

West Hartford Public School District

Agenda Item: Update on the Elementary Social Emotional Learning (SEL)/Civics Curriculum

Meeting Date: May 17, 2022

From: Paul Vicinus, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment
Dr. Roszema Haskins, Director for Equity Advancement
Kerry Jones, Director of Elementary Education

Through: Tom Moore, Superintendent

Background:

As part of our District Development Plan, we have named areas of focus related to both equity advancement and social emotional learning. Relative to equity, we seek to advance equity of educational opportunities and outcomes through deliberate efforts at family and community engagement, culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, and a systemic approach to uncover and eliminate bias. Social and emotional learning (SEL) means the process through which children and adults achieve emotional intelligence through the competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. West Hartford Public Schools (WHPS), as a public education system, has a responsibility for student development as caring, informed, and responsible citizens of the local and global community and our work within equity advancement and SEL are cornerstones of that development. Our SEL and social justice curriculum provides for the understanding, skills, and dispositions for community and civic engagement from Grades Pre-K through 12 and is fostered through classroom instruction as well as other school experiences.

This report provides an overview of the framework specific to elementary social emotional learning as a foundation of social studies/civics at the elementary grades. Furthermore, this report provides greater context focused on gender identity- what it is and is not, and concludes with the district's plans for extended parent education and communication.

Overview

Our larger SEL curriculum at the elementary level is embedded within our civics curriculum and grounded in national and state standards. The WHPS [PreK-Grade 5 Civics Matrix](#) (see QR code below to access) defines a learning progression of social-emotional learning and social studies/civics-related knowledge and skills organized around four learning domains:



- (1) developing a positive self-concept,
- (2) identifying, understanding, and regulating emotions of self and others,
- (3) developing an understanding of rules and responsibilities within diverse communities, and
- (4) developing positive interpersonal relationships

These four domains of social skills are critical for students to build relationships in the classroom and school community and to effectively engage in academic learning. Social-emotional skills provide a foundation for future civic engagement through understanding of diversity within society and the roles and responsibilities of individuals and groups within their community.

Our curriculum is aligned with [Connecticut Elementary and Secondary Social Studies Frameworks](#) which, in turn, were based on the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) [College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework](#). The Connecticut frameworks define themes and content for civics education related to SEL. Beginning in Grade K, students are expected to explore diversity and culture within the world progressing to skills in the early grades that explore important civic values to include mutual respect, cooperation, and equality. Our work is further aligned with and grounded in standards contained within the CSDE's [Early Learning & Development Standards \(CT-ELDS\)](#) and the [K-3 Social, Emotional and Intellectual Habits](#). This latter document was informed by the most current research on social and emotional habits and provides a model for districts for integrating social and emotional habits into academic content areas so that students will learn, practice, and model essential personal life habits and skills.

Core Resources

Core elementary curriculum resources aligned to the SEL/Civics framework include the Second Step program and Responsive Classroom. Responsive Classroom is a student-centered, social and emotional learning approach to teaching and discipline which has informed and served as a model for our [morning meeting structure](#). Second Step is an evidence-based social-emotional learning program “designed to promote school success, self-regulation, and a sense of safety and support” (www.secondstep.org/elementary-school-curriculum). [Second Step lessons](#) focus on topics such as problem-solving, advocating for oneself and others, and conflict resolution. Students engage in lessons through daily morning meeting sessions. SEL lessons are often grounded in a read-aloud story centered around a [mentor text](#). The purpose of the text is not only to provide a consistent resource and framework for instruction, but also importantly, to provide a more impersonal character reference for the story elements. In this way, whether the lesson topic is that of diversity, self-expression, or self-management, individual student(s) in the class will not need to bear the responsibility of representing the specific culture, class, or behavior under study. The texts are intended to serve as mirrors and windows to see themselves as well as gain an appreciation of the diversity that exists within our community and the larger world.

