

Learning by Heart

The Power of Social-Emotional Learning in Secondary Schools

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What Kids Can Do, Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice, February 2014

At this school, they go all out around the student's emotions. They ask, they listen. I don't wake up and think, 'Oh I hope this don't happen.' I think, 'I'm okay. I'm fine. I'm ready to learn.'

– Jameisha, Fenger High School

AT THE SOUTH SIDE CHICAGO HIGH SCHOOL THAT Jamiesha attends, social-emotional learning has transformed the environment from a nightmare of urban violence to a place where students dream of college. Still, the business of distilling hope from heartbreak remains a work in progress.

What would it take to weave social and emotional learning (SEL) into the daily fabric of our nation's high schools? What distinct practices, programs, and structures help schools embed SEL into ongoing teaching and learning? How does this vary from school to school, in response to the conditions that make that school unique, that shape its climate? What formal and informal measures do schools use to assess the impact of social and emotional learning on student success?

From 2013 through the winter of 2014, we asked these and other questions as part of an in-depth investigation of social and emotional learning in U.S. secondary schools. For thirteen years, our small nonprofit What Kids Can Do (WKCD) has studied, documented, and championed what we call “powerful learning with public purpose” by our nation's adolescents.¹

I. The Lay of the Land

Twenty years after Daniel Goleman's landmark book *Emotional Intelligence*, “cognitive” skills continue to trump “noncognitive” skills hands down when it comes to the student achievement public schools most value and measure. For the first decade of the new century, the overwhelming focus No Child Left Behind put on literacy, numeracy,

and standardized tests consumed much of the oxygen in education policy and practice. Today, the wider and deeper Common Core State Standards are having the same effect.

“Imagine if ‘teaching to the test’ meant teaching students the skills they need to lead richer and fuller lives, the ‘life test,’” mused one principal in our study. “Isn't that as important as knowing how to interpret informational text?”

Despite the prevailing winds, however, a small stream of programs targeting social-emotional learning has flowed into schools across the country these past two decades. In turn, a growing body of research attests to the effectiveness of these programs, largely at the elementary grades. In a 2011 meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs, participants demonstrated improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance with an achievement gain of 11 percentile points.²

Studies have increasingly shown that factors such as student motivation and engagement, personalization, and student voice improve academic performance. “The movement to raise standards may fail,” adolescent development researchers Eric Toshalis and Michael Nakkula concluded, “if teachers are not supported to understand the connections among motivation, engagement, and student voice.”³

In a 2012 paper on the role of noncognitive factors in adolescent learning, researchers at the Chicago Consortium on School Research (CSSR) identified five critical factors that underpin student success in middle and high school: academic behaviors, academic perseverance, academic mindsets, social skills, and learning strategies.

Support from the NoVo Foundation made the Learning by Heart initiative possible.

“School performance is a complex phenomenon, shaped by a wide variety of factors intrinsic to students and in their external environment,” the authors noted. In addition to content knowledge and academic skills, “students must develop sets of behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strategies that are crucial to academic performance in their classes, but that may not be reflected in their scores on cognitive tests.”⁴

In back-to-back commentary pieces in *Education Week* in January 2013, education thought leaders David T. Conley and Mike Rose called, respectively, for rethinking the notions of “noncognitive” and “cognition.” Conley suggested replacing the term “noncognitive” with “metacognitive”: the mind’s ability to reflect on how effectively it is handling the learning process as it is doing so.⁵ Rose suggested reclaiming the full meaning of cognition—“one that is robust and intellectual, intimately connected to character and social development, and directed toward the creation of a better world.”⁶

Paul Tough’s talk of “grit” in his popular book *How Children Succeed* gives muscle to the “soft” qualities traditionally attributed to character skills. And long-overdue national attention to the deleterious effects of “zero tolerance” policies has recently elevated another strand of SEL: replacing punitive discipline with restorative practices that heal rather than harm.

We sense that educational thinking and practice is at a cusp, ready to turn away from a dichotomous view of learning and toward a more capacious view that appreciates the complex interplay between academic and social-emotional skills.

