



The “F-Word” of Social and Emotional Learning: Faith

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Key Points

- For millions of Americans, the values, mores, and mindsets behind social and emotional learning (SEL) can’t be separated from faith.
 - Despite its historic role at the center of moral instruction and character formation, faith is conspicuously absent from the current SEL conversation.
 - If SEL is to succeed, advocates need to take the role of faith seriously, funders must invest in the social and emotional well-being of teachers, and education leaders should explore ways to partner with communities of faith.
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The “f-word” is considered a vulgar term that is unacceptable in a professional environment, let alone in front of schoolchildren. If someone dares utter the word in a discussion about American education policy, for example, they risk being viewed as uncouth, unprincipled, and borderline fanatical. I’ve seen people gasp, roll their eyes, and immediately object to the word. But the irony is that while the “f-word” is taboo in serious conversations about how to improve public education in the US, it is actually an essential element in saving the heart and soul of the education sector.

The word I’m talking about? *Faith*.

Nearly 80 percent of American adults—over 198 million people—identify themselves as adherents of a religious faith, according to a 2017 Gallup report.¹ The same poll says that 37 percent of Americans say they are “highly religious,” though a 2015 Pew Research Center poll puts the number of those who believe that religion is “very important” at 53 percent.² These folks tend to link their faith to their values, which inform how they set goals, form relationships, make decisions, and express empathy.

This all sounds a lot like social and emotional learning (SEL). While SEL has many different definitions, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines it 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.”³ In other words, what we’re really talking about are things like empathy, love, and healthy relationships. For millennia, this has been the ethos of religious doctrine, which inspired the creation of schools as a means to instill such values in children who would grow up and govern the world.

Yet, schools are missing a golden opportunity to leverage this asset of faith to improve outcomes for kids, particularly in the much-discussed area of SEL. There’s perhaps no place in education where the impact of religious faith is more evident than in social and emotional development. And that’s because, for millions of Americans, faith powers it.

But nobody would know this from looking at the SEL landscape. Despite the centrality of faith to millions of American children and families, faith is

conspicuously absent from the SEL scene. It's the "f-word." And that's a problem.

At its core, social and emotional development embodies a *spiritual* competence—regardless of one's religious faith—and that must be acknowledged and intentionally nurtured if SEL advocates, philanthropists, school leaders, and parents ever hope to actualize wide-scale improvements to students' cognitive health. Ignoring this risks dooming SEL from the outset.

I confess: I am full of faith. I am a committed follower of Jesus Christ and the author of *The Master Teacher: 12 Spiritual Lessons That Can Transform Schools and Revolutionize Public Education*, a new book on how biblical principles can positively transform schools.⁴ I also founded the nonprofit organization Teachers Who Pray, which equips educators around the country to ground their work in knowledge, faith, prayer, and spiritual practices.⁵

But I never set out to be an evangelist of the "f-word" in education. All I wanted to do was teach.

I was a newspaper reporter in New York City on September 11, 2001. All that year, I had a gnawing urge to quit journalism and turn my volunteerism as a Sunday school teacher at my storefront church in Harlem into a full-time public school teaching career. But I was too afraid to do it. Less pay. Less prestige. More headache and red tape to change careers. But when I watched the destruction of the Twin Towers—the beloved buildings I had admired from an airplane window just 24 hours earlier—I knew my reporting days were over. That day, I became a teacher.

Within six months, I had relocated my family to my hometown, Chicago, and was applying to graduate programs in education. But the stress of working inside an unjust and inadequate system that held chronically low expectations—and feeling as if I could do nothing to fix it—was untenable for me. I was either going to quit, get fired, or fight back. And over my nearly 15 years in Chicago Public Schools, I did all three.

The stress of trying to be a great teacher in hostile school environments led me to my knees. I held my first Teachers Who Pray chapter meeting during the 2007–08 school year, which saw 27 Chicago Public School students killed in street violence. I wanted to pray with my believing colleagues to gain the strength I needed to do my job well and to

seek divine protection over my students who lived in the high-poverty, high-crime community surrounding my school. As permitted by law, four teachers gathered to pray in my classroom after school—without students. Not only did it forge an unbreakable bond among us, but our prayers caused us to teach our students with a spirit of excellence and abundant joy despite tough circumstances. (See my TEDx talk "Why Faith Will Fix Education" for more details.⁶)

Since then, I've met hundreds of teachers from Maine to California who fulfill their social and emotional well-being through faith and prayer. Faith is a part of their identity that gives them life and inspires them to keep teaching when they are burning out.

