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# Birmingham City Schools

Birmingham, AL

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## Prioritizing SEL to Create Healthy Learning Environments





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Birmingham City School District (BCSD) is home to 43 schools with more than 22,000 students. Since 1874, BCSD has worked diligently to provide its students with a strong academic curriculum and to ensure a nurturing and safe learning environment for all. BCSD is a diverse Title I district in Birmingham, Alabama. While new to the Rethink Ed SEL platform, district leaders, teachers, families, and students are eager to ramp up SEL implementation as they have seen immediate benefits.

Courtney Nelson, the district Director of Social Emotional Learning, is leading the charge on making SEL a priority for everyone because to her, “it means doing things in the schools for children that often get ignored or tossed aside or mislabeled as negative behavior.” She believes that SEL “is preparing children for real life and adulthood” and that SEL “is everything that academics does not address.” She says that when schools “embrace things like teaching relationship skills and sustaining those and responsible decision making,” it helps to “structure life in a more positive way.” Candace Curry, who teaches 11th and 12th-grade science, implements SEL primarily through the REACH program where she targets SEL directly every morning with students, agrees and has seen how it helps her “students deal not only with their educational aspects but also with their being, who they are, how they feel.” Ms. Curry said it has helped her “to understand not just (her) students but (herself) and how all of it relates to (them) as a class and as a school.”

For Latanya Jordan Winters, a 2nd-grade teacher, SEL “means stability” and helps student learn “what’s acceptable in the school environment” so that she can “increase academic learning”. She thinks that SEL helps “keep (students) grounded” and it allows the children to talk, they love to talk and they want to tell you about their day, they want to tell you how they feel, and the more you can pull that out of them, they’re not bottled up” and this helps them to focus better throughout the day.

### **Rethink Ed SEL Provides the “Piece of the Puzzle That Was Needed to Put Everything Together”**

Rethink Ed SEL “was that little piece of the puzzle that was needed to put everything together” according to Ms. Curry. The program has “made it easier for (her) to have the kinds of conversations that (she) needs to have with students in order to get to the root of a lot of the issues that we as teachers have with communicating with students.” The videos, activities, and discussions have helped her students because it helps them to “talk out their feelings” and they are “able to have discussions that (she) does not think would have been easy to tap into” before using Rethink Ed SEL. “If those prompts weren’t available, if those videos did not open the door to help them realize that a lot of these conversations that we are having are needed and that they are not alone in a lot of the situations they are going through.” She feels that “Rethink has given them the voice that they were missing” and it is giving them the chance to see that “I’m not so different than the other person.” Now, she feels that the conversations are more productive and powerful “because now they have empathy for each other and they are giving each other the opportunity to share things that they might not have shared prior to these discussions.” Ms. Nelson also sees how SEL has helped students talk about things and share their feelings and how “they’re able to articulate things in conversations” and how students “finally have a place to talk about things” and that students “have a time where it feels okay” to share their feelings.

Mrs. Winters explained that the previous program they were using “generally touched (their) tier 2 and tier 3 students” and “maybe one day out of the week, there was a select group of students that actually got to get those benefits.” Now, with Rethink Ed SEL, she feels that it is more in the “teachers hands” and “that is how (they) start the day, every day, so students know they’re in that routine and when (they) start class, (they) know that (they’re) doing social emotional learning and that gives them an opportunity.” She thinks that the curriculum allows students to “tap into some good positive skills strategies” and that these skills are “something that they can use to go forward in their lives with school, with home” and it helped to “bridge that gap between school and home.” She loves “the way that progression just moves along with the scope and sequence” in Rethink Ed SEL and specifically praised the lessons on empathy and safe and ethical behavior. She has noticed that it has helped her students “to be more considerate, more compassionate” and attributes this to them “having these discussions every single day.”

