



GLISI

Strong leaders transform lives.

THE HUMAN ELEMENT IN IMPROVING EDUCATION

BUILDING LEADERS' SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS TO ELEVATE SCHOOL SUCCESS



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A LETTER FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Our world is changing profoundly. As virtual interactions increasingly replace face to face contact, schools remain one of the few institutions where children and adults gather each day to connect, create, and change. Yet, the very place that ought to be a bright spot of human synergy is hemorrhaging teachers, with nearly half leaving the classroom in their first five years.ⁱ More alarming, nearly 70 percent of Georgia’s teachers report they would not encourage their students to pursue a career in teaching.ⁱⁱ

There are many factors beyond school and outside of our control that contribute to this. This report isn’t about those factors.

This report illuminates a factor directly within the control of the institutions and individuals who support education leaders that’s often brushed aside: leaders’ social and emotional skills. It’s common to hear that leadership is about “building trust” and “all about relationships.” Indeed, there can be no more human endeavor than the work of schools, which calls leaders to see and draw out the best in every adult and child who crosses the threshold. Yet we heard from Georgia’s leaders that they don’t have adequate opportunities to cultivate their social and emotional skills, though it’s widely understood how essential they are to school and student success.

The Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) has a proud tradition of supporting leader and team learning for school improvement since 2001. Historically, our work has skewed toward teaching leaders the technical processes vital for their success. In 2018, we conducted a landscape analysis to more deeply understand barriers faced by our district partners in realizing unprecedented success, especially for students whose race, geography or family income were predictive of academic struggle. What emerged was clear: Our work must continue to scaffold leaders’ technical skills, but technical skills alone are not enough.



“THE RECOMMENDATIONS IN THIS REPORT ARE CRITICAL FIRST STEPS TO CREATING CONDITIONS AND GROWING LEADERS WHO TRANSFORM CULTURE, SCHOOLS, THE NARRATIVE, OUR FUTURE.”

Our new three-year strategic plan addresses this need by ensuring all of our leadership development experiences are designed to cultivate skills that leaders need: the ability to reflect on their own impact; the ability to build generative relationships; the ability to read and respond productively to others’ emotional states; the ability to engage in meaningful, courageous dialogue; and the ability to think systemically.ⁱⁱⁱ

More must be done to support leaders in building vibrant cultures of innovation, well-being, and belonging that are centers of excellence in teaching and learning. The recommendations in this report are critical first steps to creating conditions and growing leaders who can restore the human element in our schools; supporting leaders who transform culture, schools, the narrative, our future.

Sincerely,

A blue handwritten signature.

Leslie Hazle Bussey, Ph.D.
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

WHY 'THE HUMAN ELEMENT' MATTERS IN IMPROVING EDUCATION

Many education leaders in Georgia say they're missing a key ingredient in their growth as professionals—hindering improvement of schools and districts across Georgia. **If we want schools to be places where teachers love to teach, students love to learn, and results defy the odds, we need more leaders in education with social and emotional skills who can lead the way.**



"I AM FORTUNATE THAT I WORK IN A SYSTEM THAT FOCUSES ON SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING. I DO BELIEVE WE NEED TO GO DEEPER AND SUPPORT THE LEADERS WHO ARE DOING THE WORK—BECAUSE THERE IS SO MUCH TO BE DONE."

- PRINCIPAL

For this report, GLISL surveyed hundreds of school and district leaders across Georgia about their knowledge and use of social and emotional skills, and found strong interest among them in developing and applying such skills—but significant limitations and barriers to accomplishing that goal.

For decades, school leaders' preparation and continued training has focused on the technical skills to lead school improvement. To be sure, school leaders need to make data-informed decisions, monitor student achievement, evaluate teacher performance, and make effective use of school improvement tools and processes. But the human element in leading culture change and organizational growth is also critically important: students and school communities need leaders with the social and emotional skills to inspire and push adults to realize their potential; improve student performance; and to honor and engage each student and family.

When strong social and emotional competencies are present in a school, family, or organization, it's transformational. Without them, frustration, stress, and anxiety fester. Teachers and staff quickly burn out, and performance improvement is superficial or incremental at best because

deeper barriers to performance are never addressed. The mass exodus of educators from the profession—**nearly half of Georgia teachers**

- **leave their jobs in their first five years^{iv}**, including many with high levels of technical proficiency, content knowledge, a passion for service and a heart for children—should be a call to action.



