



*Arne Duncan was the U.S. Secretary of Education from 2009 through December 2015. He previously served as CEO of the Chicago Public Schools from 2001 to 2009. He is currently a managing director at the Emerson Collective, working to provide opportunities for disconnected Chicago youth. This Q&A is adapted from remarks he made during a keynote address at CASEL's Cross-Districts Learning Event in May 2018.*

### **Importance of SEL**

You can't have academic success, high graduation rates, college attendance, and college success without addressing the needs of the whole child. It's the foundation. This is more important than having great physics, biology, and chemistry teachers. It's not "this" versus "that," academics versus social and emotional learning, but both/and.

### **A job for all adults**

Helping the whole child is not only the job of the counselor and social worker. It's the job of everyone in the building—administrators, teachers, lunchroom aides, attendance aides, librarians, and coaches. All are responsible for ensuring every student gets the foundational support to succeed.

### **Necessity of efficacy data**

Many don't understand the necessity of this work. Therefore, you have to show the data. James Heckman, the University of Chicago economist, was initially skeptical of early childhood education. But he became its greatest proponent after seeing the 13:1 return on investment. [Note: [Columbia University](#) has found an 11:1 ROI for social and emotional learning.] And what's driving that ROI? Most of the gains are coming from the SEL side—children learning to interact, take turns, and so on.

### **Role of SEL in helping save democracy**

I worry about democracy now—the inability to compromise, the fraying of the middle. Democracy is premised on the ability to compromise. SEL helps teach these skills, which are hard to learn as adults. It teaches empathy, learning what you have in common with kids who are very different. Schools need to plant the seeds, to help kids understand their common humanity, build trust and understanding, and learn to listen. Educators are uniquely positioned to teach these skills. If not us, who?

### **His current work with Chicago youth**

In the seven and a half years I ran Chicago Public Schools, the city had one killing every two weeks. That was partly my failure. Last year, the city had 59 killings in 40 weeks. In one high school alone, 17 students were shot. I'm haunted by our failure to keep our kids safe.

Through the Emerson Collective, we are focused on African-American males in Chicago aged 17-24. We're hiring the shooters *and* the victims of shootings. We're providing trauma care, teaching them SEL skills and job skills. We're providing life coaching, mentoring, and connections to jobs. We know that hurt people hurt people. We're giving these young men their first chance. The key question we adults have to answer is, "Who is raising these kids?" We know the gangs are always active. The vast majority of these kids made a deliberate choice to join the gangs. We're giving them a better choice.

### **Impact of the Parkland, Florida, shootings**

After the shootings at Sandy Hook School in Connecticut, I felt that nothing would ever change. But something very different is happening now. Our Chicago kids live with this violence every day. We sent six of them to meet with the Parkland students. It was transformational. They met at Emma Gonzalez' [one of the most visible Parkland leaders] house inside a gated community. She put her privilege on the table. Our guys started crying. The Parkland students gave our young men a chance to share in their pain. The conversations were open and honest. I'm immensely hopeful. We're seeing what teens can do—by showing empathy and working together.

### **Different approach to school safety**

We need to be transparent about what works. For instance, when I was CEO in Chicago, one of our high schools had nine security guards. The principal asked me to replace them with nine social workers. That had never occurred to me before. The result was a huge reduction in violence. They had a different mentality. We need to trust local leadership and give them permission to take risks like this.

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