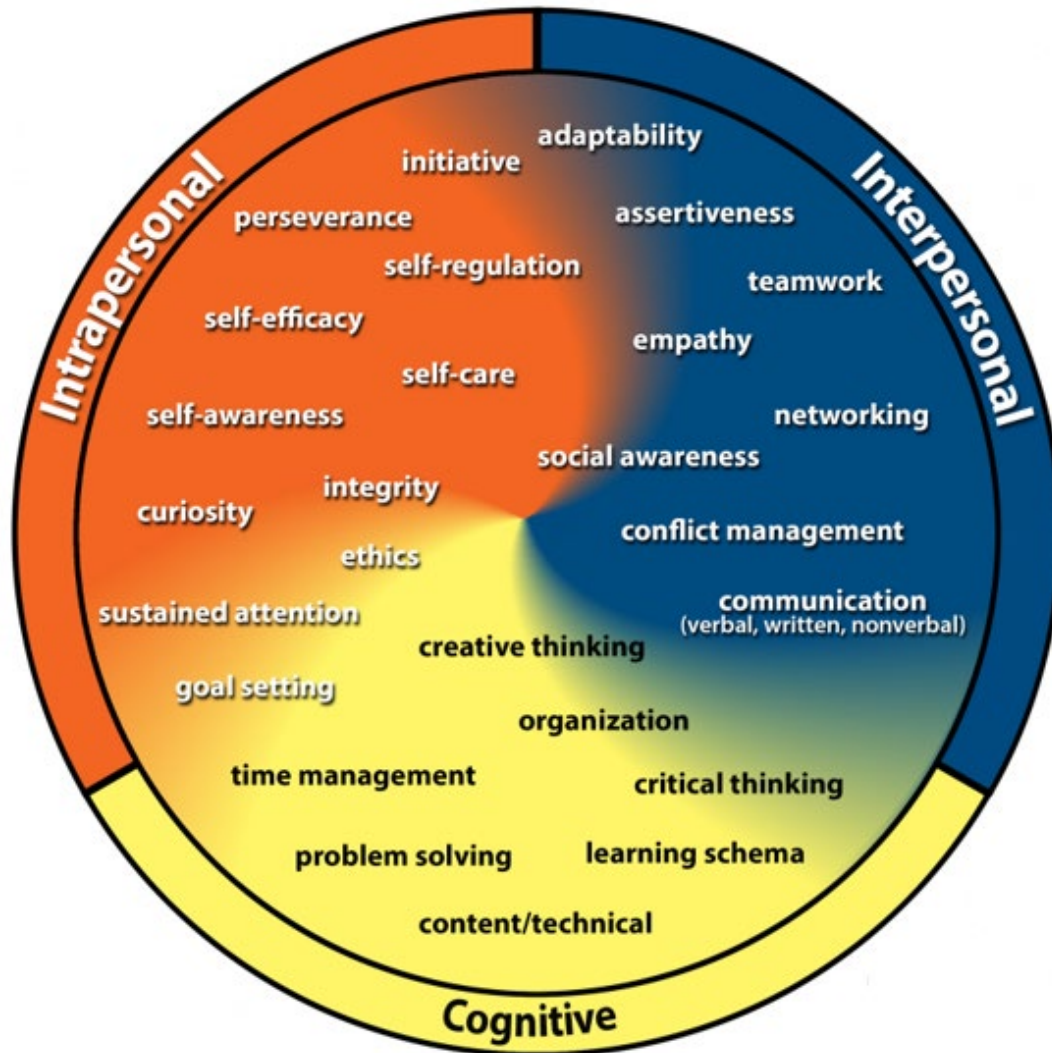


Figure 4.1. The Kansas Can Competency Framework Wheel (Kansas Technical Assistance System Network, 2015).

engaged learners that are college and career ready. Figure 4.1 illustrates the 26 specific competencies of Kansas Can Competency Framework and how they are categorized into three domains. The three domains include interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive. A school-wide SEL focus on the intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies help students develop self-regulation, self-efficacy, assertiveness, and conflict management skills. Resources such as videos and lessons are provided to teacher to utilize with students in the classroom (Kansas Technical Assistance System Network, 2015).

To prepare for the implementation of the Kansans Can Framework, an eight-member team of educators from the building was assembled and received training during the 2016-2017 school year. The team developed lesson plans for addressing the assertiveness and conflict management competencies, which were implemented at the start of the 2017-2018 school year.

To monitor the effectiveness of the SEL programs implemented, the district adopted the Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS) in the later part of the 2016-2017 school year to be used throughout the district for data collection. School staff members completed training on how to use the screener during the remainder of the 2016-2017 school year and into the summer. SAEBRS is a FastBridge, norm-referenced tool that allows brief screenings to identify students who are at risk for social and emotional behavior problems. SAEBRS is a dual-factor screener measuring students' social and emotional functioning by screening both internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and the presence of social and emotional skills (FastBridge, 2021). The SAEBRS screener was implemented in all buildings at the start of the 2017-2018 school year.

