

# Skokie REACH

Middle school students and adults are far more likely to take on new challenges in an atmosphere of trust and fellowship. The positive responses we receive when taking risks, help us gain the confidence and resilience we need to move forward when disappointment occurs. When babies are first learning to talk, we celebrate their early approximations of speech. Babies feel their families' joy and are motivated by the proud response. Family members sit at the edge of their chairs anxiously awaiting the next attempt at communication. Although we strive to develop independent, resilient, risk-takers, we all need the support and encouragement of others. Middle school students need this support as much or more than a baby learning to talk.

The development of a learning community, which fosters challenge, inclusion, and thoughtful risk-taking, is a fundamental goal of our REACH program. At our first assembly, I highlighted our responsibility to create classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, and neighborhoods where mistakes are opportunities to grow, rather than opportunities for others to laugh or be critical at our expense. These are not always easy values for middle school students to maintain. Adolescents face increasing pressure to conform. They want to be cool in the eyes of friends so they will be included in the peer group they select. Providing students with the tools and strategies they need to maintain their values as social pressures increase is a challenge for you as families, and for us as educators.

Research supports our belief that social and emotional variables are integral, rather than incidental, to learning. Improving social and emotional competence advances our academic mission, while also ensuring that we meet our broader mission to produce caring, knowledgeable, and responsible students. The context for most learning in school settings is fundamentally social. Students who are emotionally connected to peers, who value learning and who value community will engage themselves more readily in challenging academic tasks. In order to develop this type of learning environment, students must communicate ideas effectively, as well as listen to, evaluate, and integrate the ideas of others. They must elicit ideas and input from others and be willing to ask teachers and peers for help when needed.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified specific ways social emotional learning programs positively affect academic performance. CASEL has outlined five key social emotional competencies that should be part of any social-emotional skills program. These competencies are the foundation of The Skokie School REACH Program.

**Self-Awareness:** Knowing what we are feeling in the moment; having a realistic assessment of our own abilities and a well-grounded sense of self-confidence

**Social Awareness:** Sensing what other are feeling; being able to take their perspective; appreciating and interacting positively with diverse groups

**Self-Management:** Handling our emotions so they facilitate rather than interfere with the task at hand; being conscientious and delaying gratification to pursue goals; persevering in the face of setbacks and frustrations

**Relationship Skills:** Handling emotions in relationships effectively; establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resistance to inappropriate social pressure; negotiating solutions to conflict; seeking help when needed

**Responsible Decision-Making:** Accurately assessing risks; making decisions based on a consideration of all relevant facts and the likely consequences of alternative courses of action; respecting others; taking personal responsibility for one's decisions

(From *Safe and Sound: An Educational Leader's Guide to Social and Emotional Learning Programs*, 2003.)

The competencies listed above challenge us throughout our lifetime. They do not become part of who we are without practice and resolve. As we grow and mature, we must continue to develop strategies to help us stay grounded in who we are and what is important. Students are not always enamored with the challenges we bring forward during REACH. Using our problem solving methodology takes a lot of hard work and practice. Students and adults alike often choose shortcuts to expedite the resolution of problems. They say what is needed to resolve the immediate problem, but do little to find a true resolution. REACH develops skills to help students examine their feelings and motives, seek the perspective of others, and select the best solution based on the intended outcome. Imagine a world where individuals routinely examine their feelings and seek to understand the point of view of others during challenging problem solving situations. These skills require hard work and specific skill development. It does not take much training or effort for most of us to hear. Specific skill development, effort, and practice are required to learn how to listen. Over the course of the year, we will highlight REACH classroom activities in the Home Scoop, and provide ideas to extend the lessons at home.