

The S-LEphant in the Room

Rather than ignoring the elephant in the room, Melissa, co-author of *The ABCs of Social Emotional Learning for School Counselors*, and I made the choice to instead look directly at it. We understand that publishing a book on social emotional learning (SEL) in a political climate that does not fully support it will undoubtedly bring about challenges.

As we wrote our book, we had to take a moment to pause and reflect. We asked ourselves these questions: “Do we want to remove the words *social emotional learning* from our book title even though it is one of the three domains of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Model? Do we want to remove all the buzzwords relating to diversity, equity, and inclusion? Would doing so legitimize the arguments against SEL in schools?”

After two years of immersing ourselves in research about the dramatic increases in rates of trauma, depression, and suicide among youth, we arrived at a clear and resounding answer: We are not changing a word.

The topic of social emotional learning is personal to my own experience as a youth. I have shared my story many times when I was named ASCA’s School Counselor of the Year in 2018. It is the reason I became a school counselor. My story begins in seventh grade, when I began to drink alcohol. I can remember a distinct change in my behavior at that time. I pulled back socially from others and became quiet at school when I used to participate. Over the years, there was a steady decline in my attendance and my grades. It was at its worst in my junior and senior year, when I transitioned schools and struggled to adapt to the new environment. I had to go to summer school after my senior year to graduate. Soon after I graduated, I got pregnant. And, though my son is my greatest gift in life, I was only 18!

When I look back, I don’t think I should have even graduated. I attended a private tuition-based high school in Chicago for my junior and senior year and yet I was still pushed through. If someone noticed me and the obvious changes in my behavior in middle school, maybe someone could have caught me early and perhaps I could have been on a better track.

I don’t often share my son’s father’s story because it is not mine to share, but I will here solely to help illustrate this point more fully. When he was 16 years old, his mother died from cancer. It was a devastating shock to his family. He externalized his grief and quit playing basketball despite once being a star player. Soon after, he started to get into trouble and fights at school. By his junior year, he was placed into an alternative school, from which he eventually dropped out. I often think that if someone had reached out to him and provided him with the support he needed to work through his grief then maybe he, too, would have taken a different path.

I became a school counselor because I wanted to help youth like my son’s father and me. I know, personally, the impact that schools can have on youth. School staff are often the first to notice these types of behavior changes in children, and when school faculty members are trained to notice signs of trauma, depression and grief, they are better equipped to provide children with the support that they need. School counselors specifically have unique training to support students' social emotional needs

and to connect youth and families with external resources such as mental health providers, mentors, and community programs.

People often comment that schools are becoming “too soft”. I’ll admit, I have laughed at some Instagram reels myself around this topic. But let’s also be real. Alternative forms of discipline do not support permissive approaches to student behavior. There should be consequences for actions that cause harm. If we are too permissive, we are not implementing these models correctly. Restorative forms of discipline ask that individuals take responsibility for the harm they cause. However, these practices, if done with fidelity, also look more deeply at the root cause of students’ behavioral needs and assess not just what a student did, but why. What need is going unmet? What grief is unprocessed? What supports are missing?

As I have grown in my career, my knowledge and understanding of SEL deepens. I have seen not only how individual students can change with the support of school counselors or other educators, but also how whole school communities can be transformed through comprehensive SEL programming.

When I worked as an SEL specialist, I coached across a network of 27 schools in Chicago. I served in this role during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and amid the national call for racial justice following the murder of George Floyd. It was a challenging time. Educators were leaving the field burnt out and many families and students were grieving losses and facing economic strain. The communities I served experienced some of the highest COVID-19 death rates in Chicago. We were also continuously transitioning between online and hybrid learning to meet the health needs of communities.

I could never pretend to be someone that had all the answers or someone who was even fully equipped to address some of the needs that we were presented with at that time. I viewed it as a time to collaborate, to learn, and to grow. I noted that schools that had a strong mission and vision, educator buy-in around social emotional learning, clear collaborative practices, consistent procedures and protocols, engaging instruction, and relationships with external providers for wrap-around services were able to maintain both their staff and student attendance, even on virtual platforms.

How did these schools achieve this?

We wanted to learn from individuals who have transformed school communities through strong SEL and school counseling programming. We called on both expert practitioners and scholars to be part of our book. We wanted to explore best practices for SEL and school counseling program implementation to truly create change. We wanted to understand how various frameworks can work together to support the well-being of students and how we can make these initiatives effective and sustainable.

This is why we called on leaders like Dr. Jasmine Thurmond (Chapter 2), former principal of King School of Social Justice, to contribute to our book. We wanted to learn from administrators who have done this work effectively on the ground. Her diligent work to create systems to support the social and emotional needs of students and faculty resulted in her ability to maintain an environment conducive for academic learning. Jasmine’s faculty, students, families, and community members felt safe and supported. Through

a distributed leadership approach, Jasmine helped build a school counseling program that was fully integrated schoolwide.

We paired Jasmine with Dr. Anita Young, Associate Professor in the Counseling Department at Johns Hopkins University. Melissa first worked with Anita during her graduate studies at The Ohio State University. Before earning her doctorate, Anita served as both a school counselor and administrator, experiences that shaped her leadership-focused approach to the profession. She has since authored two books and numerous articles on school counseling, data and accountability, and leadership. Together, Jasmine and Anita lay the foundation for our book, highlighting the importance of strong administrative leadership.

We know that for school counselors to be effective in their work and to gain buy-in for their programming within school communities, administrators must leverage and support their leadership capacity in order to create systemic change. Likewise, it is important for both school counselors and administrators to fully understand the role of school counselors and others within these larger SEL frameworks. By looking at different models of practice to support SEL, we can better understand how to integrate school counseling programs and collaborate more effectively for schoolwide impact.

Many educators are leaving the field of education, and unfortunately, the communities with the highest level of need experience the greatest turnover and staff vacancies. So, we wanted to explore a more sustainable approach: not only an approach that retains school counselors, but that also sustains other educators in school buildings. We believe this work is foundational to support school communities.

So, yes, we decided not to change the title or the content of our book. We know and believe these practices work. And we know that there are clear connections between social emotional needs and academic learning. Students cannot thrive without being in an environment that fully supports them. We look forward to hearing your thoughts about our book and engaging in ongoing dialogue with you!

—Kirsten Perry, co-author of *The ABCs of Social Emotional Learning for School Counselors and Administrators*