

Testimony of Timothy P. Shriver, Co-Founder and Board Chair of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, Emotional Learning (CASEL) and Board Chair of Special Olympics

Social and Emotional Learning: Scholarship and Love

Nine months ago, the field of social and emotional learning (SEL) lost a giant, Dr. Roger Weissberg. He was one of the field's founding architects, a stalwart advocate for children, a great scholar, and a beloved colleague and friend. In Roger's last publication, written just a few weeks before his death, he shared his battle with pancreatic cancer and how it felt to confront terminal illness. In beautiful language, he described the support of his family, the love from colleagues around the world, and the many ways social and emotional learning had served him well. He realized the skills that he thought were so important to teach children had changed his own life, especially near the end. He concluded that he would continue to live his final days dedicated to *scholarship and love*—two qualities that helped build the field of SEL and the qualities that made his life worth living. In his honor I share my remarks today, hoping to model our work through these pillars. Scholarship is our dedication to evidence, inquiry, listening, thoughtfulness, and collaborative planning. Love is the reason we have always done this work—to nurture, care for, and promote the social, emotional, and academic development of all our children.

Nearly a half century ago, Dr. James Comer's research in your home district of New Haven revealed that many educators were unprepared for the core task before them: promoting children's development and learning. At the time of his research, I was in training to become a certified teacher in Connecticut. Our training taught us to be proficient in our subject matter, exposed to theories of pedagogy, capable of designing curricula, and practiced in various methods of teaching. But absent from our training was what Dr. Comer saw as the critical missing link to achieve academic achievement and excellence for all students: a deep understanding of the emotional, social, ethical, and cognitive and even spiritual dimensions of child development—attention to the ways children express emotion, build relationships, make decisions, develop their sense of self, and become productive citizens. Addressing this missing

link would help teachers accelerate and deepen academic learning by better understanding behavior, strengthening relationships, unlocking purpose, and nurturing belonging. It would also make it more likely that our children would grow up to be contributing members of a pluralistic, working democracy.

Dr. Comer's insights became a well-researched model of school reform that would help to raise academic grades and test scores by supporting the learning, development, and overall well-being of students. He built a model of school governance and collaboration that brought parents into meaningful roles in setting the goals and objectives of the school. He introduced the concept of a mental health team that would align staff and community leaders to create coordinated and collaborative approaches to mental health prevention and intervention. He introduced the idea of a "social development" plan that would explicitly support social and relationship strengthening for children, parents, and educators alike. In short, he created a way for educators to change—to become the facilitators of growth, learning, and development rather than the arbiters of information distribution and child sorting.

Dr. Comer helped stimulate the efforts of scholars and educators around the world. Over the next few decades, growing attention to the whole child brought together collaborators across child development, prevention science, and many other connected fields. Together, we found effective ways to remake schools so they could become effective at promoting both the cognitive development of children as well as their social and emotional development. We learned that the focus on child development deepened students' academic, social, and emotional learning. Importantly, we also learned that a focus on helping children develop could help end the conscious and unconscious obstacles that school districts and educators had created for children of color whose behavior was often judged negatively, whose parents were often treated

dismissively, and whose development was unsupported generally. Child development, as Dr. Comer suggested, not only improves learning outcomes, but could also end damaging practices – labeling, sorting, and exclusionary punishments– that often lowered expectations, harmed the social and emotional development, and limited the academic potential of children of color.

I share all this because at one level, educators and families have long known that children learn best when their social and emotional needs are met, when they are surrounded by supportive adults, and when they feel motivated and capable of achieving their goals. At another level, we have seen a foundational shift in education to focus on facilitating all aspects of children’s growth, learning, and development. We have seen how the integration of cognitive, social, and emotional learning helps children connect more deeply to academic content, engage productively with peers and teachers, work through struggles, and plan toward their goals. The notion of the whole child means that we don’t split information and inspiration, or separate academic instruction from social and emotional development. Why? Because there is no child whose brain goes to school without their heart and body being there too; no child who connects to learning without first connecting to a human; no capacity to pay attention divorced from the capacity to feel and believe that attention matters.