Focused attention on developing the social and emotional skills of school leaders *is* school improvement work. Leaders who make knowledgeable use of social and emotional skills transform how schools can help children, families and communities. Too often, we treat leadership development, culture change and school improvement as distinct silos, when in fact **there's often a deep connection between a leader's social and emotional skills and the success of teachers and students.**



Why hasn't social and emotional skill development been a higher priority for school leaders?

Effective school leadership has always required leaders with strong social and emotional skills—the field just hasn't historically focused on the development of these skills. This may be because some leaders believe that social and emotional skills are purely innate and nothing can be done to develop them, or that social and emotional learning is “too soft” to prioritize. Some leaders conclude that their own professional growth has peaked because they've been placed in a leadership position, so their primary role is to focus on closing the skill gaps of others around them.

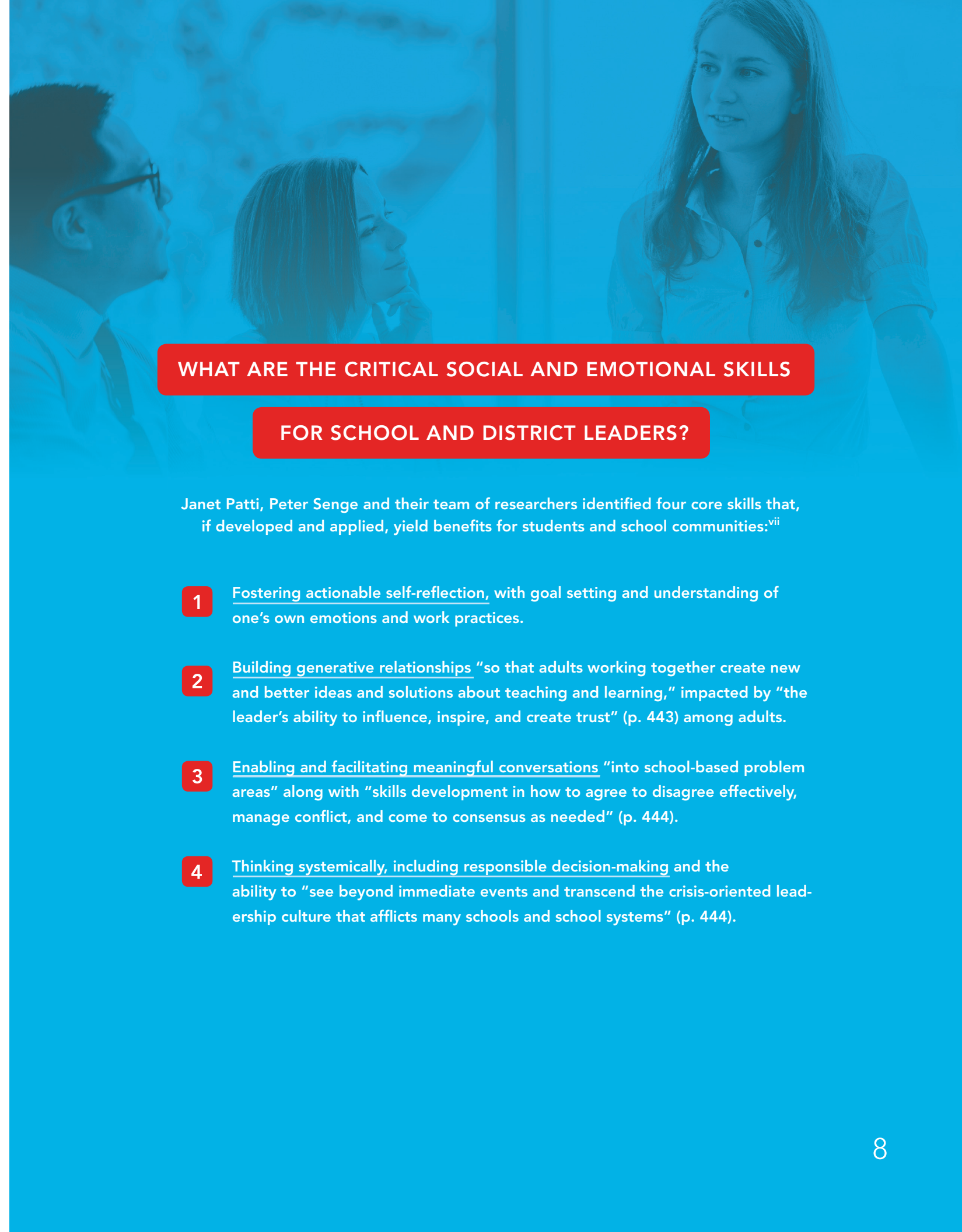
Research highlights several flaws in these assumptions. Carol Dweck's research suggests “mindsets” are not just about attitude or mood. They actually can be taught, learned, and improved over time. **Dweck's work on “growth mindset,” along with other emerging research in neuroscience, strongly indicates that social and emotional skills can be developed in leaders.** As the author explains the differences between a “carved in stone” fixed mindset and a constantly developing growth mindset, she writes, “Although people may differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can

