

Calming Our Classrooms

This is a series of four Chicago Sun-Times editorials urging the Chicago Public Schools to embark on a radical new approach to teaching—one that addresses the social and emotional needs of students. In too many schools, socially and emotionally traumatized kids arrive for class each day filled with anger and despair. Inevitably, they disrupt classrooms, slow learning to a crawl, and at times become violent. We believe there are sensible, compassionate ways to help these children, calm our classrooms and make it possible for all students to really learn.

Schools must confront root causes of violence

September 2, 2008

<http://www.suntimes.com/news/commentary/1139446.CST-EDT-skuledit02.article>

Thirty-five sixth-graders attended Kohn School in Chicago's Roseland neighborhood just before classes let out in June.



Counselor Lee Jones of the South Side Help Center met with sixth-graders weekly last year at Kohn School in Roseland. He taught them, according to one student, "how to express your feelings instead of fighting all the time." (Keith Hale/Sun-Times)



Students at Schneider School, including Veronica Carter (left) and Gessina Rodriguez gathered daily to share the good and bad things happening in their lives. (Al Podgorski/Sun-Times)

Twenty-six of those kids—nearly 75 percent—told a visitor from the Chicago Sun-Times that they knew someone who had been murdered. Half said they had actually seen a shooting, including Amos, who saw his 19-year-old cousin take a bullet to the head.

"He was throwing up black blood, that's how I knew he was going to die," Amos told the visitor and his classmates, who were gathered in a stuffy classroom for a weekly social skills and counseling session.

"Sometimes," Amos said quietly, "I think it could happen to me."

Since last September, 36 Chicago public school students have been killed, but the fallout extends far beyond those grieving families.

Legions of Chicago kids are traumatized by what they've seen in their neighborhoods.

Many know little about resolving problems except through violence.

Still more carry the burdens of the poverty, isolation and mental illness that fuels the violence around them.

Today, these children arrive for their first day of the new school year. There, they'll find little to salve their wounds.

The Chicago Public Schools spends \$55 million on security each year to quell violence. Several high schools, such as Farragut and South Shore, spend more than \$400,000 annually on security guard salaries alone.

But when it comes to confronting the root social and emotional causes of violence, the city's public schools fall woefully short.

Social workers drop by most elementary schools just a few days a week; psychologists come by even less. Almost all their time is taken up by special education students, leaving little time for anyone else.

Counselors work at schools full time, but many students never see them. In high schools, it's one counselor for every 350 students. In grammar schools, it's one counselor per school. But that just started this fall. For years, it was one elementary counselor for as many as 1,200 students, with most of the counselor's time reserved for special needs students.

Faced with limited budgets and an unyielding emphasis on raising test scores, the vast majority of schools simply get by.

We must do better.

Today, the Chicago Sun-Times is advocating for a radical rethinking in the way the Chicago Public Schools deal with the social and emotional problems plaguing many students—the stuff that makes metal detectors and security guards necessary in the first place.

It's not enough to teach fractions: kids must be taught to get along.

It's not enough to teach American history: kids must be taught to stand in each other's shoes.

It's not enough to teach spelling: kids must be taught to express their feelings in words, not with their fists. We're not asking schools to take on more than they're already doing. These problems are in the schools now, poisoning them. But we are urging the entire Chicago school system, not just individual teachers and schools, to confront these problems head on, instead of drowning in them.

"It's not reading, writing and arithmetic anymore— that doesn't work," said Lisa Maggiore, a rare social worker who is assigned to just one school because her principal sets aside extra money for it. "I look around and see how many kids are hurting and feeling abandoned, and they bring it right here, into the classroom."

The good news is that some top Chicago school officials already get it. The school system, after a year of planning, is experimenting with a radically different approach this fall.

A handful of schools are launching a well-established program that systematically teaches kids the social and emotional skills many aren't getting at home: anger management, empathy and problem-solving. The program also helps schools take concrete steps to promote and reward good behavior.

