Addressing Students' SEL Pandemic Needs by Addressing their SEL Universal Needs (Part I)

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What Social, Emotional, Attributional, and Behavioral Skills Do ALL Students Need from an SEL Initiative?

Dear Colleagues,

Introduction

Lately, two or three times per week (or more), I receive "news" stories from the popular and professional newsletter press summarizing the results of surveys (framed as "research") concluding that significant numbers of school-aged children and adolescents continue to experience pandemic-related stresses or traumas.

Other stories discuss the low levels of staff and student morale, how many teachers or administrators have considered resigning their positions (or actually have resigned), and what educators can do to maintain their "wellness."

In response, many of these news stories recommend that schools implement some type of SEL (social-emotional learning) program or initiative. Some of these stories do not define or specify what SEL is or what SEL actions should occur. Other stories provide testimonials that describe SEL activities, but do not provide the objective data that validate their efficacy. And, still others quote "research" without demonstrating that the research is sound such that the outcomes are accurate and meaningful.

As we've noted in the past, "SEL" in education today is subjectively defined by whatever the news story author, in-field researcher, or district or school staff member says it is. Citing it is almost like jumping on a gratuitous bandwagon. Especially as numerous national surveys tell us that the vast majority of schools across the country are "doing SEL."

Part I of this two-part Blog Series focuses on the challenge that many students have pandemic-related (andpre-pandemic-related) social, emotional, and behavioral needs that schools need to address to maintain safe school settings, positive classroom climates, and consistent student engagement and achievement.

But part of the challenge also is that some schools are investing a lot of time and money in "SEL," without recognizing that their investments have a low probability of success because they are not addressing the student outcomes needed in scientifically sound ways.

As part of this discussion, we address some critical flaws in the "SEL world," and present a cognitive-behavioral alternative that emphasizes students' social, emotional, and behavioral competence and self-management skills.

In Part II of this Series, we will discuss the concern that many districts and schools are "doing SEL" by purchasing on-line computer software to "teach" SEL skills and interactions.

The concern here is that (a) schools are trying to teach "interpersonal," social problem-solving, and conflict prevention and resolution skills using a two-dimensional, less-than-personal (i.e., three dimensional) interactive mode; and (b) schools may not understand (because of the marketing done by companies selling these software) that they are wasting time and money—and sacrificing intended student outcomes—by "investing" in these products.

Indeed, no computer can fully substitute for a real student experiencing and learning real emotion-triggering situations that require on-the-spot social analyses and prosocial, human interactions.

SEL Problems at the School Level

Usually, when someone says "SEL" at the school level, the next sentence includes the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

And that is fine. . . . except educators need to know who and what CASEL is. . . as well as its strengths and limitations, and how these impact its framework and components, its evaluations and recommendations of SEL programs, and its political influence at the

federal, state, and local levels.

Critically, what CASEL says about social and emotional learning does not represent the full range of what social and emotional learning is or should be. CASEL is one voice—albeit a dominant one. But there are other evidence-based and well-established voices out there. They just are being drowned out by the popular press SEL bandwagon.

Significantly, CASEL is an independent organization that is not certified by the U.S. Department of Education or any other statutory or accreditation body as an official spokesperson or approving body of SEL or SEL programs and practices.

Moreover, while not explicitly stated on its website, it is assumed that CASEL is registered as a 501(c)(3) public charity as it (a) takes tax-deductible donations—as well as millions from well-endowed corporate and other foundations (like the Allstate Foundation, and the Novo Foundation run by the daughter of Warren Buffett); and (b) has lobbied influential U.S. Congressional delegations for years—one of its chief political sources of power.

Given all of this, CASEL largely writes its own unchecked and unfettered rules.

For example, when it publishes its "research-based" Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs, it does this—once again—as an independent organization that sets it own (not always accepted) criteria as to what constitutes a "good" SEL program, and what "research" demonstrates that an SEL program is effective and successful with students.

Indeed, there are research-validated SEL programs that CASEL does not recognize, and SEL programs that CASEL recognizes based on research that would never be published by a reputable, refereed journal.

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CASEL's SEL implementation framework basically gives districts and schools a menu of possible strategies and directions, encouraging them to "pick-what-you-want." Significantly, this approach increases the probability that schools will pick the "wrong" strategies— resulting in wasted time, training, resources, and efforts, and poor or counterproductive student outcomes.

This approach contrasts with the use of well-researched and field-validated models with implementation blueprints that include essential, sequenced, and scaffolded practices.

