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DISCUSSION FORUM REPORT FROM THE GARRISON INSTITUTE AND COLLABORATIVE FOR ACADEMIC, SOCIAL, AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (CASEL)

ASSESSMENT FOR SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ACADEMIC LEARNING WITH PRESCHOOL AND ELEMENTARY-SCHOOL CHILDREN

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Executive Summary:

Co-sponsored by the Fetzer Institute, the Garrison Institute and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a meeting convened twenty-five scholars, leaders, and funders in a retreat setting to identify priorities for providing guidance to educators and policy makers on appropriate assessment strategies and systems in order to promote and ensure high-quality educational opportunities that foster the social-emotional development and academic performance of preschool and elementary-school children.

Co-chaired by CASEL President Roger Weissberg and George Mason University Professor Suzanne Denham, discussions focused on the following three core areas:

1. Strategies to use data emanating from appropriate SEL assessments for system planning, evaluation, and accountability;

2. Important social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies and literacy/academic outcomes for 3 to 10 year olds, their inter-connections, and how to assess these appropriately (e.g., overarching strategies and specific tools); and

3. Contextual and practice factors that influence student behaviors, including (a) those that correlate with positive and negative child outcomes; and (b) those that promote learning and developmental outcomes in evidence-based prevention and intervention programming.

The rich discussion over the 2-½ day period clarified key issues and raised concerns that need to be addressed in order for social and emotional learning to be included with the educational needs for 3 to 10 year olds. There was consensus that the following areas in assessment should be addressed:

1. Assessments should emphasize both the child's social and emotional learning and the contextual factors that promote such learning.

2. Assessments should be broad in scope assessing not just "bad behaviors" but also those indicative of children's strengths in social and emotional areas.

3. The field needs a mechanism for sharing scientifically useful assessment tools that are feasible to administer, affordable, and beneficial to schools, teachers, parents, and children.

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4. There is a need to attend to infrastructure, professional development and supports, for administering assessments within a school system.

5. The most important standard for SEL assessments is that they benefit individual teachers and children *and* allow for aggregation of reliable data at the class, grade, and system level to guide system planning and determine program effectiveness on a large scale.

6. We recognize the potential of technology for collecting and rapidly reporting data.

7. We emphasize the importance of developmentally and culturally appropriate assessment systems that link preschool and elementary school programming, with a focus on children's social and emotional development.

8. A crucial issue to consider is that assessment systems can have negative unintended consequences that need to be anticipated and avoided.

Meeting participants emphasized the need for assessments that address the many contextual factors that influence the students' social and emotional competence and impact both child and classroom outcomes such as teachers' social and emotional competencies and their ability to implement social and emotional curricula, to coach students through challenging social and emotional situations that naturally arise in classrooms settings, and to serve as role models of prosocial behavior.

In line with the Garrison Institute's mission to explore the intersection of contemplation and engaged action, the Institute's education initiative Director Tish Jennings introduced the contemplative pause exercise during transitional moments in the meeting providing moments of reflection, facilitated integration, and transition from one activity to another. Each evening, David Rome, Director of Program Initiatives at the Garrison Institute, led the participants in a deep listening activity designed to bring awareness into the body and to learn to access the "felt sense." The meeting concluded with a mindful walk around the Garrison Institute lead by Richard Brown, founder and chair of contemplative education at Naropa University and Garrison Institute Education Initiative Leadership Council member.

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Background and Rationale:

Research continues to demonstrate the importance of children's social and emotional development. However, in order for social and emotional developmental outcomes to become widely recognized and valued in the larger educational arena, and to standardize the evaluation of innovative interventions, there is a need for developmentally and culturally appropriate assessment systems. These assessment systems should address both the child and the learning context and should utilize a strength-based approach by moving beyond an intervention's current focus on reducing bad behavior to promoting competence.

