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CHICAGO

# FROM HASHTAGS # + TO HEALING

## Restorative Recommendations for Our School Communities

Thank you to the 150+ educators and the expert stakeholders who shared their experiences and opinions through more than 35 focus groups and conversations to help shape the issues and recommendations outlined in this memo.

The Chicago Teacher Action Team, composed of twelve educators and three teacher captains leading the work, spent an intensive two months researching and discussing the topics of social and emotional learning (SEL), trauma, and anti-racism.



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# FROM HASHTAGS TO HEALING

## Restorative Recommendations for Our School Communities

# SEL. Trauma. Anti-racism. These ideas have become trending topics as a direct result of our city – and country – coping with two concurrent crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing awareness of police brutality toward Black people.\* Both illuminate how years of institutionalized racism through segregation and racist policies continue to disproportionately impact our Black and Latinx students.

Every single student in this city has experienced a new level or form of trauma, but the sad reality is that educators have seen inequities, especially along racial lines, play out in our classrooms and districts for years. For so many of our most vulnerable students, many of whom are People of the Global Majority (a non white-centered term for Black, Indigenous, & People of Color), the trauma they are experiencing is twofold: the

hyper-recent trauma from this past year has only compounded the intergenerational trauma these students have inherited and have lived with their entire lives. Before learning can occur, their social and emotional well-being must become a daily commitment and renewed through an anti-racist lens, otherwise we run the risk of continuing to traumatize our students.

SEL, trauma, and anti-racism cannot continue as mere buzzwords – we must move from hashtags to reality in our schools, whether in-person or virtual. At this moment, our students need action and we need the resources to make that action happen. We must change our curriculum, pedagogy, mindsets, and policies to reflect our values and our way forward. In order to make SEL and its reflective trauma and anti-racism work true priorities for our schools, our Teacher Action Team crafted the following five recommendations.

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“Access to the social worker can’t be the only outlet when there is a traumatic issue. Educators need to ditch the idea that they are not socially and emotionally aware and that they can’t help students with this. Educators are more expert than they realize.”

Focus Group participant



\* **Authors’ note:** Our team is incredibly diverse. In this work, terms are used to identify various demographics. This is not meant to diminish how individuals identify themselves but to be as inclusive as possible and embrace intersectionality.

## Our Recommendations

- + Chicago Public Schools must allocate and protect funding to maintain current essential student and teacher support positions (e.g. social workers, counselors, restorative practices coordinators, etc) for all schools in need (“need” as defined through a public hardship index) in order to ensure sustained healing-centered services for all school communities by December 2020.
- + The Illinois State Board of Education must create an incentivized micro-credentialing pathway, utilizing outside organizations, that trains current educators into the role of a SEL Specialist, who will aid staff in ongoing SEL assessment, support, and growth by the 2021-2022 school year.
- + To assess effectiveness before bringing to scale, the Office of Social and Emotional Learning in Chicago Public Schools must implement a student SEL skills inventory based on the CASEL Five Competencies, piloted at one high school and three elementary schools per network by the 2021-2022 school year. Actionable data from this pilot at the school, network, and district level can then be used to determine necessary and targeted SEL supports.
- + By the 2022-2023 school year, Chicago Public Schools must adjust the districtwide Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP) requirements to create one additional mandatory District Priority Area focused on anti-racism and reducing bias, by utilizing existing, relevant data for schools to identify and create targeted goals.
- + In order to dismantle a systemically racist education system that has inflicted and exacerbated trauma on our students, Chicago Public Schools must provide mandatory ongoing training for all school personnel to build competencies in anti-racism, implicit bias, healing-centered practices, and culturally sustaining pedagogy starting in the 2020-2021 school year, including but not limited to coaching, feedback (both formative and evaluative), and educator-led collaboration.