Sadly, faith is also the topic teachers feel most restricted to discuss in the public square. This exaggerated deference to the establishment clause and general misinterpretation of the separation of church and state has threatened to squash the very source of encouragement that teachers of faith depend on to do their best work. The law may prohibit teacher-to-student prayer and proselytizing in public schools, but friendly educator-to-educator prayer and faith discussions are protected free speech under the free exercise clause of the First Amendment.

Given these dilemmas that teachers—myself included—have faced, here are some things SEL advocates should consider if they want their cause to be most effective for students and educators alike.

Lesson 1: SEL Advocates and School Districts Must Acknowledge the Spiritual Essence of SEL

There's nothing new under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

If faith has so much to offer SEL, then why is the spiritual core of SEL so thoroughly ignored in the SEL conversation? Since about 80 percent of American adults identify as people of faith, shouldn't advocates be eager to welcome faith-based groups into their coalition?

Most ancient faith texts, like the Bible, contain a rather comprehensive set of teachings about self-awareness, self-management, and how to responsibly make decisions—all part of CASEL's SEL

wheel. These classical teachings have stood the test of time. In fact, most effective SEL curricula that achieve positive results in children’s lives have simply rephrased and repackaged the Bible using secular terms. The principles of love, forgiveness, justice, honor, redemption, humility, respect, trust, courage, and so forth are virtues that SEL aims to promote, yet acknowledging their faith-based roots has become taboo in our society. For instance, teachers can tell students not to bully, but they can’t fully articulate the spiritual reasons *why* (that is, that the Bible instructs us to love thy neighbor as thyself).

It wasn’t always this way in America. Religious instruction was an explicit or subtle mainstay in public education well into the mid-20th century as a means to teach character formation, a sense of purpose, and responsibility to one’s neighbor. And while public schools back then were largely prejudiced against nonwhite, non-Protestant students, this faith-infused education suggested that a higher power instituted basic moral standards of dignity by which every human being should live. I believe that this doctrine effectively staved off the crises of anxiety, depression, disrespect, suicide, and school violence that have infiltrated many of our classrooms today.

Most educators today acknowledge the desperate need for greater attention to social and emotional needs in schools, but just *how* to reach the hearts and minds of students in the era of social media and information overload is hotly debated. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on one’s perspective), this trendy topic comes with a hefty profit margin for education consultants and book publishers. There are a host of gimmicky curricula that promote imaginative, pseudoscientific SEL strategies that don’t work. These tend to get hot and reach stardom quickly, only to fizzle out like a Roman candle on a moonless night. Then, 10 years later, research studies prove that these ill-conceived SEL practices caused more harm than good. (Remember the self-esteem craze of the ’80s and early ’90s when some schools were actually banning “winning” in competitions, choosing to give ribbons to every child who participated?)

As it stands, most leading SEL advocacy groups like CASEL don’t explicitly list the religious sector on their framework wheels or actively champion

religious organizations as portfolio partners—even though churches, temples, and mosques are prominent players in virtually every community in America. What a missed opportunity for SEL proponents! They agree that it’s about not just schools and teachers but also community groups, yet they fail to take it a step further. If SEL in schools is ever to reach its potential impact, then it *must* include churches and faith groups as strategic partners.

Robust social and emotional development requires much more than engaging puppet shows, deep breathing, yoga poses, and feel-good mantras for students to sing along.

You see, SEL is attempting to capture students’ hearts and minds—spaces too deep, mysterious, and protected for tactical interventions alone, particularly with children who have experienced trauma. Due to the complex nature of social and emotional needs and capacities, having an effective SEL strategy is all the more essential. Cognitive neuroscientist Caroline Leaf writes in her book *Switch on Your Brain*, “Our mind is designed to control the body, of which the brain is a part, not the other way around. . . . Research shows that 75 to 98 percent of mental, physical, and behavioral illness comes from one’s thought life.”⁸

Robust social and emotional development requires much more than engaging puppet shows, deep breathing, yoga poses, and feel-good mantras for students to sing along. Compelling people to change the way they think or their perspective on life is profoundly spiritual; it’s a time-consuming process, and it can get messy—fast. For those reasons, and because educators must prioritize quality academic instruction in their limited school schedule, SEL works best in collaboration with an external faith community.