### **2018-2019 School Year**

I started as the superintendent of schools on July 1, 2018, before the start of the 2018-2019 school year. I spent the majority of that summer meeting with staff members listening and learning about the processes, procedures, perceptions, culture, and climate of USD 417. I spent time reading through past board of education meeting minutes, as well as district documents and reports. The one theme that continually emerged was the behavior issues and the at-risk nature of a large portion of the student body. It seemed many staff members had a defeatist mindset towards their students and SEL, despite the fact that the district had recently invested in new SEL resources and training for staff members to address the negative impact on the classroom

and learning environment. Outwardly, staff members gave the appearance that there was a collective sense of community and pride. However, through my own conversations and observations with staff members, it was obvious to me this outward appearance of a collective sense of community and pride was not the internal mindset for many.

I spent the much of the 2018-2019 school year observing classrooms, visiting with stakeholders, and continuing to listen and learn about the district from the perspective of the staff members. With every day that passed, I began to better grasp issues that were interfering with many of our students' academic success in the classroom. I was able to start cataloging common themes and concerns, as they would consistently arise amongst different staff members.

The first concern that stood out to me was the apparent emotional overload many of the staff members were facing. Both veteran and beginning teachers felt like they were constantly treading water and were barely able to keep their head above the water line. With the ever increasing state mandates, testing, and progress monitoring requirements placed on education in Kansas, some staff members expressed concerns that they did not have the time to teach the core standards effectively, let alone add more expectations on top of what they were already struggling to get done. They were frustrated that more expectations were being placed upon them requiring more time they felt did not exist. They believed the district had unrealistic expectations and they were being set-up for failure. This group of staff members appeared to be in a constant state of frustration and it affected the classroom environment as a result. Even though they expressed that the behavioral needs of their students were a concern and were affecting learning in the classroom, they did not feel giving them one more thing to do was the best answer.

A second concerning theme that some staff members shared was that, while they felt there was a need to integrate behavior interventions and SEL into their classroom, they were frustrated because they did not feel they had a true understanding of SEL. This lack of confidence in their understanding of SEL made them timid and anxious to use the new resources the district had provided. These staff members were willing to address the SEL needs of the students; they simply did not have the proper understanding of SEL. In addition, they felt there was a lack of support from the administration to integrate the new resources into their classrooms. They wanted additional training, not just with the resources themselves, but more training about what SEL was in general and the meaning behind it.

A third concern that stood out to me was that a small number of staff members refused to implement the new behavior and SEL programs in their classrooms because they did not believe in SEL. While they acknowledged there were severe behavior problems with some students that compromised the learning environment for those kids and the class as a whole, these staff members felt that it was the administration's fault because they were too "soft" on kids. They felt that accountability through punishment was the answer and not a "touchy feely" approach.

The last concern that alarmed me through my observations and discussions was a perception shared by some staff members that it did not matter what they did in their classrooms, because it would not make any difference in the end. They were detached and non-committal towards the implementation of new strategies or pedagogies that the SEL programs were suggesting. Comments from staff members such as, "it doesn't matter what I do, it won't make a difference in how the students act", or "why bother taking the time and putting forth the effort to do this when parents are not going to support us at home." Other comments were shared such as, "maybe I just need to retire as education has changed too much since I started and I can't

keep up”, or “this is just another hoop we have to jump through to try to appease the administration and the state, and it will not make any difference or change a thing.” It was apparent to me that these staff members felt that they were powerless in the classroom and did not have a voice to effect any positive change.

After much thought and reflection on my observations and conversations throughout my first year as the superintendent of USD 417, I felt it was time to have a deeper conversation with the board of education and the administrative team. This conversation focused on how they developed the scope for the initial SEL implementation and identified needs amongst the staff members to support the process. The consensus was that the district had student performance and behavior data that supported a need for change. The majority of the staff also confirmed that there was a need for a change and were initially committed at varying levels with an SEL program implementation of some sorts. The board of education and the administrative team did their due diligence to analyze the data, targeted the perceived needs of the district, and adopted practical SEL resources to address those needs. However, the board of education and administrative team left out a critical component when planning the implementation process.

While the district provided necessary and adequate training for the majority of staff members on how to use the newly adopted SEL resources, they missed a key step and probably the most important step in the very beginning. The district never took into consideration what the social and emotional competence of staff members were, as well as, where staff members stood with their own self-efficacy. The district leaders used the student data to identify a need and sought a solution to address that problem. It was apparent that after my first year as superintendent, and two full years of the district previously implementing the newly adopted SEL resources, staff members were struggling and the student data had not improved.

## **Removing the Monkey**

After two years of SEL implementation, are we where we want to be as a district, and are we on track to get to the finish line successfully? That is the question the administrative team was challenged to answer. To help with this challenge, the building administrators were tasked with collecting the thoughts and perceptions of their staff members through a series of faculty meetings in each building. After analyzing and discussing the thoughts and perceptions of staff members, as well as reflecting on the current student data, the administrative team came to the collective conclusion that we needed to turn our focus to the staff members themselves. The social and emotional competence of our staff members was never addressed and the district neglected to provide the critical professional development to staff members on the context of and meaning behind the importance of SEL.

