

Swinging The Pendulum Towards Social Emotional Support

(A Position Paper)

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Abstract

This paper discusses how for 15 years mandated high-stakes testing took precedence as the prominent measure of student success. An unintentional consequence of this time was that social-emotional competencies were overlooked. Most recently, the Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) has developed and implemented an accreditation model that is based off of a more holistic look at student success. This new model broadens the scope of academic success, and uses the ideas of relationships, relevance, responsive culture, rigor, and results as key measurable components. This article posits that leveraging the expertise of school counselors in social and emotional development, and providing support for classroom teachers is paramount to the success of this accreditation model and initiative.

Swinging the pendulum towards stronger social-emotional support for students

“We, as educators, are paid to educate the academic side of an individual. However, if we truly want to teach and impact lives, we must be attuned to and care for the whole individual- personally, socially, emotionally, and developmentally.” This statement is how I have begun every undergraduate and graduate course I have taught for the last 11 years. Never have those words been more true; as the notion of caring for the “whole child” seems critical. The time is ripe to swing the pendulum towards stronger social-emotional support for students.

History

Over the last 15 or more years, schools nationwide have been solely driven by academic benchmarks due to mandated academic initiatives. With the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001(NCLB) a strong emphasis on testing and assessment measured outcomes took precedence. English language arts and math curricula were emphasized to meet testing and accreditation requirements. In an effort to enhance instruction and help to raise test scores, additional money and resources including testing resources and instructional coaches helped to meet the demands of this initiative that relied exclusively on state assessments. While strong teaching practices can influence and engage learners, unfortunately they cannot negate the fact that students still have additional stressors which impede learning. In sum, a well-constructed math lesson, full of educational strategies, differentiation, and engaging activities sadly is unable to supersede a student’s fear of bullying, abuse, or concern of neglect, trauma, or other concerns that might be impacting academic success.

Current Issues

School counselors and teachers see first-hand the deficits left by a one-dimensional form of education, and also remain faced with the current needs of today's students. Arguably, two of the largest deficits in our schools are the lack of student prosocial skills and the increase in student mental health needs. First, depersonalization is a growing trend in our society. Current technology affords students the opportunity to be "connected" via social media, and yet, people are "connecting" less and less. This lack of true connection manifests in a variety of ways, including but not limited to: depletion of social-emotional skills, a lack of employability skills, and a lack of resilience. Second, studies regarding children's mental health have led to the determination that school is the de facto mental health system for children (Blanchat, 2017). Without question, schools currently serve as the front line for psychological first aid. Teachers who are trained in content and pedagogy are left feeling ill equipped to address such sizable student needs. Sadly, these issues are not going away on their own.

Thankfully, Commissioner Watson was receptive to hearing the voice of Kansans on his listening tour. Business, industry, and educators alike spoke clearly on the need for developing employability skills, or "soft skills". As a result, the Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) developed the Kansans Can initiative, which defines social-emotional growth as one of the 5 major tenets of success. Likewise, the new accreditation model, Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA), broadens the scope of academic success, and uses the ideas of relationships, relevance, responsive culture, rigor, and results as key components of success. In these efforts, it is clear that student success is not narrowly defined by one test score, but broadened to account for other measures of success and well-being. Kansas is moving in a different direction and swinging the pendulum towards stronger social-emotional well-being as part of addressing the "whole child".

Moving Forward

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So how do schools begin to develop and strengthen social emotional skills and competencies?

Utilizing the school counselor and his/her expertise is the first step in strengthening social-emotional development and student support within a school. School counselors' training has evolved over the years to include three key domains: social emotional, academic and career. School counselors utilize P-12 curricular standards which cover each of the three domains and provide a scope and sequence through an articulated, developmentally sound curriculum. Counselors also have training in the areas of: helping relationships, social and cultural diversity, group work, assessment, and research, in addition to academic and career support. School counselors are skilled in crisis management, trauma, bully and violence prevention, and are uniquely trained to develop partnerships to collaborate and consult with mental health and community resources to support students in need. Every student deserves access to the programs and competencies that a school counselor can provide. Leveraging the expertise of the school counselor in social and emotional development is paramount to the success of students and staff. Helping to develop classroom teachers' skills around social and emotional competencies is also important. Today's students need more than a teacher of academics; they need a person who supports them personally and socially as both a mentor and advocate. Currently teacher preparatory programs do not provide training in social-emotional support, and yet teachers are faced with these issues daily. Therefore, it is essential that teacher preparatory programs provide professional development and/or deliver lessons designed around these issues. By providing training and support of basic conflict resolution skills, prosocial skills, and fundamental social-emotional skills, teachers will feel better equipped to discuss and model prosocial behaviors in their classrooms.

As it stands, there are simple ways that current classroom teachers can infuse social-emotional support into the classroom. Teachers can help attend to and strengthen social-emotional behaviors by:

- Utilizing student-centered pedagogy

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- Emphasizing relationships
- Striking a balance between accountability and availability (Souers & Hall, 2016)
- Acknowledging issues that may impede learning
- Thinking about resilience as something you can practice

In closing, academic rigor is necessary; and strong, research based teaching strategies and instruction are also required. However, while schools' previous focus on academic rigor and success may have seemed necessary and admirable at the time, those efforts were narrowly focused on academics and state assessment success. We have come to a critical point where the pendulum needs to shift towards stronger social-emotional support of students, and school counselors are ready to take the charge. Social-emotional issues must be considered, and school counselors' expertise in social-emotional development and building comprehensive school counseling programs make them likely leaders for this initiative.

References:

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