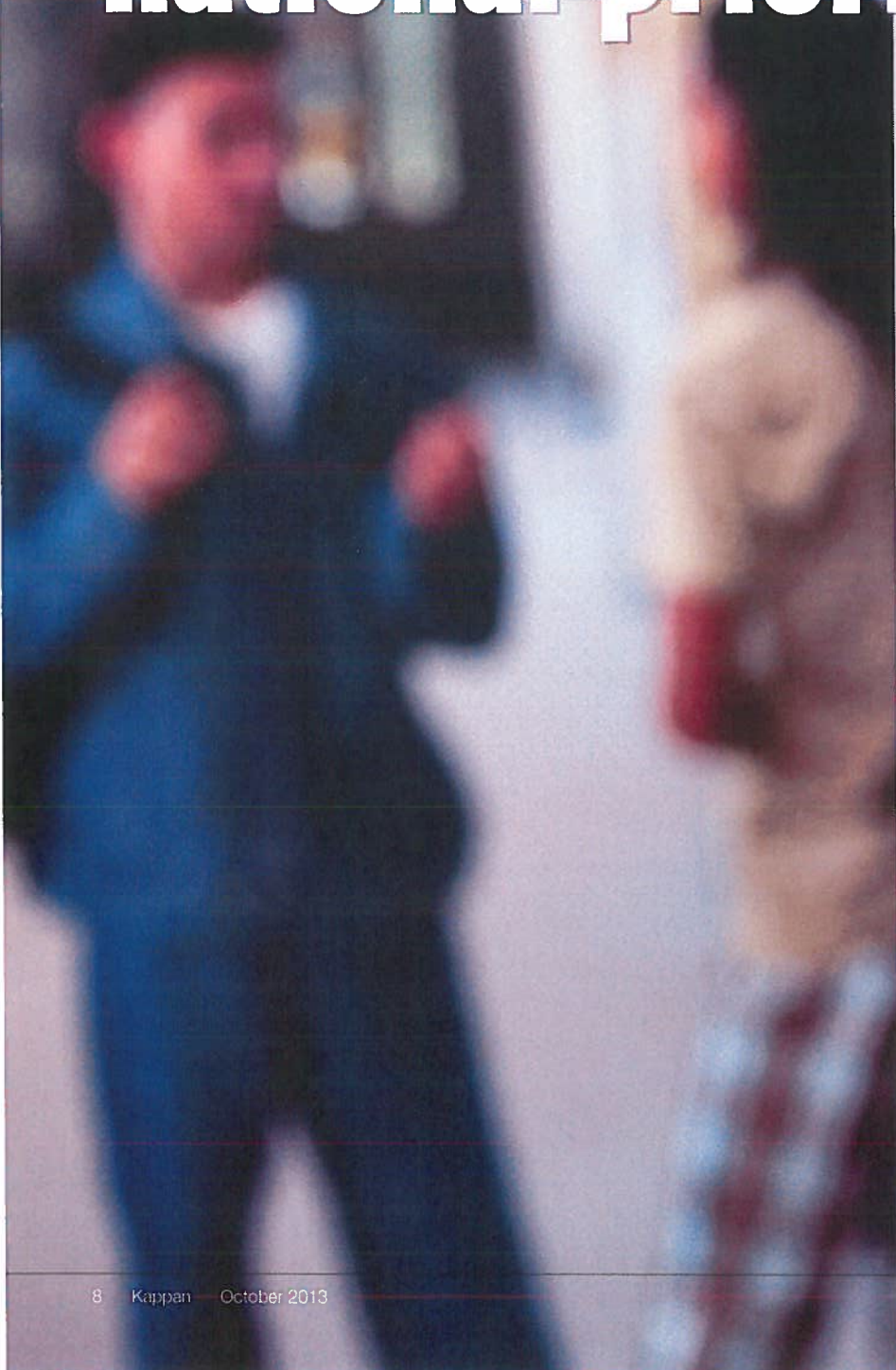# Academic learning +
social-emotional learning =
national priority

Policy makers need to understand what researchers and educators already know: Social-emotional learning helps create more engaging schools and prepares students for the challenges of the world.

