

Intentional and Consistent: SEL in Action

Insights From the Field

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SCHOOL STATS

Grades: PreK-8

Free & Reduced Lunch: 100%

Demographics: 82% Black,
15% Hispanic, 3% 2 or more races

Principal: Jenna Markoff

Location: South Side of Chicago

BACKGROUND

For the 2019-2020 school year, Visitation Catholic School (Visitation), in conjunction with Big Shoulders Fund developed an action plan around the implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL) to address the needs and challenges of their students. The [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#) defines SEL as “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”

Visitation, located in an urban area on the south side of Chicago, serves students in pre-kindergarten through 8th grade. All of the students qualify for free-and-reduced lunch. Many of their students experience hardships outside of school, making it even more important to foster a nurturing learning environment. While the goal of educating the “whole child” is not new, we know more about the impact of social and emotional skills on learning than ever before.

“*You need to create an environment that’s safe, kind, compassionate and friendly, and that isn’t adding to any trauma that the student might already be experiencing.*”

—Kirk Ziemke, SEL and Wellness
Leader, Big Shoulders Fund

The [National Commission on Social and Emotional Development](#) finds that the development of social and emotional skills has a direct connection to student academic learning. Further, although SEL benefits all students, it disproportionately benefits children from low-income communities, many of whom experience insecure access to housing, food, health care, and safety. In the article, [Social-Emotional Learning Boosts Students’ Scores, Graduation Rates, Even Earnings, New Study Finds](#) SEL training has long-term positive impacts on students’ academic success and overall health. Students with SEL training “scored 13 points higher academically than their peers 3.5 years later, had 6 percent better high school graduation rates, and could even reap lifelong monetary benefits for their healthy adult lifestyle.” The time that a teacher spends working on SEL skill development is not time taken away from academic instruction; it is time that is spent laying the foundation for academic achievement and lifelong health.



SEL disproportionately benefits children from low-income communities, many of whom experience insecure access to housing, food, health care, and safety.



“It’s helping us control ourselves, be more aware of ourselves and show more empathy and compassion.”

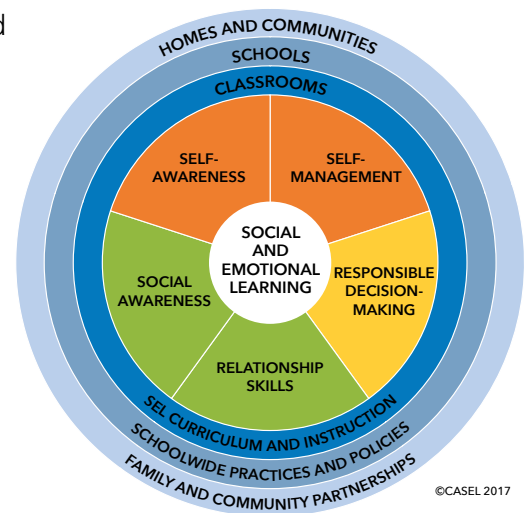
—Dereonna, 3rd grade student



SEL ACTIVITIES

During the summer, Jenna Markoff, principal of Visitation and Kirk Ziemke, SEL and Wellness Leader, Big Shoulders Fund brainstormed ideas for a structure and process to support the implementation of SEL. Visitation utilized the five core constructs of the [CASEL SEL Framework](#) and designated a day for each construct:

- Monday – Self Awareness
- Tuesday – Self Management
- Wednesday – Responsible Decision Making
- Thursday – Relationship Skills
- Friday – Social Awareness.



Many teachers also participated in the SEL MOOC-Ed course, developed and facilitated by the Friday Institute, to learn more about the implementation of SEL. Teachers could build their own SEL skills, access tangible examples of how other educators are teaching these skills and learn strategies that they could use in their classrooms.

SEL MOOC-ED

The Friday Institute, along with a group of experts, researchers, and practitioners, developed the SEL MOOC-Ed course with funding from the Oak Foundation. The course helps educators build a foundational understanding of how SEL skills are essential to, and inseparable from, student learning. Participants build their own SEL skills, see examples of how others are teaching these skills and learn strategies to apply in the classroom. To date, the course has over 8,000 participants and is free for everyone.



Mr. Ziemke led the development of short lessons based upon grade level bands for each construct. These lessons are housed in the SEL Padlet, and teachers at Visitation added their own ideas and lessons to the Padlet to ensure ownership and a constantly evolving bank of resources.

Visitation also adopted daily circle time across grades K-8 to highlight the SEL construct for that day. During daily circle time, teachers typically share a reading or a video to guide or spark discussion along with several discussion questions. Daily circle time allowed students time to reflect on the SEL construct highlighted that day. While the format or timing varied, daily circle time typically and purposefully happened in the morning in most classes to help set the tone and expectations of the day.



LEARNING DURING COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, Visitation School continues to maintain school-wide SEL practices while following the stay at home order. Principal Markoff starts each day with a video that she shares with teachers and students using various school platforms. Principal Markoff introduces the day's SEL construct, models how she practices that competency and then directs students to the daily wellness [SEL Padlet](#) to receive a short, grade appropriate lesson.

