Student Services Advisory Committee

February 2, 2026

Members

Dana Milburn, chair	Staff liaison:	Mr. Jeffrey Carpenter, Jr., Ed.S., NCSP, SHRM-SCP,
Adora Williams, co-secretary		Executive Director of Student Services
Kirstin Pickle, co-secretary		
Elizabeth Fabrizio	Larissa Leclair	Stacey Stump
Judy Hadden	Maddie Leclair	Bethany Vanderbilt

Recommendation: We offer two related proposals to deepen Social Emotional Learning within APS. These measures will benefit students and school communities in and of themselves, and also benefit APS' progress in implementation and understanding/buy-in for social emotional learning:

- **Create an APS Community of Kindness using a free, ready-made, high quality curriculum, highlighting both those elements of kindness directly related to social emotional learning (SEL) and those that might appear less closely related to SEL; and**
- **Launch an executive functioning (EF) skills initiative, much of which clearly can be considered part of SEL.**

Alignment to the Strategic Plan: The committee recommendation supports the Strategic Plan priorities and performance objectives in multiple areas, such as:

- ***Student Wellbeing*:** School climate and mental health, Reducing chronic absenteeism and suspensions, Students feeling safe in schools (including students in vulnerable populations- racially/ethnically diverse, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+, English learners, and other historically marginalized groups)
- ***Student Academic Growth and Success***: Graduation competencies (College, Career, Civic Readiness Indicators), General education access to Students with Disabilities
- ***Student, Family and Community Partnerships*:** Student and family engagement and education, Equitable family engagement

SUMMARY

KINDNESS, SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL), AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING (EF) SKILLS – A NATURAL SYNERGY WE SHOULD CAPITALIZE ON FOR OUR STUDENTS (See full Recommendation on Page 5)

Executive functioning skills serve as what's often called the brain's "air traffic control system," providing organization, and cognition. Our students require these crucial and practical skills to complete assignments, manage their time, prioritize work, and many other tasks. Most executive functioning skills can be considered to fall under the rubric of SEL, but EF skills often are smaller and more specific chunks of the whole, applying directly to the ability to perform a number of tasks necessary for success in school, work, and life.

Social emotional learning adds the emotional intelligence to interpret situations and make informed and responsible decisions, in addition to self-awareness and relationship skills. Our students require these crucial life skills, also, to work with others, understand their emotions and control their behavior, build relationships, work in groups, resolve conflict, understand and interpret the world around them, and empathize with the perspectives of others. (See CASEL Core Competencies, Appendix 8.)

Kindness requires both SEL and some EF skills, and is the application of them for the greater good – for the well-being of others, and of oneself, and often the well-being of one's group or community. When one is calm; when one is not under stress; when one understands oneself, others, and a situation clearly; and when one has the personal and interpersonal skills to apply to a situation, kindness becomes far more possible. Further, as we'll see below, kindness is contagious and can create or further enhance calm, happy feelings, building on itself and providing the best basis for further learning of all types, including EF skills and SEL.

Virginia Portrait of a Graduate and the 5 C's – How Kindness, SEL, and EF Skills Enhance Student Success:

- **Critical Thinking:** EF and SEL are both directly related to this category in that the regulation, impulse control, and cognitive control that students gain by building both then allow them to engage in problem solving, analysis of real world problems, and taking the perspective of another.

- **Creative Thinking:** Similarly, EF and SEL both bolster a student's ability to think "outside the box" with an open mind; if cognitive load is decreased and the student's emotional needs are met, they are more likely to be able to think creatively, have flexible responses, and use their imagination.
- **Collaboration:** This is the category where all three (EF, SEL, and kindness) come together: in order to work effectively with others, students need to be able to organize and share their thoughts, ideas, and opinions clearly and with empathy and respect for other students. Particularly in our area, where students are coming from an incredibly diverse variety of backgrounds and experiences, supporting their ability to work effectively and compassionately with others will set them up for success when they leave APS.
- **Communication:** reflection is a core element of social emotional learning; a student's ability to understand themselves, their emotions, and the emotions of others sets the stage for effective communication. Further, the ability to organize and sequence thoughts and ideas supports a student's ability to speak, write, and convey themselves effectively to others. Focusing on kindness in communication ensures that students go beyond being "nice" to one another and instead develop the skills to be respectful, empathic, and understanding of others.
- **Citizenship:** SEL builds the foundation of good citizenship by focusing on skills like empathy, responsible decision-making, relationship building, conflict resolution, and self awareness. Kindness supports this by encouraging a culture of care, mutual respect, curiosity, and understanding. Solid executive functioning skills also support citizenship by reducing cognitive load and improving cognitive flexibility, impulse control, and planning.