By Roger P. Weissberg and Jason Cascarino

Mr. Jenkins thought he had taught a great problem-solving lesson to his 5th-grade class. He posed hypothetical social situations, and students conversed animatedly in small groups as they generated alternative solutions. However, at the end of the period, Tamika approached him and asked, "Mr. Jenkins, does problem-solving work in real life?"

Mr. Jenkins asked Tamika if she was upset about something. She told him her two best friends from elementary school no longer

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spoke to each other, and she didn't know who to sit next to at lunch. Mr. Jenkins encouraged Tamika to think of different ways she might handle the situation. Tamika came up with several strategies and decided on one to try. Mr. Jenkins encouraged her to let him know how things turned out.

Every day students experience real-life situations like Tamika's that can affect their learning and well-being as well as the learning and well-being of their classmates. This reality raises important questions about what competencies schools should promote and how educators and students can relate most effectively and constructively with each other.
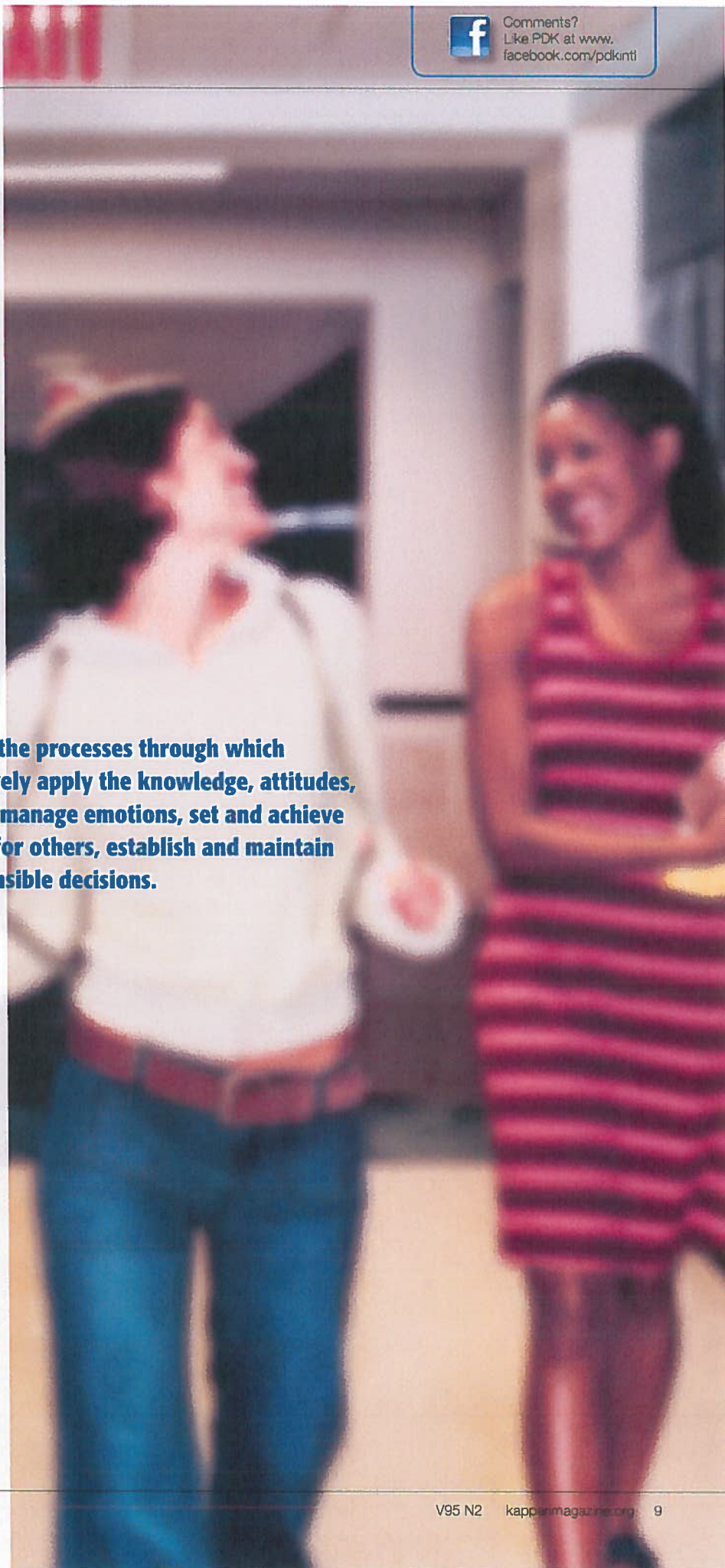
What do we want children to know and be able to do when they graduate from high school? How can we organize communities to ensure that all students reach these stated learning goals? Educators, families, students, policy makers, researchers, and child advocates are working to provide practical, evidence-based answers to these questions.

