

Student Learning Loss: Widening the Achievement Gap During the COVID-19 Pandemic SEAD as a Strategy to Address Learning Loss

Thank you for the opportunity to join the Committee of the Whole and address you today. My name is Danielle Gonzales and I am the managing director of the Aspen Institute Education & Society Program. I'm also mom to three kids who have attended DC Public schools. At the Aspen Institute, we support district, state, and federal leaders to improve public education with a focus on achieving equity for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

From 2017-2019, the Aspen Institute hosted the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. There are two takeaways from the Commission's work that I'd like to highlight today: 1.) is the definition of SEAD, 2.) is the research base—what we know about how we learn. Then I'll share implications for the District of Columbia and recommendations based on what we're learning from other cities and states across the country.

First, the definition of SEAD: Many people use the term “social emotional learning” or SEL. The Commission used “social, emotional, and academic development” or SEAD. For SEAD to happen:

1. Students need to be intentionally taught SEL skills and competencies,
2. Students are asked to exercise them as they learn academic content and interact with peers and adults, and
3. Learning environments must support the whole student and be physically and emotionally safe and based on positive, supportive relationships—including those between children and teachers.

There has been a lot of focus on #1 (SEL competencies), and more so these days on #3 (school climate or learning environment), but all three components must exist in harmony.

Second, the research base—what we know now about how we learn. There has been an explosion in knowledge and understanding over the last 25 years about how the brain works. Drawing from brain science, medicine, economics, psychology, and education research, as well as a [2018 consensus study](#) from the national academies of sciences, here is what we know about how we learn:

- Social and emotional competencies (such as the ability to manage emotions, focus attention, successfully navigate relationships, persist in the face of difficulty, apply academic content, and problem-solve) are related to, and predictive of, success in schools, the workplace, at home and in society. There is a substantial and rigorous body of evidence showing that [students learn more](#) and classrooms and [schools are more effective](#) when children and adolescents have these skills and competencies. *SEAD matters.*
 - Further, neuroscience indicates that students who feel unsafe experience a flood of stress hormones inhibiting their ability to process information, to concentrate and learn. This means that *in order for students to master academic content*, they must first experience trust and affirming relationships, and feel emotionally and physically safe. *Relationships and safety are prerequisite to academic learning.*
 - To learn, people must *want* to learn and must see the value in accomplishing what is being asked of them. Engagement and intrinsic motivation are fostered for learners of

all ages when they perceive the school or learning environment is a place where they “belong” and when the environment promotes their sense of agency and purpose.

- [SEAD offsets the effects of stress and trauma](#). For students who have been exposed to chronic, unbuffered stress—such as violence, food shortages, homelessness, racism, or the loss of a loved-one, SEAD can help buffer against the negative effects of stress.
- Social and emotional skills can be taught. These competencies are not set or pre-determined, but can emerge, grow, and change over time. SEAD is *malleable*.
- SEAD can be measured in ways that are valid, reliable, and feasible within the school day. The measurement of SEL skills is still in its infancy: we currently rely primarily on student self-report and adult report on students (e.g. from teachers, parents, etc.). There are some real limitations to these types of measures, but they are preferable to no measurement at all. Having a common set of measures used across a large, diverse group of students enables us to target supports.
- So SEAD rests on a 3-legged stool, and it is meaningful, malleable, and measurable

As we consider where we are today, in addition to understanding how SEAD is related to learning, it is important to note that [research done in the wake of Hurricane Katrina](#) showed that students struggled when schools focused too quickly on remediation/skill recovery, rather than on social-emotional needs, and grade-level content. So, we know it matters, what does it look like in practice?