II. What We Saw and Heard

In the course of 50 combined years of documenting schools that work, we two have learned to take a constructivist approach to our research. Rather than bring a list of contested issues to the schools visited, we worked the other way around. We asked administrators, faculty, and students to show us where in the school day social and emotional learning stood out for them, and what effects it had.

We focused on effective practices as much as effective programs—another reflection of our constructivist instincts, but also a reminder that the best schools are learning organizations, continually inventing and measuring the effectiveness of practices rooted in their own particular circumstances. Our mixed research approach also made multimedia one of the tools in our data gathering.

Four of our five study sites were schools whose design inextricably linked academic, social, and emotional learning—though the designs and students served were decidedly distinct. Each of those four had close to twenty years of experience forging these links. The fifth, Chicago’s Fenger High School, offered an extraordinary opportunity to observe educators embracing SEL as a strategy for turning around years of poor performance, the result of a three-year federal school improvement grant.

With one exception, we visited each school twice for several days, observing and interviewing as many students and faculty as possible and gathering images and voices for multimedia extensions to our narratives.

In summarizing what we saw and heard, we observed the six key elements that gave social and emotional learning such potency in our study schools:

► ELEMENT 1

A Web of Structural Supports

Although none of our study schools enrolled more than 600 students, their size alone did not ensure that adults would know students well and support their development. A web of structural supports made that possible in these schools:

Daily advisory periods gave every student a home base.

Mixed-grade groups of students and a teacher met daily (usually for at least 30 minutes) and often stayed together for four years. Personal discussions, team-building activities, learning and practicing social skills, planning and goal setting—and rarely homework—filled the time, which students at Quest Early College High School called “the heart and soul of this school.”

Strong and purposeful student-teacher relationships were the norm. Teachers viewed their role as that of coaches and facilitators; they kept their doors open, engaged with students in the hallways, and made themselves available before and after school. Again and again, students spoke movingly about how much their teachers cared.

Deliberate structural choices kept class sizes small. Interdisciplinary courses or teaming often decreased the number of students that teachers worked with. East Side Community School chose to offer online language study so as to allocate more teachers for core subjects.

Formal systems for following student progress kept the focus on support, not censure. They included formative assessments and portfolios, along with protocols for helping students the moment they fell behind. Trust replaced shame. “The adults here,” a student at Fenger High School said, “they’re not going to let you fail, as long as you meet them halfway. They won’t let you fail.”

Weekly grade-level and subject-area meetings created a professional learning community among faculty. As soon as an issue arose, teachers could consult on students and teaching strategies. Faculty also met regularly as a whole, to learn new practices for helping their students develop academically, socially, and emotionally.

► ELEMENT 2

An Intentional Community

Research affirms the critical role of shared norms, values, and language in shaping a sense of community in a school and helping students feel they belong. We saw the impact of these factors on student success in the schools we studied:

Carefully crafted transition programs prepared incoming ninth graders for what they would encounter. Older students typically served as guides. At Oakland International High School, where newly arrived immigrants enrolled throughout the school year, an ongoing “culture of welcome” took root.

Student artwork and posters filled the walls, underscoring behavioral norms. “You’d have to walk around with your eyes closed to not know exactly what this school stands for,” a Fenger student told us.

Classroom rules, created collaboratively by students and teachers, reinforced expectations. “No matter how many times students hash out class norms,” one teacher said, “it always seems to set a tone of community among a fresh group of students.”

Frequent rituals and assemblies applauded accomplishments and brought students and faculty together. Procedures were also in place to diffuse tensions that arose in the school community.

Security personnel were regarded as part of the school community and trained to de-escalate disruptive behavior. They sought to keep students in school when addressing problems, rather than removing them.

► ELEMENT 3

A Culture of Respect, Participation, and Reflection

A focus on acceptance of differences, inclusive practices, and the habit of reflection seemed to develop a sense of belonging and agency among students in each of our study schools.

East Side Community School grounded much of its academic coursework as well as its behavioral norms in the principles of Facing History and Ourselves, asking students to think through instances of inequity and injustice and consider the choices they made in their own lives.

Fenger High School students learned and practiced a range of social skills in and outside class: asking permission, disagreeing appropriately, having a conversation, making an apology, accepting criticism or compliments, and more.

