Social and Emotional Learning
Helping Our Students and Teachers Succeed
As I enter the last few months of a 52-year career in public education and prepare to welcome a new County Superintendent, I often think of the difficulties Sonoma County’s young people face that simply did not exist when I was first elected to this office in 2010.

Massive wildfires, once relatively uncommon in Northern California, now disrupt our lives on an annual basis. Our children are coming of age at a time of seismic cultural shifts, as our nation wrestles with institutionalized racism and debates what it means to have equal opportunity for all. This upcoming school year will be the fourth in a row that overlaps with the coronavirus pandemic, which has upended so many aspects of childhood we long took for granted.

But just as our challenges have shifted, so, too, have the tools available to make sure students are set up to succeed. Study after study has shown that our children perform better academically when they feel safe and supported at school. That data has led to a greater emphasis on what is known as social and emotional learning (SEL).

SEL, as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, aims to give both young people and adults the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to identify and manage their emotions and establish and maintain supportive relationships that allow them to make responsible and caring decisions.

Our expanded partnership with national nonprofit YouthTruth, which in January surveyed more than 60,000 Sonoma County students, family members, and staff from 130 school sites, has highlighted the need for teaching students an emotional vocabulary and a sense of empathy. On Page 3, you will find data from the first part of a three-year expanded commitment to surveying our school communities.

This data, which you can explore more deeply online, shows we must do more to support our students, something the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) is addressing with the expansion of our behavioral health team. The same data also shows that students feel more productive in school when the lessons are relevant to their lives, or their future college and career plans, another area of priority at SCOE.

In this publication you will find a sampling of what is happening on the SEL front in some of our schools. In Rincon Valley, Kimochi characters help our youngest elementary school students recognize and process their emotions, while in Rohnert Park, a group of high school students sat down to discuss how they hope schools can support students’ emotional wellness.

Another key component of making sure our students feel supported and thrive at school is building an educational workforce that better reflects our increasingly diverse community. That is why my office has a program that provides full credential scholarships to encourage a more diverse pool of teaching candidates within Sonoma County. Turn to the back cover to learn more about this effort.

I hope everyone in Sonoma County takes the time to learn about the exciting ways in which our schools are preparing students for an emotionally healthy and productive adulthood.

Sincerely,

Steven D. Herrington, Ph.D.
Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools
In January, SCOE worked with national nonprofit YouthTruth to administer
surveys to more than 60,000 students, families, and staff at 130 school
sites from 27 of Sonoma County’s 40 public school districts.

The surveys provide key
insights into how these
groups perceive public
schools in key topic areas
such as belonging,
culture, college and
career readiness, and
mental health.

To learn more about the YouthTruth surveys, and to dive deeper into the data,
visit sonomacf.org/youthtruth.

**YouthTruth: Surveying Students, Families, and School Staff**

The Data: Understanding Students’ Needs

Percentage of students who cited feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious, the
most identified obstacle to learning:

Middle school: 48%    High school: 55%

When I’m feeling upset, stressed, or am having problems…

I know some ways to make myself feel better or cope with it:

Elementary schools: 55%
Middle schools: 66%
High schools: 69%

My school has programs or services that can help me:

Elementary: N/A
Middle: 39%
High: 32%

There is an adult from school who I can talk to about it:

Elementary: 49%
Middle: 39%
High: 35%

Percentage of students who say they feel content about their life either all
of the time or sometimes:

Elementary: 56%
Middle: 60%
High: 54%
Students Speak Out on Need for SEL

On a warm spring day in April, four Technology High School juniors with very different backgrounds came together to discuss what they described as a critical need for schools to support students’ emotional well-being.

Addison, Andrew, Juliana, and Khansa are headed into their senior year with academic experiences unlike those of any graduating class in recent memory. In the fall of their freshman year, nearly 200,000 Sonoma County residents were ordered to evacuate their homes because of the Kincade fire. The following spring, the COVID-19 pandemic began, forcing them into a year and a half of distance learning, which overlapped with two more large wildfires in 2020.

Although they returned to campus for the 2021-22 school year, social distancing, mask requirements, outbreaks, surges, and limits on campus events made the four students’ junior years far from normal.

All of those disruptions and stressors take a toll, the students said, during a group interview with the Sonoma County Office of Education.

“How do you continue learning when there’s something so big and chaotic happening?” Khansa said of the threat of wildfires. “It’s right outside your door. It was really stressful for me because it’s like, I was trying to continue learning and I was trying to keep up my grades and do all my work. But at the same time I was worrying that, ‘Hey, am I still going to have a house at the end of the day?’”

Khansa and her classmates expressed hope that schools would do more to support students’ mental health through social and emotional learning (SEL). The topic has become a common passion for the four students, as they crave a safe and positive learning environment where students can be their authentic selves as they strive to succeed in and out of the classroom.

Reflecting on what a teacher could do to help students during wildfires, she concluded by saying, “Teachers don’t need to have all the solutions, but sometimes students just want to have someone listen to them.”

