

Superintendent's Message



I am delighted to present to you the first issue of Impact LA: A Los Angeles Unified Research Publication.

This digital magazine is a compendium of important internal and external education research findings as well as voices from the field, including students, teachers, principals, parents, and other District staff. Our goal is to share thoughtful, educator-informed research that explores curricular and pedagogical innovation, best practices, and other important subjects that are critical to how we view education. We aim to guide and inspire positive changes in our classrooms and campuses, and delve into issues most important to our readers.

The inaugural issue includes findings from a study conducted in 2023 by the District's Strategic Data and Evaluation Branch.

Sincerely,
Alberto M. Carvalho,
Superintendent
Los Angeles Unified
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Principals at Successful Schools: High Expectations, High Support

In the fall of 2023, LAUSD’s Strategic Data and Evaluation Branch staff set out to learn what district schools were doing to achieve unexpectedly high growth on student test scores. What we learned was that, at these schools, underlying specific strategies was a school culture of *acknowledging the very human needs of educators and students*. This perspective came through in how school leaders supported teachers and how teachers planned instruction. We also learned that the person with the most influence over this culture was the school principal. The school staff we talked to told us that their principals engaged in specific actions to unify teachers and other educators behind the school’s mission. First, *principals led by example in ways that were visible and meaningful* such as by greeting parents and students each morning at the gate and covering the classes of absent teachers.

They also *made efforts to connect personally with staff*. Perhaps most importantly, they not only communicated high expectations to teachers but also *provided consistent feedback and support* so that teachers could meet those expectations.



Principals at Successful Schools: High Expectations, High Support

A principal we spoke with shared,

“ I put a lot of pressure on my teachers, but at the same time, I don’t just come in and say, ‘Do it. Your score is low so do it. I need you to work harder,’ and then leave. I’m in there with them. My struggle is with them. My coordinator is in there with me. I don’t want the teacher to feel, ‘I’m all alone. The pressure is on me by myself.’ The culture is there that we have to do this together. ”

An important strategy for ensuring that teachers received the support they needed to succeed was [building an effective instructional leadership team](#). Each principal identified a strong group of teachers and support staff and the team [clearly defined roles for each person in supporting instruction](#). An educator we spoke with shared that clearly defined roles are necessary so that *“teachers know who can answer which questions and who’s responsible for what. I think sometimes at some schools the principal might be doing everything, and they’re so overloaded that if they’re busy, teachers don’t know who to go to. Here, I do feel like there is a clear line of communication with different people, and they’re open to you to come and ask those questions.”*

Staff also told us that [creating structures to support collaboration among teachers](#) was an important contribution of principals at successful schools. Principals did this by arranging master schedules to allow for consistent collaboration, promoting an open-door policy across classrooms, and facilitating opportunities for mentorship and coaching.

A principal we talked to shared that they facilitate an open-door policy and mentorship among teachers by, for example, *“releasing Teacher A to come and observe Teacher B who is having small group difficulty. I tell Teacher A, ‘Go talk to them. I’m not teaching every day, you’re very strong in small group.’ It’s tactical. Teacher A receives positive feedback from me. The feedback to Teacher B is coming from a teacher peer. And now those teachers build that connection. Teacher B was struggling and now they feel empowered to go to that specific peer and say, ‘Hey, I tried this but between us, I’m still struggling. What do I do?’ Building leaders and building relationships to make them work together. That happens a lot here.”*



To support teachers, principals at successful schools:

1. Led by example in ways that were visible and meaningful:
 - a. Greeted parents and students each morning at the gate
 - b. Covered the classes of absent teachers
2. Made efforts to connect personally with staff
3. Communicated high expectations and provided consistent feedback and support to teachers
4. Identified a strong group of teachers and support staff to build an effective instructional leadership team with clearly defined roles
5. Created structures to support collaboration among teachers
 - a. Arranged master schedules to allow for consistent collaboration
 - b. Promoted an open-door policy across classrooms
 - c. Facilitated opportunities for mentorship and coaching



Successful Schools Support Students Holistically

When LAUSD’s Strategic Data and Evaluation Branch ‘outlier research team’ visited some schools in the fall of 2023 to find out what led to their unexpectedly high growth in test scores, we learned about the importance of school culture. As we share in another article in this issue, strengthening a culture that honors the needs of teachers is one piece of the puzzle. Educators at these successful schools also shared that *reinforcing a culture that fosters student engagement is imperative* for accelerating learning and performance.

A fundamental way that educators at these schools built a culture of student engagement was through individualized connections between staff and students. This can look as simple as greeting students with “Good

morning!” when they walk through the gates and recognizing them individually by name.

Educators also shared with us that a holistic view of students’ needs is also essential for creating a climate of engagement.



Successful Schools Support Students Holistically

To do this, educators at these schools analyzed [School Experience Survey data](#) to understand school-wide trends in student social-emotional needs and [checked in with families](#) to identify individual student needs. They also [intentionally integrated social-emotional learning \(SEL\) instruction](#) into the day. For example, at some schools, the first 15 minutes of the day were devoted to SEL. At other schools, teachers facilitated morning check-ins with students or shared stress-relief strategies for testing.

A principal we spoke with shared that they use multiple data points and support strategies to meet the holistic needs of students:

“So the school report card is one of the data points that we use for trying to identify children, social emotionally, also teacher referrals. And then my instructional leadership team and I also know students, we know pretty much all the students and the families. [S]o, we're able to pinpoint when a child is struggling or if they need additional support. And if we can't provide that support here at the school, then we're referring out to community-based organizations.”

At many of the schools we visited, educators told us that providing students with authentic choices in their education contributes to student engagement and leads to overall success and well-being.