change and grow through application and experience” (p. 7).^v

Researcher John Hattie has found that the most effective leaders are those who (1) believe their major role is to evaluate their own impact; (2) help everyone in the school to work together to understand and evaluate their impact; (3) learn in an environment that privileges high-impact teaching and learning; (4) are explicit with teachers and students about what success looks like; and (5) set appropriate levels of challenge, never retreating to just, 'do your best' (p. 3).^{vi}

Research makes clear that excellent school leadership—resulting in schools with cultures of belonging and well-being, combined with academic success—demands well-honed social and emotional skills, and these vital skills can be developed with effort. Given the substantial academic and mental health challenges that lie ahead for our schools, it is insufficient to simply call for more qualified leaders. Action must be taken to help the leaders we have today, as well as the school leaders of tomorrow, to grow a more complete set of skills to lead the schools our children deserve and our future demands.

THIS CRITICAL PART OF THE WORK OF EDUCATING CHILDREN SHOULD NO LONGER BE GIVEN SHORT SHRIFT.



WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS FOR SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS?

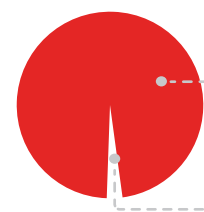
Janet Patti, Peter Senge and their team of researchers identified four core skills that, if developed and applied, yield benefits for students and school communities:^{vii}

- 1 **Fostering actionable self-reflection**, with goal setting and understanding of one's own emotions and work practices.
- 2 **Building generative relationships** “so that adults working together create new and better ideas and solutions about teaching and learning,” impacted by “the leader's ability to influence, inspire, and create trust” (p. 443) among adults.
- 3 **Enabling and facilitating meaningful conversations** “into school-based problem areas” along with “skills development in how to agree to disagree effectively, manage conflict, and come to consensus as needed” (p. 444).
- 4 **Thinking systemically, including responsible decision-making** and the ability to “see beyond immediate events and transcend the crisis-oriented leadership culture that afflicts many schools and school systems” (p. 444).

OUR KEY FINDINGS

GLISL surveyed hundreds of school and district leaders across Georgia about their knowledge, use of, and training and development in social and emotional skills—the “human element” in education leadership. Some of our key findings:

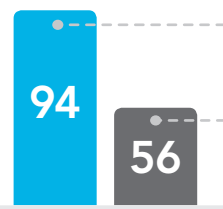
ONE: Nearly every school and district leader says social and emotional skills are critical to their work.



- On our survey, **98 percent** of leaders agreed with the need to improve leaders’ social and emotional competencies
- Only **2 percent** disagreed

“I think most anyone would agree that this type of growth would have a positive impact on any school or district.”
- SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADER

TWO: Most school and district leaders do not have sufficient access to professional development for their own social and emotional learning.



- Percentage of respondents who want access** to more formal opportunities to develop their social and emotional skills
- Percentage of respondents who have access** to structured opportunities to grow their social and emotional skills

THREE: As many schools focus on students’ social and emotional learning, leaders are not prepared to guide such learning for adults—therefore impacting educators’ ability to lead student learning.