Critically, as discussed below, CASEL's framework is "anchored" by its five broad and interrelated constructs of competence: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making. These constructs have never been empirically validated by any well-designed, large-scale factor analytic research studies. Indeed, they have been created (and recently re-created) by CASEL.

A CASEL Research Case in Point

To provide but one example of the research-related point above, on March 17, 2021, the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences published an independent technical paper on the PATHS (Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies) SEL curriculum through its objective, research-reviewing What Works Clearinghouse (WWC).

PATHS is cited in CASEL's Program Guide to Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs. . . its self-published compendium of "research-validated" SEL programs. One of PATHS' authors is Dr. Mark Greenberg, a founder of CASEL. . . who will be quoted later below.

[CLICK HERE for PATHS Report (https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/InterventionReports/wwc_SLE_PATHS_IR_mar2021.pdf)]

In the Summary of its independent review of PATHS, the What Works Clearinghouse Report stated:

> The Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS®) program is a curriculum that aims to promote emotional and social competencies and to reduce aggression and behavior problems in elementary school children. PATHS® is delivered through short lessons given two to three times a week over the school year.
>
> The program is based on the principle that understanding and regulating emotions are central to effective problem solving. The lessons focus on (1) self-control, (2) emotional literacy, (3) social competence, (4) positive peer relations, and (5) interpersonal problem-solving skills. There is a separate curriculum for each grade.
>
> This What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) intervention report. . . explores the effects of the PATHS® program on student emotional awareness, social interactions, behavior, and academic achievement. The WWC identified 35 studies of the PATHS® program. (Only) two of these studies meet WWC standards.
>
> The evidence presented in this report is from studies of the effects of the PATHS® program on students—including 70% White, 11% Asian, and 8% Black students, and students with and without disabilities—spanning grades 1 through 5 in both urban and suburban districts.

One study included 1,582 students in 45 schools in 10 districts in the United Kingdom. The second study included 133 students with disabilities in seven elementary schools in three school districts in the state of Washington.

Based on the research, the WWC found that PATHS® has no discernible effects on academic achievement, social interactions, observed individual behavior, or emotional status.

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And yet, in almost total contrast, CASEL's most-recent preschool and elementary school Program Guide to Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs states that PATHS demonstrates "evidence of effectiveness" in the following areas:

- Increased Positive Social Behavior and Reduced Emotional Distress at the Preschool level; and
- Improved Academic Performance, Increased Positive Social Behavior, Reduced Conduct Problems, and Reduced Emotional Distress at the Elementary School level.

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Critically, if you were a district or school wishing to purchase an SEL curriculum and you looked at the PATHS website, you would only see research that supports this curriculum and your potential purchase.

If you looked at the CASEL website, you would see the statements above that tell you that PATHS has good research evidence for some of a school's most-desired SEL student outcomes.

And yet, if you looked at the WWC independent Report, you would see that (a) 35 of the 37 PATHS studies reviewed did not even meet the WWC's criteria for sound research; and (b) that the WWC did not find the same positive results cited by CASEL in the two studies that they objectively reviewed.

So, how do educators reconcile these apparent contradictions?

First of all, please understand that my goal here is not to disparage my colleagues—those at CASEL, or those involved with PATHS.

The first message is that districts and schools need to know the backgrounds of those who review the different SEL curricula that they are considering for purchase.

Different reviewers set their own—sometimes non-objective or at least different—criteria for determining what is "good" research, what is a "research-based" curriculum, and how much good research is needed to endorse a specific SEL curriculum.

As represented above, some evaluative criteria are broader and more subjective than others (e.g., CASEL), and others—like WWC—use criteria that are defined in federal law.

The second message is that districts and schools looking to purchase an SEL curriculum need to:

- Independently review and vet the testimonials, claims, and "research" cited by endorsing specific social, emotional, and behavioral programs, curricula, or practices; and
- Remember that anyone can publish their own research and post it on a website. This does not make this research—or its results— sound, accurate, or generalizable.

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To summarize this section: An April, 2020 Education Week article, written at the beginning of the Pandemic, summarized the status of SEL at the school level, stating:

> But too often, experts say, teachers are tasked with implementing new social-emotional learning practices in their classrooms without adequate, ongoing support, which can tank the effectiveness of the initiative.
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> "Everybody wants to do things quickly and efficiently, so there's been a move toward online training as a way for teachers to do this," said Mark Greenberg, a professor of human development and psychology at Pennsylvania State University and a founder of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, known as CASEL. "There's little or no evidence that online training is sufficient to have teachers implement these programs with quality."
>
> He continued: "I think there are districts that feel they have to check SEL off as one thing they've done. They purchase curricula and they buy online training, and in most cases, if you go back two years later, you won't find anything [different in schools]."
>
> Sustained implementation and change in classrooms, Greenberg said, "really requires leadership and ongoing support." After all, actively supporting the social and emotional development of students is not an innate skill. Veteran teachers are not used to some of these practices, and many new teachers didn't learn these skills in their teacher-preparation programs.