Helping *All* APS Students, Especially Those Who Are Vulnerable or Disadvantaged:
Adding more deliberate emphasis on both kindness and EF skills will make a positive difference – in academic performance, personal success and happiness, and school climate – for *all* of our students. **But we believe, and have seen evidence, that our students who are disadvantaged or historically marginalized will benefit even more**. By combining kindness, SEL, and EF skills we believe a more caring school environment will be created, filling in some of the blanks in the protective safety net we all want for them. " Research shows that a kindness initiative can emphasize the importance of valuing and accepting everyone, regardless of differences in backgrounds, abilities, or identities. As people practice kindness students feel more accepted and have a sense of belonging. There is research that shows that this also increases attendance rates, which makes sense." (Why Should My School Have a Kindness Focus? - The Power of Kind) We also know that developing EF skills benefit all students, as well, and again, often provide even more benefit for students in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. We believe all students, including those most vulnerable, will develop more of the skills that both increase academic/work success *and* create more protective factors and/or help students create protective factors for themselves, too, building more robustly the safety net we all want them to have. We've included some citations below that might be helpful in illustrating this point:

- **Students with disabilities:** see Executive Functions and Special Educational Needs and Their Relationship with School-Age Learning Difficulties - PMC; 5 Ways to Help Neurodiverse Students Improve Executive Function Skills | Edutopia; and Executive Functions in Social Context: Implications for Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Supporting Developmental Trajectories

- **English learners:** see SEL for English Language Learners: What Educators Need to Know | Colorín Colorado; and SEL for English Language Learners: What Educators Need to Know | NEA)

- **LGBTQ+ students:** The Trevor Project (2025). Friends, Family, and Community: Social Support and the Health of Transgender and Nonbinary Young People of Color; The Trevor Project (2025). Anti-Bullying Policies in School and LGBTQ+ Young People. (Also, please see Appendix 7.)

- **Students from racial/ethnic/religious minorities:** Culturally Responsive SEL for Black Students; Honoring the Cultural Backgrounds of All Students

- **Students from from disadvantaged backgrounds:** Reimagining Social and Emotional Learning: From Individual Competencies to Systemic Transformation; The power of centering equity in social and emotional learning; Why Marginalized Students Need Hope to Succeed

- **Students with trauma in their backgrounds:** Executive functions in trauma-exposed youth: a meta-analysis; How Trauma Affects Kids in School

Reduced Bullying:
Bullying is a large and troubling concern for many school systems, including our own, and for many students and families. Its results, as we know, can even be tragic. The reduction of bullying by a kindness program is both intuitive and proven:

> Many traditional anti-bullying programs focus on the negative actions that cause anxiety in children. When students are instead taught how to change their thoughts and actions by learning about **kindness and compassion**, it fosters the positive behavior that's expected and naturally rewarded with friendship. Promoting its psychological opposite is key in reducing bullying to create warm and inclusive school environments. (Why Teaching Kindness in Schools Is Essential to Reduce Bullying | Edutopia)

We see close relationships between kindness, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), and Executive Functioning Skills (EF skills). There are strong overlaps between the three, as we demonstrate in Appendix 1, our Venn diagram. We believe that SEL acceptance and success can be enhanced and deepened by reinforcing it with these two more concrete concepts, which have a great deal of inherent value of their own, as well. **Kindness** is something everyone understands, and most people value very much. Kindness builds more caring and inclusive communities, fills students' (and adults') emotional bank accounts; builds protective factors; helps people feel accepted as and who they are; helps people feel welcome at school; and helps people feel safe at school, among other benefits.

While the term, **Executive Functioning Skills** might not ring a bell with everyone, conversation with almost any fellow parent soon can land on concerns about their children's need to do better in one or more EF skills, whether it's meeting deadlines, planning/organizing work, knowing what to do when, or other related issues. All of these EF skills, similarly to SEL skills, have crucial impacts on whether one is successful in school, work, relationships, and membership in society.