Social and emotional learning involves the processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

High-quality schools ensure that all students master reading, math, writing, science, history, foreign languages, and the arts. In addition to graduating academically proficient students who are culturally literate, intellectually reflective, and committed to lifelong learning, schools must also enhance students' intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies so they're optimally prepared for work and life (National Research Council, 2012).

Successful students develop personal strengths including grit, tenacity, perseverance, and positive academic mindsets. They also learn broader social and emotional competencies such as interacting with diverse individuals and groups in socially skilled and respectful ways; practicing positive, safe, and healthy behaviors; and contributing responsibly and ethically to their peers, family, school, and community (CASEL, 2013a, 2013b).

The best schools foster students' aca-

demic, social, and emotional competencies. Students learn to read so they can read to learn. Students also learn to relate so they can navigate. When schools promote students' academic, social, and emotional learning, students will possess the basic competencies, work habits, and values for engaged postsecondary education, meaningful careers, and constructive citizenship (Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013). We need to balance academic learning with social and emotional learning in schools across the United States.

Social and emotional learning

Social and emotional learning — or SEL — involves acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2013a, 2013b). SEL programming is based on the understanding that the best learning emerges in the context of supportive relationships that make learning challenging, engaging, and meaningful (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013).

Social and emotional skills are critical to being a good student, citizen, and worker. Schools can help prevent or reduce many different risky behaviors (e.g., drug use, violence, bullying, and dropping out) when they engage in multiyear, integrated efforts to develop students' social and emotional skills. This

- **Self-management**. The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations, and to set and work toward personal and academic goals.
- **Social awareness**. The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.
- **Relationship skills**. The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups through communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.
- **Responsible decision making**. The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, the realistic evaluation of the consequences that stem from actions, and the well-being of self and others.

The short-term goals of SEL programs are to promote students' self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship, and responsible decision-making skills, and to improve their attitudes and beliefs about self, others, and school. These, in turn, provide a foundation for better adjustment and academic performance as reflected in more positive

Effective SEL programming begins in preschool and continues through high school. All 50 states have preschool SEL standards; many states have integrated SEL standards with academic standards.

is best done through effective classroom instruction beginning in preschool and continuing through high school, student engagement in positive activities in and out of the classroom, and broad parent and community involvement in program planning, implementation, and evaluation.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has been a leading voice in studying, defining, and promoting SEL for nearly 20 years (www.casel.org). Based on extensive research, CASEL has identified five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies at the heart of SEL.

- **Self-awareness**. The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior.

social behaviors and peer relationships, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and improved grades and test scores.

Educators can help develop these competencies in every type of school, and in students of every background by coordinating two sets of educational strategies:

- Systematically teaching, modeling, and facilitating the application of social and emotional competencies in ways that allow students to apply them as part of their daily repertoire of behaviors, and
- Establishing safe, caring, and highly engaging learning environments involving peer and family initiatives and schoolwide community-building activities.