States and large school districts must broaden the menu of SEL options they provide to families by including more faith-school partnerships. This could mean giving parents a menu of choices for their children’s social and emotional support, including

opting into school-based, after-school religious programming. Or it could mean having chaplains of various faiths on hand to serve students, families, and teachers (just as they do in public hospitals, prisons, and the military). At the very least, it means shifting the paradigm to accept faith leaders and houses of worship as indispensable allies in the school-based SEL movement.

Long before SEL was a popular term, faith communities were the experts people turned to for counseling, encouragement, and hope. Religious faith predates SEL, and I suspect it will long outlive SEL as well.

Lesson 2: Funders Need to Invest in the SEL Needs of Teachers—Not Just Students

Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into a pit? (Luke 6:39)

With teacher shortages in all 50 states and school culture tied with teacher salary as a leading cause for teacher attrition, philanthropy needs to prioritize improving how educators experience K–12 schooling.⁹ Encouragement through teachers' religious faith is an untapped domain that could make their role on the front lines of education feel less like battle lines.

Unfortunately, funders tend to be laser-focused on promoting student SEL as a driver of academic success while deliberately bypassing teacher-focused SEL programs. News flash: Broken teachers cannot uplift broken students!

Teachers are not widgets or a means to an end. Teachers are human. Teachers get scary medical diagnoses. Teachers are victims of domestic violence. Sometimes, teachers drink too much. And, yes, teachers are also gatekeepers of knowledge, conduits by which virtues and values are passed on to students for six to eight hours a day. How we all cringe and shake our heads in disgust when we see a mugshot of a teacher on the evening news. Yet, how many of us ever wonder, “What was going on in that teacher’s life to lead him or her to such a breaking point?”

Philanthropic dollars that flow to student SEL will be wasted if the humanity of teachers is systematically ignored. It’s like an obstetrician expecting

to deliver a healthy baby based on an ultrasound but never checking the vital signs or bloodwork of the pregnant mom.

When I pitched Teachers Who Pray to a major funder a couple of years ago, he told me that he loved the vision and mission but said, “We’re not going to give you money just to make teachers feel good.” There was so much wrong with his statement, but let’s start with this: Who would risk going into the operating room with an anxious, fidgety surgeon? Who would put their child on an airplane knowing the pilot was prone to mid-flight panic attacks? Who would feel vulnerable enough to recall painful childhood memories to a cynical, sarcastic therapist? Yet there seems to be little empathy or concern for the mental wellness of teachers who are tasked with instructing, disciplining, and caring for dozens of other people’s children all day. And as states like Florida move closer to arming teachers in schools, educators’ mental wellness has never been more crucial.

Emerging academic research shows that educators suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder at levels similar to that of combat veterans and from secondary traumatic stress from caring for students who have experienced unimaginable neglect, abuse, or violence. These symptoms may include irritability, anger, or hopelessness; inability to concentrate; inability to sleep; overeating or not eating enough; and persistently worrying about students, even when at home or sleeping.¹⁰

I experienced several of these symptoms during my time in Chicago Public Schools. Then I learned to pray, and it transformed me. However, even with prayer, a few teachers with whom I’ve interacted through Teachers Who Pray have experienced work-induced depression and resorted to taking medication just to get through the school day.

At a recent student-focused SEL convening that brought together 200 service providers from around the country, I heard time and time again that the need to tend to the social and emotional state of teachers is great. Many practitioners lamented how difficult it is to raise funds to do such work. At the end of the conference, a woman in the audience stood at the mic and concluded, “Funders don’t care about teachers or teacher SEL.” Sadly, I had to agree.

There is no “whole child” instruction without having a “whole teacher” to provide it. If SEL has

any staying power, it will be because teachers have internalized a sense of “wholeness” for themselves and then pursued it for their students. A sizable number of teachers like me have their social and emotional needs met through their religious faith, but groups like Teachers Who Pray are under constant threat of going out of business due to lack of funding.