Deepening SEL: We see metrics within APS and beyond that indicate continued behavioral issues, suicide ideation, and other concerning issues have persisted since the pandemic. In more recent years, students have also been exposed to an increasingly polarized world, and often-stress-inducing messages. Our Student Services staff members already function at top capacity and work hard to support students, staff (with behavioral issues, for instance), and whole school communities. The APS SEL LP no no(Social Emotional Learning) initiative has been maturing over the past several years and provides instruction on a number of skills that also serve as social and emotional protective factors for students as they navigate their school and lives. As we consider next steps to solidify and increase progress, we see two integrated paths towards increased success, and further, acceptance and understanding of SEL among students, parents, and even staff in general, could be improved, allowing SEL to be even more beneficial:

WE THEREFORE RECOMMEND:

- **A kindness initiative, which might be called something like "Creating a Community and Culture of Kindness,"** which can serve both as an intrinsically valuable addition on its own, and an expansion of SEL lessons, using a free, CASEL-coordinated/SEL-related kindness curriculum that is ready-made and high quality and specifically designed to dovetail with the existing CASEL framework. We hope the suggestion of this curriculum also provides the benefit of alleviating any staff concerns about any need for staff time spent on curriculum development.
- **An executive functioning skills initiative,** dovetailing with and expanding upon current SEL work in APS.
- **(While building upon and continuing the important SEL** practice staff have been implementing.**)**

Budgetary Implications **None**

Committee vote: Unanimous vote **Date: October 16, 2025**
Full Recommending Report: Unanimous vote, Including New Members **Date: February 2, 2026**

The Student Services Advisory Committee (ACSS) wishes to thank the School Board and its members, and ACTL and its leadership, for this opportunity to share our recommendations, research, and information gained from our connection with the community.

We also wish to thank the following APS Student Services staff members for their kindness in contributing to this recommendation from their wisdom and experience:

- Mr. Jeffrey Carpenter, Jr., Ed.S., NCSP, SHRM-SCP, Executive Director of Student Services
- Dr. Darrell Sampson, EdD, MA, LPC, NCC, NCSC Former Executive Director of Student Services

- Ms. Jennifer Gross, Coordinator, Social-Emotional Learning
- Mr. Gradis White, Director, Office of School Climate & Culture
- Dr. Chip Bonar, Student Behavior Coordinator, Office of Climate and Culture
- Ms. Grace Santarelli, M.A., N.C.S.P., School Psychologist
- Ms. Xenia Castaneda, Administrative Specialist, Office of Student Services

DETAIL:

THE SCIENCE OF LEARNING AND KINDNESS, SEL, AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS

The Science of Learning emphasizes that learning is an active process of making connections, driven by neuroplasticity, and heavily influenced by emotion, motivation, and social context. The Science of Learning relates directly to teaching social-emotional learning (SEL), kindness, and executive functioning (EF) by providing evidence-based strategies to develop the whole child, optimizing the brain for both academic and social success. (The impact of positive encouragement on pre-school children while completing a constructive task - ScienceDirect, and Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success)

Connections between Science of Learning & Student Development:

- Social Emotional Learning (SEL): A positive, safe, and supportive school environment reduces stress, which lowers cortisol and allows the prefrontal cortex—the brain's center for learning and decision-making—to function effectively .(9 Unique Ways to Promote a Safer Classroom Learning Environment | Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI))
- Kindness: Acts of kindness are neurologically smart. They trigger the release of dopamine (pleasure), serotonin (mood regulation), and oxytocin (bonding) in the brain, reducing stress and increasing emotional regulation. Regularly practicing kindness can actually increase the density of gray matter in brain areas responsible for empathy. (See discussion of "The Science of Kindness" in Appendix 2, below, and Increased gray matter volume in the right angular and posterior parahippocampal gyri in loving-kindness meditators - PMC.
- Executive Functioning (EF): Often called the "air traffic control system" of the brain, EF includes working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control. The science of learning shows that EF is developed through practice, particularly through structured, consistent, and scaffolded opportunities. (See "The Science of Executive Functioning Skills and the Developing Brain" in Appendix 3 below, and Executive functioning in the classroom: Primary school teachers' experiences of neuropsychological issues and reports - ScienceDirect.

DEEPENING SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND ITS POSITIVE IMPACT

Both kindness and executive functioning skills should join SEL in becoming permanent parts of APS life across all schools and all levels:

1. Each of these is crucial to our children as both students and whole people;
2. Each will be important for both work success and quality of life in the future;
3. Each is important for us to teach throughout our school system.
4. Each will deepen students' SEL competencies, as SEL in turn enhances both kindness and EF skills;
5. Kindness will contribute to a more caring school community, deepening of SEL, with EF skills added, will contribute to a more emotionally intelligent and self-managed school community, lessening bullying and discipline issues, which we know to be persistent concerns for APS. (Creating a Culture of Kindness: Using Research-Based Approaches to Prevent Bullying)
6. They hold importance in and of themselves, and would be natural recommendations from a committee such as ours in any case, given the state of current research as well as the world climate.
7. But they also hold the importance of their relationship to SEL, in that their deliberate inclusion/expansion could increase the success of our SEL efforts in several ways:

a. **Communication and definitions**: SEL is a rather dry term that is less accessible to many than the concept of kindness, or, say, learning time management or getting started on work assignments. Most parents we have consulted do actively want their kids to be kind people, and TA periods have community building/SEL requirements. We have yet to speak to a parent who would not like to see one or more (often many) of their kids' EF skills improve. But while a whole industry now exists around tutoring for EF skills, many of our families, *particularly* those in disadvantaged circumstances, cannot afford to hire a tutoring service for these skills that are crucial to success in school and beyond.

b. **More politically neutral:** SEL does not deserve the reputation it has been given by some people, few as they are, for "indoctrinating" students into a political philosophy. This issue is recognized elsewhere, as well, as is discussed, for instance, in an article from *Education Week*, SEL by Another Name? Political Pushback Prompts Rebranding. EF skills and kindness do not appear to carry the same concerns.

c. **More concrete:** Executive functioning skills, many of which can be seen simply as extensions of any one of the five core social and emotional competencies, often are more conceptually accessible in each one's narrower focus and simpler definition – meeting deadlines, for instance. Kindness, too, is a more fully accessible term to all, and more universally understood.

STUDENT SERVICES ADVISORY COMMITTEE 2025-26 RECOMMENDATION SYSTEM-WIDE KINDNESS AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS INITIATIVES

To implement the Kindness and Executive Function Skills Initiatives, the committee recommends APS take the following actions:

- **The School Board and Superintendent announce kindness and EF skills initiatives**, with a name approved by them, such as "Creating a Community and Culture of Kindness." /"Deepening our Students' 21st Century Crucial Skills for School, Work, and Life." The initiatives would feature **regular inclusion of one concept from each category (kindness and EF skills) in the School Board's and Superintendent's update messages** to parents and staff, and students. This communication should also talk about the connections between kindness, SEL, and EF skills. We also recommend that Dr. Duran and the School Board suggest that administrators bring these topics into teacher/staff meetings.

- **Include families and older students; and capitalize on the involvement of parents/guardians and school-related community groups:**

    - **Ask PTA's to carry the above messages in their own newsletters and offer implementation support to their schools, and/or ask principals to carry the above messages in their own newsletters.** Ask both to consider this area in any potential initiatives of their own. ("Kidsgiving," and "Kindness Clubs," offered at some schools, already demonstrate kindness in action, for instance, and might be amplified further. Speakers on kindness, SEL, and/or EF skills might be brought in by PTA's, as already happens occasionally.) A community of kindness, for instance, certainly includes families and should request their involvement.

    - **Provide parent educational event(s)** as part of the introduction of the kindness and EF skills initiatives.

    - **ACSS/APS can ask to work with CCPTA on similar surveys for PTA's**, and share results and recommendations for PTA support for" Creating a Culture of Kindness in our Schools" (or however it is named), along with the EF skills initiative.

    - **Hold listening sessions organized by ACSS, with staff assistance or by APS:** with elementary school parents; middle school parents and students; and high school students to determine the most important elements of kindness and EF skills from each group's perspectives, and their suggestions for implementation.

    - **Create systemwide Kindness, SEL, and EF Skills events**. This can be done by APS alone or in partnership with ACSS, ACTL, CCPTA, school PTAs and other community groups.

- **Add/offer the free Pre-k through 12 Kindness Curriculum** with age-appropriate curricula for each level, designed to coordinate with existing CASEL SEL curriculum and provided by The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, In making this recommendation, our goal is not to add work, but to provide a ready-made, high-quality, free curriculum that is specifically designed to dovetail with the existing CASEL framework. We hope this addresses potential staff concerns about curriculum development. The Random Acts of Kindness Curriculum offers, among other things, for example:

    - For Pre-K through 8th Grade: FREE K-8 Kindness in the Classroom® Curriculum
    - For High School Students: High School Curriculum
    - Allows schools to become a "Distinguished Kindness School."
    - Accompanying kindness project ideas, free training materials, and free resources such as: Kindness Ideas; Kindness Posters; Coloring Pages; Kindness Bingo; RAK Tag Cards; Kindness Award Certificates; Kindness Bookmarks; 50 Ways to be Kind Poster; How to Start a Kindness Club; Recommended Kindness Books; and Grab and Go Games
    - Kindness at Home lesson plans and Daily Dose of Kindness; Kindness Ideas; Kindness Quotes; Kindness Videos; Kindness Stories; and The Kind Blog
    - Kindness at Work, and Become A Distinguished Kindness Workplace; Workplace Assessment; Free Kindness at Work Calendar; 7 Steps to Create Kindness at Work; Kindness at Work Poster; Kindness Award Certificate; RAK Tag Cards; Kindness Idea

