

MEMORANDUM

Fr: Student Services Advisory Committee (SSAC)

To: APS ACTL and the School Board

Purpose: Provide community input into Student Service Department (SSD) Services (specifically focused on Social Emotional Learning (SEL))

DATE: December 4, 2020

Committee Members: Stacy Savage, Gillian Patrick, Adora Williams, Luisa Concepcion, Alisa Cowen, Naomi Cummings, Melissa Daddio, Jennifer Golden, Alicia Guarjado, Judy Hadden, Dana Milburn, Kirstin Pickle

Overview:

APS has the highest per-pupil expenditure in this regional area. However, many students are graduating neither college, nor career ready. More importantly at this time many students are struggling to find “success” in their day to day academic and emotional lives. To properly assess this issue for the 2020-2021 school year, ACTL was tasked with reviewing how APS could improve outcomes for all of its students, and ensure that students reached their maximum potential related to their cognitive, academic, social and emotional development. Success in this area translates into improved student performance and in turn, greater student access and opportunity. As SEL is considered integral to the acquisition of skills that lead to a student’s academic and emotional development, SSAC reviewed SSD’s implementation of the SEL curriculum, to assess what was working well and not working well, as well as develop recommendations for improvement. These findings are outlined below. Every person involved in the education of our students agrees that their emotional well-being is critical to their overall daily survival and to their academic success. It is also important to acknowledge that while we review whether our students have equitable access to a quality education that supports their mental health, we do so as we survive a global pandemic occurring amidst demands for racial equity and reconciliation on all levels that have long been viewed as inadequately addressed. This memorandum should be analyzed against that backdrop.

Data Collection:

In order to obtain an understanding of how SSD supports APS counselors, students and teachers, the committee agreed to collect data by conducting empathy interviews, collecting APS data artifacts and hosting panel discussions during committee meetings. Below is an overview of our methodology. These methods cover both qualitative and quantitative data collection in order to ensure that a wider net of voices can be heard.

APS Empathy Interviews:

To gather organic and detailed first-hand information related to how the SEL program was working, SSAC decided to conduct empathy interviews. Empathy interviews are used to gather insights that otherwise might not be apparent. An empathy interview uses a human-centered approach to understand the feelings and experiences of others. In order to ensure that a diverse set of voices were heard, the committee leveraged the School Summary Data (2015-2018) to identify a mix of schools from elementary, middle and high school. Our sample included schools from both south and north Arlington, as well as teachers, parents, students, principals and counselors. We completed 22 interviews over a 3-month period covering 10 different schools. We anticipate additional coverage throughout the year and view this process as ongoing to support memo development.

APS Data Artifacts:

The Committee has requested the following data artifacts from SSD:

- List of SEL programs implemented per Elementary, Middle, and High School
- Organizational Charts that cover APS Central Office, DTL, SSD, ACTL, and supporting committees
- Assessment Tools that are used to monitor student progress under SEL and supporting results (not yet received)
- SEL Brief presented to ACTL
- Example SEL video presented at the elementary, middle, and high school level (not yet received)
- List of schools that conduct responsive classroom and are RAMP recognized
- Artifacts that identify how equity and race are addressed within SEL curriculum and/or training (not yet received)
- SEL Teacher training data (mandatory vs. non) and supporting interpretation of data (interpretation not yet received)
- Second Step Feedback from Counselors (not yet received)

Student Services Committee Panel Discussions

The committee has held three panel discussions to obtain a greater understanding of the APS structure, scope and responsibilities, and activities that are ongoing to support our students with regards to SEL and mental health. Participants that have provided input during these discussions are:

- Laura Newton (Director of SSD)
- Pam McClellan (Supervisor, Counselling Services)
- Wendy Carria (Supervisor, School Psychology and Social Work)
- 2 Elementary School Counselors
- 2 Middle School Counselors
- 2 High School Counselors

Executive Summary

As mentioned above, 2020 has been a critical time within our community. The social and mental well-being of our students and the people who support them are challenged daily and are at great risk. An overwhelming and recurring theme that has been highlighted in our empathy interviews is a resounding and recurring request for pause and self-reflection. While everyone acknowledges that academics remain important to the success of our students, our students are facing new emotional pressures that impact their ability to master the intricacies of academics at the level that APS currently demands.

