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# SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) SYMPOSIUM

## FINAL SUMMARY REPORT

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In October 2016, Youth Development Executives of King County brought together leaders and thinkers from the Road Map region and beyond to advance research and practice in the area of Social Emotional Learning (SEL). The symposium-style event was titled “Whole Child, Whole Day: Elevating and Integrating Social Emotional Learning.”

The timing for such an event was opportune, due to the convergence of several factors. Nationally, the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (or ESSA, signed in December 2015) allows for a broader definition of student success, and encourages states to focus on student health and safety when designing accountability systems for schools. At the state level, Washington released a set of recommended [Social Emotional Learning Benchmarks for K-12](#) in October 2016. If adopted, these benchmarks will help to shift organizational practices and culture to better support the development of SEL competencies in adults and children. In the Road Map region, a number of schools and school districts are emphasizing holistic student outcomes in their short- and long-term planning efforts.

The symposium attempted to bring together these efforts in the hope that implementation of SEL initiatives can be broad, integrated, and mutually reinforcing. The specific goals of the symposium were to:

1. Advance local understanding of current SEL initiatives
2. Place SEL in a larger context by tying it to related opportunity gap closure efforts
3. Promote professional connections between leaders of SEL efforts across sectors

### WHO ATTENDED THE SYMPOSIUM

Over 80 people attended the SEL Symposium. The group was comprised of leaders from school districts and youth development organizations, researchers, policymakers, and public and private funders. Attendees were focused on elementary, middle, and high school-aged youth, and most expressed interest in the full range of topics covered during the symposium when they enrolled. These topics were: regional and statewide SEL efforts, cross-sector integration of SEL, high-quality practice, cultural responsiveness, trauma-informed approaches, and SEL measurement issues.



## SYMPOSIUM FORMAT AND CONTENT

The symposium opened with a general framing of the day, punctuated by a presentation of Washington State’s newly recommended [Social Emotional Learning Benchmarks for K-12](#). These benchmarks provide a state-level framework for building a system for effective SEL programming in schools, and can serve as guiding principles for those who support the work of schools in community settings.

Morning sessions focused on case studies of local schools and school districts that are using strategic partnerships to build strong, intentional SEL programming. In the afternoon, sessions addressed key themes related to SEL: high-quality instruction, implicit and explicit racial bias in childhood, trauma-informed practice, and measurement issues in SEL. See the list of session topics at right.

Symposium participants reconvened at the end of the day to discuss lessons learned during the day, and next steps for moving SEL forward in the Road Map region. The general themes that emerged from this discussion are summarized below.

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE SYMPOSIUM

Enthusiasm for the progress of SEL in Washington was high among Symposium participants. However, a number of issues were raised over the course of the day that warrant caution, or at least further discussion:

- **Equity is an Issue** for several reasons. Some raised concerns around the cultural specificity of some SEL concepts, and worried that assessing SEL in students could lead to a further stigmatization of already marginalized groups.

## SYMPOSIUM SESSIONS

### MORNING SESSIONS:

- ❖ Graham Hill Elementary: Using Social Emotional Learning to Improve Student Achievement
- ❖ Gear Up in Highline: Using Student Voice to Improve SEL and Metacognitive Supports for Middle and High School Students
- ❖ Creative Schools Initiative: Building Academic Mindsets and Deepening Literacy through Collaborative Arts Integration

### AFTERNOON SESSIONS:

- ❖ Fostering Environments for Social Emotional Learning with Youth Program Quality
- ❖ Implicit (and Explicit) Bias and Positive Racial Identity Development
- ❖ Linking Trauma-Informed Practice and a Systematic Approach to Social Emotional Learning
- ❖ Getting to Measurement – Challenges and Opportunities (Panel Discussion)

*Session descriptions and materials are available at <http://ydekc.org/road-map-region-social-emotional-learning-symposium/>*



