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# Social-Emotional and Character Development and Academics as a Dual Focus of Educational Policy

Maurice J. Elias

*Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey*

There is a missing piece to America's education agenda, and children will continue to be left behind until that piece is addressed. Furthermore, children are not being systematically prepared for their complex roles as citizens in our democracy. A growing body of evidence from research and practice suggests reconceptualizing education as an integration of social-emotional and character development (SECD) and academic learning. This article reviews skills children need for effective social and academic participation, characteristics of schools that effectively integrate these forms of learning, and key reasons to adopt this integration. It concludes with examples of, and suggestions for, bringing SECD to prominence in educational policy making.

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Defining the skills necessary for success in the next generation is often an elusive task for educators because many jobs have not yet been invented. What skills will be needed for learners to be competitive in the global marketplace? How can we equip students for success in a world we can only envision? There are many more areas of literacy needed in the 21st century than have been traditionally taught in classrooms. For educators, the challenge becomes how to weave these skills into the academic setting in a challenging way.

—Truesdale (2008, p. 2)

There is a missing piece in American education policy. We have not sufficiently recognized the inextricable connection of academic learning with students' social-emotional and character development (SECD). As will be

detailed shortly, our failure to address this piece may contribute strongly to continued underperformance in education. More than that, it likely sustains selective underperformance, as our urban students, our minority students, and our at-risk learners suffer the most. The difficulty begins with the misdirection that “leaving no child behind” gives to the American education system, in contrast to much of what we know from existing research and theory about enduring educational success. Our goal must be to continuously move all children forward. For them to be able to do so, they will require the full complement of skills needed for success in school and life, what Sheldon Berman, superintendent of schools in Louisville, Kentucky, and longtime leader in Educators for Social Responsibility, the Character Education Partnership, and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, has called effective engagement with the world (Berman, 1990).

Neil Postman (1994, 2005) has documented the ways in which cultural trends emerging since the early 1990s have changed the very nature of childhood, infusing adult concerns and agendas into the everyday life of young people in ways that they are ill-equipped to grasp. He is not alone in showing how schools cannot be considered moated fortresses from which unsavory outside forces can be excluded. The shootings at Columbine High School have come to symbolize the vulnerability of schools to violence on the part of their own students. Even our sense of national safety has been impacted by the events of September 11, 2001, suggesting increased vulnerability of our schools and communities to terrorism from abroad. Television “reality” programming and pop culture programs exemplified by the MTV network convey powerful messages to young people about expectation versus hard work, entitlement to recreation and leisure, and immediate gratification. The increasingly ubiquitous electronic media offer children access to virtual connections and relationships, with personal devices such as the iPod heralding an era when it will be almost unheard of for individuals to be able to gather their own thoughts without simultaneously sorting out digital impulses coming in through the wires connected to their ears. This is the world our children live in, and it enters school with them and awaits them when they come home. Thus, at the same time as students’ academic work is presented to them in an increasingly high-stakes mode, the media, and often adults surrounding them, appear to be focused on how to expand and intensify their leisure and recreational activities. Schools are operating against “powerful effects of mainstream media entertainment that glorifies often harmful habits and styles that are distinctly not mainstream” (Price, 2008, p. 20).

These influences have a strong impact on children's character, values, and life habits (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008). Those who say that the schools should focus only on academic skills and that it is up to parents to build students' character may or may not be technically correct. But they underestimate the potency with which these influences are conveyed to children through the mass media and mass culture, many hours per day, every day, throughout the year, and with a great deal of pedagogic sophistication. At the same time, in pragmatic terms, schools cannot function if students lack character. Without respect, responsibility, honesty, trust, positive relationships, caring, justice, integrity, and good citizenship, to mention just a few key aspects of character, it is impossible for classrooms and schools to function and for the adults in the school to serve as educators and role models for students. James Comer summarized it well: "To be successful, one needs a threshold level of cognitive ability. But many other things are just as important: creativity, personal discipline, the ability to relate to other people" (quoted in O'Neil, 1997, p. 10).