Three of four Georgia education leaders say their school systems are more focused on developing students’ social and emotional skills than those of adults—even though students are unlikely to master these skills without the help of principals, teachers, and others.

FOUR: “Fear of failure” is one of the most common experiences of school and district leaders in their day to day work, clouding their vision, decision-making, and problem solving.

Where are leaders **most fearful** of falling short?

 <p>ENSURING ACADEMIC SUCCESS of all students</p>	 <p>ENSURING SAFETY of all students</p>
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“Growing our social and emotional skills would allow us to make more genuine connections with our students and families, increase student achievement, teacher engagement, and overall district success.”
- ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

MORE ON EACH KEY FINDING

ONE: Nearly every school and district leader says social and emotional competencies are critical to their work.

Almost all school and district leaders surveyed see the need for strengthening their social and emotional skills (98 percent). Perhaps this is because their jobs require them to use such skills every day.

A school or district may have good teachers, a rigorous curriculum, effective instruction, and a technically competent leader—but if leaders lack the capacity to unite and lead teams toward a clear vision for improvement, then students and communities cannot reach their full potential.

School and district leaders are culture-builders and change agents. **Social and emotional skills help them to better manage and relate to teachers and staff, self-reflect, and take decisive action to maximize their strengths and address their own skill gaps.**

Teachers and leaders who participated in GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit¹ identified connections between their social and emotional skills and positive culture change on their teams. "If my team opened up more and was vulnerable

LEADER VOICE: HOW WOULD YOUR SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY BENEFIT FROM LEADERS GROWING THEIR SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS?



“ Make more genuine connections with students and families.



“ It would allow us to better serve our community.



“ Morale and engagement of teachers and students would improve.



“ ... students and staff could reach greater levels of competency in every area of their lives.

¹ Learn more about Base Camp and Leadership Summit at <https://glisi.org/base-camp-and-leadership-summit/>

with one another, we could get to the root of issues and solve . . . problems within our school,” wrote one teacher-leader. A district leader added that development of these skills could help him or her better reflect, perform self-evaluation, build the team, improve school culture, and would “bring the team closer to our ultimate goal: student achievement.”

Others saw direct connection to their work in coaching and “providing feedback to faculty, staff, and students.” Still others cited working directly with teachers, challenges brought forth by a difference of opinion, community concerns regarding race and equity, and motivating staff “to be their best self.”

In describing how social and emotional skills are useful to their work, many leaders emphasized their interactions with parents, students and professional colleagues. **Several leaders described the relevance of social and emotional skills in responding to parent concerns.**

“EVERY INTERACTION WITH PARENTS . . . REQUIRE(S) AN ABILITY FOR ME TO BE EMPATHETIC, TO LISTEN CLOSELY, TO UNDERSTAND THE EMOTIONAL CONTEXT, AND ACKNOWLEDGE THE NEEDS OF THE PARENTS TO BE HEARD AND UNDERSTOOD BEFORE ANY RESPONSE OR RESOLUTION IS POSSIBLE.”

- SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADER

LEADER VOICE: HOW WOULD YOUR LEADER PRACTICE IMPROVE IF YOU INVESTED IN YOUR SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL GROWTH?

“ I would become a more authentic communicator.

“ I would better understand the emotions and behaviors of students and staff.

“ I could better detect commitment and conflict on my team.

“ I would have deeper insight about myself, leading to more positive and sustainable relationships with others.



TWO: Most school and district leaders do not have sufficient access to professional development for their own social and emotional learning.

School and district leaders express a strong desire to build and improve their social-emotional skills: 94 percent of respondents strongly agreed that they want more of these opportunities.

Despite the enormous interest, **nearly three out of four leaders (74 percent)** reported little or no embedded support related to mindfulness and stress management; **more than half (58 percent)** reported a lack of embedded workplace wellness for new leaders; and fully embedded mentoring and induction supports varied widely across the state.

