

# Taking a Skills-Based Approach to Social and Emotional Learning

*By Erin Lumpkins*

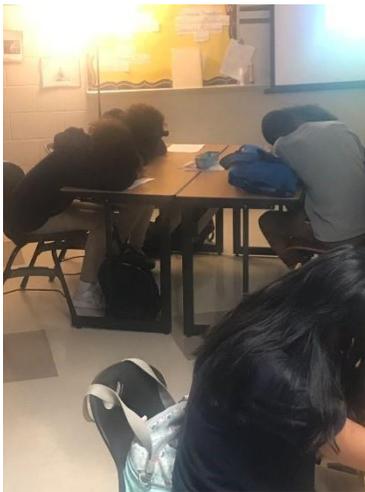
This past fall, I had the opportunity to view a play that tackled issues of mental health, substance abuse, and identity. Afterward, I was part of a panel that discussed its overarching themes. During my participation, several audience members stressed the importance of teaching students how to manage their emotions, cope with stress, mitigate the effect of unhealthy influences, and access mental health resources.

Parents and educators who don't teach health and physical education might think that teaching students relationship skills, decision-making, self-management, self-awareness and social awareness — the foundation of social and emotional learning (SEL) — are new and innovative concepts. The good news is, students engage in this type of learning when we, as health educators, take on a [skills-based approach to teaching health education](#) in schools!

[Social and emotional learning](#) is “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”

These are the very skills that create the foundation for the health curriculum that I've developed for my school district, DC Public Schools. Students make *real decisions* regarding their health, practice using critical skills through facilitated skills practice, and choose how they will demonstrate their knowledge through project-based learning and assessments using real-life examples.

Here's how we go about addressing the skills represented in the DC Public School's health education standards.



## **Self-Awareness**

Self-awareness is the ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and how they influence behavior; accurately assess one's strengths and limitations; and possess a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism. This SEL competency is closely aligned with the health skills of analyzing influences, interpersonal communication and self-management.

*Activity idea:* To help understand the concept of self-awareness, our students learn various strategies for maintaining positive mental health. Some of these strategies include: deep breathing, meditation, yoga, and journaling. Students identify some of the things that trigger negative emotions, choose two or three strategies that work for them, and develop a plan to use the intervention the next time the trigger occurs.

## Self-Management

Self-management is the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts and behaviors effectively in different situations as well as manage stress, control impulses, motivate oneself, and set and work toward achieving personal and academic goals. This, of course, aligns with the health skill of self-management.



*Students use vision boards to demonstrate the ability to manage stress, control impulses, and motivate themselves as they set and work toward goals.*

*Activity Idea:* Our students practice self-management by creating vision boards that include detailed goals, identify individuals or groups who can help them accomplish their goals, anticipate barriers, and develop a plan for overcoming them. To modify this for younger kids, after tasting several fruits and vegetables our kindergarten students set a goal to incorporate colorful fruits and vegetables into their diets.

## Responsible Decision-Making

Responsible decision-making is a competency in both SEL and health education. It's the ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on a consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, consequences of various actions, and the well-being of others.

*Activity Idea:* We have our students develop a resource that educates the community on the benefits of being alcohol, tobacco and drug free. Another way students demonstrate decision-making is by developing a "choose your own adventure" story, that includes realistic consequences, in which the main character is faced with decisions that adolescents face.

## Social Awareness

Social Awareness is the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures understand social and ethical norms for behavior and identify family, school and community resources and support. This SEL competency is reflected in the health skills of interpersonal communication and analyzing influences.

*Activity idea:* Our DCPS students examine the impact of violence in their school and home communities (including the physical, mental and emotional effects of violence and bullying) and develop strategies for decreasing violence.

Another way DCPS students display social awareness is through a project called Place Matters. During this project students explore why some people are more likely to be sick than others. In this exploration, they examine health disparities that are caused by their built environment. For the project, students focus on the presence (or lack of) grocery stores, gyms, pharmacies, and use photos to share why people in their neighborhoods get sick. Then they develop solutions for them and advocate for the community to adopt these solutions.

### **Relationship skills**

Relationship skills allow students to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with a variety of people, communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, resist inappropriate societal pressure, negotiate conflict and seek and offer help when needed. In order to be successful at this, students practice the health skills of interpersonal communication, analyzing influences, and advocacy.

*Activity Idea:* This skill is practiced when we have our students produce a guide for parents on how to talk to teens about sexuality. The guide is designed to help parents communicate clearly, listen actively, and teach their teen to resist inappropriate societal pressure, negotiate conflict, and seek help when needed.

The emphasis on social and emotional learning is an educational trend worthy of our full attention. As health educators, we must lead the charge since we are explicitly doing this work with students every day.

Some of my favorite resources on the topic include:

[What is SEL?](#)

[Keys to Social and Emotional Learning](#)

[Guiding Principles to Social and Emotional Learning](#)

How do you go about teaching these concepts to students? Send me a tweet @1908Erin.

Caption in first photo above: *DCPS students practice mindfulness and meditation as to reinforce positive mental health.*