One way that secondary school leaders can create opportunities for authentic student choice is through elective courses that offer opportunities for career exploration while also focusing on ELA, math, or science standards.

Another way is through offering a **variety of extra-curricular activities** throughout the school day, sometimes [partnering with community organizations](#).

A principal shared with us: **“Student voice is important to success. We offer a lot of extracurriculars. We partner with community organizations to bring more extracurricular activities such as dance classes and folklorico. A lot of staff members take the initiative and create different opportunities for kids. Last year, a journalism club was born to work on the students' writing and speaking opportunities. We also started a movie club.”**

When school leaders encourage connections between staff and students, they promote a holistic approach to education and create structures for authentic student choice and engagement.



To build a culture that fosters student engagement, staff:

1. Built individualized connections with students (e.g., by greeting and knowing students by name)
2. Reviewed School Experience Survey data to understand students' social-emotional needs
3. Intentionally integrated social-emotional learning (SEL) instruction
 - a. Devoted the first 15 minutes of instruction to SEL across classrooms
 - b. Teachers facilitated morning check-ins with students or shared stress-relief strategies for testing
4. Provided students with authentic choices
 - a. Offered elective courses that highlight opportunities for career exploration while targeting content standards
 - b. Offered a variety of extra-curricular activities, sometimes through community partnerships



Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) for a Positive School Climate

Emotions, thoughts, and memories impact our cognitive growth throughout our lives, particularly during our formative years. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) instruction has been shown to be a key strategy for schools to support students. SEL programs help students do better academically, improve their behavior, regulate their emotions, relate positively to others, and connect with peers and their school community. LAUSD offers various SEL programs and resources for our communities. ([You can access a comprehensive listing of LAUSD SEL Program and Resources here](#)).

We understand that good practice in social-emotional learning is multidimensional. It begins with [providing universal direct instruction in the competencies](#), especially for our youngest learners. Direct instruction in SEL using evidence-based programs that are sequenced, active, focused, and explicit have been shown to promote the best outcomes for students across all grade levels. We also know that foundational classroom practices that promote connection and well-being ensure that our students are ready to learn. [Lastly, we know that intentionally integrating SEL into academic content ensures that our students gain practice in and a deeper understanding of the SEL competencies](#).



Integrating sequenced SEL into curricula across disciplines and providing direct and virtual services increases [student well-being and teacher satisfaction](#). SEL integration starts with small steps. Something as simple as a daily SEL check-in can establish a culture of emotional awareness in a classroom and school community. Micro-steps and small changes accumulate over time, leading to greater well-being and improving attitudes about self, others, and school.

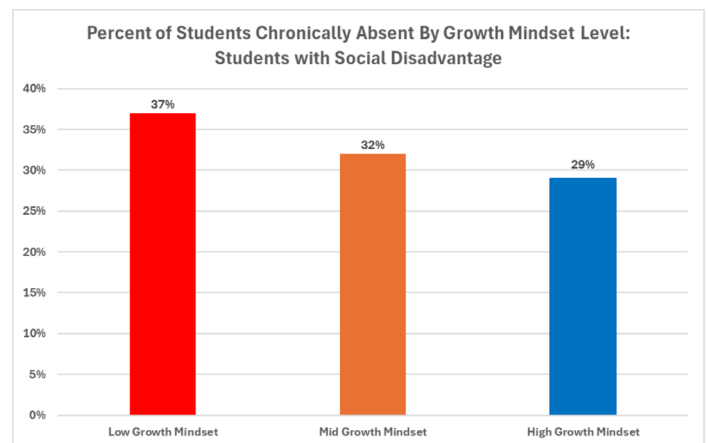
SEL for a Positive School Climate

“ Wellness is a result of the direct [SEL] instruction. If students learn SEL... that will build up their personal repertoire of skills. We are not waiting for the situation to prevent it. Everyone needs the basics. We know when we talk about SEL that we do observe outcomes of about 11-13% improvement in academic achievement. We do find direct correlations with decreases in negative behaviors with stress. ”

–Susan Ward Roncalli, Ph.D., California Department of Education, SEL Policy Workgroup

Many of the programs available to our students are guided by what they have told us in the School Experience Survey (SES) about their [self-awareness](#), [growth mindset](#), [self-efficacy](#), [responsible decision-making](#), [self-management](#), and [social awareness](#). An exploratory analysis of LAUSD’s SES SEL indicators and academic outcomes confirms there is a [positive relationship between students’ attendance, grades, and emotional well-being](#). Students who rate their SEL competencies positively are less likely to be chronically absent and are more likely to meet or exceed the benchmark for SBA ELA and Math. SEL benefits all students across grade levels, ethnicities, geographical areas, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

SEL helps teachers and students build relationships, which then enable students to grow their [emotional intelligence \(EQ\)](#) and practice skills they will use throughout their lives: emotional regulation, stress management, and community building. Similarly, a strong SEL culture in a school community enables teachers and school leaders to learn which students could benefit from [therapeutic services and supports](#).



Note: The student groups were created by categorizing respondents who answered growth mindset questions on the SES at low, mid and high levels of agreement.

Addressing the social-emotional well-being of our communities is more critical than ever. The members of our school communities are telling us how stressed and anxious they are feeling. Teachers who are trained and supported in implementing SEL [manage student behavior more effectively](#), [experience lower job-related anxiety and depression](#), have positive classroom interactions with students, and are better able to avoid burnout, regulate their emotions, and serve as [behavior models for students](#).

The District has embedded SEL into the [School Leadership Framework](#) and [the Teaching and Learning Framework](#) to support educators in the development of a positive school culture for students and teachers to thrive. The District also offers an SEL micro-credentialing program for current educators and a robust SEL and cultural competency curriculum in our teacher and administrator [credentialing programs](#).



Share Your Thoughts



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