

Fitting Social Skills Instruction into the School Day: Necessity, Priority, Fidelity, and the Secondary School Advisory Period

Saturday, March 5, 2022

Fitting Social Skills Instruction into the School Day: Necessity, Priority, Fidelity, and the Secondary School Advisory Period

Effective Planning, Execution, and Accountability are Essential to SEL Success

Dear Colleagues,

Introduction

I'm going to begin this Blog discussion with a mixed message.

- We will start by discussing the importance of teaching students—from preschool through high school—the interpersonal, social problem-solving, conflict prevention and resolution, and emotional awareness, control, communication, and coping skills that they need for school, peer, graduation, and post-graduation success.
 - We will then address the importance that these skills be taught as part of the general education curriculum and by classroom teachers, and the difficulty in “finding time” to do this during the school day and across the school year.
 - Next, we will next focus our “Blog time” on Middle and High Schools that often carve out an Advisory Period where social skills are taught.
 - And then—and here's the mixed message—we will discuss how Advisory Periods “solve” the “time dilemma,” but are not working due to limitations that need to be considered, prevented, or resolved.
-

The Importance of Teaching Social Skills and the Dilemma of When to Teach Them

As districts and schools scramble around to “do” social-emotional learning, it sometimes seems that “doing anything” takes precedence over implementing effectively planned systemic and systematic strategies that result in demonstrable student outcomes.

To “begin with the end in mind”:

The primary preschool through high school SEL goal should be (as in any academic area) to consistently teach and help students master and demonstrate— at an independent or self-management level—their interpersonal, social problem-solving, conflict prevention and resolution, and emotional awareness, control, communication, and coping skills.

While this should occur along a multi-tiered continuum of services, supports, strategies, and interventions, the instructional process begins as social skills are taught to all students in their general education classrooms by their classroom teachers.

[CLICK HERE to re-read our last Blog (<https://bit.ly/3s34nOW>)—February 19, 2022:

The SEL Secret to Success: You Need to “Stop & Think” and “Make Good Choices.” Helping Students Learn and Demonstrate Emotional Control, Communication, and Coping]

As the author of the best-selling, evidence-based preschool through high school Stop & Think Social Skills Program [through SAMHSA, and on the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP) since 2000], it is still always difficult to convince classroom teachers to implement this SEL necessity with fidelity.

This is even after providing professional development with teachers that:

- Discusses research that shows how students who demonstrate good prosocial skills in kindergarten have (correlationally) better social, emotional, health, and income outcomes as adults;
- Share studies showing that the schools who teach students interpersonal, social problem-solving, conflict prevention and resolution, and emotional control, communication, and coping skills have (correlationally) fewer discipline problems and better student academic engagement and outcomes;
- Emphasizes how students with more proficient social skills contribute to more positive classroom climates, effective classroom management strategies, and successful cooperative or project-based learning groups; and

- Recognizes that, during the past two Pandemic years, many students have returned to school with significant social, emotional, and behavioral needs that can potentially impact their academic and social-emotional success.

Relative to this latter point, in an [Education Week](#) article last week (February 24, 2022) titled, “Educators See Gaps in Kids’ Emotional Growth Due to Pandemic,”

Reporter Evie Blad noted:

"The challenges of returning from remote learning combined with responding to the stress of adults during a national crisis have led some children to struggle with their emotions and with social routines, school and district administrators told [Education Week](#). In some cases, that leads students to withdraw, they said. In others, it may lead them to act out or seek attention.

In a national survey of educators administered by the [EdWeek Research Center](#) in January, 39% of respondents said that “compared to prior to the pandemic in 2019, the social skills and emotional maturity levels” of their current students are “much less advanced.” 41% said their students were “somewhat less advanced” in those areas, and 16% said they were “about the same” as their pre-pandemic peers.

The data come as states and school districts continue to design and adapt recovery plans, many of which place a heavy emphasis on helping students with mental health, emotional stability, and regaining a sense of normalcy. But they face hurdles: schools have struggled to attract and retain staff in all areas, including counselors and social workers; the evolving nature of the pandemic has stressed employees, too; and children respond to the stress of adults around them.

