Social Emotional Learning in High School: How Three Urban High Schools Engage, Educate, and Empower Youth

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Social Emotional Learning in High School: How Three Urban High Schools Engage, Educate, and Empower Youth documents the practices and outcomes of three highly effective urban high schools that leverage social and emotional learning to educate and empower their students. Through an explicit, school-wide focus on social emotional learning, these schools educate the "whole child," prepare students to be socially aware, skilled, and responsible, and provide students with the psychological and academic resources they need to belong and succeed in school. The schools in the study are non-selective in their admissions, are strong performers compared to schools in their districts, and represent a range of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity among the student communities they serve. They are Fenway High School (Boston, MA), El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice (Brooklyn, NY), and International School of the Americas (San Antonio, TX).

This report—based on in-depth case studies of these three urban, socioeconomically and racially diverse small public high schools, a student survey, and a comparison of student survey results to a national sample of students—investigates the ways in which these schools design, implement, and practice school-wide social emotional learning as well as how this focus on social emotional learning shapes students' educational experiences and outcomes. In particular, the schools we study—which aim to engage and empower the student communities they serve—ground their educational approach in an expanded vision of social emotional learning that incorporates a social justice education perspective as essential to their practice.

Social, emotional, and academic learning in high school: What we need to know

The psychological, social, and emotional aspects of education—so-called "non-cognitive factors" and "soft skills"—have gained traction in recent years among educators as well as the wider public as major drivers of student achievement. From developing grit and a growth mindset, to learning collaboration and perspective-taking skills, to fostering student belonging and inclusion, psychological resources are critical to student success and to a 21st century education. This renewed attention represents an important shift, as social and emotional supports for students in school have frequently been called the "missing piece" in the accountability-driven practices that are the legacy of No Child Left Behind. Further, failing to meet students' psychological, social, and emotional needs will continue to fuel gaps in opportunity and achievement for students—in particular, low-income students and students of color—who are frequently underserved by the schools they attend.

Researchers in the field of social emotional learning are working to understand how schools can effectively implement and sustain practices that meet students' social and emotional needs as well as provide them with the opportunity to learn adaptive skills and strategies to succeed both inside and outside of the classroom. Social emotional learning aims to educate the "whole student"; support students' capacity to know themselves, build and maintain supportive relationships, and participate in their school communities as socially responsible citizens; and foster academic achievement. While research in the field clearly demonstrates the promise of social emotional learning, we designed our study to address three open questions that are necessary to its effective practice:

- *How is effective social emotional learning practiced in high schools? In particular, what can we learn from high schools that have developed an explicit mission to prepare students to be personally and socially aware, skilled, and responsible?* Much of the existing research on social and emotional learning has focused on elementary and middle schools. This is likely because fostering the development of social and emotional skills is often seen as part of the educational mission in earlier grades, social emotional initiatives have been easier to launch and implement in primary and middle school contexts, and scholarly and practical interest has centered around early intervention. As a result, little is known about what effective social emotional learning practice looks like at the high school level and throughout the later years of adolescence.

- *How can social emotional learning strategies be tuned to meet the needs of students in diverse socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic schooling contexts?* While social emotional learning, as typically conceived in the field, seeks to foster students' capacity to know themselves, build and maintain supportive relationships, and participate in their school communities as socially responsible citizens, a social justice perspective integrates a focus on students' social and emotional needs with culturally relevant, asset-based, identity-safe, and empowerment-oriented practice. This perspective has led some educators to view incorporating what is often termed "social justice education," along with social emotional learning, into their framework for school design to most effectively meet the needs of their diverse student communities.

- *How does a systemic, whole school approach to social emotional learning, in contrast to an interventionist or programmatic approach, function as a model of school-wide practice?* Most existing research on social emotional learning takes a programmatic approach to intervention. While understanding what it takes to design and implement an effective program is important to social emotional learning research, practice, and policy, one significant concern is that these programs are not typically incorporated into the life and educational practice of schools in meaningful and sustained ways. This lack of incorporation may send incompatible messages to students if they are inconsistent with how the school typically functions as well as lessen the effectiveness of programs and initiatives.

Our study takes up these questions and seeks to learn from successful high schools that serve urban youth of color and produce strong outcomes for their students through the whole-school, comprehensive practice of social emotional learning coupled with social justice education. Our research questions were:

1. How is social emotional learning conceptualized and implemented at these high schools? How is it informed or shaped by a social justice education perspective?

2. How do these schools practice social emotional learning to meet the needs of their respective urban, diverse student communities and with what results?

