

PUBLIC EDUCATION

How Can We Help Students Thrive?

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The Aspen Institute's *National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development*, which met for the first time this month, unites leaders with diverse backgrounds with the goal of helping our nation's schools integrate social, emotional, and academic development into K-12 education. This blog post is the first in a series of posts of perspectives on why supporting young people holistically is crucially important.

"I am entering my third year teaching at a public high school, and at this point have realized that my students' social/emotional/academic skills, like teamwork, perseverance, problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking, are much more important than any math I can teach them. But my training and evaluation is based on teaching math. I would love to see a more explicit effort made to teach these skills (and to train teachers in how to do so, as I currently just do my own idiosyncratic best...)"

This is what one of my former Princeton students wrote me when he learned I had been appointed to the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (SEAD). His response captures the essence—and urgency—of the challenge and opportunity facing the Commissioners.

I come to the Commission having devoted much of my professional career to providing second chances for youngsters who have struggled in school and in life. While in law school I mentored adolescent boys who had continuously gotten in trouble with the

law. I originated a military-like youth corps for high school dropouts now known as the [National Guard Youth Challenge Program](#). And I wrote a book—*Strugglers Into Strivers: What the Military Can Teach Us About How Young People Learn and Grow*—which focuses on how SEAD is central to the success of this program and our young people.

During the coming months, my fellow Commissioners and I will listen to students, educators, parents, business leaders, and others to determine the next steps in research, practice, and policy that will help our schools fully support their students. Our work got underway last week with a series of riveting presentations and discussions.

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At the Commission's inaugural meeting, two distinguished researchers briefed us on the compelling scientific evidence that social and emotional development is integral to academic development. The lawyer in me would say that the former is a condition precedent to the latter. We heard that, in fact, our brains are hardwired to learn in a social and emotional way. For example, one of the very first learning experiences we have as humans—language learning—absolutely depends upon human interaction. Researchers have found in experiments that infants learned nothing at all from recorded or televised foreign language; indeed, they require a live human connection in order to learn. They also shared heartening findings from social science about the favorable impacts of SEAD programs on students' emotional well-being, behavior, and scholastic performance. One major study found that these programs generated an 11-percentage point gain in grades and test scores.

Local school administrators and principals told us about their successful efforts—and, yes, their struggles—to get their local districts and schools to embrace and implement SEAD, not as just

another intervention from on high, but as essence of the school culture, curriculum, and method of operation. They are building on the momentum evidenced by the overwhelming majority of teachers who believe that social and emotional skills can be taught, and that these skills benefit students.

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Though the science was compelling, student testimony about the pivotal difference they experience when their schools and teachers are authentically committed to SEAD stood out. They said it made a huge impact in their attitudes toward school, in their readiness and hunger to learn, in their relationships with teachers and classmates. And, even further, in their preparation for college, the world of work, and life.

I respect scientific research and evaluations. But for me, these young people closed the sale when it comes to the crucial, life-changing importance of SEAD.

The challenge ahead for the Commission and for the key adults in our youngsters' lives—the teachers and principals, school boards and state education agencies, mayors, governors, legislators, parents, churches and community groups, employers and taxpayers, policymakers and opinion leaders—is to heed our children's urgent and impassioned plea for schools that are attuned to their realities and needs. America, can we hear them now?

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