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Educational Equity

Solutions Through Social and Emotional Well-Being

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This practitioner brief is the first in a series highlighting concrete strategies that educational leaders can use to increase equity in education, by building supportive learning environments that meet all students' social and emotional needs. This introductory brief starts by laying out the aspects of a student's social and emotional well-being that are the most strongly related to school engagement. It then describes how environmental and structural factors facing particular groups of students lead to disparities in these aspects of social and emotional well-being that affect learning. The discussion then turns to three levels of change that are needed to address this inequity: making equity-focused structural and policy changes, enhancing staff capabilities, and enriching the social and emotional support available to students. Subsequent briefs will flesh out specific relevant issues, providing evidence for various strategies and implementation advice from educators who are using them. How a particular district proceeds will depend on its circumstance and resources, but this brief and future ones should help educators striving to make their systems more equitable.

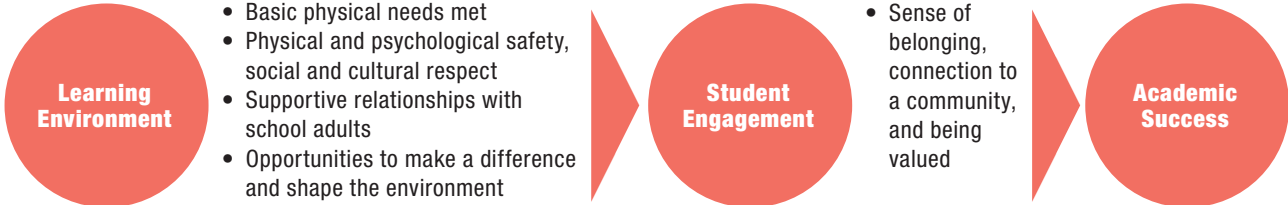
Social and Emotional Well-Being Is Fundamental to Academic Success

Recent research in neuroscience offers important insights into why social and emotional development and well-being are so crucial to learning. The research shows that all learning involves three brain networks: a network that supports attention, focus, maintaining goals, and controlling impulses; a network that supports self-reflection, understanding others' feelings and motives, conceptual understanding, and creativity; and a network that supports the ability to weigh the importance, urgency, and emotional relevance of a task. All children have these three networks, and the way those networks develop, "cross-talk," and balance each other affects how children behave and learn. The networks are continuously shaped by a person's environment, opportunities, and relationships well into adulthood.¹ In particular, they develop in response to the quality of children's physical environments, their emo-

tional experiences, and especially how they think, feel, and relate to others.² This science means that educational systems need to do more than just offer academic content. They need to attend to the needs of the whole child—the child’s physical, social, emotional, and cognitive well-being—so that the child can fully engage in the academic content.³

Researchers have found that students flourish and engage in school when their learning environments provide the following conditions: (1) a way to meet unmet basic physical needs; (2) physical and psychological safety, as well as an environment of social and cultural respect; (3) supportive relationships with their teachers and other adults in school that promote learning and development; and (4) opportunities to have their voices heard in shaping their school environment.⁴ When students experience these four conditions, they develop a sense that they belong and are valued, and they are more likely to engage in learning.⁵ Figure 1 illustrates the relationship.

FIGURE 1



But Disparities Exist in These Conditions

Because of America’s limited safety net, students from low-income families are more likely to go hungry, to be homeless, to have stressed parents, and to have untreated health problems. Similarly, although children in all families can experience things like divorce, violence, abuse, neglect, exposure to drug or alcohol abuse, or parents with mental health issues, students from lower-income families are much more likely to experience several of them.⁶ Additionally, some students of color, immigrants, English language learners, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students have to deal with structural bias and racism, explicit discrimination, hate crimes, and negative stereotyping, in school and outside it.

These pressures can all change the brain, inducing an overactive threat-response system that can in turn make it harder for children to concentrate, remember things, and control their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. These sources of stress can also lead many students to feel that they are not valued or fully respected in school. A school system can only create equitable learning environments when it recognizes these disparities in students’ in- and out-of-school experiences, and provides all students with the social and emotional conditions they need in order to learn.

Unfortunately, many school districts' current norms, policies, and resource allocations do not lead them to offer that support, nor to direct it to the students who need it. So these students who need support the most are less able to concentrate and learn—and educators may come to believe, incorrectly, that they are less capable of learning, no matter the environment. As a result, students from low-income families are more likely than their counterparts to be labeled with special education classifications, are often assigned less challenging material, and are less likely to be given access to advanced placement courses or gifted and talented classes.⁷

Discipline tells a similar story. Black, Latinx, and Native American students, as well as students living in low-income households and those with disabilities, are more likely to be disciplined and suspended than White, high-income, or nondisabled students.⁸ Unsurprisingly, students who face substantial life challenges, such as poverty or prejudice, tend to report on school-climate surveys that they feel less safe and less respected than students who do not experience these kinds of challenges. They also have less of a sense of belonging and of being valued in school, have fewer relationships with adults in school, feel they have fewer opportunities to influence how school is run, and ultimately engage less fully in school.⁹

A Framework for Creating More Equitable Educational Systems

To create sustainable, system-level change in education, district leaders need to see educational equity as central to their mission and comprehensively change the way schools interact with students. To do so, they need to bring about coordinated changes at three levels:

1. The structural and policy level
2. The staff level
3. The program level

Each level affects the degree to which students can experience the four key social and emotional conditions critical to school engagement that underlie educational equity. Without coordinated change at all levels, leaders are unlikely to achieve the goal of creating an equitable learning environment.