As part of the shift to understand and attend to the whole child the field of SEL was formalized in early 1990s, sharpening the focus on helping children and adults learn the knowledge, skills, and attitudes best suited to promote social development, emotional health, relationships, and good decision-making. By focusing on school-family-community partnerships, SEL integrated the learning and practice of these skills across their classrooms, throughout school climates, and in all policies and practices. Drawing from brain science and child development, leading scholars following Dr. Roger Weissberg and his many collaborators began designing,

implementing, and evaluating evidence-based programs, practices, and teacher professional learning. In classrooms and schools, this meant that children had the skills and supportive climates to focus on their academic learning and achievement. A dysregulated child can't learn. So we teach them the "turtle technique" to pause and think when they feel overwhelmed with emotions. A child who feels unseen won't engage; so we show teachers how to listen and invite connection using active listening strategies like "EARS," which stands for eye contact, reflection, acknowledge, and say what you heard. Life is full of moments of conflict and disagreement, so we teach children how to disagree without being disagreeable and assume positive intent. We integrate these lessons with math to help students practice collaborative problem solving, with social studies to practice social awareness, with language arts to practice communication and perspective-taking, and with science to practice curiosity and reflection. Learning in these core academic areas depends on being motivated, inspired, challenged, and intrinsically rewarded for wanting to learn. Social and emotional learning strengthens academic learning. We scale these into other aspects of the school by using more effective discipline practices that focus on relationship-building and social and emotional skills development, creating pathways that help connect students to services when they need additional support, and collaboration with youth serving agencies and community organizations, and more.

While this may all sound abstract—in practical terms it is transformative—for students, schools, and communities. As you know Madame Chair, a good part of my career has been devoted to support children with intellectual disabilities. Over a decade ago, we studied how SEL can be used to reduce social isolation, bullying, and loneliness for students with intellectual differences. Over the course of the past decade, the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools came into being. What we have developed is a model that brings together students *with* and *without*

intellectual disability and in doing so creates experiences intentionally designed to develop their SEL skills in ways that build positive connections among young people—reducing bullying, increasing social inclusion, and strengthening school climate and culture.

Unified Champion Schools is founded on the value that every child matters equally. It engages children in experiences—sports, leadership, whole school activities—where they develop SEL skills essential to their success on and off the playing field, and in and out of the schoolhouse. The ability to take the perspective of another; the ability to resolve conflict constructively; and the appreciation that differences should be celebrated—not feared. When these skills are infused in the growth of young people, we see the development of mindsets that are inclusive, as young people use their SEL skills to become agents of change—advocates of inclusion— within their schools...and I dare say, their communities. The results have been truly stunning as Special Olympics inclusive sport and experiences have become a core part of American education.

Many years of research and implementation on this model and other evidence-based models have demonstrated that the benefits of SEL are clear. The overwhelming evidence shows an education that promotes SEL contributes to academic achievement, healthy behaviors, mental wellness, and positive attitudes about self, others, and school. For example, a landmark 2011 analysis found that SEL increased students’ academic performance by 11 percentile points, compared to students who did not participate in SEL. At least four more meta-analyses – representing hundreds of studies – have replicated these findings in recent years, demonstrating that SEL is consistently effective at improving academic outcomes and overall well-being, and that the benefits last up to 18 years later. In fact, SEL is more effective at improving academic outcomes than many programs specifically focused on academic acceleration. Additionally,

students' social and emotional skills are a stronger predictor than academic test scores of high school graduation, post-secondary attainment, and career success.

Today, many say we're hopelessly divided. The predominant political narrative is that we are a divided country that can't even agree on what we want to include in our children's education. But this is a lie when it comes to social and emotional learning – teachers, parents, administrators, business leaders, researchers, policymakers, and students themselves have found significant common ground. Across party lines, we all understand the importance of developing healthy relationships, understanding and managing our emotions, and collaborating to achieve our goals and contribute to our communities. In fact, 80 percent of parents believe families and schools should work together to promote SEL, and that social and emotional skills are essential for their children's futures, and 84 percent of teachers said integrating social and emotional learning into the core curriculum has become even more important since the start of the pandemic. High school students themselves also support SEL as part of their education, with 76 percent saying that they would benefit from schools that focus strongly on SEL. Additionally, 92 percent of executives surveyed by the Wall Street Journal said social and emotional skills (or “soft skills” as they call it) are equal to or more important than technical skills – yet 89 percent said they have a difficult time finding employees with those skills. In bringing together scholars from a broad array of fields, policymakers from the Republican and Democratic parties, educators, parents, students, and others, the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development demonstrated that the consensus is clear. In their final report, the Commission writes: “The promotion of social, emotional, and academic learning is not a shifting educational fad; it is the substance of education itself. It is not a distraction from the ‘real work’ of math and English instruction; it is how instruction can succeed. And it is not another reason

for political polarization. It brings together a traditionally conservative emphasis on local control and on the character of all students, and a historically progressive emphasis on the creative and challenging art of teaching and the social and emotional needs of all students, especially those who have experienced the greatest challenges.”

The fact is there is no question about whether to engage in SEL: All learning is inherently social and emotional, and all schools impact the social and emotional development of children and adults – intentionally or not. The only question is whether we will do this well so that we fully support the learning and development of all children. As policy leaders, you play an essential role in creating the conditions that will help schools, as well as out-of-school time programs, engage in high-quality SEL based on evidence and best practices.

At CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), we have spent the last three decades dedicated to supporting the research, implementation, and policy that guides schools and districts in effective SEL strategies. Our widely used SEL framework identifies five core social and emotional competencies that help students succeed in school, college, career, and life. It also emphasizes the role of school-family-community partnerships to coordinate practices and create environments that support positive social and emotional development in all the places students live and learn. This framework has guided more than half the states in the U.S. in developing their own SEL standards or competencies to define what students should know and be able to do across grade levels. In turn, state standards and competencies guide schools and districts in implementation decisions when selecting SEL evidence-based programs, professional learning, or assessments. SEL implementation is not a one-size fits all approach - it is driven by local decision-making based on the strengths, needs, and priorities of each community. Each school and/or district decide how to make SEL systemic given their local context and goals.

Implementation decisions are critical, and the positive impact of social and emotional learning are a result of effective educators who are supported with high-quality professional learning, ongoing technical assistance and coaching, and evidence-based guidance and curricula that are applicable to their context. If we care about student outcomes, if we care about their academic learning and achievement, we must continue to prioritize and ensure funding and infrastructure that supports robust SEL implementation tailored to local context.

Lastly, I want to take a moment to address the politically charged conversations that have added to confusion and misinformation around SEL and CASEL's definition and framework. CASEL has always been dedicated to the healthy development of all children, and like any effective organization, we continuously improve and update our work toward this goal. In 2019, we updated our definition and examples of social and emotional skills to reflect the latest research and implementation insights on how best to achieve high-quality educational opportunities and environments that promote every child's social, emotional, and academic development. This did not shift or change the five core social and emotional competencies, which are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Instead, we expanded upon examples of skills that help both children and adults navigate and contribute to our increasingly diverse schools and country: skills like awareness of different cultures and social norms, demonstrating open-mindedness, and making decisions that support our families and communities. We also updated our framework to elevate the prominence of family partnerships and community partnerships. As children's first teachers, parents have also been essential to their social and emotional development. For SEL to be effective, we need authentic partnerships between schools and parents so that students have consistent opportunities to learn and practice essential skills.

This work has never been more important. Our education system faces significant challenges that have accelerated over the past few years: the long-term unraveling of the impacts from a global pandemic that disrupted all our lives, increasing attention to a crisis around youth mental health, persistent inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes, and divisive politics that have seeped into school board meetings and classrooms. The latest report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reveals just how acutely our children are struggling and need support: 37 percent of high school students experienced poor mental health throughout the pandemic, and nearly one in five have seriously considered attempting suicide. Additionally, students are continuing to cope with the loss or illness of family members, navigating economic hardships, longing for more social connections, and struggling academically. Meanwhile, preparing students for their lives beyond school has become increasingly complex. Not only are the jobs of the future rapidly shifting—an estimated 85 percent of jobs that will exist in 2030 don't yet exist today—but youth who will enter the workforce in the coming years are also more entrepreneurially minded than previous generations.

All these challenges have underscored a new charge for our education systems: to prepare a generation for a world that is more complex, globally connected, and technologically advanced than we have ever experienced. The students of today will need deep self-awareness, an ability to adapt to and navigate diverse contexts, dynamic relationship-building skills, and strategies for collaborative problem-solving. In other words, SEL is integral to every child's education, across every stage of development from early childhood to workforce preparation.

My ask of you today is simple: support children, parents, and teachers. Let's not let political agendas get in the way of our children's social and emotional learning and development. Over the last decade, SEL has had strong bi-partisan support and Congress has taken steps to advance

SEL, including appropriations packages passed in each of the last three years that include set-aside funding for SEL in the Education, Innovation, and Research grant program and increased focus on whole child strategies through the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) program. Because of the support from many of you working across the aisle, states have integrated SEL with career and workforce development efforts to improve how we prepare students for their post-secondary plans, districts and schools have been able to adopt SEL programs and practices based on evidence and local context, and teachers have been able to establish effective learning climates and teach skills that will help students succeed throughout their lives. Your continued support for SEL is even more critical now as we continue to grapple with the impact of the pandemic for years to come. Congress can come together to create conditions that will help students successfully navigate the uncertain future ahead – such as policies that incentivize pre-service teacher training to deepen their focus on child development and SEL; resources to address staffing shortages with quality educators that understand students’ social, emotional, and academic needs; grants that support districts in weaving SEL into workforce development efforts; guidance that help shift punitive policies to effective disciplinary practices that promote social and emotional growth; and expansion of youth-serving organizations that are prepared to use evidence-based SEL strategies to extend across in-school and out-of-school time.

Policies that promote SEL are not divisive or ideological. They are grounded in evidence and support the skills and learning opportunities that families, students, business leaders, educators, school leaders, and districts across the country have already prioritized. Let’s rise above the political rhetoric to ensure that all children in our nation can learn, grow and succeed - socially, emotionally, and academically.