3. How does effective social emotional learning practice shape students' educational experiences and provide them with critical psychological resources that foster personal, social, and academic success?

In examining each school as an ecological or sociocultural system, nested within a particular community context, we trace and map how social emotional learning is implemented and practiced across three key aspects of the school—school climate and culture, organizational features and structures, and school practices.
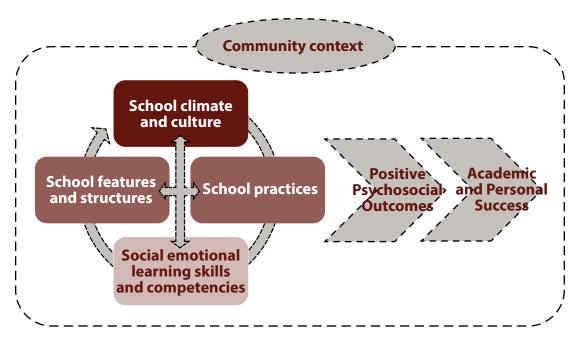

Figure 1: Conceptual framework: A sociocultural approach to studying schools' social emotional learning practice. This figure represents our theoretical and conceptual approach to studying schools' social emotional learning practice and outcomes.

Learning from Successful Practice

How does a social justice education perspective inform social emotional learning?

First, we asked how Fenway, El Puente, and International School of the Americas (ISA) approach social emotional learning and how a social justice education perspective informs how they conceptualize and practice social emotional learning. We found that:

- The schools work to increase educational opportunity for students who do not typically have access to high quality public schools or who are frequently underserved by traditional schools—i.e., students of color from low-income backgrounds who are often the first in their families to go to college. Educators at these schools believe that providing this kind of education for their students is itself an act of social justice.

- All three schools seek to educate the "whole student" by providing a physically and emotionally safe learning environment, developing close and caring relationships among all members of the school community, challenging students with an engaging, relevant, culturally responsive, and high quality curriculum, providing community engaged learning opportunities, and supporting students through critical transitions into college and career. Doing so requires viewing the academic, social, and emotional aspects of schooling as necessarily linked with one another and with the aims of social justice education.

- The schools work to prepare and graduate students who are socially aware, skilled, responsible, and empowered to stand up to injustice and work for positive change in their own lives and for the lives of others. Building students' social emotional and social justice awareness, skills, and competencies works to engage and empower students as well as foster academic success and achievement.

  - ~ Fenway designs educational experiences that teach students the tools and confidence needed to lead and take action.

  - ~ El Puente's approach is grounded in acknowledging and affirming students' cultural backgrounds and identities as well as building their capacity for self-determination.

  - ~ ISA challenges its students to consider what it means to act at one's fullest potential as a learner, leader, and global citizen by developing empathy for others and inspiring allyship, advocacy, and action.

Social emotional learning schools provide students with key psychological resources they need to thrive in school

Next, using a student survey, we assessed what students' experiences were like at these social emotional learning schools. Compared to students in a sample of national comparison high schools ($N = 2063$), we found that students in the social emotional learning schools we studied ($N = 363$) were significantly more likely to:

- Report a more positive, caring school climate and like school more

- Report greater engagement in school and social emotional support

- Feel efficacious, resilient, and demonstrate a growth mindset

- Value helping others in their community and working to improve society

- Express ambitious goals for higher education and receive support for these goals from counselors, teachers, parents, and peers.

Taken together, student survey results revealed that students in the social emotional learning schools we studied reported more positive educational experiences, felt more connected to their schools, demonstrated higher levels of psychological and emotional support, engagement, and empowerment, and were more socially engaged than students in the comparison schools sample. While not a causal study, these findings suggest that social emotional learning school environments and practices hold the potential to better equip students with critical psychological resources and social emotional supports that they need to feel like school is important, that they belong there, and that they can be successful.

Leveraging a whole-school approach to social emotional learning supports students' social, emotional, and academic needs

Finally, we examined how these high schools engage in and implement social emotional learning through their climate and culture, features and structures, and formal and informal practices. We investigated how these key levels of the school context worked together to support and mutually reinforce how social emotional learning takes place. We also examined how the schools practice social emotional learning to meet the particular needs of their urban, diverse student communities. See boxes below and on the next page that summarize common themes across the schools.

School climate & culture

- Social emotional learning is front and center, highlighted in each school's mission and vision, reinforced through community norms and values, and articulated in graduate expectations.