> But only 29 percent of teachers said they have received ongoing training in social-emotional learning that has continued throughout the school year, a new EdWeek Research Center survey found. A fifth of teachers say they never receive opportunities in their job to reflect upon and improve their own social-emotional skills. To help, a growing number of districts have begun to hire SEL coaches to work with teachers. Others are training their principals alongside their teachers in order to boost the entire school's commitment to that work.

SEL Problems at the Instructional Level

A major problem here is that CASEL's five areas of SEL competence: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making. . . are all constructs.

From a scientific perspective, if you want students to emotionally, attributionally, and behaviorally demonstrate competence, you need to teach interpersonal, social problem-solving, conflict prevention and resolution, and emotional control, communication, and coping skills. You cannot teach constructs.

This explains why many SEL programs, that embrace CASEL's SEL competencies, have not helped schools attain the outcomes that they most want—a decrease in inappropriate student behavior, and an increase in appropriate, prosocial student behavior.

These "poor" results occur because these SEL programs only (a) increase students' (Self or Social) awareness of appropriate and inappropriate behavior; and (b) they often only talk about Self-Management, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making—for example, through stories, discussions, and group interactions.

Significantly, student awareness does not necessarily transfer into behavior. And behavior only results through cognitive-behavioral instruction.

Specifically, SEL programs that decrease inappropriate student behavior and increase appropriate, prosocial student behavior use scientifically- and pedagogically-sound cognitive-behavioral approaches that help students to (a) control their emotions, (b) think (attributionally) clearly, and (c) execute learned, prosocial behaviors.

Indeed, to be successful, cognitive-behavioral SEL instruction must include the following social learning theory-to-practice elements:

- Teaching the steps, scripts, and behaviors for specific, targeted skills;
- Modeling or demonstrating the steps, scripts, and behaviors for the skills;
- Having students role-play or physically practice (with explicit, critical feedback) the steps, scripts, and behaviors;

- Having students role-play or physically practice the steps, scripts, and behaviors under simulated conditions of emotionality so that they learn how to handle real emotional situations effectively in the future;
- Transferring the practice of the behaviors (with continued supervision and feedback) into progressively more challenging and emotional real-life simulations, settings, and situations;
- Using teachable, real-life moments to infuse the behaviors into real-life settings and situations; and
- Continuing the practice and infusion until the behaviors are automatic, conditioned, and able to be demonstrated in different stressful situations or emotional conditions or circumstances.

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CASEL does not require specific skill outcomes from its "approved" SEL programs, and it does not evaluate whether these programs used cognitive-behavioral approaches as an essential foundation to instruction.

This leaves it to schools to independently determine that some approved CASEL SEL programs are missing these science-to-practice elements (and, hence, are unlikely to change student behavior), and that they need to be teaching skills and not constructs.

For example, CASEL does not tell schools and educators that:

- Teachers cannot teach Respect; they need to teach the behaviors of Respect.
- Teachers cannot teach Responsibility; they need to teach the specific behaviors that represent the construct of Responsibility.
- Teachers cannot help students to control their emotions by discussing its importance; they need to teach students emotion control skills.
- And, teachers cannot expect students to understand complex social situations so that they make effective interpersonal choices and decisions; they need to teach these skills to them.

In the end: Talk does not change behavior. Only behavioral instruction changes behavior.

And only SEL programs that embed this principle into their instruction have a high probability of successfully changing students' emotions, thinking, and behavior.

SEL Problems at the Student Outcome Level

As noted above, CASEL frames SEL outcomes in five specific constructs that they operationalize in the following way.

