

Fronde & Fiddlehead

The newsletter of FernLeaf Community Charter School



Fall 2019/2020

In this issue

As the national conversation on education policy centers on academic areas like standards and testing, outcomes and results, the social-emotional learning (SEL) that happens during the school year receives less attention. Research summarized by CASEL, a national leader in developing, implementing and studying social-emotional learning, shows that intentional SEL program in schools impact everything from improved academic outcomes and classroom behaviors to improved economic mobility and reduced poverty.

At FernLeaf, SEL has been a core and intentional component of the curriculum since the school's founding. From kindergarten to middle school, the teachers and staff at FernLeaf incorporate social-emotional learning into each day as purposefully as they plan lessons on algebra or phonics. The SEL lessons are more understated than a more familiar discussion on how to diagram a sentence, but they are just as specific. SEL is the bass rhythm in the soundtrack of the school - critical and integrating despite its subtlety.

Editor's Note

FernLeaf is nothing if not inventive. The school was built on a desire to seek and create meaningful ways to engage students and families in the incredible work of education. That commitment requires a willingness to call audibles, adjust course, try new things and abandon projects, no matter how precious, that don't work.

The school newsletter has followed that same arc. From its first days as little more than a bulletin board for announcements, the newsletter has changed over the years as well, progressively looking more deeply at the people and stories of the school community, highlighting the culture of this place that is dear to each of us.

This year, the newsletter has changed again. Focusing on a single subject each issue, this space is intended to create a sandbox of ideas, where we, as a community, can start conversations built on respect and a desire to listen and learn together. This is a space where we can explore the various, dynamic and exciting ideas that shape the school.

Thank you for joining the discussion. I am grateful to be part of this community with you.

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The Subtle Art of Caring a Great Deal

Social-Emotional Learning at FernLeaf

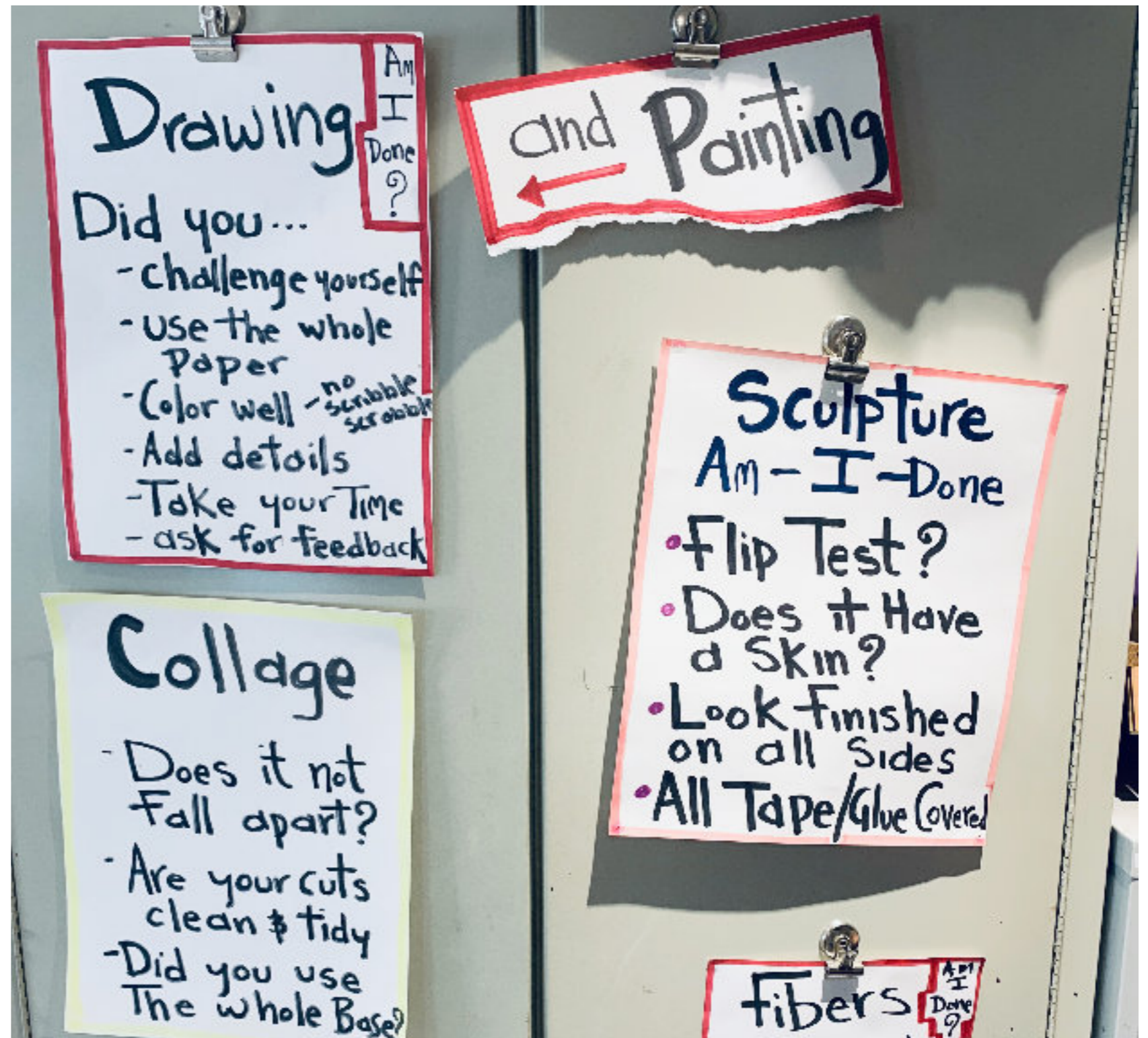
To be fair, the NC Department of Education includes Guidance as a category in its Standard Course of Study. On its alphabetical online listing of the nine categories that comprise the Standard Course, Guidance lands right after Global Education and right before Healthful Living. It shares space with the academic giants - math, language arts, science - that are the department's management and testing focus.

