White Paper

Addressing Mental Health Through Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

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Executive Summary

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has been shown to be essential in addressing mental health issues in children and teens (Reicher & Matischek-Jauk, 2017). SEL focuses on building social intelligence and helping students to better understand emotions, relationships, and their own self care and development. This includes building empathy, accepting differences, conflict resolution, self-awareness, self management, and social interactions. SEL challenges can lead to chronic absences, behavior problems, suspensions, lower academic achievement, and self-destructive behavior such as substance use or engaging in unhealthy or dangerous relationships. In a study from CASEL (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning) (DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland, 2017), 97% of principals reported that they felt SEL is important for improving student behaviors and social development.

SEL is directly related to mental health and improving SEL skills can help address mental health issues (e.g. Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017). Rethink Ed's SEL platform is a comprehensive solution for building SEL skills in students of all levels, as well as building SEL skills in educators. Mental health, trauma, and equity are also targeted in the Rethink Ed platform including professional development and student lessons.

KEYWORDS

Mental Health, Trauma, Well-Being, Whole School Wellness, Student Achievement, Social-Emotional Learning, Inclusion, Professional Development, Curriculum, Technology, Inclusion

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Mental Health Issues in Children and Teens

Mental health is a serious matter and has become a heightened concern during the challenging times that we have had to face in this past year with COVID-19, abrupt changes in schools and homes, social issues related to racism, and a financial crisis for many

> **1 in 5 children and teens in the United States** exhibit symptoms of a mental health disorder (CDC, 2020)

individuals, families, schools, and communities. 1 in 5 children and teens in the United States exhibitsymptoms of a mental health disorder (CDC, 2020). The mostcommon mental health diagnoses in children and teens aredepression (3.2%), anxiety (7.1%), behavior problems (7.4%),and Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (9.4%)(CDC, 2020). Often, mental health disorders overlap orco-occur. For instance, many children and teens withdepression also have anxiety (73.8%) and/or behaviorproblems (47.2%). Suicide is the second leading cause ofdeath for teenagers with a suicide rate of 14.45 per 100,000individuals (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention) (AFSP, 2020). Suicide attempts are concerning for teens with about 7.4% reporting having made at least 1 attempt. Female teens (9.3%) report attempting about twice as many times as males (5.1%) and black teens (9.8%) are more likely to attempt than white teens (6.1%).

Substance use is another common mental health issue that affects many high school students. In addition to the physical dangers associated with substance use, it can also lead to increased mental health issues. Approximately 2/3 of students have tried alcohol by 12th grade and 12-20 year olds consume about 1/10th of all alcohol in the U.S., about ½ of high school students claim to have used marijuana, and 4 in 10 have

tried cigarettes (CDC, 2020). About 2 in 10 12th graders claim to have used prescription medications without a prescription. Other mental health issues can occur from bullying and violence, trauma (e.g. domestic violence, abuse, death in the family, divorce, etc.), or from unhealthy relationships (American Psychological Association, APA, 2011).

Rethink Ed's Mental Health Suite will provide professional development and student lessons to help educators address these kinds of challenges and will include modules on Anxiety, Bullying/Violence, Developing Healthy Identities, Depression, Digital Citizenship and Online Safety, Human Trafficking, Kindness to Animals, Mental Wellness, Reducing the Risk of Suicide, Substance Use Disorders, and Trauma.

More than 60% of children have some kind of trauma (APA, 2011)

The Effect of Trauma on Mental Health

In addition to the ongoing mental health crisis that schools have been tackling for decades, the pandemic, and other crises (e.g. school shootings, racial tension and violence, loss of jobs, and natural disasters such as fires, hurricanes, and earthquakes) can have a devastating impact on individuals and communities, and can lead to even more mental health issues, and an even greater demand on schools to address the problems. Trauma can lead to anxiety, irrational fears, sleep problems, social isolation, anger, and problems with school work, grades, attendance, and reduced interest in normal activities (APA,2011). More than 67% of children have some kind of trauma (APA, 2011). Being a victim of community violence is estimated to be about 25-43% Socioeconomic status, gender, and race/ethnnicity can increase risks with more boys experiencing community violence and more

girls experiencing sexual abuse. In many of these cases, children are exposed to multiple traumatic events over the course of many years and their mental health can be seriously impacted.