At Oakland International High School, even newcomers without a word of English found immediate opportunities for expression and participation: not only in soccer and the visual arts but in the protocols of classroom discussion.

At Quest Early College High School, the (two) school rules were clear and simple: respect each other in “creed and deed” and keep the school environment clean and safe. Every aspect of the school’s daily operation supported these dicta, including zero tolerance for exclusion and nonparticipation.

Springfield Renaissance School students themselves chose the values to which they would be held, and then took the lead in reviewing their progress and goals in regular parent-teacher conferences and “passage portfolios.”

► ELEMENT 4

A Commitment to Restorative Practices

Forging constructive alternatives to destructive disciplinary policies is an important hallmark of the emerging field of restorative practices, and we saw robust evidence of that. Yet our study schools also demonstrated other powerful restorative practices that did not bear that name—by meeting students’ basic needs for food, shelter, health, and safety.

Peer mediation, peer juries, and peace circles were accepted (and effective) alternatives to detention, suspension, and expulsion. At Fenger, the “Peace Room” was the heart and soul of the school, and East Side Community made the “public apology” a badge of honor.

Students who arrived at school clearly burdened by circumstances at home could rely on a rapid and empathic response: a quiet room for a nap after a night broken by domestic disputes; a bag of groceries; a stabilization plan when suddenly homeless.

Counseling and therapy groups fostered resilience in the students most at risk. These schools employed on-site mental health professionals; several also partnered with community mental health services or nearby graduate programs in social work.

Programs and practices reached out to families and brought them into school. Parents of Fenger students could request a peace circle to help resolve family conflicts. Staff routinely made home visits at most of these schools. Oakland International integrated family learning and services into the school day.

► ELEMENT 5

A Curriculum of Connection and Engagement

Student motivation and academic standardization often stand off like rivals, yet our study schools linked engagement and scholarship in ways that mattered to students. Among the many practices we observed:

Project-based learning

Serious inquiry required hands *and* minds at all these schools.

- In learning “expeditions” at Springfield Renaissance, students investigated challenging cross-disciplinary issues, addressing the authentic needs of an audience other than their teachers.
- Students at Oakland International wrote, recorded, and published their own immigration stories, building impressive skill sets in the process.
- Advanced statistics students at Fenger conducted an analysis of bullying in the school.

Student choice

Student choice was a deeply held value that permeated every aspect of these schools. Their students created and monitored personal learning plans; exercised substantial choice among assignments, readings, and topics; demonstrated mastery in different forms and media; and pursued independent projects and extended learning opportunities that built on special interests, culminated in public presentations, and often counted toward graduation requirements. Other examples:

- Four days a week at Quest, first period was set aside for student-run clubs on topics of interest (from women’s empowerment to kickball).
- Just before winter and summer vacations, regular Renaissance classes came to a halt for a week, replaced by dozens of intensive elective courses (largely in athletics and the arts) arising from students’ interests. At Oakland International, comparable intensives took place in the last two weeks of school.

Reading across the curriculum, steeped in life lessons.

These schools explored themes of cultural diversity, identity, dislocation and relocation, and social justice through deep and discursive reading tied to journal-writing, reflection, and often independent choice.

- East Side students and teachers started every English class with half an hour of reading anything they chose. Trading books went on schoolwide and students vied for a place around the table at the principal’s regular book club.

Students as teachers

Strong evidence of student learning at these schools emerged when students taught each other what they knew.

- At Quest, students routinely led class discussions and Socratic seminars.
- In the heterogeneous ELL groups at Oakland International, more proficient students coached and translated for those with less developed English.
- Students often acted as instructors in East Side after-school groups such as skateboarding and beat making.

Service learning

All of these schools had significant service-learning requirements. At Quest, however, every Friday for all four years students left school to volunteer at community sites instead of attending classes. They talked often about the sense of purpose they gained from giving back.

► ELEMENT 6

A Focus on Developing Student Agency

Each of our study schools trained its sights on students developing the beliefs and habits that result in satisfying and productive lives and learning. Some ways this came across:

By conveying to students that “they matter” and “they can”: through encouraging words, caring gestures, invitations to converse, applause for small accomplishments, ready availability, steadfast accountability, and reaching out at unexpected moments.