- **Expand SEL work to include Kindness and EF Skill specifics, using the existing CASEL framework and curricula.** (See Appendix 8, or p. 7 of APS-CASEL Brochure for outline of CASEL Core competencies and their elements.) Solicit SEL lead advice (and that of interested staff) on how the initiatives can be incorporated into existing school days/hours and staff work. It is anticipated that a successful kindness/EF initiative will, in the future, lessen some of the existing need for discipline, anti-bullying enforcement, etc.; and support academic performance of all students (including those in vulnerable populations).

- **Share information and resources, capitalize on knowledge already in existence in APS:** Allow ACSS in conjunction with staff, and/or just APS, to conduct a brief on-line survey of schools, to compile an inventory of school-level kindness campaign info, to be redistributed once compiled. (We know that many elementary schools, especially, already do something related to kindness, at the least during Kindness Week, and sometimes more.) Incorporate what is already happening around kindness and EF skill building in APS, and evaluate where, at what levels, with what success, and how can we collect and share information for everyone's use, combined with resources APS has available more broadly. See Appendix 5 for examples of potential survey questions.)

- **Require that principals support kindness, SEL, and executive functioning skills initiatives**, and protect SEL time.

- **Monitor survey results and assess survey result changes** for improvements and/or areas for future work.

Together, it is our belief and hope that these two additions – kindness and executive functioning skills – will help expand the competencies of all students, and at least equally importantly, will expand the safety net of protective factors needed by all children and youth, but even more by those from more vulnerable populations.

STAFF RESPONSE:

Potential Student Services Committee (ACSS) Future Recommendations/Projects/Events:

- ***Ensure that every APS school has at least one full-time social worker and one full-time school psychologist, as required by the 2024 APS Planning Factors Study Final Recommendations, Slide 10****, by hiring an additional 5.3 elementary school social workers and 4 elementary school psychologists. (Committee's 2024-25 recommendation.)*
- **Possible follow-up work on kindness and EF skills initiatives**
- **Event(s) – ACSS has a history of helping to create a bridge to the community through events that will be beneficial and of interest:**
    - **conflict resolution**/tough conversations across today's divides
    - **Kindness event(s),** both info for families and possibly other ideas
    - **"Crucial Life Skills,"** with SEL and EF combined or separate
    - **Substance use**
    - **Stress, resilience, and/or trauma-informed**
- **Continue to follow SEL progress as well as any Kindness and/or EF skills initiatives**
- **Contribute to a more robust trusted adult program** – relationship research shows successful relationships have 20 positive interactions for every single negative.
- **Inventory of ALL free resources in mental wellness** -- we would like to collect a more comprehensive inventory, to reshare across schools and families.
- **Mandatory Adult SEL for school administrators and Syphax;** PL available for all adult staff
- **Revisit and update ACSS 2017 Sources of Student Stress document**
- **Info sheets/one-pagers on things parents might not know kids are facing,** such as the dangers of AI companions or "friends," new drugs or ways of hiding them.
- **More on student well-being overall**
- **Trauma-informed practices in our schools,** both in and of themselves and connected to SEL
- **Building resilience/protective factors** – where do we stand at APS, and what further can we recommend?
- *Other ideas would emerge with time, too, as the idea for our current recommendation did, over the course of last year.*

