

TEACHER

COACH

# Live Well. Teach Well.

*A Mental Wellness & SEL Newsletter*

Issue 2: Mental Health



## Message from the CEO

By Dr. Jared Scherz

With the close of the election and the apparent transfer of power, the ills of society are figural. Whether you feel vindicated or cheated, it's clear we have considerable work to do on our evolutionary continuum. The moral and ethical division in this country that bared itself through the political race, created a great deal of trauma on both sides; trauma from worrying about what the next four years will be like, trauma from heated disagreements with family and friends and trauma from trying to decipher fact from fiction within the media, both mainstream and social. The ability to differ peacefully and constructively, to value differences even with different values, to recognize and embolden our most oppressed citizens, to decipher fact from fiction, and to balance our morality with the negotiation of ethics and values, are all paramount to both our healing and advancement. With this work emerges a new set of priorities, squarely affixed on the shoulders of our primary and secondary school systems, who will help ensure we prepare our next generation of decision makers.

*Constructive Differencing:* Conflict resolution has become antiquated. We can't simply teach our students to disagree peacefully and expect they will gain the tools needed to bridge the great divide in this country. We need a concerted effort to prepare our educators to be facilitators for the meaningful exploration of differences that keep people connected.

*Equity and Social Justice:* With implicit and explicit racism fueling social injustice and catalyzing violence, it's time for our curriculum to reflect this pressing need. From understanding the historical influences of oppression to the current economic disparity, we can't solve complex problems like food deserts or institutional racism without proper and truthful education.

*Discernment of Information:* We are inundated with information from social media making it difficult to root out fact from opinion. Confirmation bias is reinforced by

the rapid spread of misinformation making it difficult to filter unbiased data. Schools need to help students learn how to vet sources of information, contrast opposing claims and make educated choices about complex issues.

*Ethics, Values, and Morals:* Winning at all costs means losing, a lesson we need to learn from this election. If we defend our values without a balance of ethics, we risk damaging our moral compass. Integrity through transparency, honesty, and civility need to guide our process of debate, discussion and dialogue if we wish to maintain unity and order as a society.

*Power Balanced with Responsibility:* If we want to prevent a Darwinian attitude from igniting our base instincts, we have to remember a simple premise. Those who hold influence must cautiously use it to empower others rather than to amplify their own agenda. This is a difficult lesson to learn in hierarchical systems where students have no agency.

*Trauma and Healing:* The scaffolding of the pandemic, social justice issues, and an aggressively contested election means both chronic and acute stress on a massive scale. Adults and children are grappling with resiliency to endure without hope for timely relief. Psychosocial emotional learning to begin our recovery is required for any other academic agenda to succeed.

The contentiousness and raw rage that has gripped this country for the past four years is something that must be tended to and cared for as you would any other wound. Citizens who have been spending more time together than normal due to quarantines and lock-downs have often engaged in more heated conversations and disagreements between family members, creating trauma not only for the adults but children as well. As educators, this is an imperative opportunity to employ our best P/SEL practices to help teachers and students address the endured traumas and move forward as academic performance and effectiveness becomes a major focus now that the election drama has passed, and we continue to deal with Covid-19.

## **Parkland Parent Turns Trauma & Tragedy Into Help & Healing For Others**

February 14, 2018 forever altered not only the lives of the families of the 17 who were murdered on the grounds of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, but also the entire community of Parkland, FL. The trauma inflicted on everyone that day had far reaching and lasting implications.

The 17 families, our close knit town of Parkland, and on a greater scale, all of America, exhibited all of the stages of grief at one point or another as we moved through this tragedy together. The emotional trauma resources

available in Parkland made themselves known shortly after the incident. While some took advantage of those opportunities immediately, others processed their grief and healing differently and more slowly.

Make Our Schools Safe, the nonprofit organization I created after my 14 year old daughter Alyssa was shot and killed in her English classroom, became my source of strength and healing. MOSS seeks to empower students and staff to help create and maintain a culture of safety and vigilance in a secure school environment. In addition, The Make Our Schools Safe Clubs, established in high schools around the country, provide an inclusive, welcoming forum for all students. These clubs have also become a source of empowerment to its members.

The impact of the trauma on 2/14/18 in Parkland, FL has been extensive and long-lasting. Thankfully, with the help of available resources and services, as well as Make Our Schools Safe and it's Clubs, the healing will continue for years to come.

