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Tips for Implementing District Wide and School Wide SEL

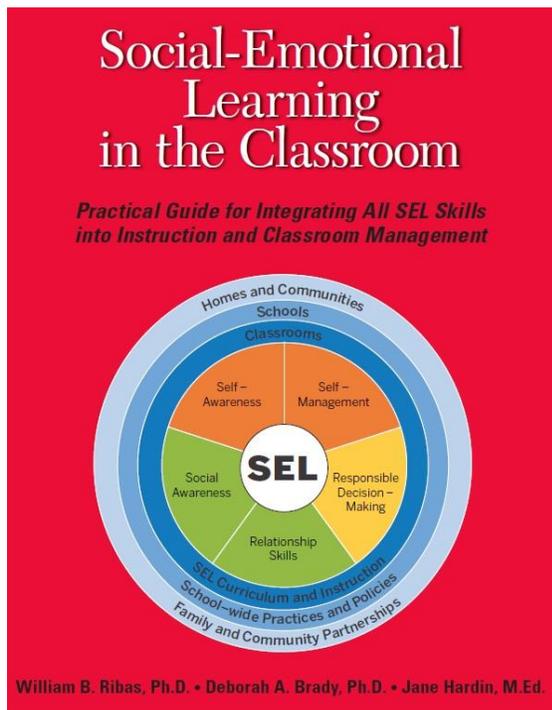
By William B. Ribas, Ph.D.

We are working with over 50 school districts implementing *Social-Emotional Learning* instruction into every classroom. Together, with these districts, we have learned a lot of lessons about the “do’s” and “don’ts” of effective implementation. I recognize that every district is different. This may cause you to modify any of the steps. However, I offer the following tips in the hope that they help your district with this planning and implementing this important work.

1. Keep the focus on the message that teaching SEL skills is primarily the role of classroom teachers. Everyone else is there to support the work of the classroom teacher. Learn the lesson from special education. We didn’t approach special education in this way 50 years ago and for the past 25 years we have been trying to change the mindset that “special education students are the responsibility of the special educators.” That said, it is important that classroom teachers receive the training and support they need and aren’t “left out to dry.”
2. Don’t have guidance counselors or other specialists do “SEL Training” in classrooms until the message in 1 above has been internalized by everyone in the district. Counselors and others should serve as resources and supports, not the primary instructors. If you eventually do use specialists to teach an SEL curriculum make sure it is co-taught with the classroom teacher and the classroom teacher has a strong foundation in the classroom strategies for developing SEL in students.
3. Introduce SEL to staff with the message “this is not a new initiative.” Implementation of SEL into classroom teaching only requires teachers to “adjust” those practices they are already implementing. In our book *Social-Emotional Learning in the Classroom* we demonstrate that teachers can adjust classroom management, group work, and questioning to develop all 44 skills. You want to be careful of messages that cause anxiety in this era of **initiative fatigue**. For example, I recently spoke with the superintendent of a district who changed their teacher and clinical staff performance rubric to include specific language about SEL at the outset of the implementation. This created a lot of anxiety among teachers who took from that the message that “this is a big (and time intensive) change in what you now do.” To calm people down I showed the administration that all the SEL skills were already contained in the present rubric even though the words “social-emotional learning” never appeared in the rubric. It took the administration a number of meetings to undo the message that was sent by changing the rubric. We don’t need to change the rubric when we improve strategies for teaching math, reading, writing, science, or other areas of performance. The reason for this is that we are

adjusting and updating present practice. The same is true for SEL skills. If you do go down the path of changing the rubric I recommend you implement the program first so teachers can see that implementation means an adjustment (not whole sale change) in their practice. You can then decide whether or not it is in everybody's best interest to change the rubric.

4. If you introduce a separate "SEL curriculum" be sure it fully integrates with the academic learning skills. For example, direct training explaining each of the discrete SEL skills is a good topic for an "SEL Curriculum". However, development and future reinforcement of those skills should take place as part of the academic curriculum, wherever possible. A robust health and PE program will allow for the implementation of those skills related to decisions about sexual activity and substance abuse which may not fit easily into the reading, writing, social studies, math, and science (although the effects of alcohol and drugs does appear in some science curricula). There are a few topics that may not fit well into the academic curriculum (e.g. bullying) and need to be taught as separate content. However, the reinforcement of those areas should become part of the repertoire of anyone who does recess duty, hall duty, cafeteria duty, chaperones extra-curricular activities or supervises students in other areas where there is a high incidence of bullying.
5. There isn't one right way to train classroom teachers and school clinical staff. Within the over 50 districts using the program in our book, *Social-Emotional Learning in the Classroom*, there are an array of ways educators are being trained. They include:
 - Administrator supervision, evaluation, and coaching of staff through the present structures for developing and assessing all teacher performance. Supervisors need to become aware of how the skills align with the district performance rubric(s).
 - Teacher or administrator lead book study groups (see the two protocols):
 - a. One uses the book chapter by chapter.
 - b. The other focuses on discrete skills.
 - Modeling SEL skill development in faculty meetings. A good meeting is like a well-planned and taught lesson. There are multiple opportunities to model SEL development in the same way we want teachers teaching the SEL skills.
 - In-district trainers who teach workshops and provide coaching.
 - Outside trainers as long as there is a plan for the implementation of what is learned in the workshops. Such workshops are a good way to "download" a large number of skills. However, they have a very low rate of implementation unless there is a plan to support implementation.
 - Train child study team members in SEL so they can provide teachers with general education classroom modifications. Counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, and other clinical staff often are well versed in the discrete SEL skills and the student behaviors that demonstrate those skills. Few, if any, know how teachers can integrate the development of those skills into all of their teaching. If they are to serve as resources to teachers they need to know this information.



6. Provide programs that show parents/guardians how to develop SEL skills in the home. We know that teachers need training even though most have bachelor’s degrees, master’s degrees, and a great deal of in-service training that teaches them how to work effectively with children. Even with all that training, very few teachers today are equipped to integrate SEL skills into their teaching. Most parents can’t even define the term “social-emotional learning.” The average early childhood student spends significantly more time with parents than with teachers. The average elementary student spends more time with parents than with teachers. The average middle school student spends almost as much time with parents as with teachers. The average high school student may spend more time with teachers but still spends a lot of time with parents. Parents are an untapped resource for developing these skills.

It is much easier to get parents to support the development of SEL skills than it is with academic skills. With academic skills parents are required to devote a specific time to help with homework or provide other academic supports.

7. Don’t forget your paraprofessionals. Many have less knowledge of SEL than parents. Yet, they have multiple one-on-one and small group interactions with students each day. Giving them just four or five SEL adjust practices can make a huge difference.

Dr. William B. Ribas was a teacher of grades 2 through high school, a guidance counselor, a principal, a director of pupil services and an assistant superintendent. He is currently the president of Ribas Associates and Publications Inc. Bill Ribas is the co-author of the books:

- [*Social-Emotional Learning in the Classroom: Practical Guide for Integrating All SEL Skills into Instruction and Classroom Management \(2017\)*](#)
- [*Social-Emotional Learning in the Home: A Practical Guide for Integrating the Development of Social-Emotional Skills into Your Parenting \(2018\)*](#)

Bill’s other books include:

- [*Instructional Practices That Maximize Student Achievement: For Teachers, By Teachers \(2017\)*](#)
- [*Low Performing Educators: Essential Skills for Teacher, School Clinician, and Administrator Supervision \(2019\)*](#)
- [*Teacher Supervision and Evaluation That Works! \(2019\)*](#)
- [*Inducting and Mentoring Teachers New to the District \(2014\)*](#)