The Need for Assessments of SEL:

Research continues to demonstrate that skills required for successful learning are closely linked to social and emotional skills. However, in these days of high stakes testing, schools need hard evidence that SEL programming promotes academic outcomes. The field needs scientifically sound and rigorous assessments of social and emotional competencies to demonstrate the value added of including social and emotional programs in school curriculum. There is also a need to promote strategies to use such data to inform schools and teachers about how they can best address social and emotional competencies, thereby improving the educational abilities of students.

Selected statements from participants:

> Roger Weissberg – "We need to work on the framework for the contribution of child-centered social and emotional learning and system-focused social and emotional learning programming to child behavior, school performance, and development – that would emphasize academic performance beyond test scores, behavioral development and other important long-term outcomes including social relationships, healthy behavior, citizenship, and work place effectiveness."

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Ross Thompson – "For social-emotional learning to have a meaningful place at the table in our understanding of children's achievement in school, it is essential that we are capable of demonstrating that we can validly assess learning gains in this area. Otherwise, we risk the importance of this aspect of learning not being taken seriously. For this reason, I believe that addressing assessment challenges is crucial."

Marty Zaslow – "Why is SEL important? Why is positive social and emotional development not the same as the absence of problem behavior? What do these forms of learning relate to in terms of important aspects of later development? In an era of No Child Left Behind, why should we care about SEL? The skills assessed in young children for SEL are closely related to skills needed for early learning. It is not SEL *vs.* academic achievement: they are closely interrelated."

Defining and Identifying Key SEL Competencies:

SEL competencies are well articulated in many SEL publications. However, some are very complex constructs whose definitions need further refinement. For example, social competence involves many complex facets. Currently there may be a proliferation of too many constructs to be useful for assessment. However, reducing this number through clustering may risk the loss of domain and context specificity. There is clearly a need for basic research work to clarify these constructs and how they develop over the child's lifespan, in order to create valid and reliable measurements.

We must identify the core social and emotional constructs, how they are expressed, and how they contribute to academic success. We recognize that social and emotional constructs are expressed in different ways for different age groups, in different contexts and in different cultures. Once these constructs are defined and understood in developmental and cultural contexts, we need to determine which of the core social and emotional constructs are most central to educational achievement of students in school settings. Moreover, there is a need to explore which deficits among the many social and emotional competencies matter for academic and overall success. When a deficit in these areas is identified, we need plans for addressing them.

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Selected statements from participants:

> Mark Bracket & Susanne Denham – "We need to clarify what constructs we are interested in - personality/emotion-related skills/social skills."
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> Marty Zaslow – "There are multiple constructs in social and emotional learning. The distinction between social and emotional is an essential first step and why is this distinction important? For each construct, there are subcomponents of each. Note that there are different ways to subdivide, with some approaches differentiating more constructs and some fewer. We also need evidence supporting the existence of these constructs."
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> Karen Freel – "In discussions on defining the constructs, I think we cannot be too narrow, nor too expansive. What constructs are critical or most important for children?"
>
> Mark Ginsberg – "(We need to resolve) the perplexing issue about the identification of appropriate (SEL) variables to be assessed (and identify them as) independent or dependent variables."
>
> Kim Schonert-Reichl – "We would need to not only identify what SEL dimensions (individual and contextual) that are predictive of academic success, we would also identify which of these SEL dimensions predict present and future life success (e.g., positive relationships, contributing and caring citizen, healthy life style)."

Contextual Factors:

When we assess behavior, we try to identify characteristics of the child that are stable across settings. Contextual factors constrain or enhance the capacity that kids have to express their social and emotional competencies. In naturalistic settings, as the setting changes (one-on-one interaction, small group, large group, etc.) the behavior may vary. Therefore, when making assessments, knowing the behavioral context is crucial.

A child may demonstrate strength in one area of social competence in certain contexts or situations and weakness in others. For example, a child may show social competence in a one-on-one interaction with a peer but have major problems in a large group activity. The differential performance of social and

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emotional competencies by one child under different conditions compels us to investigate if social and emotional constructs are traits or the result of context-dependent states.