Administrators who spoke to Education Week said they expect their heightened concerns about students’ social-emotional well-being will continue into future school years."

While counselors and school psychologists are essential to the multi-tiered continuum here, we have been training general (and special) education teachers to provide the initial, core (Tier 1) instruction of social skills in their classrooms [since 1990](#).

This is one reason why (once again) our work—in both social skills and school-wide SEL/PBIS systems—was designated as evidence-based by SAMHSA, CASEL, and included in the NREPP Registry over 20 years ago.

The Point here is that: While we need our counselors and school psychologists, we can have a significant, immediate impact on the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of many students—who do not need Tier 2 or 3 services—by implementing effective SEL

initiatives that are anchored by an evidence-based social skills program taught effectively by well-trained, coached, and supported classroom teachers.

But the “Teaching Time Dilemma” must be factored into this process.

The Teaching Time Dilemma

As with any classroom-based strategy, the issue of how to fit it into an already-packed instructional day is always present.

This issue is compounded by the fact that social skills—like academic skills—need to be taught with pedagogical integrity. Otherwise, the student outcomes desired will not be attained, and the time invested will be wasted.

But . . . this issue is even further compounded, in our current Pandemic-impacted world, because students are both academically behind and they have concurrent social-emotional needs.

This means—as with the dosage amount of a COVID-19 vaccination—that enough time (and the “right” time during the school day) needs to be devoted to social skills instruction.

And this means that school administrators, classroom teachers, and related services professionals need to:

- Consciously commit—prior to training and implementation—to social skills instruction that consistently occurs across the entire school;
- Determine, in the context of strategic planning and prioritization, what classroom activities need to be eliminated or de-emphasized—so that the social skills instruction consistently occurs for the “right” amount of time each week; and
- Protect—at all costs—the time blocked for social skills instruction.

Relative to the first point above: The simple fact is that—when students are experiencing social, emotional, or behavioral challenges in the classroom—they will be less able to engage and learn in the academic program. You can have the greatest teachers and most wonderful instruction in the world, but if the students are not engaged, motivated, and focused, all of that goes for naught.

Thus, social-emotional skills are essential to helping students to benefit from their academic programs—making the rationale for including social skills training a logical necessity.

For students who already have “good” social skills, we want to enhance and enrich these skills—nurturing these students, perhaps, into leadership roles.

Relative to the second point above: Yes—some academic work will need to be “re-prioritized” in order to “make room” for the recommended social skills instruction.

But let’s be honest. Most schools are already reassessing, revamping, renovating, and recalibrating (downsizing) their academic programs to focus—as they should—on “power standards” (or pivotal foundation skills), student mastery, and teaching students at their skill—and not grade or chronological—levels.

With so many students academically behind already, we need to stop talking about “double-booking” instruction so that students can “catch up” to some unrealistic proficiency or norm-referenced skill level. We need to establish a balance between academics and social-emotional learning.

Indeed, the current obsession on academic acceleration is adding even more social-emotional pressure and stress on our students, which is making it even more difficult (as above) for them to academically focus, which is increasing their already-existing academic gaps.

When are we going to stop this vicious cycle?

Clearly, now is the time to stop this cycle, because now is the time when schools are reprioritizing their academic expectations. Now is the time to integrate social skills instruction into the general education curriculum, and to schedule the instruction so it can be implemented with fidelity.

(Remember the correlational research cited above about the potential academic pay-off when schools are teaching and students are using their social skills.)

Relative to the third point above: A strategically reprioritized curriculum—that includes social skills instruction—gives teachers permission (and protection) to devote the time needed to focus on teaching students essential interpersonal and social-emotional skills.

But beyond this, administrators still need to consistently reinforce the importance of the social skills instruction—formally and informally.

Examples of formal reinforcement include principals (a) requiring that teachers put their weekly social skills instruction into their class schedules and lesson plans; (b) observing at least one social skills class per year as part of the coaching and evaluation process for each teacher; and (c) providing teachers feedback and data on students' social skill interactions in both classroom and common school areas.

