Open Circle's Input on Developing Guidelines for Social and Emotional Learning Curricula K-12

Presented March 8, 2011 to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education by Nova Biro and Nancy MacKay, Co-Directors of Open Circle

We appreciate the opportunity to share our experience with the Department.

Open Circle is a leading provider of evidence-based professional development and curricula for social and emotional learning (SEL) in Kindergarten through Grade 5. Since its inception in 1987, Open Circle has reached nearly half a million children and trained over 10,000 teachers, administrators, and school support staff members. Open Circle is currently used in 237 schools across 75 communities in Massachusetts.

Effective SEL implementation helps children by promoting their health and well-being and contributing to the prevention of violence, truancy, bullying and drug and alcohol abuse. Moreover, SEL is associated with significant gains on academic achievement tests, raising performance by 11 percentile points. Furthermore, SEL prepares young people for success in adulthood by helping students become good communicators and problem-solvers, cooperative members of a team, effective leaders, and caring, concerned members of their communities.

For more than 20 years Open Circle has designed and delivered SEL curricula and professional development to educators, administrators, paraprofessionals, and support staff in schools across Massachusetts and beyond. Based on this experience, we encourage the Department to consider the following best practices in its guidelines for K-12 SEL Curricula.

1. SEL programming should address the **two** key elements for effective SEL implementation:
    *   Skill-building for social and emotional competency, and
    *   Community-building to create safe, caring, and highly-engaging learning environments.

2. SEL curricula should meet the "S.A.F.E." standard defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning:
    *   **S**equenced and grade-differentiated lessons,
    *   **A**ctive learning tools (e.g. role-plays, games),

- **F**ocused time for SEL, and
- **E**xplicit social and emotional skill development.

3. SEL should be a whole-school initiative with professional development for all school staff (including teachers, administrators, specialists, and support staff) and multiple components for parent engagement.

4. SEL programming should include professional development about how to plan for, assess and sustain SEL practice over time. SEL assessment should involve measuring school climate, student social and emotional skill development, and student behavior.

5. SEL professional development should respect the unique needs of adult learners and provide opportunities for multiple cycles of learning, practice, reflection, and deeper learning.

6. Quality SEL programs should be research-based with clear evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of techniques, tools, and theory implemented. There are several existing lists of evidence-based SEL programs, including:
   - DOE's Expert Panel *Guidebook of Exemplary and Promising Safe, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools Programs;*
   - SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices; and
   - CASEL's *Safe and Sound: An Educational Leader's Guide to SEL Programs* (which is scheduled for update later this year).

7. SEL programming should provide a multi-faceted approach as well as explicit instruction on the identification, prevention and addressing of bullying behavior that aligns with Massachusetts' Law titled "An Act Relative to Bullying in Schools" (Chapter 92 of the Acts of 2010).

Thank you very much for this initial opportunity to share our experiences. We look forward to continuing this conversation and providing additional input to the Department as this process moves forward.

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Resource List for Developing Guidelines for Social and Emotional Learning Curricula K-12

CSEFEL's How to Choose a Social-Emotional Curriculum (for ages 0-5, but still quite relevant):
http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/dmg_choose_se_curriculum.pdf

CASEL's Implementation Guidance:
http://www.casel.org/implement/guidance.php

CASEL's SEL Assessment Resource Lists:
http://www.casel.org/assessment/index.php

CASEL's PowerPoint Introduction to SEL:
http://www.casel.org/downloads/Tool2_2009.ppt

Illinois Learning Standards for Social and Emotional Learning:
http://isbe.net/ils/social_emotional/standards.htm