It is therefore important as a district that as we approach the end of the year, we analyze whether the mechanisms that are currently in place are truly supporting and positively impacting our students and staff's mental health. In addition, APS should be using any data collected in a systemic way to ensure that all students are supported. Our research is showing that unfortunately, APS is not doing this and we are seeing increased inequity amongst our schools at a time of a pandemic, when even more children (especially disadvantaged) are in danger of falling behind mentally and academically. Without a systematic approach, we will be unable to pool resources and identify best practices in a timely manner to support all of our students and staff.

Principals currently dictate how SEL programs are implemented within their particular schools, which leads to a lack of consistency. This lack of consistency, in turn, is hindering our ability to identify and address systematic issues pertaining to SEL and mental health. Presently, there are a myriad of data collection mechanisms in place. However, the data never moves beyond its collection and referral to the underlying issues that prompted the collection. At both the macro and micro organizational levels, we are siloed data rich and all-around information poor. To properly support students and staff during this critical time, it is necessary that APS perform a comprehensive review of its systems for data collection, integration and ease of access to data. With that said, below are highlights that reflect areas of best practices and improvements that should be considered when developing a systemic strategy to address SEL and mental health. This strategy should be owned by a single organization/person that has accountability for the end to end implementation and progress reported to the Superintendent to include both qualitative and quantitative data. Currently, we cannot say, with any certainty, that any of the mechanisms we have in place today are truly improving student mental health and their social-emotional wellbeing.

What is working well

Overwhelming agreement that SEL is a critical aspect of learning

There is a common understanding within APS amongst parents, teachers, principals and counselors that SEL is critically important to a student's success. The focus is even more important this year given the current virtual environment along with the ever-present social unrest that can directly impact many of our student's lives.

Strong communication about available mental health resources

APS staff is doing a good job of providing access to continuous communication with parents about the resources available to help support students and parents dealing with mental health issues. We have been provided with multiple resources, such as flyers and emails that provide specific guidance and highlight a selection of mental health resources at various schools.

Best Practices exist and can be leveraged from individual schools

Best practices acknowledged across schools and school levels that can be leveraged by the school district as a whole for the benefit of all students:

Elementary pre-school programs ages 3-5, implement a program that is supposed to be consistently applied across all APS schools which provides access to a SEL curriculum for 15 minutes consistently throughout each synchronous school day. Students learn how to access their feelings and engage in exercises to promote emotional wellness daily.

Some principals have and continue to tout SEL as the number one priority: e.g. an elementary school (ES) principal directed teachers to focus on SEL implementation for

the first 4 weeks of school thereby allowing teachers to establish peer to peer and teacher to peer relationships virtually in order to more easily facilitate engagement in academics. This alleviated pressure and allowed teachers to become creative in integrating critical parts of the Second Step program. In another ES a teacher, by her own directive, sent home a request for information related to each student's family make-up/their child's likes/dislikes/favorite colors/shows etc. weeks before school began. This teacher then digested that information before school started and uses that information daily to help foster discussion and relationships between her students.

In some schools, teachers are working across disciplines (art, science, music, etc.) to develop creative ways to engage children in SEL curriculum. One school had children create emotional monsters. In the middle of class, a 3rd grader described a teacher that stopped the class and asked them to draw their emotional monster to reflect how they were feeling at that moment. The student was clearly engaged and excited to share. In another school a 5th grade teacher implements a daily morning meeting which allows the students to greet each other as well as an end of day release and stretch which brings them together once again to engage before the end of school. On Fridays a student is chosen to lead a poll of the week which the students look forward to as a ritual to end the school week.

SEL Assessment Surveys are being conducted across some elementary, middle, and high schools as a meaningful tool to be used by both counselors and teachers; and on a monthly basis, MS and HS counselors are coming together to verbally share best practices and lessons learned

Where Improvement is needed

Unclear structure and accountability for end to end SEL implementation

There are multiple SEL programs being managed by different parts of SSD. SSD is not responsible for any end to end SEL program implementation. They are therefore unable to collect feedback that would help them assess the success and/or failure of a program. At each school, the principal has the authority and accountability for SEL implementation. SSD does have oversight for K-12 SEL curriculum and teacher training, however, this is only one aspect of managing and implementing a SEL program or set of programs. Consequently, they are not in a central office position where they can be the collective voice responsible for determining whether a SEL program is successful or not. This is critically important for the success of any SEL program.

