

# SEL Essentials: What Do We Prioritize? Three SEL Essentials for Beginning the Year

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

A few weeks ago I sat down with two of the most experienced, trusted, and thoughtful teachers I know. We meet regularly, and they always dazzle me with their thinking and ideas. We also laugh a lot.

However, when we sat down this time to talk about planning for the new school year, it felt different. They were still the same smart and dedicated educators; both were excited to begin planning the new year and quick with a laugh. But as I looked across the picnic table (we were outside, masked, and physically distancing), I could tell this was not “normal.” Their shoulders were tight and their eyes seemed anxious. The questions came fast:

- *How do we do this again virtually with a new set of kids? If we go back, how do we do it in person **and** virtually?*
- *How do we cover everything? How do we address learning loss from the past six months?*
- *What do we do to support students (and teachers) who have experienced trauma?*
- *How do we connect with families?*
- *How do we talk with kids about what they are experiencing?*
- *How can we get kids to connect with one another virtually?*

## Climbing the Mountain

As my colleagues and I talked, the list of challenges seemed to loom over us; it felt insurmountable. Preparing to scale a mountain is daunting when the terrain is so fraught that you can't pick a route, when you can't even glimpse the summit.

But we kept talking, and as we climbed together, a big truth emerged: *we can't do everything*. At first this was difficult to acknowledge, but it freed us to plan intentionally and strategically, knowing that some things will be important and others will be de-emphasized or set aside for now.

Once that big truth was established, our logical next questions became: *What do we prioritize? What is most important?* Once we identified those priorities, then the challenges seemed less intimidating, more feasible. I could see their shoulders relax and their eyes brighten.

As my co-author Kristy Rauch and I talked about this blog series, we realized that the question of “What do we prioritize?” is crucial for us to consider, as well. And so in this blog series, we challenged ourselves to distill the most essential learning from our decades of work in schools.

For us, there are three essentials that guide our thinking about best practices for starting the school year. Your own list of essentials may be different from ours, based on the needs of your community. Nonetheless we hope that by sharing our thinking, we will help you zero in on your own short list of what is most essential for your students.

## Essential #1 – Build Relationships

We think that building relationships is at the top of most people's lists. However, saying that relationships are important is very different from actually *doing* the constant, ongoing work of building relationships. (And let's be clear: doing a tidy set of team builder activities during the opening weeks of the school year only scratches the surface of this work.) Authentic relationships are complicated and often messy. They require true listening, openness, and vulnerability. Robust connections are only forged when we acknowledge the hopes, dreams, fears, and weaknesses in one another.

### *Why are relationships so important?*

Relationships are foundational for learning. If "going virtual" last spring taught educators anything, it was this: when kids do not feel safe, connected, and intrinsically motivated, doing the hard work of learning is almost impossible. Relationships are crucial for creating the conditions in which students can fully engage and in which learning occurs.

We know from the groundbreaking work of researchers Edward Deci and Richard Ryan that for students to be intrinsically motivated, it's imperative that three fundamental human needs are first met: the need for autonomy, the need for belonging or "relatedness,"<sup>[1]</sup> and the need for competence (the ABCs).

We also know from our own organization's research that a strong sense of belonging and connectedness is positively correlated to a whole host of positive outcomes for students. Here are a few other points to consider about the importance of relationships:

- **Relationships embolden students to take the intellectual risks that are necessary for growth.** Learning involves taking risks. Taking risks means that we are making ourselves vulnerable, opening ourselves up to the possibility of failing, sometimes publicly. In order to take these intellectual risks, students need to feel safe and connected.
- **In virtual settings where we have limited time with students, there are twin temptations: first, to rush and cover a great deal of content, and second, to skimp on relationship building.** Although covering content is obviously important, the content *won't* be learned if we do it at the expense of making sure students feel safe and connected. Just because we cover the content does not mean students learn it; only the learner controls what gets learned.
- **Meaningful relationships between the teacher and each student help us transcend our biases and be responsive to our students.** We all come with unconscious biases about race, ethnicity, gender, and class. When we only have surface level relationships with students, we have a tendency to use these biases to make judgements about them. Those biases shape how we see them and impact what we expect of them. But when we form authentic relationships with our students, when we take the time to learn about the families and communities they come from, we start to see them as individual people with their own hopes, dreams, and fears. The relationship provides a potential pathway around our biases, into a new space where students can thrive.
- **Positive, healthy relationships play a central role in supporting students who have experienced trauma, according to the research.** (In our next blog post in this series, we will look more deeply at the issue of trauma and explore how this impacts teaching and learning.)

