

We Need to Educate Our Children's Hearts and Minds



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Meria Joel Carstarphen, EdD, is Superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools. She brings to Atlanta an impressive record in transformative educational leadership that has led to significant student performance gains. Dr. Carstarphen has nearly 20 years of education and experience in diverse, major metropolitan public school districts, including Austin, Texas; Saint Paul, Minnesota; and the District of Columbia. She leads and provides oversight to Atlanta's 50,000 students; 6,300 employees; and 106 learning sites with a nearly \$1 billion annual budget. Dr. Carstarphen earned a doctorate in administration, planning, and social policy, with a concentration in urban superintendency, from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She also received a bachelor of arts in political science and Spanish from Tulane University and master of education degrees from Auburn University and Harvard University.

“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.” This is just as true today as it was when Aristotle taught it more than 2,000 year ago. And so, social-emotional learning (SEL) enables us to educate students in whole-child development.

As superintendent of an urban district, I recognize that many of our students come to us without the necessary social-emotional skills they need to become productive adults in a world that is increasingly becoming smaller and flatter. Since these skills can be taught, I feel it is imperative that we as educators do more to teach self-management, relationship building, cooperation, and conflict resolution.

From my perspective, I am responsible for ensuring our public school system provides the type of education that is good for all students, and not just some, and that requires a balance of three things—it's a third, a third, and a third:

- Academic achievement, which involves rigorous course work, high expectations, and success in grades, accountability, and testing
- Practical skills and rich experiences, which brings in co-curricular activities like the fine arts, athletics, world languages, and exposure to career and technical educational environments
- Authentic engagement for all that promotes fairness, goodwill, and well-being

SEL supports all three of these pillars by teaching students goal-setting and communication skills for college, teamwork and problem-solving skills to use in a career, and empathy and emotion-management skills to use throughout their lives.

SEL is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively.

As students acquire social-emotional skills, they become more focused on academics and learn to manage all of the other noise around them. SEL

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anchors you in your own behavior so that you can do more and learn more without being as distracted from the educational process.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which works on SEL at a national level, conducted a meta-analysis in 2011 and found that systematic SEL implementation with fidelity led to a 9-percentage-point drop in problem behaviors, a 9-percentage-point increase in prosocial skills (meaning managing emotions and conflict appropriately), and an 11-percentage-point increase in reading and math standardized test scores.

Relationships are at the core of SEL—relationships with others, but also, equally important, relationship with self. If you think about it, successful navigation in life (career, marriage, partnerships, family, and friends) is about our ability to successfully manage relationships. External SEL skills as simple as picking up on social cues and internal SEL skills such as being able to regulate our emotions in the face of stresses we encounter are important skills to have.

In my own SEL training, I learned about the distinctive differences between transactional behaviors or interactions and strong relationship management. Strong relationships happen as a result of having quality exchanges, quality time, and frequency.

But equally important is the relationship with self. As you learn to control your emotions and deal with issues both external and internal, you become better prepared to handle personal stress, anger, and other emotions and distractions.

Having said that, I think there is some confusion around what SEL is all about and its importance to learning and child development. There are varied SEL-type programs and strategies that have SEL components, such as character education, which can cause confusion; so we have to do a better job of explaining the full concept.

I think we need to do a better job of ensuring that parents, schools, and communities understand that SEL is not an add-on but a core component of how we approach teaching and learning in our schools.

In the Atlanta Public Schools, our mission is this:

“With a caring culture of trust and collaboration, every student will graduate ready for college and career.”

An essential part of this mission is to create that caring culture by teaching our adults the SEL skills they need in order to be able to have healthy interactions with students and then help our students build those skills in their own lives.

SEL lays the foundation when done well and with fidelity. It supports skills all of us need to be successful, happy, productive, and well-adjusted adults. SEL skill sets are often thought of as those “soft skills” many of us of a certain generation received from our parents and grandparents. Unfortunately, our students don’t all come to school with these skills. Many of the students in Atlanta Public Schools are economically disadvantaged. Many come from situations of living with chronic stress, meaning that, for them, elevated levels of cortisol are normal, and they remain in the “fight, flight, or freeze” mode all the time.

The good news is that research has shown SEL skills—the ability to manage your emotions and actions, develop good relationships, and make good decisions—can be taught. I have worked with students from all ages, focusing on everything from learning methods to calming down to getting the energy and gumption to finish their school work and achieve their goals. Atlanta’s students—and those across the country—can master these skills and become change agents for their communities.

As educators, it is our moral imperative to produce well-rounded citizens. We must ensure that our little people become big people who have the smarts and hearts

to be better people than we ever were. They need to have hope and believe they can succeed. They need to have healthy relationships with others and a better sense of self. We must provide them with a suite of tools including organization and time management and social-emotional skills to succeed in education or workplace settings. We can do this. We must do this.

But this fundamental shift in public education is not going to happen with just a few school districts like Atlanta aligned with a foundation focused on such instruction. It has to be a national movement with national leaders.

I think about what it would take for SEL to become part of a national shift in public education. I see parallels with the civil rights movement. The shift away from a culture of punitive testing to a focus on the whole child is a fundamental transformation in education and will require national leaders and large-asset foundations to light the fire and make it happen.

And if there are those who are still not convinced given the evidence that SEL is core to child development, tangible financial benefit has also been documented. A recent report from the Columbia Teachers College, *The Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning*, reveals a very real economic benefit from SEL, which could be seen in the research even when controlling for the obvious benefits of preparatory work for college and career.

Simply put, there is no downside.

In general, people who are mentally and emotionally healthy, and who have productive and enriching lives, put less stress on our health care systems, our workforce gaps, our schools, and even our criminal justice systems. Imagine the possibilities when fewer people have the need to access supports or make their way through these systems. It’s a mind shift that sounds simple and workable if we simply make it a priority. The return-on-investment is there.