But character does not denote inborn and immutable personality attributes. Character is something that students "catch" from the way adults in the environment set it up for them (Comer, 2003). It is something students learn, and if they are not learning it adequately at home, schools have to teach it because they cannot attain their academic missions without doing so. We must move beyond lamenting why things have come to this, and beyond waxing nostalgic about the dubiously labeled "good old days" when all children came to school with high moral character that they learned from doting parents at home. Hence, education must provide systematic attention to building the social-emotional skills that underlie sound character and the ability to engage in the tasks of learning, and academic instruction that will afford children literacy in a broad array of subject areas.

The empirical rationale for attending to these skills is quite strong. As noted by Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004),

The need to address the social-emotional challenges that interfere with students' connecting to and performance in school is critical. Issues such as discipline, disaffection, lack of commitment, alienation, and dropping out frequently limit success in school or even lead to failure. . . . If schools only focus on academic instruction and school management in their efforts to help students attain academic success, they will likely fall short of their goals. (p. 4)

They can state this because *"there is a growing body of scientifically based research supporting the strong impact that enhance social and*

*emotional behaviors can have on success in school and ultimately in life”* (p. 19, italics in original).

Indeed, with all the recent focus given to the “academic side” of the report card, we risk losing sight of “the other side.” That is the side that reflects how we live with one another and whether we are inclined toward respect and cooperation or harassment and selfishness and the skills needed to avoid problems of violence and alcohol and substance abuse. Research is beginning to yield a clearer picture of the skills students need for life success and the conditions that must be present in schools for those skills to be nurtured.

## **Key Skills for Social-Emotional Learning**

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an international group of educators, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers (see [www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org)), has drawn from an extensive empirical literature to identify teachable skills essential for educating students for sound character and seeing themselves and their learning as positive resources for their families, schools, workplaces, and communities. These skills are fundamental tools for citizens in a free and democratic society:

- knowing and managing one’s emotions;
- listening and communicating carefully and accurately;
- recognizing strengths in self and others;
- showing ethical and social responsibility;
- greeting, approaching, and conversing with diverse others;
- taking others’ perspectives;
- perceiving others’ feelings accurately;
- respecting others;
- setting adaptive goals;
- solving problems and making decisions effectively;
- cooperating;
- leading and also being an effective team member;
- negotiating and managing conflicts peacefully;
- building constructive, mutual, ethical relationships; and
- seeking and giving help.

This list is based on converging evidence from research, site visits of schools that excel in addressing students’ academic, social, and emotional

development and a rigorous analysis of the focal areas addressed by exemplary programs for social and emotional learning (such as PATHS, Quest, the Seattle Social Development Program, the Child Development Project, Second Step, and the Responsive Classroom) (Elias, 2003; Elias & Arnold, 2006; CASEL, 2003).

### **Features of Effective Schools That Integrate Academic Learning and Social-Emotional and Character Development**

CASEL also has conducted a series of site visits of schools throughout the United States that were strong academically and strong in building students' social and emotional strengths and character. The schools were characterized by five main characteristics. Understanding them can help direct policy toward creating schools that are most likely to achieve overall excellence (Elias, Zins, Weissberg et al., 1997):

1. *They have a school climate articulating specific themes, character elements, and/or values:* Schools benefit from coherent organizing principles or cognitive "hooks" on which to hang or organize the many and diverse things that happened in them over the course of time. Schools of excellence in academics and character send messages about character; about how students should conduct themselves as learners in the classroom and hallways; about the respectful ways that staff should conduct themselves as educators and when interacting with students, colleagues, and parents; and about how others who work in the school, as well as parents, should conduct themselves as supporters of learning. Many of the schools with such climates had incorporated social-emotional learning or character education into their overall mission statements or board policies.
2. *They have explicit instruction in social-emotional skills:* Each school had specific ways to ensure that all students would learn the social-emotional skills needed to negotiate complex interactions in school, the workplace, and life. Most often, this took the form of explicit instruction across grade levels, to allow students to achieve the depth of learning required for internalization. In the best of situations, this was blended with strong, thematic character education infused into academic subject areas as well as in the governance and routines of the school.
3. *They have explicit instruction in health-promotion and problem-prevention skills:* Schools with strong initiatives in social-emotional learning and character education also need to provide students with

context-specific instruction in the application of the skills to such areas as healthy eating; violence prevention; and the prevention of smoking, alcohol, tobacco, steroid, and other drug use.

