Social and Emotional Learning in the School Cafeteria

**BACKGROUND**

- 1 out of 7 children in the US are food insecure and uncertain where their next meal will come from. Children who experience food insecurity are at a higher risk for chronic disease, poor mental health, poor academic performance, and unfavorable health behaviors in adulthood. 2-4
- Encouraging school meal participation and creating a positive cafeteria environment are two extremely important strategies to limit effects of child food insecurity.4-12
- Research shows that school-wide Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies help improve academic performance, reduce conduct problems, promote positive social behavior and lower emotional distress.5-13

**RATIONALE**

The cafeteria should be treated as a learning laboratory for children to develop healthy relationships with food and continue to foster SEL development.

**What are the SEL competencies?**

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<tr>
<th>Compentency</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Self Management</td>
<td>Regulates emotions, thoughts and behaviors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self Awareness</td>
<td>Identifies emotions, personal assets, areas for growth, and potential external resources and supports</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self Efficacy</td>
<td>Motivates, perseveres, and sees themselves as capable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Management</td>
<td>Makes safe and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Awareness</td>
<td>Takes the perspective of and empathizes with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Engagement</td>
<td>Considers others and shows a desire to contribute to the well-being of school and community</td>
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SEL strategies are MOST EFFECTIVE when the six competencies are comprehensively applied.

**METHODS**

- Conducted a comprehensive needs assessment at one elementary school to develop an implementation plan including:
  - One-on-one interviews with key school stakeholders
  - Mealtime observations
  - Focus group discussions with school staff

- Completed a literature review on the effects of cafeteria environment factors on dietary intake
- Assessed the effectiveness of social and emotional learning strategies on academic performance, behavior outcomes, and emotional support
- Developed SEL-focused implementation strategies based on the six competencies to make the cafeteria environment a positive place to eat a nourishing meal and socialize with peers

**RESULTS**

**SELF MANAGEMENT**

- Communicate clear, concrete cafeteria expectations to students
- Facilitate cafeteria tours
- Encourage teachers to role-play pros and cons of strategies to manage emotions in cafeteria

**SOCIAL MANAGEMENT**

- Set expectations to maintain quieter noise volume
- Increase staff to student ratio for students and staff to build connections during lunch

**SELF AWARENESS**

- Implement student feedback system
- Conduct focus groups with students, paraprofessionals, and administrators to develop innovative ideas to increase enjoyment in cafeteria

**SOCIAL AWARENESS**

- Implement orderly line systems for entering and leaving cafeteria
- Implement strategies to calm students when coming into the cafeteria from recess
- Organize and plan try-it tours for specific new and culturally relevant menu items

**SELF EFFICACY**

- Implement cafeteria/class leaders from each class to help in cafeteria clean up

**SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT**

- Increase menu posting in the cafeteria and classroom
- Create morning routines for teachers to announce daily menu
- Implement a school-wide attention getting signal

**CONCLUSIONS**

- To build a positive cafeteria environment for students and staff, efforts should be continually made to reassess the volume level, student conduct, adherence to cafeteria expectations and flow, and improved perceptions and attitudes towards the cafeteria environment by students and staff.
- Strategies to improve SEL in the cafeteria should be applied to schools district-wide.

*For a complete list of references, please contact Kelsey at kkinder3@uw.edu.

*Competencies and SEL social ecological model adapted from CASEL and Washington State’s SEL Implementation Guide.