

SEL Essentials at Mid-Year: How Do We Reconnect, Rebuild, and Begin Again?

By Peter Brunn | Categories: Social-Emotional Learning, Classroom Community

January is here, with a host of new (and recurring) challenges. For all of us, the shocking attack and ongoing events in our nation are causing a swirl of painful emotions. The tragic toll of the pandemic continues to mount, despite the recent hopeful news about vaccines.

On a more personal level, as an educator you might feel shocked to realize that we are already entering the second half of the school year. Or perhaps you're grappling with the fatigue that comes from feeling that this school year and the previous one have merged into one seemingly endless slog.

Despite everything, January remains an opportunity for a fresh start in our classrooms, particularly when attending to social-emotional learning (SEL) for our students.



How Do We Begin Again?

During the next few months, some of us will welcome students back on campus for the first time since March 2020. Others among us will remain in virtual settings for the foreseeable future.

No matter the context, we are all asking ourselves some version of the following questions: *How do we begin again? How do we reconnect with our students? How do we revitalize our classroom community for the second half of the year?*

In a “normal” school year, starting again in January is usually straightforward. We might reaffirm our community by inviting students to share highlights from their holiday break. Or we might reflect on our collective hopes for the new year. And then we’d simply pick up right where we left off back in December.

But in this year, with its myriad disruptions, challenges, and trauma, what extra steps are needed to bolster students’ SEL competencies and their sense of connection?

Acknowledge and Reflect on the School Year So Far

As my coauthor Kristy Rauch and I discussed the challenge of starting again, we acknowledged that while we bring hope, optimism, and prayers for an end to the pandemic and to violent civic unrest, the truth is that educators still need to dig deep to get through this year and support our students as best we can. It won’t be perfect, it won’t be easy, and it certainly won’t be “normal.”

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For us, the first step in preparing for a new calendar year is to reflect on where we are and where we’ve been. If we sit for a moment in the joy and pain, we might discover some concrete successes and insights from the past seven months that will illuminate our path forward.

So, as we move from cold winter months toward the promise of spring, we invite you to ask yourself:

- *What has gone well so far this school year?*
- *What do you want to continue to do?*
- *What might you need to reconsider?*
- *What needs to start anew?*
- *Which students might need special attention right now?*
- *Where can you get help and support?*

Revisiting the SEL Essentials

Reflecting on these questions allows us to hold tight to what worked and let go of what did not. As you reflect and prepare for the second half of the year, you will inevitably have to make some hard decisions about what to prioritize.

In our SEL Essentials blog series, which debuted last fall, we explored several key topics, including beginning the school year, dealing with trauma, developing pro-social skills, and reimagining our discipline practices.

Today, we propose revisiting our very first blog of the series, “SEL Essentials: What Do We Prioritize? Three SEL Essentials for Beginning the Year,” in which we outlined the following three essentials:

- Invest in the ongoing work of building and nurturing authentic relationships.
- Ensure that your instruction authentically integrates academic and social development.
- Take care of yourself and stay connected to others.

In January, at this mid-year point of inflection, these essentials still ring true. As students return virtually, in person, or both, there is no way we can expect them to undertake the hard work of learning (or expect ourselves to do the hard work of teaching) without the solid foundation that these SEL essentials provide.

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With that in mind, we invite you to reflect: *What suggestions and ideas from that first blog post might you revisit or try as you welcome students back this month?*

For example, you might recommit to morning circles, providing a predictable, caring space for your students to connect with each other and refine their social and emotional skills.

Or you might make time every day for your students to reflect together on their partner work, thinking about what went well and how they coped when the partnership was challenging.

Or you might resolve to find new ways, such as the practices presented in our Teacher Wellness series, to attend to your own self-care.

Do A Mid-Year “Tune-Up” with the Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit

As the first half of this year has shown, it is challenging to build connections and create community in this hybrid world of in-person and virtual instruction. It can be done, but it requires mindfulness, a commitment to the work, and an array of resources tailored to the task.

