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Voices of Young People Lead the Way at 2020 SEL Exchange Virtual Summit, Hosted by CASEL

CHICAGO, IL – On October 15, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) held the [2020 SEL Exchange](#), the preeminent annual event dedicated to [social and emotional learning](#) (SEL). The impact of COVID-19 on in-person convenings provided an opportunity for innovation and creativity. In response, CASEL curated a four-hour Virtual Summit featuring the voices of young people, as well as education luminaries such as Linda Darling-Hammond, John B. King Jr., and Tim Shriver. Focused on the theme of “Catalyzing Our Commitment to Youth,” the SEL Exchange Virtual Summit brought together nearly 2,500 people from 22 countries to promote societal healing and transformation through SEL practices anchored in an unwavering commitment to equity.

“Amid the profound challenges of today, we must be more united than ever in our commitment to SEL as a way to affirm the full identities of our youth, support young people and adults in becoming change agents, and create a sense of belonging and connectedness. CASEL was thrilled to host our SEL Exchange Virtual Summit to renew that collective commitment and inspire positive change,” said CASEL President & CEO Karen Niemi. “This special event brought together voices from around the world, including our young people, to help make high-quality, evidence-based social and emotional learning a reality for every community, school, and student.”

To continue the momentum of the Virtual Summit, CASEL also announced the [“Together for SEL” Pledge](#), which supports a commitment to SEL and the promotion of healthy identity development, agency, and belonging for all young people within and across social categories. The “Together for SEL” Pledge is already being taken [around the world](#). Thank you to our Presenter Sponsors: [Mosaic™ by ACT®](#), [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), [Committee for Children](#), and [Rethink Ed](#).

Centering Youth Voices at the SEL Exchange Virtual Summit

Youth presenters spoke on the topics of identity, agency and belonging - three priorities for learning and development that CASEL has highlighted in a recently [updated definition of SEL](#)



Asalah Youssef, Photographer & Advocate for Sustainability, Well-Being, & Social Entrepreneurship

The virtual session was moderated by Asalah Youssef, 17-year-old photographer from British Columbia, Canada. Her most recent work, titled, "[Screenshots of Home](#)" documents people virtually around the world in their homes during quarantine, including our other youth speakers.

"Too often young people remain silent, not because we lack something to say, but because we don't expect to be heard. When we are given a sense of belonging in the conversation, however, we find the courage to share our stories and begin learning from each other," said Asalah. "The theme of 'Catalyzing Our Commitment To Youth' has the power to break down the barriers that keep adults and young people from transforming education, together."



Rashad Evans, Eighth Grade Honors Student

Rashad is a 13-year-old eighth grade honors student from Frankfort, Illinois who spoke on the topic of **Agency**, which refers to the ways we use our resources and abilities to advocate for and effect change through purposeful action. Agency is connected to the social and emotional competencies of self-management and responsible decision-making. Rashad was excited to share his story, using the Virtual Summit to educate kids his age, as well as adults, about how racism affects his own life and those of all people of color. Rashad is committed to educating others in order to create compassion and change.

"Because I'm 13, a lot of adults dismiss what I think and think I'm too young. Over time I got into that mindset, until George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery were killed. That really got to me, that really made me mad. So I didn't really care what adults thought, anymore," said Rashad at the Virtual Summit, discussing his recent appearance at a Black Lives Matter Rally. "Our generation has to take a stand against [racism]," he said at the rally, "and if we unite now we will be unstoppable."



Chiqui Diaz, High School Sophomore and Youth Activist, Beyond Differences

Chiqui is a youth activist from San Rafael, California who spoke on the topic of **Belonging**, which refers to the experience of acceptance, respect and inclusion within a group or community. Belonging is connected to the social and emotional competencies of social awareness and relationship skills. Chiqui has always been passionate about social justice, and since middle school, she has become very active in her community. Chiqui is a teen board member of Beyond Differences, a youth-led social justice movement working to end social isolation. Chiqui is a strong believer in the importance of social and emotional learning and the power of storytelling and empathy.

“I think storytelling in general is so powerful because you really get to connect with whoever’s story it is. That’s how we build empathy and that’s one of the most important things we can do. In social justice work it’s so necessary to build empathy and understanding. Telling each other stories is the first step of that,” said Chiqui during the Virtual Summit.

She also performed an original, spoken word poem, “Belonging,” which included these lines: “‘Belonging’ is the counselor letting me stay tucked away in their office when it was all too much. ‘Belonging’ is the teacher who complimented my hair, letting me know that someone cares and they’re there, even when I thought no one noticed. ‘Belonging’ is my newfound friends, sitting in the hallways at lunch, a chance meeting, a rag-tag bunch, where we just get to be ourselves and no one has to be afraid or contain who they are. It’s an escape and we belong.”



Samia Zia, High School Senior, nXu Fellowship

Samia is a Pakistani-American student living in Long Island, New York who spoke on the topic of **Identity**, which refers to who you are, informed by how you see yourself and how others perceive you. Identity is connected to the social and emotional competencies of self-awareness and social awareness. Only 16 years of age, Samia has set numerous goals in various fields that she stays true to with the use of dedication and discipline. During the pandemic, she decided to show her friends and family what role her identity serves in her life and its effects (via Instagram). Samia aspires to

inspire those around her to focus on their objectives and stay true to who they are regardless of what obstacles they encounter.

At the Virtual Summit, Samia shared her personal experience around forging an authentic identity, saying, “I realized that sharing my story is powerful. Maybe it will encourage other girls to share their stories. That is the way we can combat stereotypes. Stereotypes create boundaries that keep me from being me. Wearing what I want to wear and doing what I want to do.”

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All sessions and content from the 2020 SEL Exchange Virtual Summit have been recorded and are [available for purchase](#). Recorded content will be accessible November 2, 2020 through December 31, 2020. **Media interested in viewing the sessions and/or conducting interviews should contact jlewis@casel.org.**

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CASEL is the nonprofit that founded the field of SEL. Today, it collaborates with leading experts and districts, schools, and states nationwide to drive research, guide practice, and inform policy.

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