

Panel Presentation – Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents – Friday, July 17 2015

Nadja Reilly, Ph.D. – William James College

- Key message: **Academic and emotional functioning are integrally connected.** The two cannot be separated and children cannot learn properly if they are emotionally not feeling well or safe.
- What your teachers and school staff are reporting regarding the number of students in struggling with emotional needs is indeed correct
 1. 1 in 10 children and adolescents suffer from a mental illness severe enough to cause significant impairment in at least one major area of functioning (e.g., school, home, social relationships)
 2. Anxiety may begin as early as preschool, and rates go up to about 28%
 3. Among those diagnosed with one anxiety disorder, there is a 50% likelihood they will be diagnosed with another anxiety disorder
 4. Up to 25% of adolescents will be diagnosed with depression by age 18
 5. Among those with depression, there is a 66% comorbidity rate, with anxiety and substance use disorders most prevalent additional diagnoses
 6. There is a large percentage of children who are struggling with yet undiagnosed symptoms, and this adds about another 10-15% of children and adolescents struggling emotionally
 7. Fewer than 1 in 5 children and adolescents are receiving the treatment they need and deserve in any one year
- At the same time, we are facing a crisis with our teachers
 1. Approximately half a million (15.7%) of US teachers move or leave the profession every year
 2. 40-50% leave within the first 5 years
 3. Many cite lack of knowledge and support around student mental health needs, as well as lack of support and emotional safety for themselves as primary reasons for leaving the profession
- What this tells us is that we need to think about how to create, protect, and sustain the safety and social emotional strength of our entire school community as a **critical and integral** part of our educational system
- How do we do this? We need to look at frameworks that resonate and fit with the school setting and teaching practices. By doing this we can integrate tools that teach social emotional skills as part of the regular curriculum, use teachers' expertise, and do not make teachers feel like they are merely adding more programs (out of context) on to their already busy schedules.
 1. A very useful framework is the role of **behavioral and emotional self-regulation** in social emotional functioning. Research indicates that between 2 and 5 years of age, there is a

significant emergence of increasingly sophisticated models of regulation. Preschoolers' ability to regulate predicts their understanding of emotion 2 years later. Self-regulation also predicts better academic functioning. Children with good self-regulation are able to manage and control attention, behavior and emotions in a willful and flexible manner. However, those with regulation difficulties have peer difficulties, as well as consistently lower reading and math achievement scores.

- Having this framework helps us understand how social emotional difficulties develop and gives us a clearer map for intervention
- For example, key structures of self-regulation include: working memory, attention shifting, and behavioral control. These are areas with which teachers are familiar – these structures are needed for learning – paying attention to the development of these skills for social emotional functioning is also critical.

2. The second very important piece to address students' social emotional needs is a **conceptual shift in when** we begin addressing their needs. Ironically, as tools and technology continue to make everything immediately accessible and we continue to develop means to improve education, mental health has not caught up accordingly. The field, and therefore its interface with the educational system, remains more reactive in its approach, putting programs in place once problems have already appeared. **Instead, we should focus on a prevention approach.** Recall the dramatic developmental burst in self-regulatory skills during the ages of 2 to 5. This is the time to begin implementing social emotional programs. Prevention and mental health promotion are long-term investments but we know that financially and clinically, it makes more sense to begin early. There are significant and positive results that emerge from long term and early efforts. As leaders of your school systems, you have the wonderful opportunity to infuse a sense of excitement and instill hope that this long-term benefit will yield positive results in your school community.
3. We know that kids do not exist in isolation. What families, schools, and the community contribute is also critical to their social emotional development. Given that notion, as superintendents, I believe that the cultures you create in your schools can have a significant impact on adults' and students' emotional health. When you invite families and community partners to share that vision, it makes a truly positive systemic change (at the micro and macro levels) for students. So what can leadership bring to make this happen?
 - Create a climate where students feel emotionally safe and connected. In a recent study by Durlak and colleagues (2011), from among a national sample of close to 150,000 6th to 12th graders, only 29% reported their school provided a caring, encouraging environment. By the time they reach high school, as many as 60% of students become chronically disengaged from schools.
 - The climate of emotional safety is critical for the adults in the school as well. In environments where high stakes evaluations and measurements can promote

stress, it is not unlikely to have blame or judgment in the face of difficult situations. Emotional safety can allow staff to discuss their own social emotional needs, as well as work collaboratively by sharing their vision, ideas, and thoughts even, (and especially) during stressful times. I encourage you to go back to schools and listen – how are people talking to one another? To students? What explicit and implicit messages about mental health are shared? What methods of ensuring connection among each other and with students are in place?

- To address all the teachers who are leaving due to perceived lack of support, do you have mentoring programs in place that can help them safely express their worries or concerns without fear of being labeled inexperienced or ineffective? Does the professional development they receive go beyond the cognitive piece (i.e., just sharing information)? There should be opportunities to practice skills, increase self-confidence and efficacy, and understand his/her role within the school's larger social-emotional initiative.

4. And finally, when we talk about integrating social emotional programming, we need to think about how this can be a **conscious effort to include this as part of the daily functioning, values, and practices of the school.**

- Intentional, mindful integration of social emotional needs means the school begins with a careful needs assessment. What does your particular school need? One size fits all models and fragmented efforts simply do not work.
- Use of evidence based programs that offer clear opportunities to collaborate with the home and community are especially beneficial.
- Use of assessments to measure progress in relevant areas is critical. Assessments should not be merely quantitative, but qualitative as well. How are students feeling? How are teachers and staff feeling? How would they describe their experience in the school?
- Use of programs that are sustainable – that is, the programs continue to occur as integrated curriculum and are implemented by the internal resources of the school (e.g., teachers, counselors, etc.). Relying on outside agencies does not build the capacity of the internal system.

In closing, it is critical that everyone in the school community receives the same message: social and emotional health and success are as important as academic success. This message inherently promotes more collaboration, and engagement with the process rather than a focus solely on individual outcomes. This message of support and validation leads students to have a stronger sense of self and to see a broader range of possibilities for who they will become.

Thank you.