Meeting the Social-Emotional Learning Needs of South Carolina’s Students: Creating cross-sector professional learning community for whole child education

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Why: The pandemic, and sudden school closures, has exposed many inequities and teaching and learning. Educators have made major shifts in their work with children — making sure they are safe, continue to have access to school meals, and that some form of distance learning can take place. A new UofSC research study found that South Carolina teachers’ (over 12,000 surveyed) number 1 concern as they taught in midst of the pandemic was the well-being of their students. In-depth interviews revealed that teachers’ viewed their social-emotional needs as more critical than academic learning loss.

Over the last several decades a new science of learning has shown how developing social-emotional skills leads to higher academic and other outcomes for students. As a result more is known about common evidence-based practices (see CASEL SELect). One of the most effective programs has been developed at National University through their Sanford Programs — Harmony (curriculum) and Inspire (educator professional development).

While many school districts across South Carolina offer a variety of programs, we have learned that SEL practices and supports for students are inconsistent and often not evidence based. Due to a lack of consistency, when and where they are in SEL practices are in use, students may experience different approaches by teachers in their schools to those who support them in early childhood or in after school programs.

In partnership with United Way of the Midlands and Sanford Programs, UofSC’s ALL4SC (Accelerator for Learning and Leadership in South Carolina) is developing a cross-sector Social Emotional Learning model and initiative as part of a whole-child education strategy.

What: The ALL4SC, the United Way of the Midlands, and Sanford Programs partnership will:

1. Provide immediate SEL support to students, parents and teachers through online resources and of the consulting staff of Sanford Programs at National University;
2. Utilize common evidence-based practices with consistency, through Sanford Harmony and Inspire, for students and the teachers, early childhood educators, and afterschool providers who teach them;
3. Draw on common measures to engage in cycles of continuous improvement;
4. Support a professional learning community; and
5. Assist school communities in integrating SEL supports within a district’s instructional approach.

Where: The partnership work begins in Fairfield County in September 2020. Expansion to an additional county and schools will be explored for implementation in January 2021. Over the next two years, a larger scale-up and sustainability strategy will be developed and aligned with the SEL priorities of the SC Department of Education.
Who: In the first year, we expect to: (1) engage 600 educators and approximately 4,000 students across two counties in evidence-based practices; (2) reach 500 educators and behavioral health professionals through virtual (and potential F2F) convenings; (3) work with approximately 50 teacher educators from UofSC and South Carolina Association of Teacher Educators will allow for evidenced-based SEL practices to be introduced to pre-service educators.

New Partner Districts: We are seeking an additional school district partner to participate in this pilot. Initial partner counties will: (1) participate in gap meetings, via video conference, so that the Team can appreciate the unique needs and challenges of each community; (2) collaborate with the Team to identify initial student populations for support; (3) select a team of educators within each county to establish a professional learning community (PLC) and ongoing support network for others in the county; (4) permit selected educators to attend orientation and training on how to use the Sanford Programs; and (5) allow the Team and the established PLC to provide support other educators, both in- and out of school.

Expectations of Local Partners: Partners in each county are expected to:

1. Dedicate district staff to serve as a liaison between the district and the Team. The liaison will coordinate with the Team to facilitate data collection and implementation of Sanford Harmony curricula and professional development;
2. Agree to use a common screening tool and will allow UofSC faculty to administer the screening;
3. Support educator participation in professional learning in order to provide consistency across all faculty and out of school providers;
4. Share de-identified school and/or district data regarding student population, SES, demographics, discipline referrals, attendance, grades, and achievement; and
5. Allow superintendents and other district and school leaders to participate in webinars around common practices and the use of Sanford Program tools.

Next Steps: Over the next two years, a larger scale-up and sustainability strategy will be developed within the UofSC, aligned with the SEL priorities of the SC Department of Education and in collaboration with SEL4SC. Our ALL4SC efforts also will include establishing innovations in teacher education and cross-sector professional learning for SEL and integrating SEL practices in whole child model of teaching and learning. In addition, ALL4SC will be working in partnership with the Learning Policy Institute, to develop a whole child education policy system in states across the nation.

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