The implications of a lack of investment in these areas is perhaps best understood by considering findings from the School Leaders Network (SLN). *Churn: The High Cost of Principal Turnover* reports that half of new principals in the U.S. leave by their third year on the job. The report showed that over time, such disruption diminishes students' academic performance and eventual earning potential, translating to lower tax bases in communities. Contributing factors to the churn? A lack of support for existing principals in

becoming more effective leaders and managing the complexities of the position.^{viii}

Respondents who have engaged in some type of social and emotional skill development provided compelling examples of **how they used these skills to manage the growing complexities and challenges of school and district leadership.** Examples include addressing community concerns related to race, equity, and student safety; leading a school community in the aftermath of the death of a student; managing interpersonal conflicts of school

“**AS A SCHOOL LEADER, YOU OFTEN ENCOUNTER OTHERS AT POINTS OF HIGH FRUSTRATION. IT'S VITAL THAT YOU HAVE THE ABILITY TO MANAGE AND REGULATE YOUR EMOTIONS TO SUCCESSFULLY TACKLE CRITICAL ISSUES.**”
- SUPERINTENDENT

staff; understanding the needs of children with disabilities; supporting a teacher facing terminal illness; and leading conversations about instructional improvement.

While improving leaders' access to professional development is crucial, the development of a leader's social and emotional skills should not be limited to participation in a single program or training. **Social and emotional learning is an ongoing process of developing knowledge and skills that can be used to build stronger relationships and achieve personal and professional goals.** Engaging in this type of growth calls on leaders to take ownership for the assessment of their own impact—how they relate to others; how they view and live in their communities, workplaces, and the world; how well they meet challenges; and how they equip colleagues and students to assess their own impact. **This is the daily work of the school leader. The role of district leadership and state policymakers is to create the conditions for leaders to engage in this learning.**

THE ROLE OF DISTRICT LEADERSHIP AND STATE POLICYMAKERS IS TO CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR LEADERS TO ENGAGE IN THIS LEARNING.





ACHIEVING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL GROWTH IN LEADERS:

THE POWER OF CAPTURING CRITICAL SKILLS IN A FRAMEWORK

GLISI supports school and district leaders across Georgia in building frameworks that capture the technical *and* the social and emotional skills critical for leadership success. Design Team is a process that builds shared understanding about leadership expectations and results in a framework co-constructed by school and district leaders. The process creates space for participants to not only consider the social and emotional skills most relevant for success in their system, but to actually practice those very skills as they engage with one another in the development of the framework. With support from GLISI facilitators, participants practice actionable self-reflection; foster deeper connections with other Design Team members; take responsibility for engaging in courageous and meaningful dialogue; and are required to think systemically to produce a framework to inform the selection, recruitment and development of future leaders.

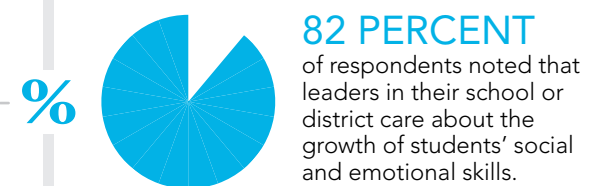
The resulting frameworks are powerful tools that help existing leaders to examine their own practice and to make critical decisions about professional learning for other leaders. One leader shared, “I better understand myself as a leader—the type of leader I aspire to be for students and teachers I serve.” District partners also reported that their professional learning became “more practical and relevant” when they brought professional learning into tighter alignment with the frameworks they built.

Learn more about Design Team, see example frameworks, and read a case study about how these frameworks are transforming district and leader practice at <https://glisi.org/design-team/>.

MORE ON EACH KEY FINDING continued...

THREE: As many schools focus on students’ social and emotional learning, leaders often are not prepared to guide such learning for adults—therefore impacting educators’ ability to lead student learning.

Legislators and other leaders often hear from educators and voters of the need for stronger mental health and other types of “wraparound” support services for students, including investment in students’ social and emotional learning. The relevance of this topic was noted in our survey findings: **82 percent of respondents said that leaders in their school or district care about the growth of students’ social and emotional skills.** The concern is well-founded: research suggests these skills position students for greater success in the workplace, higher education and community life.^{ix}



But social and emotional learning isn’t just for kids. Adults need depth and authenticity in their own social and emotional skills to build supportive learning environments for students. Their daily interactions should be a model for students of the value of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship

building, and responsible decision-making.^x As James Baldwin is widely attributed as writing, “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.”