Without discounting work that had already been done throughout the district in regard to SEL, the rest of the 2018-2019 school year and following summer was utilized to plan additional professional development. It was decided to focus on providing teachers with a better background about what SEL is, address the perceptions and misperceptions of staff members, and help staff members increase their self-efficacy, as well as the collective efficacy of each building.

## **2019-2020 School Year**

For the 2019-2020 school year, the district collaborated with the educational service center, Essdack, to provide high quality and ongoing professional learning in trauma-informed school research and practices. We started the school year with an all-district staff inservice exposing staff members to the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE Study) conducted by the Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published in 1998.



The purpose of this inservice was to two-fold. We felt it would be beneficial for staff members to understand the impact of the trauma they have experienced in their own lives and to grasp the neuroscience behind the effects of trauma. We felt this exposure would help staff members make connections concerning why certain kids behave the way they do allowing for a deeper understanding of behavior. Changing misperceptions behind student behavior was the goal, along with allowing staff members to become more aware of their own social and emotional competence. Subsequent inservices focused on helping staff members develop tools for resilience and co-regulation for both themselves and their students. The goal of these inservices was to create a culture that responds to trauma by building resilience partnered with empathy and understanding.

To reinforce the district's commitment to developing a culture of acceptance, resilience and support staff members, the district made a substantial investment in sending two staff members from each attendance center to become trained Resilience Coaches through the Essdack Service Center. The role of the Resilience Coaches is to promote social and emotional wellbeing for both students and staff members. They are equipped with the tools, access to resources, and the skills needed to address various situations as they arise within the building and to provide continuous and ongoing training and support for staff members at whatever level of implementation each staff member may be at individually.

During the 2019-2020 school year, the school district was approached by the Kansas MTSS and Alignment Institute and CORWIN, a SAGE publishing company, to be part of a three year pilot program with Professor John Hattie and the CORWIN Visible Learning team. The purpose of the pilot program was divided into three outcomes: leaders, teachers, and students. For leaders, the outcome was to enhance the visibility into school performance and improve the

decision-making process based on evidence. Key indicators for this outcome were leaders working to develop a clear action plan to keep all students moving forward. Establishing relationships with leaders and teachers to evaluate their impact and foster a climate of trust within the school. Helping leaders to collect evidence demonstrating that all students are gaining at least a year's progress in every subject.

For teachers, the outcome was to develop inspired and passionate teaching based on a clear understanding of what works best for increasing student achievement. Key indicators for this outcome were teachers collaborating to gather evidence of their impact and establish a common language for what impact means. Teachers having evidence that impact is shared across diverse groups of students. Teachers sharing and learning from each other and seeking feedback from students, and teachers emphasizing equity in their classrooms and are dedicated to ensuring all students can succeed.

For students, the outcome was increased attendance, engagement, retention, progress, and achievement. Key indicators for this outcome were that students can articulate where they are in their learning and what their next learning steps will be, and student learning is student-directed rather than reliant on the teacher.

The opportunity to join this pilot program was desirable to USD 417 not only because of the opportunity to work with Professor Hattie, but it addressed several factors USD 417 was lacking in our SEL journey. The pilot program was scheduled to officially begin during the 2020-2021 school year, while the 2019-2020 school year would be spent laying the foundation for the program and instructional leadership. This included developing teacher self-efficacy, teacher clarity, and collective teacher efficacy. These components aligned directly with the

district's work implementing SEL by focusing on the teachers' social and emotional competence and self-efficacy.

The retooling of our SEL implementation appeared to be going well. Building principals and resilience coaches were establishing norms in their buildings for a supportive and collaborative culture. I was receiving positive and genuine feedback from staff members that indicated we were moving in the right direction. The groundwork was underway for the Visible Learning pilot program with Professor Hattie and the morale amongst staff members was on the rise. Just as the administrative team started to feel comfortable with our progress, the proverbial bomb dropped on us. On March 12, 2020, I received a phone call from our county health officer informing me that he was shutting down the school district due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic**

While I was aware of the increasing severity of the COVID-19 virus, it had not yet reached the rural areas of Kansas to the extent I was seeing in more coastal states. Talks of shutting down Kansas schools had not yet started, so the call from the county health officer came as a shock when I was ordered to shut down our school system immediately. We closed our district to onsite learning effective March 13, 2020. Soon after, several other school districts closed as well.

On March 18, 2020, the Governor order a statewide shutdown of all school systems to in-person education in Kansas for the remainder of the school year. The COVID-19 pandemic and school shutdown is a topic for a completely different study researching the effects on staff and students physically, mentally, and academically. However, in regard to our SEL implementation journey, the COVID-19 pandemic was a game changer. Our focus as a district had to

immediately pivot to begin creating policies and procedures to educate and provide daily meals to students remotely.

The COVID-19 pandemic and school shutdown put the resilience of our staff and students to test. Efficacy became more important than ever as the pandemic forced us to rethink our pedagogical beliefs individually and as a system. Weekly changes to our practices and procedures were necessary to adapt to the evolving needs of our students and families. Resilience became a key survival word, and thanks to the work the staff and administration had put in throughout the year learning about resilience and the implementation of resilience coaches, we were better equipped and better prepared to address the ongoing and evolving needs of each other and our students.