Classroom quality and the degree of the student-environment fit are important contextual factors. Assessment should consider the climate of the classroom as a context for the student's behaviors. We need comprehensive measures of these contexts. While we all agree that measuring context is important, doing so raises a number of challenges. Needed are effective methods for improving classroom and school climates if we find them to be problematic. We cannot, and should not, assess these contexts unless there is a system and method in place to address what is found.

Another contextual factor that emerged as important is the teacher's social and emotional competence. It may be important to measure changes in the teacher's social and emotional competencies and their related behaviors as an outcome of social and emotional learning intervention, but also as it affects program implementation quality and as a mediator of changes in children's behavior.

Finally, family, language and culture make important contributions to the context of children's behavior and it is important to consider them in assessment. Participants stressed that cultural and diversity considerations must garner stronger attention whenever assessments of SEL are discussed.

Selected statements from participants:

> Jason Downer - "Classroom context is inseparable from SEL as assessed in the school context, and arguments for the utility of child-level SEL assessment must always be accompanied by discussions of measurement of the classroom context and in particular teacher-child and child-peer interactions (the contextual mechanisms of SEL development)."
>
> Kim Kendziora / Karen Freel – "Assessment of context is consistent with the theory and logic model of SEL. We need to assess teachers' own SEL skills and acknowledge that principals' and even superintendents' SEL skills matter in creating an environment that is supportive of kids' positive development. The family/home context is equally important and may be beyond the scope of this work but we can partially address it by looking at how teachers interact with parents."

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> Mark Ginsberg – **"**I strongly believe in the consideration of 'context,' and believe that it is essential that 'context' be a critical consideration – therefore, I believe a critical domain of context that was conspicuous by its absence during our discussions was the consideration of both family and community factors, as well as the impact of culture. In particular, and with greater specificity, the family (however defined) is a prominent 'context' for the development and learning of children, as is the cultural background and traditions of the family –somehow, our discussions never captured these critical elements, and I found that the absence of family and culture as factors was significant and there will be much to be gained when we add back in the family as a structure and culture as an organizing principle that we need to understand in terms of their impact on teaching and affirming SEL."

Data Use Strategies:

Immediately needed is a comprehensive resource guide that lists all the currently available assessments, their purpose, their reliability and validity, and their appropriateness for different age groups. A clear assessment profile should consider multiple methods, informants and the child's individual context.

The purpose for assessment should be clearly identified and articulated whether it is for holding schools accountable to social and emotional standards or to provide feedback to schools or researchers about the effectiveness of their efforts. Needed is a strategy for coordinating the many uses of SEL data at all levels of the school system: the classroom teacher who wants a quick and easy to use screening tool and for report card assessments; administrators and policy makers who need to track the results of large scale system changes; and researchers who must assess the effectiveness of interventions. Experience has demonstrated that data collected for one purpose may not be appropriate for another. There can be negative consequences of conducting SEL assessments if the results are not handled in a sensitive manner in line with their purpose. Moreover, conducting SEL assessments without any follow-up may lead to negative consequences.

From the very start, clarity is required to determine whether one is assessing for feedback on intervention efforts, accountability, or identifying kids in need of intensive services. For example, educators want tools to help them identify at-risk kids. Typically teachers are well aware of who are the kids with problem

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behavior. However, often educators focus on children's bad behavior rather than seeing it in the context of social and emotional learning as reflections of lack of SEL competence. This may lead to their overlooking the needs of kids with other social and emotional problems, such as kids with internalizing problems or emotional bullies, who are not as apparent to the teacher and whose impact on the classroom as a whole may not be readily noticed. The assessment needed for this effort may be much different than that needed for accountability purposes.

Data collection and utilization systems needs to connect an individual teacher operating at the classroom level, to school, to policy, to statewide systems. During early childhood, kids are seen by multiple service providers that often do not share information. Needed are shared databases that can be accessed by multiple providers with common identifiers to track kids' progress over time and across different school levels. For this to occur, superintendents need to support the assessment process and oversee a system where all parties involved with kids can use and share data.