Inconsistent Implementation leads to school inequity

When individual schools are run autonomously, the school district as a whole loses the opportunity to reap the benefits of what is working well or to avoid the pitfalls of what is not. We need to change our approach and work collaboratively as a district.

Imagine what would happen if all principals were given the direction to take the first couple of weeks of school to just focus on building relationships while anticipating the difficulty of doing so within an online environment. The one APS school whose leadership supported this action does not have the platform to share the advantages or lessons learned in doing so with others. This is just one example of many of how inconsistent implementation and collaboration inequitably impacts students' well-being across the district.

Finally, there is the No Place for Hate Program, which is not implemented by SSD, but is managed by the new Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion officer. It is not clear how equity and race is being incorporated into SEL training and the curriculum.

Lack of mandatory SEL training for teachers

Through interviews, teachers indicated that they believed that optional SEL training was available the first 2 weeks before school started. However, the majority noted that they were too busy trying to learn the technology to prepare for online learning and did not have time to take the SEL training. At both the middle and high school levels, counselors rely on teachers to teach the SEL curriculum. If teachers are not properly trained, this task becomes much more difficult.

There are some teachers who took an interest in SEL when it was first introduced to them during their careers and began to integrate these practices in their daily teaching routine. Their students now benefit from this. However, since all teachers are not trained in the delivery of SEL, not all students are having the same access to this aspect of teaching and learning.

Some counselors mentioned that additional training could be used at this time for support-staff who are interested in supporting implementation of SEL curriculum. This would be helpful as counselors are overwhelmed at every level supporting parent calls/meetings providing guidance/tools on behavior management—this has taken up a significant amount of their time this past semester.

APS policy related to cameras being on and how this affects the delivery of SEL and academic materials

Before the academic school year began, APS enacted a policy that students were not required to actively have their cameras on during the school day. This policy was expressed through principals at Open Houses and reiterated at BTSN by teachers. Despite this policy, our interviews revealed that in many instances teachers constantly request and sometimes require that students turn on their cameras. For instance, a HS student who suffers from debilitating anxiety attacks from being on camera was forced to come on camera despite the fact that the counsellor and teachers were made aware of the student's circumstance. This significantly impacted the daily anxiety level of the student at the beginning of the school year and this impact still resonates. Another student expressed that one day an ES teacher advised that the class would be taught without the teacher's camera on. When the children protested, the teacher expressed that this was what the students were doing to the teacher daily by not having their camera on. Another ES student explained that the teacher asks students repeatedly to turn their cameras on. After a period of time if a student does not do so, the teacher told them that the teacher would contact their parents to let them know that they were not turning their cameras on.

In interviews with teachers, some expressed that while it was difficult to connect with students whose cameras were off and many children have their cameras off in MS and HS (students in ES are having their cameras on more) that they realized that they had to respect the individual situation of each child and attempt to focus more on connecting with that particular child. However, a HS teacher insisted that it was difficult to teach a blank screen and that they constantly encouraged their students to turn their camera on. When asked whether they understood that students were not required to do so, they explained that they did, but it was important that they connect with the students via camera.

It is critically important that APS not only revisit this issue to clarify the requirements of their on-camera policy, but that they train teachers to truly understand what the policy means. Forcing children to turn on a camera where this may cause any level of anxiety, interrupts that student's ability to learn and impacts not only their mental health, but also their ability to receive SEL instruction.

Lack of Curriculum that is relevant to obtain and sustain student engagement

ES counselors-grades 1-5 are in classrooms daily from Tuesday to Friday and see students once every other week for approximately 15-20 minutes. Though this is helpful in that SEL is being delivered consistently for these students, the time dedicated to their emotional support seemingly has little impact in their day to day lives.

HS parents noted that the Monday curriculum should focus on real world events that are currently impacting the students. For example, a parent noted that their family has strict COVID rules around socializing. This has impacted their student's ability to engage with friends and has caused exclusion via social media—the one way the student had to interact with friends. It would be helpful to discuss how different students may be dealing or coping with these restrictions and the different level of risk tolerance.