## **How SEL Impacts Students at Birmingham City Schools**

Students are also excited about SEL and were happy to share their perspectives. Charity, a senior who is interested in going to college to pursue computer science and business management, feels that SEL helped her to understand her mental health as well as coping with the challenges of her senior year with COVID, college applications, scholarships, etc. Now that she “is growing up and starting to face big responsibilities,” she needs to prioritize time management, organization, decision making, and stress management. Before Rethink Ed SEL, she “was struggling to figure out when is the time to take a break?” and “it was hard managing (her) time” but “once (she) started Rethink, it made (her) think, okay, the steps that (Rethink) is giving me or things that they are trying to help me with affect me where I can get my words together.” She also thinks that SEL has helped her with relationships and boundaries and says that she is “starting to understand who is really for (her) and who is not really for (her) and who has (her) best interests in mind and who does not.”

She feels that SEL has built better, more meaningful relationships with teachers and that “it can truly impact the student’s life and actually make them want to come to school and lets them know ‘I actually do have people that I can go to if I’m having a bad day.’” She also has seen the impact on peer relationships and how they talk about difficult subjects such as social justice. She says that “social emotional learning helps you realize that everybody’s not going to be on your side” for instance “with the Black Lives Matter movement, people have different opinions” but with SEL “you’re going to think “well, they may not agree with what I’m saying but I feel like this is a big issue and I’m going to do something regardless of what they say.” SEL has also reinforced her confidence in pursuing her dreams of becoming a leader in computer science engineering and says “women are the next leaders and they could be the next leaders in STEM fields” and “with social emotional learning, it’s like, if you have a passion for something, you should stick to it.”

Ethan, a 6th grader who likes basketball and spending time with his family, thinks SEL is about “keeping a positive mindset” and trying to “stay strong with all the things that are going on in the world.” He believes it is about “keeping a healthy mindset.” SEL has helped him in a lot of ways including learning how to “get rid of distractions during school and stay more focused and more motivated.” He also described how it has helped him with his peers and how he knows the importance of treating them equally and that he needs to “be nice to them” and “never be negative or mean to somebody else, just treat them how you want to be treated, just try to make the best of it.” He says that it helps him “stay composed because sometimes in life, you know, you can lose your temporary worth but social emotional learning helps (him) stay composed, keep a healthy mindset, always stay positive going through life, look for the best in things, and not look at the negative side.” His favorite activities in Rethink Ed SEL are the discussions with peers and journaling because it “helps out a lot” and he can write down “what (he’s) done in that day, write down things that

(he) needs to accomplish or what (he) needs to do, and making sure (he) doesn't lose track of anything." Crystal Mullen-Johnson, a parent of a 6th grader and a mental health provider in the community, has also seen how SEL helps her son and other kids "recognize differences and embrace people for those differences." She believes that SEL "allows (students) the community to hear each other" and "that empathy piece is critical" as well as "compassion and being able to extend that to and accept his peers for who they are, regardless of what their race is or gender." She thinks that SEL skills create an environment where students "feel safe in expressing their emotions, whether they are positive or negative" and that Rethink Ed SEL "helps to cultivate that." She sees how her son's confidence, self-awareness, growth mindset, and empathy are developing and shared a heartwarming story about how her son recognized a peer that was "struggling with mental health problems" and he approached his mom to ask how to help, and she explained that "he was able to be an active listener when a peer was expressing struggles and he was proactive." She attributes his ability to do that to his growing development of SEL skills.

## **Getting Through the Pandemic with the Help of Rethink Ed SEL**

During the pandemic and school closures, Ms. Nelson says that Rethink Ed SEL helped "tremendously because the students had consistency" and "the only thing that had to change was instructional model, Zoom, which was going to change for all subjects anyway." She feels that "having the students able to go into the platform themselves" and being able to complete activities in the Student Center "was huge." The platform was a lifesaver for her team because she "didn't have to shift the instructional calendar and the curriculum" and did not need to "have an updated training on how to engage students" because with Rethink Ed, "it just seamlessly flows" and they were able to take a breathe and say "oh, we're ready, we're good, let's go" and it "was kind of nice."

Ms. Curry also thinks that Rethink Ed SEL was important for her students because “they’re at home and they’ve been at home all of this time for like a year now and they are dealing with stuff at home during school time, they’re dealing with parents and siblings and responsibilities that they normally wouldn’t have during the school day.”