4. *They have systems to enhance coping skills and social support for transitions, crises, and resolving conflicts:* Services are set up for students prior to, or at the earliest possible point within, their experience of personal or familial life crises, life transitions, or other difficult situations. Providing such extra support is likely to help to forestall or minimize the development and severity of problems. Relatedly, because students all encounter interpersonal conflicts, they benefit from instruction in conflict resolution as a standard part of their school program, rather than only after they are referred for peer mediation.
5. *They have widespread, systematic opportunities for positive, contributory service:* Positive, contributory service experiences create a positive bond to school and community. service experiences, which can begin in elementary school, allow students to feel part of a greater whole and to develop an increased sense of empathy and social concern. These experiences can also be designed to bring students into contact with others about whom they might only have stereotypes, again, something highly important in these turbulent times. When carried out in a pedagogically sound manner, they provide students with a chance to build meaningful relationships that provide a sense of usefulness and purpose. Such service is deeply part of the American culture, but it has often been pushed to the side in the name of formally covering a required breadth of academic content. What is the message this sends to students about the kind of character we want them to develop? Should we not prioritize helping every child excel in character and citizenship?

In addition, many of the schools had strong parent education and parent involvement components. They used approaches that allowed parents to learn about, and also develop, the same social-emotional skills that their students were learning in school (Elias, Tobias, & Friedlander, 2000, 2002; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Manning, Walberg, & Redding, 2005). They also ensured that students with special education classifications participated in all of the structures and opportunities noted above.

In professional meetings, educators sometimes act as if students' social-emotional intelligence and character are not as important as academic grades, but consider this: In life, does it matter who shows up, who works well with others, who is prepared for what they must do, who can function as part of a team, and who is an ethical person? Are these any less important than algebra, geometry, chemistry, and spelling grades?

## **Why Educators Must Care About the Integration of Social-Emotional and Character Development With Academic Learning**

Among many reasons that educators should care about SECD and academic learning, four stand out as being of the most pervasive significance. Each is discussed briefly below.

*1. SECD is a culmination of a strong convergence of streams of evidence about factors influencing learning.* In the ensuing decades, many have begun to focus on elements of Dewey's holistic, constructivist, and action-oriented view of learning, on the path to articulating SECD. The field of confluent education believes that content knowledge is the organizing factor in learning. "Confluence" involves the application of reflection, inquiry, introspection, physically active learning, and mind-body awareness to lessons in each discipline (Hackbarth, 1997). Emotions are conceptualized as central to learning, though primarily as a potential distraction. Gardner's (1993) multiple intelligences theory similarly advocates multichannel learning, speaking particularly to the importance of noncognitive modalities and both intrapersonal and interpersonal factors for many learners.

Moral and character education (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008) raised awareness that educators must be concerned with the congruence of learning and the learner's perception of himself or herself as an individual with values and an identity. Incongruent material has a low likelihood of retention and generalization. Goleman's (2006) popularization of emotional intelligence began to put a long-overdue spotlight on the pervasive role of emotion on how and what students learn, influencing attention, focus, and retention. Connections to research at the physiological level are growing stronger as our methodologies for investigating emotions grow more sophisticated (Kusche & Greenberg, 2006). Recently, Davidson (2007) provided initial evidence, from imaging studies, that SECD programs sustain their effects in individuals by producing changes in brain structure and functioning. Memory is impaired by high degrees of anxiety and stress, and learning is enhanced by calmness and cooperation. Whereas these findings have been more easily demonstrated in adults than in children, research into the latter is advancing rapidly.

SECD brings together the central role of emotion in instruction and in learning, in the educators and the students and all others connected with the enterprise of education, with a focus on the way in which the classrooms

and school as a whole are organized as interdependent ecological entities. By highlighting the formative role of emotion, the integrating role of character, the actualizing role of skills, and the sustaining role of context, all within a developmentally continuous frame, SECD provides the glue that allows for a potential synergistic joining of related educational policy streams that have been flowing in our schools and communities unchanneled.

