

# SEL Practices in the North Rockland CSD

The Journey of Two Sister Schools

*Between stimulus and response  
there is a space*

*In that space is our power  
to choose our response*

*In our response lies our  
growth and our freedom*

– Victor Frankl  
*Psychiatrist and Holocaust Survivor*

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By Mary S. Esposito

On the day I began to write this article, I realized coincidentally that it was also the 20th anniversary of the Columbine tragedy. The significance of this day brought back the memories of where I was and what I was doing when the tragic news first unfolded. I was 30 years old and a first-year administrator – a middle school assistant principal. Twenty years ago, schools operated under a “zero-tolerance” policy when it came to discipline. Based on the events of the past two decades, I question if today we are seeing the unintended consequences of such an extreme management approach.

Additional school tragedies since Columbine, all heart-wrenching headlines. However, the one that hit hardest personally and maybe had the most impact for the future was Sandy Hook.

Over the course of the months and years that followed the Sandy Hook tragedy, schools across the nation made a huge push to beef up their security and response procedures. Although extremely important, intentionality was on preparedness to react in an unthinkable school crisis, but much less on the prevention of such events ever occurring in the first place. In our local effort to be proactive, I'd like to share the unfolding story of how our school and its sister school became part of a movement connected to emotional well-being as a prevention.

#### UNCOVERING THE WHY:

During a series of faculty meetings, the teachers began the process of hypothesizing why students struggled despite solid instruction, strong curriculum, and a welcoming school environment. Through discussions, a recurring theme surfaced: students came to school emotionally not "ready to learn." We sat on this notion for the next year. We explored and researched, polled and observed; what we learned was that students were lacking the explicit instruction of social emotional skills in school. We made an assumption that these skills already existed in our students based mostly upon a mindset of norms of how we may have been parented or how we parent ourselves. There was an equity divide in our student body; not all students were coming into school with the tools needed for emotional regulation. Therefore, they were struggling academically and behaviorally. Our focus was then to build a culture of equity through SEL so all students could have the same opportunity to learn.

West Haverstraw Elementary School is a K-3 building of approximately 775 students, 150 staff members, and an 80 percent poverty rate. We struggle with the issues that a sudden increase in poverty and family mental health crisis brings about in a school setting. The staff response related to managing those worlds colliding as children enter our doors is some-

thing that we can control. By taking a proactive approach, we can all be better equipped to help all children, especially our neediest. We are on the path of school improvement and increased student achievement. I am telling the story as the proud principal of a school with an exceptional team of educators and paraeducators who have embraced the vision of educating the whole child.

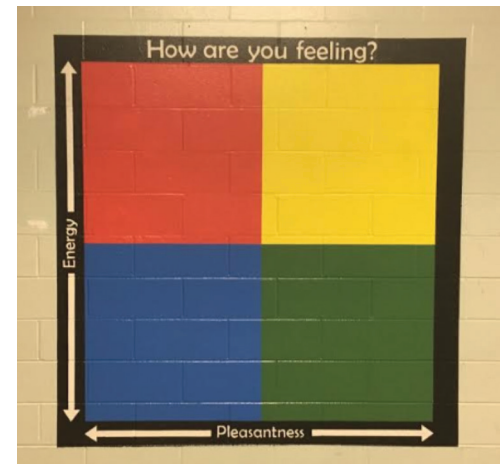
Today, in addition to our positive behavioral intervention supports that ensure our rules for behavioral expectations and physical safety, we now have a set of guiding principles and norms of how we come to school to ensure our emotional well-being. By "our," I refer to every child and every adult at WHES; this is not just a system for our students, it is becoming a way of being in the culture of our school. In the next section, I will explain the pathway we took: our RULER journey and our work with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, founded and directed by Dr. Marc Brackett.

#### YALE CENTER FOR EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE THE RULER APPROACH:

This school year marked our second year of RULER implementation. In year one, we worked exclusively with the adults in our school. In year two we began schoolwide implementation with our students. This targeted approach embodies the notion that emotional well-being for students starts first with the emotional well-being and self-regulation of the adults who support them. Adult modeling of behaviors that we expect from students is critical for successful implementation.

The acronym RULER stands for recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing and regulating emotions. Within RULER we use anchor tools such as the mood meter, best self, meta-moment, and the blueprint for problem solving. This common language within our school is helping us all talk about the emotions that we are feeling and how we can properly manage them so that we can ultimately be our "best selves" and do our best work in school while being guided by

the charter: a set of norms developed by staff and by students. We have so much yet to learn, but we pause to celebrate our accomplishments thus far.



Life-size mood meter, painted on our wall by art teacher Mrs. Karen Baumann.

#### THE JOURNEY:

This is hard work! Any staff member who takes this work seriously struggles with it. In order to implement with fidelity, one must become comfortable with self-work and introspection. Adult self-examination is a very important part of the RULER approach. What adults bring to school in their emotional "briefcases" is as important to consider as what students bring in their own emotional "backpacks."

RULER is not a curriculum, it is an approach. The RULER approach is modeled by adults and implemented within our existing curricula. It is woven into the fabric of daily school life. It is not an add-on.



Students checking in on the mood meter before solving a problem.

As you implement anything new, getting things going is a little messy.



