

Social and Emotional Development: The Next School Reform Frontier

May 2015 | The Brookings Institution

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Introduction

As Congress wrestles with rewriting the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (currently better known as the No Child Left Behind law or NCLB), it is high time policymakers address a crucial aspect of K-12 school improvement that has long been given short shrift by legislators and educators—the social and emotional development of youngsters who chronically lag far behind academically. More than 30 years after the controversial *A Nation at Risk* report triggered successive waves of reform, America’s schools have unquestionably gained ground: achievement gaps along racial and ethnic lines have narrowed and high school graduation rates nationally are climbing. Yet progress in urban districts that largely serve low-income and minority students is still stalled.

The sobering statistics

- As recently as 2013, half of black fourth-graders and 47 percent Latino fourth-graders scored “Below Basic” in reading according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as the “nation’s report card.” Minority youngsters, who will comprise a growing proportion of the U.S. labor force, suffer disproportionately from high suspension and grade retention rates, and they still drop out in droves.
- Students who struggle perpetually in school often lack the social and emotional skills needed to succeed academically. They act out, interact poorly with teachers and classmates, pay scattered attention in class, and skip school.
- Some educators view social and emotional development as peripheral. Others lack the time or energy to address it because of unrelenting pressure to improve test scores as mandated under NCLB.

On the bright side

- Research and real-world experience convincingly show that interventions aimed at developing youngsters’ social and emotional skills boost their achievement levels and curtail behavioral problems.
- Cost-benefit analyses demonstrate that these approaches produce significant benefits that appreciably exceed their cost.

For the sake of our children and society, we must invent—and invest in—a new educational paradigm. We urgently need public schools that are devoted explicitly to the academic and social development of struggling students. This dual mission should drive the structure, curriculum and staffing of these schools.

Wise federal, state and local policy should reflect the reality of America’s children who remain left far behind. The smartest way to jumpstart school improvement is, at long last, to give social and emotional development its due in education policy, appropriations and practice. Congress should bear these empirically-validated and academically compelling policies in mind as they reauthorize NCLB.

Social and Emotional Development: The Next School Reform Frontier

The Broad Foundation rendered a stinging verdict on the state of public school reform by suspending the \$1 million it awards annually to the urban school district that demonstrates the greatest improvement in boosting student academic performance and narrowing the achievement gaps afflicting low-income and minority pupils. The foundation cited sluggish academic results as a primary reason. Congressional leaders currently engaged rewriting the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act and No Child Left Behind law should take heed and devise fresh strategies for educating youngsters stranded on the wrong end of the achievement gap.

Nearly one-third of a century ago, a panel appointed by U.S. Secretary of Education Terrell Bell issued a harsh critique of America's schools in a report entitled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. It triggered an avalanche of reform policies and initiatives that have engulfed public schools ever since, from the top down and bottom up. The dizzying litany of reforms that have been imposed consecutively, concurrently and even at cross-purposes includes: the federal No Child Left Behind law; tougher academic standards and Common Core; high-stakes tests; state takeover and mayoral control of local school districts; teacher accountability and merit pay; whole school reform; school vouchers; public school choice; small public schools and charter schools; and school turnaround.

Clear signs of progress shine through the pervasive haze generated by all this reform. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) serves as the nation's report card for public and private school students. According to the 2012 NAEP report, 9- and 13-year-olds scored higher in reading and math that year than did their counterparts in the

early 1970s. The achievement gaps between white and black students and between white and Latino students have closed significantly over the course of four generations due to larger academic gains registered by minority versus white youngsters.

There is heartening news as well on the high school graduation front. The rate continues its steady climb in recent years, reaching 81 percent for 2012-13. Among minority groups who traditionally bring up the rear, the graduation rate for Latino students soared to 73 percent, while the rate for black students rose to 69 percent. These gains thankfully extend to black males, who routinely suffer the lowest graduation rates among all racial, ethnic and gender groups.