### *How do I build and maintain relationships?*

When you consider the most meaningful relationships in your own life, it's likely they are the ones you actively nurture and maintain.

Relationships with students are no different; a healthy classroom community also needs to be carefully tended and cultivated. Whether it's your relationship with families and students, or the relationships your students have with each other, relationship building must be intentional: it can't be left to chance.

Here are a few key research-supported structures that we have developed to help students develop and maintain healthy relationships in the classroom:

- **Class meetings** – Class meetings are conducted with students gathered in a circle. Specific ground rules govern the discussion (e.g., talk one at a time, listen to one another, allow differences of opinion.)
  - The teacher's role in these meetings is to create an environment that intentionally fosters the ABCs of autonomy, belonging, and competence and that takes students' learning, experiences, opinions, and concerns seriously.
  - The students' role is to participate as valued and influential contributors to the classroom community. Class meetings might be used to solve whole class (not individual student) problems, plan events, or make decisions.
  - To see examples of class meetings and get support for starting your new school year, download our free Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit. The Class Meetings in this Toolkit can be used to build relationships and provide a forum for students to come together and talk about some of the important feelings and issues they may be carrying with them.
- **"Morning Circle"** – This activity forms the centerpiece of our evidence-based Caring School Community. The Morning Circle is a daily gathering that provides a predictable, caring space for kids to connect with each other, refine social and emotional skills, and transition into the school day.
  - To download a sample of a morning circle activity, [click here](#).
- **Cross-age buddies** – One of the key ways in which schools help students feel connected to the school community – not just the classroom – is through the intentional partnering of students with "buddies" from other classrooms.
  - Typically classrooms separated by at least two grade levels are paired together which allows students to form a special relationship as an older or younger buddy with a student outside their classroom.
  - Buddies activities can be simple partner interviews, or more elaborate activities connected to content areas.

### *How do I build relationships while doing virtual instruction?*

Those of us who will be working with students virtually have the difficult task of trying to help build relationships without being together in the same physical space. Last spring, our partner districts found the following strategies effective as they worked to maintain close relationships with students and families:

- **Partner interviews** – At the beginning of the year, when students don't really know each other yet, partner interviews give students the opportunity to learn things about each other that might not come up in video class meetings or lessons. These interviews can be as simple or elaborate as teachers have time for and can be done many times throughout the year. Students might discuss favorite movies, foods, or games. They might share what kinds of books they like, where they go when they need quiet time, or what makes them most sad or happy.
- **Scheduled phone calls home** – By scheduling calls, teachers ensure they reach out to and connect with all families. It

also ensures that teachers can find a good time to reach the family and arrange for an interpreter if necessary. Regular check-ins can be short conversations where you share a bit about what is happening in the class and any projects kids are working on and give parents and guardians a chance to share how their child is coping at home.

- **Letters and cards** – Sending a student letters and cards in the mail is a way to demonstrate our care and to celebrate a birthday or acknowledge a significant milestone or accomplishment.
- **Physically distanced visits in an outdoor setting** – When these visits can be safely planned and executed with appropriate physical distancing and other precautions, they can be an excellent way to reconnect with small groups of students.
- **Creative community building** – Edutopia has featured creative ideas to forge community, including asking students to volunteer as “question-askers, connection-makers or participation-encouragers” during an online class, and ending each virtual session with an ongoing talent show or show-and-tell.

## Essential #2 – Ensure that Instruction Authentically Integrates Academic and Social Development

Often when working with teachers, we hear a common refrain. Teachers will articulate their support for building relationships, but say, “I do team builders for the first few weeks of school; then I get to the important stuff.”

The “important stuff” usually means moving on to the academic content areas. But as we know, *SEL and relationship building are just as important*. In fact, relationships are the building block of academic development. In the absence of strong relationships, students will not be motivated to do the work or take the intellectual risks they need in order to succeed.