Gender Identity

Gender is but one of many aspects of identity and diversity addressed within the larger SEL curriculum. While our SEL/Civics curriculum explores multiple dimensions of identity and diversity such as race, ethnicity, language, nationality, ability, religion, family structure, it is gender and gender identity that have garnered the most public attention. In total, our elementary SEL / civics curriculum features one lesson on gender stereotypes and one lesson on gender identity among between 80-100 lessons within our larger framework at each grade. While this topic is a smaller piece of a larger whole, it is an important concept and one that needs to be better (publically) understood, both in terms of the content and goals of our lessons and the boundaries we set to provide room for more in depth conversations to be had at home.

Connecticut's Early Learning Standards recognize and provide schools guidance relative to expectations for supporting children's development of self-awareness and self-concept. As early as ages 3-4, students are expected to refer to themselves by first and last name and identify some characteristics (e.g., gender, hair color, etc.) (ELDS SE.48.9) as well as recognize and describe themselves in terms of basic preferences (ELDS SE.48.10). These standards follow a progression and by ages 4-5, students will be able to describe themselves by referring to preferences, thoughts and feelings (SE.60.12). It is evident from both research and experience that students begin at an early age to develop a concept of self that is inclusive of gender and thus it is important to provide lessons inclusive of gender and gender stereotypes within our larger curriculum. Our own experience with families within our community further reflects the need to provide lessons related to gender non-confirming preferences which by fifth grade is inclusive of the topic of gender identity. In accordance with guidance from the CSDE, this includes a lesson and practices related to preferred pronouns for the upper elementary grades.

Questions have arisen regarding the differences between the lesson relating to gender identity and the larger human growth and development curriculum. Such questions serve to illuminate the misunderstandings regarding gender identity as a construct but also the misconceptions about the lesson goals and objectives. Our human growth and development curriculum does address concepts related to physical anatomy, sexual health and sexual identity. Aside from contrasting physical anatomy with gender identity (grade 5), these are not topics associated with gender identity, underscoring a potential lack of understanding of both the subject of gender identity and more narrowly, the goals within our gender identity lesson.

The goals of our gender identity lesson are for students to feel comfortable in being able to express who they are and for students to show respect relative to the self-expression of others. A third goal relating to identifying examples of gender stereotypes represents a second lesson related to gender but is much less debated. In grades 4-5, an additional goal relating to using the preferred pronouns of others is also introduced. In our primary grades, the mentor texts associated with lessons do not overtly tease out the potential differences between biological / anatomical identity and gender identity nor do they attempt to teach the differences between a person's gender identity and a

person's preferences related to their sexuality. Instead, the lessons focus on character traits such as positive self-image, respect for others, friendship and allyship (standing up for others). The context for these traits can include characters who may demonstrate traditionally non-confirming gender identity and preferences (e.g. preferences related to clothing or dress, names, or pronouns). Our own experience tells us of the existence and presence of students in our community who are either questioning or gender non-conforming. Decades of research articulate the mental health risks for such youth associated with feelings of isolation and lack of acknowledgement. More recently, we are seeing [new research](#) emerge that demonstrates the positive mental health impacts for transgender youth who are supported in their identity citing lower rates of anxiety and depression. Other criticisms of "teaching gender identity" made claims of the potential to create confusion and false identification of gender identity. Other public comments referenced fears over "rapid-onset gender dysphoria (ROGD)." Such remarks seem to misunderstand or misrepresent the true intent and content of our gender identity lesson (above) but also draw questionable conclusions. A recent study highlighted in [Psychology Today](#) found that gender-identity is stable over a five year period among transgender youth. A [second study](#) coming out of the Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences, Brown University School of Public Health aims harsh criticism at an earlier study of ROGD based on design flaws and researcher bias. We continue to be informed by a growing body of research on the needs of transgender youth and the best approaches available to support them. That aside, relative to our curricular goals to support inclusivity, positive self-image and respect for differences in the culture and identity of others, while we can cite research, we also rely on our values and sense of common decency and humanity.

