

# Create a Caring Community

Health and physical educator **Christine Botti** reflects on how SEL has strengthened her students



**M**y journey to better understand social and emotional learning (SEL) and its connection to health and physical education began about two years ago.

While we were evaluating our health education curriculum, an administrator asked where social and emotional learning was being taught in our program.

I decided to do some research and familiarized myself with the widely used framework developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). The framework includes five core SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.



SEL competencies set up students for success in the classroom, school and life.



I realized the correlation between those competencies and the health and physical education standards was undeniable. As I began to deepen my knowledge of social and emotional learning, I was able to affirm my notion that SEL naturally embeds itself into health, physical education and athletics.

## A STRONG FOUNDATION

The five SEL competencies set up students for success in the classroom,

school and life. I also believe that the health and physical education standards do this — so how do we intentionally make connections between all of them?

I started by going back through my lessons, where I looked for the natural relationships both direct and indirect. I then used the skills identified by CASEL to enhance my current lessons. I found that when I looked at lesson activities and objectives through an SEL lens, small adjustments had big impact.

Personally, one of the easiest places for me to start incorporating SEL skills was by looking at the competencies of self-awareness and self-management. In the classroom, in the gym, and on an athletic field, emotions affect all of us in many ways. Students and athletes can struggle with the regulation and impact of their emotions.

SEL focuses on these skills and helps create a “toolbox,” which can be used to help students identify feelings and recognize how their body is responding to those feelings. In my classes and other interactions with students, I now spend more time practicing mindful activities. We work to reflect and self-evaluate in order to address and strengthen the skill of self-awareness.

## IMPACT ON ACADEMICS

My next strategy was to begin using the SEL competencies as a way to strengthen the classroom community. When our classrooms honor SEL skills, they become environments in which students feel welcomed, safe and able to be themselves, and thus, academic improvement follows.

By having a better understanding of SEL and incorporating it into the classroom environment, I have been

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able to consciously create routines and checkpoints within my class. This allows all students a pathway to feel heard, valued and connected to the class. In my personal experiences, I have found this to be invaluable. I have witnessed students connecting to the lessons — and to each other — in a deeper and more meaningful way.

An important part of what I have learned is that by committing to an educational framework that integrates SEL into the academic setting, we are intentionally helping students develop these skills all while supporting and increasing academic performance.

SEL places emphasis on core values and life skills, which leads to improved behavior, increased self-esteem, and greater empathy among students. And, when you integrate SEL into all facets of your school, it can lead to the creation of a more caring community.