Creating an Emotionally Intelligent School District: A Skills-Based Approach

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Introduction
School personnel have long understood the importance of programs to simultaneously enhance social, emotional and academic learning (Elias, Zins, Weissberg et al. 1997; Greenberg, Weissberg, O'Brien et al. 2003). Links between these areas of learning have been unclear. However, a recent meta-analysis of over 300 studies has shown that SEL programs significantly improve social-emotional skills as well as academic performance (Durlak & Weissberg 2005). Although these findings are promising and the importance of such programs is evident, actually incorporating the programs into districts can be challenging, as they require school-wide support (Elias et al. 1997; Zins, Weissberg, Wang & Walberg 2004). For example, according to CASEL (2003), initiatives to integrate SEL programs into schools should provide training in these skills to both teachers and administrators in addition to students, and should have support at all levels of the district. Moreover, the programs should be field-tested, evidenced-based, and rooted in sound psychological or educational theory (Elias et al. 1997; Matthews, Zeidner & Roberts 2002; Zins et al. 2004). CASEL’s (2003) recommendations also emphasize:

- teaching children to apply social-emotional skills both in and out of school
- building connections to schools by creating a caring and engaging learning environment
• providing developmentally and culturally appropriate instruction
• enhancing school performance by addressing the cognitive, affective and social dimensions of learning
• encouraging school-family partnerships
• including continuous evaluation and improvement.

In this chapter, we describe a model developed to address these needs, which was employed to create an Emotionally Intelligent School District in Valley Stream, New York. Our work in the district began after the second author, a former school principal, had attended an EI workshop developed by the third author and psychologist David Caruso (Wolfe & Caruso 2000). The principal believed that infusing programs that are designed to develop the social-emotional skills of administrators, teachers and students would help to create a nurturing school environment and prevent increasingly prevalent problem behaviors such as substance use and abuse, and teen pregnancy. Furthermore, these types of programs were compatible with mandates set by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, and the New York State Education Department’s (NYSED) Project SAVE—the Safe Schools Against Violence in Education Act of 2001—which required instruction in civility, citizenship and CE.

The process we describe is rooted in the model of EI promoted by Mayer and Salovey (1997), which involves four fundamental emotion-related skills:

1. Identification and expression of emotion.
2. Use of emotion to facilitate thinking.
3. Understanding of emotion.
4. Management of emotion in oneself and others.

In this tradition, EI relates to a person’s capacity to reason about emotions and to process emotional information in order to enhance cognitive processes and regulate behavior. Importantly, this model focuses on the four skills and does not incorporate other variables such as personality characteristics, like optimism and empathy, that might accompany EI but are better addressed as distinct from EI (Brackett & Mayer 2003). In our view, restricting EI to a skills-based approach enables the assessment of the degree to which EI skills specifically contribute to a person’s behavior; it also provides a firm foundation for developing programs to increase these skills and for evaluating the efficacy of the program (Brackett & Gehr in press).

Table 9.1 gives an overview of Mayer and Salovey’s (1997) four-domain EI model. The skills are expected to influence a person’s ability to communicate effectively with others, handle stress and conflict, and create a positive work environment. For example, the teacher who is sensitive to subtle changes in emotions may notice sooner when a student begins to get bored or irritated, and perhaps empathize better with the student, depending on the situation. In this way, the teacher has demonstrated good identification of emotion and good use of emotion respectively. Moreover, if the teacher knows what caused the student’s reaction, thus showing good understanding of emotion, they may be able help the student to effectively handle the emotion, thereby showing good management of emotion.

There are certain performance tests that map onto the Mayer and Salovey (1997) model, including the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Tests for both adults (MSCEIT) (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso 2002a) and children (MSCEIT-Youth Version) (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso 2005). Research now shows that EI, as measured with these tests, is associated with a wide range of important outcomes at home (Brackett, Warner & Bosco 2005), at school (Gil-Olarte Márquez, Palomera Martín & Brackett in press) and in the workplace (Lopes, Côté, Grewal et al. under review). For example, in a recent study involving approximately 250 Grade 5 and 6 learners, EI scores as assessed by the MSCEIT-YV were associated significantly with teacher-rated outcomes, including adaptability, leadership, study skills, aggression, anxiety, conduct problems, hyperactivity, and attention and learning problems, as well as self-reported smoking behavior, all in the expected directions (rs in the .20 to .50 range) (Brackett, Rivers & Salovey 2005). These findings remained statistically significant after controlling for verbal intelligence, ethnicity and grades. Moreover, the findings support and extend prior research on EI with adolescents (see, for example, Trinidad and Johnson (2001)) and are consistent with several studies conducted on college students (see, for example, Brackett, Mayer and Warner (2004); and Lopes et al. (2004); as well as Brackett and Salovey (2004); and Mayer, Lopes, and Caruso (2004)).
We believe that our work in Valley Stream District number 24, which is now being replicated in other districts, provides a useful model of how to implement successfully district-wide SEL programs. Our approach entails two full-day workshops for teachers and administrators. In the first, EI Critical Skills Training, participants learn innovative strategies, tools and techniques to:

- increase their awareness of the importance of EI skills
- enhance their ability to employ these skills in their personal and professional relationships.