With specifics for each of the categories, the state department measures student, and school achievement through generalized, grade-specific outcomes. The academic categories, on paper, are concrete and tangible - either a student can do the thing or a student can't. From the outside, it appears that the academic requirements can be targeted specifically - if a student, or a class, or a school is weak in math, just teach more math. Regardless of how it plays out in the daily work of diverse schools with diverse students across the state, it appears simple and rigorous, quantifiable and achievable - it is the realm of accountability, expectation, and bureaucracy.

Guidance, on the other hand, is the catch-all for learning outside the pail of academic rigor. It centers on the social and emotional aspects of students' development and needs. It is less tangible, if not wholly intangible. How, for instance, is it possible to assess a student's ability to "to set boundaries that maintain personal rights while paying attention to the rights of others"?

These immeasurable (and un-measured) qualities make the social-emotional aspects of a curriculum an area for schools to take up slack in the crowded daily tasks and requirements schools are taxed to cover.

Bryan Gillette, FernLeaf's counselor, watched this temptation play out in schools across the area where he worked before his move here



this fall.

“Teachers everywhere feel pressure for academic rigor,” he said with both empathy and frustration. “Many places give up on social-emotional learning.”

From its founding, however, FernLeaf was designed to focus on the less concrete components of learning as clearly as the more typical academic realms.

On the school’s 2013 charter application, the founding committee of FernLeaf stated the school’s intention to integrate “traditional core academic subjects with social-emotional learning” so that “FernLeaf students are able to discover their unique passions and aptitudes in an engaged and supportive community.” Social-emotional learning is not an area of slack in the system at FernLeaf, it is as critical as the quantifiable aspects of the curriculum.

Bryan says this focus was evident to him as soon as he started in his role at the school.

“I was a little bit lost when I came here,” he said, noting he has been at work in schools for over 20 years.

Previously, most of his time was dedicated to individual and group counseling with students focused in areas of social and emotional need. At times, Bryan was the only one at a school able to work with students on

these critical needs. At FernLeaf, however, he found a culture and commitment to the topic that extended across grades and through classes, and that addressed many of the gaps he previously tried to fill. From spontaneous lessons in the moment, to formal, structured sessions with their students, the teachers at FernLeaf see social-emotional learning as important as anything else they are teaching through the year.