Due to the severity of the pandemic, we found out in July 2020 that Professor Hattie withdrew his participation in the Visible Learning pilot program, causing CORWIN to cancel the program in its entirety. While the administrative team and staff members were disappointed in this development, the uncertainty of what the 2020-2021 school year would look like made it difficult to plan for a long-term partnership. Data concerning the pandemic was changing daily causing educational policies and mandates at both the local and state levels to be updated and revised weekly, if not sooner on certain occasions.

### **2020-2021 School Year**

Due to the cancellation of the Visible Learning pilot program, the district was brainstorming ideas to find a program that could replace the components of the Visible Learning program. As an optimistic person would say, when one door closes, another door opens. Due to our previous and ongoing work on trauma and resilience, Essdack invited USD 417 to be one of three school districts in the state of Kansas to participate in a Department of Justice grant that

utilizes the Virtual Interactive Based Education (VIBE) Predictalytics data platform. VIBE uses a cumulative analytics approach to social, emotional, and behavioral health integrated into the everyday classroom utilizing real-time data to capture a holistic view of every student for early at-risk identification (VIBE, 2019). Figure 4.2 illustrates the VIBE Multi-Tiered Support Model that focuses on all students, leading to predictive early identification of at-risk factors.

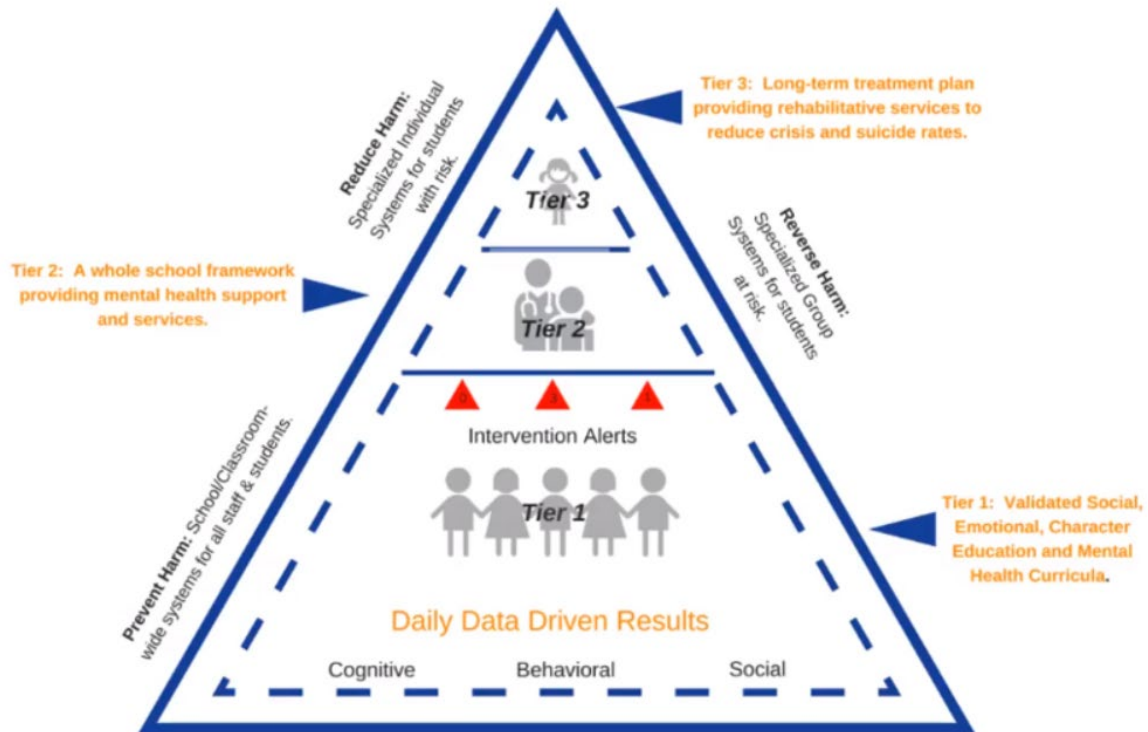


Figure 4.2. The VIBE Multi-Tiered Support Framework (VIBE, 2019).

The outcomes for this Department of Justice grant includes two domains: staff and students. The student outcomes are to increase relationship mapping, attendance, engagement, hope, trust, commitment to school, and core academic scores. Student outcomes also include decreasing office referrals, school suspensions, incidences of bullying, and risk factors for depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Outcomes for staff members include increased professional quality of life, hope, trust, engagement, retention, self-efficacy, collective efficacy, and use of trauma-responsive practices. The VIBE platform will play a critical role in collecting

ongoing data from both staff and students to ensure fidelity in the implementation of the SEL programs throughout the year and in the years to come. Later in this chapter, I will discuss what data the VIBE platform will collect and the purpose for it.

Once the USD 417 Board of Education approved the district's participation in the Department of Justice grant, the administrative team began working with Essdack starting the groundwork for participation in the program. Due to the pandemic lingering into the 2020-2021 school year, the program was slated to launch at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year. This allowed the use of the 2020-2021 school year for planning and preparation, as well as continuing the development and promotion of the current SEL resources and practices we had already established. Through collaboration with the board of education, staff members, families, students, and community partners, the district developed a specific outcome goal for participation in the Department of Justice grant. Our goal was to create a school where relationships and accountability are the cornerstone of every decision that we make in a clear, consistent, accepting, empathetic, and restorative way, and where students are achieving at their fullest potential academically, socially, and emotionally.