The hope is that everyone is on board; the reality is that not everyone buys in right away so it is important to be steadfast and patient. With those embracing it, you can see the difference in the conversations that we are having with the adults and the students. What enhanced this journey is that we did it together with our sister school, Haverstraw Elementary School. Having a partner to share ideas with and work out solutions to challenges as they arise is crucial. WHES is the feeder school to HES, so we share the same families and the same percentages of poverty and need. Our two schools together have been part of the “Emotional revolution” as Marc Brackett puts it – effecting change in the community of the North Rockland Central School District creating a K-6 continuum of learning around SEL.

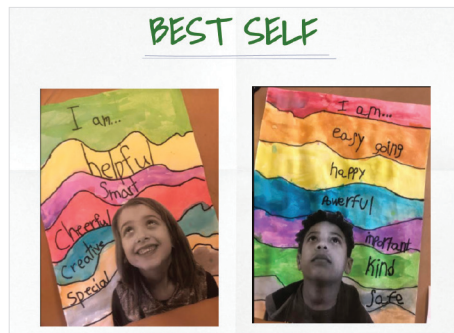
**PRE-IMPLEMENTATION YEAR  
2016-2017 – THE INITIAL  
LEARNING PROCESS:**

Administrators and a core implementation team from both schools attended trainings with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. We were part of the first cohort of schools that worked with Yale via Putnam Northern Westchester BOCES.

**YEAR 1: 2017-2018  
ADULT DEVELOPMENT:**

Our two schools prioritized professional development around emotional intelligence at all of our faculty meetings and our PD days. We taught the tools while also learning them ourselves. It was challenging, but not impossible. We used the resource of Yale coach Bonnie Brown to help us along the way. In year one, we were able to work on the foundations of emotional intelligence, roll out the mood meter, and create our staff charter. We did not rush the process at all. We took our time, approached the learning thoughtfully, and went deep as opposed to wide. At the end of year one, we fell short of our initial goal. We still had two anchor tools that needed to be rolled out to the adults while going into year two and the initial push with the students. Our coach encouraged us to keep moving forward with the adult learning while implementing with students.

During the first year of adult learning, I had the privilege of attending my very first ASCD conference, Empower 18 held in Boston. There I had the indescribable experience of attending a session with Scarlett Lewis, mother of Jesse Lewis, a Sandy Hook victim. Her resilience and purpose moved me so deeply. She started the Choose Love Movement, which incorporates a K-12 SEL curriculum. Her session opened with the Victor Frankl quote that kicks off this article. This quote describes the essence of what we are trying to accomplish in teaching emotional intelligence: the ability to feel a stimulus, pause, envision our best selves, and provide ourselves with tools and/or strategies that help us make better regulated choices in our response. The experience of hearing Scarlett Lewis tell her story affirmed for me that we were doing exactly the correct work in our schools.



Being your “best-self” starts with calling out the words that you want to be known for. Lesson and pictures from Reyna Texler, coteacher and interventionist, and second-grade teacher, Kaitlin Felicello.



West Haverstraw’s reflection room is a space where students can go when they need help with coregulation of their emotions. Reyna Texler, coteacher/interventionist, works with students so they can leave with a regulation strategy that can be used when they notice the next time that something has triggered them.

**YEAR 2: 2018-2019 – STUDENT  
IMPLEMENTATION AND  
CONTINUED ADULT  
DEVELOPMENT:**

I, along with my team, could not have done it alone. We have supportive central office administrators and board of education members who have supported this work for our two schools. Our parent community has embraced it. We encourage parents to focus conversation starters on how students “felt” at school rather than what they “did” at school.

**NEXT STEPS:**

As our two schools move forward with the RULER approach, it is important to pause, reflect and celebrate our accomplishments. We look forward to giving our work a deeper dive with both adults and students. Both schools plan on expanding the core implementation teams so we can empower more adults as experts in our school to facilitate deeper work and expansion. We will also continue to work with PNW BOCES and the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. We have signed up for a third year of learning with them.

This work is challenging, yet so rewarding. When I reflect on the impact that it has had on the school culture and ultimately the children, I believe that it has been the most important work that I have done in my entire administrative career.

**SO, “HOW ARE YOU FEELING  
TODAY?”**

Each classroom has a class charter. Students are being recognized for being “charter champions” as opposed to the traditional “Students of the Month.”

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:**

I’d like to thank Dr. Kris Felicello, assistant superintendent, for encouraging me to write this article and supporting our work with SEL; Mrs. Ileana Eckert, superintendent, and the board of education for their unwavering support with this work as well; Reyna Texler, coteacher and interventionist for her contribution to this article and for giving me so much inspiration and support along with

her in-depth knowledge in mindfulness practices. Thanks also go out to Michelle Mareello and Renee Gargano from PNW BOCES for making this groundbreaking resource accessible to school districts locally by creating the partnership with Yale. Special accolades go to my colleagues Mr. Benito Herrero, Mrs. Amaris Scalia and Ms. Beth Shusterman, Ms. Teresa Wargo, Mrs. Reyna Texler, and Ms. Denise Casanova for being brave and joining me on the implementation team to bring RULER to our schools for the social emotional well-being of our adults and

students. Teamwork made this happen!

For more information on how we became part of the emotional revolution with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, please contact me at mesposito@northrockland.org or on twitter @whesmesposito.

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