“When we started our school-wide SEL initiative in August, I never could have imagined that by the 3rd trimester we would be facing a global pandemic. We were able to adapt the SEL practices already in place onto our online classrooms. We were able to not only continue our efforts, but provide students and parents with the very practices they need during this time.”

—Jenna Markoff, Principal,
Visitation Catholic School





SEL IN ACTION: MS. COURTNEY'S 4TH GRADE CLASSROOM

During a visit to the school, the Friday Institute observed Ms. Courtney's fourth grade classroom and interviewed several teachers and students about the SEL implementation. Ms. Courtney introduced Wednesday's construct on Responsible Decision Making using a mini lesson found in the [SEL Padlet](#). She shared a video that involved two Dustins: a dog and an automated vacuum. Students were engaged with and amused by the video. With minimal direction, students quickly transitioned to the carpet area and sat in a circle for discussion time. Ms. Courtney began with a general question about the problem Dustin faced and passed the "talking piece" (a stuffed object) to the first student. In this case, the students passed the talking piece and shared only when it was their turn. One student opted not to participate by simply passing the talking piece along. The students progressed into a discussion about when and how they might utilize responsible decision making portrayed in the video in their own lives. Students shared succinctly and respectfully and did not interrupt or hurry one another. Students utilized language around responsible decision making, but also brought in ideas from other SEL constructs, such as compassion and empathy. Students in Ms. Courtney's classroom appeared comfortable talking about how this year was different in their school because of the implementation of SEL. Their faces lit up when talking about circle time and the school-wide Tiger PAWS for Pizza program. They also shared some very reflective examples of how they have changed in their own implementation of SEL.

“ I noticed with two students who used to get in trouble, put out of the classroom, suspended, written up [and] I have not had to write them up, they don't get in trouble, and they're practicing self-regulation.

—Angela Courtney,
4th grade teacher

POSITIVE RESULTS

After nearly six months of intentional and consistent implementation of SEL, positive results are already evident, including:

- **Creation of Common Language:** The SEL constructs and competencies provides a common language for students, teachers, administrators and other staff members. Students described how to use empathy and compassion in their interactions in and out of school. They spoke of making responsible decisions and being self aware, and they joined their teachers and the principal in modeling the common language.
- **Decreases in the Severity of Discipline Referrals:** The principal has seen a distinct shift in the types of referrals across all students. She and some teachers noted that several students have made significant gains in decreasing or eliminating the number of referrals they receive.
- **Exhibition of SEL in Action:** Students are demonstrating how they use SEL during circle time, but also in other discussions. Several students mention that they are applying SEL outside of school, either at home or at the park.
- **Readiness to Learn:** One teacher shared that as self awareness and self management are improving, students transition and stay on task more easily. Another teacher shared how SEL helped students collaborate or work in small groups, often providing more time for the teachers to work individually with students or in small groups.

“ *It’s changing my interactions with the kids because I have to show them that we all need to practice these competencies.* ”

–N. Mundt,
3rd Grade Teacher



Staff members and students talk about social emotional learning experiences at Visitation Catholic School. The password is lowercase sel.

“ *I think SEL is important because it teaches these kids, as well as adults, to learn how to handle their emotions better. I think every kid in the city needs SEL.* ”

–Richard Ward,
5th Grade Teacher

KEY COMPONENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

School Leadership



The school principal displays leadership and is committed to the implementation of SEL on a daily basis. She models this commitment in how she spends her time and the support she provides for the teachers and students. Ms. Markoff is present in the classrooms and all teachers understand her enthusiasm and commitment for the effort.

School-wide Approach



Visitation employed a school-wide approach with all grades, students, and teachers participating in the SEL implementation, as well as before and after care and food and nutrition staff. All classes participated in daily circle time around SEL, creating a school-wide environment supportive of SEL implementation. This approach re-enforces the importance of SEL for all.

Professional Learning



Teachers engaged in face-to-face professional learning offered by the Big Shoulders Fund that was tailored to the needs of the school. Teachers also participated in the SEL MOOC-Ed developed and facilitated by the Friday Institute. Principal Markoff also shared articles and provided direct support to teachers as they implemented SEL in their classrooms.

Collaborative Curriculum Development



In conjunction with Visitation, Big Shoulders created the SEL curriculum with five to ten-minute lessons and activities on a [Padlet](#). Teachers can add their ideas and resources to the Padlet at any time ensuring ownership and a robust resource. Principal Markoff encourages teachers to take on leadership roles to build the curriculum and share with others.

Assessment and Continuous Improvement



Students in grades K-6 participate in the xSEL Labs assessment for SEL competencies and aptitude at the beginning of the school year, and they will again at the end of the school year measure changes between the pre- and post-assessment. Visitation is also using the Big Shoulders Restore Behavior Platform to track discipline referrals, including a specific assessment of SEL constructs.

Celebrate Success



Visitation offered incentives, such as the "Tiger PAWS for Pizza", to encourage students to support each other in applying their new SEL skills. Students' name and grade were written on a paw print and displayed on a wall when they use their SEL competencies. The school provided a pizza party for students when the wall was full of paw prints.