

INTRODUCTION

The Uncommon Core

Timothy P. Shriver and Jennifer Buffett

We wonder when all the talk about how to improve our schools will focus on the “real core” of education. We have had so many reform efforts, and we have focused on everything else but the real core—on the length of the day, the uniforms kids wear, the tests we take, the way we pay, whom to blame, whom to charter, how to discipline, what books to buy, what computers to use, what buildings to build. These all have a place in making it possible for children to learn. But none of these are the real core.

The real core of education is the relationship between the teacher and the student, and the extent to which that relationship nurtures the longing of the child to matter in the world, and the longing of the teacher to nurture and fulfill that desire. In so many ways, the whole science of child development and the best philosophy of education agree completely on the fundamental truth that learning is a relationship and that the success of education depends almost completely on the strength of the social and emotional dimensions of that relationship. The real core is just that: the social and emotional dimensions of the learning relationship.

Although we have been working on school reform for almost a half-century, if we are honest, we have not yet focused on the core. The social and emotional factors in learning

are the core, but attention to them remains painfully uncommon in the debates about school reform.

We are happy to say that the gap between where we need to focus and where we currently are focusing is beginning to close, and this *Handbook* represents a significant step forward in trying to close it more quickly. Within these pages, many of the most prominent leaders in both the research and practice of social and emotional learning (SEL) present the most current findings about the best practices and their enormous promise. If there is one overriding conclusion to draw from all the contributions in this volume, then it is this: A dramatic improvement in both the academic and social-emotional outcomes for kids and teachers alike is within reach. The time is now for making the changes necessary to attain that longed-for outcome.

To the extent that we strengthen SEL, we increase the likelihood that students will learn to the best of their ability. After decades of practice, we know that social and emotional skills and values can indeed be taught. We know that when taught and modeled well by adults in schools, bonding increases, motivation to learn increases, problem behaviors decrease, and test scores go up. Careful attention to issues such as

stress management, relationship skills, nonviolent problem solving, and learner-centered goal setting are critical. These issues can help students focus on “what” we want them to learn by helping teachers focus on “how” to connect, motivate, and inspire.

To the extent that we ignore SEL, we increase the likelihood that students will further disengage from learning, and that teachers will become increasingly frustrated by the ways in which the system makes it difficult for them to teach. In recent years, we have learned that large numbers of children do not believe that the academic content they are being asked to learn has any relevance to their lives. Similarly large numbers report not feeling safe in school and, of greatest concern, not feeling like anyone cares about them. We can and must face the reality that many of our children are resorting to alcohol and drugs, violence, and other risk-taking behavior because, from their point of view, these destructive choices make sense in the context of their increasing disengagement from the options that education offers.

More than five decades ago, a young minister saw his country at a similar juncture, one where problems that were once thought to be intractable were, on the contrary, close to being solvable. In the midst of great tension and violence, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke to the nation of not only “valleys of despair” but also of the “fierce urgency of now.” Despite conditions in the country that many thought hopeless, he offered an alternative message: Now is the time to act decisively to bend the arc of history toward justice.

In our own time, the ideals of education are falling prey not only to the grinding poverty and enormous economic pressures facing so many of our children and families but also to the perception that nothing works—that dropout and depression are inevitable, and that we should resign ourselves to expecting that many youth will be lonely, confused, and rudderless. Unlike Dr. King, we are too quickly resigned to solutions that we know cannot make a big difference because we are not sure a big difference can be made.

But as we know, Dr. King’s reference to the “fierce urgency of now” was followed by his dream, and the dream changed everything. His was a dream of a more unified future, a dream that animated the nation and even the world to reach for what was bold but attainable—a future where all children and all men and women would be treated justly and be able to access fair opportunities to learn, earn, contribute, and lead fulfilling lives.

We believe that today is a time in need of a similar dream for education: a dream where all children love school; where all children meet teachers who understand them, believe in them, challenge them, and unlock them; and where the heart of learning is at the center of what is learned. We believe that today’s dream, drawing on the best science and practice, must be a dream in which all children are told that they have within them a profound goodness and a noble purpose, that the purpose of education is to invite students to become engaged with great ideas and experiences that can in turn help them discover their own great ideas and purpose. We believe that education is first, and most importantly, about discovering one’s place in the world, then seizing it. And we believe that we are on the verge of being able to teach in a way that allows all children to do just that.

This *Handbook* marks a turning point in the decades-old discussion about school reform. It invites all of us to allow the social and emotional longings of children to be recognized as the crucial force that they are. It invites all of us to focus on the ways in which those forces can be marshaled to create powerful relationships between students and teachers. And it invites all of us to focus on creating schools that use the best available science and practice to build those relationships and therefore create the most positive and highly motivated generation of citizens, workers, and family members we have ever seen.

Then and only then will we have addressed the core curriculum. Then and only then will this core go from being “uncommon” to being the common pathway for fulfilling our nation’s dream of a more purpose-filled and meaningful education.