Back in July, we introduced our complimentary Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit to help K–6 educators do this vital work. As you start school this January, it may be helpful to reacquaint yourself with the Toolkit as a way to continue building your caring classroom learning community.

Whether the Toolkit is brand new to you or you are returning to it after using it this past fall, you will find helpful support for connecting with students and building relationships.

What’s In the Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit

The Toolkit is free to download and is designed for use by any K–6 educator. You don’t need to be currently implementing any Collaborative Classroom programs in order to use it.

The Toolkit includes an Introduction, which contains helpful implementation tips and suggestions for modifications, plus a set of developmentally appropriate Community Chats or Class Meetings. The kit spans two grade level ranges, K–1 and 2–6, with specific content for each.

At K–1, the Rebuilding and Reconnecting Toolkit includes the following Community Chats:

- Welcome Back 1: Introducing Community Chats
- Welcome Back 2: Introducing Community Chat Rules
- Welcome Back 3: Keeping Each Other Safe
- Welcome Back 4: Learning About Feelings
- Problem Solving
- Managing Difficult Emotions
- Handling Loss
- Responding to Tragedy
- Preparing for Remote Learning
- Coming Back from Remote Learning

At Grades 2–6, the Toolkit contains the following Class Meetings:

- Welcome Back 1: Introducing Class Meetings
- Welcome Back 2: Keeping Each Other Safe
- Welcome Back 3: Developing Empathy
- Problem Solving
- Managing Difficult Emotions
- Handling Loss
- Responding to Tragedy
- Preparing for Remote Learning
- Coming Back from Remote Learning

Welcoming Your Students Back

As you review the list of K–1 and 2–6 topics, you can see that there are a variety of meetings specifically designed for this difficult school year. For those of you using this kit for the first time, or for those who are returning to in-person instruction for the first time since last March, you might start at the beginning with the “Welcome Back” weeks.

If you have used the kit in the past, we invite you to take a fresh look at those weeks to pull out what you might want to reintroduce this January.

Regardless of whether students have been joining instruction remotely or in-person, taking the time now to make all students feel welcome will help lessen the typical anxieties and worries that may manifest after an extended break from school.

Addressing Specific Topics to Support Your Students

It is important to note that as students return this January, they are likely to be carrying a heavy emotional load—especially in light of last week’s violent attack in our nation’s capital. Given these considerations, you may wish to make immediate use of the “Responding

to Tragedy” class meeting.

Students may also be struggling with personal emotional burdens that impact their relationships and behavior in the classroom. As you encounter these inevitable challenges, the meetings “Problem Solving” and “Managing Difficult Emotions” might be helpful. In addition, please consider sharing the toolkit with your school counselors, social workers, or school psychologists as a resource that might further support their efforts with struggling students.

If your school experiences more periods of temporary closure and reopening over the next few months, the “Preparing for Remote Learning” and “Coming Back from Remote Learning” meetings will support you as you navigate those disruptions.

Finally, if your school community has experienced serious loss and/or tragedy, you will most likely need lots of help and support. While the “Handling Loss” and “Responding to Tragedy” meetings are only a piece of what you will need, they are designed to provide helpful support as you begin the work of healing.

A New Year’s Resolution: Be Patient, Give Grace

Because I usually abandon most of the resolutions I make at New Year’s, I have tried not to make many of them. But this year, I have pledged to make a few hold true. As I thought about them in the context of beginning school in January, I think they might be helpful for us all to consider as we move forward together.

For us to remain emotionally healthy, and to bring some light to a dark winter, I suggest we strive to be patient and give grace to ourselves, our colleagues, our students, and their families.

We will all make mistakes, and there will be days when we are not our best selves—but with patience, grace, and lots of kindness, we will get through this hard time.

Download the complete, complimentary Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit for grades K-6.

In case you missed it, read the Introduction to this series, “SEL Essentials: Reimagining Our Social and Emotional Learning Priorities,” and catch up on earlier installments of the series.