Leaders we surveyed reported high interest in helping other educators grow their social and emotional skills, but only 7 percent of respondents strongly agreed they know how, suggesting tremendous need for developing the capacity of educators to lead such adult learning.

“IF WE FOCUSED ON THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS, SKILLS, AND CAPACITY OF OUR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS, WE COULD BUILD BETTER LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS. ‘SEL’ IS NOT THE THING YOU DO FOR 20 MINUTES. IT’S A MINDSET ABOUT THE WAY WE INTERACT AS HUMANS AND LEARNERS AND AN UNDERSTANDING THAT CONNECTION ENHANCES LEARNING AND LIVING.”
- SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADER

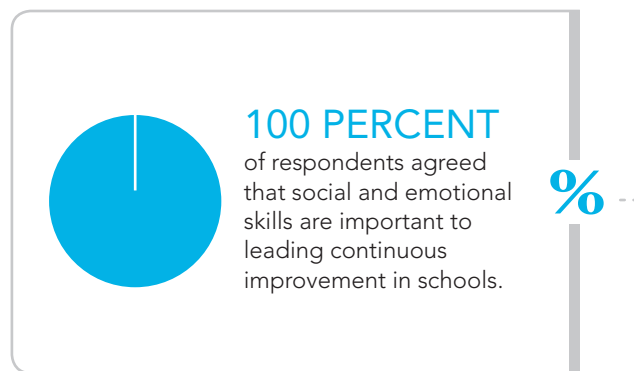
FOUR: "Fear of failure" is one of the most common experiences of school and district leaders in their day to day work, clouding their vision, decision-making, and problem solving.

Fear can be a positive motivator of behavior, but emerging research in neuroscience also finds that catastrophic or chronic fears, such as for one's life or the lives of those under your charge, can negatively impact rational decision-making.^{xi} School and district leaders cited a fear of failure as one of their most common experiences at work, both on the GLISI survey and in their reflections during GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit workshops. Leaders' fears are especially pronounced on issues of student safety and student academic success.

Fear of failure hampers leadership and improvement. Solutions that are familiar and known may become more attractive because they feel safe. Yet school leaders' role should be to cast a vision for a better future, and to lead innovations to realize that future. Leading change inherently involves discomfort and the unknown.

Raising leaders' self-awareness, equipping leaders with self-management and decision-making tools and skills—all social and emotional skills—can help leaders mitigate the impact of their fears on their own work and lessen its impact on teachers and students.

Discussing how fears and other emotions influence leader practice is an important step in ensuring those fears don't impede bold improvements.



The influence of district leaders and policymakers in either helping or worsening principals' fear of failure also should not be ignored. Meredith Honig's research finds that **significant district-wide improvements in teaching and learning are only possible when district leaders work toward change alongside school leaders.**^{xii} This often requires shifts in the daily practice of district leaders, and even has implications for policymakers who are in a position to influence and incentivize these shifts in how central offices structure support for schools.

Social and emotional skill development isn't just for school leaders: it's relevant for anyone in a position to influence school culture and student success.

Now in its 57th cohort, GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit professional learning sessions help participating teams become more aware of the opportunities for their own social and emotional development, and the relationship between their leadership growth and school improvement. "I grew as an individual by facing my personal [growth] opportunities, and with the support of my team, was able to achieve more than I thought was possible," said one participant. Another leader offered that he or she grew to "understand that working together, being honest, and trusting my team is how to make real gains."

IF WE ARE TO ACHIEVE VIBRANT CULTURES OF INNOVATION IN EVERY SCHOOL, FOR EVERY CHILD—CULTURES THAT PROMOTE CREATIVITY AND LEAD TO NEW DISCOVERIES THAT ENHANCE LEARNING—WE ALL HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO EXAMINE OUR ROLES IN HELPING SCHOOLS REACH THAT GOAL.



RECOMMENDATIONS:

Steps for building social and emotional competencies for education leaders

FOR DISTRICT LEADERS:

- **Model the importance of social and emotional skills** in your own leadership practice.
- **Engage principals, teachers and other professionals in defining the social and emotional skills** that are most important for your schools, district and community.
- **Make explicit the connections between these skills and school improvement.** Is there a shared understanding of the connections of leadership, school culture, and student success across your system?
- **Provide readings, tools and professional development** that support the building of social and emotional skills for your system's principals and other leaders.
- **Create more opportunities for school leaders to reflect on their own impact, dialogue with others, and practice new skills.** Design or provide adult learning experiences for leaders to develop critical social and emotional skills alongside the teams they lead. Provide coaching for leaders that focuses on growing their social and emotional skills alongside more technical aspects of school leadership.

