

## **The New School at Southshore Social-Emotional Learning in Action**

The New School at Southshore in southeast Seattle shines as an example of social-emotional learning in action. Founded in 2002 to foster the development of mind, body, and spirit in children, The New School is part of the Seattle Public School system and currently enrolls students from preschool through fifth grade with plans to expand to the eighth grade. The school day begins in each classroom with the practice of “silent time,” three minutes to still the mind and nurture self-awareness. Many teachers follow silent time with a heartfelt written “morning message” that combines reading practice with content related to social-emotional insight and skills. Teachers sometimes take the opportunity to model emotional and spiritual insights from their own lives for their students.

At The New School, social-emotional learning is deeply personal and imbues the school culture. School leaders set the tone by presenting themselves to the school community as real people faced with challenges and feelings. Sometimes, they do great things, and show pride, satisfaction, and gratitude. Other times, they are uncertain or make mistakes, and demonstrate self-acceptance, problem solving, and collaboration. Teachers skillfully share with students their own observations and personal growth. Children engage in peer conflict resolution and proactive acts of service and compassion. One year, a third-grade class built by hand a wooden rocking boat as a gift for the preschool. Older students regularly read with and mentor younger students. First graders make gift bags of snacks, pencils, erasers, and good-luck tokens for students taking the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). Students of all ages attend with caring words and kind deeds to a child who is sad, scared, angry, or lonely.

The entire school builds social and emotional skills using programs such as Second Step and Peer Mediators. This gives everyone the opportunity to proactively learn and practice vocabulary, concepts, and new skills that result in acts of kindness and compassion. To make compassion a tangible experience, students have also participated in local service projects and have sent school supplies to children in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania.

Families are actively welcomed to the New School, warmly greeted, put at ease, and included in activities. Younger siblings of students commonly spend many happy hours at the school for years before they enter preschool. Some parents and guardians become well known in their child’s classroom and are additional role models for social-emotional skills and learning.

The “Spirit Celebration,” an all-school gathering held on Friday mornings, honors the work of knowing and valuing each individual in The New School community as a unique and precious being. The Spirit Celebration begins with three minutes of silent time and often a brief talk by a teacher, student, or guest on a topic such as kindness, compassion, or interdependence. Student performances follow, sometimes well rehearsed by a whole class, other times created by one or a few students sharing a favorite dance or song. Occasionally, guest artists and performers delight and enlighten the audience with interpretations of what it means to be human. Spirit Celebrations are powerful reminders that those present are, without exception, members of a loving community.

At The New School, we teach about respect and we practice respect for each other. We teach about compassion and we treat each other (and ourselves) with compassion. We reveal our true selves and we gently keep each other safe. And, most of all, we learn together—from the youngest child to the revered elders—how to be the force of positive change we seek for ourselves and for the world.

Michelle Domash