### **2021-2022 School Year**

The 2021-2022 school year began by finalizing the VIBE training with staff members and establishing the deadlines to collect baseline data from staff and students that will be used to determine future professional development needs. In addition, the VIBE baseline data will aid the district in fine tuning the SEL programs for increased effectiveness amongst staff and students. In addition, the baseline data will be used to monitor current implementation, as well as serve as a comparative measure for the effectiveness of the programs over the next three years. The VIBE platform will collect data from staff members by utilizing three separate

surveys. The initial surveys will be given during the month of October, during the school day at designated times.

The first staff survey is the Safe and Responsive Schools Survey. Staff will answer a series of questions that focus on the teachers' perceptions of personal safety, belongingness, effective learning and general climate, major safety issues, drugs and alcohol, and incivility and disruption.

The second staff survey is a school climate survey. This survey will provide data to Essdack and the school district to develop and guide future professional development for the district. The school climate survey will measure staff members' beliefs around the science of trauma, hope, efficacy, engagement, relationships, competence, and trust.

The third and final staff survey is the Professional Quality of Life Survey (ProQOL), Compassion Satisfaction and Compassion Fatigue Version 5. This survey collects baseline data to measure the compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue of staff members. Compassion fatigue has two subscales: burnout and secondary trauma. Data collected from the school climate survey will be used to address any concerns that are flagged from this survey.

The students will utilize the VIBE platform during the month of October to take the Safe and Responsive Schools Threat Survey for the appropriate grade levels. This survey will collect baseline data about the students' perception regarding their personal safety, belongingness, effective learning, general climate, major safety issues, incivility, and disruption.

Once the baseline data is collected and analyzed through the VIBE platform, the administrative team will work with Essdack to develop the necessary professional development that will be implemented throughout the rest of the 2021-2022 school year. The students will continue to utilize the VIBE platform to complete daily/weekly check-ins where additional

evaluative and validation data is collected. Additional data will be collected from staff members on a semi-regular basis via the VIBE platform to ensure implantation fidelity throughout the process. A three-year timeline implementation timeline was established to align with the grant's funding window. I felt it was important to make sure the district implemented this program in small segments to better support staff members along the way, helping to ensure proper buy-in. In addition, by using a three-year implantation timeline, the district will be able to set frequent and attainable targets that create opportunities to celebrate multiple successes throughout the process, promoting increased efficacy and morale. Finally, the district continues to feel the effects of the ongoing pandemic which creates additional work and emotional overload for staff members. A three-year implementation timeline will reduce the additional impact of the SEL initiative on staff.

### **Conclusion**

Every school district has unique characteristics, demographics, and geographic complexities that contribute to the system's culture and climate. Policies and procedures that are appropriate for one district may not work for another. However, the one constant that every school district has in common are human beings. The individuality and complexity of human beings must not be overlooked in the SEL implementation process. USD 417 made this mistake. Even though the data supported a need for SEL programming throughout the district, and the administrative team and board of education adopted tools to address the concerns, the implementation was sabotaged because the school district failed to include the staff members' social and emotional competence and self-efficacy as part of the implementation process. Once we recognized this mistake and intentionally put the staff members' social and emotional competence and self-efficacy at the forefront, we have seen noticeable improvements in the staff



members' perceptions of SEL and their willingness to participate in the SEL implantation process. Time will tell as we are just now in the beginning stages of collecting the data that will either confirm or disprove if we are on the right track moving forward.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusions and Implications**

### **Looking Back**

The culture and climate of the system, as well as the efficacy of its employees, contribute to the successes and failures of a school system. If we drilled deeper, we could undoubtedly say that employees' self-efficacy has a powerful impact on the make-up of the culture and climate, making efficacy one of the most important components of a school system when it comes to the human component. A school district can provide access to unlimited resources to its staff members, but if it fails to recognize the importance of understanding how the component of self-efficacy is a catalyst for effective change, then resources can become expensive paperweights and fancy bookshelf decor.

Knowing what I know now from the research and through hands-on experiences, I would begin the conversation differently if I had to start over again in any school district with the implementation of an SEL program. The conversation should start with the local board of education to build a consensus on how the district allocates its available resources such as money, people, and time. To do this, the board and the administrative team should identify the purpose of every utilized program and curricula, and determine how they are being used, the expectations for staff members, and the impact they have on student learning. They need to identify if staff members have the necessary tools available to them to adequately facilitate learning in the buildings. They need to evaluate if relevant and engaging professional development is being offered to staff members that addresses the actual needs and concerns of staff members, while being aligned to the district goals or strategic plan. Determining if building schedules are structured in a manner that allows both staff and students the time they need to take ownership in the learning process is critical. Finally, the board of education and

administrative team need to analyze all policies and procedures and ensure they are aligned with appropriate expectations for both staff and students, and that the policies and procedures support the mission and vision of the school district. Misguided or misaligned policies and procedures generate negative perceptions amongst staff and students that contribute to low self-efficacy.