## More than a Buzzword

Social and emotional learning can be defined as, “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”<sup>1</sup>

Anti-racists don’t think any particular race is inferior or superior to them. Rather, “whenever the anti-racist sees individuals behaving positively or negatively, the antiracist sees exactly that: individuals behaving positively or negatively, not representatives of whole races. To be anti-racist is to deracialize behavior, to remove the tattooed stereotype from every racialized body. Behavior is something humans do, not races do.”<sup>2</sup>

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“A lack of social and emotional learning not only affects students in the moment through their academics, but it has long-term effects. A student with a strong SEL foundation becomes a mentally healthy adult.”

Focus Group participant



## SEL Through a Racial Equity Lens

A foundation of SEL is, “a learning environment that is infused with healthy relationships and that models safety, belonging and purpose so that students can invest their whole selves in learning.” These foundational conditions for learning require an anti-racist lens, thus one cannot create a supportive environment in the absence of anti-racism.<sup>3</sup>

However, SEL can and has been misused in ways that reflect white dominant culture and values in ways that are oppressive and carry a deficit mindset into teaching children of color. This kind of racist environment works directly against healthy social and emotional development.<sup>4</sup>

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## # Insufficient Funding and Staffing

Essential student and teacher services provided by nurses, social workers, and SEL coaches are not provided due to **insufficient funding and staffing** resulting in inequitable and insufficient mental health support and SEL implementation.

### + RECOMMENDATION ONE

Chicago Public Schools must allocate and protect funding to maintain current essential student and teacher support positions (e.g. social workers, counselors, restorative practices coordinators, etc) for all schools in need (“need” as defined through a public hardship index) in order to ensure sustained healing-centered services for all school communities by December 2020.

The National Association of Social Workers recommends one social worker per 250 students; for intensive-need students, that ratio changes to 1:50.<sup>1</sup> There is one social worker per roughly 650 students in Chicago Public Schools (CPS).<sup>2,3</sup> Very few schools have a full-time social worker, which means most schools do not have a fully-staffed, fully-functional behavioral health team to immediately meet the needs of students in crisis. With a dwindling budget and shortage of SEL-related support positions (including social workers), retaining current positions is critical to the mental health of our children and educators. According to COVID-19 guidance issued by the Illinois State Board of Education, “access to school counselors and supports should be as readily available as possible.”<sup>4</sup> This highlights the critical role SEL staff and other related support service providers have throughout the state. The state’s priority coupled with our district shortage of supportive service providers means we must at least maintain our current staff levels so we can continue to provide needed services to our most vulnerable students, especially in light of impending CPS budget cuts.<sup>5</sup>

### + RECOMMENDATION TWO

The Illinois State Board of Education must create an incentivized micro-credentialing pathway, utilizing outside organizations, that trains current educators into the role of a SEL Specialist, who will aid staff in ongoing SEL assessment, support, and growth by the 2021-2022 school year.

Teachers are actively searching for leadership opportunities at their schools. In E4E’s 2018 nationally representative teacher survey, Voices from the Classroom, 92 percent of teachers said they, “wish there were more opportunities to further their careers and professional skills while staying in the classroom.”<sup>6</sup> Creating SEL micro-credentialing pathways has the potential to build staff capacity, contribute to higher teacher retention rates, and boost implementation of state and districtwide SEL standards. By leveraging partner organizations who specialize in SEL, trauma, and anti-racism, teachers across the state could receive the same preparation, regardless of where they teach while also increasing a sense of ownership and participation in their own schools. Current teachers are uniquely qualified for these roles, because they understand their school’s specific needs and can leverage existing relationships with both students and staff.

## # School Community Buy-in and Accountability

There is inconsistent implementation of training, collaboration, and measurement of SEL, ***leading to a lack of accountability and buy-in from our school communities.***

### + RECOMMENDATION THREE

To assess effectiveness before bringing to scale, the Office of Social and Emotional Learning in Chicago Public Schools must implement a student SEL skills inventory based on the CASEL Five Competencies, piloted at one high school and three elementary schools per network by the 2021-2022 school year. Actionable data from this pilot at the school, network, and district level can then be used to determine necessary and targeted SEL supports.

While climate- and culture-related data is collected across CPS in a variety of ways, the district does not currently utilize a streamlined system to monitor and ensure healing-centered supports. A streamlined student SEL skills inventory would give staff shared, consistent data that they can use to identify supports needed for students more effectively.

