

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: February 26, 2015

Published in Print: March 18, 2015, as **The Heart Payoff**

Social-Emotional Learning Pays Off

By **Timothy P. Shriver & John M. Bridgeland**

From time to time, we chance upon an insight that disrupts our sense of what we thought was obviously true. For example, most of us think we learn skills that will make us money by using our minds—by learning what to “do” with the information we “know.” Investing in developing our hearts—how we “feel” and “relate” to one another—is not viewed as a primary function of education.

If this seems obvious, then it might seem equally obvious that education should be about learning things with our heads. “Leave your problems at the schoolhouse door,” a sign once read, “and enter here to learn.” Learn what? Learn academic stuff. Learn how? Learn just with your head.

Wrong. This week, a groundbreaking study from Columbia University, **“The Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning,”** reveals what we call “the heart payoff.”

For many years, growing numbers of scholars and educators have been exploring the ways in which emotions and relationships contribute to learning. Under the broad umbrella of “social and emotional learning,” hundreds of researchers, teachers, administrators, and policymakers around the country have been trying to promote the social and emotional development of children and adults. At the same time, these pioneers are working to improve the culture of schools, the expectations of adults, the ways in which discipline is meted out, the mind-sets of learners, and the opportunities for young people’s expression, service, and aspiration.

Most people, when introduced to these kinds of social and emotional strategies, assume that they’re “nice”—maybe even “important.” But few think that developing healthy emotions and social connectivity is really a good return on investment.

But that’s the news from the Columbia study’s authors, Henry M. Levin and Clive Belfield. Over the last year, they examined the economic returns from investments in six prominent social and emotional interventions—from learning and

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literacy programs to combat aggression and violence; to efforts to promote positive thinking, actions, and self-concepts; to practices that improve problem-solving abilities, capacities to manage emotions, and the very skills that lead to greater student motivation and engagement in their learning.

Their findings are striking: Each of the socially and emotionally focused programs—4R's, Positive Action, Life Skills Training, Second Step, Responsive Classroom, and Social and Emotional Training (Sweden)—showed significant benefits that exceeded costs. In fact, the average among the six interventions showed that for every dollar invested, there is a return of more than 11 dollars. The lead researcher told us, "These are unprecedented returns, particularly given that, while the estimates of the costs are clear, only a portion of the possible benefits are captured." Benefits include reductions in child aggression, substance abuse, delinquency, and violence; lower levels of depression and anxiety; and increased grades, attendance, and performance in core academic subjects.

These findings build on other recent evidence that our long-standing neglect of relationships and the inner life of children needs to change. **A path-breaking study of teachers commissioned by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL**, found that 93 percent want more focus on social and emotional learning in schools. Similar surveys of employers confirm the same thing: They seek the very skills that programs of social and emotional learning foster: teamwork, problem-solving, character, and grit. A 2011 meta-analysis of social-and-emotional-learning interventions ("**The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions**") established perhaps the most important link: High-quality social and emotional learning increases academic achievement, too.

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All this suggests that something powerful is emerging in American education. At long last, the stubborn myth that the head and the heart are separate organs may be about to die in the place where that myth has had its most negative consequences: schools. Neither science nor common sense supports the idea that learning is a mechanical process of taking information and bolting it onto a brain, but that's exactly the mentality that has led generations of reformers to overlook the art and science of promoting the social and emotional development of children. Somehow, we came to think of emotion and relationship as tangential to knowledge acquisition. Somehow, we thought we could learn, become productive, and be successful without engaging our social and emotional lives.

Now we can see otherwise. Social and emotional learning has a powerful combination of evidence and support: teachers on the front lines of learning, research on its power to promote improved test scores, policymakers frustrated with the toxic environment in education today, and now a strong economic case for change. This ought to be enough to unleash a full-scale national effort to make high-quality programming for social and emotional learning a core part of education from prekindergarten through high school.

The tide is finally shifting. The head and the heart are headed for a reunion in the classrooms of

America. It can't come soon enough.

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