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An Innovative Approach to Social-Emotional Learning

Today’s students face a far more complex, technologically advanced, and multi-disciplinary workplace than did past generations. In order to succeed in this 21st-century workplace, educational institutions must prepare students with a range of social and emotional skills alongside traditional core academic skills (the three R’s). A knowledge base of facts, formulas, and information is no longer sufficient for success at school or in the workplace—today’s learners must be healthy both socially and emotionally.

What is Social-Emotional Health?

At the core of social-emotional health is a set of social skills that enables students to understand and adaptively negotiate the world. As Figure 1 illustrates, these skills are interwoven and build on one another, starting with an awareness of self—one’s strengths and weaknesses, emotional state, sense of self-efficacy—and awareness of others—ability to take another’s perspective, be empathetic. With awareness comes the ability to manage oneself—controlling our impulses, regulating our emotions, motivating ourselves to achieve. With self-control comes the ability to make rational and responsible decisions,
considering factors such as social norms, expectations, and consequences of our actions. After those abilities are developed, students can work on the skills needed to successfully enact those decisions with others in the world, including social initiation, communication, listening, cooperation, and negotiation of conflict.

Figure 1

Link with 21st-Century Skills and STEM Careers

According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, researchers and educators alike have identified attributes like ‘critical thinking,’ ‘collaborating,’ and ‘leadership’ as vital for success in school and the workplace in the 21st Century. This need to fuse content knowledge with social skills to apply that knowledge in the real world is particularly pressing for students who wish to pursue STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) careers. To solve complex problems, you need to take time to weigh options, gather facts, and not jump to conclusions. To collaborate in a group—for instance, on a science project—you must be able to communicate clearly, cooperate with others, and negotiate when there are disagreements. To be a leader within a diverse, multidisciplinary group, you need to be able to engage with others, take their perspective, and make persuasive arguments. Social skills such as empathy, impulse control, communication, and cooperation are essential to one’s ability to perform these necessary tasks.

A New Approach

Engaged in a wide range of efforts to promote positive social, emotional, and mental health, 3C Institute in Cary, North Carolina, has developed a new approach to bridging the research-practice gap.
Founded in 2001 by Dr. Melissa DeRosier, 3C’s focus is on improving the social-emotional health of children and families, primarily through the delivery of social skills interventions in schools and clinics. 3C Institute integrates social development research into game-based platforms to create effective and engaging intelligent systems for assessment and learning.

The institute’s Zoo U, for example, is an interactive, evidence-based online game designed to assess and enhance elementary students’ social skills, while simultaneously tracking their progress toward specific goals. The game focuses on six core social skills: impulse control, empathy, initiation, communication, cooperation, and emotion regulation. In Zoo U, students navigate social situations in an engaging virtual school for zookeepers-in-training.

Studies show that programs enhancing social-emotional health, such as those developed at 3C Institute, result in significant benefits for students, schools, and society, including:

- Safer schools with fewer incidents of bullying, discipline problems, and violence;
- Lower truancy rates and increased student engagement;
- Greater ability to persist in secondary and postsecondary education; and
- Higher test scores and grades.

Interested in hearing more ways North Carolina’s companies and communities are innovating to solve other complex issues? Join leaders and learners from across North Carolina this February 9-10 at the 30th Annual Emerging Issues Forum: Innovation Reconstructed. Click here to register.

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Do you know a teacher who is working hard to help students succeed? Let us know, and s/he could be featured in the next education issue!