

PLANTING THE SEAD

To implement a social, emotional, and academic development program, principals must infuse it in every student interaction

As a former principal, chief academic officer, and superintendent, **Ann Clark** knows it can be difficult to apply new concepts in a school—especially when there are a multitude of programs and trainings, and as many questions about what works and what doesn't. Here, the former superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and co-author of the *SEAD Action Guide for School Leadership Teams* talks about the principal's role in implementing social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD).

On defining SEAD

When it comes to SEAD, I've found it helpful to start with a clear definition of what it is. SEAD rethinks the school experience for students and adults alike so that the social, emotional, and academic dimensions of learning are mutually reinforcing in practice.

SEAD is not meant to be an off-the-shelf program but instead infused throughout the school day. All interactions between adults and students are opportunities to model SEAD, and every student stands to benefit.

On school climate, teacher bias, and the principal's role in implementation

Research from the University of Chicago shows that the most significant impact principals can have on student learning is through the school climate they create. Since climate drives achievement, the principal's role is to stress SEAD as a schoolwide effort.

When I was a high school principal, I pushed my staff to think about the connections students had to our school beyond the classroom, be it sports, drama, or marching band. Why do students come to school, I asked, as opposed to dropping out or staying home? What creates a sense of belonging? Taking an interest in students outside of academics communicated that we saw them as whole beings.

How students see themselves relies upon their relationships with teachers, so helping teachers identify and mitigate unconscious bias is critical. Teachers have hundreds of interactions with students every day and must often make quick judgments that might be influenced unwittingly by stereotypes. The effect of such bias on students can be deep and lasting, and it takes a toll on self-esteem.

Low expectations and the biases that undergird them affect children of color disproportionately. These students often disengage from school because they receive

less effective teachers, fewer enrichment activities, lower-quality instruction and coursework, and curricula that don't reflect their backgrounds.

Principals must push for the use of high-quality instructional materials that reflect students' identities, cultures, and experiences; they can lend affirmation to student's diverse backgrounds and help them feel more connected to the school.

On the relationship between equity and effectiveness

SEAD must be implemented with equity because schools do not adequately serve children who face adverse circumstances such as hunger, housing insecurity, and lack of access to health care. Without an equity lens, SEAD is likely to be carried out only on the surface as episodic interventions, rather than an ongoing commitment to creating a climate of belonging and relevance that builds on each child's unique assets.

SEAD is at its most effective when integrated as part of a school's natural improvement cycle; don't expect implementation to be complete in the first or second year. SEAD is not a program; it is a set of strategies schools and leaders can adapt to best suit their students' specific needs. You don't have to make a false choice between high-quality content and the soft skills that students need to learn.

Every student deserves an education that instills a continuous love of learning, prepares them for career success, and helps them be a responsible, engaged citizen. Children learn to work in teams, persevere through challenging material, and take responsibility for themselves at school. These skills pave the way toward economic mobility and well-being, and we owe it to our students and to our society to teach them. 