FOR SCHOOL LEADERS:

- **Build your own knowledge of social and emotional skills** through reading, professional development, and reflection. Develop your own vocabulary around social and emotional skills. Begin to recognize and name your own social and emotional skills and define paths for improvement.
- **Set goals for growing your own social and emotional skills** and for incorporating these goals into your daily work.
- **Model the importance of social and emotional skills** in your own leadership practice.
- **Seek out professional learning opportunities to cultivate your social and emotional skills alongside the team you lead.** Informally, share relevant readings and invite your team to dialogue and reflect on their own learning. Make your work on your social and emotional skills public. Share what you're working on with others, including your triumphs and your struggles.

FOR POLICYMAKERS:

- **Build your own understanding of school and district leaders' complex responsibilities.** Shadow a principal or superintendent for a day with an eye for how educators use social and emotional skills in their daily work. Consider how policies may create barriers or constraints to the work of developing young people.
- **Champion social and emotional skill development for educators,** especially for school leaders. Understand that growing such skills in leaders is a key part of overall improvement in school leadership and opportunities for students to excel.
- **Secure specific resources for social and emotional skill development** for current school and district leaders, especially those serving high-need student populations and communities.
- **Advocate for the importance of social and emotional skill development** in school and district leaders' preparation and ongoing training.
- **Connect key education policy issues to leaders' social and emotional skill development,** including: chronic student absences, retention of quality leaders and teachers, and school-climate ratings (that indicate the health of a school's learning environment).
- **Use existing measures of school climate and culture** as proxies to gauge collective effectiveness of leaders' social and emotional skills.

GETTING STARTED

GLISI is developing a toolkit for getting started with developing social and emotional skills in your school or district. Sign up at <https://glisi.org/sign-up-for-glisi-updates/> to receive an update when the toolkit is available. In the meantime, follow us @GLISI on Twitter and participate in #GLISIChat with other leaders across the globe who are working every day to improve their own practice, create vibrant cultures of innovation, and build more excellent and equitable schools.

ENDNOTES

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- xii. Honig, M.I., Copland, M.A., Rainey, L., Lorton, J.A., & Newton, M. (2010 April). *Central office transformation for district-wide teaching and learning improvement*. Seattle: University of Washington Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy.

APPENDIX

Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) invited any school and district leader currently serving in a Georgia public school system to participate in this research. An initial invitation was sent via email to 2,119 superintendents, central office leaders, and school principals on September 10, 2018. A reminder email was sent to this same distribution list on September 26, 2018. Invitations were also shared via the Georgia Association of Educational Leaders' newsletter, September 12, 2018 edition, and promoted on GLISI's social media and website.

Survey respondents were invited to reflect on the importance of social and emotional skills to their leadership; the level of support they have received in developing their own social and emotional skills; how prepared they feel to help other adults develop these skills; and the connections they see between a leader's social and emotional skills and school and district culture and climate.

The survey included a total of 26 items in a variety of formats including rating matrix, short answer, and open-ended response. A total of 165 responses were received. 51.18 percent of the respondents reported their position as district level leader and 48.82 percent as school level leader. Respondents represent all 16 regional educational service agencies.

To request more information on the research design, survey instrument, or research findings, contact Dr. Jennie Welch at jennie.welch@glisi.org or 770.464.9299.



GLISI was born in 2001 when a coalition of education, business, and government leaders came together to improve Georgia schools. We incorporated as an independent non-profit organization in 2012 and grow approximately 1,500 teachers and leaders in 50 districts each year.

OUR MISSION:

- > **UPLIFT** school leaders
- > **TRANSFORM** mindsets and actions
- > **CREATE** vibrant cultures of innovation
- > **BUILD** excellent and equitable schools

OUR VISION:

A Georgia where schools and communities pursue breakthrough success for all students—regardless of race, geography, or family income.