These two strategies are mutually reinforcing. Positive learning environments help students learn and further develop social-emotional competencies; meanwhile, classrooms, schools, and communities filled with socially and emotionally skilled students are more caring and safe.

Growing evidence and interest in SEL

More than two decades of rigorous scientific research shows that high-quality, well-implemented SEL can have a positive effect on school climate and promote a host of academic, social, and emotional benefits for students. A major review of 213 experimental-control group studies of K-12 students who participated in SEL programs demonstrated:

- Improved social and emotional skills, self-concept, bonding to school, and classroom behavior;
- Fewer conduct problems such as disruptive classroom behavior, aggression, bullying, and delinquent acts; and
- Reduced emotional distress such as depression, stress, or social withdrawal.

Students also performed better academically, including on achievement tests where scores averaged 11 percentile points higher than students who did not receive SEL programming (Durlak et al., 2011).

Other investigators have reported similarly positive findings regarding SEL's effect on student behavior and academic performance (Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). More recently, Sklad and colleagues (2012) analyzed 75 studies of SEL programs and found beneficial effects on seven major outcome areas: social skills, positive self-image, prosocial behavior, antisocial behavior, substance abuse, mental health, and academic achievement. Researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago documented that "noncognitive" academic behaviors, academic perseverance, academic mindsets, learning strategies, and social skills positively affect student success in school (Farrington et al., 2012).

Recently, Civic Enterprises, the Washington public policy organization that authored *The Silent Epidemic* and put the high school dropout crisis on the national map, released *The Missing Piece* (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013). The report, based on findings from a nationally representative survey of more than 600 teachers by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, showed that more than 9 in 10 teachers believe SEL helps students in school, work, and life. Nearly all teachers believe social and emotional skills are teachable. Large percentages believe SEL would benefit students from all backgrounds in academic performance, graduation, college, and workforce readiness. Yet the same teachers also said they need strong support from district and school leaders to effectively implement and promote SEL.

These results mirror sentiment from the broader public. The 2013 PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools found that most Americans agree that public schools should teach students a full range of social, emotional, and cognitive competencies including how to set meaningful goals (89%), communication skills (94%), how to collaborate on projects (84%), and character (76%).

Making SEL a core part of education

Despite widespread demand for social and emotional learning and recognition of its value, SEL remains at the periphery of K-12 education. We need to make it part of the core — just as it is in preschool.

We need to implement classroom strategies that have been proven to work. For the past decade, there has been a growing emphasis on evidence-based programs in education that have solid designs and show significant effect on student outcomes. Educators should expect the same standard for SEL programs and approaches. Indeed, dozens of SEL programs have a well-designed theoretical model, implementation supports and professional development for teachers, and evidence of effectiveness (CASEL, 2005, 2013b).

To help educators choose from among many options, CASEL has reviewed more than 200 SEL programs. The CASEL guide for preschool and elementary schools includes 23 programs that meet high standards for program design, implementation support, evidence of effectiveness, and applicability to specific grade ranges (CASEL, 2013b). CASEL will publish a similar guide for middle and high school programs later this year.

Schools need to fully integrate SEL with their own vision for teaching, learning, and student outcomes (CASEL, 2013a). SEL should be embedded in curriculum and instruction, as well as in student supports and after-school programming. It should be a key feature of teacher preparation and ongoing professional development. Selecting an evidence-based classroom program is just one step in a multiphase, schoolwide process for sustainable SEL implementation. Building a strong school climate requires schoolwide practices that strengthen relationships among students and teachers, students and students, and teachers and teachers. This requires a commitment not only from classroom teachers but also from the school leaders who supervise them.

Ample research supports this view. For example, a summary of 15 years of research on school reform by Bryk and colleagues (2010) identified five essential supports for effective school improvement: strong leadership, solid parent and community involvement, development of professional capacity, strong instructional guidance and materials, and a learning climate that reflects SEL components by being safe, welcoming, stimulating, and nurturing to all students. These supports produced substantial gains in student performance in reading and mathematics. A focus on strong social and emotional development underlies many elements of these supports. CASEL's (2013a) implementation guide and toolkit for schools emphasizes the importance of school-family partnerships and cultural responsiveness, and it describes how school climate and culture contribute to an overall feeling of connectedness and student engagement.