By encouraging students to find their voice: in class discussions, in personal writing, on issues they cared about, when they felt something was unfair, when they didn’t understand.

By helping students push past fear: when they were trying something new, when they felt exposed (for example, by speaking in public) or apprehensive (for example, when thrust into an unfamiliar role), when they were confused.

By helping students persist: in a subject they believed they could not learn, when they fell far behind and thought they couldn’t catch up, when they felt they had practiced enough but were not satisfied with the results, when distractions exerted a constant pull on their attention.

By inspiring students to grow into something bigger: to be the first in their families to go to college, to become mentors to other students, to make a difference in the community, to turn their own narratives of struggle into stories of agency and resilience.

III. Implications for Policy

The design-based schools in *Learning by Heart* have consistently produced academic results that stand out compared to those of schools with similar demographics: strong attendance and low dropout rates, good proficiency results on state assessments, a high percentage of students going on to college.

Staff, students, and parents at each school identified its commitment to social and emotional learning as a forceful contributor to the academic success of students. After SEL became Fenger’s driving force, its academic results made it one of the most improved high schools in Chicago.

Other benefits of social and emotional learning mattered almost as much as test scores to these stakeholders. In adolescents struggling to find their stride, it developed confidence and maturity. For youth haunted by brokenness and violence, it offered a lifeline.

At a moment when civic engagement and discourse seem more precious than ever, these schools demonstrate the viability of communities of respect, where diversity is valued and everyone participates. As the students say at Springfield Renaissance, “We are crew, not passengers.”

What are the policy implications of what these schools have shown us?

To start, we need new language that ends the “versus” between cognitive and noncognitive factors in our discussions of learning and mastery. Academic, social, and emotional learning *are* deeply mutual.

In turn, we need learning standards that treat SEL as integral to the curriculum. Common Core State Standards already require students to collaborate, to see others’ perspectives, and to persevere in solving problems. A 2013 survey of 605 teachers found that more than 75 percent believed that a greater focus on social and emotional learning would be a “major benefit” to students because of its positive impact on “workforce readiness, school attendance and graduation, life success, college preparation and academic success.”⁷ The Illinois Learning Standards now include social and emotional development standards,⁸ and other states should follow their example.

Taking stock of student gains in SEL is a complex matter—one more argument for assessments to include performance-based measures. As with student drivers, the written test reveals less than the road test. Does the learner actually persevere, for example, when the going gets tough?

Our investigation also underscores the critical role played by supporting structures and practices in high schools—advisories, strong student-teacher relationships, student choice, a culture of respect, intentional and inclusive community, and more. Evidence-based SEL programs play critical parts in that ecology, we acknowledge, but their potential is increased when integrated into daily instruction in a systemic approach.

The convergence of academic, social, and emotional learning serves all students well, we found. It misses the point to embrace SEL largely as a behavior management or character development tool for at-risk students in urban schools, though certainly such programs play a part in closing the achievement gap. Our five study schools demonstrate the capacity of SEL to enrich student learning, aspiration, and engagement across the entire spectrum of students.

We applaud the rising interest in restorative justice programs as an alternative to harmful zero-tolerance policies. The evidence is irrefutable: harsh and exclusionary disciplinary

procedures have helped feed a school-to-prison pipeline, disproportionately filled with students of color and those with a history of abuse, neglect, poverty, or learning disabilities.⁹ Restorative practices have proven themselves more positive, effective, and just.

Yet the youth in question often need much more than the chance to right their wrongs and stay in school, however critical these are. They usually need help managing the chronic stressors that lie behind their defiance—worries linked to family, health (mental and physical), safety, and sometimes food and shelter too.

A full commitment to restorative practices would make schools part of the social safety net these youth need and deserve. Though cognizant of the limits of what schools can do, we also know the exorbitant costs of the consequences of neglect and school failure.

