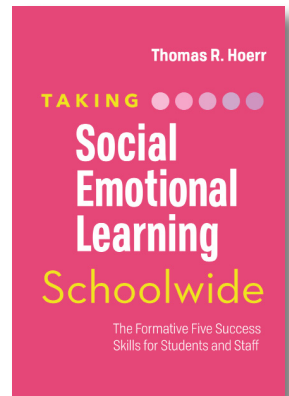


# ASCD® LEADERSHIP SUMMARIES for EDUCATORS

## Taking Social Emotional Learning Schoolwide

The Formative Five Success Skills for Students and Staff

by **Thomas R. Hoerr**



### Contents

SEL: It's About Time!

Page 2

The Formative Five Success Skills

Page 2

What Is Culture?

Page 3

Vision, Mission, Values

Page 3

Practices

Page 4

People

Page 5

Narrative

Page 5

Place

Page 6

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Growing numbers of people recognize that social-emotional learning (SEL) is central to a well-rounded education and to success in life outside and beyond the school building. What's missing is the know-how and framework for weaving SEL into the fabric of the school.

In *Taking Social Emotional Learning Schoolwide*, Thomas R. Hoerr shows teachers, administrators, and other school staff how to integrate the Formative Five success skills—empathy, integrity, self-control, embracing diversity, and grit—with school culture essentials of values, vision, mission, practices, people, narrative, and place.

Incorporating the author's years of hands-on experience as a school leader, relevant research, and helpful strategies for use at all levels and with all K-12 populations, *Taking Social Emotional Learning Schoolwide* is the ultimate blueprint for making sure students and staff are equipped to thrive.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to ensure your school is helping students develop SEL skills.
- How to cultivate students' appreciation of the differences among us.
- How to establish and nurture a welcoming school environment.
- Why you should settle for excellence and not pursue perfection.



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## SEL: It's About Time!

Many educators have been bothered by the fixation on test scores but were given neither the voice nor the opportunity to view students more broadly. The test-score mantra of legislators, school board members, the local press, and some parents has made it very difficult to go beyond percentiles and address the needs of the whole child. That's because in most cases test scores have been viewed as *the* barometer of a school's quality.

Our battle for high test scores has caused us to lose the larger educational war. Children do need to learn to read, write, and calculate, but there is much more to consider in their education. We must also be focused on developing the kinds of people that these children will become. Will they be caring and productive, respectful and honest? Will they be good neighbors and understanding friends? Will they work to improve their communities?

We need to prepare students to succeed in life, not just to do well in school, and for that we need to address their social-emotional learning (SEL).

### Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation describes SEL as “a framework that focuses on the core social and emotional skills necessary for students of all ages to be healthy and successful.” In an article for *Educational Leadership*, Angela Duckworth divides SEL into three categories:

- **Interpersonal character strengths of the heart** (gratitude, empathy, honesty, and social and emotional intelligence);
- **Intrapersonal character strengths of will** (academic self-control, grit, and growth mindset); and
- **Intellectual character strengths** (curiosity, open-mindedness, intellectual humility, imagination, and creativity).

What standardized tests cannot do—indeed, what almost no test can do—is capture a child's essence. Tests don't speak to the internal factors that play a major role in life success: curiosity, effort, resilience, and compassion.

## The Formative Five Success Skills

People grow and succeed in a range of settings. Sometimes this is surprising and sometimes not. What qualities and behaviors relate to who succeeds where?

I have taught in city and suburban elementary schools, been an adjunct professor at two universities, coached athletic teams, and led public and private schools. Although my roles varied considerably, there was one commonality. It became clear to me that the people who advanced toward a goal were able to do so primarily because of their interpersonal and intrapersonal qualities—and especially from what I call the Formative Five success skills of *empathy*, *self-control*, *integrity*, *embracing diversity*, and *grit*. I address these in this book using the lens of John Coleman's “six components of a great culture”: vision/mission, values, practices, people, narrative and place.

**1. Empathy** is sorely lacking in today's society. Its lack is reflected in the harshness of public comments at the school board meeting, conveyed by the facial expressions of someone impatiently waiting in line, or vividly displayed in the rhetoric at a political rally. Clearly, our obligation to teach our students empathy has never been stronger.

From kindergarten up, empathy is a word that should be part of everyone's vocabulary and used routinely. Posters and signs proclaiming the definition of empathy and offering some visual examples should pervade the school.

Students need to intentionally pursue empathy by working to hear and understand others' experiences, perspectives, and feelings, and by engaging in activities that stem from these understandings.