SEL can be a big topic that schools address with a range of different approaches. When asked to define what SEL meant to them, Addison responded, “I think that social emotional learning, it brings a toolkit to students to be able to process emotions and how you’re feeling, and also describing what you’re feeling and dealing with conflict or interpersonal issues and just helping people figure out themselves.”

The conversation concluded with the students discussing what they need from teachers to be successful. Using the lens of SEL we asked our panel, “How would your ideal teacher support you during this time of your life?”

“I draw back to the teacher that helps me, the teacher that can be serious and also be not so serious at the same time,” Andrew quickly volunteered. “I like teachers who are more grounded and can be serious during a learning situation. But outside of the class, they can be more open to students and be more human in a sense, because I feel like we’ve lost a lot of community feeling, especially over quarantine.”

“It was really stressful for me because it’s like, I was trying to continue learning and I was trying to keep up my grades and do all my work. But at the same time I was worrying that, ‘Hey, am I still going to have a house at the end of the day?’”
They can regulate their tones and actions. By design, every character has some aspect of its personality it needs to work on, Dodge said.

The curriculum’s short lessons help kids develop emotional skills and identify challenges their friends might have, without taking things personally or making blanket statements like, “They’re mean.”

“One of the things that we learn from Cloud is that it’s OK to be mad, but it’s not OK to be mean,” Prather said before her classroom visit.

To practice self-control, Prather gives the students brief windows in which to be “silly” before clapping twice to signal it’s time to dial it back.

As Prather chants, “Silly, silly, silly” and wiggles Huggs in front of them, the children twist, wave their arms, dance, and make noise before coming to a stop each time, right on cue.

While it might seem like a fun game, this exercise is designed to teach young students how to regulate their bodies and to understand that it’s great to be silly in certain settings, like recess, but not in others, like math class.

Huggs and Cloud are Kimochis, a social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum first developed in the Bay Area but now in use at thousands of schools worldwide, including throughout the Rincon Valley Unified School District, which includes Austin Creek.

The characters were created by animator Nina Rappaport Rowan, said Kimochis education director and curriculum author Ellen Dodge. Rappaport Rowan developed the characters after the Columbine High shooting because she was worried about sending her child to school and wanted to put her storytelling skills to use.

Dodge, like Rappaport Rowan, was based in Marin County. The speech pathologist joined the company early on and put her educational background to work developing the curriculum.

“They called me and said, ‘Come look at our toy,’ and I thought, ‘That is not a toy, that is a tool’ … It was such a game-changer.”

The eight Kimochis have distinct personalities. Bug, for example, can be either a caterpillar or butterfly and represents fear of change, while Cloud has a smiley and a frowny face and teaches children about unpredictable moods and how they can regulate their tones and actions. By design, every character has some aspect of its personality it needs to work on, Dodge said.

The curriculum’s short lessons help kids develop emotional skills and identify challenges their friends might have, without taking things personally or making blanket statements like, “They’re mean.”

“One of the things that we learn from Cloud is that it’s OK to be mad, but it’s not OK to be mean,” Prather said before her classroom visit.

Each character has a pouch, which can be used to store the other part of the Kimochis curriculum: feelings pillows. The small bean bags feature a word representing a feeling, such as “scared,” and a face that illustrates the feeling, which helps nonreaders.

The pillows can be used in lessons, or on their own.

“We just sit in beanbag chairs and I’ll toss a feeling pillow at the student. They catch it, read the feeling word, and then make an ‘I’ statement out of the word. It helps kids develop an emotional vocabulary,” Prather said.

Ultimately, the Kimochis and pillows are aimed at helping children learn to express their feelings in positive ways and empowering kids to solve interpersonal problems respectfully, Prather said. Kids learn that all feelings are OK, we all make mistakes, we all can have a “redo,” and we all deserve to be treated with kindness.

Clarke said that she uses them in concert with the SEL Toolbox, another program designed to give students tools to manage their emotions. She said she’s seen a difference in her students’ behaviors over the nine years she’s spent at Austin Creek.

“They main difference I notice is they’re much more verbal about their feelings,” Clarke said.
Kaesa Enemark, Santa Rosa City Schools’ coordinator of student and family engagement, uses the term “trauma lasagna” to describe layered setbacks endured over the past decade by students in Sonoma County and, specifically, Santa Rosa.

The first layer was the fatal shooting of 13-year-old Andy Lopez by a sheriff’s deputy in 2013, followed by the 2017 firestorm that leveled parts of three Santa Rosa neighborhoods. Subsequent wildfires, floods, and evacuations created lost days of instruction and have become an annual fact of life. Schools recently wrapped up the third consecutive academic year upended by COVID-19, adding layers of trauma around distance learning, social distancing, vaccines, and mask mandates as schools became a cultural battleground.

“One of the things we experienced at the start of the school year is a realization that we have students who are truly coming back to school after having been absent from a school campus for multiple years,” said superintendent Anna Trunnell. “Their social and emotional growth was very necessary coming into a more mature environment than when they last left.”

The 2021-22 school year was the first time Santa Rosa City Schools leaned into social emotional learning and restorative practices at all its sites. The district hired additional mental health therapists and encouraged students to engage in surveys, including the YouthTruth survey, so it could have multiple measures of how students were doing around social emotional wellness.