*2. Academic learning and performance is linked to social-emotional skill and character development.* The very nature of school-based learning is relational, and social and emotional skills are essential for building and sustaining learning relationships of the kind needed for academic success, citizenship, a civilized and nonviolent classroom, and effective inclusive education. More than a decade ago, Sylwester (1995) pointed out that memory is event-coded, linked to social and emotional situations, and that the latter are integral parts of larger units of memory that make up what we learn and retain—including and especially what takes place in the classroom. In his words,

By separating emotion from logic and reason in the classroom, we've simplified school management and evaluation, but we've also then separated two sides of one coin—and lost something important in the process. It's impossible to separate emotion from the other important activities of life. Don't try. . . . Scientists have now replaced this duality with an integrated body/brain system. (p. 75)

Recent work in understanding the functioning of the brain and its role in learning have only provided further evidence of the role of social and emotional factors in academic accomplishments (Goleman, 2006; Kusche & Greenberg, 2006). These findings are being borne out in a growing body of research.

In a recent study using a randomized design, Schwab and Elias (2007) found that teaching emotional regulation and success reflections to students and prompting them to use these skills immediately prior to math tests led to significant improvements on tests and quizzes in elementary-grade students, relative to controls receiving the usual pretest advice to review their work, get a good night's sleep, have a good breakfast, and the like. A meta-analysis by Durlak and Weissberg (2007) examined 379 studies of universal preventive/competence-promotion interventions for youth in Grades K-12. They found that interventions produced significant impact on social-emotional-cognitive skills, positive self-efficacy, school bonding, and adherence to social norms with effect sizes between .21 and .41.



Findings also showed significant impact of the programs on negative behavior, school violence, detention/suspension, and peer rejection (effect sizes .21-.28) and improvements in positive behavior at school, academic achievement test scores, and grades (effect sizes .28-.47). The effect sizes denote moderate influences that are at least as strong as those attributed to factors usually touted as essential to academic achievement, such as small class size and after-school academic tutoring. The meta-analysis and other studies belie the NCLB focus on test performance as a preeminent index of student knowledge. Performing well on tests requires social-emotional skills such as self-control, cooperative interaction, and appropriate assertiveness and problem solving on the day of the event, during the period of preexam preparation and studying, and while students are engaged in the many and ongoing tasks associated with academic learning and homework. Indeed, Lickona and Davidson (2005) have developed the notion of "performance character" to capture the need to conceptualize a pathway from talent and disposition to demonstration, rather than assume a unity.

3. *SECD is the basis for meeting the preventive and character-building mandates of schools.* No one can reasonably expect students to learn effectively if they are beset by behavioral or emotional problems. These may relate to such regular occurrences as parental illness, divorce, incarceration, absence, or economic hardship, but also to bullying, pressure to join gangs or other negative peer groups, or feelings of hopelessness. Because emotional upset cannot be left at the schoolhouse door or placed neatly in one's locker, it is logical for schools to have programs to prevent these difficulties and promote sound character, and many do. As it turns out, if one analyzes the content and pedagogy of violence, bullying, suicide, substance abuse, smoking, depression, pregnancy, school disaffection and dropout, and related prevention and character education programs, it is clear that social and emotional skill development is the critical unifying factor across areas. Students must have an array of emotion recognition and management skills if they are to be able to focus on the increasingly sophisticated academic agenda being put before them.

Individuals working in the field of resilience education have identified that children at risk for school failure and problem behaviors due to socioeconomic and family-related factors can be helped substantially by improving their social-emotional competencies and by developing a sense of positive purpose and agency (Brown, D'Emidio-Caston, & Benard, 2000). When classroom learning does not include this kind of skill development and attention to the meaning of what is learned to students, they become more likely to disrupt the

learning process and head toward dropping out from it, often emotionally prior to physically (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003).

But effective prevention and character building do not occur solely as a result of programs. They require a school climate that is challenging, respectful, caring, and engaging for both students and staff members (Elias, Utne-O'Brien, & Weissberg, 2006; Watson, 2006). Furthermore, research is beginning to show school climate as a pivotal mediator of academic success (Cohen, 2006; Sherblom, Marshall, & Sherblom, 2006). This point has been central to Kozol's (2005) arguments about the tragic impact of NCLB's emphasis on skill drilling and test preparation on the education of inner-city youth. Schools must be thought of in an organic and systemic way, not simply as an interchangeable collection of students, teachers, and programs.

