

# Live Well. Teach Well.

*A Behavioral Health, Wellness & (P)SEL Newsletter*

Issue 8: Organizational Health & (P)SEL

## *Message From The CEO*

### SEL Is Imperative to Strong Organizational Health

By Dr. Jared Scherz



The ongoing crisis highlights an ongoing struggle for district leaders, forcing them into an unfavorable light no matter what choice is made. Professional decisions need to be made each day, many of which reflect the choice between what is good for the organization and what would be pleasing to the individual, putting district leaders in constant scrutiny. While we may want to believe that what is good for the district will ultimately favor the community, that is not always true or at least believed to be the case. Losing the confidence of the faculty or parent community can undermine the trust in a district leader making it difficult to execute complex challenges that benefit the entire community.

Balancing individual and organizational needs requires continuous calibration, not possible during times of crisis. Instead of collaborative leadership, we focus on incremental or transitional change, recognizing our role is much like a ship captain navigating during a storm. There isn't time to consider people's feelings, yet we can feel the heavy burden of responsibility and the omnipresent finger pointing when sacrifices are made.

Psychosocial emotional learning extends well beyond social skills for students, it also plays an integral role in the process of balancing organization with individual health, influencing all three dimensions of school culture including adaptation, climate, and infrastructure. How leadership reads the instruments knowing when to pivot toward transformational change (process over outcome or content) is a result of this work, which helps people see themselves clearly in relation to their community.

As leadership looks toward the summer as an opportunity to regroup, consider your admin retreat as the ideal time to explore this critical intersection. Consider one of the many testimonials written about our work in this area:

*"For our fourth annual administrator summer retreat, I suspected that our educators might be willing and able to take an evolutionary leap in their training. I immediately thought of Dr. Scherz, having seen him present in other venues. He worked closely with our planning team to tailor a two- hour workshop that not only met the needs of a diverse group of 75 preK-12 and district leaders but challenged us to think differently about students moving forward. More importantly, he left us with tools and strategies to help more students-- particularly those who are disengaged-- succeed." -Dr. Marc Natanagara, Assistant Superintendent of Tom's River Regional School District*

## *District Spotlight*

### SEL and Organizational Health

By David Thompson, Director of Student Services, Buncombe County, Asheville, NC



Much focus has been put on the mental well being of educators and students, especially over the past year with the pandemic and its incurred consequences. However, it is important to give proper attention to the overall health of the district, or organization, itself. SEL plays a huge role by providing support and engagements that directly address organizational health.

“An organization is healthy when its structure and leadership support an alignment of personal wellness with both performance standards and measured outcomes. Just as it is impossible to separate social emotional learning and academics, it is equally essential to recognize the staff wellness connection to learning, sustaining, and growing in leadership,” explains David Thompson, Director of Student Services, Buncombe County in Asheville, NC.

### **Tough Times Call for Thoughtful Actions**

Educational districts in this country have never been as challenged to maintain organizational health as during this unprecedented pandemic. Issues rarely, if ever, dealt with before have arisen, creating an environment of tough decision making by administrators. Stress levels of all members of the educational community have no

doubt been at some all-time highs, and leaders are working tirelessly to ease tensions, fears and frustrations. It is times like these that an innovative SEL platform can be the tool that makes every administrator's job easier.

Thompson elaborates, "We must recognize that we have experienced collective, chronic stress or trauma over the last year and examine how that has impacted our brains reaction to fight, flight or freeze. We must be able to provide a safe and supportive environment that recognizes the behaviors resulting from chronic stress, understand the importance of determining the needs staff or students who are trying to connect, and provide the culture where those needs are met. Some of those needs are environmentally based with safety measures and standard practices of support in place. While some are more informal with time allowed for personal connections with other staff that provide that emotional support.

We have definitely been more intentional and focused on faculty wellness. That is a major component of our plan currently in development. We have worked with our local hospital systems, family medical practices, and school-based mental health providers to increase access to prevention and support groups as well as individual therapy for staff as needed. We will have a continued focus on training and supporting resiliency skills to manage the post trauma stress reactions caused by the isolation resulting from the pandemic, and stress from shifting to new and different ways of working, teaching and responding to students."

TeacherCoach's unique "top down" SEL paradigm offers numerous engagements that are both entertaining and essential as many educators struggle maintain a stable learning environment. Thompson explains it is necessary to take a very proactive approach to establishing and maintaining programs that specifically address the health and wellbeing of all members of the organization.

"BCS has a School Health Advisory Committee who looks at eight areas of programming and support for health and wellness. Each school is required to have a wellness team that plans and supports the health and wellbeing of students and adults in their own schools. The eight areas to be included are from the Whole School, Whole Child, Whole Community Model of the Association for Curriculum Development.

"We are currently developing a multi-year MH/SEL plan for the district to implement/support resiliency skills, physical and emotional health, SEL industry standards, accessible MH support and treatment, community school hubs of services for students, families, and staff, restorative practices, and integration of SEL into curriculum content standards and staff wellness.

"We are also developing a district Equity Plan to address non-discrimination, equitable discipline, hiring and retention policies, etc."

Both Thompson's district in Asheville, NC and TeacherCoach's approach to SEL are unique and, some have said, innovative, is that the purpose of integrating SEL programs into one's district is to make the lives of all educators, students and parents easier, not busier or more difficult. "I think the uniqueness in our approach is a commitment to not make SEL the 'one more thing' that teachers do not need from district expectation. We are actively identifying the connections between current practices, curriculum, and policies with how SEL is part of who we are, how we behave, how we teach, how we problem-solve and make decisions," explains Thompson.

This philosophy really is the cornerstone of addressing and maintaining organizational health.