Examples of informal reinforcement include principals (a) celebrating teachers' effective social skills instruction (and their student outcomes) at faculty meetings; (b) emphasizing their schools' social skills program in parent and community communications; and (c) ensuring that the social skills program has a prominent place on their school's website and in their School Office.

Easier at the Elementary than Secondary Level: The Advisory Period

From a scheduling perspective, elementary schools have a much easier job relative to ongoing, year-long social skills instruction. This is because classes are more self-contained, students have one (or fewer) teachers (than at the secondary levels), scheduling specific blocks of time is more flexible, and students typically stay in more stable cohorts, clusters, bubbles, or groups.

Thus, scheduling for social skills instruction at the secondary level is more challenging—especially if all of the students in a school are expected to be involved on an ongoing basis.

While some districts (and states—through their state standards) integrate social skills into the Social Studies curriculum, districts are often reluctant to ask other subject-area teachers to take time away from their academic program to devote to social skills instruction. Nonetheless, when this is done, schools attempt to equally distribute the academic time-loss by teaching social skills during a specific period each day (e.g., 1st Period, 3rd Period, 7th Period) or on selected days (e.g., once or twice per week during the designated period).

Some middle and high schools avoid the dilemma above altogether by teaching their social skills curriculum to all students during a 20- to 30-minute Advisory Period each day or on selected days each week.

I have consulted with many middle and high schools across the country that do this and, quite honestly, very few schools are able to sustain high-quality social skills instruction across all of their teachers and Advisory Periods for even two years—if that at all.

Indeed, in most cases, despite training and administrative oversight, the quality of the social skills instruction by many teachers—even in Year 1 of the initiative—is spotty at best. . . and, for some teachers, there is no social skills instruction at all, and the Advisory Period has become a glorified “homeroom.”

Some schools try to compensate for less skilled or unmotivated social skills teachers by having the social skills lessons “taught” over the school’s closed-circuit TV or broadband system—expecting every teacher to effectively prompt their students’ attention and then reinforce and practice the skills presented during the second half of the Advisory Period. But this, too, has been largely unsuccessful.

Other schools buy a “packaged” social skills media-driven program that teachers “cue up” during the Advisory Period. Once again, teacher-led discussions regarding the skills or issues presented and student roleplay practices are expected, but this does not consistently occur—or with high, mastery-level quality.

Indeed, without the live instruction, followed by guided roleplays—where students must “dramatically” act out their social skills scripts and “good choice” behavioral interactions to mastery, most students (at best) will leave the Advisory Period instruction being aware of different social skills and the importance of controlling and effectively channeling emotions, but not being independently skilled in demonstrating them under different real-life circumstances.

Moreover, if students are not held accountable, in other school settings and at different times during the school day, for demonstrating the social skills taught in the Advisory Periods, the Advisory instruction—even when of high quality—will not provide its promised “return on investment.”

Indeed, every school should systematically develop a multi-year social skills “scope and sequence” so that the most essential skills are taught. . . and periodically prompted, used, evaluated, and reinforced in every classroom by every teacher in the school. Without this planning and execution, the probability that students will transfer the Advisory Period training such that they learn how to apply the skills automatically and independently in real-life situations is low.

Advisory Period Effective Practices

A review of the current literature discussing and evaluating Advisory Periods returned very few good quality citations. From a research perspective, there is virtually nothing. From an “effective practice” perspective, a few articles are useful.

Below—based both on the articles reviewed, and my own 30+ years of experience in training schools to implement school-wide social skills instruction at the middle and high school levels—is a summary of the most notable effective Advisory Period practices.

The first step in the process involves the need for planning before implementation.

This planning should be done by a duly-constituted committee or subcommittee (for example, of the School Climate and Discipline Committee) that has representation from all of the critical constituencies in the school—from administrators to teachers to mental health and related services professionals to support and ancillary staff to students.