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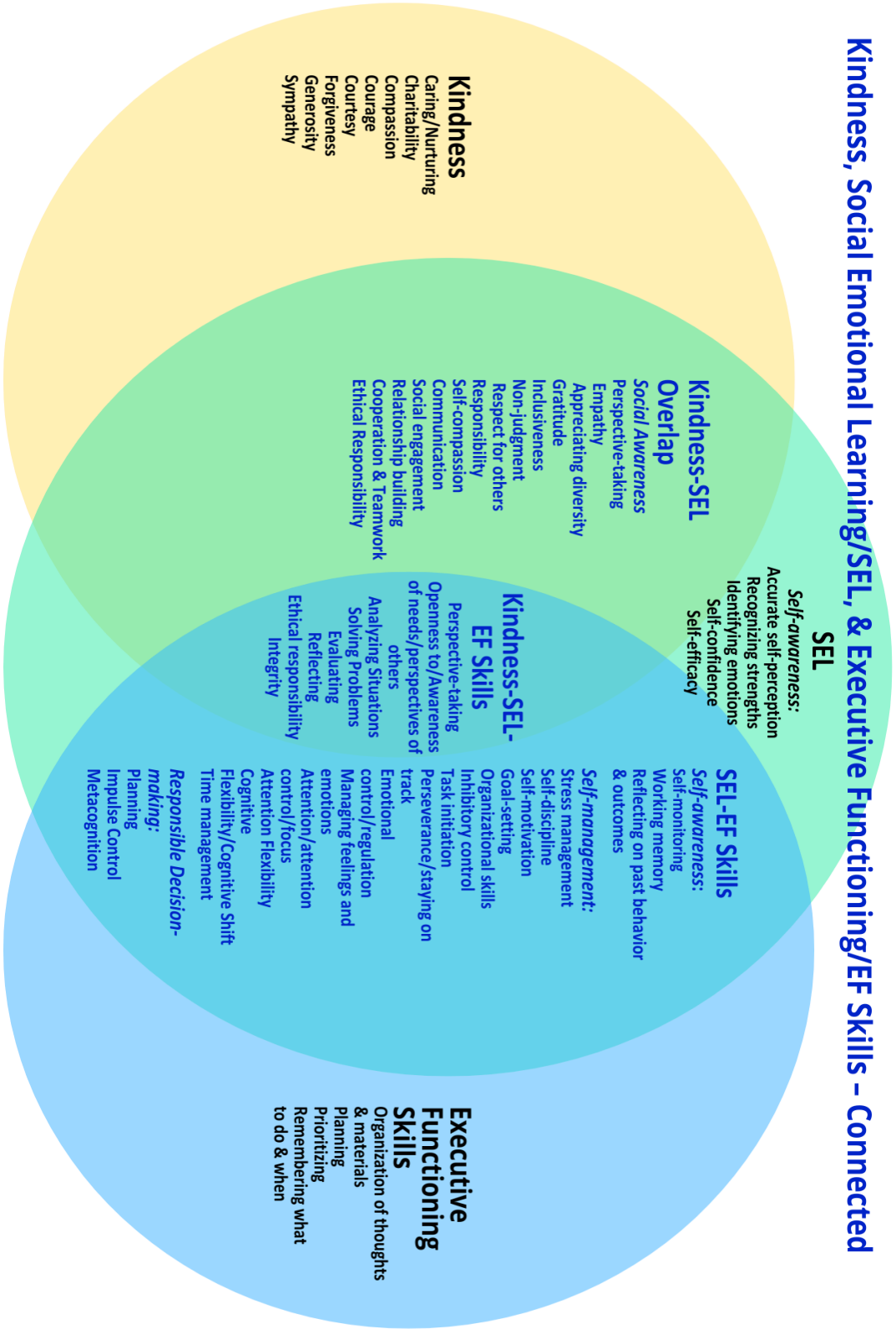
APPENDIX 1

VISUALIZING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN KINDNESS, SEL, & EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS:
KINDNESS, SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING/SEL, & EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING/EF SKILLS – CONNECTED



APPENDIX 2
KINDNESS INITIATIVE RATIONALE, KINDNESS SCIENCE & THE BRAIN, AND CONNECTIONS TO SEL

EXAMINING KINDNESS AS A PRIMARY GOAL:
Everyone deserves kindness. Everyone deserves to feel respected, understood, safe, and valued. Everyone also deserves to experience the joy – and often growth – that giving kindness to others brings. But it would be a mistake to assume that our children all know how to give kindness, in spite of the fact that they all have the capacity to learn kindness and learn to give it. A kindness initiative in APS, as we envision it, would include everyone, from the very top, to administrators, to teachers, to all other staff, both providing examples for our children and perhaps also making each other's work lives a bit more joyful; and from preschoolers to graduating high schoolers and their families.

Rationale for a kindness initiative recommendation: "The ultimate goal of a kindness initiative is to create a safe, comfortable culture and environment for students and teachers alike. By involving students and parents, the likelihood of success increases significantly, and the hope of sustaining kindness over time is a probable outcome." (Why Should My School Have a Kindness Focus? - The Power of Kind). The author continues, outlining the benefits of school-wide kindness initiatives:

- **Improved culture and environment**
- **Reduction in bullying and conflict**
- **Enhanced social and emotional skills**
- **Boost in academic performance**
- **Promotion of inclusion and community**
- **Enhanced mental health and well-being**
- **Strengthened parental/guardian involvement**
- **Long-lasting positive impact**

