

Sustainability Course Offers Students Hope through Social Emotional Learning

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What is Social Emotional Learning?

Schools and school districts are increasingly aware that an “education” must consider not only a child’s academic success, but also their social and emotional success. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) practices teach students important life skills, such as understanding themselves, developing a positive self-image, managing their emotions, and taking responsibility for their actions. SEL also encourages students to set goals and make responsible decisions, leading to greater success and better interpersonal relationships in school and throughout their lives.

Washington State adopted a set of SEL Standards, Benchmarks and Indicators in January of 2020. This document helps educators to recognize what to look for when describing social emotional development in the areas of:

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Self-Efficacy
- Social Awareness
- Social Management
- Social Engagement

The indicators are arranged in grade-level bands to offer insight into how social-emotional competencies build over time, understanding that every child develops at their own pace, depending on a variety of factors including context, culture, and prior experiences.

Why is SEL important?

Educating the “whole child” is the aim of SEL, and it has benefits at all grade levels. Here are just a few:

- Increased positive attitudes toward oneself and others
- Enhanced self-efficacy, confidence, persistence, empathy, connection and commitment to school
- A stronger sense of purpose
- More positive social behaviors and relationships with peers and adults
- Reduced behavioral issues and risk-taking behaviors
- Decreased emotional distress

This positive sense of self can lead to better test scores, grades, and attendance, as well as an increased likelihood of high school graduation, readiness for postsecondary education, career success, positive family and work relationships, better mental health, reduced criminal behavior, and engaged citizenship (<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/why-sel-essential-for-students-weissberg-durlak-domitrovich-gullott>)

What does SEL look like in the classroom?

SEL practices have a positive impact on student behavior. Some examples of SEL practices include:

- Allowing for student voice and choice through practices such as class meetings
- Acknowledging positive social skills and work habits
- Encouraging collaborative problem-solving through cooperative games, puzzles, or problems
- Journaling, breathing exercises, and movement
- Encouraging students to set goals individually and collectively
- Developing emotional intelligence by naming feelings, and talking about how to channel them
- Providing activities that encourage students to understand the perspectives of others

What are some examples of SEL work in PEI's Sustainability Course?

Washington's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) expects educators to implement and integrate SEL into all academic contexts in a culturally responsive way. Pacific Education Institute (PEI) can help!

PEI's brand-new Sustainability Course was developed with SEL principles in mind.

Climate change education can be especially anxiety-inducing, in fact, the American Psychological Association has coined the term "eco-anxiety" to define the chronic fear of environmental cataclysm that plagues many students (and adults) today. While it is normal for children to feel worried, frustrated, angry, and sad when learning about issues around climate change, SEL can help students to accept these feelings, talk about them, and learn ways to cope, empowering them to face this challenge head-on. Wellbeing information and reflection activities embedded throughout PEI's new Sustainability Course are designed to help students understand, track and manage their emotional reactions to the material.

SEL activities in the course encourage students to talk about their reactions, regulate their emotions through breathing and journaling, and to spend time outdoors. Tools such as Mood Meters and Sit Spots are introduced early in the courses and their use is encouraged throughout the science notebooks developed to accompany the course. A list of supplemental SEL resources is included with the middle and high school versions of the course.

Students cope better with challenges when they have been prepared and can be actively involved in the solutions. To help them feel hopeful and engaged, we've focused our resources on scientific information, as well

as initiatives and success stories from around our region, especially those that highlight actions taken by young people. Throughout the unit, students will work toward creating their own action plans to fight climate change.

By providing SEL resources and practices that are proven to be effective in improving students' social and emotional well-being, PEI supports teachers, students, and school districts in educating the whole child. It's clear from our workshops that teachers appreciate the efforts, not just for their students, but also for themselves. One teacher said, "I appreciated the SEL activities. After a long day of work, it was nice to get centered and focused to learn." Another responded to the question "What aspect of your learning are you most likely to use in your classroom" with "Talking about eco-anxiety and stressors related to climate change." To sum it up, one teacher said, "I appreciated the SEL ideas. That is so big now and very much needed."