### Implementation Barriers

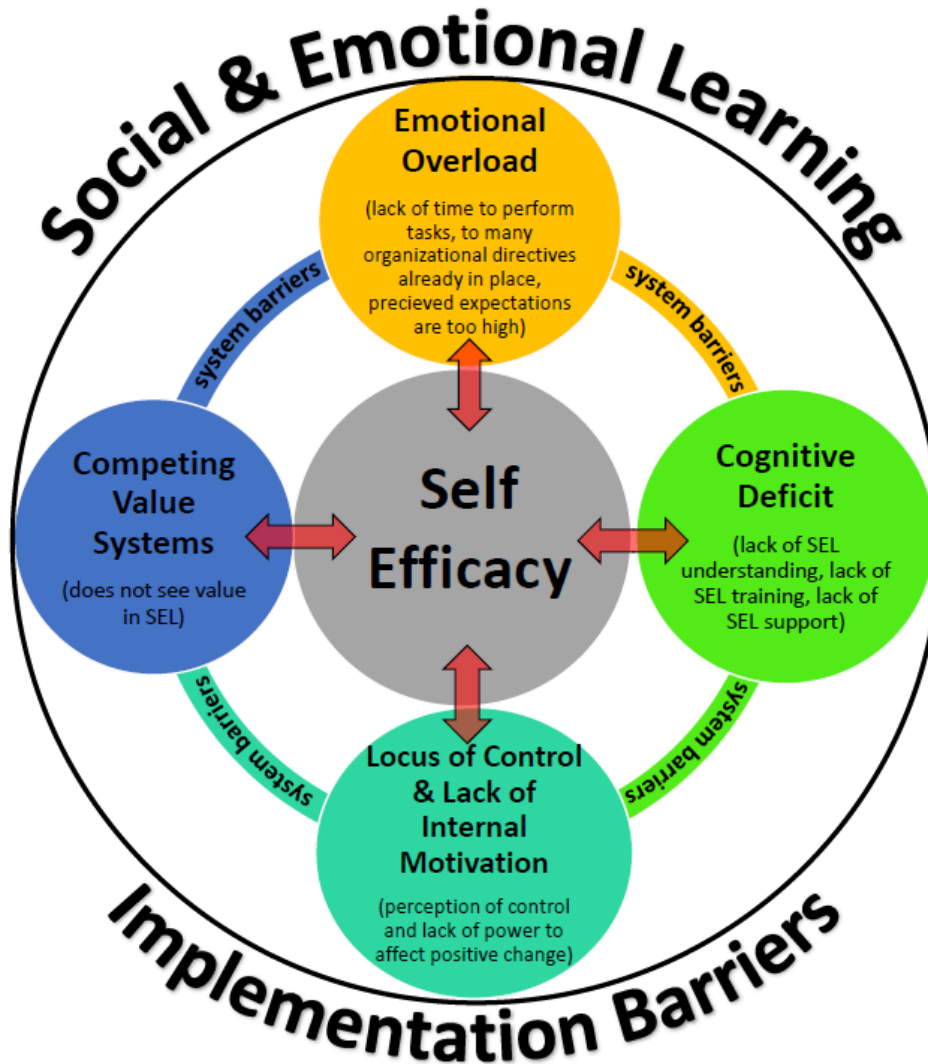


Figure 5.1. Social and Emotional Learning Implementation Barriers

Figure 5.1 illustrates four internal domains that I have concluded as areas having a direct impact on the self-efficacy of staff members in USD 417. In turn, the low self-efficacy of many

staff members initially compromised the fidelity of the implementation process for SEL programs. The human components having a direct impact on SEL implementation are categorized into four domains. These four domains are competing value systems, emotional overload, cognitive deficit, and locus of control/lack of internal motivation. Some staff members seemingly struggled with just one domain while others appeared caught in the undertow of multiple domains. The following sections in this chapter further explain these domains using my own observations as well as input from district staff members.

### **Competing Value Systems**

The old saying, “actions speak louder than words,” is a phrase that comes to mind when I categorized the small percentage of staff members that fit into the domain of competing value systems. This domain had a negative impact on their self-efficacy and their attitude towards SEL in general. The internal struggle compromising their self-efficacy was due to a different belief system, or ideology, centered on student behavior and accountability. After several observations of interactions between staff and students, it was clear that further discussion was warranted. Individually, I asked why they handled these situations the way they did when it clearly went against the training provided and the expectations the district had establish in regard to SEL. Common responses from these staff members carried the theme that SEL was touchy-feely nonsense that only pacified and made excuses for students’ bad behavior. They had a perception that SEL meant that students did not have to be accountable for their actions.

