



EDUCATION

## There's Hope

An emerging understanding of brain development has revealed a remarkable period of elasticity during adolescence. Could social-emotional learning (SEL) foster the “soft skills” needed to direct students toward a thriving adulthood?

By **Kathleen Carroll**

**A**t Harvest Collegiate High School in Manhattan, students know what to do when they face a mysterious math problem. Take a breath, recognize a “maze moment,” and retrace their steps to find an alternative to their temporary dead end.

It's a simple idea: learning as navigation, choosing among concepts and strategies that either pave a path forward or trap you in the puzzle at hand. But these “maze moments” at Harvest, along with a half dozen other schools in New York City that have adopted the theme, give teenagers a new way to understand and articulate their roles as not-yet-perfect masters in school and in life. Instead of a frustrated “I don't get it,” students can visualize their position in the maze: what they've learned so far, what they don't yet know, and how they might persist past this current challenge to chart a different path and solve the problem.

This is the language of social-emotional learning, a holistic understanding of the richly human context in which students develop and grow. Social-emotional learning, or SEL, encompasses the broad spectrum of skills, attitudes, and values that promote success in school and in life, things like managing emotions, setting and achieving goals, persevering through adversity, and working in a team. It explicitly acknowledges the importance of mindset and the fundamentally interpersonal project of education, in which knowledge is developed through a series of trusting relationships between teachers, students, and peers. And it can be a critical set of strategies to advance educational equity by supporting the development of all students, including those who have learning differences,

are growing up in poverty, or are otherwise affected by adversity.

Supporting such learning is an explicit priority of the Education program at Carnegie Corporation of New York, which seeks to advance systems and opportunities that ensure all students reach adulthood with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to participate in a democracy and thrive in the global economy. SEL is one of a suite of strategies the Corporation supports to position young people to experience success after high school graduation — especially those who have not traditionally been well served.

“Learning doesn't happen in a vacuum,” says Saskia Levy Thompson, a program director at the Corporation's Education program, where she manages the New Designs to Advance Learning portfolio. “You can't actually function in a purely academic zone without also developing the sensibilities, orientations, behaviors, and strategies that all of us use to navigate our everyday lives.”

### A Call to Action

This type of thinking and teaching, which took a back seat to the academic standards-based accountability movement of the past 30 years, is now on the rise. The 2015 federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, shifted broad decision-making power to the state level and gave states new sources of financial support to promote social-emotional learning. In addition, the growing imperative to meet workforce needs for so-called “soft skills,” such as solving unfamiliar problems and collaborating with diverse colleagues, has prompted more than a dozen

**The Circle of Life** Valor Collegiate holds weekly group check-ins called “Circles” at its three charter schools in Nashville, Tennessee, as part of its efforts to embed social-emotional learning into its curriculum. During the Circle, students share stories of their growth as well as their frustrations. Likewise, students are encouraged to show their support for each other's struggles. Here, Gambia Flemister, a ninth-grade Spanish teacher at Valor College Prep, offers feedback to one of her students in their weekly Circle. PHOTO: VALOR COLLEGIATE/JOSH BENNETT

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— Saskia Levy Thompson, Program Director, Education, Carnegie Corporation of New York

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states to consider new laws to explore or fund expanded SEL programs since 2017.

A call to action was broadcast in 2018 in *A Nation at Hope*, the culminating report of the Aspen Institute’s National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. That project, produced with the support of Carnegie Corporation of New York, explored the opportunities and barriers for educators and decision-makers looking to thread SEL throughout their work. A Council of Distinguished Scientists, comprised of educators, neuroscientists, and psychologists, concluded that teaching social and emotional skills is essential to students’ success. Hundreds of interviews across the country revealed widespread commitment to social, emotional, and academic learning — in other words, to educating the whole child.