**2. Self-Control** incorporates many attitudes: focus, restraint, patience, and optimism.

People with strong self-control can ignore distractions, count to 3 or 33 before responding impetuously, recognize that the goal is a long way away, and remain confident that they will succeed.

According to Walter Mischel, self-control skills, both cognitive and emotional, can be learned, enhanced, and harnessed so that they become automatically activated when they are needed.

**3. Integrity** is what we show through our visible behaviors. It is a public statement, made with or without words.

Whether our goal is to live and work in an effective and healthy setting or whether it is to make the world a better place, integrity is essential. Integrity is manifested by taking a public stand and doing the right thing for others to see. Integrity is a conscious choice that often requires courage.

We see the leadership aspect of integrity in action when taking a public stand is designed to influence others.

We often must push against injustice, entropy, gimmick solutions, and others' perceptions, and our integrity enables us to follow our values and our conscience.

**4. Embracing Diversity** means that respect for others goes beyond accepting or even appreciating others. To truly exhibit it, we must embrace those who are different than we are.

Recent events in the United States and around the world have illustrated the need to assert the importance of developing an awareness of and a sensitivity to diversity in students.

Verna Myers, a Cleveland attorney, captured how far we have come and yet how far we need to go when she told *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, "Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance."

To teach students to embrace diversity, I suggest taking the following steps: appreciating ourselves, recognizing others' diversities, appreciating others, planning, and implementing. These steps must be taken with intentionality and transparency; we need to be clear about our goals and our strategies and share them openly.

**5. Grit.** Successful people come in many sizes and colors, degrees of talent and academic preparation, but the one thing they all possess is grit. They may refer to it as their tenacity or perseverance, or talk about their passion and relentlessness, but it's grit all the same.

Perhaps Leila Janah put it best when she told the *New York Times*, "The biggest reason for success in entrepreneurship is not brilliance. It's not creative genius. It's the simple ability to not quit when things are really bad."

When interacting with someone who is highly skilled, it can be difficult to recognize the role that grit has played because their success appears so effortless. But that fails to consider the thousands and thousands of hours of preparation and practice that this level of skill requires. A manifestation of grit is standard practice for athletes at all levels, as it is for high achievers in most other fields.

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### What Is Culture?

The power of school culture is obvious if you visit two or more schools with the same grade range in the same school

district. Although these schools operate under identical policies and guidelines, there is almost always a different feel between the schools.

Now in her seventh year of teaching at Pershing School, Stacey finds comfort in routine. If you asked Stacey what messages she received between the time she entered the school and opened her classroom door, she might respond, "Messages? Not many. There was some mail from yesterday, a dozen emails awaiting me, but that's it. Oh, and several people gave me a friendly greeting."

In fact, Stacey received many messages about her school's culture. What she saw, heard, and felt pointed to the school's values, student achievement, diversity, the roles of educators, and more. She felt expectations, rules, habits, and norms. Their omnipresence caused her to be unaware of them. These messages would be received by every adult or child who walked the halls and entered the office, and would reflect the school's culture, even if it's unintentional.

The culture that embraces Stacey as she enters Pershing School each day affects all aspects of the school's operation. It determines how faculty and committee meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and professional development activities are conducted and perceived. It frames how staff members view students and treat one another.

Stacey's expectations for how students should enter her classroom each day is framed by both the school's culture and the culture that she has established in her classroom.

In most situations, our colleagues' expectations and perceptions have a greater influence on us than do formal policies or guidelines. Culture doesn't usually have a single author.

It is vital for principals to appreciate that leadership is a shared responsibility. Every faculty member should feel engaged and have a voice. Teachers own a lot of the culture in every school; strong principals widen the definition of leadership to ensure that all voices are heard and that everyone is engaged. That does not mean that everyone's vote is equal or that administrators abdicate their responsibilities; it does mean that everyone owns the culture.

In the following sections, we will use culture as a tool to develop students' Formative Five success skills.

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### Vision, Mission, Values

When principal Kim Bilanko helped to set up Ella Baker

Elementary School in Redmond, Washington—a school centered on the Formative Five skills plus curiosity, optimism, and gratitude—she started with the expectation that the mission, vision, and values they would hold would become their driving force, their mindset, in all decisions that they made.

