

Written Testimony
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Thank you Representative Wood & members of the Commission for inviting me to participate in this important event, & for the opportunity to hear from a variety of regional representatives. I would like to present to you on the topic of social-emotional learning. But first, I will describe my current role in the Darien school district.

Intro

As the Darien Coordinator for Student & Family Social Services, I work closely with families & schools in various capacities in an effort to promote positive child & family functioning across settings, & assist in strengthening home/school communication & collaboration. Some of my responsibilities include crisis/trauma response assistance & family outreach. I help families connect with district, community & State/Federal resources for mental health, alternate special needs education settings, parenting education, child respite, special needs recreation, healthcare, & financial support. I conduct parent information sessions about parenting & child development. I am also a member of a district-wide elementary level mental health professionals PLC team. The team's primary objectives are to promote social-emotional learning for all students, & increase social-skills program efficacy in all five elementary schools.

What is Social & Emotional Learning?

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, & Emotional Learning (CASEL) is the nation's leading organization advancing the development of academic, social & emotional competence for all students. As defined by CASEL: "SEL is the process through which children & adults acquire & effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes & skills necessary to understand & manage emotions, set & achieve positive goals, feel & show empathy for others, establish & maintain positive relationships, & make responsible decisions."

As a leading component of the Darien Public Schools' ongoing goal to support social-emotional learning for all students, all five elementary schools & the middle school are implementing the Second Step program. Research conducted on this specific program indicates increased positive social behavior, reduced conduct problems, & reduced emotional distress in students. We are currently in our 4th consecutive year of district-wide program operation, which serves as a fundamental & comprehensive component of the district's SRBI Tier 1 universal strategies in the social-emotional/behavioral domains.

Effective implementation of SEL curriculums can help promote skills for learning, empathy, emotion management, & problem solving. This can create a learning environment where children are safe, comfortable & ready to learn, & provides students with skills to demonstrate care for one another, manage their own behavior & emotions, & negotiate social interactions with peers & adults. The lessons that our district utilizes are often interactive. It is common for a teacher to introduce an idea, to show a video, a poster card, or an interactive scene that prompts a class discussion. Some of the primary grade lessons include hand puppets & songs to support the concepts the children are learning. Role-playing & turn-&-talk peer pairings are also incorporated into the lessons.

To help children practice social-emotional learning skills at home, parents are encouraged to use the incorporated home forms/activities, which are typically distributed by the classroom teachers. The home components can provide parents with valuable insight about what children are learning in the classroom, help support concepts & common language between school & home, & help parents utilize specific strategies with their children in everyday situations.

It is very important to emphasize that our school district applies SEL teaching universally for typical peers & those with special needs. The ongoing initiative to further support students with IEPs includes special education staff co-teaching & collaborating with classroom teachers, providing direct support for IEP students during whole-class lessons, & pre & post teaching of lessons individually & in small groups. The rationale for this is that, in tandem with a variety of other interventions & programs, we strive to improve these students' achievement & self-confidence, & their enhanced ability to participate & absorb the information through alternate modalities. This helps strengthen our support of students' social-emotional learning across environments & help promote generalization of skills. Additionally, these efforts further promote the inclusion & integration of students with special needs with their peers in the general education environment.

It is also important to note that the Second Step program is simply one of a number of programs that can be used systemically to advance the development of student academic, social and emotional competencies within school districts.

In closing, I would like to thank the members of the Commission for inviting me to participate in this event, & for listening to my comments.