### *Why must academic and social development be integrated?*

If we are to create and sustain authentic relationships with and among students, we can’t relegate the work of building meaningful relationships or practicing social and emotional skills to the beginning of the year or to a special SEL-themed block of time during the day.

Since our founding in 1980, Collaborative Classroom’s mission has been to equip teachers with effective practices that fully integrate social and academic instruction. Below are several structures that help students learn more about each other, explore their own identities, build meaningful relationships, and find real-life contexts for refining and growing their social skills, all while engaging in rigorous academic work:

- **Relevant and meaningful content** – This is often overlooked, especially in the younger grades. If we are to build deep relationships in school and help students do high-level work, the content we cover and the topics we discuss must be relevant and meaningful. None of our other strategies or structures will work if there is no meaning to the work that students are doing. By honoring and including topics that kids care about, we ensure that the collaboration built into our lessons has purpose and meaning.
- **Random partner work** – At the beginning of the year, we create norms that make it safe and expected for students to work with everyone in the classroom during instruction. Students might not be (and certainly don’t have to be) close friends, but they will need to develop strategies for collaborating with each other. This means working through sticky situations, solving problems, and advocating for yourself and others when necessary.
- **Reflecting on partner work** – A key act of learning and community building that is often overlooked in the classroom is

providing students time to reflect together on their partner work during instruction. After students have talked with a partner about a book, solved a problem together, brainstormed a list, given feedback on writing, or conducted an experiment, it is essential that we provide time for them to reflect on their behavior. We might ask them:

- *How did it go working with your partner? What went well? What did not go well?*
- *What strategies did you use to work through that together?*
- *How did it feel when you did not get a turn?*
- *Where did you get stuck?*

These questions provide teachers with opportunities to hear what skills kids already have and what skills they might need. It sends the message to kids that we value this learning, that it is essential to our academic development, and that we can work through problems together. In fact, it is often the act of overcoming a challenge that brings us closer together.

- **Reading aloud and discussing the big ideas in books** – There might be no better way to help students feel connected than to read a great book together. Books can make us laugh, make us cry, make us wonder, and fill us with joy. Rigorous book discussions open windows for students to look through and show them mirrors to see themselves. Even when done through Zoom or another virtual platform, reading books to students has the power to connect them with one another.
- **Choice and independence** – Students thrive when they are given choice in their learning and are encouraged to be independent. Choice fosters autonomy, which, as mentioned earlier, is foundational for intrinsic motivation. This is important now more than ever as students are expected to take on more independence working virtually. Read more here about Collaborative Classroom’s experience exploring choice and student engagement this past spring.

### Essential #3 – Take Care of Yourself and Stay Connected to Others

“Put on your own oxygen mask before assisting other passengers.” As flight attendants always say when explaining what to do in case of a drop in cabin pressure, it’s imperative that we each take care of ourselves before we try to help the people around us.

This might be a good way to think about our task during the challenging year ahead. We all need time to take care of ourselves, to make sure that we are doing OK mentally and emotionally. Self care will mean something different to each of us. It might take the form of exercising, meditating, praying, journaling, making art, gardening, connecting with friends and family, or all of the above. If you’re feeling burnt out or unsure of how to begin making time for self-care, we invite you to explore our Teacher Wellness series.

Even if you are already well-versed in self care, the truth is that none of us can do this alone. We will need advice and a sympathetic listening ear. We will require hard feedback, and we may need shoulders to cry on. For all these reasons, it’s vital that we stay connected with our colleagues and keep those relationships strong.

### Reflect: What Are Your Essentials?

These are our essentials as we begin the school year: building relationships, integrating academic and social development, and taking care of ourselves and staying connected to others. What will *you* prioritize? What will guide you? We hope that, through reflecting on our list, you have solidified your own.

As we embark on this journey, let’s do our best to look out for each other as we build and strengthen our learning communities. Our hope is that, as you climb your own mountain this year, you get the grace, patience, and flexibility that will allow you and your students to thrive.

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*In case you missed it, read the Introduction to this blog series, SEL Essentials: Reimagining Our Social and Emotional Learning Priorities.*

*We look forward to connecting with fellow educators over the next several weeks 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.*

[1] Relatedness or belonging “refers to learners’ experiences of positive and mutually satisfying relationships, characterized by a sense of closeness and trust.” <https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/application-education/>