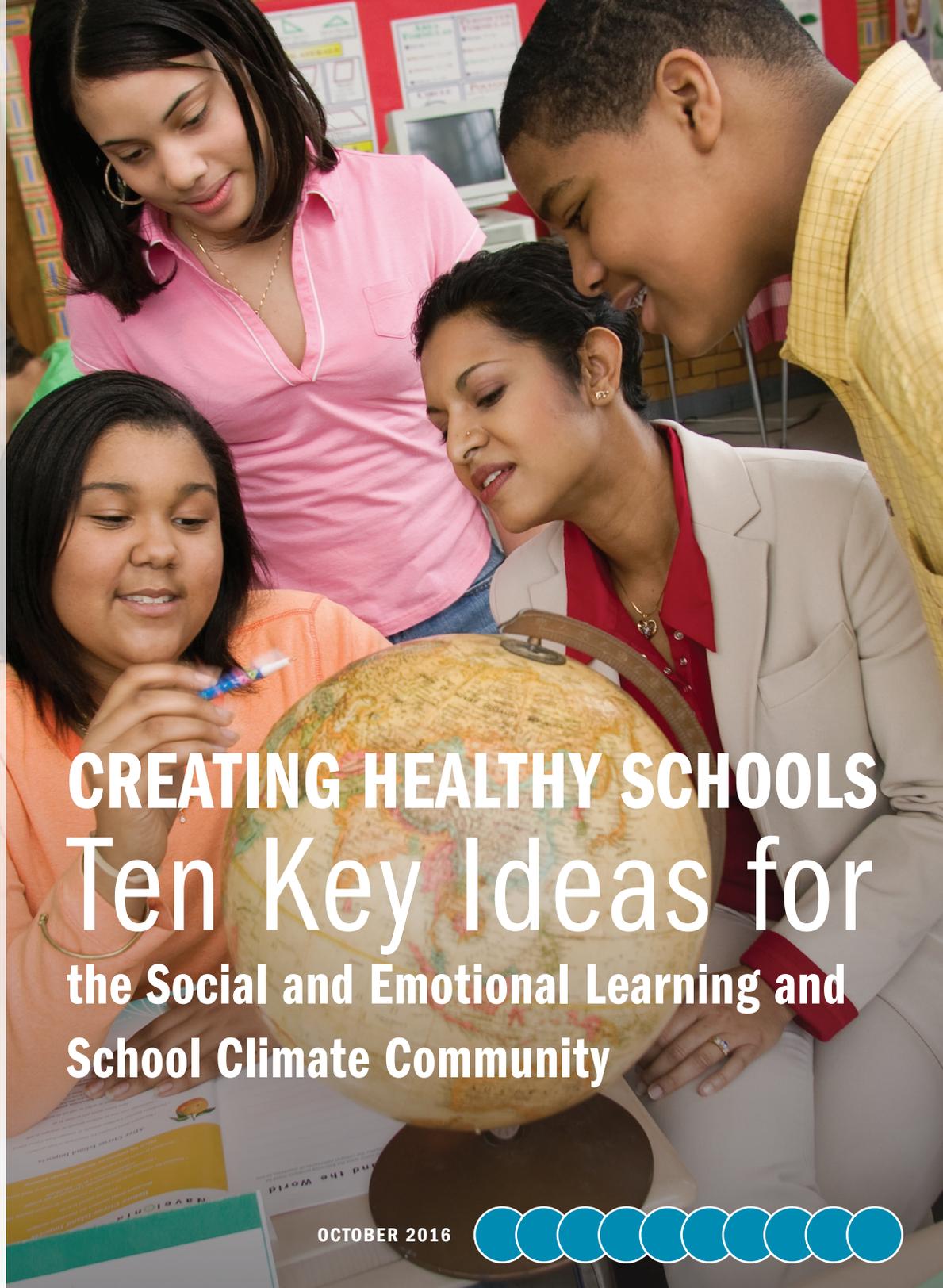


THE 10

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CREATING HEALTHY SCHOOLS Ten Key Ideas for the Social and Emotional Learning and School Climate Community

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Acknowledgments

This brief evolved from a larger Robert Wood Johnson Foundation–funded project to examine the intersection of and alignment between social and emotional learning (SEL) and school climate. The ideas contained here emerged from a two-day discussion of SEL and school climate with practice leaders in April 2016. The authors wish to thank David Osher and Deborah Moroney of American Institutes for Research (AIR) and Jennifer Ng’andu of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for their review and comments as well as their leadership and facilitation of the convening. They would like to thank Tracy Costigan of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for her input and review and Paul Cheh of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Kimberly Kendziora, Samantha Neiman, and Greta Colombi of AIR for their participation and facilitation at the meeting.

