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Melania Trump's good idea

by Timothy Shriver



Melania Trump announces her initiative on May 7. (Shawn Thew/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock/)

The news media are obsessed with the unstable stream of contradictory messages, hirings and firings, ethical failings and volatility that constitute our national politics today. But in the midst of it, most of us missed the voice of the one person in the executive branch who is almost guaranteed not to be fired and is, at the same time, most able to speak independently about what matters in the country: Melania Trump.

It's time we listened to Melania.

Trump announced [her initiative](#), “[Be Best](#),” to respond to the social media and economic pressures facing young people nationwide. The New York Times dismissed the announcement as an effort to “[primarily repackage projects that already exist](#).” This is hardly unusual: First ladies are often accorded polite respect, but their work is rarely accorded serious attention.

In this case, though, the first lady has entered an arena with serious policy implications and even more serious educational implications: the issue of how to transform our schools into places that use evidence-based practices to support social and emotional learning in parallel with academic learning.

Social and emotional learning is an idea whose time has come. It builds from neuroscience that reveals that our brains are both malleable and dependent on the strength of our relationships. It involves teaching skills like self-awareness and problem-solving, and then empowering young people to use those skills to focus on academic learning and supporting others. It calls for schools to engage families and, in particular, to end inequities and bring families and educators together to promote positive growth.

Recent research suggests it works. In one [study](#), social and emotional learning programs were shown to reduce behavior problems and increase test scores. In [another](#), they were shown to improve physical and mental health outcomes — and with gains that persist up to 18 years. In a [third](#), they were shown to deliver an 11-1 return on investment. The [World Economic Forum](#) recommends a focus on social and emotional skills for the workplace of the future. Overwhelming majorities of teachers, administrators and parents report wanting more social and emotional learning in their schools.

The implications of seeing teaching and learning as a social interaction could hardly be more sweeping. In Chicago's public schools, chief executive Janice Jackson says a focus on integrating social and emotional learning resulted in a steep drop in discipline problems as well as an improvement in test scores. A teacher in Atlanta wrote a letter to a colleague of mine describing the fruits of teaching social and emotional learning in her class: “We are all in this space where they are comfortable with one another . . . and this has opened up an entirely new relationship. I had a student stand and tell us that she battled stage 4 cancer a few years ago, and that this cancer came back 3 times. She had to learn how to walk and do everything all over again. While doing this, her grandmother died from the same cancer she was battling. She became the teacher on that day. . . . She taught us all to value our lives differently.” This classroom isn't just a place of belonging; it's also a place of deeper and more purposeful learning.

Could Trump be on the forefront of this massive shift in thinking? I don't know. But she did use the exact language of the field of social and emotional learning [when she said](#), “We can and should teach children the importance of social and self-awareness, positive relationship skills, and responsible decision- making.” This isn't just nice language; it's cutting-edge science meeting school improvement on a national scale.

And could this administration's Education Department move decisively in this direction? I don't know. But consider that a week after the first lady's announcement, the department announced the creation of a new [center](#) — one that I and others have been recommending for many years — dedicated to providing “technical assistance to support States and districts in the implementation of social and emotional learning evidence-based . . . programs and practices.” It's a small step but an important one: Districts all over the country are eager to move toward an integration of social and emotional learning.

Ultimately, the integration of social, emotional and academic development in schools around the world is a change bigger than any administration or even country. It's using all the knowledge we have about children and development to make schools places of inspiration — places where desire is unlocked, belonging promoted, purpose discovered. In truth, it's not an option. It's an obligation.

There's one voice in the White House asking for just that. Maybe it's time we paid attention to her.

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