In the second workshop, teachers learn how to easily integrate an emotional literacy program into history and language arts curricula, as well as district initiatives such as CE.

We now explore the two workshops in more detail.

Stage 1: EI Critical Skills Training for School Leaders and Teachers

Overview

This workshop is highly interactive and provides participants with:

- in-depth information about the Mayer and Salovey (1997) model
- knowledge of how EI skills can be applied to professional practice
- a powerful tool, the emotional Blueprint, which helps them to apply EI skills in their personal lives and work environments
- an opportunity to provide us with their feedback on the program.

There is also the option of an additional half-day, which includes a personal assessment of the four EI skills with feedback. Time constraints and district-specific objectives need to be considered in the determination of the suitability of the one- versus two-day option.

The repertoire of tools offered in the workshop is designed to serve as a set of coping mechanisms for stress, which continually ranks as the top reason for teachers leaving their jobs (Darling-Hammond 2001). Furthermore, the workshop focuses on the improvement of relationships among all the various stakeholders in the school community, as interpersonal relationships have been shown to be a prominent determinant of school efficacy (Taddie & Reynolds 2000). Topics include classroom management and healthy interactions with parents and administrators, with an emphasis on creating a productive, safer, satisfying and caring school environment. The workshop also pays attention to leadership and professional development, and provides guidance to enhance EI skills.

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Each EI skill is presented with group activities, simulations, discussions and ideas for applying the skills in school. For example, to learn about the value of using the emotion-based planning and problem-solving model taught in the workshop, small group discussions are formed using several real case studies pertaining to classroom management, bullying and parent interactions, among others. The case studies demonstrate how the Blueprint can be useful in every aspect of intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships.

Personal EI assessment and feedback

Participants in the extended workshop complete the MSCEIT. The MSCEIT is administered online and takes approximately 40 minutes to complete. The test assesses the four-domain model of EI—identifying, using, understanding and managing emotions—with items that are divided between eight tasks, two for each domain. An individual’s score is computed by comparing their responses either:

1. to those of the normative sample, comprising over 5,000 people from the US and Canada
2. or to a group of 21 emotions experts who have spent much of their careers investigating how emotions are conveyed in facial expressions, emotional language and emotion regulation.

You can find more information on the MSCEIT in Brackett and Salovey (2004); and Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2002b).

Participants receive one of the following five types of feedback on their MSCEIT scores, with a brief description:

1. Develop.
2. Consider developing.
3. Competent.
4. Skilled.
5. Expert.

Participants are informed that the MSCEIT is just one way of estimating EI skills, and that low or high scores may not necessarily reflect actual performance, but may have an impact on performance. Also, considerable time is spent on discussing how individuals may be able to develop their emotion-related skills with proper training and effort, and how individuals with high EI can potentially leverage their skills more effectively using the Blueprint.

The emotional Blueprint

The Blueprint (Caruso & Salovey 2004; Wolfe & Caruso 2004) integrates scientific theory on EI with its practical applications. The Blueprint helps
participants to deal effectively with their own and others’ emotional experiences in order to enhance interpersonal interactions.

To learn how to apply the Blueprint, individuals analyze a situation that elicited an emotional response. They ask themselves: Who was involved? What were the circumstances? Then they work through the EI model, skill by skill. The steps of the Blueprint are hierarchical, beginning with identifying emotions and ending with managing emotions or using the specific strategies that people need to handle their own emotions and those of others. In Table 9.2, the four skills in the first column represent each EI domain. The questions in the second column provide a template for selecting tactics or strategies for dealing with the emotional content of situations based on the skills. The statements in the third column represent scientific principles embedded in the EI model that support the selection of these questions.

We now explore how a school principal applied the Blueprint to dealing with an extremely challenging parent. The parent was adamant about having her child’s class changed, even though the principal and faculty did not believe it was in the best interest of the child. Based on dealings with the parent, the principal knew that the situation could escalate until he was forced to accommodate her request.

The example has been broken down into the four steps:

- **Step 1: Identifying emotion.** The principal identified how the parent was feeling, for example, concern for the child, irritation with the parent’s reaction, worry that his advice would be ignored. Then he asked about various emotions that the parent may be experiencing, such as concern, worry and a need to be combative.