Needier students will get group or individual counseling—and not only by already-burdened social workers, counselors and psychologists. The pilot program calls for freeing up in-house staff or enlisting outside mental health professionals. It also, wisely, calls for hiring a coordinator at each school to make sure the program doesn't get shelved.

CPS hopes to bring this model to most of its schools by 2011, says Bryan Samuels, chief of staff to Schools CEO Arne Duncan, and the driving force behind the new approach.

But scaling up from a handful of schools will require money, proof the model works and widespread public support.

We know there is no magic solution. We also know this model is no cure-all and won't be carried out effectively at every school. But it represents a clear break with the school system's understaffed and haphazard approach. That's a mammoth step— a revolution, really— and it's way overdue.

This pilot program holds promise of genuine progress. Don't let it go the way of hundreds of other CPS efforts— here today, gone tomorrow.

Many teachers and administrators object to all this, saying a school's job is to teach, not to fix all of society's ills. We don't blame them. They were trained as teachers, not as social workers. They also say they have no time— the demands of raising test scores trump everything else.

But a frontal assault on the social and emotional issues facing kids should make teaching easier, as any veteran teacher already knows. When kids have a place to turn, rather than blowing up in a classroom, when kids learn to manage their emotions, rather than repeating what they learn in the streets, teaching is easier and scores go up.

This isn't just intuition talking. Research backs it up. Students completing social and emotional learning programs score 11 percentile points higher on standardized tests in reading and math than kids who don't, according to a 2007 meta-analysis of 207 studies spearheaded by the Collaborative

for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

They are also better behaved, have better attitudes, are less depressed, and show fewer other signs of distress.

"It's not about marching in the street against violence," said Joyce Brown, who oversees high school counselors for the Chicago school system. "It's about getting to know the kids and their needs. Many just need to know someone cares."

Tomorrow: What a frontal assault looks like.

'Everyone should have someone to go to'

September 3, 2008

<http://www.suntimes.com/news/commentary/1141313,CST-EDT-skuledit03.article>

There's a revolution under way at a small Chicago public school near a North Side housing project.



Teacher Nyree Broom pulls names of first-graders at Schneider School for a chance to talk during "community time." (Al Podgorski/Sun-Times)

Three years ago, Schneider Elementary began confronting the social and emotional needs of its students head on— instead of drowning in them, as far too many Chicago public schools do.

The result?

- Many students now turn to a social worker instead of lashing out. "My stress went away and I didn't have to take it out on my classmates," Kelly Centro, an eighth-grader, said last spring.
- Kids with run-of-the-mill problems get immediate help: When a six-year-old started hitting other kids, for example, he spent three weeks in behavioral counseling instead of stewing in the principal's office. The hitting stopped, keeping the boy out of special education and returning order to his kindergarten class.
- Once-reluctant parents now visit the school social worker. "Parents want to shun mental health, but parents seek out our social worker now because they're so comfortable with him," said first-grade teacher Nyree Broom.
- Fighting, suspensions and cursing out teachers, once almost daily realities at Schneider, are largely in the past. In 2003, the school reported 22 violent or serious incidents of misconduct. Last year, they reported just one.

We need radical rethinking

A drop in enrollment played a role— most Schneider families live in the nearby Lathrop Homes public housing project and many have left in recent years as the city prepares to overhaul it. But a profound shift in how Schneider helps its mostly low-income kids also made the difference.

In a series of four editorials this week, the Chicago Sun-Times is calling for a radical rethinking in how Chicago Public Schools addresses the social and emotional needs of its students. In too many schools, these needs go unattended but not unnoticed — needy, distraught kids regularly disrupt class and drag down achievement, with some ultimately turning to violence.

This is wrong. Schneider Elementary shows it's possible to try to get it right.

With help from Children's Memorial Hospital, Schneider began formally teaching its students what some aren't getting at home: anger management, goal-setting and self-control. Critics might dismiss teaching these skills, known as "social and emotional learning," as fluff— just teach the kids to read and write— but research shows it leads to better behavior and higher test scores.