Sitting in on a 2nd grade math lesson, this commitment is clear. As students shuffle in from another classroom, Whitney Mebane immediately starts the session with a conversation designed to engage more than the students’ logical, mathematical minds.

As kids work through the inevitable wiggles of a transition, she simultaneously helps kids settle, spells out the agenda for their time together, and hands back any unfinished work from the day before.

“It was clear to me as I read through your packets,” she says, the crisp, consistent rhythm of her words bringing calm to the space, “that you all put so much thought and energy into your work. I really want you to always put so much thought and energy in all your work.” It isn’t a dictate, but rather an invitation; it has nothing of

judgment but still carries clear expectations. “Remember,” she concludes, “if you finish first it doesn’t always mean you did your best.”

That invitation and expectation that students “always do their best” is one of the central tenants of social-emotional learning, and it is specific to a student in a way that generalized metrics of achievement cannot be. It is one of many moments at the school that day where the teacher nudges the class to build something more than memory banks and test tricks - Whitney is working to build grit and a growth mindset in the students as they worked through challenges and opportunities.

Growth mindset, grit, resilience - these are the spelling words of social-emotional learning. They are skills that not only serve 2nd graders in math and science and music, but serve them as 5th graders, in high school, as they launch businesses and chase dreams, and as they parent

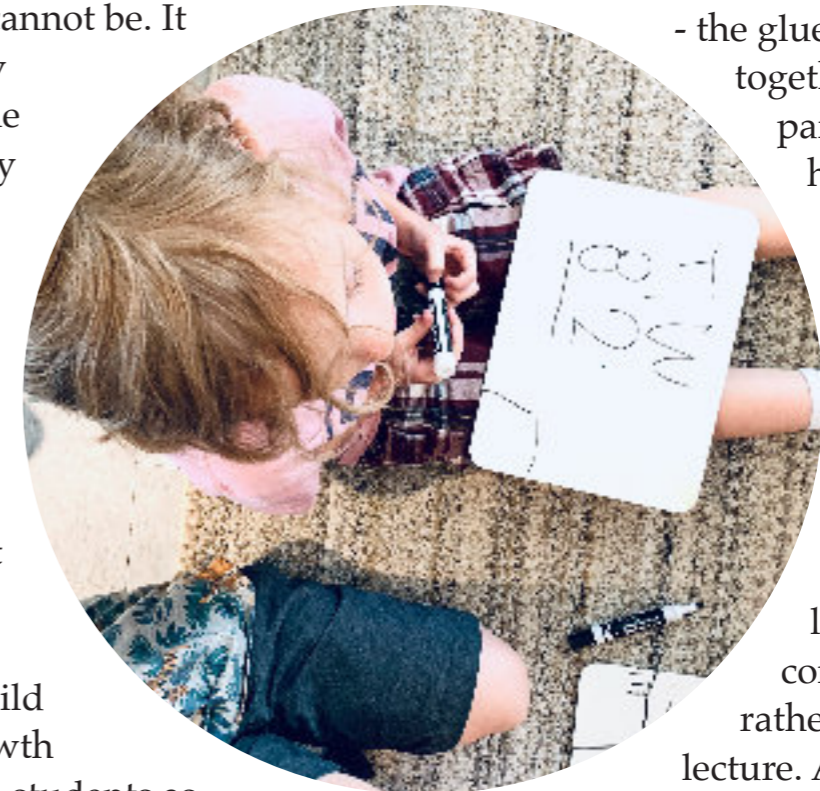
their own 2nd graders later on in life.

They are ideas that require a masterful blend of support and freedom, a willingness to allow unanswered questions linger, and they ask teachers to bring creativity to a process made of more fits and starts than smooth progress.

They are also ideas that cross all academic (and life) disciplines - the glue that holds together the many parts of being human.