Self-Awareness

- Integrating personal and social identities
- Identifying personal, cultural, and linguistic assets
- Identifying one's emotions
- Demonstrating honesty and integrity
- Linking feelings, values, and thoughts
- Examining prejudices and biases
- Experiencing self-efficacy
- Having a growth mindset
- Developing interests and a sense of purpose

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Social Awareness

- Taking others' perspectives
- Recognizing strengths in others
- Demonstrating empathy and compassion
- Showing concern for the feelings of others
- Understanding and expressing gratitude
- Identifying diverse social norms, including unjust ones
- Recognizing situational demands and opportunities
- Understanding the influences of organizations/systems on behavior

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Self-Management

- Managing one's emotions
- Identifying and using stress-management strategies
- Exhibiting self-discipline and self-motivation
- Setting personal and collective goals
- Using planning and organizational skills
- Showing the courage to take initiative
- Demonstrating personal and collective agency

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Relationship Skills

- Communicating effectively
- Developing positive relationships
- Demonstrating cultural competency
- Practicing teamwork and collaborative problem-solving
- Resolving conflicts constructively
- Resisting negative social pressure

- Showing leadership in groups
- Seeking or offering support and help when needed
- Standing up for the rights of others

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Responsible Decision-Making

- Demonstrating curiosity and open-mindedness
- Identifying solutions for personal and social problems
- Learning to make a reasoned judgment after analyzing information, data, facts
- Anticipating and evaluating the consequences of one's actions
- Recognizing how critical thinking skills are useful both inside & outside of school
- Reflecting on one's role to promote personal, family, and community well-being
- Evaluating personal, interpersonal, community, and institutional impacts

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NOTE that we are not saying that these constructs are not valuable.

We are saying that virtually none of the above constructs can be taught until they have been operationalized into directly observable, measurable, and behaviorally-specific skills that are developmentally- and maturationally-sensitive and matched to specific age (grade) levels of students.

Thus, districts and schools will need to operationalize CASEL/SEL's global constructs on their own, and then utilize the social learning theory approaches discussed above to teach the behaviors that they want to target.

But we would like to help.

Below are two sets of universal skill examples that schools can use both (a) to guide their SEL social, emotional, and behavioral skill instruction, and (b) to address students' pre-Pandemic and current Pandemic SEL needs.

These skills come from two sources. The first source is the evidence-based Stop & Think Social Skills Program (Knoff, 2001; 2018; http://www.projectachieve.info/store/stop-think-books (http://www.projectachieve.info/store/stop-think-books)). This Program was designated an evidence-based program by the U.S. Department of Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) in 2001. It was designated a Key Model SEL Program by CASEL in 2002. And it is listed on SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP).

The second source is from the classroom/SEL expectations identified by teachers from across the country as they developed their Classroom Behavioral Matrices (Knoff, 2018; http://www.projectachieve.info/store/e-books (http://www.projectachieve.info/store/e-books)). Developing grade-level Behavioral Matrices is a proprietary and copywritten process within Project ACHIEVE's SEL/PBSS model—also identified as an evidence-based program by the U.S. Department of Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) in 2001, and as listed on SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP).

Some Universal SEL Skill Examples that need to systematically and developmentally taught to all students, from preschool to high school, include the following:

Ready to Learn Skills

- Bring all Needed Materials to School (each day, each period)
- Be a Good Listener (to Adults and Peers)
- Follow Directions Quickly, the First Time
- Work Quietly Without Disturbing Others
- Working (Independently or Cooperatively) On Task
- Complete Your Work on Time—To the Best of Your Abilities,
- Raise Your Hand Before You Speak
- Ignore Distractions

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Safety Skills

- Keep Arms, Feet, and Body to Yourself—In Your Own Space
- Walk Safely (To the Right, In Your Space) in the Classroom and School
- Sit In your Chair Properly – "Six on the Floor"
- Use School Equipment and Supplies Appropriately and Safely
- Ask Adults for Help to Solve Serious Problems
- Report Health, Safety, and/or Destructive Situations to School Staff

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Responsibility Skills

- Tell the Truth
- Be a Good Leader and a Good Follower
- Take Responsibility and Be Accountable for your Own Words and Actions
- Accepting Consequences Quickly and Appropriately
- Apologize Appropriately (in Words and Actions)

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Interpersonal/Prosocial Skills

- Be Kind and Cooperate with Others
- Respect Yourself and Others
- Celebrate and Positively Reinforce Others' Successes
- Start and Finish Conversations Appropriately
- Speak Positively and Supportively to Others (Appropriate Tone, Volume, Voice Pitch)
- Discuss Disagreements in a Calm and Respectful Manner
- Treat Classroom Furniture, Books, Equipment & Technology (School or Personal) with Respect
- Respond Appropriately to Peer Pressure

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Social Problem-Solving Skills

- How to Generate Choices and Make Decisions
- Understanding Your Rights and Responsibilities
- Understanding Conflict: Types, Causes, and Strategies
- Finding Solutions: Conflict and Behavior
- Standing Up for a Friend

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Conflict Prevention and Resolution Skills