Lesson 3: SEL Proponents and Policy-makers Should Embrace Communities of Faith as Community Partners

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10)

The scope of SEL is bigger than school districts might think. Like the majority of American adults, most students also have a faith.

A 2003 report called *Hardwired to Connect*, written by a commission of 33 leading children’s doctors, research scientists, and youth service professionals, offered strategies to reduce the high numbers of US children who are suffering from emotional and behavioral problems such as depression, anxiety, attention deficit disorder, conduct disorders, and thoughts of suicide. The commission based its recommendations on “recent scientific findings suggesting that children are biologically ‘hardwired’ for enduring attachments to other people and for moral and spiritual meaning.”¹¹ If providing more explicit faith-based and moral content to children is the best way to ensure students’ healthy development, as the report suggests, then it’s high time for states and large school districts to find creative, appropriate ways to include faith in their SEL tent. (See a few suggestions below.)

Most school districts are closed on major religious holidays and grant students excused absences when they need an extra day or two to observe their holy days. That, however, is typically the extent to which most districts are attuned to their students’ faith identities. In general, teachers, principals, and district leaders are reluctant, even afraid, to engage in the faith conversation because they erroneously believe that the so-called “separation of church and state” doesn’t allow them to say the “f-word” out loud.

Let me offer one anecdote. At a lunch meeting with one of the nation’s leading education attorneys in Washington, DC, I told her that Section 9524 of the No Child Left Behind Act provided some basic guidance for legal prayer and religious expression in public school. I asked what her interpretations of the same topic were under the new Every Student Succeeds Act.¹² “Those guidelines still haven’t been written,” she told me, “but even if they were, I wouldn’t know how to answer you. If you asked me about any other aspect of education law I could probably tell you, but I don’t deal with religion in schools; that’s what constitutional lawyers do. I wouldn’t want to steer you wrong.”

If one of the nation’s top education attorneys doesn’t know the laws governing religious rights in schools, how are teachers, principals, school district leaders, and even state education department officials supposed to know? How are parents and community faith leaders supposed to know? The truth is most people in education don’t know what they can or cannot do in schools regarding religion, so the default response is to mumble something about the “separation of church and state” and punctuate the sentence with a hard “no.”¹³

In general, teachers, principals, and district leaders are reluctant, even afraid, to engage in the faith conversation.

Teaching about religion from a purely *academic* stance is not only legal but also encouraged by the government as a means to providing students with a well-rounded education. When public schools partner with religious organizations to offer families optional religious instruction from a *devotional* perspective, it can help students develop a sense of purpose that is bigger than themselves, which is the very essence of social and emotional development. This is why many affluent families send their children to private religious schools; however, access to a faith-infused education shouldn’t be determined by the size of a parent’s paycheck. The challenge is to convince states and large school districts to give faith a seat at the educational table.

Many public schools *do* allow for faith—albeit, the less obvious kind. Indeed, religious activities sometimes take on a secular facade for the sake of promoting social and emotional well-being.

For instance, I once taught at a charter school that centered its SEL instruction around yoga. Every day, sometimes multiple times a day, students practiced yoga, which often included chanting, deep breathing, and transcendental meditation. Guess what? It actually worked! Students were happier, calmer, and more ready to learn after having done a few focused yoga poses.

While a handful of Christian parents transferred their kids out of the school, citing religious objections, the vast majority of the students (who were mostly Mexican Catholic immigrants) participated with no problem. The school insisted that its yoga practices were not religious in nature. However, when I asked several of my Indian friends if it were possible to divorce yoga from the Hindu faith, they gave a resounding “no.” They said yoga is a form of Hindu worship. In fact, when the school first opened, a local Hindu group filed a formal complaint with the school district that the public school was co-opting their sacred religious customs.

This example reveals not only that faith-based activities *can* be incorporated into public schools but also that the lines drawn around what is *actually* allowed can be arbitrary and biased. Why is yoga embraced as an acceptable way for students to de-stress and focus, while a reflection led by a pastor or priest is seen as illegal? It would seem that yoga has achieved such a level of popularity in secular environments that it no longer “feels” like a religious rite—yet it remains, strictly speaking, a form of worship. When does a historically faith-based practice become “acceptable” in a nonreligious setting, and who gets to decide which practices are “too religious” to be tolerated in a public school classroom?