With small legs crossed on the carpet, grease boards in their laps, Whitney shapes the 2nd grade lesson as a conversation rather than a lecture. As students

wrestle with more and more complex two-digit numbers, Whitney’s focus is on maintaining their desire to engage in the process - both its academic concepts and its social-emotional opportunities - rather than short-cuts to some measurable ideal of academic achievement. By the end of 20 minutes, the students demonstrate a general academic understanding.



They have also, however, discussed and practiced honesty, persistence and the power of asking for help.

The scene is similar later that day across the courtyard in Ashley Gregg's 3rd grade classroom.

With her turquoise sunglasses perched in their rightful place atop her head, and huddled with a small number of students in a break-out reading group, Ashley's contagious enthusiasm is magnified around the small table.

Without enough books to give each student a copy, Ashley sets the expectations for the group - to continue their reading and conversation of the novel they had nearly completed together - and then steps out of the fray and lets the students find a solution to the shortage. It is a practice used over and over in classrooms around the school - set a vision then get out of the way and let the student's find the answer. It's a commitment that demands patience and awareness from the teacher as it sees every problem, whether on a worksheet or in a relationship, as an opportunity to learn.

"Good readers," Ashley reminds the students once the group is settled, "always re-read a bit to remind themselves where they are." Like Whitney in 2nd grade, it isn't a command, but an



invitation and part of an ongoing conversation Ashley and the group have going.

Then, continuing another branch of their conversation, she says: "When you get to a tricky word, remember your strategies."

In less than 60 seconds, she sets clear expectations for the group, creates a deeper vision for their work and sets the stage for the inevitable challenges that would arise. While framed in the setting of Standard Course objectives to improve students' fluency and comprehension, it is also a lesson in living life with resilience and grit.

As each student reads a short passage aloud, the group follows along. Between quiet giggles and murmurs of relatable knowing at the characters' hijinks, Ashley helps the students support each other as much as anything.

When one student stumbles with the word "windiest" - its tricky vowels confusing for both the eyes and tongue - Ashley facilitates a brief discussion on how other members of the group approach the challenge. The diversity of ideas and approaches is significant, but so is the understanding that each has merit and value. There is no one way to solve a problem - in reading or in life.

Later, she asks the group to race backward in the book, to literally turn the pages back, and find an earlier reference to an idea that forms a key to their critical point in the story. When one student is slower to locate the passage, the others neither give the answer nor chide the delay. Until they are all together, the group waits.

This community of support is critical for resilience, Bryan says.

“Humans are social. Trust and connection prove a foundation for our relationships and lives; it’s not only expected, it’s necessary.”

Without that trust, Bryan says, it’s difficult, if not impossible, to regulate emotions. “Emotional regulation,” he adds, “is critical for resilience.” Without that regulation, emotions become hooks that can pull students (and teachers, and parents, and neighbors, and interstate drivers) into shadow corners of exaggeration, overwhelm and dread; unchecked emotions make it hard to bounce back and stick with a challenge.

At FernLeaf, that foundation of trust and connection is built in the classrooms slowly and patiently. Each class begins the day with a morning meeting: an intentional time to check in, set expectations for the day, review needs and connect.

In Kathleen Askew’s 4th grade room, the students trickle in before

the school day begins. They manage their bags and lunches and laundry lists. They huddle in small clusters and conversations, some looking at a graphic novel together, others around a chess game. At 8:00, with Kathleen’s clear “Good morning, friends,” the students settle into a quiet that has depth and attention, and circle up on the floor at the front of the room.

After a moment of silence, where the students have a opportunity to begin the day however they would like, Kathleen leads the class through the schedule. She leverages the power of language to highlight opportunities rather than obstacles, with phrases like “we’ll be able to work on some writing,” and “we’ll be able to work on math,” and she sets the expectation that the students will need to be flexible as some agenda items are yet to be established. It’s clear, concise and empowering.

Then, Kathleen shifts the conversation to headline news in Building B - challenges keeping the boy’s bathroom clean. With a form of educational jut-jitsu, she transforms a moment that could have easily been a disciplinary lecture, one that was generalized, unspecific, and monotonous in the way Charlie Brown’s teacher sounds on the classic specials, into an active discussion about community and the cost of emotional hyperbole, gossip



and a breakdown in respect.