It's important to share the mission and educate everyone about what this means. “The physical environment of a school sends a message to students, staff, and families,” Bilanko says. “For us, the walls speak volumes about who we are. We want to ensure our environment is aligned with our mission, vision, and values. Since character building is an essential aspect of our school, our eight character traits are found everywhere in our hallways. We value students and families feeling connected to our school.”

Often a disconnect occurs in schools at faculty or committee meetings, during parent education evenings, and even during professional development sessions. We have a vision and proclaim a mission, yet it's easy to get caught in the activity-response cycle: We do things because they need to be done and have always been done, without stepping back and asking how our actions help us achieve our mission.

Distractions and deterrents abound, so our vision and mission should be our lodestar, something that ensures that our efforts are on target and focused.

### Practices

Social-emotional learning should be part of the fiber of after-school activities, athletics, and assemblies. It should be evident on walls, in halls, and on signage. Although everyone is pursuing the same vision and mission statements, the result can be quite different norms and practices.

In a *Harvard Business Review* article, “The Leader's Guide to Corporate Culture,” Boris Groysberg and colleagues state that “cultural norms define what is encouraged, discouraged, accepted, or rejected within a group.” These norms are our practices, how we bring our school's vision, mission, and values to life. They stem from how we see the role of educators, the ways we interact with others (students, their parents, colleagues, and the community), and our approach to curriculum, pedagogy, grading, and professional development activities.

Unfortunately, many faculty meetings are not engaging, productive, or insightful; a strong learning focus is not the

norm. Faculty meetings should be designed so that they are relevant, interesting, and sometimes even fun, addressing academic topics, schoolwide issues, and students' and educators' SEL. A practice of vibrant and inclusive meetings would speak volumes about a school's culture and faculty engagement.

### Intentionality, Transparency, and Collaboration

In all of our practices (and indeed, in all of our interactions), we need to remember that we should act with intentionality, transparency, and an eye toward collaboration. *Intentionality* means that we must deliberate and prioritize our practices. We should choose strategies as part of an overall quest, balancing time, energy, and resources. *Transparency* means being public and clear about what our practices are, why we implement them, and what our hopes are for the future. We must explain the conditions or changes that cause us to act as we do, presenting information in various venues and ways to ensure that everyone understands. *Collaboration* means creating opportunities for teachers and administrators to work together and develop practices, thus increasing the likelihood that they will be better designed.

### Ensuring an SEL Focus in the Classroom

At Arundel High School in Gambrills, Maryland, I saw teachers asking

- What are the characteristics of good citizenship? What do good citizens do?
- What does it feel like not to belong? Write down three emotions you would feel.
- Write one thing about you that gives you confidence.
- Write something nice about the person sitting next to you.

Teaching students how to identify emotions begins with raising an awareness about emotions—what they are and how they can be identified.

Second grade teacher Karen Brennan of Fairway Elementary in Grover, Missouri emphasizes the Formative Five with her students. “I encourage grit on a daily basis rather than explicitly teach it,” she says. “Any time students are challenged by their learning is the perfect time to remind them that it's not time to quit, it's time to show grit! When we're in the halls, walking by working classrooms, we also remember self-control. When someone's feelings are hurt unintentionally (or intentionally), we talk about empathy. When we're using other languages for our morning greet-

ing and some are tempted to laugh, we revisit celebrating a diverse world. When I'm called into the hall for a moment, we remind ourselves to show integrity."

One incredibly creative way to teach integrity was developed by teachers from Roosevelt Elementary in Iowa City, Iowa Jami Mundt (3rd grade), Anna Brooks (2nd grade), Hannah Owens (special education, 3-5), and Mary Biggs (5th grade). They led their students to develop "What would you do scenarios?"—situations in which students were confronted with good and bad choices (e.g., finding money on the ground or having the opportunity to look at another student's test). Students discussed the temptations and what they should do to show integrity. Teachers created a series of 30-second videos with students acting out each scenario. When the moment of decision arises, the actors turn to the camera and ask, "What would you do?"

Producing the videos was a wonderful learning opportunity for everyone in the class, not simply those who appear on screen.

There is no limit to the practices that can teach SEL. Almost any practice can be placed within a Formative Five context to develop SEL.

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### People

If we want to advance the Formative Five success skills, we must be sure that we have teachers who can effectively teach and model them. A school is only as good as the quality of its teachers, and teachers who are effective will connect with their students regardless of content or grade level.