How to do it:

- States and districts have exceedingly broad flexibility in how new Education Stabilization Funds can be spent; if it helps schools and educators serve students and respond to the historic disruptions of the last year, it’s almost certainly allowable. State, district, and school leaders can and should use these new federal stimulus dollars to help schools improve SEAD. This could include funding personnel for in-person and virtual home visits, reengagement specialists, [building healthy school climates to foster social and emotional learning](#), and teacher training and support.
- Multiple education support organizations have created resources to support implementation of SEAD. Most relevant are from:
 - [Turnaround for Children](#) which provides a curated list of resources for responding to the trauma of the last year with a focus on the 3Rs of relationships, routines, and resilience.
 - [Student Achievement Partners](#), the Council of Great City Schools and the Council of Chief State School Officers, who together provide guidance for the field, including on instructional content priorities grounded in the structure of college- and career-ready standards for Math and ELA. These can be thought of as “power standards” for this unique school year, grounded in the science of learning and development and inclusive of SEL at each grade level.
 - [The Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety](#) at WestEd which provides resources on a variety of related topics, including adult well-being—because we can’t foster student wellness until or unless the adults in our schools and systems are also healthy and well.
- Any supports—whether social, emotional, or academic—must attend to each students’ unique needs, assets, culture, and stage of development. A great example is the [BeMore Me](#) curriculum in Baltimore City Public Schools.
- Schools must build structures that support relationships—such as advisory groups, class meetings, team teaching, multi-grade looping, daily 1:1 check-ins—so that every student is known well by at least one adult, such as the “Every Student, Every Day” initiative in the [Phoenix Union High School District](#).

- We need to create, prioritize, and foster schoolwide structures that encourage student voice and agency through practices such as student-led parent-teacher conferences, choice in assignments, and participation in collaborative decision-making structures such as student-led reopening advisory committees, such as the [Kentucky Student Voice Team](#).
- Bring the assets of community organizations—including art, music, sports, and health and mental health services—into the life of the school, such as [Tacoma Public Schools](#) in WA state.

Specific Recommendations and Actions for the District:

- The Council should support LEAs in providing richer *professional development on SEAD*, including information about the research base for SEAD, and the practical implications. Routines for classroom dialogue, individual reflection, building community and belonging, treating errors as learning opportunities, etc.—as supportive of SEL and academic engagement.
- Provide access to free climate survey tools for each LEA, such as the [U.S Department of Education’s survey](#), which was [recently validated](#) in a set of DC schools.
 - OSSE can provide templates for each LEA to analyze their own data by student group, and against other measures of school climate such as attendance and discipline data.
 - For LEAs to make climate data accessible to families, the District can consider adding data—where available—to the Equity Report Card, school profiles, and MySchoolDC profiles
- The Council can collaborate with OSSE or SBOE to host a city-wide summit on climate and SEL so leaders across the district can learn more about the opportunity.
- The city can work holistically—in partnership with DPR, DPH, and out-of-school-time partners to collect and use the same or similar SEL and climate data and engage in shared PD, and to engage community leaders and families in co-designing solutions
- When it comes to academic development, the focus should be on formative and diagnostic assessment and providing access to grade-level work, while assessing and remediating. The council should take care before attaching positive or negative incentives to evidence of recovery, and instead place an emphasis on high levels of participation in formative diagnostics.
- This means providing LEAs with the guidance and flexibility to focus on key academic content (such as SAP’s guidance), not trying to recoup 18 months of learning this summer.
- Uncovering and addressing unfinished learning in the context of grade-level work will require teachers to know what students know and can do *throughout* the school year. This means assessment should:
 - Be used to determine *how* to bring students into grade-level instruction, not whether to bring them into it, as a deliberate alternative to assessment choices that have the potential to serve as a gatekeeper to grade-level content.
 - Center formative practices.
 - Leverage such sources of information as exit tickets, student work, and student discussions as sources of information to inform instructional choices in connection with high-quality instructional materials.
- Excessive testing and labeling runs the risk of increased pressure and stress on the students themselves—the resulting label of ‘deficient’ or academically behind may very well further alienate and isolate the students who most need our support.

In conclusion, students cannot recover lost learning unless they feel safe, engaged, motivated and a sense of belonging. A comprehensive focus on student and staff well-being, school climate, and formative and diagnostic assessment that provides access to grade-level content will best position students—and the District—for recovery and growth.