



CLS Insights

Building Up, Not Building Out: Embedding SEL Into the Work of PLCs



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It is common to hear, “We have been doing PLCs for years.” Sometimes that statement is followed by frustration: “Despite our efforts, we aren’t seeing improvements,” or a realization that scores remain unchanged. In other schools, PLCs are described as “well-oiled machines.” The meetings happen, the protocols are followed, and the process is in place.

Regardless of which scenario feels most familiar, there is always room to strengthen the work. The goal is not to add another initiative or expand the agenda. Instead, it is about building up – deepening the impact of the work already happening – rather than building out and contributing to initiative fatigue.

When PLCs meet regularly to discuss standards, assessment, instruction, and differentiation, they have a strong foundation. They are “doing the process.” The key for taking PLCs to the next level (building up) is not adding focus areas (building out) or changing the process, but implementing strategies that enhance the work. One way to deepen this work without expanding the agenda is to **examine how social-emotional competencies already live within the standards** teams are teaching.





Building Up, Not Out

One key strategy that PLCs can start doing tomorrow to enhance their work is embedding social-emotional competencies into their daily work. If your school has singleton PLCs without shared content and uncertainty about how to focus their work, this strategy provides a through line for collaboration - shared competencies. The goal in the process is to strengthen or deepen the work of PLCs, not overload them.



Embedding SEL competencies does not replace the work; it enhances it.

Why SEL Matters

In the last decade, SEL curricula have gained popularity, hitting a high point following the global pandemic of 2020. Schools and districts invested vast amounts of money into scripted lessons that could be “easily implemented” and “didn’t require teacher planning.” However, the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) recommends that SEL is best implemented when it is “woven throughout all classrooms, across the school building, and in the broader school community.” (casel.org)

What It Looks Like In Practice

Hanover Research (2022) notes that “while the majority of teachers agree that SEL should be a high priority, a significantly lower percentage feel confident in their ability to develop the competencies in their students.” This is where PLCs working together can change the game. As the team answers the first question “what do we want students to know and be able to do?” they don’t just stop at deconstructing the standard. They **probe deeper to make a connection** to the essential skills of developing decision making, relationships, self-management, self-awareness, and social awareness.





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For example, a middle school English Language Arts PLC might be discussing how the author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text. This standard provides an opportunity to embed the SEL Competency of Social Awareness: ability to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts. Collaboratively, the PLC will create learning intentions that weave both skills together.



This intentional decision can be the difference between learning content and making real-world connections for students.

A Simple Next Step

To further enhance the work of embedding SEL competencies, invite your school counselor to the meetings when you are breaking down standards and creating learning intentions. Have them assist in blending the content and the competencies. To learn more about this process check out [*The Successful Middle School Counseling Program*](#).

PLCs don't need more programs. They need deeper purpose. When teams intentionally embed social-emotional competencies into their existing work, they shift from covering standards to developing students. That's not building out. That's building up..



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