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“Road Blocks” to Districtwide SEL Implementation That Are Easily Avoided

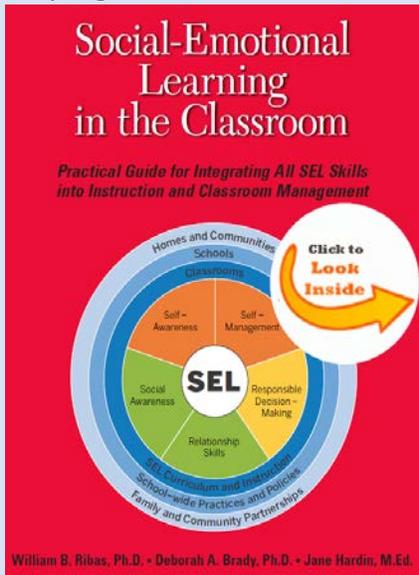
By William B. Ribas, Ph.D.

I spent nine years teaching and then 16 years in public school administration as an assistant principal, principal, director of student services, and assistant superintendent. Following that, the last 16 years I have been consulting to school districts on the implementation of district wide programs. I have been involved in countless program implementations in over 40 districts. The most important lesson I learned is that any implementation plan must align with the district culture. There is no such thing as a “one size fits all.”

Over the past year my colleagues and I have worked with over 55 school districts implementing *Social-Emotional Learning* programs. Together, with these districts, we have learned a lot of lessons about the “dos” and “don’ts” of effective implementation. Recognizing that every district is different, I offer the following list of possible “road blocks” to avoid. Full district implementation of any program is difficult. I hope these lessons help increase your success.

1. Keep the focus on the message to all staff that teaching SEL skills is primarily the role of classroom teachers. Everyone else is there to support the work of the classroom teacher. The message that SEL skill development is most effective when integrated into the academic curriculum of every day teaching needs to be clearly understood by all. And, classroom teachers need to know they will receive adequate training, coaching, and support.
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. 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 ingrained mindset that “modifications for special education students are the responsibility of the special educators.” All SEL skills can be taught in the regular classroom by adjusting questioning, behavior management, group/partner work, and classroom meetings/advisories. That said, it is important that classroom teachers receive the training and support they need to do this well.
3. If you eventually do use specialists to teach an SEL curriculum make sure it is co-taught with the classroom teacher. It is still important that the classroom teacher and the specialist have a strong foundation in the classroom SEL strategies integrated into every day instruction. It is the daily classroom strategies that will reinforce and make permanent the skills learned in an SEL curriculum.

4. Introduce SEL to staff with the message “this is not a totally new initiative that will take large amounts of teacher time to implement.” Implementation of SEL into classroom teaching only requires teachers to “adjust” those practices they are already implementing. We have demonstrated to hundreds of teachers that they can adjust the classroom management, group work, questioning strategies, advisor/advisee strategies they already use to develop all the SEL skills. You want to be careful not to send the message that this is a whole sale change in teaching. That message causes anxiety in this era of teacher **initiative fatigue**. For example, I recently spoke with the superintendent of a district who changed their teacher and clinical staff educator evaluation performance rubrics to include specific language about SEL at the outset of the implementation. This created a lot of resistance among teachers who took from that the message “this is a big (and time intensive) change in what you do now.” To calm people down I showed them that all the SEL skills were already contained in the present rubric even though the words “social-emotional learning” never appeared in the rubric. We also showed classroom examples of what the teachers were already doing that could be adjusted without large amounts of additional planning time or reducing academic instructional time to increase the level of SEL skill development. It took the administration a number of meetings with teachers and their union to undue the message that was sent by changing and implementing the new rubric without sufficient prior discussion and explanation with staff. We don’t immediately change the teacher evaluation 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 constantly. The same is true for SEL skills. Teachers need to first see that implementation of SEL means an adjustment (not a monumental change) in their practice. They need to know that it will enhance, not steal time from, academic teaching. This requires training teachers in the strategies for integrating SEL skills into academic instruction first. Modifications to curriculum, educator performance rubrics, and other district structures should come as a next step after teachers understand what it “looks like” in their classrooms.
5. If you introduce a separate “SEL curriculum” be sure it fully integrates with the academic learning skills. For example, direct training that explains 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, bullying, 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).