In a recent study, the effects of extended quarantine (even after the quarantine was lifted) included a range of mental health symptoms including depression, anxiety, stress (related to extended confinement, financial strains, and difficulties in finding supplies and medical care), insomnia, fear, irritability, confusion, anger, and boredom (Brooks, Webster, Smith, & Woodland 2020). Extended effects of the pandemic can lead to anxiety, depression, or substance abuse. It is important to understand and address the mental health needs of students not only during school closures but also in returning to school as the trauma that students and their families and their teachers have endured will need to be a priority as we all return to learning (whether from home, in school, or in blended models).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Mental Health

When not treated or addressed, mental health issues can adversely impact a child's emotional and social well-being and their ability to learn or participate in everyday activities with their peers. SEL is an effective and pro-active approach to targeting mental health concerns and teaching SEL skills has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, substance use, and impulsive or dangerous behaviors (e.g. Taylor, et al., 2017). Improving SEL skills can also improve self-care, peer interactions, attendance, behavior, and academic performance (e.g. Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland, 2017).

> **SEL is an effective and pro-active approach** to targeting mental health concerns (e.g. Taylor, et al., 2017)

The Rethink Ed SEL curriculum targets critical SEL skills such as self-knowledge, emotion regulation, stress management, optimism, healthy boundaries, mindfulness, relationships, conflict resolution, and others that are important for mental health and well-being. Teaching students to better manage their emotions and to think more productively and positively about themselves and others, as well as teaching them the skills that they need to interact with and get along better with others, is critical for building their confidence and well-being. Implementing the Rethink Ed SEL series in conjunction with the Mental Health Suite can effectively and proactively address potential mental health issues and can teach preventative strategies to help students develop the resilience and strength to cope with future problems.

Professional Development and Educator Well-Being

SEL is not just for students. A teachers own SEL and well-being is one of the strongest predictors of the success or failure of SEL implementations and relationships with students (e.g. Schonert-Reichl, 2017). It is important that teachers buy-in and believe in SEL and in fact, most do, and they believe that the skills can be taught and that SEL can have a positive effect on student outcomes (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013).

Teachers and other school staff experience a lot of stress and may experience challenges with their own well-being and mental health. Due to substantially high demands from administrators, parents, students, and the general public, (particularly now after the COVID-19 pandemic wiped out traditional education and forced educators to re-think and re-do everything with no preparation or warning), teacher burn-out and stress is higher than ever. Studies show that teachers who are trained in and develop their own SEL skills are better able to manage their own stress, have better instructional practices, better job

satisfaction, have better relationships with their students, demonstrate better empathy, and tend to have less behavioral challenges and better academic performance in their classrooms (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Rethink Ed feels that educator growth and learning is equally important to student learning.

The Rethink Ed SEL platform includes a large library of professional development modules to help educators with their own well-being, as well as learning strategies for working with students to improve SEL, mental health, and wellbeing.

Conclusions

SEL is not just a curriculum but a culture, and it creates a safer, more engaging, and less disruptive learning environment for everyone. SEL can help ameliorate mental health symptoms in a pro-active, positive, and mutually beneficial way for not only the students experiencing mental health symptoms, but for everyone around them as well. SEL creates a culture of support, acceptance, and equity (Reicher & Matischek-Jauk, 2017).

Students with or without mental health challenges need to feel a sense of belonging, safety, and opportunity to learn, grow, and build relationships, and SEL is a proven strategy for building a positive, accepting, and productive school climate. Teachers too, need the support and professional development to enhance and grow their own SEL. While SEL is not the only solution for mental health concerns, it is certainly an accessible, proven, and

constructive tool that should be in every classroom. Rethink Ed's SEL platform is based on research and was developed by a large team of experts in SEL, psychology, and education. The curriculum is aligned to CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) and offers lessons and professional development using a multi-tiered framework and is available in English or Spanish.

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About Us

Rethink Ed was founded on a simple, yet powerful idea: To re-think education. To make it better and easier. To unburden school districts and empower educators. To improve outcomes and elevate accountability. To promote collaboration and inspire learning. And most importantly, to make a difference in the school day for everyone – administrators, educators, and students.

The Rethink Ed solution is part of Rethink First, a global company that is transforming behavioral healthcare. Similar to Rethink First's other solutions that are innovating and improving outcomes for clinicians and employers globally, Rethink Ed is pioneering EdTech with our relentless pursuit of innovative methods that put evidenced-based, data-informed, digitally delivered instruction and assessments into the hands of educators, clinicians, and parents who share our singularly minded focus: To power the potential of all children and to work together to help them succeed.

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