

SEL Essentials at Year's End: Honoring the Learning of the 20–21 School Year

By Peter Brunn | Categories: SEL, Thought Leadership

Even in the wake of a global pandemic, old habits die hard. As our teaching and learning shifts back to in-person environments, it's human nature to revert reflexively back to our familiar patterns, our comfortable assumptions, and our "tried and true" ways of approaching the work.

However, we don't have to—and emphatically should not—go "back to normal." Nor should we unquestioningly accept prevailing judgments about how teaching and learning have fared this school year.

Instead, as we conclude the year and look toward the next, let's examine what we really learned during this difficult year, what our students and families taught us, and consider how best we can apply these hard-won insights to the 2021–22 school year. Our goal for these reflections is to ensure that in the fall, our schools meet the full needs of all of our students—socially, emotionally, and academically.

Students Have Surprised Us

Late last summer, as we braced for the start of the 20–21 school year, we invoked the game of hide-and-seek to describe educators' feelings of nervousness, anticipation, and hopefulness.

Another element of this game—the surprise elicited by finding someone in a place you least expected—recalls to mind the many ways that students have surprised us and challenged our expectations this year.



These surprises can be hilarious. My neighbor's 4-year-old, for example, promptly stripped down to his underwear at the conclusion of every Zoom class. Surprises can also be heart-warming: the shy student who suddenly found her voice in this new digital learning realm. Finally, they can be heartbreaking, like the students in my daughter's class who either don't show up, or who never turn on the camera or unmute during class—not even during small breakout groups.

All of these surprises, whether funny, inspiring, or deeply sad, are pieces of the lived experiences of our students. They are key elements in the learning and development that have occurred over the past year. These experiences demand our attention and thoughtful consideration. They might upend our assumptions and open our eyes. And they always give us a window into the lives of our students, providing insights to guide our future teaching-and-learning relationship with them.

Resisting a Deficit Mindset While Accelerating Learning

While there has been talk on different platforms about "learning loss," we would caution that this label can be unproductive,

misleading, and even a trap. You might be concerned that students are not scoring exactly where you want them to on spring benchmark assessments, or you could be understandably anxious that they have not yet mastered certain skills that students typically would have in a “normal” year. However, students have engaged in other kinds of learning during the pandemic—learning that might surprise us, learning that doesn’t show up on assessments.

Over the past year, we have seen children learn to take care of siblings, wake up on their own, log into Zoom every day without prompting, ably manage virtual assignments, clean the kitchen, and pick up after a pet—all signs of increased responsibility and independence.

Additionally, many students have had to manage spending more time alone or without adult care, reading independently, drawing and crafting, coding or playing complicated video games, baking cookies, learning instruments, or becoming politically engaged. Learning has not been lost; it’s simply that different kinds of learning and growth have occurred.



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These non-traditional experiences matter. They are vital parts of the foundation of learning that students will bring with them once they return to physical school buildings. As educators, it will be up to us to resist a deficit mindset and instead to honor such experiences—and, most importantly, to help students build upon these foundations.

Next year we can strive to “catch them up,” but in the end, it will be students themselves who accelerate their learning—it *is* *their* learning after all. Our responsibility as educators is to identify innovative, creative ways that leverage students’ non-traditional learning experiences to support them with instruction and resources that meet their needs as we move forward.

Serving Our Communities of Color

Finally, one thing we learned from some of our district partners that initially surprised us, but in hindsight should not have, is that some families—particularly Black and Native American families—have chosen to keep their children at home, rather than sending them back to in-person school.^[1] This choice was obviously personal and multifaceted, but one key reason why families opted-out was that their children did better and felt more connected and supported in their learning pods, community centers, and families than they had at school.

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This realization must spark culturally responsive reactions from teachers, schools, and districts. We must be laser-focused on building deeper relationships and refining our approaches to these traditionally marginalized populations of students so that they feel safe, connected, challenged, and supported.

What Will Our Students Need?

As children return to buildings and we consider what they will need in the school year ahead, first and foremost will be to provide a multitude of experiences that cultivate their intrinsic curiosity and motivation to learn.



Students will also need time and support as they reconnect with their peers. With the opportunity to once again play or hang out with friends in person, students could be surprised by the changes they notice in themselves and one another. If you've not seen someone face-to-face in months, the sheer fact of being taller, having a deeper voice, or dressing differently might at first create some social awkwardness. Let's help students navigate these situations by making sure they feel confident with their SEL skills.

All of this is a reminder that while this has been one of the hardest years many of us have ever faced, our students are still learning and growing. They continue to navigate this pandemic and plant their own seeds of learning. These precious seeds may not have been planted in the straight and predictable rows of a traditional school year, but they are present nonetheless. It is now our duty to ensure there is enough water and sunlight to nurture their growth.

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.

Please share your thoughts and suggestions with us on Twitter (tag @CollabClassroom along with @pdbrunn, and @kristy_rauch) or on Facebook.

[1] https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-1.html