The annual cost of keeping one adjudicated youth at the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center in Chicago currently exceeds \$100,000, by most estimates.¹⁰ The three-year federal school improvement grant at Fenger High School—which underwrote the SEL supports and additional staff that fueled the school’s turnaround—cost roughly \$3,000 per student per year. Now that grant has expired and the extra staff has gone, but the stressors in those students’ lives will continue.

Finally (though perhaps first of all), teacher preparation programs must equip new teachers with the core competencies necessary to foster social and emotional learning. They need guidance in creating the safe, respectful, motivating, and engaging classrooms in which young minds and characters can develop. They need coaching in helping their students stand in the shoes of others and grow into bigger shoes themselves. And new teachers, too, deserve instructors who model the social and emotional skills they will soon be modeling for their own students.

The vision of weaving social and emotional learning into the daily fabric of our nation’s high schools seems understandably daunting. The study schools in *Learning by Heart* offer five proof points that it can actually happen.

Endnotes

¹ As the research arm of WKCD, the Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice has conducted numerous projects since its start, including a student-driven inquiry into college access and success (Lumina Foundation, 2010), an ongoing investigation of student motivation and mastery called the Practice Project (MetLife Foundation, 2009–2013), and a five-city initiative exploring discrepancies between student and teacher perceptions of school quality (MetLife Foundation, 2004). WKCD is currently a research partner in the Students at the Center initiative, a multi-year Jobs for the Future investigation of student-centered learning, for which Barbara Cervone and Kathleen Cushman produced “Teachers at Work: Six Exemplars of Everyday Practice” (2012).

² Durlak, J., Weissberg, R., Dymnicki A., Taylor R. & Schellinger K. (2011). The impact of enhancing students’ social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82, 1, 405-432.

³ Toshiaki, E. & Nakkula, J. (2012). *Motivation, engagement, and student voice*. Jobs for the Future: Students at the Center.

⁴ Farrington, C. A., et al. (2012). *Teaching adolescents to become learners: The role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research.

⁵ Conley, D. Rethinking the notion of “noncognitive.” *Education Week*, January 23, 2013.

⁶ Rose, M. Giving cognition a bad name. *Education Week*, January 15, 2013.

⁷ Bridgeland, J., Bruce, M. & Hariharan, A., with Peter D. Hart Research Associates. (2013). “The missing piece: A national teacher survey on how social and emotional learning can empower children and transform schools.”

⁸ [Illinois State Board of Education/Illinois Learning Standards and Social-Emotional Learning](#)

⁹ See for example, “[How bad is the school-to-prison pipeline: Facts](#),” PBS, March 28, 2013.

¹⁰ [Chicago Youth Justice Data Project](#)

ELEMENTS	PRACTICES
A web of structural supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Advisory periods that give every student a home base ▪ Prioritizing strong and purposeful student-teacher relationships ▪ Design and structural choices that keep class sizes small ▪ Formal assessment systems that focus on support, not censure ▪ Grade-level and subject area meetings that create a professional learning community among faculty
An intentional community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Transition programs that prepare incoming students for school norms and culture ▪ Meaningful student expression regarding school norms ▪ Classroom rules that reinforce expectations, created collaboratively by students and teachers ▪ Rituals and assemblies that bring students and faculty together for recognition and problem-solving ▪ Training that makes security personnel part of the school community
A culture of respect, participation, and reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Opportunities to learn and practice core social skills (e.g. apologizing, decision-making, self-regulation) ▪ Programs and curriculum that encourage substantive dialogue about injustice and civic participation ▪ Zero tolerance for exclusion and a focus on participation ▪ Protocols for classroom discussion ▪ Regular pauses for individual and group reflection
A commitment to restorative practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prioritizing positive alternatives to detention, suspension, and expulsion ▪ Rapid and empathetic response to students who arrive at school clearly burdened by outside circumstances ▪ Counseling and therapy groups to foster resilience in the most at-risk students ▪ Programs that both reach out to families and bring them into school
A curriculum of connection and engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Project-based learning ▪ Student choice ▪ Reading across the curriculum that connects to life’s lessons ▪ Students as teachers ▪ Service learning
A focus on developing student agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conveying to students that “they matter” and “they can” ▪ Encouraging students to find their voice ▪ Helping students push past fear ▪ Pushing students to stretch for something greater