Our Why

Our shared values, our mission, and our Board of Education policies are replete with references regarding our responsibilities within our instructional program to value, recognize, and address the needs of all children as well as promote student understanding of and appreciation for cultural and individual differences. Research clearly identifies that "transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students often feel a lack of support at school" and that these students report "the highest levels of negative emotions related to safety, well-being, and other SEL components (Hanover Research, 2022).

We know that we have students across nearly all of our elementary schools who are either gender non-conforming, gender questioning or exhibiting preferences - typically in their dress or appearance - that are gender non-traditional. Students will encounter and may have family who may be either gender non-conforming or exhibiting non-traditional gender preferences in appearance, name, or pronoun use. We acknowledge and respect students' or staff members' expressed wish to be called by something other than their legal name (e.g., a nickname) or by a specific personal pronoun. There is clear guidance for schools from the State of CT regarding our responsibilities to respect such requests for students and staff. Without some opportunity to learn about gender identity, students may feel confused and may, even unintentionally, demonstrate a lack of kindness or overall civility we expect toward each other, whether in school or community settings.

Civil Rights Protections under state and federal laws require schools to provide students with programs and courses of study without discrimination on account of gender identity or expression.

In order to ensure equitable access to all children, we must create equitable environments in which students can feel safe, accepted and welcomed, regardless of who they are. Children should see themselves and others represented in their learning. Our curriculum provides students with mirrors and windows for the vast diversity that exists within our schools and teaches students to appreciate our common bonds of community and respect individual differences.

Our shared values seek to ensure every child is made to feel welcome, safe, accepted and valued within our school community. That isn't just our promise, it is our policy that grants the right of every student to be entitled to an authentic feeling of safety and belonging and enables students to be accepting and respectful of differences of expression.

Review Process

As with all of our curriculum, we have processes for continuous review and revision to ensure the quality, relevance, and vitality of the curriculum. As SEL has taken on greater emphasis at both the state and school levels, we have engaged in a process of ongoing review. Major efforts to this point have included a review of our overall SEL curriculum to ensure our capacity to provide for the needs of our students post-pandemic, and to ensure the consistency of implementation of a comprehensive curriculum. The integration of related efforts inclusive of our SEL work, efforts under the heading of cultural competence and social justice, and our existing civics framework was undertaken in order to align to our state standards and ensure a cohesive approach. Based on feedback from both the field (classroom) and the community, we have undertaken two major reviews of our resources to ensure the appropriate breadth of materials across grade levels and the development appropriateness of the same. Our most recent review identified several new resources better aligned to our learning objectives related to gender identity. We continue to research new materials in order to match the best possible resources with our learning intentions. We remain committed to providing developmentally appropriate SEL education to all students but we are open to screening new resources and ensuring our materials are the best match for our intended learning outcomes.

Parent Communication

Educators at the school and district level share information about curricular topics through both formal and informal structures and communications. An [overview SEL/Civics document](#), shared via school newsletters and posted to the district website provides families with a description of social emotional learning standards, curriculum and learning structures. School newsletters, workshops, and meetings serve as informal venues to update parents on a variety of curricular and extracurricular topics.

Several schools have hosted family workshops related to social-emotional learning and gender identity. These sessions served to inform families about the focus of our curriculum and provide opportunities for families to review mentor texts. Based on the success of these sessions, the district team will share plans for school-based workshops in the late fall / early winter. Parents of current elementary students will have the opportunity to learn more about identity, specifically gender identity and gender stereotypes, engage in lesson samples, read mentor texts and seek clarification related to the curriculum in their child's grade or upcoming grades. Additional workshops regarding

other aspects of our SEL curriculum may become a feature depending on parent interest and program needs. As noted by Karen Mapp, a nationally-regarded parent engagement specialist, initiatives involving families should be relational, interactive, and connected to teaching and learning goals for students. School/district staff and families will continue to build respectful, trusting relationships and stay informed about social-emotional learning skills and gender identity concepts in these school-based workshops.

Paul Vicinus, Roszena Haskins and Kerry Jones will be available to answer questions.