Still, the national obsession with testing and accountability continues to roil public education, as evidenced by the pushback against the Common Core and the harsh sentences imposed on educators in the Atlanta public schools for rigging exam results. A blue ribbon committee established by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences foresaw the perils of taking testing to excess. The NRC panel's scan of the literature raised warning flags when it comes to students who are struggling in school. It noted, for instance, that when performance incentives for educators and schools are pegged to the number of "proficient" students, the result is extra attention to those who are just below the threshold of proficiency, and may even trigger competition for proficient students who do not pose a threat of negative consequences. Furthermore, the panel found evidence of attempts to increase scores by excluding low-performing students from tests.

Demographic trends indicate that the U.S. economy will rely increasingly on Latinos and African Americans because they, and especially the former, will comprise a steadily growing proportion of the adult workforce. Yet despite glimmers of progress in student achievement, these economically indispensable groups, along with the overlapping population of low-income youngsters, consistently lag farthest behind academically.

As recently as 2013, 50 percent of African-American fourth-graders and 47 percent of Latino fourth-graders scored *Below Basic* – roughly two notches under grade level -- in reading according to NAEP. That is certainly a welcome contrast to 2002, when 68 percent of black youngsters and 61 percent of Latino students respectively scored *Below Basic* at the same grade level. The Center on Education Policy projects that it could take decades for minority and low-income students to catch up with their better performing peers. The Center even offered the astonishing projection that in the state of Washington, for example, it will take 105 years to close the black-white gap in fourth-grade reading!

Compounding pervasive low achievement is the problem of rampant school suspensions. The demographic profile of low achievers roughly mirrors that of youngsters who are disproportionately suspended. A study by the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA revealed yawning disparities in disciplinary actions and grade retention imposed on African-American students. Suspension rates vary by state and by school district. The proportions in Texas, for instance, border on astonishing. During 2009-10, more than half of all students in Texas were suspended or expelled at least once between the 7th and 12th grades.

The high incidence of suspensions extends to students with disabilities. In 2009-10, the Chicago school system suspended nearly 63 percent of black students with disabilities. The

term “disability” typically evokes images of physical infirmities or mental retardation. Yet under the law, disability also encompasses learning difficulties, a phrase which potentially covers youngsters who are faltering because their teachers do not know how to reach or teach them.

The picture when it comes to grade retention basically resembles that for suspensions. Nationwide data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education’s civil rights office reveals that black and Hispanic students are far more likely to repeat a grade, especially in elementary and middle school. Across all grades, African-American pupils were 3½ times more likely than whites to be retained in grade. Hispanics fared a little better; they were twice as likely to be held back.

Distressingly large numbers of Latino and African-American youngsters give up and drop out of high school entirely. Unfortunately for them, many of these youngsters attend lousy urban high schools, labeled “dropout factories”, where fewer than half of the students reach senior year on time and where graduation is not the norm. Despite the welcome progress among youngsters who are dropout prone, the Schott Foundation reports that between 2010 and 2012 the gap between black and white males actually widened again to 21 percentage points after narrowing in recent years. As recently as 2012, Schott ventured the alarming projection that:

“...(A)t the current pace of progress for both, it would take nearly **50 years** for **black males** to secure the same high school graduation rates as their **white male** peers.”

Typically we view educational disparities, from achievement levels to dropout rates, through an ethnic prism. Yet the achievement gap between poor and rich children has widened significantly in the last three decades and is now nearly twice as large as the black-white achievement gap. Thus when it comes to low-income and minority students, the bottom line, after all these years, all the interventions, all the testing and tough love, and all the investment, is encouraging yet still underwhelming.

There is little hope of dramatically improving woefully low-performing schools so long as we cling resolutely to the idea that, as presently conceived and structured, these schools can reach the large cohorts of youngsters who, while technically enrolled, have disengaged and dialed out, as a prelude to dropping out. Conventional public schools focused exclusively or predominantly on strictly scholastic objectives clearly are not attuned to their needs and do not work for them, much less serve their best interests.

Students who struggle perpetually in school often lack the social and emotional skills needed to succeed academically. They act out, interact poorly with teachers and classmates, pay scattered attention in class, and skip school. By contrast, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) notes that youngsters who are socially and emotionally developed manage their emotions, calm themselves when angry, establish positive relationships, make responsible and safe decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively and ethically.