The attitude towards SEL by this small percentage of staff members was cancerous to other colleagues around them. It created difficult situations with parents and other staff members due to inconsistencies on how they approached situations inside the learning environment with students and in dealing with parents externally as well. It became clear to me that these staff

members had a different value system that trumped the district's philosophy on SEL, and they were not going to "buy-in" to the implementation of the SEL programs. In response to this, the building administrators were tasked with conferencing with these individuals and informing them compliance with the district's SEL initiative was not an option. Administrators were instructed to further investigate additional resources to help address the conflicting values within these staff members to help address their compliance. As a last resort, building administrators incorporated the implementation of the SEL programs into the staff evaluation tool and issued plans of improvement to staff members who would not comply with explicit directives and expectations. In addition, letters of reprimand were issued to staff members who deliberately ignored district expectations centered around SEL. In one incident, a staff member was unresponsive to multiple employee conferences and two letters of reprimand, resulting in their employment being terminated. In an exit interview with this employee, he stated that his value system did not align with what the district expected of him and it never would. This particular individual's competing value system was so strong that he chose to leave his job instead of opening his mind to giving SEL implementation a chance.

While this example is an extreme case, other staff members were able to challenge their competing value system they held initially with further professional development and increased accountability. With increased support, many staff members in this domain were able to change their ideology, which increased their self-efficacy allowing them to better understand the purpose of SEL and recognize the advantages SEL programs can lend to them working with students. Other staff members in this domain started to comply as they valued their job more than their competing value system that initially interfered with their compliance. In the future, it will be beneficial for the district to update employment application procedures that incorporate questions

or screeners that addresses a candidate's views towards SEL and their ideology. Identifying a candidate's ideology could allow administrators a better gauge if there were competing value systems that could potentially compromise the candidate's self-efficacy if hired, therefore creating a barrier for implementing SEL programs with fidelity.

### **Emotional Overload**

The Kansas legislature and the State Board of Education is notorious for placing more mandates on schools every year without removing anything from the ever growing list of requirements. Every year, there are new mandated trainings and curriculum changes that must be addressed. These items take professional development time, which is already limited. Due to the negotiated contractual length of licensed staff, we are not able to add professional development days each year to allow for time that is necessary to address newly mandated trainings and procedures. Compromises must be made regarding how the school district allocates its limited and precious contractual professional development time. When items are added to professional development days, other items must be removed from the agenda. Priorities must be adjusted and inevitably, some needs are not addressed each year to the extent they should be. When it comes to the domain of emotional overload, I completely understand how this barrier can have a negative effect on staff member's self-efficacy.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic started, emotional overload of staff members was a serious concern amongst administrators in many school districts. In USD 417, the emotional overload of many of our staff members becomes very evident in the month of October every year. The "newness" of the new school year diminishes and anxiety goes up. In conversations with staff members, many articulated that their emotional overload was due to perceptions that the expectations the school district has placed upon them are too high. They feel there are too

many directives already in place, and there is not enough time in the day to get done what was previously required, yet alone the accomplish the new expectations each year brings. Staff members with perceived higher levels of self-efficacy and resilience seem to manage these perceptions better than those with seemingly lower levels of self-efficacy and resilience.

To address this domain with the staff members, the board of education and the administrative team had to become intentional about providing opportunities to recognize the successes of staff members and provide validation that they matter, are valued, and make a difference. To help accomplish this task, small gestures such as giving handwritten notes to staff members and utilizing opportunities to publicly recognize and thank them for being part of the USD 417 educational family. We utilized social media to tell the stories of the fun and exciting activities going on inside the buildings and classrooms. We provided inexpensive rewards to staff members such as ice-cream sundae day, staff cookouts for lunch, treats in the breakroom, and other spontaneous surprises that boosted morale. The administrative team invested personally in the staff members by substituting for a class period in staff members' rooms to provide an extra plan period so they could either work on items they felt they were behind on, or simply just take a "mental health" break. The administrative team worked to change the narrative with staff members from, "the district's expectations are unrealistic and I do not have time to accomplish them", to "the expectations are important for student success and we will accomplish them together."

### **Cognitive Deficit**

Staff members who were identified in this domain were those who understood the need for and were open to the implementation of SEL programs, but they were not able to put the implementation pieces together as a whole. Some did not properly use the tools and resources

provided in the manner intended. Others did not actively participate in the training opportunities so they attempted implementation but were “flying blind.” Other staff members in this domain wanted improvements in student behaviors and increased engagement in their classrooms, but they wanted someone else to do the work for them to make it happen. They wanted a quick solution and had a “fix it for me” mentality. Staff members who fit into this domain quickly became frustrated with the implementation and saw little results in their classrooms. The lack of results and increasing frustrations had a negative impact on the individual’s self-efficacy, hence halting the implementation process for these staff members.

To address staff members in this domain, the district has, and will continue to re-engage these staff members in training opportunities and provide coaching and mentoring for them. Offering co-teaching opportunities where a mentor teacher can model the proper use of the SEL resources, as well as providing an SEL liaison that is accessible when needed to help build a better understanding of the SEL programs with staff members throughout the year.

### **Locus of Control and Lack of Internal Motivation**

The final domain is locus of control and lack of internal motivation. Staff members that were categorized by this domain had what I phrased to be the “Eeyore Syndrome.” Eeyore is the fictional character in the Winnie-the-Pooh books by A.A. Milne. Eeyore is the old grey stuffed donkey who is the depressed, gloomy, and pessimistic friend of the Winnie-the-Pooh.