- Strong relationships and a respectful community characterize school culture and set the stage for social and emotional learning to take place. Adults and students are socialized to be members of this intentional culture.

- Students' psychological needs are not secondary to their academic needs. The culture at each school, and the climate it fosters, is designed to support students' psychological needs and views this as necessary for academic success and achievement.

- Clear norm setting fosters a safe school climate. It is an important learning tool that the schools use to promote a trusting, safe, and supportive climate. Norms are explicit, shared, and highlight social emotional learning skills and competencies (e.g., self and social awareness, personal and social responsibility).

- An interdependent community values and requires empathy, social responsibility, and action. Being a community member at each school entails standing up for one's community—school culture fosters student voice, agency, and empowerment and the cultivation of social awareness and social responsibility in the context of community empowerment.

School features & structures

- Small school size and opportunities for personalization work together support an intimate environment where social awareness and relationship skills are necessary and social emotional learning can take place.

- "Family" structures (e.g., house or academy systems) serve to further personalize relationships, foster social responsibility, and map students' developmental trajectory.

- Advisory provides a regular time and place to focus on social emotional skill-building. While each school takes a whole-school approach to social emotional learning, advisory is a design feature that provides a regular time and place for direct instruction on social and emotional skills as well as a progressive focus on social justice skill-building.

- Student support staff steward social emotional learning and facilitate critical life transitions for the student communities they serve. They are central to the life and culture of the school, work closely with teachers, administrators, and parents, and tailor their services to their student communities, understanding sociocultural variation in student challenges and opportunities.

- Community-based partnerships, projects, and learning opportunities inspire responsibility, engagement, and action and enable students to practice social emotional and social justice education skills in real-world settings and situations.

- To best support students' social and emotional needs, adults' social, emotional, and professional needs must also be a priority. Each school works to provide professional development, collaborative opportunities, and shared leadership structures to empower and support school staff to give the time, care, and energy they need to their students.

School practices

- Curricular design and instructional practices integrate social emotional learning with academics through both content—what students learn—and process—how they learn it. The schools' curricular design and instructional practices integrate social emotional learning and social justice education with academics and foster the application of skills across subjects and situations. Topics and assignments are relevant and engaging and instructional practices foster resilience, a growth mindset, and student agency.

- Collaborative, project-based learning teaches social emotional skills and fosters social awareness and engagement. These experiential learning opportunities help build relationships, enable students to practice collaboration and relationship skills, promote social awareness and interdependence, and foster community engagement.

- Performance-based assessments foster reflection, resilience, responsibility, and a growth mindset. These learning experiences provide opportunities for students to reflect on and demonstrate their academic progress while understanding the social and emotional journey that it took to get there.

- Restorative disciplinary practices preserve relationships, foster responsibility, and respect students' dignity. When disciplinary action is needed, the schools draw on their social emotional and social justice education perspectives to provide opportunities for students to practice social and emotional skills, develop personal responsibility, and remain part of the community.

- School traditions, rituals, clubs, and activities build community, honor students and families, and support voice and agency. From orientation activities that initiate students and families into the school community, to practices that celebrate student achievements, to clubs and activities that give students time and place to share their cultures and their struggles, social emotional support is both broad and tailored to the needs of each community.

Lessons for Social Emotional Learning Research

Social emotional learning in high school: Adopting a developmental perspective

Our findings highlight the developmental knowledge that underlies effective social emotional learning practice. Fenway, El Puente, and ISA all seek to educate the "whole child"; successfully doing so requires understanding which social emotional needs, challenges, and opportunities for growth can and should be targeted along students' educational and developmental journeys. Effective social emotional learning in high school will benefit from incorporating a developmental perspective that aligns its practice with the processes of growth and transition that accompany adolescence.

Social emotional learning across diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic schooling contexts

Our findings also underscore the need for research on social emotional learning to: 1) better theorize how social emotional learning can and should be conceptualized and practiced to most effectively meet the needs of students from different backgrounds and engaged in diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic schooling contexts and 2) better understand how to leverage the practice of social emotional learning to engage, educate, and empower students who are frequently underserved, and often profoundly "left behind," by the mainstream educational system. In applying a social justice education perspective to social emotional learning, the schools that we document here intentionally tune their practice to meet the needs of their respective student communities by working to empower students to be agents of change in their own lives, for their communities, and for society at large. Across each school's social emotional learning practice, we observed the powerful—and sometimes subtle—ways in which this sociocultural tuning takes place.