*4. Our system of democracy is linked to the emotional intelligence of voters.* Perhaps most egregious is that NCLB does not look forward far enough or fast enough. Every student must graduate with the competencies needed to be an involved citizen in our democracy. How do we prepare students to follow candidates' arguments, listen to their words, consider all of the candidates' positions as well as their own, think through the consequences of various proposals under consideration, and actively join in civic life? John Dewey (1916) recognized that education in a democracy had to provide students with the tools for exceptional capacities of discernment. Such discernment requires considerable analytic and reflective skills, self-knowledge, and cultural and contextual awareness, all elements in Dewey's constructivist pedagogy. Ultimately, education is not about producing talented students and the highest test scores; it is about producing talented *people*. It is about teaching *all* children to have the patience, interest, and skills to think about the complex issues all citizens face and to have the knowledge, inclination, and skills needed for civic participation.

Although hinted at in writings about democratic schools (Apple & Beane, 1995), current thinking with regard to 21st-century schools and civic involvement identifies social-emotional competencies and character and ethical education (Berman & McCarthy, 2006; Truesdale, 2008; Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007) as the foundation of democratic participation and engaged citizenship. The development of these skills and values begins within schools as arenas for student participation and leadership. How are students helped to understand their role as "citizens" of their school? What allows children to see that school has relevance and importance to their everyday lives and that they are important to the school?

Paradoxically, President George W. Bush provided the reply in his remarks at the White House Conference on Character and Community, on June 19, 2002:

The thing I appreciate is that you understand education should prepare children for jobs, and it should also prepare children for life. I join you in wanting our children to not only be rich in skills, but rich in ideals. Teaching character and citizenship to our children is a high calling. (Quoted in Spring, 2004, p. 3)

As we approach the reauthorization of NCLB, we must give this high calling high priority and adequate resources. Children need the skills of discernment as well as participatory competence (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2007a). These skills reflect the extraordinary amount of information children have to process on their path to adulthood and the ways in which advertisers, politicians, and other parties with interests seek to subtly (and at times, brashly and unashamedly) persuade children to believe their version of facts and truth. Cognitive and marketing research seems to make it ever easier to learn how to “package” information to enter the zone of truth, past the sensors of discernment. Social-emotional skills, including emotion recognition, situation analysis, problem solving, and decision making, are essential for bolstering discerning judgment. These skills and others are also vital for children to have in order to grow up with the confidence and competencies needed to participate effectively in a global and highly politicized world, where being part of the mechanisms of democracy, community life, family, and workplaces is going to be challenging.

### **Toward an Education Agenda That Integrates Academic and Social-Emotional Learning**

In New Jersey, the Department of Education has initiated Developing Safe and Civil Schools (DSACS, at [www.teachSECD.com](http://www.teachSECD.com)), a multiyear effort to improve academic performance, enhance school climate, and reduce violence through coordination of the many SECD efforts already occurring in schools (Elias, 2008). DSACS provides a framework whereby school leaders and designated SECD committee members can engage in inclusive, ongoing discussions and produce written, rolling plans to address the following questions about social-emotional competencies and the character and climate of their schools:

- To what extent is my school addressing the five features of effective schools as enumerated earlier?

- What are the important principles of SECD that we want to convey to our students? What developmental emphasis do we want to have?
- How are teachers and other staff being prepared to build social-emotional skills and sound character in classrooms and in the schools overall, as outlined in the five areas?
- How are our ongoing instructional efforts being supported, refreshed, and renewed?
- How are those new to our school brought “on board” with your social-emotional, character, and citizenship-building efforts?
- How is the social and emotional functioning of our staff being addressed? How can we be sure to address a sense of peace and mutual respect among staff in our schools, as well as among our students?
- What is each staff member’s personal improvement plan for developing his or her skills in SECD instruction?
- What can each staff member do to make our school a better and more welcoming place for all groups of students and their parents?

