

Global Greatness: How Social-Emotional Learning Helps Children Succeed in School, the Workplace, and Life



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As the leader of a nonprofit organization that strives to help the world's children develop vital social-emotional skills early in life, I am pleased that there's growing demand throughout the economy for employees with affective abilities.

A recent report from an advisory group of U.K. executives and educators was especially heartening because it made clear that non-cognitive skills and attributes such as team work, emotional maturity, empathy, and other interpersonal skills are as important as proficiency in English and mathematics.

This is refreshing thinking.

In so many ways, education policy has been stuck in the manufacturing age, driving schools to turn out people who recite information and pass cognitive tests so they can work on a production line effectively. Meanwhile, business has moved at light speed into the information age. To put it bluntly: Education policy hasn't kept up with the competency requirements of 21st-century work environments.

A good example is the empathy that's needed when we're creating well-designed products. It's not just about

coding a functional e-widget. Steve Jobs started this refocus at Apple, and now people increasingly want elegant solutions; so even software engineers need to be able to stand in the customer's shoes today and feel how the end-user will respond to product design. This is a great reason why social-emotional skills are so critical to modern workplaces.

Another reason is that 21st-century work environments are all about cross-functional teaming, collaboration, and integrated design. They're also about working with people remotely, and these diffused work settings put a higher premium on social-emotional competence than old-school work environments ever did: It takes more effort and skill to connect on a human level with someone when you're not in the same room with them.

Social-emotional skills are absolutely essential for 21st-century leaders, too.

More and more, we're seeing that to be a successful boss these days, you simply can't be bossy. You need to be collaborative and convivial. You need to sell ideas to your teams. You need to listen well. You need to be attentive to customers' needs. You need to understand and internalize other's perspectives. And you need to appreciate everyone's problems and concerns and use that data to come up with win-win solutions.

Just as significantly, it's very difficult to demonstrate the cultural competence that's required in the global

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marketplace today if you're not imbued with social-emotional learning.

We now work with people from highly diverse backgrounds—and many of us interact with colleagues from just about every continent on a regular business basis. Indeed, almost every technology company is asking people from Silicon Valley or Seattle to team up with employees or contractors from Mumbai or Shanghai. Sometimes these people work together in the same physical space; and other times they're solving difficult problems together in a web-based setting.

I find these multicultural environments fascinating—and they present a wonderful and rich opportunity for learning, growth, and the development of substantive human relationships.

But these deeper relationships require sensitivity, empathy, social awareness, and an ability to imagine a completely different life experience from our own. When people who work in these environments possess these skills, collaboration can be magical and highly profitable; and when they lack these skills, collaboration can be disastrous with serious and negative bottom-line implications.

The big question we need to confront is whether current policy is allowing educators to prepare our children for today's workplace, and for the future work environments we've yet to imagine.

Despite the fact that technology will play an even greater role than it does now and that multicultural teams will become even more common, the answer to that question is “no.”

The sad truth is that many educators aren't allowed the classroom time to teach much-needed social-emotional skills or to test kids for these competencies; and with the exception of just a few states, we don't have policies that support schools in imparting these skills to children.

Yet smart educators know that these social-emotional skills aren't a nice-to-have frill, or an extra add-on. Instead, they're fundamental to a well-educated 21st-century child's future well-being. That's why so many educators are teaching, advocating, and advancing social-emotional learning in spite of education policies.

“Teachers across America understand that social and emotional learning (SEL) is critical to student success in school, work, and life,” according to the [Missing Piece survey of educators](#), commissioned by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning:

“Educators know these skills are teachable; want schools to give far more priority to integrating such development into the curriculum, instruction, and school culture; and believe state student learning standards should reflect this priority. Teachers also want such development to be available for all students.”

But wouldn't it be so much better if educational policy truly reflected the necessity of social-emotional learning in our schools? I believe so.

Illinois and Kansas have already passed education standards for SEL. In addition, most states include SEL standards for early learning. But these standards often stop at or before the elementary-school level, and we need to address this oversight.

In the end, this is a preparation and prosperity issue—and we would do well to listen to all the empathy-seeking employers out there who are clamoring for employees with social and emotional competency.

This is my view. And I work hard to support it each and every day as executive director for Committee for Children.

But as you'll see when you read through this publication, I'm not the only one who wants to help children use social-emotional learning (SEL) so they can become successful in school, the workplace, and life.

Indeed, in the following pages, you'll hear from some of the most thoughtful, committed, and accomplished people when it comes to SEL.

Be sure to see the essay by R. Keeth Matheny, a teacher in the Austin (Texas) Independent School District, on how teaching social-emotional skills has made a dramatic difference in students' lives.

Spend some time with the piece by Reed Koch, president of the Committee for Children Board of Directors (and a former senior executive at Microsoft). Reed explains why companies should enhance and enrich their employees' social-emotional skills.

I think you'll be nourished by Paul Eaton's illuminating take on how social-emotional learning readies children for their life mission. A retired United States Army general best known for his command of operations to train Iraqi troops during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Paul is uniquely qualified to weigh in on this critical topic.

I highly recommend Matt Segneri's thoughts on empathic and emotionally mindful leadership in business, government, and the nonprofit sector. As director of the Social Enterprise Initiative (SEI) at Harvard Business School, he's in a position to really understand how to be a force for good all over the world today.

There is wisdom in the piece by Roger P. Weissberg, the vice chair of the board of directors and chief knowledge officer at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional

Learning (CASEL). As always, Roger focuses on the fact that his movement is all about individual children whose lives hang in the balance.

I'm inspired by Meria Joel Carstarphen, the superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools, who talks about the fundamental educational shift from a culture of punitive testing to an emphasis on the whole child.

Dan Kranzler, the founder of the Kirlin Charitable Foundation, touches our hearts when he discusses how social-emotional learning helps people feel a deep sense of satisfaction about the world.

Alonda Williams, a senior director of education at Microsoft, is equally compelling as she assesses SEL and its connective values for us.

And Andria Amador, the assistant director of Behavioral Health Services for Boston Public Schools, moves us to action with her call for proactive and preventive help for students who are hurting.

Taken as a whole, these nine viewpoints, from nine diverse and influential thought leaders, make a profound and powerful case for children with social-emotional skills everywhere.

I hope you're engaged and energized by this special thinking.

And if you have any questions, or would like to discuss any aspect of SEL, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me.

Sincerely,

JCD