Drawing these arbitrary lines and stripping faith-based activities from their origins ultimately works against SEL, which inevitably must tap into a spiritual dimension to work. Most people would not be surprised by the story of a charter school that supported students’ emotional needs through yoga. Acknowledging that activity as faith-based, however, would be socially problematic, though no

less impactful. It seems we want the calming results of faith, just not the faith itself.

Nevertheless, school leaders who fear crossing the church-state divide often feel they have no choice but to gentrify, secularize, or culturally appropriate religious practices to extract all their natural benefits to the body, mind, and spirit without appearing to endorse the “f-word.” Official partnerships between school districts and religious organizations, with memorandums of understandings, would help alleviate the tension around delivering faith-inspired SEL.

Suggestions for Putting Faith and SEL in Action

So, what *can* be done to unite faith and SEL? I am advocating faith-school partnerships and faith-friendly education policies in which SEL can take place in a legal, authentic environment. The following are lawful and effective examples that have been implemented in school districts across the country and that other schools would do well to make room for.

- **Adopt a School.** Churches can support schools’ SEL work by lending their resources and talent for activities already part of the school day. One decades-old adopt-a-school program provides neighborhood schools across the country with vetted and trained volunteers from a local congregation to serve the school in a variety of ways, including mentoring, tutoring, and recess or hall monitoring.¹⁴
- **Faith-Based After-School Programming.** Another option is free or low-cost, faith-based, after-school programming on campus and led by religious nonprofits. One program, the Good News Club, mostly run by trained volunteers, allows children in grades K–6 who have parental permission to meet for an hour each week to hear a Bible story, sing songs, eat a snack, and play games that reinforce the Bible lesson, such as learning from the early Christians to persevere through difficult times.¹⁵ Far from a proselytizing imposition of religion, optional after-school programs like this one (which has been ruled constitutional) offer a faith-based context that can help support and ground SEL.
- **Student-Led Religious Clubs.** Students in middle and high school can also form and lead

religious clubs, sponsored by faculty members, much like secular student clubs operate.¹⁶ As long as a school's policy allows for extracurricular student-led clubs to meet on campus, students have every right to organize their own religious clubs or student prayer events on school grounds.

- **Released-Time Programs.** As many as 28 states have a shared understanding with families that religious instruction can be a key complement to academic instruction. To accommodate this, school districts have implemented released-time policies, which allow students (with parental permission) to receive religious education during the school day at off-campus sites.¹⁷ These programs were upheld as constitutional in 1952 and offer students easy access to a daily, weekly, or monthly religious experience that could readily attend to their social, emotional, and spiritual needs. Because churches, mosques, and temples play an integral role in reinforcing SEL values, released-time programs should also be thought of as an important ingredient in carrying out SEL.

These are just some examples, but schools should be on the lookout for other innovative approaches to partnering with faith groups, since they have so many resources that can bolster students' social and emotional well-being. Parents, of course, would

have to opt into faith-based options available at or through the public school, with no penalty for students who choose not to participate. But based on anecdotes from the field, there is a high interest in faith-based after-school SEL instruction among students and families when schools make such programming available to them.

Conclusion

School districts tend to turn to the faith community for hope and healing *after* a mass shooting or some other tragedy has taken place. But what would happen if districts partnered with faith institutions to establish proactive supports for student social and emotional well-being, not just as a reaction to a crisis? SEL should not dismiss faith; faith is SEL's best friend.

It will take a concerted effort on the part of SEL advocates, state and district leaders, philanthropy, and local educators to explore all that faith has to offer SEL—for the benefit of both teachers and students. The first step toward achieving this end is for policymakers to consider and embrace the powerful role faith can play in SEL—and not respond to it as if someone just dropped the f-bomb.

About the Author

Marilyn Anderson Rhames is the founder and CEO of Teachers Who Pray, a faith-based nonprofit that has more than 140 chapters nationwide. She is also the author of *The Master Teacher: 12 Spiritual Lessons That Can Transform Schools and Revolutionize Public Education* and serves on the design team for Harvard University's Leadership Institute for Faith and Education.

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