- Avoiding Trouble/Conflict Situations
- Deciding Whether to Follow the Group
- Dealing with Peer Pressure
- Being Honest/Acknowledging your Mistakes
- Apologizing/Excusing Yourself
- Steps to Mediating a Conflict
- Conflict Resolution: How to Phrase Concerns/How to Present Issues to a Person
- Showing Understanding of Another's Feelings/Empathy
- Dealing with and Responding to Another Person's Anger or Emotionality
- Walking Away from a Fight/Conflict
- Win/Win Approaches to Conflict Management
- Negotiating/Strategies for Resolving Conflicts Peacefully

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Emotional Control, Communication, Coping Skills

- Be Aware of Your Own Feelings and the Feelings of Others
- Identifying Your Inner Voice
- Understanding What Triggers Your Different Emotions
- How to Relax and Control Your Emotions

- Evaluating Yourself
- Standing Up for Yourself or Your Rights/How to be Assertive
- Dealing with and Responding to Teasing
- Dealing with and Responding to Fear or Anxiety
- Dealing with and Responding to Failure
- Dealing with and Responding to Being Rejected or Left Out
- Dealing with and Responding to an Accusation
- Dealing with and Responding to Anger

Summary

The primary messages embedded in this Blog include:

- All students, from preschool through high school, need to learn the interpersonal, social problem-solving, conflict prevention and resolution, and emotional control, communication, and coping skills that help them demonstrate social, emotional, attributional, and behavioral self-management.

  These need to be the explicit goals and outcomes of any SEL initiative, and districts and schools should choose their curricula and organize their scaffolded scope and sequence instruction with these goals in mind.

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- These skills (see our examples in the last section of the Blog) need to be developmentally-sensitive, observable, measurable, behaviorally-specific, and taught using a social learning theory paradigm.

  While constructs (like Responsibility, Respect, or Safety) may help organize social, emotional, and behavioral skills, constructs are not specific enough to be taught so that students can “demonstrate” them.

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- Districts and schools need to independently review and select the evidence-based programs, curricula, and practices that work. . . and will work in their settings and with their students and staff.

  This means wading through the testimonials, marketing claims, and “research” cited by those recommending specific social, emotional, and behavioral programs, curricula, or practices.

It also means recognizing that some organizations (like CASEL) make their recommendations based on their definitions and criteria related to SEL, and that there are other evidence-based programs and approaches that CASEL misses.

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- The ultimate goal of an SEL initiative is to progressively teach students the skills to independently apply and demonstrate—in different real-life situations—the ability to (a) maintain emotional control; (b) think clearly using good social problem-solving, decision-making, and planning; (c) implement their interactions and plan preventatively, prosocially, and proficiently; and (d) evaluate the outcomes, making adjustments as needed. . . all at the appropriate age and developmental levels.

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These are the universal SEL principles and practices that are needed now (with the Pandemic) and were needed then (before the Pandemic) by every district and school in the country. While the current social, emotional, attributional, and behavioral needs of some students (and staff) are somewhat different and (perhaps) more intense right now due to the Pandemic, they are largely a "variation on the theme" of what all students always need.

If schools teach all students the universal SEL skills and science-to-practice strategies, and then apply them, using multi-tiered processes, to the Pandemic as needed, we will all be much further ahead as we successfully progress past this challenging time.

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I hope that the thoughts and analyses in this Blog are useful to you. As we continue to address Pandemic-related issues, we clearly need to differentiate the issues that existed before the Pandemic and those that are Pandemic-specific.

In Part II of this two-part Series, we will discuss the concern that many districts and schools are "doing SEL" by purchasing on-line computer software to "teach" SEL skills and interactions.

The concern here is that (a) schools are trying to teach "interpersonal," social problem-solving, and conflict prevention and resolution skills using a two-dimensional, less-than-personal (i.e., three dimensional) interactive mode; and (b) schools may not understand (because of the marketing done by companies selling these software) that they are wasting time and money—and sacrificing intended student outcomes—by "investing" in these products.

Meanwhile, I encourage and look forward to your comments. . . whether on-line or via e-mail. Also, please feel free to share this Blog and my website with your colleagues.

As always, if I can help you, your colleagues, your school, your district, or your professional setting to analyze its current strategic status, needs, and directions; or to address specific issues or challenges (e.g., multi-tiered services, special education service efficacy, disproportionality, social-emotional learning), please do not hesitate to contact me.

I am always available to you—virtually and on-site. . . ready to apply my 40 years of psychoeducational experiences to your needs. And, I am always happy to provide a free one-hour consultation conference call to help you clarify these needs and your potential directions on behalf of your students.

Best,

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