- **Step 2: Using emotion to facilitate thinking.** He determined how he wanted the parent to feel about the situation, for example, to open to various potential solutions and secure that the child’s best interest is considered, and how he wanted to feel himself, such as satisfied with the solution and optimistic about his relationship with the parent.

### Table 9.2 The emotional Blueprint

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EI skill</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Scientific basis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify</td>
<td>How do we both feel?</td>
<td>Emotions contain data about people and the environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use</td>
<td>How do I want each of us to feel?</td>
<td>Feelings influence how we think and what we think about.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>Why are we feeling the way we do and how might the feelings change?</td>
<td>Emotions have underlying causes, and they follow certain rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage</td>
<td>What are we able to do—and what are we willing to do—to keep or change these feelings?</td>
<td>Optimal decisions and actions need to blend thinking with the wisdom in feelings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Wolfe and Caruso 2004.)

- **Step 3: Understanding emotion.** Now he needed to understand his and the parent’s feelings and how the feelings could change to lead to the best possible outcome. For example, he decided that in order to shift the parent’s state of mind from combative to open and trusting, he should demonstrate empathy for the parent, compassion for the child, and commitment to making a decision that would be supported by the school and the parent.

- **Step 4: Managing emotion.** The principal needed to determine what he was willing and able to do about the situation. He decided first to inform the parent in a caring tone that he was willing to place the child in the classroom that she had requested. After watching the parent’s demeanor change from combative to satisfied, the principal then asked the parent if he could share why he and the faculty felt the change was not in the child’s best interest. The parent agreed. The principal gave his explanation in a compassionate way. The parent then asked for time to reflect, and eventually decided to allow her child to remain in the current classroom placement. Finally, a better relationship was developed between the parent and principal.

**Evaluation of the workshop**

The final element of this first workshop is an evaluation of the training program. Thus far, evaluations have relied primarily on written feedback in the form of a questionnaire distributed at the end of the workshop as well as anecdotes from teachers and administrators who have either used the Blueprint themselves or received feedback from colleagues. In Valley Stream, a core group of 14 people participated in the training, including the superintendent, assistant superintendent, three principals, the author of the district’s CE curriculum and eight faculty members.

In a series of interviews conducted six months after the training, the authors discovered a variety of improvements that the core group attributed to what they had learned in the workshop. Administrators felt that they had improved the way they conducted performance evaluations by understanding how emotions change at the beginning, middle and end of emotionally charged discussions. Classroom teachers recognized the need to be sensitive to the emotions that students brought with them from home and the playground. For example, instead of rushing directly into schoolwork, one teacher now allows a few minutes first thing in the morning for students to share their feelings. He claimed that spending just 5–10 minutes on this topic made students comfortable and resulted in a better mental state for starting the day’s agenda. A special education teacher noted that she had benefited by learning to control her own emotions and becoming more sensitive to the classroom teachers’ feelings and needs regarding the mainstreaming of the students for whom she provided services. Finally, one teacher discussed how she used the Blueprint to handle her own and other teachers’ feelings of sadness and anger regarding the retirement of a well-liked principal. The teachers were struggling to deal with both losing the retired principal and accepting the new one.
in which cognitive, social and academic pressures converge to increase risk of psychopathology and poor social and academic functioning.

Furthermore, ELMS was designed to provide children with social-emotional skills that are vital to their healthy development. The goal of the program is to encourage students to become emotionally literate by gaining a holistic understanding of feeling words—words that characterize the extent of human experience such as elation, guilt, alienation and commitment. The program fosters social skills by teaching students self- and social awareness, empathy and healthy communication. It is also geared toward developing emotion-related skills as students are taught to recognize, label, understand and express feelings. Finally, it aims to promote overall academic learning by enhancing vocabulary, comprehension, abstract reasoning, creative writing, critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

ELMS integrates directly into traditional school subjects such as language arts and history. Given the current environment in schools, language arts and literacy curricula are the most practical vehicles with which to teach social-emotional skills (Bucuvalas 2003). Lessons in both history and literature invariably involve characters who have a wide range of emotional experiences that need to be expressed, understood and regulated. These characters provide 'real-world' examples of how emotions play an integral role in human development. The program is also organized to help teachers to differentiate instruction, thereby supporting the unique and full development of every student.

At a practical level, ELMS provides teachers with six 'how to...' steps for quick and easy implementation. Table 9.3 elaborates on these steps.