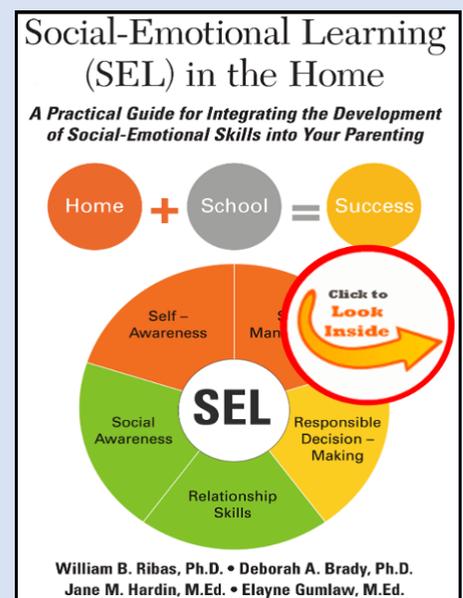


6. Reinforcement of SEL skills should become part of the training received by non-instructional support staff who do recess duty, hall duty, cafeteria duty, chaperone extra-curricular activities, or supervise and interact with students in other areas of school life. Cafeteria workers, custodians, playground monitors, bus drivers and monitors, school resource officers, and school secretaries all need to be trained to use behavior management and conflict resolution strategies that develop SEL skills.
7. There isn’t one right way to train classroom teachers,

school clinical staff, and support staff. Within the now over 75 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 and school clinical staff performance. Supervisors need to become aware of how the skills align with the district performance rubric(s) for all staff,
 - teacher or administrator lead book study groups,
 - modelling SEL skill development in staff meetings. A good staff meeting is like a well-planned and taught lesson. There are multiple opportunities for the leaders of meetings to model SEL development in the same way we want teachers and others teaching the SEL skills
 - in-district trainers who teach workshops and provide coaching
 - outside trainers as long as there is an in-district plan for the implementation of what is learned in the workshops after the workshops- workshops are a good way to “download” a large number of skills. However, they have a very low rate of sustained implementation unless there is a plan to support implementation with coaching
 - train child study team (a.k.a. student support team) members in SEL *in the classroom* strategies so they can provide teachers with general education classroom teaching 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 daily teaching. If they are to serve as resources to teachers they need to know this information.
8. 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. In writing our book for parents/guardians we found that most can’t even define the term “social-emotional learning.”

The average early childhood and early elementary student spends more time with parents/guardians than with teachers. The average upper elementary and middle school student spends almost as much time with parents/guardians as with teachers. The average high school student may spend more time with teachers but still spends a lot of time with parents/guardians. And, parents/guardians are doing most of the support with making healthy decisions related to dating, friends, substance use, college, and career. Parents are an untapped resource for developing SEL skills. Once parents/guardians are trained they are in a better position to support the development of SEL skills than they are with



academic skills. With academic skills parents/guardians are typically only able to support this work by helping with homework or providing other “extracurricular” academic supports such as visits to museums. With SEL every interaction a parent/guardian has with their child is an opportunity to develop SEL skills. As I speak to more and more parent/guardian groups it is exciting to see their level of enthusiasm for learning to integrate SEL skill development into their parenting.

9. Don't forget your paraprofessionals or assistant teachers. Many have less knowledge of SEL than teachers. Yet, they have multiple one on one and small group interactions with students each day. In many school districts they are the fastest growing, yet least professionally developed, category of instructor. Giving them just four or five easy to implement SEL adjusted practices can make a huge difference.

Bill Ribas (wribas@ribasassociates.com) is an author of the books *Social-Emotional Learning in the Classroom: Practical Guide for Integrating All SEL Skills into Instruction and Classroom Management* (April 2017) and *Social-Emotional Learning in the Home: A Practical Guide for Integrating the Development of Social-Emotional Skills into Your Parenting* (January 2018). He was a teacher of grades 2 through high school, guidance counselor, vice principal, principal, director of student services and an assistant superintendent. He is currently the president of Ribas Associates and Publications, Inc. Bill's other books include *Inducting and Mentoring Teachers New to the District*, *The Educational, Legal, and Social-Emotional Components of Educator Supervision and Evaluation*, and *Instructional Practices That Maximize Student Achievement*.