HS students indicated that Monday SEL videos were not helpful or did not foster a feeling of sharing and participation. For example, some student comments included—this is a waste of time; why are the videos directing comments to parents and not students; why are the videos heavily focused on suicide; and I attend as a check in the box for attendance and then find something more useful to do during the video; these videos are not helping me to build relationships with fellow students or teachers. Unfortunately, these videos are not having the impact, at the HS level, that was intended.

HS teachers noted that receiving SEL themes the Friday before Monday instruction, was not enough time for them to develop lessons. Some teachers indicated that the students could not relate to the lessons provided. Some HS counselors noted that they create the lessons for the teachers, however, this seems to be inconsistent across the board.

Lack of district-wide SEL data that could inform program progress

During our panel discussions counselors indicated that surveys and assessments are being conducted at the school level, but comments reflected that data is not being collected at an organizational level to truly understand the progression of SEL programs across the district. Some counselors are getting together on a regular basis to share best practices, but this is not a district wide requirement. Even at the school level, it is unclear what data is being collected, how the data is being used to identify best practices and areas of improvement within a school, or if there is any consistency of data collection across schools. This is a missed opportunity that could inform district wide SEL program progression.

As stated above, teachers indicated that SEL training was not mandatory. However, SSD noted that 2 of the 7 SEL training modules were required to be taken the first two weeks of school. We requested data to understand how many teachers, did in fact, take the mandatory training. While we were provided numbers, the interpretation of the numbers could not be provided by SSD due to lack of access of that information. Therefore, it is not clear who took what SEL training and if feedback was sent back to SSD on the usefulness of the training.

In conversations with both counselors and teachers, there are a number of different SEL programs being implemented across the district and there are multiple programs run by different school leadership (student services, counselors, principals, etc.) with little consistency across the board for baseline implementation, oversight, accountability, and feedback. This makes it very difficult to share best practices and lessons learned across the district, as well as, determine program success or failure.

While programs like Second Step and Sources of Strength, which are used at the middle and high schools, are touted as model evidence-based programs, there is no central organization that has information that supports or refutes the success of any of these programs. When asked for district-wide data and/or analysis of SEL programs at the central office level, there was none that could be identified. However, counselors did indicate that at a school level (within pockets) data is being assessed for SEL implementation success/failure, but that data is not shared at a district level for systematic review. Sharing this data would be very helpful to both the central office and individual schools.

The difference between Social and Emotional Learning and Mental Health and its impact on academics

Mental health is defined as “a state of being that is important at all stages of life that includes our emotional, psychological and social well-being.” SEL, according to APS, is “the educational process that leads to the development of emotional intelligence . . . by which we become better at understanding and managing our emotions and learning how they impact the choices we make, the relationships we have and our outlook in life”. Given our current social situation, it seems that these two terms are being conflated to the detriment of many students. Students first need to be in an appropriate mental state to be open to accessing social and emotional learning at any level and in turn academic content. Overwhelmingly, through our interviews, educators and parents express that a child not emotionally connected is a child that cannot appropriately process academics. It has become clear that the mental health of our students and all involved in their support is being challenged daily. Educators at all levels express that the emphasis on academics at a time where mental health is challenged is a clear recipe for many being left behind. As we see children struggle with online content and are overwhelmed with inputting assignments for grades while sitting in front of a screen for hours daily, we are faced with a call to slow down, to concentrate less on academics and more on maintaining our children’s mental health. While an APS survey conveyed that 73% of parents felt comfortable sending their children back to school, when that specific issue is addressed during our interviews, we find the same, however when further discussion is allowed, our interviewees all noted that though they would like to return, they knew, or their parents felt, that it was not safe to do so, and so they would remain at home. It is also important to note that this survey was conducted in June 2020 a time much different than where we stand today with the pandemic. This heightens and highlights the call of a principal who stated without hesitation, that we needed to remain 100% virtual until we could all safely return to school.

In an interview of a parent who contracted COVID we were given access into the lives of a family where both parents contracted the virus during the academic year. Though everyone made it through, the mother expressed that it was an extremely difficult time not only for the parents who were forced to quarantine at home while managing the daily emotional and academic lives of their two children, but for their children who needed to process their academics while watching their parents struggle to regain their health and care for them despite their illness. This reflects a recognition around how mental health and SEL are interconnected and how we must move beyond our present status quo to implement solutions so that we can be successful.