The Structural and Policy Level

The degree to which schools can provide students with the four key social and emotional conditions depends on how states and districts allocate resources; how the structures and policies they have in place affect students' basic needs, perceived safety, relationships with caring adults, and voice in decisions; and how central equity is in the vision and culture propagated by educational leaders. Thus, a critical step in transforming the educational system is reexamining the system's struc-

tures and policies to identify and replace those that undermine some students' access to supportive learning environments, and to question assumptions about what explains disparities in students' learning and behavior.¹⁰ Redesigned structures and policies need to build on students' strengths and recognize and address the actual underlying causes for issues with their behavior or learning.

The Staff Level

Because the adults in the educational system create the school environment, change can only occur if they have the capabilities, tools, and skills to provide equitable social and emotional support to their students. Adults in the school, themselves, must have levels of social and emotional well-being and competencies that enable them to model appropriate social and emotional behavior, and that allow them to recognize each student's individual strengths and needs. Stressed-out staff members cannot do these things. School adults need to be given support for their own social and emotional well-being, as well as skills and tools that help them to identify students' strengths and unmet needs, manage behavior to create schools that are physically and psychologically safe, break down biases and promote respect for different cultures, build supportive relationships with students, and give students appropriate opportunities to shape their learning environments. Finally, an important step is to ensure that all adults in the system—from superintendents to teachers to other adults in schools—firmly believe that all students have the potential to meet high expectations when provided the conditions to do so, and all are committed to providing those conditions. To achieve sustainable change, adults in the school need to embrace equity goals, and seek to help students of all backgrounds experience school in a way that promotes their social and emotional well-being.

The Program Level

Finally, for the students who most need them, districts need to put in place specific interventions that provide the social and emotional conditions critical to school engagement. For example, schools can provide students and adults with the time and structure to form supportive relationships, so that every student feels known and supported by at least one adult. They can adopt culturally relevant teaching techniques and provide students who normally do not hold leadership positions with opportunities to influence school or classroom practice.

For these practices to promote equity, however, they need to include mechanisms to get particular types of support to students who need it, through active encouragement or targeted, nonstigmatizing recruitment. Giving the same opportunities to all students will not lead to equal levels of engagement because students come to school with different levels of well-being and experience the school environment differently. The specific interventions and specific types of social and emotional support provided to students will vary based on the needs and circumstances of each school and district. What matters is that educators actively foster the excellence and strengths of students who face barriers to full engagement, with the goal of engaging every student and thereby providing educational opportunities equitably.

Future Briefs

To build educational equity, districts must address issues of students' social and emotional well-being in a coordinated manner at all three levels. Educators must understand that they will not create an equitable school environment simply by adding a mentoring program, teaching a social or emotional skill, or partnering with community organizations to meet some of their students' social or emotional needs. These are useful interventions, but they need to be combined with complementary actions to train adults in the school to support children who face different conditions and different environments, and to redesign structures and policies so that schools can meet all students' physical, social, emotional, and cognitive needs. Only then can schools level disparities in student engagement and achieve educational equity.

This transformation takes time and entails actions on many fronts. Educators will embark on this journey in varied ways; some may already be actively interrogating their systems, while others will be just beginning the reenvisioning process. To help them, MDRC and its partners Education Trust and the Alliance for Excellent Education are producing a series of briefs highlighting concrete issues that can be addressed at the structural and policy, staff, and program levels, and describing how addressing them can advance the goal of creating equitable, engaging schools. These issues will include:

- **HOW TO BEGIN CREATING SYSTEM-WIDE CONDITIONS TO PROMOTE EQUITY WITHIN DISTRICTS.** This brief will discuss concrete actions that districts can take to engage in equity-focused structural and policy change, with the aim of creating environments that support students' social, emotional, and cognitive development and well-being.
- **CREATING EQUITY-PROMOTING SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS** that help meet many student needs and increase the number of adults that students interact with—all at minimal school cost. This brief will discuss how districts, by connecting with outside organizations and agencies that serve children and families (such as out-of-school-time organizations and social service agencies) can enable schools to provide students with additional support and opportunities.
- **HELPING SCHOOLS IMPLEMENT STRENGTH-BASED, HEALING PRACTICES.** This brief will examine how districts and schools can change their environments and staff practices to build students' resilience to stress, and how they can ensure that their actions do not create additional stress or worsen school engagement.

NOTES

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