

Building Capacity for Change: Constance Easton’s Journey in Social-Emotional Learning Through the Learning Forward Academy

Constance Easton can trace her interest in social-emotional learning to the early 1980s when she was working with secondary students who were chronically absent from school. She realized early on that she was “missing some tools from my toolbox” when it came to enhancing the non-academic side of learning.

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“I was a young teacher in my early 20s, thrown into this situation without any (social-emotional) programming in place. We had to build it from the ground up with a social worker at the school. But it was a fabulous experience that helped me understand the invisible backpacks that our students bring into the classroom,” Easton said.

Now an experienced educator responsible for coordinating mental health, social-emotional learning, and counseling for the 23,000-student Richmond School District in British Columbia, she has developed a deep well of knowledge. She knows that students often don’t progress because they can’t “calm their brains so they are ready to learn.”

But Easton knows she alone can’t help every student. She believes students will do better if their teachers know more about how to employ social-emotional learning (SEL) routines into their classrooms, so she’s aiming to build their capacity to do just that.

That capacity building became her problem of practice when she joined the Learning Forward Academy, a two-year learning experience with other educators aiming to improve professional learning (see text box). She was able to join the Academy’s Class of 2022 because of a scholarship from the Learning Forward Foundation.

Specifically, Easton wanted to harness the power of professional learning communities (PLCs) to help teachers build a shared language and shared practices

for SEL. If more teachers would consistently use the same routines, student learning would improve, she believed.

When she enrolled in the Academy, she was already at work developing a PLC focused on SEL routines, practices, and pedagogy at Ferris Elementary School in Richmond, which has 625 students in K-7 and 60 staff. But that work was threatened because of changing needs in the district. Easton may not have been able to continue pursuing the SEL PLC without her participation in the Academy, and she could not have enrolled in the Academy without the scholarship.

The Academy was an ever-present partner for Easton as she developed and nurtured the SEL PLC. Academy colleagues helped her refine her problem of practice and offered feedback at numerous points along the way. They introduced her to new ways of thinking about leveraging tools such as a logic model or KASAB. Being among a group of colleagues who valued reading and applying research gave her a safe environment to explore, ask questions, and keep learning.

KASAB refers to the defined outcomes that delineate the expected changes in Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills, Aspirations, and Behaviors.

Expanding SEL through Collaboration and Data-Driven Confidence

Initially, four teachers volunteered to join the SEL PLC; by the end, eight teachers were directly involved in the work. The initial focus on intermediate grades (4-7) was expanded to also include primary grades (K-3) because of teacher interest.

As Easton had hypothesized, when teachers learned together, they grew more comfortable trying new skills and implementing SEL strategies and programs. By the

end of the project, teachers were confident enough with the SEL content and routines that they were refining their practices, not just repeating what they had learned from others.

“I think teachers intuitively know that a safe space is necessary for learning,” she said. But teachers needed more coaching about how to create those safe spaces and how to navigate the day-to-day routines.

Being part of the PLC also allowed teachers to “take risks they probably wouldn’t have taken otherwise,” she said, because they knew that she was available to coach them through this work.

Prior to the SEL PLC, teachers had never collected data about any measures of social-emotional health. Easton’s participation with the Academy introduced her to some new data-gathering tools and helped her refine what she knew about others. With Easton’s guidance, the Ferris teachers evaluated student changes by using a brief questionnaire that asks about eight domains of social-emotional wellness: personal responsibility, optimistic thinking, goal-directed behavior, social awareness, decision-making, relationship skills, self-awareness and self-management.

Primary students showed the most improvement, moving from less than 10 percent use of social-emotional skills to more than 29 percent use of the skills. Primary students also showed the greatest growth in social awareness, increasing 20 percent on average across the grades. Grade 5 and 6 students improved their observable SEL skills by four percent over the six months when evidence was collected.

Having the data was convincing. Teachers were no longer operating on hunches that student behavior had changed. They could demonstrate how learning SEL

strategies had changed student engagement, and that data encouraged them to continue with the program.

Easton said being part of the Academy was essential to the success of the PLC and therefore to expanding her school’s SEL work.. Her Academy colleagues brought fresh eyes to her work and could either nudge her to keep going or reconsider. For example, at one point, during a gallery walk about the various Academy projects, her Academy colleagues urged her to rein in her project. She had allowed it to become too big and was losing focus.

Easton said being part with the Academy was essential to the success of the PLC.

“I got a lot of encouragement around this work (from other Academy participants). Sometimes, in your own space, it can feel very discouraging, particularly if you’re one of the few people that’s blowing that horn (for SEL). So it was really great to have other people say, no, you’re on the right track. Keep it moving,” she said.

For more information about the Learning Forward Foundation and their scholarship/grant recipients visit <https://foundation.learningforward.org> or email us at foundation@learningforward.org.



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Learning Forward Academy is a premier, immersive learning experience designed to foster impactful, lasting change in educational settings. Over a 2½-year journey, participants from around the world collaborate on real-world challenges, focusing on innovative, equity-centered professional learning practices. Guided by expert coaches and leaders, Academy members gain practical tools and insights to drive meaningful transformation in their schools and districts. The program emphasizes sustained, iterative growth—equipping educators to adapt, refine, and continuously improve their practices to enhance educator expertise and ensure excellent outcomes for all students.