In addition to the weekly introduction of feeling words through the six steps, there are student projects which are designed to have students work intensively on certain emotional literacy skills, including the identification and regulation of emotion. For example, one project requires students to collect pictures from newspapers and magazines and use them to create collages or mobiles depicting various emotions. In another project students are asked to pick a song and, among other tasks, think and write about the emotional content of its lyrics and the feelings that it evokes.

Training

In Valley Stream, teachers were mailed the curriculum during the summer so that they could prepare for the training workshop that preceded the implementation of the program. Two individuals trained extensively in EI theory and the ELMS program led the training, which consisted of an overview of EI theory, a detailed description of the six steps of the emotional literacy program, and sample lessons. Teachers were also provided with information for parents and tips for getting parents involved in the program (see Maurer and Brackett (2004) for more information). Finally, six quality-assurance visits were made to the schools.
Table 9.3 The six steps to implementing ELMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Significance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Introduction of Feeling Words</td>
<td>Learning emotion-related vocabulary words by relating their meanings to student experiences</td>
<td>For the word “elated,” students talk about a situation in which they felt very excited and happy</td>
<td>Words introduced within the context of their own personal experiences may enhance the understanding and recall of the words and their meanings</td>
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<td>Step 2: Designing and Personified Explanations</td>
<td>Interpreting and explaining abstract designs in terms of their possible symbolic representations of feeling words</td>
<td>Students explain how a design consisting of several circles connected by lines looks like the word elated</td>
<td>Encourages divergent thinking and the visualization of the elements and actions that represent meanings of feeling words</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 3: Academic and Real World Associations</td>
<td>Relating feeling words to social and academic issues</td>
<td>Students are asked to link the word elated to the 2004 Tsunami disaster</td>
<td>Teaches students to evaluate how people of different societies and time periods experience, express, and manage emotions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 4: Personal Family Association</td>
<td>Discussing feeling words with family members at home</td>
<td>Students ask parents about a time when they felt elated</td>
<td>Parents are involved in students' academic work; Students have increased self-understanding by relating to parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5: Classroom Discussions</td>
<td>Initiating class discussions based on sharing of Real World Associations and Personal Family Associations with Class</td>
<td>When a student says refugees in Thailand were elated after receiving help and food, the teacher asks the class how they feel when they help others</td>
<td>Students expand each other's knowledge and are exposed to others' viewpoints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6: Creative Writing Assignments</td>
<td>Writing essays using the feeling word of the week</td>
<td>Students are asked to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end about a person who went from feeling forlorn to elated</td>
<td>Students incorporate their own ideas and personal experiences into writing and think critically about how emotions progress and transform life experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Maurer and Breckner 2004.)

A comprehensive multi-method system was implemented to evaluate ELMS. Aural and feedback was collected in monthly meetings with faculty and members. The researchers also conducted several topic-related commentaries from the students about the progress of the program. For example, teachers commented on the improvements made in the classroom discussions and essays, and discussed what had occurred during the last week. Students also expressed strong positive reactions to ELMS.

Moreover, a grant-funded randomized field experiment to test the efficacy of ELMS. The study examined the program's impact on students' attitudes toward health-risk behaviors, decision-making and self-management skills, and social competencies. The results indicated that students who participated in the program showed better social-emotional skills, more positive relationships with teachers and other students, more comfortable with sharing their own experiences, better at recognizing and responding constructively to their students, and more constructive behaviors. Students' self-report also showed an increase in prosocial behavior and a decrease in problem behavior. Teachers noted that students were more comfortable expressing themselves in class without fear of being judged or ridiculed. According to the teachers, their students were feeling more comfortable expressing themselves in class without fear of being judged or ridiculed. Teachers also reported that their students were exhibiting strong, positive reactions to ELMS.
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These programs are currently being evaluated. Thus far, the anecdotal feedback from both teachers and students indicates that the two workshops are well received and enjoyable, and produce consequential results. Teachers and principals report having improved relationships with colleagues, parents and students. In turn, students report fostering better quality relationships with their peers, teachers and parents. The anecdotal feedback and results also demonstrate that ELMs has a positive impact on psychosocial and academic outcomes. Our next steps involve replicating the program in other school districts and following teachers and students in a longitudinal effort to determine the lasting impact of social-emotional skills training.

There is now substantial evidence demonstrating that social-emotional skills play an integral role in people’s daily lives (Durik & Weisberg 2005; Mayer, Salovey & Caruso 2004). Consistent with the views of CASEL (2003), we assert that integrating social-emotional skills training into a school district will result in a number of benefits for students, teachers and administrators. Thus, creating an Emotionally Intelligent School District acknowledges that emotions are an important topic for discussion and that none of us can be fully intelligent if we do not value and work with emotion.

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