School System Challenges SEL Must Address

A recent report entitled *Evidence for Social and Emotional Learning in Schools* is online at
https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/evidence-social-emotional-learning-schools-report

The report's emphasis on available findings is important. So is its recognition that "education should focus on supporting essential capacities to help children navigate the world successfully," and that for SEL to be effective, "schools should be healthy, caring spaces that create a climate of support for equitable pathways for children to reach these goals while also creating a challenging and dynamic learning environment."

Where the report falters is in its discussion of "*systemic support for SEL*."

Here are three realities not adequately discussed that need systemic attention as districts adopt/adapt SEL:

(1) *Socialization Practices at Schools*. As schools play their major role in the socialization of the young, the emphasis from prek-12 involves ensuring students behave in ways that are acceptable to the school. At most schools, this calls for *managing* student behavior every day using practices that generally overemphasize *external* control of behavior.
     Note that one of the major goals of SEL is to enhance development of individual's *self-management* of behavior -- and hopefully their intrinsic motivation for learning and being. Note that there is a considerable body of research cautioning that overemphasizing external control practices can undermine intrinsic motivation (i.e., feelings of self-determination, competence, and relatedness).
     From this perspective, introduction of SEL must be accompanied by practices that counter the overemphasis on external control of student behavior and learning. See Chapter 6. "Managing Behavior at School: Beyond Overrelying on Behavior Control Strategies" in *Improving School Improvement*
https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/improve.pdf .

(2) *Barriers to Learning and Teaching.* Every school has students who are experiencing factors that interfere with their learning at school. Schools struggle to play their role in addressing a variety of barriers to learning and teaching. For some students to engage effectively in Social Emotional Learning, schools need to provide a more effective system of student/learning supports. (And in some schools, there are many students needing such supports.) See *Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*
https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefguide.pdf .

(3) *Replication, Scale-up, and Sustainability.* Implementation of SEL calls for districts to make significant changes at schools. The intent is to replicate the work throughout the district and to do so in ways that are sustainable. This calls for complex systemic changes based on implementation and school improvement science. See our evolving framework outlining the systemic support required –
https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/forfeedback.pdf .

 How well these challenges are addressed will determine whether SEL fulfills is promise.

Best wishes and be well.

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