After some time of back and forth - students offering point and counter-point ideas to the topic - Kathleen moves from asking open questions to share her own perspective:

“I envision a community where we don’t make a big deal about something out of the ordinary,” she says, the students quiet, respectful, attuned. “Is it ok to have feelings when something happens that you don’t expect?” she asks. Heads nod around the circle, and a quiet murmur or agreement waves through the space. “I agree. But, it’s about how we react that matters.”

It’s an environment where students’ voices are given as much - if not more - space than the teacher’s, and where ideas, even diverse and nuanced ideas, are exchanged like something interesting rather than something dangerous. It’s an environment where trust and connection form the footings of the relationships and create room for students to receive feedback and take it in rather than be toppled by it.

Back in Building A, the scene is similar in Jenn Love’s kindergarten room.

After weeks of structured copy writing - where students were given a word or sentence to copy - Jenn leads her class of 5- and 6-year-olds to the edge of the academic precipice asking them to write captions for drawings they made on the lifecycle of a monarch butterfly.

“You get to a point,” she tells the students, who may or may not really understand what they were about to do, “where you just have to start doing the thing that is hard.”

This early in their education, Jenn knows that the students have widely ranging skills and abilities; some are able to write in complete sentences, others are still learning to write their own names. Instead of setting a general, measurable goal for the students to achieve, she implores them to set an aim



based on their own capacity and then stretch a bit beyond it, a teaching, and learning, strategy called scaffolding.

She hands the students their drawings, and then, unfazed by the wide-eyed stares of confusion, she reviews the task at hand again, and again. And again.

The ideal of perfection is ingrained early, and against an echo of “I don’t know how...” Jenn and Joe Hinchcliffe shuttle around the room reminding students about the importance of challenging themselves to grow rather than getting the “right” answer.

“It’s okay,” she says more than many times, “to not know. This is about working hard and doing your best.”

Eventually, the anxious energy in the room dissipates into pockets of focused attention. The sounds of short vowels and the edges of hard consonants take the place of students’ confused questions as they start to reach for words like chrysalis and egg. Surprisingly, “mischievous” makes its way onto more than one life-cycle observation.

From the ordered, creative chaos of the art room, to a 6th grade class on story telling and personal narrative, from science demonstrations exploring chemical transformations to the age-old obstacle of 3rd grade multiplication tables, testing objectives are part of the lessons, they are not, however, the lessons themselves. Instead, from kindergarten to 6th grade, the teachers at FernLeaf work to create a culture where learning is a wholistic practice, incorporating the academic and the emotional, the measurable and the intangible. Instead of passive containers to be filled, the students are active participants in creating a space where trust and connection provide support

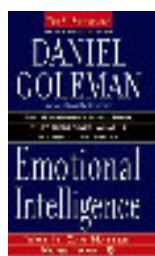
to take risks, make messes and learn from mistakes. It’s an environment that celebrates the pursuit of student-specific excellence, born of grit and growth and resilience, rather than an impossible ideal of perfection. It’s a space that takes Guidance as seriously as any other standard.

Resources & Further Reading

Here is a list of books and resources to give you more information on social-emotional learning and how to bring the ideas home.



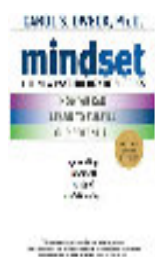
Angela Duckworth's nuanced look into the components of tenacity and persistence sheds light on how to elevate work in the classroom, at home, in the work place and beyond.



Daniel Goleman is a founding member of the CASEL organization that is working nationally to improve social-emotional learning across the board. The book is a classic introduction to the science of intelligence beyond standardized tests.



Written in his clear journalistic voice, Paul Tough's examination into the obstacles and opportunities as teachers and parents in the modern era is both challenging and inspiring.



Carol Dweck is the leading researcher on the power of mindset, particularly a growth mindset, has on all aspects and areas of life. With data to support her stories, she makes a compelling argument that what you think is as important (if not more) than what you do.



CASEL.org - the leading national organization supporting and studying social-emotional learning in classrooms .