Having ongoing answers to these questions, obtained in a spirit of continuous improvement, can ensure that children will be educated with attention to both sides of the report card and that they will be prepared for the tests of life, and not just a life of tests (Elias, 2001). Fortunately, well-researched programs exist that can serve as the cornerstone of helping students become productive citizens, behave ethically and responsibly, and appreciate the benefits of living in a multicultural society (Elias et al., 2006; CASEL, 2003). These programs are organized in ways that are not “add-ons” to the curriculum but instead are meshed with already existing school goals and mandates. However, they devote explicit time to helping children learn how to think through important issues of everyday life, relating to their becoming healthy, educated adults and their being concerned with their classrooms and schools as communities, their neighborhoods, and the larger environment. These programs emphasize problem solving, decision making, empathy, self-control, working well in groups, and clear communication. As noted earlier, these are the kinds of skills basic to a truly participatory democracy, choices for a healthy lifestyle, and acquiring academic knowledge that can be put to positive use in the world. But most important, they are best learned when embedded in schools that are committed to creating climates of excellence in social-emotional and character development as well as academics.

One can find examples of such schools of excellence from Highland Park, New Jersey, to Seattle, Washington, and many places in between. CASEL ([www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org)) keeps track of the best of these settings, and the Character Education Partnership ([www.character.org](http://www.character.org)) identifies National

Schools of Character; these organizations are joined by others, such as the George Lucas Educational Foundation ([www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org)), the Center for Social-Emotional Education ([www.csee.net](http://www.csee.net)), 6 Seconds ([www.6seconds.org](http://www.6seconds.org)), and the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations ([www.eiconsortium.org](http://www.eiconsortium.org)), in acting as clearinghouses for the latest empirical research and best practice information relevant for interested educators, legislators, parents, and politicians. Careful scrutiny of successful SECD schools shows that although they involve a small amount of initial work for teachers, the payoff in increased instructional time materializes well before the end of the first year of implementation and then yields greater benefits in subsequent years (Elias & Arnold, 2006). This is in large part because the pedagogy of SECD is not highly demanding. Furthermore, in New Jersey, consortia of professional organizations (e.g., NJ Education Association, NJ School Counselors Association, NJ Association of School Psychologists, NJ Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) have joined to integrate SECD into their ongoing professional development activities. A higher education advisory group has also been convened to begin the process of integrating SECD into the ongoing preparation of educators. Indeed, at the time of this writing, states such as Illinois, New York, Georgia, Ohio, Iowa, Rhode Island, and New Jersey have or are formalizing statewide efforts around social-emotional learning, character education, and school climate. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development has devoted considerable resources to promoting a Whole Child Education approach as a positive alternative to NCLB (Marshall & Price, 2007; [www.wholechildeducation.org](http://www.wholechildeducation.org)). There is every reason to believe these trends are on the rise and will be more influential upon educational policy as effective examples proliferate.

## Summary . . . and Prologue

Identifying “the missing piece” may create a challenge, but it also outlines a path. The evidence from theory, research, and practice is growing that education at all levels—preschool through college—must focus explicitly on the integration of social, emotional, and academic learning as part of the process of preparing, humanizing, and educating students. The very nature of school-based learning is relational, and SECD is essential for building and sustaining learning relationships of the kind needed for academic success; citizenship; a civilized, engaging, stimulating, and nonviolent classroom; and effective inclusive education. The skills of social-emotional intelligence appear to be an

essential cornerstone of genuine progress in the education field and essential for enduring school reform, particularly in urban contexts. Those concerned with educational policy may want to consider approaching the task with a mindset consonant with a new title: ACMF (All Children Moving Forward), in ways that include SECD as well as a range of academic subject areas—and then focus on providing the infrastructure and resources needed to vigorously and relentlessly accomplish this attainable goal.

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**Maurice J. Elias** is a professor in the psychology department at Rutgers University. He is the academic director of the Rutgers Civic Engagement and Service Education Partnerships program, president of the Society for Community Research and Action/Division 27 (Community Psychology) of the American Psychological Association, and director of the Rutgers Social-Emotional Learning Lab and Developing Safe and Civil Schools (DSACS, at [www.teachSECD.com](http://www.teachSECD.com), where he can be contacted). He writes a blog on Social-Emotional and Character Development (SECD) for the George Lucas Educational Foundation at [www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org).