SEL helps the students balance the stress and develop better-coping strategies and she feels that “it is so important to teach our children that there will be stressful situations, but this is what we do to balance them out.” Her students “were even talking about how they could work together to help ease the load” and the Rethink Ed SEL lesson on “balancing stress was like the big light bulb for (her) entire class because some were not dealing with stress at all” and “they had the stress, but they weren’t dealing with it, but that lifted, that was like a home run hit for sure!” She shares a story about one of her students who contracted COVID and had to go through the quarantine period. She utilized one of the SEL lessons about being able to move on and “what you can do now in order to prepare for later and how you overcome obstacles” and the student’s mom was in the room observing the lesson. The mother said “I had no idea what y’all did in that class” and she was so happy that the school was reinforcing what she and the student’s father said about “even though things happen, you still have to press on, you have to move forward.” And now, Ms. Curry talks to the parent regularly and they have conversations about SEL and how it is helping her child.

Ms. Curry loves that SEL allows her to hear “those winning stories, those glows” rather than negative conversations with parents. She thinks it has brought her parents more into the classroom community. Tamara Bonner-Royster, Assistant Principal at Huffman High School and Birmingham City’s largest school, shared that “Rethink Ed, especially during these times with the pandemic, did help to address some of the anxiety (their) students have been facing” and finds value in the



comprehensive library of SEL topics and said that “there is a wide range of lessons from different topics that will be able to serve the teachers and what they've used to kind of help their students navigate and communicate how they're feeling during this time, when school closed abruptly to this rollercoaster ride that we're going through another year, or in a second year.”

John C. Lyons, Principal of Huffman High School, agrees with Ms. Bonner-Royster and adds that “Rethink Ed has helped (them) a lot because students get an opportunity to speak about the anxieties that they encounter because of this new learning style (i.e. remote learning). And they were able to have that one-on-one interaction that they didn't normally have, as well as they got to work with their teacher very closely, and the teachers got to learn them on a personal level and not just as student-teacher. They got to learn a little bit more about the individual and learning what makes that individual tick, so to speak. Learning a little bit in-depth about a student kind of helped us as we went through the year, it's to ease some of the anxieties that the students have.” Ms. Nelson also described how important SEL is going to be in bringing students back to campuses. She plans to focus on “a stress management and trauma-informed approach to welcoming the students back” and so far their “numbers are showing progress because they are able to communicate and adapt.”

Ms. Mullen-Johnson applauds the teachers who she says “have been marvelous in terms of helping kids adapt during this challenging time” and that “during this pandemic and virtual learning, the social emotional learning program has been critical in developing skills” to adapt to the difficulties during this time. And Ethan says that as a middle school student, he missed going to school and hanging out with his friends and SEL helped him “stay strong, like keep enjoying life and not breaking down or being too sad or mopey about it.”

### **Professional Development in SEL Helps Staff “Hit the Mark”**

Ms. Curry believes that the Rethink Ed SEL professional development modules have helped the staff “hit the mark” because it gives them “the chance to let (their) students see (them) as human beings and not as a professional who just gives grades and moves you on, they’re actually getting to see (them) as people too.” With Rethink Ed SEL, she says that they are no longer “scrambling and they’re not having to spend extra time planning and figuring out what to do” and she continues by saying that “it’s giving them the opportunity to move forward with the lessons without having to be bogged down with just another task to do in order to get through the day and it is making a difference.”