Social and emotional competence bears directly on children's ability to learn and achieve in school. Recognizing that cognitive and non-cognitive skills combine to contribute to student success, the influential National Research Council empaneled a committee of experts in education, psychology and economics to formulate a definition of 21st century skills and

explain their relationship to achieving positive outcomes in education, work, and other areas of life.

According to Education Week, Paul R. Sackett, a psychology professor at the University of Minnesota who served on NRC committee, argues that "research...points to five key non-cognitive indicators that a student will need to be able to complete college and become successfully employed..." He contends that "the biggest predictor of success is a student's conscientiousness, as measured by such traits as dependability, perseverance through tasks, and work ethic. Agreeableness, including teamwork, and emotional stability were the next-best predictors of college achievement, followed by variations on extroversion and openness to new experiences."

Social and emotional competence matters enormously in the workplace as well. The traits that employers value in their employees include self-esteem, goal-setting, self-motivation, pride in work accomplished, interpersonal skills and teamwork. Daniel Goleman reinforces this point in his influential book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. As he points out, "Today companies worldwide routinely look through the lens of EI (emotional intelligence) in hiring, promoting, and developing their employees."

Sadly it comes as no surprise that low-income and minority children are more likely than their economically advantaged white counterparts to exhibit the academic indifference and behavioral difficulties associated with social and emotional deficits. In 2005, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimated that 14 percent of parents living below the poverty line reported social and emotional difficulties in their children.

Children raised in poverty and exposed to violence often exhibit symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, including flashbacks, inability to focus attention due to mental

distractions, lack of motivation, apathy and depression, and unpredictable behaviors. “The psychological and emotional distress associated with living under dangerous, stressful, unpredictable conditions,” Robert Pianta and Daniel Walsh observe, “are some of the primary reasons why these children have difficulty attending and learning in classroom settings.” These youngsters, they found, “lacked persistence, attentiveness, or motivation, often wandering aimlessly around the room. A striking proportion – 80% -- of these children was referred to special education by the end of first grade.”

Spurred by the strength and consistency of clinical research as well as by studies of prevention-oriented and youth development programs, many school-based programs have been designed and implemented specifically to promote youngsters’ social and emotional development. These interventions range from strengthening children’s social and emotional skills and “teaching” teachers to address their pupils’ social and emotional needs, to organizing entire schools – including faculty, staff and parents – to attend to the academic and social development of the children. These programs may operate within the standard school day, during extracurricular hours, even outside the building after school ends. They vary from after-school courses taught by specialists to school-wide efforts incorporating curriculum, teacher professional development, school activities and parent training.

Do SEL programs actually work? A large-scale meta-analysis of more than 200 programs involving roughly 270,000 students from kindergarten through high school gauged the effectiveness of school-based social and emotional learning programs. The study affirmed the benefits of social and emotional development programs situated in schools. What’s especially noteworthy in terms of education policy and practice, the researchers reported that the academic performance of students served by SEL programs improved

significantly. The gain reported in some reviewed studies was equivalent to moving a student ranked in the middle of the class academically up to the top 40 percent during the course of the intervention. In fact the achievement gains were comparable to the results of more than seventy meta-analyses of strictly educational interventions.

On the non-academic side of the ledger, compared to their non-participating peers, students served by SEL programs improved significantly on five key non-academic measures. They demonstrated greater social skills, less emotional stress, better attitudes, fewer conduct problems like bullying and suspensions, and more frequent positive behaviors, such as cooperation and help for other students.

Another study focused more narrowly on SEL interventions in public elementary schools serving large numbers of children from poor families living in high-crime areas of Seattle. Here, too, the findings affirmed the value of school-based SEL initiatives fully six years later. Compared to non-participants, fewer students involved in the full intervention had engaged in violent delinquent acts or heavy drinking. They also evidenced more commitment and attachment to school, higher academic achievement, and less misbehavior in school. Evaluations of Dr. James Comer’s School Development Program, a school-wide model emphasizing social and emotional development, also demonstrate the academic and other payoffs of the approach.