Initially, this Committee should meet—on a regular basis beginning six to eight months prior to the Advisory Period “roll-out”—to plan all of the important functional elements of the initiative. After roll-out, this Committee will continue to meet so that (a) formative evaluations and mid-course corrections are completed; (b) staff and student participation and feedback are monitored and addressed (as needed); and (c) the quality and outcomes of the curriculum and instruction is validated and revised (as needed).

The Committee, then, needs consistency, regularity, and stability. After the first two years (where Committee membership does not change), members should receive staggered three-year “terms,” so that the Committee never loses more than one-third of its members (and its “institutional history”) at the end of any school year.

As alluded to immediately above, some of the critical elements that the Committee needs to strategically plan include the following:

- The goals and expected outcomes of the social skills program, its instruction during the Advisory Period, and its transfer into classroom and common areas across the school

- How the goals and expected outcomes—including the fidelity of instruction and implementation—will be formatively and summatively evaluated

- The selection and/or development of the social skills curriculum, in addition to its multi-year (e.g., Grades 6 through 8, or Grades 9 through 12) scope and sequence, and its grade-specific lessons or lesson plans (including built-in accommodations or supports for different students in need)

- Staff training, coaching, supervision, support, and evaluation; along with decisions regarding staff pairing (if, for example, Advisory Periods will be co-taught/co-led)

and staff logistics (for example, when and where will Advisory Periods occur, and will staff stay or loop with the same Advisory cohort of students during their time in the school)

- Student involvement, contribution, feedback, and voice; along with decisions regarding what students will be organized into what Advisory Periods (single-grade or multi-grade? gender-specific or random?), how they will be paired with teachers (by academic interest? by race or gender?), whether student mentors will be used (and how they will be trained and supervised), how students with multi-tiered needs will be supported

- How the initiative will be shared with the School Board, parents, and other community members; how it will be (as relevant) integrated into community-centered discussions and programs; and how community assets and resources can be identified and used to strengthen the school's planned Advisory program

At a more molecular level, the Committee should integrate the following “effective practices” into the planning discussions and outcomes:

- As organized in the multi-year scope and sequence (see immediately above), the Advisory Period should teach specific interpersonal, social problem-solving, conflict prevention and resolution, and emotional awareness, control, communication, and coping skills.

For example, as discussed in our last February 19, 2022 Blog and in the context of a focus on interpersonal, social problem-solving, conflict prevention and resolution, and emotional awareness, control, communication, and coping skills, some essential skills might be:

- Possible Social Skills Targets
 - Avoiding Trouble/Conflict Situations
 - Deciding Whether to Follow the Group
 - Dealing with Peer Pressure
 - Being Honest/Acknowledging your Mistakes
 - Apologizing/Excusing Yourself
 - Dealing with Teasing
 - Dealing with Being Rejected or Left Out
 - Dealing with Losing or Not Attaining Desired Goals
 - Showing Understanding of Another's Feelings/Empathy
 - Dealing with and Responding to Another Person's Anger or Emotionality
 - Walking Away from a Fight/Conflict

o Negotiating to Resolve Conflicts Peacefully and Productively

- All of the social skills should be taught from a cognitive-behavioral and social learning theory perspective by (a) teaching students the skill scripts/steps and their related behaviors; (b) behaviorally modeling or demonstrating the skill; (c) providing every student multiple roleplay opportunities across different relevant scenarios with feedback on their “performances”; and (d) practicing specific situations “under conditions of emotionality” so that students learn how to demonstrate the skill under those real-life circumstances.

- Integrated into the social skills instruction and roleplay opportunities should be, for example and on a skill-by-skill basis: (a) guided group discussions on the use and importance of the skills; (b) surveys and/or self-evaluations of students’ current and emerging (after instruction) proficiency with how effectively they are using specific skills; (c) literary or historical readings that provide examples of the appropriate and inappropriate use of specific skills (and their differential outcomes); (d) discussions of skill-relevant current events or social, moral, or ethical dilemmas; (e) relevant YouTube or other videos; (f) opportunities for students to prepare, discuss, and debrief their roleplays; and (b) student discussions on how and where new social skills will be needed and used in the classroom, with peers, or across common areas of the school.