## **Lori Alhadeff**

President

[www.MakeOurSchoolsSafe.org](http://www.MakeOurSchoolsSafe.org)

609-335-8226



## **SEL & Trauma**

By Christy Anana

As a teacher and a school counselor since the early 90s, I've worked in schools where there are periods of acute trauma. A heart-breaking event happens, and the school community comes together to help individuals, families, and classrooms heal in the context of school.

I've also worked in a school serving historically underserved populations, where students and families have experienced both generational and chronic trauma. It is an honor to be part of this community. It is also an imperative opportunity to employ educator well-being. I've seen my physical and emotional health worsen as my responsibilities in dealing with others' trauma increased.

Education in the time of Covid-19 has become even more challenging and without the positive rewards that we normally receive in our day-to-day lives. We are isolated from our colleagues and students. I can empathize with district leaders who are feeling the tension of balancing organizational needs and individual needs, and I can feel frustrated when their decisions seem tone deaf to the feelings of staff. Band-aids of self-care are offered up like another layer of teacher responsibility. When we express our feelings,

some push back by encouraging us to keep adding more to our plates like we have an endless appetite for toxic positivity.

Even before Covid-19, vicarious or secondary trauma invaded classrooms and leaked into the hearts of educators who carry the emotional burdens of their students. What is the difference between acute/chronic trauma and what we are experiencing now with this mass experience of pandemic and unrest resulting in our own trauma? The distinction here is important in terms of how we can help and support our educators, and in turn, our students. I feel a heaviness and fatigue that is palpable every time I speak with a fellow teacher.

On the flip side, what kind of social and emotional learning is taking place in this difficult time? What new skills will emerge for both students and adults as we emerge into a transformational era of education?

Leaning into the discomfort and exploring our feelings is vital during times like these. Our bodies guide us with sensations of distress. We can take moments to distract, but the feelings are not going to go away. As we develop self-reflective practices, we can understand that the sensations point us in the direction of our unmet needs. What I am feeling and hearing from my colleagues is an exhaustion that is hard to describe. I feel tired from trying so hard to connect and being met with very little. The fatigue is physical and is also emotional. I am starting to sense the signs before the full-blown reaction happens. I notice the tightness on one side of my head and the hurt feeling around my heart. It is an observation that I am learning to meet with unplugging from the computer (as soon as I am able) and doing some kind of movement, preferably in nature. I live in Seattle, and so weather is often prohibitive.

By expressing those needs and negotiating how to get those needs met, we are building social emotional skills within ourselves. Expanding our capacity and talking about it with our students can be the greatest teaching we can offer. We model self-care not as another chore, but rather as part of our lesson plan that builds both teacher and student wellness.

We heal in relationship with each other. Educators are accustomed to creating and maintaining a community. We establish rituals that create safety and meaning to our work. We feel competence as we create these secure attachments where students can safely risk as they grow academically and socially. There's a reason for our work. We are meaning makers.

I can tell the difference within myself when I have taken the time to employ my mindfulness practice. I have more room in my body and mind to tolerate the stress of the day. I am able to regulate faster. My window of tolerance is expanded. When I bump out of my window, I am able to get back into the zone more quickly, and I feel my resilience expanded. I realize that my inner life of mindfulness can be the same as my outside life. That feels better. When I sense my ancestors standing with me, I am empowered with strength.

We need to honor our educators and their work by offering time and space for their own self-care. Then, we help them stay whole to enjoy long, healthy careers being present for students and their own learning. And we can't make self-care be just another add-on. We need to walk alongside educators and support them compassionately as people who have families, dreams, and aspirations.

We are increasing our collective tolerance for distress and accessing deeper levels of compassion for ourselves and others. Most importantly, we don't have to do it alone. TeacherCoach, LLC offers personal and professional development that can help you feel heard and less isolated. I've created some engagements on the TeacherCoach platform that educators can use to explore well-being strategies. As we feel better, we make room for students to develop their SEL capacity. My wish for you is that you know how much you are needed.

## Sponsor Spotlight



TEACHER'S PENSION

Bob Lee, chief business development  
official, Teacher's Pension

Trauma comes in many forms, and from many sources. Financial trauma can be just as devastating on an individual or family as any other type of trauma. Bob Lee, chief business development official at Teacher's Pension, has seen first hand the effects of financial trauma in educators. "We look at the data and research and can see that 82% of American teachers have indicated that retirement and what will happen to their flow of income is of the greatest concern. Our company has reached out to individual teachers as well as school districts to help them understand resources that are available but also act unemotionally as their fiduciaries to see what their status is as it relates to their future. Knowledge is power. We take out the emotion to alleviate the impending sense of trauma."