Furthermore, the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education (CBCSE) at Teachers College assessed the available evidence on the economic value of social and emotional learning. In a breakthrough study released earlier this year, CBCSE reported that improving student’s social and emotional skills produces measurable benefits that exceed its costs, often by considerable amounts. For every dollar invested in SEL programs, there is a return of

eleven dollars, a rate of economic return that would be the envy even of hedge funds.

Some educators view SEL as peripheral. Others recognize the value but are unable to allocate the time or muster the energy to address it because of the unrelenting pressure to improve students' test scores. The cruel irony, of course, is that the challenges facing educators in the lowest performing schools are compounded by high concentrations of youngsters whose social and emotional shortcomings impede their inclination and ability to learn.

As Robert Balfanz, the Johns Hopkins expert on the dropout phenomenon, has observed, in schools with steep dropout rates, only one in five youngsters can be described as typical students whom high schools were designed to educate, who attend school regularly, who are not assigned to special education, and whose reading and math skills are grade level or better. "Four out of five students need substantial and sustained supports in order to succeed at all, let alone in a high-standards high-stakes testing environment," he notes.

Anthony Bryk and his colleagues who evaluated the Chicago school reform initiative reported that an endemic concern for urban schoolteachers is students with acute personal and social needs. As the authors cautioned, "The natural inclination for school staff is to respond as fully humanly as possible to these heartfelt personal needs; but if the number of students presenting substantial needs is too large, even extraordinary teachers can be quickly overwhelmed.... (I)t can be difficult at the school level to maintain collective attention on instructional improvement when the social needs of children continue to cry out for adult attention. It is easy to see how the core work of instruction and its improvement can quickly become a secondary priority."

Many conventional schools are ill-suited to the needs of youngsters who have palpably tuned out of the education offered there. This stark reality in Chicago prompted Bryk to call for a

much more powerful model of school development, which would entail transforming schooling through a comprehensive and integrated set of community, school, and related social program initiatives, including expanded student learning opportunities and a strong programmatic focus on the myriad of social, emotional, and physical health needs that impede the learning of many children. Actually, he and his colleagues called and raised themselves by envisioning an even more radical model. "Perhaps we should be aiming toward something more akin to a total institution that creates an island of safety and order, established social routing, and new norms for academic effort in order to counter the external forces pushing students in very different directions."

Stitching together these threads of research and reality, I am convinced that the futility of the prevailing approaches to "educating" disengaged youngsters cries out for fresh thinking and strategies. Tweaking customary methods that repeatedly fall short will result in the continued "miseducation" of youngsters who have dialed out of traditional schooling. Accordingly, I call for an entirely new paradigm, namely public academies devoted explicitly and unequivocally to the academic *and* social development of youngsters who are struggling mightily in school and in life.

Children with varying social and emotional needs require varying doses of development calibrated to their needs. Light "doses" of support provided by teachers, other school personnel and youth development programs after school may suffice for some, especially preschoolers and elementary school children. As estrangement from school intensifies and hardens, especially among middle-school and high-school-aged students, more robust social and emotional interventions may be indicated. At the far end of the disengagement continuum lie youngsters teetering on the precipice of dropping out. Yet even these virtually lost causes can be saved by concerted second

chance programs dedicated to their social as well as academic development.

One robust and successful example is the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program, a civilian intervention devoted to turning around the aspirations and life prospects of school dropouts. It treats academic and social development as co-equal objectives. The basic experience consists of a 22-week residential stint on a military base. These days ChalleNGe operates in 27 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia, serving roughly five thousand 16-to-18 year-olds annually. Since its inception in 1993, more than 121,000 former dropouts have graduated from the program.

While the program attracts dropouts from all walks of life, they share certain characteristics, among them disenchantment with school, truancy, disruptive and violent behavior, disrespect for teachers, family conflict, poverty, parental and personal substance abuse, drug-dealing, gang membership, and physical abuse.