Building a support system for assessment data collection and for understanding the data is equally important as the assessment itself. Once data has been collected, numerous questions can arise including, but not limited to, what do we do with assessment data, does our intended audience know how to use the data, and who in the school system will make decisions about targeted interventions for a child? Whatever assessment method is implemented there needs to be a support system in place for teachers so that they can understand the purpose of the assessment, how to use the data that results from the assessment and so they can be reliable reporters and data collectors.

Selected statements from participants:

> Dave Schultz - "A person or committee should summarize existing SEL assessments. This review should divide/include teacher-reported and direct child assessments. A conceptual framework for organizing these instruments should be established. This conceptual framework could either emphasize important SEL skills for basic developmental processes or, alternatively, organize instruments around how teachers/schools might use the information. The person/committee should also establish criteria for evaluating the instruments prior to beginning the review. These criteria would likely include constructs assessed, item reliability, inter-rater reliability (if applicable), test-retest reliability, convergent and/or discriminant validity,

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developmental norming that has been done, criterion validity with social and emotional behaviors, criterion validity with academic outcomes, criterion validity with behavior problems."

Kim Schonert-Reichl – "SEL Assessment Compendium: Gather a working group that has already collected a lot of data on SEL at the child level and the context level. Gather together for a meeting over a few days to examine measurement and identify those measures that appear to be the "best" for SEL assessment. There would also be an assessment of the measures so that there could be a rating system for identifying the best assessments (similar to the rating systems used for the Safe and Sound programs). The SEL measures would include those at the child, classroom (including teacher), and school level."

Lisa Klein – "I feel the priorities are: identifying and creating valid, reliable, appropriate assessments that can be done at scale for children 0-5, defining particular uses for assessment and making it clear what measure is used for which purpose, identifying a solid battery of potential measures that child care, Head Start, and schools can use."

Heather K. Warren – "Get datasets from large studies from the meeting participants and run analyses on psychometric scale properties."

Clancey Blair – "If assessment is done, it is necessary that systems be in place to assure that services and supports are available to address problems identified by the assessment."

Marty Zaslow – "If to improve practice in the classroom and help individual children, we must have way to provide immediate feedback. We need to provide not only feedback but also guidance and supports for following up. If assessments are for purposes of a whole school or community wanting to take stock of children's social and emotional wellbeing we may need briefer and broader measures. When measuring SEL as part of an evaluation or accountability effort, we need to be clear about which SEL constructs are considered the highest priority."

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Action Steps:

Meeting participants identified a clear need to take further action and address the issues raised by this conference. The personnel, resources, motivation and scholarly capacity of the participants are well-suited for these tasks. The steps listed below are considered as priority tasks that the participants would like to address in the future:

- Publish a position paper that defines the need for assessment of SEL.
- Draft a product that clarifies the connection between SEL and academic achievement at the pre-school and elementary grade level.
- Clarify and define SEL constructs. Work on possibly reducing the number of SEL constructs.
- Examine if assessments of SEL not only assess deficits in SEL competencies, but strengths as well.
- Examine how SEL constructs develop over the lifespan of the child.
- Form a working group that formulates criteria for evaluating the quality of SEL assessments, collects information about currently available assessments of SEL, and publishes a compendium of the appropriate use of these assessments.
- The working group establishes a central location for the compendium of SEL assessments. A website and a search engine should be created to support this effort.
- Assess classroom and teacher contexts and examine how they interact with the development of children's social and emotional competencies.
- Work further on establishing the psychometric properties of measurements of classroom environments such as the CLASS and the ECERS.
- Investigate how to evaluate if assessments of SEL are culturally sensitive.
- Educate stakeholders about the complexity of assessment and that different assessments are needed for different purposes.
- Produce plans that provide guidelines on how school systems can use, share, and understand the SEL assessment data and make decisions to better the well-being of children.
- Form a teacher work group to explore the teacher's role in promoting SEL of students.

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