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Introduction

Inside and outside education circles, recognition is growing that supporting young people socially and emotionally—not just academically—is key to a healthy school environment. The following two connected components create that environment:

Social and emotional learning (SEL) provides a foundation for healthy development. It is the process children, youth, and adults go through to develop the skills to engage with others, manage their emotions, show empathy, handle stress, resolve stress, set goals, and make responsible decisions to succeed in work and life.

School climate is a product of the interactions among and experiences of the individuals that make up a school community and includes shared norms, values, and everyday behavior expectations. Hallmarks of a positive school climate are perceptions of emotional and physical safety, support, inclusiveness, respect, challenge, and engagement.

SEL and school climate are complementary and intertwined. Positive school environments with opportunities for social and emotional learning enable students and staff to develop social and emotional competence, which in turn can make school climate more positive.

So, how do schools start integrating and aligning these two important concepts? How can the two fields join to build awareness and strengthen understanding? What should happen now, and how can we plan for the future? And what key opportunities must educators seize to ensure that SEL and school climate initiatives instigate real and effective change?

These are questions the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) and [American Institutes for Research](#) sought to answer when they convened some of the nation’s top SEL and school climate practice leaders to begin setting out how schools and communities can best support the healthy development of children and youth.

Ten key ideas emerged from that meeting.



Focus on Equity

Teachers, administrators, and students can create safe and supportive school climates and implement SEL practices, only if real or perceived, racial, ethnic, gender-based, economic, or other inequities are addressed. Examine all activities—including communication, assessment, and implementation of SEL programs and practices—to see how well they support and promote equity:

- Diversify the leadership base so that it better represents the nation’s population.
- Find, recruit, and support high-quality educators in high-need schools.
- Develop culturally responsive resources for families and educators—tools and information about fostering social and emotional skills, working together, supporting development, and creating an equitable school environment.
- Ensure all students’ success by strengthening the capacity of schools to support students who require additional and more intensive, tailored supports than the general student body.

- Review SEL and school climate programs and curricula for how well they promote equity and modify them so they serve all students.
- Review assessments—both those that diagnose student needs and those that assess student progress—for bias.
- Develop case studies of exemplary schools that successfully promote equity (by, for example, creating a one-page document with examples of effective practices to share with educator unions, parents, and other interested parties for discussion).
- Learn more about the effectiveness and implementation of [restorative practices](#) to prevent and address conflict by building healthy relationships. Restorative practices are intended to help students feel more connected to school and become more socially and emotionally competent.

“We need to have a conversation about structural and systemic issues that lead to inequity. There is a practical reality to reckon with—that students and educators may live in environments where teaching social and emotional skills alone will not address fully the embedded challenges that they are facing. How do you bring that understanding—the context of their environments—into these efforts and facilitate structural change to ensure that their social and emotional well-being is sustained?”—

—Jennifer Ng’andu

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Be Systemic. Be Holistic. Be Practical.

To address the needs of the whole child—socially, emotionally, academically, and physically—we need to think about the big picture. How can all systems that support children and youth (e.g., schools, families, mental health agencies, community organizations) work together over the long term so that young people succeed? At the same time, we have to be practical about how to get work done today. To be practical and systematic, consider the following:

- Think in terms of “and” rather than “or”—for example, training educators on practical strategies to improve SEL instruction and classroom climate right now and convening cross-district committees to discuss long-term goals and districtwide implementation of SEL practices and school climate initiatives.
- Create tools and materials to make implementation easier and less overwhelming—for example, by creating a matrix that enables districts to choose which of many SEL and school climate programs and practices to implement.
- Avoid silos between fields and disciplines by using common approaches and definitions and identifying areas to align—for example, incorporating SEL programs and practices into an overall strategy to improve bus safety or conducting training in restorative practices as part of a schoolwide anti-bullying campaign.
- Expand SEL and climate approaches beyond the traditional school day to afterschool and summer programs, community-based organizations, and other places where children and youth gather.