Eight core components reflect the program's commitment to academic and social development. The *Academic Excellence* component prepares them to obtain a high school diploma or GED certificate, or at a bare minimum, become functionally literate and employable. Through *Leadership/Followership* training, cadets earn opportunities to lead their peers, while also learning to heed the instructions of their teachers and mentors. *Responsible Citizenship* covers the rights and obligations of citizens, voting, the role of government, and the legal system. Cadets devote at least 40 hours to *Community Service*, such as building a walking path in a park. These activities provide opportunities for experiential learning where the participants practice their reading, math, planning, and teamwork skills. Military researchers have found that, compared with traditional instruction, this kind of learning-to-do instruction generates rapid and robust gains in job-related reading and math literacy that endure over time. In *Life-Coping*

Skills, participants develop techniques for dealing with anger, stress and frustration, handling peer pressure, and making constructive choices. *Job Skills* focuses on exploring career options, developing resumes, filling out job applications, and preparing for interviews. *Physical Fitness* and *Health and Hygiene* cover what one would expect.

Beyond these core ingredients, ChalleNGe embodies other key attributes associated with effective social and emotional development. Students who struggle academically are often devalued and stigmatized as failures by adults. They yearn for adults, like those in this program, who genuinely value them and challenge them to succeed. By relying on experiential learning, ChalleNGe departs from traditional pedagogy, which clearly has not worked with youngsters who chronically lag behind academically and lose interest in school. The program fosters a positive sense of belonging among young people whose alternative often is gangs. They also teach young people to function as interdependent team members upon whom others can rely, rather than Lone Rangers answerable to no one. Absorbing this lesson is one of the keys to growing up and getting ahead in civilian life

Furthermore, ChalleNGe instills self-discipline, which in turn motivates youngsters to succeed. The related structure and routine help negate the destructive culture of the streets. The program recognizes and rewards youngsters frequently for virtually any accomplishment or contribution, however modest. This demonstrates that advancement is well within reach for young people who seldom experience success, at least within legitimate organizations. Lastly, immediate accountability and predictable consequences for misbehaving are staples of ChalleNGe, which prizes an orderly climate where faculty can focus on teaching and students need not fear for their safety.

The dual mission of fostering academic and social development drives the staffing

configuration. The unique feature is the so-called cadre, namely the full-time military veterans, retirees, National Guard reservists and youth workers who are considered the heart of the program. They roam the corridors to keep order so that cadets can learn and teachers can teach. They listen to and counsel the young people. They make sure homework gets done, correct wayward behavior on the spot, and ensure that cadets dress appropriately.

A random-assignment evaluation by MDRC provides convincing evidence that Challenge works. Roughly two years after graduating, cadets were much more likely than controls to have obtained high school diplomas and GED certificates. They also were more likely to have received vocational training, earned college credits, or enrolled in college. Fifty-eight percent of participants held jobs compared to 51 percent of non-participants and they averaged 20 percent more in earnings annually. Although MDRC reported no significant behavioral differences, there are promising indications from some sites that Challenge may help curb teenage pregnancy.

RAND conducted a cost-benefit analysis using MDRC's results and concluded that Challenge pays tangible dividends to society. Per cadet, "Total benefits of \$40,985 are 2.66 times total costs, implying that the Challenge program generates \$2.66 in benefits for every dollar spent on the program. The estimated return on investment...is 166 percent." Actually, RAND believes that the payoff could be greater because the benefits of higher educational attainment were not fully captured by the evaluation. In an MDRC survey of Challenge graduates, the interviewees enthusiastically recounted how the program enabled them to break habits and generated profound, positive changes in their attitudes, expectations, and self-confidence.

Challenge demonstrates convincingly the value of investing in a new educational paradigm for

deeply disengaged students who are ill-served by public schools as we know them. Accordingly, I envision middle schools and high schools devoted explicitly to the academic and social development of struggling youngsters. These would be small civilian—as opposed to military—schools of up to 500 students that are organized as charter schools and/or public schools with operational flexibility.

The dual mission would drive the structure, size, curriculum and extracurricular offerings, staffing, schedule and funding. As for the curriculum, the academies would offer the courses typically mandated by the state and host school district. Ideally, school districts which establish these academies could persuade the state education agency to relax certain high stakes testing and higher level course requirements. After all, given where these academically troubled youngsters start out, it may not be realistic to expect all of them to make up so much lost ground and reach the finish line articulated by increasingly rigorous state graduation standards.