- Built-in times in the Advisory Period calendar to students and teachers to debrief the current status of the group and the social skills instruction so that group-specific improvements or enhancements can be planned and implemented

- Formally scheduled whole-group and/or grade-level-specific opportunities for teachers (and others) to debrief the current status of their groups and the social skills instruction, and to share successes, failures, issues, and challenges so that group-specific improvements or enhancements can be planned and implemented

- The development of on-line/on-demand Advisory Period/social skills instruction training modules—perhaps developed during the initial round of live trainings, so that each year’s group of new faculty have an immediate training and content resource, and the school does not have to continually do new live training each year with a small number of new staff
-

Summary

Teachers, administrators, and related services professionals are intimately aware of the social, emotional, and behavioral skill gaps that many students are exhibiting in their classrooms—along with the academic gaps created or exacerbated by the Pandemic.

Indeed, we quoted a recent Education Week Research Center national survey of educators that revealed that:

- 39% of respondents said that “compared to prior to the pandemic in 2019, the social skills and emotional maturity levels” of their current students are “much less advanced;
- 41% said their students were “somewhat less advanced” in those areas; and
- 16% said they were “about the same” as their pre-pandemic peers.

To address these gaps, this Blog discussed the importance of teaching students—from preschool through high school—the interpersonal, social problem-solving, conflict prevention and resolution, and emotional awareness, control, communication, and coping skills that they need to be both behaviorally successful, as well as academically successful.

We then described some the characteristics of an effective social skills program—a critical anchor to any school’s SEL/Positive Behavioral Support system, and addressed the dilemma of who and when to teach the social skills and why.

Part of the dilemma rests with the fact that teachers and administrators are so focused on “catching students up academically,” that they do not believe that any time can be devoted to social skills instruction.

This dilemma was directly addressed by noting a series of interdependent psychoeducational realities that result in the conclusion that the absence of social skills instruction will actually undermine students’ academic recovery.

The remainder of the Blog outlined critical details on where to schedule a social skills program at the elementary and secondary levels, with special emphasis on the secondary Advisory Period. Here, the essential components needed to strategically plan, implement, evaluate, and sustain a successful schoolwide Middle or High School social skills process—using the Advisory Period as a “home base”—were presented.

More Resources: A New On-Line/On-Demand Course on Implementing Effective SEL/Positive Behavioral Support Systems in a School

If you are thinking about implementing an SEL/Positive Behavioral Support system in your District or School. . . .

Or if you are currently implementing SEL or PBIS framework activities, but are not getting the results that your students and staff need. . .

We want you to know that we are in the process of publishing a new On-Line/On-Demand Course based on our evidence-based blueprint and 30+ years of implementing our evidence-based SEL/PBS model in thousands of schools across the country.

The Course is titled:

Teaching Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Skills to Improve Student Engagement, Self-Control, and Achievement

The course has 15 sessions (and one Bonus Session), and it provides over 15 hours of presentations that provide the multi-tiered components and implementation steps—at the school, staff, and student levels—to teach students the interpersonal, social problem-solving, conflict prevention and resolution, and emotional awareness, control, communication, and coping skills that they need to be academically and behaviorally successful.

With all due respect to my colleagues, the psychoeducational information in this course is different than the SEL (from CASEL) and PBIS (from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs) frameworks that have significant gaps and flaws and that are not working for many schools, staffs, and students.

A free Introductory Webinar will be available, and more information on the Course can be found at the Link below:

[CLICK HERE for More Information on this New On-Line SEL/PBSS Course (<https://www.projectachieve.info/store/on-line-courses>)]

As always, I appreciate everyone who reads this bi-monthly Blog and thinks about the issues or recommendations that we share.

If I can help you in any of the SEL/Positive Behavioral Support System areas discussed in this message, know that I am always happy to provide a free one-hour consultation conference call to help clarify your needs and directions on behalf of your students and colleagues.

You, too, can be one of the many districts, schools, or psychoeducational settings to take advantage of this post-Blog opportunity. I hope to hear from you soon.

Best,

HOWIE