We also learned much about students who are being left behind academically; who were A students before but now receive E's and feel that their chances at success are ruined. We have learned of parents who have to leave their children at home to work because they have little choice and of children who are left to tend to their siblings while they attempt to navigate an academic day. There are so many vulnerabilities at this time and we must consider how best to assess and work through them.

The importance of addressing racial inequities in the quest to improve SEL

It is critical to discuss issues related to racial inequality and the overwhelming call for the American education system to deal with how it shows up in our classrooms. The death of George Floyd against the backdrop of the pandemic allowed a captivated audience fresh eyes into how the American system struggles with equal rights as it relates to Black Americans. This specific space in time has allowed much to be revealed around how this pandemic is affecting the social safety net of all Americans, but especially how it falters when it comes to the lives of students of color and in particular Black American students and their families. A Black HS student expressed how after being bullied in MS around her race that she then became isolated because the bully's parent was part of the staff and so there was no redress. She offered that when she then went on to HS, the incident followed her, and she knew that she was being treated differently. Another Black parent expressed that a resource officer came to her home related to an item that was stolen at school and was brought to the home by another student. The student's parents were never alerted by the school administration prior to the officer's arrival right after school dismissal, but the student's father was home from work early and able to help the student navigate the situation. Race is an uncomfortable subject for many. School books fail to appropriately record and teach true history and some teachers fail to recognize their own biases. Parents of color will express that the H-B Woodlawn situation is not an aberration in the system, but a part of the unfortunate norm for some students. It is important that when we discuss the mental health and social wellbeing of our students, that we include a discussion of reconciliation around race in their day to day academic lives. To fail to recognize that this reconciliation is critically necessary for success fails to incorporate all of the necessary aspects of SEL for all students. Superintendent Duran said it best in his statement issued after George Floyd's death "[a]t APS, we believe education is a path toward breaking the cycle of systemic, institutionalized racism, and we commit to being a part of the solution. "

Short Term Solutions (1 year)

Many teachers highlighted the relationship between their ability to foster a present connection with their students and the need to have an opportunity before school starts again to connect with their students and have their students connect with each other. Parents and students equally noted a desire to find a way for students to connect with each other socially within the school day. It is therefore important that APS identify and empower a single organization (and or spokesmodel with a representative from each academic level) to manage the end to end strategy to review SEL with this objective in mind and include community representation in the strategy development.

Empower this single organization to utilize the SEL assessments (currently being used) as a basis for feedback, action, and monitoring across the district. This organization should be the catalyst to ensure best practices and lesson learned, whereby all is documented and shared.

Include students in the development of SEL education/curriculum. Empower the students to have a role in what they discuss on a weekly basis

Think outside of the box to build peer to peer and student to teacher relationships (counselors to leverage educational cross-disciplines (e.g. art, history, science, PE) to develop solutions for online outreach)

Consider Monday a day of connection and sharing instead of focusing on academics. APS needs to identify ways in which student voices can be heard and they are allowed to reflect and share what they are currently experiencing—for example, student led discussions where they choose the topics and drive the conversations. Now more than ever, students need to feel connected.

Roll-out the COVID-19 exercise: allow students to express themselves in 19 words about what their life is like living in a COVID world. Incorporate this as part of a discussion teachers/counselors can facilitate with students at all appropriate levels—modify for younger students. Counselors should share across schools to identify common themes that drive new exercises. Lastly, ask students to share their 19 words as part of their yearbook lay-out –historical perspective captured. *A MS has expressed an interest in piloting this program and counselors overwhelmingly have expressed an interest in implementing the program school wide.

Identify “mandatory” SEL training that is critical for teachers to have given the online environment they are in. This training should include mandatory implicit bias training. Provide staff development time for teachers to complete this training and a mechanism for them to provide feedback for training improvement.

Update the job description for the Supervisor of Counseling Services position to reflect the experience and skills needed to implement and manage a district-wide SEL portfolio.

Note: All of these recommendations must be implemented at a systematic level to ensure best practices and lessons learned can be shared across the district.

Long Term Solutions

Please refer to May 2020 SSD recommending report. The bottom line is that SSD needs a full evaluation of the structure and services provided to fully implement an evidence-based SEL program/portfolio of programs that can be managed at a district wide level to ensure both equity and effectiveness.