If the state concurs, the academies might provide a variation of the traditional curriculum by configuring the civic responsibility component of Challenge as a civics course incorporating experiential learning. The health and hygiene component, which includes sex education, could be designed to satisfy the customary science requirement. The physical fitness component should easily meet any physical education requirements.

Other components akin to Challenge could be fashioned as elective courses and extracurricular activities. With the active participation of local businesses, the job skills component could cultivate specific competencies and attitudes that are aligned with actual job opportunities, pair youngsters with mentors and summer internships, and steer them to real jobs upon graduation. The life-coping skills component, which runs the gamut from behavioral ingredients to personal

financial planning, could be designed as an extracurricular offering. Community service incorporating experiential learning would fit right into the curriculum of the academies.

Staffing obviously is crucial to the ability of the academies to accomplish their unique mission. The standard academic courses require state-certified teachers. It is essential to enlist teachers committed to working with “these” youngsters in “this” setting. Given the mission and program components, the academy staff must consist of more than teachers. The staff should include an appropriate contingent of civilian equivalents of cadre members. These can be social workers, youth development workers, military vets, teachers and athletic coaches who are carefully screened and suited to the role. I lean toward calling these indispensable staff members *life coaches*. They would teach courses, mentor students, closely monitor their progress, maintain discipline and order, keep an eye on classrooms, corridors and school grounds, oversee a version of a student chain of command, and handle other components, such as physical fitness, leadership and followership, and community service.

Yes, these schools may cost more per student at the outset. Their base budgets might resemble those of comparably-sized themed public schools. To that we add the cost of life coaches, extracurricular programs fashioned after the ChalleNGe components, longer school days and years, and enriched career preparation and exploration programs. Consolidating some courses and program components could reduce the incremental cost of the more expansive curriculum associated with academic and social development. Optimally these academies should occupy their own buildings instead of co-locating in large facilities with other schools, in order to maintain their distinct culture, identity and atmosphere. Lastly, community service projects and experiential learning that take students outside the building would cost more.

On the other hand, these academies may generate meaningful savings and efficiencies compared to traditional schools. Assuming the atmosphere is orderly and the students are focused on learning, the academies may actually get by with larger classes. They may need fewer administrators and no security personnel who do only that, since the life coaches who mentor students can also keep a watchful eye on them, as well as the corridors and grounds. It may be reasonable to expect the principal and other administrators to double up and teach one of the curricular components. The academies can hire life coaches who handle the leadership/followership and physical fitness components. In other words, it may be feasible to recruit staff that can multi-task by performing administrative or mentoring roles while also carrying part of the instructional load. Additional efficiencies may accrue from integrating technology-based instruction deeply into the curriculum. If these academies succeed, school systems might save money by retaining fewer youngsters in grade, scaling back summer school, and graduating more students on time. There would also be less need for other alternative programs and GED offerings for push-outs and dropouts.

These costs and efficiencies would be realized in the near term. Taking a cue from the Teacher’s College study as well as RAND’s analysis of ChalleNGe, the academies could generate significant intermediate and longer term savings as well if they succeed. As a non-residential approach, there is a risk they will be less impactful because they are less all-encompassing and all-consuming. On the upside, though, the academy experience may actually be more beneficial since the youngsters could attend throughout their middle school or high school years. The staff would thus have greater opportunity to build better bridges to community colleges and full-fledged colleges, career training programs, summer internships, and prospective employers. This might generate even stronger outcomes when it

comes to education, employment, earnings and eventual self-sufficiency.

Far-too-many American youngsters are marginalized academically, deeply disengaged from school, and destined for social and economic oblivion in the 21st century. They will be unable to uphold their obligations as citizens and providers. Their plight stems from many factors: family poverty and economic circumstances beyond their control; their own indifference to achievement and disenchantment with formal education as they have known it; and the inflexibility of public schools that fail to meet these troubled young people halfway.

Of course parents, churches and communities bear primary responsibility for socializing children. But if in reality they are not up to it, what then? Consigning these youngsters to academic purgatory or, worse still, the criminal justice system serves neither society's interests nor, obviously, theirs. Research and real-world experience demonstrate convincingly that investing in the academic and social development of youngsters left way behind pays welcome dividends. SEL deserves, at long last, a prominent place in school reform policy and practice.

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