With older teachers taking early retirement due to the pandemic, retirement plans are being put into sharp focus as many educators are exploring the reality of living on a fixed income sooner than they expected. Lee understands the emotion behind this and tries to provide the support they are seeking. "The current situation is very complex and complicated in that educators are dealing with several aspects of Covid-19. Challenges in the classroom and educating students virtually is not how teachers were trained or taught to educate, especially older teachers. This causes teachers anxiety and depression towards the end of a long career. It makes people question why they're doing this at all during this stage of life." Lee continues that, "our financial advisors are also affected because all of a sudden clients stopped saving and began drawing on their retirements. If they had continued working they

could still contribute as clients. As their fiduciary however, we act in the best interest of the client. That is something we pride ourselves on – always acting in the best interest of the client, not the company.”

Part of the job of a financial advisor is of course to advise. That advice tends to change with the times and, of course, the individual. Lee explains that the best thing that anyone can do is educate themselves early. “The earlier you educate yourself the more financially literate you become. Education is power. If you can make good financial decisions earlier in life, you can become the financial steward in your own life. Investing and watching your money grow enriches one’s future because of the compounding effect. And it brings a sense of security to that person, alleviating episodes of panic or trauma later in life as they are approaching retirement age. It is just as important to talk to 23 year olds and new teachers and teach them to save for tomorrow, not just today. If they learn to live within their means and set aside an amount for future investment, they will be well prepared for whatever the future brings; even a pandemic.”

The current state of affairs in this country has made saving for the future more challenging as people face financial crises that require funds to be used now. But finding any way to put some money aside is crucial to offsetting panic and trauma down the road. “There is a much greater need for financial education now and not putting it off,” says Lee. “It is vital that employers provide employees that education. Putting it off says that their futures aren’t important. Covid-19 has merely presented urgency to provide financial wellness and education.”

## Star District



Like most districts in this country, Southampton School District in Burlington County, New Jersey, has had to deal with an unprecedented learning environment which has undoubtedly caused teachers, students and families stress and, in some cases, trauma. They have been vigilant since the beginning of the pandemic about providing curricular and administrative support to their faculty and students. Asia Michael, director of curriculum and instruction explains, “At the close of the school year in June, we knew this year would be very difficult. Not only would our community be dealing with stress and anxiety from the impact of COVID-19, but they would also be dealing with the stress and anxiety of the pending presidential election and the civil unrest that unfolded over the summer. In order to address this and create a healthy school environment, we included SEL as part of our School Reopening Plan. Before we opened the doors to our students in September, we provided staff with professional development where they learned strategies to help them deal with stress and to focus on self. Our plan also included additional PD sessions throughout the year to help teachers deal with stress

in general and time to complete SEL engagement sets on TeacherCoach. We are also emphasizing self-care and mindfulness this year through a district wellness initiative, which includes a walking challenge, yoga sessions on site, and meditation. My administrative team and I have been intentional about lessening the burden on our teachers this year. We have simplified many procedures and relaxed some of our normal requirements to make the day-to-day operations less stressful. In addition, we have built time into the week for increased collaboration across grade levels. This time can be used for planning or just debriefing and problem solving. We also make it a priority to do in person check-ins with our teachers and survey the staff, students, and families to understand the needs of our school community. Additionally, we meet with our building representatives weekly to discuss any concerns the staff may have in hopes of maintaining a healthy school environment.

“In regards to curriculum, we have provided teachers with additional classroom resources to help them teach students about the Coronavirus and the current civil unrest in the country. Additionally, as part of the curriculum, K-5 teachers are required to have weekly Classroom Circles to give students a platform to discuss these issues in a safe environment. Our school counselors have also revised their curriculum to incorporate discussions around these topics in both our elementary and middle school. Their class lessons/discussions also incorporate SEL strategies including stress releasers and mindfulness.”

