

SEL Essentials: Reimagining our Social and Emotional Learning Priorities

By Peter Brunn | Categories: SEL, Relationships, Classroom Community, Caring School Community, Thought Leadership, Remote Learning

As we prepare for the 2020–21 school year, I've been thinking about a refrain from the children's game hide-and-seek. After counting, the seeker calls out, "Ready or not, here I come!"

I remember playing the game, hiding, and feeling hopeful that I had found a great spot. But as soon as I heard the seeker finish counting and shout, "Ready or not, here I come," my heart would beat faster, and I would suddenly feel anxious, not ready at all, dreading that I would be the first one found.

As I consider my emotions when planning for this upcoming year, I am transported back to this childhood memory.

After the uncertainty of the summer, we face an unpredictable fall. And while teachers have not been hiding—in fact, we've had our heads down, working furiously to get ready for the different ways in which our schools might open—many of us are definitely anxious as the first day of school draws near. Right now the hide-and-seek refrain seems relevant, with a slight twist: "Ready or not, here *they* come."

Our students are coming. So much joy, anticipation, and anxiety are packed into those four words.

Reflecting on the School Year Ahead

Whether we're feeling ready or not, the start of this school year will be the most challenging we have ever experienced. We are excited, stressed, worried, and maybe even a bit angry.

Our students, whose learning was interrupted and then turned upside down by the pandemic, are feeling much the same way. They have been stuck at home, many without summer programs, without playdates—suspended in the same limbo and dealing with the same uncertainty that we have. They are ready to go back to school, yet many will be frustrated or disappointed to start the year virtually.

At Collaborative Classroom we spent the summer getting ready, too—preparing new resources and tools to support the schools and districts that we serve. But we know that resources are just one part of readiness.

It will also take grace, hard work, and a tremendous amount of empathy and compassion to navigate successfully through this year. Perhaps most importantly, this year's return to school will require a mindset and teaching stance that intentionally foster the supportive learning communities that our students need to thrive.

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The SEL Essentials Blog Series

To that end, we're writing this blog series to share our essential strategies and insights about building and sustaining caring, robust learning communities—the kind of communities in which all students feel valued, supported, and able to take the learning risks they need to grow.

In this series, we'll draw upon our forty years of conducting research, developing programs, and collaborating with educators.

This series will have several parts:

Part 1 – “What Do We Prioritize? Three SEL Essentials for Beginning the Year”

We will explore how to open the year with our students' social and emotional needs in mind and consider what are the essentials, addressing topics such as:

- How might we approach building relationships and developing a sense of belonging among students?
- How do we build relationships virtually?
- How might we manage our classrooms (virtually and in-person) in a caring and respectful way?

Part 2 – “We Need to Be Different: Supporting Students Who Are Dealing with Trauma”

We will explore questions including:

- How might we support students who experience or have experienced trauma?
- What practices and strategies are most effective?

Part 3 – “Prosocial Skills: Anchors in a Storm”

We will discuss the kinds of skills students need to contribute to and take care of our community. Specifically, we will dig into:

- What skills do students already have that we can build upon?
- What skills do they need so they can solve problems, collaborate, and contribute to the classroom community?
- How might we support students in developing these skills virtually in meaningful ways?

Part 4 – “Reimagining Our Discipline Practices”

We will offer ways to examine and rethink our approach to discipline as educators, exploring questions such as:

- How do we take a proactive, teaching-and-learning approach to discipline?
- What are alternatives to rewards and punishments?
- What might this reimagined approach look like when we are teaching virtually?

Part 5 – “SEL Essentials at Mid-Year: How Do We Reconnect, Rebuild, and Begin Again?”

January is an opportunity for a fresh start in our classrooms, particularly when attending to SEL for our students. We will consider how we might revitalize our learning communities for the second half of the school year, exploring questions such as:

- How can we reconnect with our students and bolster their sense of connection?
- Why and how might we reflect on our current SEL essentials?

- What do our students need most right now, and how might we best support them?

While we are excited to share our thoughts with you, we do so with the humble acknowledgement that there is no one right way to do this work. Our hope is simply to provide a set of guideposts that may help orient you as you chart your own path through the year.

Those of us who are called to be educators are buoyed by the moments of connection, deep learning, and joy we find with students, even as we recognize the work can be hard and sometimes painful.

As fellow educators, we look forward to connecting with you as we publish these blog posts. Please share your thoughts and suggestions with us on Twitter (tag @CollabClassroom along with @pdbrunn, and @kristy_rauch) or on Facebook.

Ready to get started? Read the first post in the SEL Essentials blog series, "What Do We Prioritize? Three SEL Essentials for Beginning the Year."