For Jeanna King-Ruppel, restorative specialist at Ridgway High School, it’s important to build community right away with incoming students. “Oftentimes we find that having the connection ahead of time will defuse situations and create more of a community feel.” King-Ruppel offers students a wide range of restorative practices to build and sustain a school culture of respect and accountability.

“We saw some behaviors this year that demonstrated students needed support,” Trunnell said. “So instead of a knee-jerk reaction of sending students into suspension mode we did a lot of restorative work making sure students feel safe and comfortable being on campus and re-interacting with those peers who challenged them.”

At Proctor Terrace Elementary, K-3 students learn about Toolbox at the beginning of the year. The 12 tools are specific hand signals, including: the personal space tool, the courage tool, the breathing tool, and the empathy tool.

Niessia Benedetti Diehl, school counselor, wears a lanyard with each tool as a graphic so students can choose one to settle their differences. “It becomes a problem solving component when they come to me or they come to a yard duty and once the tools have been taught I can just say, ‘How do you want to handle it?’ and they’ll pick a tool.”

As children get older, they can age out of some of the groundwork laid by the Toolbox. That’s why for middle schoolers the district uses a set of activities called WhyTry. In one sample lesson designed to teach children how much harm gossip and rumors can cause, students are tasked with trying to put toothpaste back into a tube using a toothpick.

Superintendent Trunnell sees that the school community has had to learn a new sense of grace since returning to campus after more than a year of distance learning.

“We had to learn to be around each other again,” she said. “People are still dealing with trauma, and the way we interact with each other, being better listeners, and showing care, is very important. We believe in connection before content as a theme in our district. We are seeing the person before we see anything else.”
**Four-legged Support: SCOE’s PALS Team**

Christian liked when Terra fell asleep on her bed, which she will also share with students. “She snores and it’s magical!”

Students have done most of Terra’s training and helped her learn tricks. Teachers have been known to take her home for puppy play dates. Pope has seen Terra’s presence as “also a way for students to connect with each other when they take her on walks around the campus.”

Terra’s nephew Twix, a 3-year-old yellow Lab, is also on the middle school campus in Resource Specialist Program math teacher Nadine Finn’s classroom. “They’re the magic duo at the school,” Pope said.

“**She lays by a desk and makes students feel special,**” Pope said. “**I’ve had a teacher share that in one day she saved five people from meltdowns, and only two were kids!**”

Terra saunters into the classroom, wags her tail a few times, and greets each student with her mellow personality. The fact that the black, English Labrador retriever is a celebrity among the students and staff at Lawrence E. Jones Middle School doesn’t seem to faze her one bit. She’s used to all the attention, the love, and the pets over the past six years.

Terra is one of the service and therapy dogs that are part of a partnership between the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) and Paws As Loving Support (PALS) in Forestville. **She is a calm companion three days a week** to the students in Michael McAuley’s special education classroom at Lawrence E. Jones Middle School in Rohnert Park. The other two days a week, she visits classrooms for students developing independent living skills. She also is invaluable support during suicide prevention trainings at high schools across the county.

Rebekah Pope, a mental health service provider on SCOE’s behavioral health team and Terra’s owner, takes her around to Sonoma County schools where Pope has seen her calm presence dramatically change the tone of the classroom.

“She lays by a desk and makes students feel special,” Pope said. “I’ve had a teacher share that in one day she saved five people from meltdowns, and only two were kids!”

PALS and SCOE support 20 teams of volunteers, many of whom are retired educators, who visit schools with trained dogs during the recovery period after a crisis, such as a natural disaster or student or teacher death.

“When there’s a crisis that affects the school community, the schools always ask for therapy dogs,” Pope said. **The PALS comfort dogs are also always in high demand at schools.**

The students in McAuley’s classroom demonstrated using hand signals some of Terra’s tricks such as down and roll over, fist bump, choosing the hand with a treat, and catching a treat in the air.

“In the past, we only had snakes and lizards for classroom pets, never a dog,” Ash said. They then showed how Terra raises her paw to give a high five.
“This scholarship has allowed me to strengthen my impact.”

— Gabriela Mendoza-Torres, an immigrant, Spanish speaker, and working mother who recently earned an administrator credential

According to the California Department of Education, teachers of color boost the academic performance, graduation rates, and aspirations to attend college of students of color. The Sonoma County Office of Education is committed to growing an educational workforce that reflects our community and offers full scholarships to diverse teacher candidates through the North Coast School of Education. Below are testimonials from some of last year’s scholarship recipients.

“I went into education because I strive to empower students to find value in themselves and know that they are worthy of the world to see their strengths and assets.”

— Gabriela Mendoza-Torres

“I have always wanted to be part of what helps students discover their unleashed potential and we get to do that as educators. What a beautiful gift! The diversity scholarship has awarded me the opportunity to continue my work in helping students find their voice and agency.”

— Rocio Miscio

“I chose to join public education because of what it was able to provide for me. I wanted to be able to make a change in the lives of children, who like me, didn’t have much growing up.”

— Margarito Loza Alcala

Learn more about how you can make a difference in students’ lives.

Apply at ncsoe.org