An extra social worker helps

Every student now knows how to "do the turtle" or the "calming down" steps— where an angry kid retreats into his "shell," takes several deep breaths and emerges without lashing out at classmates. Most classes run daily community meetings, giving kids a time to share what's happening in their lives, boosting the odds it won't come out at the wrong time— say, in the middle of a math lesson.

Schneider Elementary, near Damen and Diversey, also added another social worker. Previously, Schneider employed a social worker and psychologist just one day a week, as at many other Chicago grammar schools, who worked almost exclusively with special needs students.

The extra social worker deals with everything that is usually neglected or handled haphazardly without another professional: He counsels kids and some parents and trained school staff to teach a social and emotional learning course. He hooks up kids who need more intensive help to a nearby DePaul University mental health center, which is taking on a larger role this school year.

Most important, the social worker was there for the kids three years straight.

"These kids don't want to spill their guts to someone who will be gone in six months," said middle school teacher Sarah Engstrom. "They cry to me when I introduce them to [a new counselor each year]: 'You want me to tell another person I've been beaten and raped?'"

A vast improvement

The model in use at Schneider isn't perfect -- many kids and teachers are still struggling.

But it's a vast improvement over the status quo. All but the most resourceful Chicago schools scrape by with far less help.

Every school, especially the ones in our toughest neighborhoods, should be like Schneider.

And this week, the public school system started on the path to take the city there.

It launched a pilot program, similar to the Schneider effort, at five schools. It's also moving about 35 schools that currently have grants or programs that deal more directly with kids' social and emotional needs toward the Schneider model. It hopes to bring this approach to all schools by 2011.

But we fear the effort could easily flame out or be poorly implemented.

Unless we start sounding the alarm bells.

"Everyone should have someone to go to," Engstrom said. "You'd never say you don't need a math or physical education teacher."

Tomorrow: A better way.

'I know why kids are killing. They're hurting'

September 4, 2008

<http://www.suntimes.com/news/commentary/1144389.CST-EDT-skuledit04.article>

Since last September, 39 Chicago public school children have been murdered.



A panel of high school students sits beside a CeaseFire anti-violence poster during a June visit to Chicago's Kohn Elementary School. The high schoolers shared their experiences with drugs, sex, gangs and violence. (Keith Hale/Sun-Times)

Thousands more were traumatized by those killings and the violence that pervades many homes and neighborhoods.

Still more struggle under the poverty, isolation and mental illness that often spur violence.

When those kids arrive at school each day, this is what the Chicago Public Schools offers:

- Until this fall, just one counselor for as many 1,200 elementary students. At high schools, it's one counselor for every 350 kids.
- Social workers at most grammar schools just a few days each week; psychologists come by even less frequently. Most of their time is taken up with special education students.

- Little training for kids in anger management, conflict resolution and problem-solving, despite a state requirement to teach those skills. Illinois in 2003 became the first state to create standards for such "social and emotional learning," but it's just starting to take off in Chicago schools.

A better way

"We can't expect them to learn if we ignore what I call 'their stuff,'" said Carol Briggs, principal of Kohn Elementary in Roseland. "I know why kids are killing. Their needs are going unmet and they're hurting."

There must be a better way.

In a four-part editorial series this week, the Chicago Sun-Times is calling on the school system to fundamentally rethink how it deals with the social and emotional needs of its students. Schools are drowning under the weight of these needs, casting about with little help or support. We are calling on the school system to deal with these problems head on.

To start, the school system and the public must rally behind an effort launched this week— one that signals a major break from the understaffed, crisis-oriented approach most schools use now.

Five "turnaround" Chicago schools that reopened with new staffs Tuesday are trying a well-established program that directly addresses kids' social and emotional needs. It teaches kids the skills some don't get at home: how to get along, how to stand in another person's shoes— skills that research shows improve behavior and test scores.

The program also offers group or individual counseling for needier kids by freeing up in-house staff or using community mental health agencies. Another 35 schools with existing programs that confront kids' needs more directly also will move toward this model this year.

