

A renewed focus on social emotional learning



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Every spring, we ask the parents of incoming kindergartners to share hopes and dreams for their children as they enter our schools. Mothers and fathers

write a few words and share them at tables. It strikes me how the themes of these messages are never academic; it's always about children being happy, well-balanced and finding their place in the world.

A few examples:

■ My hope and dream is that my son is encouraged in the new discoveries that light him up, that he makes friendships that teach him lessons he will carry through life, that he encounters

diversity and learns to find the common thread that makes us human and brings us together

■ I hope my daughter feels safe being her own sweet self, keeps singing about planets and dinosaurs and feels as special as the boys

■ I hope she will be embraced for the loving soul that she is. That she will be encouraged and validated to excel, even to reach her deepest dreams

As the father of a kindergartner – the proud Class of 2030 – I completely understand these sentiments. As superintendent, I understand them as well. We want our children to flourish in their skills and knowledge; but just as importantly, we want them to develop strong character and be nurtured as people.

Social emotional focus

The district's strategic planning committee recognized this as well, as they helped shape the

new five-year strategic plan last year. One of the pillars of the plan is social emotional learning, and it will become a strong focus moving forward.

CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, a national organization focused on student well-being, defines social emotional learning according to five core competencies. These include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

In the working world, these are often aligned with so-called "soft skills" – the ability to work well with others, negotiate a variety of social environments, exercise self-control, etc.

The building blocks for this development take shape in homes and schools. How students work with others, listen, communicate their thoughts, make daily decisions and "read" their social environment are all

vital skills that must be taught. These skills follow them from the classroom, to the lunchroom, to the playground, to life outside school.

Our approach

While these skills have been taught in our schools for a long time, our strategic plan challenges us to align our efforts into a more systematic approach. We've recently met with researchers from the University of Washington – experts in social emotional learning – to review research and hear about how other districts have approached creating a focus across schools.

This fall, ASD representatives will work together as a social emotional learning committee to develop our five-year vision and shape our strategic actions.

This work will lead to shared commitments across classrooms and schools. It will also start to define how we partner with families and the community to

help support the development of strong social and emotional skills in children. We'll keep you posted as the thinking and plans emerge, and seek feedback on family/community connections.

I'm excited because I think this work will ultimately make a difference for our students.

I like to think about those same kindergarten parents in 13 years writing a few words as their children approach high school graduation. The words I hope they write might be something like:

"Wow, I am so glad my child went to school in Anacortes. Not only is he a good thinker, but he's a good person as well. Throughout his years here, he has been nurtured for his creativity, taught to work well with others and challenged to make good decisions and own his choices. While I'm sad to see this chapter end, I know he will make a positive impact on the world."