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No Emotion Left Behind

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Op-Ed Contributor

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THE debate over education reform has tended to divide children's learning along two axes, the emotional and the academic. Either we can address children's academic performance, the conventional thinking holds, or we can address their emotional and social needs. Before No Child Left Behind comes up for reauthorization in 2007, we'd like to deliver some important news: The two kinds of learning are intimately connected. That means that promoting students' social and emotional skills plays a critical role in improving their academic performance.

Social and emotional learning is the process through which children learn to recognize and manage emotions. It allows them to understand and interact with others, to make good decisions and to behave ethically and responsibly. The best social and emotional learning programs engage not only children, but also their teachers, administrators and parents in providing children with the information and skills that help them make ethical and sensible decisions - to avoid bullying, for instance, or to resist pressures to engage in destructive or risky behavior, such as substance abuse. When they are well designed and executed, such programs have consistently achieved these goals, turning out students who are good citizens committed to serving their communities and cooperating with others.

Recent studies, however, have revealed something even more exciting about these programs. Along with Joseph Durlak, a Loyola University psychologist, one of us (Roger Weissberg) recently conducted the largest-ever quantitative analysis, encompassing more than 300 research studies on this subject. The results, which will be presented later this week for the first time, show that social and emotional learning programs significantly improve students' academic performance. The review shows, for example, that an average student enrolled in a social and emotional learning program ranks at least 10 percentile points higher on achievement tests than students who do not participate in such programs. Moreover, compared with their counterparts outside of these programs, social and emotional learning students have significantly better attendance records; their classroom behavior is more constructive and less often disruptive; they like school more; and they have better grade point averages. They are also less likely to be suspended or otherwise disciplined.

The numbers vindicate what has long been common sense among many teachers and parents: that children who are given clear behavioral standards and social skills, allowing them to feel safe, valued, confident and challenged, will exhibit better school behavior and learn more to boot.

One state, Illinois, has blazed a path in this regard. There is a social and emotional learning component to the Illinois State Learning Standards, and the state's school districts now incorporate such programs into their curriculums. Federal legislation should follow that lead. The new law should also include provisions for conducting systematic classroom assessments of children's social and emotional growth.

This simple observation is of monumental importance as we attempt to improve our country's public schools. We don't have to choose between academic achievement and the development of character. Rather, we should concentrate on both. No Child Left Behind has created greater accountability in American education, but it is inadequately financed, it fails to effectively address the needs of special education students, and its assessment standards for all children are far too narrow. A truly effective new law should include benchmarks for social and civic learning.

What we now understand about the role of social and emotional learning in academic learning should lead us to dramatic action, but it builds on common wisdom. Good teachers know that they can't sacrifice one part of a child for another. Now they have the figures to prove it. The time has come for policy makers to help restore balance to our nation's classrooms and, in so doing, to help American children achieve their fullest potential.

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