Districts need to treat SEL as a priority on a par with academic achievement, high school completion, and college- and career-readiness (Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013). In 2011, CASEL launched a Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) to encourage systemic changes that will influence students' social-emotional development and academic performance. It will also document lessons learned that can inform future efforts to foster high-quality implementation in districts across the country. CASEL is partnering with eight large urban districts (Anchorage, Austin, Chicago, Cleveland, Nashville, Oakland, Sacramento, and Washoe County, Nev.) in this project.

tification programs and professional development. Most respondents in the Hart survey said they were interested in more training in teaching SEL (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013). The largest group of interested teachers had 10 or fewer years of experience, with the potential to apply SEL training to several decades' worth of future students.

Embracing SEL as part of implementing the Common Core State Standards will also be critical. The classroom activities required to help students meet the Common Core — effective communication, project collaboration, interdisciplinary thinking — necessitate strong social and emotional competence among learners, including the ability to persist, empathize with others, and manage their behavior so they can achieve challenging goals.

The federal government has shown a growing interest in this area. The Institute of Education Sciences has funded a researcher-practitioner partnership between CASEL and Nevada's Washoe County School District where we are working with local district leaders to add social and emotional dimensions to a risk- and competence-indicator system for students. The project has the potential to infuse educational data with important new information about student growth and to build a foundation for similar work in other districts.

SEL has gained importance in federal criteria for district funding. The U.S. Department of Education's recent round of Race to the Top competition awarded significant bonus points for applications that made social and emotional learning a key in-

Positive learning environments help students learn and further develop social-emotional competencies; schools filled with socially and emotionally skilled students are more caring and safe.

States support this work by bringing academic, social, and emotional learning standards together to paint a more holistic picture of what students ought to know and be able to do at each developmental level (Dusenbury et al., in press). This means establishing comprehensive K-12 social and emotional learning standards. All 50 states have preschool SEL standards. Many states have integrated SEL standards with existing academic standards but only Illinois, Kansas, and Pennsylvania have stand-alone K-12 SEL standards. Most U.S. teachers support SEL standards (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013). States also have a responsibility to ensure that teachers understand SEL, including how to foster it in children. State certification requirements deeply influence what teachers would learn about SEL in cer-

gredient in districtwide improvement efforts.

Given the enormous potential of social and emotional learning as a key component of school reform, policy makers in Congress and the federal education department must prioritize SEL. They should weave it into the major planks of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and they should include specific support for it in early learning and in federal assistance to schools in high-poverty communities.

Bipartisan groups of legislators have demonstrated their interest in SEL by repeatedly introducing the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act in the U.S. House of Representatives. The bill would allow the flexible use of federal funds for teacher and administrator professional learning related to SEL. But for the bill to become law, elected

officials must move beyond rhetoric about education reform and tackle the larger issue of educational purpose. They must recognize that all schools — charter and traditional, low-income and wealthy, urban and rural — should teach children how to succeed in a complex, globalized century.

Making the most of the moment

The timing is right to put our knowledge from research about social and emotional learning into action. This will require the involvement and support of educators, researchers, policy makers, and the public across a wide-ranging agenda. Only by making SEL important at every level — classroom, school, district, state, and nation — will it truly become an essential ingredient in education from preschool through high school. As Franklin D. Roosevelt (1940) aptly said: "We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future." Providing high-quality, balanced education will prepare all students to handle the challenges of life more successfully.

A growing nationwide coalition in support of social and emotional learning already is at work at all these levels. The case for SEL is stronger than ever before. Now we must place a high priority on providing resources to help educators do it well, sustaining the momentum of a growing demand for SEL, and strengthening broad-based support for making SEL a foundation of American education. **K**

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