- **A Focus on Adult Practice** rather than student competencies could mitigate some equity issues. Not only should adult practice be nurturing and of high quality; it should also take into account the realities of racism and discrimination, and should value the development of positive identity in students.
- **Research is Emergent**, so high-stakes approaches to SEL measurement are premature and ill-advised. There is a need in the field for better measurement tools that are strongly tied to proven interventions. Although the evidence base is limited at present, youth perception surveys (e.g. on school or program climate) can provide useful information for practitioners.
- **Strong and Sustained Investment** is needed to allow for innovation. A fragmented, piecemeal approach to funding SEL work could derail well-intentioned efforts. Strong implementation will require consistent and coordinated funding streams for professional development, organizational capacity building, evaluation, and family and community engagement.

## NEXT STEPS FOR SEL IN THE ROAD MAP REGION

Symposium participants identified important next steps for SEL at the school district and community level and at the state level. At the **school district and community level**, the following near-term needs emerged:

- **Stronger Connections** between and among schools and other community agencies to share expertise on what works in SEL, and to link people who are doing SEL work in different places. Two concrete suggestions in this area were (1) to identify and amplify exemplary approaches so that they can be replicated; and, (2) to designate community engagement leads at schools so that partnerships are more cohesive.
- **Common Language and Improved Communication** to build understanding and buy-in around SEL, and to name SEL practices already in place. Many participants identified families as key potential partners in SEL work, and spoke to the importance of engaging families around new and changing priorities and initiatives.
- **Embedded SEL Practice** in schools, as opposed to relying on an add-on approach. In order to effectively embed SEL in schools, strong leadership and ongoing coaching and professional development are key. Some existing structures (e.g. advisory classes) can support the teaching of SEL competencies to students, but this is inconsistent and may be insufficient if it is not accompanied by a supportive school culture.
- **A Shift in Adult Practice** is needed to support student SEL growth. Adults who work with young people need to attend the development of their own SEL skills in order to effectively



model those skills. It is also important for adults working across racial and cultural barriers to recognize their own biases, and to mitigate the impact of those biases on the students they serve.

- **Stay Focused on Equity** as SEL work takes shape. As noted above, conventional ways of approaching SEL may convey cultural biases that adversely affect students' identity development. It will be important to remain asset-oriented and alert to possible bias so that all students are able to develop a positive and healthy sense of their own cultural identity alongside academic and SEL competencies.

At the **state level**, connection and communication also emerged as major themes. Participants felt that it would be important for the legislature and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to do the following:

- **Adopt the Benchmarks** to keep SEL work moving forward. Furthermore, participants hoped that the State would build on the benchmarks by investing in implementation and integration across all of the systems serving young people (e.g. schools, out-of-school time programs, justice, health and human services).
- **Maintain Communication** between the legislature and constituents. Constituents should be made aware of what is happening in the legislature, and should be prepared to provide feedback and share success stories as opportunities arise.
- **Connect SEL to Other Legislation** so that it remains relevant. Incorporating SEL into the definition of basic education would help it to gain funding consideration in light of the McCleary decision.<sup>1</sup> It will also be important to tie SEL to teacher evaluation systems and ESSA implementation at the state level.

## SUMMER 2017 CONVENING

Response to the symposium was extremely positive, with most respondents to a post-event survey expressing overall satisfaction (100%) and intent to apply learnings to their future work (94%).<sup>2</sup> Because of the event's success, YDEKC will host a companion event in summer 2017. This event will explicitly target a practitioner audience, and will provide participants the opportunity to learn from one another about what is working in this ever-evolving space.

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<sup>1</sup> This Washington State Supreme Court decision (McCleary v. State, 269 P.3d 227 (Wash. 2012)) held that the State had failed to fulfill its constitutional obligation to "make ample provision" for the education of Washington's children (Wash. Const. art. IX, § 1).

<sup>2</sup> N=35; based on a post-event evaluation distributed in print and online via Survey Monkey.