Mrs. Winters has embraced the professional development as well and says that it helps to make her efforts “more positive” and that it shows in the impact it has on her students. Ms. Bonner-Royster reports that so far their teacher is happy and “they’re excited” and “have enjoyed this program (i.e. Rethink Ed).” She also shared that Rethink Ed has “been very beneficial to the teachers as well as the students because they have the opportunity to engage in the conversation about how do we get through this part of our world now, but how do we move beyond this and using those skills through the course of not only their time in high school but through life.” Mr. Lyons concurs and adds that professional development is essential for educators because they are “also dealing with life-changing events” and “dealing with day-to-day situations” and they “need to know how to deal with those as well.” Ms. Nelson has also seen how professional development and training can greatly influence teachers because “it is unfair to assume that a teacher would automatically know how to do this thing we call SEL” so Rethink Ed has provided them with a platform “for teachers to use that guides

them into learning the vocabulary, learning the emotions themselves, learning how to teach children through them and talk through them, and follow up with activities” and this is how math, French, English, and other academic experts develop SEL skills “until it becomes something that (they) inherently feel comfortable teaching.” This spring, she plans to present the program to the Gifted teachers so that they can begin to incorporate SEL into the student's weekly curriculum as she believes there is a great need there and the program will make a big difference for those students too.

## Engaging Parents in SEL

Although relatively new to the Rethink Ed SEL program, BCSD is already engaging their parents and they are working harder in “finding opportunities for parents to join” by sharing information about SEL with parents and reminding them that they can engage with their children in the platform explains Ms. Nelson. and Ms. Curry states that conversations with parents have been positive “because they learn things about their children they did not know” and the students now feel “like they can communicate those feelings or those issues that they’re having better with their parents.”

Mrs. Winters believes that SEL is “a family affair and not just another assignment” and sends information to parents and assigns homework for students to work on SEL skills at home with their families. Charity also feels like Rethink Ed has helped her connect more with her parents and says “it’s like now I can speak to my mom about college and not feel scared” whereas in the past she “didn’t want to show (her) mom that (she) was upset because (she) didn’t get a scholarship or a college rejection.” Before she was “scared, but because of social emotional learning” she now does not “mind going to (her) mom about certain problems that before (she) wasn’t comfortable with.” Prior to learning SEL strategies, Charity felt that nobody was going to

understand her but now she feels that she can “properly express (her) feelings and even if (she) doesn’t, even if (she’s) at a point where (she) just wants to scream, then it’s not scary anymore, it’s more of a relief now than fear.” Ms. Mullen-Johnson says that as a professional, when she heard about SEL, she “thought it was beautiful concept because kids need skills to help them understand how to regulate their emotions, to understand how vital it is to foster and cultivate healthy peer relationships, and to have empathy for their peer, and to develop emotional regulation skills when they are feeling challenged because challenges are inevitable.” For her son and other students his age, she believes that middle school is “very challenging for kids because they’re trying to identify who they are” and “the virtual environment has made it a little more challenging as well.” But, with SEL, she thinks “it has created a culture where kids can come together as a community, as 6th graders, and support each other and understand that its okay to express emotions.” She loves how SEL teaches kids “that it’s okay to express emotions” and “it’s okay to have empathy.” She also noticed that it has helped with self-awareness (e.g. knowing when you are spending too much time on video games or the cell phone) and academic achievement. She notes that it has helped her son “to be more intentional about being organized” and “being more intentional about improving his time management skills.”

### **Moving Forward with SEL**

Taking on SEL implementation during a pandemic and managing to actively engage teachers, families, and students in the first year is an incredible accomplishment. BCSD has exceptional leadership with dedicated staff who are bound to see even greater changes and improvements in the years to come. The intentionality of the team to make SEL a priority and the openness of the families and students to learning more and growing as a school and community are inspiring. The return to in-person instruction will have its challenges for everyone in the Fall and Ms. Nelson believes that SEL will become an even larger priority in the district and that as staff, students, and families become more engaged, it will improve their school climate and community learning environment.



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## About Us

Rethink Ed combines the power of technology and research to deliver innovative, scalable and evidence-based instructional materials and supports for learners with disabilities. The comprehensive suite of tools ensures that every student develops the academic, behavioral and social/emotional skills they need to succeed in school, at work and in life. Rethink Ed positions educators, students and families for success. Rethink Ed is a division of Rethink First, a company that aims to place evidence-based treatment solutions in the hands of every educator, clinician or parent working with a child with special needs. We are unique in our footprint, leveraging the power of technology to provide clinical support, best-practice tools, and research-based content to all market segments, reaching more children with special needs than any other solution.

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