It’s an agenda with particular promise for adolescent students, a group whose developmental needs are often overlooked when it comes to educational improvement. The potential for social-emotional learning to transform teenage growth is undeniable. An emerging understanding of brain development has revealed a remarkable period of elasticity during adolescence — nearly a second infancy, and a second chance to capitalize on rapid change to build the habits of mind that support a thriving adulthood. And it all comes at a moment when students are taking their initial steps toward adult independence, with all the risk and reward that entails.

“The second most important part of brain development happens during adolescence, and it’s essential that we

apply that science of adolescent learning to the teaching process as well as to the culture we create in our schools,” says Deborah Delisle, president and CEO of the Alliance for Excellent Education, a national nonprofit focused on improving American high schools by sharing research and best practices with educators and policymakers across the country. “You can really help kids hardwire their brains so they can think critically and develop the skills to communicate effectively and solve problems. Unless there are opportunities presented to them to do that, kids may not get the chance.”

But what does that look like on the ground? What’s the right strategy with a roomful of distracted ninth graders on a rainy Wednesday morning? What question, expectation, experience, or assignment will help hardwire their brains to think critically?

That all depends — on the school’s core culture, students’ individual challenges, and the task at hand. Social-emotional learning is a flexible category, both in terms of needs and tactics, and so innovative schools that are implementing SEL with the Corporation’s support across the country are following complementary, but distinct, visions.

And that is by design, says Levy Thompson.

“Having the diversity of approaches is important,” she elaborates. “There is not yet as rich an implementation toolkit as there is a robust research base. And if social-emotional learning is really going to be employed

at schools with the goal of young people having universal access to this sort of supported learning experience, we are going to have to build out a suite of strategies so any community member, teacher, or parent can see themselves inside one of those examples and translate it to their particular environment.”

### The “Joyful Struggle”

Consider Valor Collegiate, a small network of three high-performing charter schools in Nashville, Tennessee. It was designed and built from the ground up with social-emotional learning as its core mission, sharing equal billing with enrolling a socioeconomically diverse student body and driving academic performance to rank with the top one percent. Its schools have hit those benchmarks, including by appearing at the top of both Nashville and Tennessee school-performance reports since first opening in 2014.

Valor’s social-emotional learning goals are established in its Compass Framework, which identifies the disciplines and habits necessary to empower its diverse community of students to live “inspired and purposeful lives,” such as defining and articulating their identity and learning to be mindful, including holding their attention when required. Through the Compass Phase System, students assess their skills, study and set goals for character building, earn badges based on relevant experiences, and share stories of that growth during weekly group check-ins called “Circles.” Teachers also participate in the Compass Framework and weekly staff Circles.

The meetings are highly structured, but the agenda responds to participants’ needs that day. In a meeting featured in a school film about the program, a student begins by saying, “Hi, my name is Aidan. I feel a little bit stressed and just like, kind of off ... usually when I don’t take my ADHD medication, my brain kind of wanders.”

The faculty member leading the Circle, Coach McNeal, asks the group, “Can we get about two or three people to make commitments to just check in with Aidan in the hallways?” Hands go up. “So let’s send Aidan some love and support.” In response, members of the group hold up a hand sideways and gently wag their fingers in a gesture of affirmation.

Aidan stands in the center of the Circle, and a classmate thanks him for his candor: “When you told us about why you were ‘off’ — it just really helps for us to give you support.” Another offers a gentle hug.

The schools’ shared focus on academics and social-emotional learning is a powerful combination, says founder Todd Dickson, a former charter school teacher and principal who leads the network with his twin brother, Daren, an adolescent counselor.

“Our theory is that when kids learn how to really be vulnerable and get rewarded with connection, that is a recipe for building courage, the super habit for learning and growth,” he explains. “If you learn to lean into discomfort — we sometimes call that process ‘joyful struggle’ — and learn to accept that being uncomfortable is an essential part of growth and learning, you are going to be really primed to learn. There is also a core communal piece where kids feel comfortable with each other and therefore are more willing to take academic risks.”