The goal is to bring this approach to all schools by 2011.

But the school system will never get there if support, money and— most importantly— the will doesn't follow.

The demands on the cash-strapped system are endless: raise test scores, lower class size, add more preschool slots. If addressing a child's social and emotional well-being doesn't top the list, this year's pilot will be just that: yet another one-time experiment.

Do it right

Even worse, we fear the school system will move on this, but will do it poorly and without the staff support it deserves. Federal special education law and Illinois law require school systems to move toward more comprehensive services for kids. We want Chicago to get it right.

We aren't interested in telling the school system what to do, knowing full well there is no money to pay for it.

That's why the school system must rank social and emotional learning over other pressing needs. CPS and its supporters also must hunt under every rock to find new cash, including continuing the push to reform the way Illinois funds its schools— a cause taken up this week through a boycott of the first day of school.

Another creative solution has been proposed by Bryan Samuels, chief of staff to Schools CEO Arne Duncan. Samuels is negotiating with the state, exploring ways to get Medicaid to pay for these student support services— more than 80 percent of CPS kids are Medicaid-eligible. The state has a vested interest in helping: A 2003 law calls for building a comprehensive children's mental health system in Illinois.

Get the money

The Chicago school system and its supporters also should push for more money from Washington. National advocates are looking for more help

through the No Child Left Behind law and a bill in Congress that would increase the number of social workers, counselors and psychologists in areas with at-risk kids.

Any new dollars found by the school system should go toward student support services, particularly at the neediest schools. Not every school, not every kid, needs help. Intensive help should be reserved for the toughest kids and the toughest neighborhoods.

At a minimum, this is where the school system should be:

Letters to the Editor Social and emotional learning helps students

September 15, 2008

Congratulations to the Sun-Times and to the Chicago Public Schools for recognizing that social and emotional learning helps children express themselves without violence, build positive relationships and focus on academics.

More than a fad, social and emotional learning is founded on scholarly research and validated by a growing body of evidence. It doesn't replace great teachers, top-notch facilities, adequate school funding, or parents and communities who work together to create a safety net that supports healthy child development. On the other hand, kids who succeed at school, resolve conflicts without fists and guns and envision a positive future for themselves are less likely to fall into gang life.

There's no magic bullet for society's ills. But social and emotional learning can produce higher test scores, fewer behavioral problems and less violent schools. Lawmakers recognized this when Illinois became the first to adopt SEL standards. It's time for all school districts to bring SEL standards to life in the classroom.

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- At least one social worker at each school who has no special education responsibilities, and at least two social workers at larger grammar schools and high schools. The School Social Work Association of America recommends one social worker for every 400 students and more for needy populations.
- One counselor for every 250 students, as recommended by the American School Counselor Association, down from CPS' current high school rate of 1 to 350. For years, elementary counselors oversaw as many as 1,200 students. After a push by the teachers' union, all grammar schools this school year should have at least one counselor. But that's still not good enough.
- Hire more psychologists. The National Association of School Psychologists says a school psychologist can't serve more than 100 needy kids.
- Each school needs a social and emotional learning curriculum and a full-time staffer to train teachers in its use— and to make sure it isn't filed away in a back office.

These are costly and ambitious recommendations, but doing anything less is negligent and short-sighted.

Many of our kids and teachers are drowning. A lifeline of just a few feet is not enough.

Tomorrow: Promoting peace

Tackle what's dragging kids and schools down

September 5, 2008

<http://www.suntimes.com/news/commentary/1146197,CST-EDT-skuledit05.article>

There are no metal detectors at North Lawndale College Prep High School.

Instead, students are greeted with a "days of peace" sign that lists the days racked up without any fights.



Counselor Stefanie Adess talks with a student at North Lawndale College Prep High School, 1615 S. Christiana. (John H. White/Sun-Times)



North Lawndale College Prep High School displays a "peace" sign each day the school goes without a fight. At its bottom, the sign reads, in part, "We take great pride that our school is a safe place for everyone." (Brian Jackson/Sun-Times)

Promoting peace is a big deal at the school. Kids sign a contract pledging to it before enrolling. They take the lead in teaching alternatives to violence. And the school pushes students to police one another.