Much like Eeyore, these staff members had a similar mental outlook toward their impact on students, the learning environment within their classrooms, and the culture of the educational system as a whole. These staff members shared comments with me such as “it doesn’t matter what I do, it won’t make a difference in how the students act,” or “why should I bother taking the time and putting forth the effort to do this when parents are not going to support us at home.”



Other comments were shared such as, “maybe I just need to retire as education has changed too much since I started and I can’t keep up,” or “this is just another hoop we have to jump through to try to appease the administration and the state, and it will not make any difference or change a thing.”

These comments were an immediate red flag indicating the self-efficacy of these staff members was extremely low and burnout was a major concern. The lack of internal motivation to improve the learning environment within their classrooms and our educational system presented a major barrier in the SEL implementation process. Finding ways to increase self-efficacy for staff members in this domain was challenging. The administrative team had to address these staff members much like those in the emotional overload domain by intentionally celebrating successes, achievements, and exploiting the individual strengths of these staff members. By utilizing building inservice and staff meeting times, we created shared leadership opportunities where their individual strengths could be highlighted with other staff members to help bolster their self-efficacy. When these tactics did not work for certain staff members, we had to turn to a more directive driven approach as we did with staff members in the competing value systems domain.

### **Barriers or Insubordination?**

Just as educators have to understand how adverse childhood experience and trauma have an impact on a child’s brain development, which in turn affects the child’s behavior and reactions to his or her environment, we must also understand that the same is true for adults. Many adults working within our education systems do not understand their own emotional competence and cannot be expected to address the social and emotional competence of their

students until they do so within themselves. If this is overlooked, then the actions of some staff members can be misperceived as disciplinary issues rather than educational issues.

During the first few years of the SEL implementation process, certain board of education members, as well as administrators, felt that the process was hindered by the insubordination of a few staff members. A challenge some administrators and board of education members had with the lack of progress in the SEL implementation process was understanding the difference between insubordination and the barriers created by each of the four domains that contributed to low self-efficacy. At times, certain administrators and/or board of education members wanted to jump right to disciplining a staff member, as their reluctance to implement the SEL programs with fidelity was viewed as insubordination. Creating a common cultural alignment amongst the board of education members and administrative team focused on social and emotional competence and self-efficacy was a critical step in nurturing our SEL implementation process and overcoming misperceptions of insubordination. Navigating away from a draconian mindset and replacing it with a compassionate and empathetic one of collaboration created a culture built on trust and respect. This helped us as a district to develop the necessary professional development, engage the staff members, and allocate financial resources in critical areas that provided better support and tools for staff members.

### **Keeping the Monkey in the Cage**

USD 417 is in the early stages of our SEL implementation process and we only have non-empirical data concerning the early successes of our implementation process. Using the VIBE platform, we are in the beginning stages of collecting empirical baseline data and comparative data on a regular basis until the 2023-2024 school year. We will analyze the data and evaluate our processes every quarter throughout the next three years to ensure fidelity with SEL

implementation. Alterations will be made when the data supports a need for adjustments within the implementation process. The district will use the three-year timeline to adopt policies and procedures to be used in the years following to ensure the continued success of and fidelity to SEL in USD 417.

Now that our district better understands the barriers associated with low levels of self-efficacy amongst our staff members and the impact it had on the SEL implementation process, it has raised other questions related to staff members' performance and student achievement. For example, is there a correlation between the performance levels of students on local and state assessments and the self-efficacy levels of staff members working with those students? Tracking student achievement data and looking longitudinally will be useful in identifying anomalies in student trends from grade level to grade level. By doing this, it may help identify staff members who fall into one or more of the domains affecting self-efficacy. Identifying staff members that may have previously "slipped through the cracks" will help the district work to ensure proper resources and supports are in place for them in other areas beyond SEL. Effects of low self-efficacy relating to staff members overseeing programs such as the reading and math multi-tiered level of supports intervention times, providing modifications to students with individualized education plans and 504s, and increasing the overall learning environment in the classrooms should be explored.

The main take away USD 417 has learned from this journey is that people come first. We must not take for granted the value employees have in creating a positive culture and climate for a successful school system. We must be intentional about addressing the social and emotional competence of staff members and continually reinforce the value we place on staff members' commitment and dedication for working with kids. Leaders cannot become hyper

focused on system data that only identify internal problems and concerns without first evaluating the staff members' self-efficacy and their social and emotional competence. It is dangerous to take for granted that adults are aware of their own social and emotional competence. In doing so, leaders make assumptions that employees have the internal capacity to address problems and adapt to change without harming their self-efficacy. As a system, we can identify problems and areas of concerns but if we do not place value in the self-efficacy of the employees who work directly with the students and families, all can be lost.

The four domains contributing to low self-efficacy amongst staff members creating system barriers to the SEL implementation process was concluded based on my own synthesis of evaluating the issues appearing to be obstructing the SEL implementation process in USD 417. My conclusions were supported through observations and conversations with various staff members and stakeholders in our school district. Further research developing empirical data to validate the impact the four domains have on self-efficacy and the barriers they present towards the SEL implementation process is necessary. In addition, further research could include looking at the impact the four domains have in regard to creating optimal learning environments and implications on the overall academic success of students.

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