Additionally, using shared competency criteria across all schools would mean the same measurements would be applied to every student. A universal competency model would allow the same interventions to follow a student across schools, making it possible for a school to immediately address the student's social and emotional needs. In this way, we as educators can become proactive instead of reactive by knowing ahead of time the supports currently needed for some students, those supports previously used, and potential future strategies for success. Our students in temporary living situations are more likely to experience significant trauma. With this data, we can provide necessary interventions and truly begin the healing process.

### + RECOMMENDATION FOUR

By the 2022-2023 school year, Chicago Public Schools must adjust the districtwide Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP) requirements to create one additional mandatory District Priority Area focused on anti-racism and reducing bias, by utilizing existing, relevant data for schools to identify and create targeted goals.

Our schools must work to break the white-normative, racist policies perpetuated by our education system.<sup>7</sup> Making anti-racist practices and pedagogy a District Priority Area will reduce bias and recenter how we imagine our Continuous Improvement Work Plans (CIWP) to be more inclusive and intentional while holding schools accountable by measuring successes.

When students feel safe at school through a positive school climate, academic achievement increases.<sup>8</sup> This includes addressing racial safety by reducing bias.<sup>9</sup> Our current CIWP process does not explicitly take anti-racism into consideration, and, in fact, continues to preserve systemically racist accountability systems through utilizing historically punitive and strictly quantitative measures of success. The CIWP is not unlike a two-year lesson plan for a school: If an objective is not on the lesson plan, it doesn't get taught, which ignores changing demographics, pedagogies, and mindsets. Making anti-racism a priority for all schools would compel CPS to become a model for truly equitable education.

## # Lack of Anti-racism Efforts

Our school communities are suffering from ongoing trauma and racism, which we are not equipped to address due to ***lack of anti-racism efforts and culturally-sustaining curriculum.***

### + RECOMMENDATION FIVE

In order to dismantle a systemically racist education system that has inflicted and exacerbated trauma on our students, Chicago Public Schools must provide mandatory ongoing training for all school personnel to build competencies in anti-racism, implicit bias, healing-centered practices, and culturally sustaining pedagogy starting in the 2020-2021 school year, including but not limited to coaching, feedback (both formative and evaluative), and educator-led collaboration.

Effective SEL implementation is not about creating a pathway to white compliance or a student unlearning their culture to fit into white-normative society. When we look at the social and emotional health of our school communities, we can see how intergenerational trauma caused by racism manifests in the lives of our students and educators, underscoring why healing-centered practices and implicit bias training are critical to the whole child's education. In many facets of our educational system, inherent racism and bias are and have been interwoven in our policies, mandates, and curricula.<sup>10</sup> Many educators struggle with their own biases, causing internalized trauma which is often exacerbated through their teaching practices and daily interactions with students, solidifying harmful racial hierarchies.<sup>11</sup>

Our work must not only be trauma-informed but healing-centered in order to focus on assets each student, teacher, and administrator brings to their schools and communities. Shifting to a healing-centered mindset emphasizes what people in trauma have to offer and does not define or isolate them as a result of their trauma. Moving from a deficit-mindset to a more holistic approach that connects traumatic experiences with "healing to foster well-being"<sup>12</sup> can remove the stigma associated with most trauma-focused practices. By providing healing-centered training for all staff, every adult would have the capacity to meet our students' social and emotional needs in an anti-racist and restorative manner. When enacted, we will address not only prejudice within our schools but build toward teaching practices and pedagogy that are culturally-sustaining and focus on equity, not equality.





## Conclusion

We as educators need skills, strategies, and supports which are not deficit-based and are instead culturally-sustaining, holistic, and healing. Educators must have the essential resources and support to meet students' urgent needs.

As we move forward, we must acknowledge our students' social and emotional strengths and needs through an anti-racist and healing-centered lens. As our students are currently living through two "once-in-a-lifetime" crises simultaneously, this work must be more than another hashtag on social media.



## Endnotes

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