"You're encouraged to stop the violence—and not promote it by laughing at a fight," said Hiram Moss, a student at the small public charter school. "They want us to be the person who breaks it up."

And North Lawndale actually hires enough adults to confront the social issues that often fuel violence.

Each counselor works with 100 students from ninth grade through the first year after graduation. At a typical Chicago public high school, each counselor sees 350 kids. Most high schools have full-time social workers, but they deal mostly with special education students.

As a charter school, North Lawndale spends its money as it chooses. It put money into social workers and counselors, not security.

In Chicago, it's an exception.

It shouldn't be.

This is the final editorial in a series in which the Chicago Sun-Times is advocating for a radical rethinking in how the Chicago Public Schools deals with the social and emotional needs of its students. Too often these needs go unattended but not unnoticed—distracted kids regularly disrupt class, drag down achievement, with many dropping out and some becoming violent.

North Lawndale has its problems—a quarter of its kids still aren't graduating. But 94 percent show up every day, and 77 percent of grads go on for higher education. Compare that with nearby Collins High School, which is being closed. There, only 78 percent of students attend each day, and just 58 percent graduated last year.

Other Chicago schools also are casting about for answers. On Wednesday, we profiled Schneider Elementary, which has made social supports for its students a top priority. Other schools use discretionary dollars to hire extra social workers or skillfully draw in community mental health services. And some schools are using grants to teach kids the social and emotional skills—anger management, self-control, empathy—they too often don't get at home.

But this amounts to tinkering along the edges. The typical Chicago school in a struggling neighborhood is drowning.

"The kids almost feel invincible or they've lost hope—I think it's the latter," said Remco Papp, a sixth-grade teacher at Kohn Elementary School in Roseland, where the South Side Help Center runs a small social skills and counseling program. The principal managed to get a social worker four days a week, more than at most schools, but says she could use two or three.

During a June visit, all 17 students in Papp's class told the Sun-Times they knew someone who had been killed.

"They don't see past tomorrow," Papp said. "They don't see anything past this."

It's time to do better.

Enhancing social and emotional supports for students must top Chicago's to-do list. Another round of three-year grants won't cut it.

It's the right thing to do it and the smart thing, too. Healing our kids and helping them grow socially not only produces better behavior, it boosts classroom test scores, a growing body of research shows.

This week, we laid out a new course for the Chicago school system. With the stakes so high, it's worth repeating today:

We must rally behind the experiment the school system launched this week at five schools.

The five "turnaround" schools are adopting a proven program that features a social and emotional learning course and concrete steps to promote and reward good behavior. Needier kids will get individual or group counseling.

This pilot was developed over the last year, with elements already in place in schools across Chicago and the nation. The school system hopes to bring this model to most schools by 2011.

At a minimum, this is what each school, particularly in our toughest neighborhoods, should have:

- At least one social worker with no special education responsibilities, and at least two social workers at larger grammar schools and high schools.
- One counselor for every 250 students, as recommended by the American School Counselor Association, down from CPS' current high school rate of 1 to 350. For years, elementary counselors oversaw as many as 1,200 students.

After a push by the teachers' union, all grammar schools this school year should have at least one counselor. But that's still not good enough.

- More psychologists. The National Association of School Psychologists says one psychologist can't serve more than 100 needy kids.
- A social and emotional learning curriculum and a full-time staffer to train teachers in its use -- and to make sure the curriculum isn't shelved.

We won't get better schools unless we acknowledge the obvious: academic performance and student behavior are intrinsically linked.

Simply stated, our schools won't improve until we pay real attention to what's dragging them down.

Schneider Elementary teacher Nyree Broom said it just right:

"Not addressing these issues doesn't work; it doesn't make them go away," Broom said. "It just makes them worse."