Connecting SEL and Kindness:
As we looked for thoughts that had come before our own, we saw some direct references to the connection between kindness and SEL:

> Acts of kindness can support social and emotional learning areas. Activities that focus on improving relationship skills, such as active listening, conflict resolution, collaboration, and fostering empathy, encourage kindness.
>
> To support the connection between SEL and kindness, parents and teachers alike can explore the following options.
>
> - Model kindness by setting and mirroring the example.
> - Explain what empathy is and show how to be empathetic.
> - Encourage children to give compliments to others.
> - Discuss how acts of kindness make children feel and how others feel when someone is kind to them.
> - Celebrate kind acts. (Social-Emotional Development and the Connection to Kindness)

Connections between Kindness and SEL at APS. Ms. Jennifer Gross, APS Coordinator, Social Emotional Learning, put together a set of slides that began the discussion of connections between SEL and kindness (with final page giving examples of connections with executive functioning skills): Kindness and Social Emotional Learning

We appreciate teachers and staff very much. We are very sensitive to how busy they are, and it is not our intention to add to their plates, but rather, for APS to provide free resources for teachers/staff as they continue things they are already doing through SEL, in conjunction with SEL leads and Student Services Staff, and through the Office of School Climate and Culture. As Ms. Jen Gross said when she participated in our October 16 meeting, there are systems already in place, but this addition gives a bit more focus and free, up-to-date resources to pull from at all levels. The free Kindness curriculum provides tools for the toolbox, with no effort needed by staff to write or design a new curriculum. (See ACSS Meeting Minutes, October 17, 2025) The free Kindness curriculum provided by the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation provides a reference point with help, to add to already-in-place work such as Responsive Classroom and Second Step, for instance.

We believe that the next steps to fuller and more robust implementation and results of the APS social and emotional learning initiative involve broadening the scope beyond current SEL curricula and align with the work of the Office of School Climate and Culture in creating awareness of the importance of the power of kindness, in two important ways:

- First, we propose **capitalizing on the significant overlaps** between kindness and the SEL work that already exists within APS.
- Second we propose also **utilizing the fact that kindness is its own concept, too, and one that is accessible and understandable to all students and adults**. We hope that a kindness initiative will both make SEL concepts more accessible *and* provide benefits to individual students and school communities of its own, as it is a necessity for positive relationships and inclusive communities.

Our recommendation dovetails well with work by Ms. Jennifer Gross, Coordinator of Social Emotional Learning; and also with the work of the Office of Climate and Culture, as we found when we spoke with Mr. Gradis White last year, and with Dr. Bonar more recently. Creating a climate of kindness would broaden the Tier 1 SEL work and the work of the Office of Climate and Culture in important ways, helping to lower the occurrence of serious incidents, creating a more proactive than reactive approach. As Dr. Bonar told us when he kindly met with us, kindness, or lack thereof, is at the base of many problems and their solutions: improved attendance; improved suspension rates; feeling safe at school; improved morale of students and teachers. Behavior also is improved by kindness: classroom management is enhanced greatly by positivity/kindness/positive reinforcement – positive reward instead of punishment – using the proverbial carrot rather than stick. Dr. Bonar told us that APS finds that many of its master teachers (or those who have mastered classroom management) already do this. The code of conduct he said, in fact, boils down to kindness – discipline and Code of Conduct essentially would not be needed if kindness prevailed.

Dr. Bonar also suggested that a Climate of Kindness campaign likely would help with providing a trusted adult to more students. He said that in his observation, too many APS students still do not have a trusted adult, or rather the two or three each student should have. In his experience as a principal, every staff member under him had a list of kids; then those not on anyone's list would be assigned to an adult, who would touch base for 10 minutes. (See Minutes - November 20, 2025)

In connection with protective factors, Dr. Bonar told us The "Arlington Partnership for Children, Youth and Families (APCYF) promotes the Search Institute's framework of 40 developmental assets to help young people grow up to be healthy, caring, and responsible adults. Some of the protective factors cited (roughly 15 of the 40) are relevant to our conversation, as they are kindness components and/or SEL competencies. The APCYF uses this framework to encourage community-wide efforts to increase these assets for local youth. (40 Developmental Assets®, by Search Institute)