“We talk a lot about school, but we also need to talk about nonschool life and provide consistent reinforcement of these concepts in out-of-school time. We need to have a continuum of options for the delivery of SEL and school climate strategies.”

—Joan Duffel



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Create a Unified Message

To build support, practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and others interested in these topics must develop and share a clear message and common definitions, and purpose behind and benefits of SEL and improved school climate.

- Researchers and practitioners should be intentional and clear about the goals for SEL, school climate and conditions for learning and how they are related and complementary, then develop awareness and communications materials and plans to get the word out about the initiatives.
- To build buy-in, program developers and researchers must develop resources that explain research-based best practices, share guidelines for ways to support and implement SEL and school climate efforts, and provide easy-to-understand steps for educators and families.

“There is confusion among educators and the general public about the definition of SEL. Even within our field there is a debate going on about the relationship between the original conception of social and emotional competencies and the so-called noncognitive skills that are the flavor of the month. Though interest in grit and growth mindset is understandable, we must strongly encourage educators to pay attention to the full range of social and emotional competencies, including social awareness, relationship skills, and making good decisions. Every day, events in our personal lives and throughout the world demonstrate how important those competencies are. Our field needs to create clear, compelling, and consistent messages about what SEL is, why it is integral to education, and how to do it well.”

—Tom Roderick

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Spread the Word

Developing common messages, definitions, and goals only goes so far. Make sure the right people are hearing and seeing those messages.

- Make SEL and school climate come alive by sharing stories and anecdotes about what it looks like in practice, how it helps youth develop important skills, and how it transforms schools and classrooms.
- Share information about SEL and school climate—why they are important; how the fields are working together to create healthy schools, children, and youth; and where the field is going in the future.
- Bring together experts from such professions as communications, technology, and education to create and share customized messages for specific audiences (e.g., families, teachers, school administrators, policymakers, and funders).
- Develop and distribute information on evidence of effectiveness and best practices to nonresearchers.
- Engage skeptics in the discussion about the need for SEL and positive school climate to broaden commitment.

“We need to create a shared understanding of what SEL and school climate practices look like across the country. Teachers need better information. Researchers put things out that are too technical. We need to think about translating research to a wide variety of audiences.”

—Lisa Thomas

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Invest in Professional Development

Building greater competence in SEL and improving the school climate begins with adults. Current and preservice teachers must learn how to implement and lead SEL and school climate efforts and support systemic social and emotional development.

- Develop a range of professional development activities for all levels and types of educators.
- Teach the educators about their own social and emotional competence and biases and how these can influence their teaching and ability to support students.
- Enhance everyone’s understanding of the impacts of trauma and the importance of trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed approaches.
- Acknowledge and support the important role social workers and guidance counselors can play in SEL and school climate initiatives, especially for students who need more intensive supports.
- Conduct more research on what type and quantity of professional development best promote social and emotional skill-building in adults and children, greater equity, and improved trauma sensitivity.

“Preservice teachers need to get training on SEL. You can count on one hand how many teaching certification programs count that as part of their process.”

—Melissa Schlinger

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Incorporate Student Leadership

Integrate the interests, needs, and voices of students through authentic engagement in practice and policy decisions. Students should have agency, experience autonomy and authenticity, and be a key part of SEL and school climate efforts.

- Engage students as co-leaders, co-learners, and co-designers.
- Research how student voice can best be tapped to shape programming and improve outcomes.
- Identify one or two key issues of importance to the student body (e.g., bullying) and have students focus and rally around them.
- Consider hosting a national student forum to capture youth voices across the country on issues related to social and emotional development.

“Youth voice is critical. The capacity of young people to own culture is more powerful than adults’ [capacity] to dictate the culture.”

