The School Social Work Association of Arizona has become aware that some Governing Boards and school districts in AZ are moving to hinder or eliminate the delivery of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) within their districts. The research on Social Emotional Learning, which has existed for decades, shows unequivocally that SEL is vital to supporting students’ academic achievement, social development, and mental health.

We are gravely concerned about what is taking place in school districts in our state, and about the detrimental impact this will have on Arizona’s students. We are alarmed about the spread of misinformation regarding SEL and more so, that districts and Governing Boards are making decisions based on misinformation and falsehoods about what Social Emotional Learning is and is not.

Social Emotional Learning is not and never has been a partisan endeavor. Social Emotional Learning does not align with any political party. Beliefs that SEL aims to promote a particular political agenda, belief system, or to teach moral values are simply false. Efforts by certain groups to propagate misinformation and to politicize the teaching of skills such as communication, problem solving, or critical thinking are far reaching, dangerous, rooted in falsehoods, and must be countered with fact.

Social Emotional Learning, as defined by the Collaborative of Academic and Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is “The process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.” (CASEL, 2021). CASEL identifies five core SEL competencies which include Self Awareness, Self Management, Social Awareness, Responsible Decision making and Relationship skills. These competencies contain the skills which research has shown to contribute to personal and collective success in the educational environment and the workplace as well as physical, mental, and interpersonal well-being (AEI/ Brookings, 2015) (Taylor et al., 2017).

An abundance of research extending over two decades has shown the link between Social Emotional Learning and improved educational outcomes in all areas, including academic achievement,
attendance, behavior, mental health, and graduation rates (Taylor, 2017). Studies have demonstrated a conclusive and direct correlation between SEL instruction and academic achievement. (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki & Schellinger, 2011).

Social Emotional Learning is now more important than ever. Recognizing the role that Social Emotional Learning plays in building resilience and mitigating the effects of trauma, school districts and State Departments of Education around the Nation as well as The US Department of Education have all prioritized Social Emotional Learning as an essential means of supporting students since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Brain Science tells us that brains under stress cannot learn. Social Emotional Learning includes creating safe and structured environments and helping students gain the skills needed to manage emotions, maintain focus, and learn. For this reason, Social and Emotional Learning has been a primary factor in the successful reopening of schools and in continuing to support both students and educators throughout the months that have followed.

In August 2021 The Arizona State Department of Education published SEL Competencies in order to offer evidence based guidance on the delivery of SEL to Arizona’s students. “The purpose of these competencies is to provide Arizona districts, schools, and those that partner with them, a set of desired knowledge, skills and behaviors that can be used to implement social-emotional learning within schools and classrooms and intentionally integrate within K-12 content areas. Arizona recognizes that these competencies benefit all adults in an educational system as well as all students that are a part of that same system” (ADE Social Wellness Committee, 2021).

Since the Spring of 2019, The Arizona Department of Education has made funds available under the School Safety Program and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund to create positions for hundreds of additional School Social Workers And School Counselors. Since that time 220 school social work and 280 school counseling positions have been created in schools throughout Arizona. A primary function of these highly qualified professionals is to implement Social and Emotional Learning because educators know that when SEL is implemented successfully, schools are safer and student outcomes are improved in all areas.

The youth of our Nation and State are facing a mental health crisis which has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2014, the suicide rate among Arizona’s youth has increased every year, making it the second leading cause of death for youth in Arizona since 2018. (AZ Department of Health Services, 2020). Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of depression and anxiety have skyrocketed.

Last month, The US Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy issued a public health advisory on the mental challenges confronting youth, and a call to action to address what he called an emerging crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. One clearly stated directive within this advisory is to “Support the mental health of children and youth in educational, community, and childcare settings.” This includes ‘Creating positive, safe, and affirming educational environments, and expanding programming that promotes healthy development, such as social and emotional learning.’ (Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory, 2021). While SEL is not mental health treatment, SEL is vital in building resiliency in youth. By helping young people to build positive relationships, and develop skills, including the ability to manage difficult emotions, SEL cultivates essential ‘protective factors’ to buffer against mental health risks. “In this way, SEL is an indispensable part of student mental health and wellness and should be implemented as part of a system of mental wellness supports” (CASEL, 2021).
The research on Social Emotional Learning and its positive impact on school safety and climate, student mental health and academic achievement is clear. With Arizona’s youth facing an unprecedented mental health crisis and students in greater need than ever of additional support, there is no place to play politics with the health and safety of our children. We must not allow Social Emotional Learning to be misrepresented or politicized.

The School Social Work Association of Arizona urges all school districts, the educational community and all stakeholders to continue to be accurately informed about Social Emotional Learning so as not to be susceptible to campaigns of misinformation. We must make decisions that are rooted in fact, driven by research, and in the best interest of students.

Approved by the SSWA AZ Board January 6, 2022

Sources

Arizona Department of Health Services Arizona State Health Assessment 2020 Update

Arizona Department of Education Social Emotional Competencies, 2021

Collaborative on Academic and Social Emotional Learning- CASEL www.CASEL.Org


Alisic, E., Van der Schoot, T. A., Van Ginkel


