ISSUE BRIEF

Social and Emotional Learning, Positive Climate, and Mental Health Supports

BACKGROUND

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) recognizes the effect of high-quality, proactive social and emotional learning and positive school and early childhood program climates on the personal development and academic achievement of all children and youth. Good mental health is as important as and equivalent to good physical health.

Schools and early childhood programs that implement social and emotional learning strategies and evidence based interventions are more successful in creating environments conducive to learning. A sense of belonging and the inclusion of all children and youth in the environment are critical features of these evidence-based practices. High-quality mental health care and treatment is needed to address the impact of trauma and environmental toxic stressors on the developing brain. These practices must be integrated into a system of care that is comprehensive in schools, early childhood programs, and communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CEC urges Congress to:

- Increase the federal investment for ESSA Title II, Part A Building Systems of Support for Excellent Teaching and Leading to ensure teachers and providers are prepared to implement evidence-based practices to address social and emotional learning strategies and response to challenging behaviors.

- Support legislative policies that require a focus on the positive and productive culture and climate in public schools and early childhood programs, and which include strategies to address bullying, harassment, disproportionate disciplinary practices, and opportunity gaps for those living in poverty and who are children and youth of color.

- Provide $1.6 billion to fund ESSA Title IV, Part A Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants to support schools and early childhood programs in ensuring safe and respectful learning environments for all children and youth.

- Support legislative policies that remedy the national lack of access to mental health services, through both private health insurance and Medicaid as well as school and program-based supports available to children and families experiencing trauma, toxic stress, environmental, and mental health challenges.

- Support legislative policies that require an interdisciplinary approach reinforcing a partnership among education, early learning, juvenile justice, mental health, and the community to ensure social and emotional well-being across communities and beyond the walls of schools and early childhood programs.
Social and Emotional Learning and Positive Climate

Program-wide approaches to enhancing social and emotional learning through early learning practices, early intervention, and collective teacher and provider beliefs can make a difference in the lives of children and youth and result in positive developmental, academic, and social outcomes.

Positive climates result from caring communities of adults, children, and youth learning together as well as implementation of evidence-based curriculum and intervention. CEC supports policy and funding efforts that promote strategies to decrease bullying and harassment; address challenging behaviors; and address the opportunity gaps for subgroups of children and youth with disabilities, those living in poverty, and those of color. Training and accountability on changing these outcomes for all schools and early childhood programs is paramount.

CEC also supports careful monitoring of the climate of schools and early childhood programs through surveys of families, children, and youth, and staff on a regular basis. These efforts create collective teacher and staff effect on children and youths’ social and emotional well-being as well as a focus on equity across the diverse populations within schools and early childhood programs.

Mental Health Supports

School and early childhood program-based mental health services for purposes of screening, providing direct services, engaging and supporting families, and serving as a connection to community-based supports, are also critical to providing the prevention, response, and treatment that are so vital to the well-being of children and youth. Policies that fund mental health services through private health insurance and Medicaid are necessary.

In addition to community-based mental health supports, CEC believes that educators, early childhood providers, and other program staff must acquire and use a knowledge base of effective practices for promoting supportive school and early childhood program climates in ways that ensure human and civil rights and promote social justice for diverse populations.

An effective approach requires addressing the national shortage of all teachers, early childhood providers, mental health providers, and specialized instructional support personnel. Reducing the ratios of personnel to children and youth and ensuring professionals are specifically trained to address the social and emotional needs of young children and school-aged students are necessary.

Along with school and early childhood program supports, children and youth and their families need community providers who are well trained in trauma treatment and support systems of care that appropriately address social, emotional, and mental health concerns, in addition to integrating treatment plans within school and early childhood programs.

CEC supports approaches that:

- provide instruction in social and emotional learning for all children and youth and early intervention for those in need;
- are rooted in research and evidence;
- are culturally responsive;
- address social and emotional supports for all children and youth and confront the stigma of mental health challenges; and
- ensure an adequate number of personnel who are trained to address the complex needs of children and youth with social, emotional, and mental health needs.