Social emotional learning through a whole-school approach

Finally, our findings illustrate what a whole school, comprehensive approach to social emotional learning can offer in contrast to program-based interventions. While programmatic interventions may lend themselves more easily experimental evaluation, as well as be more straightforward for traditional schools to insert into their ongoing activities and programs, they are rarely embedded into the life of schools in meaningful and sustained ways and, thus, may have limited potential to positively affect student outcomes and experiences. While relatively uncommon at present, social emotional learning is likely to offer the greatest benefit to students when practiced and reinforced in a comprehensive way. We also observed that social emotional learning was not meant for students alone. In order to provide the psychological resources and support necessary to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of their students, supporting the social and emotional needs of school staff was also a priority.

Recommendations for Practitioners and Policy Makers

As the psychological, social, and emotional aspects of education receive increased attention in policy and practice circles, there is growing opportunity to more fully integrate a developmental, whole child perspective into how we teach students and prepare teachers. Looking across our findings and current research trends, we provide the following recommendations for practitioners and policy makers:

- *Erase the cognitive/non-cognitive divide in education.* Successfully educating all students requires both academic and psychological resources—academic, social, and emotional factors are essentially interwoven, mutually interdependent, and should not be considered in isolation from one another. They are critical to all students' opportunity to learn, but also matter in particular ways for students of color and for students in low-income contexts.

- *Leverage a "whole-child" perspective on student development.* Failing to overcome the cognitive/non-cognitive divide in education practice and policy will lead to innovations and strategies that are, ultimately, suboptimal. Education more broadly, and social and emotional learning in particular, also needs to align with students' key developmental pathways that evolve through their elementary, middle school, and high school years.

- *Engage systemic, whole-school change.* Integrating social emotional learning into schools and curricula will fail to be maximally effective if done by inserting isolated programs into factory-model high schools that continue to underserve and disadvantage many students. Social emotional learning will be most effective when practiced and implemented comprehensively and coherently across key levels of the school—climate and culture, features and structures, and formal and informal practices—as well as when its practice is supported by districts.

- *Teach social emotional skills explicitly and ensure that they are reflected and reinforced by school practices.* While a whole-school approach to social emotional learning is necessary, schools should also set aside a time and place to focus explicitly on social and emotional skill building. Schools can do this by locating a place in the curriculum, possibly in advisory class, where students and teachers can develop and practice key skills and competencies.

- *Include a social emotional perspective in curricular and assessment policies.* Students are motivated, engaged, and responsible when their education is connected to who they are and what they care about. Curricula should be relevant, real world, and socially oriented. Assessment practices should reinforce the development of social emotional skills, enable students to apply what they learn in relevant ways, and reflect the ways in which learning is collaborative and interactional.

- *Establish approaches to discipline through practices that preserve relationships, respect dignity, and provide psychological support.* Common approaches to student discipline isolate students from their peers and teachers, expel students from the school community, offer little opportunity for students to learn from and make amends for their actions, and fail to provide psychological and emotional support. Moreover, students of color and students in poverty are disproportionately affected by harsh or zero-tolerance policies, fueling the school-to-prison pipeline, which do nothing to address the chronic stressors that often result in behavioral issues for these students.

- *Enable educators to become psychological, as well as academic, experts.* Preservice teacher training programs, as well as teacher and administrator certification requirements and continuing education opportunities, need to provide educators with the skills they need to cultivate classrooms and schools that support students' psychological, social, and emotional needs along with their academic needs. To serve students well, this requires increased expertise in social emotional learning and child development.

Conclusion

This research underscores how meeting students' psychological, social, and emotional needs is not simply an add-on to the academic goal of education. The psychological side of learning is already powerfully interdependent with the academic—what matters is whether schools leverage these connections to educate the "whole child" and provide students with the psychological resources that they need to succeed in school. Social emotional learning offers an effective way to both meet students' psychological, social, emotional, and academic needs as well as prepare students to be personally and socially aware, skilled, and responsible to themselves and to their community.

As our findings show, taking a social emotional approach to education will be most effective when these strategies are developmentally informed, practiced through both whole-school implementation and direct instruction, and grounded in the needs of diverse student communities. Further, while incorporating a social emotional learning perspective is necessary to provide all students with an equitable, high-quality education suited to today's world, it is particularly critical to closing the opportunity gap and understanding the crucial ways in which schools today frequently underserve students of color and low-income students. While psychological resources cannot replace the material resource needs of schools, they are a vital part of the opportunity equation.

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This is a summary of the full report, which includes three case studies, a cross-case analysis, a technical report, and a research brief. To see the full series, please visit:
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