—Tim Shriver



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Involve Families and the Community

Young people spend at least half of their time outside of classroom instruction, so efforts to improve their social and emotional health must include adults who interact with students outside of the classroom. To involve families and communities, consider the following:

- Be aware of strategies and practices that are in opposition to the values and cultural beliefs of families, and work to reconcile those differences.
- Acknowledge that all families are experts in their children’s development and have a deep understanding of contextual factors shaping their children.
- Share accountability for the success of children and youth with all community members and encourage leaders of community-based organizations to be actively engaged.
- Invite community members to participate in or share input on SEL and school climate efforts.
- Create physical spaces that promote community-building (e.g., a community room with a washer and dryer where families can take care of day-to-day chores while engaging in school activities).

“Engaging families is an obvious but often missed point. We need family engagement strategies to be independent of culture, income, race, etc. We need to level the playing field. The message to families can never be ‘You don’t know how to do this, but others do.’”

—Molly McCloskey

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Identify What We Know and Don’t Know

A lot of great SEL and school climate work already is happening across the country and around the world. Some schools and districts have been doing this work for years. We should learn from those efforts and determine what we don’t know.

- Examine how some states already are adopting SEL or school climate standards and see how they are being used, implemented, and assessed.
- Learn about what works in middle school and high school. For example, restorative practices are growing in secondary schools, but their impact is not yet well researched.

“Rather than having a top-down compliance approach, we need to learn from others. There are principals who are phenomenal, whose strengths are culture and climate. Can we have a conversation about family engagement and trauma-informed approaches that are working?”

—Dwight Davis

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Improve Assessment

Today, states are grappling with how to meet the requirements of Every Student Succeeds Act to support the whole child and provide a “well-rounded” education. Attention inevitably is turning to assessment. Researchers and practice leaders need to move quickly to identify and develop supports for usable, equitable, and valid assessments of SEL and school climate implementation and outcomes.



- Start by determining **readiness to assess** and what to assess (e.g., identifying a core set of social and emotional competencies and/or indicators of a positive school climate to track regularly to determine the success of interventions and inform continuous improvement).
- Be formative, not just summative. That is, schools should develop and regularly collect indicators that identify early signs of change along the way (e.g., improved teacher morale or a reduction in school disciplinary incidents), and not focus only on youth outcomes.
- Align assessments with the strategies and practices being used in schools.
- Create clear messaging for families about why students are being assessed and make clear that the results should help families encourage their children, rather than punish families whose children have fallen short.
- Teach educators and schools how to use information gathered from assessment to improve programs and better support individual students. Build the capacity to get this done.
 - Make recommendations for how to ethically and accurately measure the improvement of nonacademic skills.

“We need measurement to know whether strategies are working. A lot of assessments are created by researchers and tend to be lengthy, produce scores that don’t mean a lot to practitioners, and are hard to administer in a way that shows growth. Practitioners need to know what are the most important competencies to measure, both those linked to academic success and those that are important for longer-term health and well-being.”

—Heather Clawson

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Act Quickly and Strategically

Today, there is an unprecedented national and international interest in SEL and social and emotional health. The SEL and school climate communities should act quickly to capitalize on that interest to gain support and steer the direction of the future:

- Make and share clear, nonpartisan statements about the fields’ collective goals and founding principles.
- Provide clear recommendations to states on the next steps SEL and school climate efforts should take, including research on how nonacademic skills can be measured and how assessment can be used for accountability and continuous improvement.

“This is a moment. If there was ever a time to invest in stories both for practitioners and for the general public and to get out proactively with communication about why SEL and school climate improvement is important, now is the time.”

– Jonathan Cohen

SEL and school climate are two fields with complementary goals and aligned approaches. The 10 strategies outlined in this brief represent a starting place—a way for two fields that have not always worked together to support the success of all children and youth.

In May 2016, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and American Institutes for Research convened a second meeting. This time top SEL and school climate researchers discuss these 10 ideas—and more.

This series of convenings will conclude with a final meeting in September 2016 that will bring practice leaders and researchers together to synthesize lessons learned and discuss the best ways to advance all our *10 Key Ideas for the SEL and School Climate Community*.



Participants

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