Valor is sharing its programs and techniques with other schools by publishing its materials online and through its Compass Camp training program for educators and school leaders, which so far has trained 85 school leaders from 11 states in leading Circles at their own schools.

### Building a Sense of Self

The notion of powering academic achievement by practicing noncognitive skills is a major focus at the Institute for Student Achievement (ISA), part of the Educational Testing Service. ISA has helped six high schools in New York and New Jersey expand SEL through its Integrating Non-Cognitive Teaching and Learning into the Academic Core Project, with Corporation support.

Here, the theme is metacognition — the self-awareness and skills to assess progress, break tasks into manageable steps, and envision alternate strategies to complete a challenge. Teachers’ training begins with a video explaining brain development. But comfort and community are important, too.

“We know that to succeed academically, students need to feel supported and safe where they are actually doing their studying and learning,” says Janet Price, senior director of programs at ISA. “The professional and interpersonal skills that employers demand can be learned in English, social studies, math, and science classrooms, and those skills can actually help students do better in those classes. Moreover, the experience of success helps students develop the belief that their perseverance and effort can pay off in increased achievement, in school and in life.”

One example of how these skills complement one another comes courtesy of a school ISA has supported: the Integrated Arts and Technology High School in Rochester, New York. “Claim Evidence Analysis” was developed by the school’s English department to train students to recognize and identify assumptions and ideas, including their own, while reading a text. Students then gather evidence for these beliefs, organizing their writing as a means to provide evidence to support — or refute — those claims. It’s an exercise that demands not only close reading but self-awareness, careful analysis, and confidence in and responsibility for one’s own ideas — even when they conflict with the author’s claims. The innovation helps

students with both academic comprehension and personal awareness, and has proved popular among staff and students. In a survey, one noted, “It’s been ingrained in my head by now, it’s very easy to understand and master and I think I’m ready to move on to more advanced writing.”

And through its relationship with ISA, the Rochester school’s tool is one of 40 strategies available via the organization’s metacognitive toolkit — available to educators looking for proven ways to embed SEL in their own classrooms and schools.

Such distinct applicability to academic goals may protect SEL from “initiative fatigue,” which is endemic in the sorts of traditionally lower-performing schools that ISA supports, says President Stephanie Wood-Garnett.

“Because the schools are serving a large majority of students who are diverse or low-income, there is often initiative fatigue, because they have been working to get better and already tried a lot of things,” she explains. “Teachers may be feeling stressed or like, ‘Here comes another initiative, why is that any different?’ But because we explain it as part of the academic core, it’s seen as supportive of the work they primarily came into education to do.”

Integrating SEL within academic instruction may also guard against another reform worry: the appearance of a stand-alone program that schools can simply add to their menus with the assumption that such skill-building is therefore covered.

“I’m really concerned it will become one more check mark,” says Delisle of the Alliance for Excellent Education. “That some vendor will come and say, do this lesson every Friday from 1 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. and your kids will do great — that is the worst possibility. I think teachers, counselors, and families need to be well versed in what SEL is and how you integrate it into every class you have.”

“We’re not just having assemblies,” Wood-Garnett adds. “This is about what happens in classrooms.”

## Powering Progress

Integration also describes the approach of The Urban Assembly, which operates 22 schools in New York City and supports SEL programs at a handful of other schools in Los Angeles, Houston, and Syracuse, New York. Rather than being introduced as a new stand-alone fix-it-all, SEL is intentionally layered on top of existing resources and practices at the schools operated and supported by the UA network.

“We try to create compatibility,” says David Adams, the organization’s director of social-emotional learning. “How does this concept map into your schools? What is the

vision and mission? How does social-emotional learning contribute to that vision?”