When people were asked to share their recollections about a teacher who had made a significant difference in their life, a response from Jane, a 4th grade teacher was: "My 6th grade teacher, Mr. Reed, made a significant difference in my life. Mr. Reed was always trying new techniques with his students. His was the first class where students did not sit in neat rows. He was constantly moving us around the room and pairing us with different classmates. Mr. Reed encouraged us to read anything, even a comic book. He was extremely interested in each and every student. We all felt special."

Students are good observers, and they see whether we practice what we preach. They notice whether adults' actions are congruent with their words and whether adults demon-

strate the same social and emotional competencies they expect of students.

Administrators want to hire teachers who both possess and are comfortable teaching each of the Formative Five success skills, although empathy and embracing diversity move to the front of the line when considering candidates. Schools and districts can structure the hiring process to create opportunities for learning about these qualities.

My preference is to convene an interviewing team of two or three others with whom the new hire would be working most closely. I'd say to them, "Together, we will decide who's the best fit. I can veto your choice, but I will not hire someone unless we are all enthusiastic about the decision." Then, I would ask the team what sort of qualities we're seeking. "Beyond hiring a good teacher, what specific talents, interests, or experiences do we want?"

We need to recognize that our natural tendency is to hire people who look like us and have the same kinds of experiences we do. Articulating that bias early in the hiring process and asking people to be self-aware and guard against this tendency is helpful. Having a range of backgrounds and experiences on the interviewing team is important.

"We want all students to bring their identity with them to Burroughs," says Andy Abbott, head of school at John Burroughs School in St. Louis, Missouri. "Leave no part of yourself at the door." Asking both teacher and administrative candidates what this might mean and how they would respond in their role at the school could be a good way to elicit their understanding and perceptions of diversity.

What all high-quality schools have in common is a collegial faculty of teachers and administrators who learn together and view one another as resources. Collegiality puts relationships and synergy at the heart of a school.

People are what determines the quality of our schools and the experiences of our students.

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### Narrative

Strong leaders recognize the power of narrative and work to fashion it by consciously creating traditions and habits that foster the culture they value. Narrative helps us envision history, rationale, intention, and possibility.

From the dunking booth at the school picnic in which the principal routinely plummets into the water and arises to

students' cheers, to everyone getting an ice cream treat on the last day of school, to beginning faculty meetings by noting birthdays, and to opening assemblies with the school song, traditions form the narrative that is culture.

At Edgefield Primary School in Singapore, principal Michel Saw says that staff begin every meeting by sharing thanks and appreciation for the good things that colleagues have done. They practice greeting everyone cheerfully with a smile and saying thank you.

Narrative includes who hangs out together and who talks to whom. It's important for teachers and especially administrators to understand that everyone is watching where they stand and with whom they chat; everything they do sets a precedent.

When I was a principal, every school day at dismissal time, I made it a point to stand outside the building, step out of my comfort zone, and initiate conversations with parents and other caregivers with whom I may not otherwise have the opportunity to engage.

An important part of a faculty or group pursuing SEL is knowing and trusting one another. One principal ends all faculty meetings by asking everyone to turn to their neighbor and tell them what they are looking forward to during the following week. This focus on positives and sharing with a colleague becomes part of the narrative that frames the culture.

### Place

Who is responsible for decorating and maintaining the common areas and shared spaces in a school? Lack of ownership for this responsibility is a major hurdle to ensuring a place sends the messages we want. Use the halls to inform

and elicit. The best way for people to learn is by being actively involved in creating knowledge.

To this end, in learning about the power of place, teachers might distribute a floor plan of the school on an 8.5 x 11-inch sheet of paper and ask students to indicate areas of the building where they feel valued and safe by coloring them in green. They can use red to identify areas where they feel unsafe or where they feel no attention is paid to their SEL. The colored-in floor plans can then be posted anonymously on the wall so that faculty members can review them and then discuss in small groups. Perception is reality, so we need to consider why students have marked an area red.

At Arundel High School in Gambrills, Maryland digital arts teacher Betsey Heeney had students form teams and create posters reflecting the Formative Five success skills. "My kids really embraced this project," said principal Davenport. "Not only did they learn about the Formative Five, I think they really nailed the essences in a graphic format. My print and design shop is enlarging the posters and mounting them for display in my building."

All children should see themselves—their efforts and progress—on the walls. Even if they aren't there today, they must feel like they could be there tomorrow.

Social-emotional learning "is for every adult and every kid, all day every day. Attending to emotions is necessary on the bus, in the playground, in the cafeteria, after school, and during academic classes," writes Joshua P. Starr. "Every adult has a role to play in creating a consistent and emotionally healthy school climate."



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