SEL, or PSEL (psychosocial emotional learning) as TeacherCoach has phrased it, is not a new concept in the world of education, but under the current circumstances, it has become more relevant and imperative than ever. Teachers don't just need tools, but support for their own mental health that can then be passed along to the students. Healthy teachers educate healthy students. SEL is an important part of the curriculum and is a central part of student learning. Our job as educators is to develop the whole child, and this cannot be done if we exclude SEL. Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills are not traits we are born with. If we do not teach our students about each of these and give them opportunities to practice them, we miss the opportunity to help them grow into productive citizens and increase the potential for them to have social and mental health issues as adults. These opportunities should be embedded in the curriculum because SEL is just as important as the content material. With the shift in education to a collaborative model where students learn by discovery, they have to be aware of themselves, their classmates, and problem solve. In order for educators to address SEL properly, we have to provide them with the tools. This is where professional development comes in. Staff training is essential in helping teachers not only understand the SEL competencies but also help them develop engaging strategies to target instruction and help students practice the five core competencies. PD should also focus on the integration of SEL in teaching, understanding and utilizing trauma-informed practices, and helping teachers identify and support students experiencing challenges. The inclusion of SEL in the curriculum should be intentional and cross-curricular, so all staff members should be included in professional development centered on SEL.

SEL is a tree with many branches. It's important that each branch is cultivated and nurtured in order for teachers, and in return students, to benefit the most from a well organized SEL platform. Michael explains, "Teachers can benefit from SEL in various ways. First, understanding the five core competences of SEL helps them build a classroom community. SEL will help teachers become aware of and manage their emotions to prevent negative reactions to students, colleagues, or situations. SEL can also help teachers understand different points of view and respect diversity by being socially aware. This also helps teachers actively practice equity and empathy by showing their understanding of different values, cultures, and perspectives. I recently read somewhere that SEL teaches people to be 'compassionately curious' about others. I really like this saying because it shows acknowledgement of someone's differences in a way that shows the value placed on those differences. As professionals, teachers have to be 'compassionately curious' to understand their students and families, which in turn allows them to build positive relationships and a classroom community. SEL can also help teachers professionally. In the same way social awareness helps to build relationships with students, it also helps teachers build relationships with their colleagues. This can improve morale and contribute to a positive school climate. SEL also helps improve decision-making skills. As a professional, it is important for teachers to make decisions that are in the best interest of all parties and ones that are ethically sound. Finally, SEL benefits teachers because it reminds them to take care of themselves.

The core competencies call on us to self-reflect and practice strategies to manage our emotions and stress levels. These strategies can help teachers with both their physical and mental health. Teacher burnout is a real thing, and in the current climate, it is even more of a reality. Doing small things every day to self-manage and just be aware of their thoughts and feelings can help teachers stay centered and focused on their wellbeing." While SEL has been around for a while, its benefits and effectiveness are being tried and tested with this pandemic. Lockdowns, isolation, in-class learning, virtual learning, fear of getting sick, dying or losing a loved one, and economic concerns have created a new kind of almost chronic trauma and anxiety amongst educators, administrators, students and families, the likes we haven't seen in this country in our lifetimes. Michael and her team have made providing support and help to all those affected a top priority. "We decided to return to school five days a week with about 65% of our students learning in-person and 35% learning remotely. Returning to the classroom five days a week for eight hours a day created severe anxiety for many of our teachers. Although COVID numbers had continued to decrease, not knowing what would happen in the first few months of school worried many. Health and safety were the two major concerns (and still are). We received email after email from individuals worrying if we were doing enough to make the classrooms safe. Were the guidelines we were provided with enough to shield them from Coronavirus? Could we guarantee they would not unknowingly contract the virus and take it home to an at-risk family member? We also have staff members (and students) who lost family members or friends to COVID-19. Adults of course can process the loss a little better than children, but the trauma caused by the loss of life is real and manifests in different ways. We have had to be extremely sensitive to that and deal with members of our school community on an individual basis. We also had to provide professional



development for our staff in the area of trauma so they would be prepared to deal with this amongst their students.

We are also dealing with trauma in our remote student population. For the most part, many of these students have not returned to “normal” life. Because they have not been back in the classroom since March, some of them are experiencing serious isolation issues and have difficulty focusing on their schoolwork. It is clear they are missing being with their friends and the regular routines of school. To help these students, we continue to provide these students with support as much as possible. Their teachers conduct special ‘office hours’ to check in on them, our school counselors set up virtual sessions with them, and our school psychologist assists when needed. We have seen a difference in the majority of the students affected by this trauma.”