The organization works to adapt SEL to daily life in schools seeking to improve their outcomes. At Urban Assembly Media High School, for example, leaders opted to focus on developing students’ decision-making skills, and academic expectations were revised to require students to make and successfully defend clear choices and analyses in their work. And at Urban Assembly Institute of Math and Science for Young Women, a focus on tracking individual growth has students focusing on personal character development as they analyze texts.

Such work is possible even when the logistics are challenging. Urban Assembly Unison School is unique among neighboring schools, as it does not screen students by academics or attendance. Adams described it as “dedicated to helping ensure that regardless of income level or previous academic achievement, all students can meet their potential,” and in 2016 leaders recognized the role that explicit social and emotional development could play in enhancing outcomes.

The school was under intense pressure to improve academics, but school leaders carved out 20 minutes for SEL practice per day, including a weekly academic check-in with an advisor, one day of restorative practice to work through conflicts, and a single skills lesson taught across three days. Lessons can include mastering such techniques as belly breathing (to help remain calm under pressure) or learning how to maintain strong eye contact and shake hands firmly (an effective way to initiate successful relationships). The effects have been powerful, propelling improvements in measures of school culture like attendance as well as academic performance on annual tests, according to Adams.

## Learning for Life

There is widespread interest in such efforts. As part of the 2017 *Ready to Lead* report by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), researchers conducted a nationally representative survey of 884 school leaders and found that 95 percent were committed to developing students’ SEL skills. But far fewer had implemented such plans: only 25 percent at the high school level had any SEL plans at all, and just 25 percent of all principals had instituted SEL instruction that met CASEL’s standard for high-quality implementation, such as setting a budget, training staff, and adopting an evidence-based curriculum. The major barrier: 71 percent said teachers don’t have enough time to do it.

Urban Assembly’s Resilient Scholars work, as with similar efforts by other Carnegie Corporation of New York grantees, is designed to help bridge that gap by offering implementation strategies to schools with their own goals for



**Building Character** A group of sixth graders work on building simple machines in science class at the Urban Assembly Unison School in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn. Middle school students can participate in the Career and Technical Exploration Program (CTEP) in which teens do lots of cool things, like grow kale in a hydroponics lab, build websites, and study coding. The school has a hydroponic farm that produces 200 pounds of vegetables a month as well as a makerspace with a 3D printer! PHOTO: COURTESY URBAN ASSEMBLY UNISON SCHOOL

SEL. As part of Resilient Scholars, Fordham University’s Graduate School of Social Service is studying the impact of Urban Assembly’s SEL programs; students’ skills are measured twice a year, along with metrics of school performance such as attendance, academic performance, and school culture indicators. That data can build understanding of the relationship between SEL and other school and

postsecondary outcomes, as well as how well the Urban Assembly implementation model predicts student outcomes.

“We have to help principals with how to organize a school in ways that support these SEL outcomes — particularly in terms of transferring skills from school to the wider community,” says Urban Assembly’s Adams. “In instructional practice, for example, if you first teach what active listening looks like, follow that with a quick debrief at the end of a ‘turn and talk’ activity, the lesson is not just about a topic, but about the quality of communication. And then you can use those same communication skills to talk to your parents, or to anyone else.”

SEL has major implications for educational equity, he points out. His program’s ultimate goal for students: to operate effectively in society and solve problems.

“Every student, regardless of background, benefits from social-emotional learning,” Adams continues. “But when we are thinking about kids who come from high-risk backgrounds, the explicitness of these skills allows our students to develop fluency. We are judging kids every day based on their ability to communicate and manage conflict, and equity is about giving every student equal exposure to these ideas and the opportunity to see them modeled and taught by teachers who care about them.”

This broad range of strategies holds particular promise. Taken together, they reveal the importance of educating the whole student — helping students to not only learn content, but also learn how to learn.

“Social-emotional learning is not a discrete package of skills that we are hoping a kid learns,” observes Carnegie’s Levy Thompson. “It’s a way of being and navigating and dealing with all of the things — both wonderful and challenging — that any person is going to confront over the course of their life.” ■