The Science of Kindness:
We all have personal definitions of kindness, an intangible but immeasurably important part of our lives, characters, and hopes for ourselves and our children. Only recently, however, has the science of kindness become an area of formal study. "Once considered too esoteric to study scientifically, kindness joined topics such as gratitude and forgiveness as research themes after the "positive psychology" movement prompted a shift in the late 1990s from focusing solely on mental health problems to examining the effects of positive experiences, emotions, and traits, VanderWeele notes." In the "nature vs. nurture" question, this same researcher, VanderWeele, says that while it is true that some people seem to be more naturally inclined towards acts of kindness towards others, "it's possible to nudge yourself toward a different mindset. Performing acts of kindness — even if your heart isn't fully in them at first — can change you from the outside in, VanderWeele says." This same piece notes something we've seen many times over – that kindness begets more kindness: "If you act kindly toward another, there's also a propagation effect — that person goes on to act more kindly," VanderWeele adds. "There's a profound contagiousness to kindness. "https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/the-healing-power-of-kindness. Harvard's Gina Vild, writing in *Psychology Today* goes a big step further, saying kindness can, in fact, create a "butterfly effect," where the the ripple effects are many times broader than the original good deed.

Brain science tells us that acts of kindness increase the happiness hormones in the brain – oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin. (The Science of Kindness | Cedars-Sinai) In addition, studies have shown that acts of kindness decrease stress, anxiety, pain, depression, and blood pressure, while some study results showed not only the above-mentioned increases in positive brain hormones, but also increased energy, and even increased lifespan (44% lower risk of dying early, according to one study cited) (RandomActsOfKindness.org – The Science Of Kindness). In addition, we know that kindness is "a powerful health booster that can increase resilience and empathy. (Parenting With a Kind Mind: Exploring Kindness as a Potentiator for Enhanced Brain Health - PMC).

.

APPENDIX 2, p. 3

The study of kindness is young yet, and we could not find a definitive, broadly agreed-upon list of the elements of kindness. In addition to those mentioned above, we sampled a number of additional publications, including The Four Pillars of Kindness - The Honey Foundation; 6 Keys to the Power of Kindness | Psychology Today; Kindness matters guide | Mental Health Foundation; and The Power of Kindness - Lindner Center of HOPE.

We saw a number of lists of the elements of kindness, none of which we would disagree with, but also none of which seemed comprehensive. By listing them overtly, we believe we can see more clearly the strong relationships, and in fact many overlaps, between kindness and SEL. (See Venn Diagram on Appendix 1, as well). This clear relationship lends itself to further connecting kindness and SEL in day-to-day, as well, including throughout APS:

Caring/Nurturing
Charitability
Compassion
Courage
Courtesy
Empathy
Forgiveness
Generosity
Gratitude
Appreciating Diversity
Inclusiveness
Integrity
Non-judgment
Openness to Awareness of needs/perspectives of others/perspective taking
Cooperation & Teamwork
Respect for others
Responsibility
Self-compassion
Communication
Sympathy
Social engagement
Relationship building
Cooperation & Teamwork
Ethical Responsibility
Integrity

APPENDIX 3
MORE ON EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS, BRAIN DEVELOPMENT SCIENCE, & CONNECTIONS TO SEL

Rationale for Executive Functioning Skills Initiative:
The other expansion upon SEL we propose is adding more explicit work on executive functioning skills. These, too, are crucial life skills. Also, like SEL, they are necessary for success in school, work, and life. Many parents recognize and express concerns about their children's executive functioning, whether they use the term or not, as they think about their students' current and future needs.

According to the Cleveland Clinic, executive functioning skills are defined as: "skills that you use to manage everyday tasks like making plans, solving problems and adapting to new situations. The three main skills are working memory, cognitive flexibility and inhibition control….Executive function refers to mental processes (executive functioning skills) that help you set and carry out goals. You use these skills to solve problems, make plans and manage emotions. Research suggests strong executive functioning skills make a difference in your mental and physical health and quality of life. Poor skills can affect your daily ability to do well in school, find and keep a job, or have strong social connections."

The Science of Executive Functioning Skills and Brain Development
Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child calls executive functioning skills the brain's "air traffic control system," which, in turn, needs, among other things, supportive relationships and activities, with modeling, engagement, reduction in stress, and fostered social connections. Harvard's In Brief: Executive Function states that, "When children have had opportunities to develop executive function and self regulation skills successfully, both individuals and society experience lifelong benefits, including school achievements, positive behaviors, good health and successful work."

As brain science tells us, the process of developing these skills occurs throughout childhood, teens, and into our 20s, involving the prefrontal cortex, which we know matures over the course of this time. For EF skills, the prefrontal cortex builds and strengthens many connections or pathways between itself and other parts of the brain, again with these connections maturing during our 20s. So all of the years of childhood and youth are critically important for building these skills, which in the brain involves building and strengthening these brain pathways, in order to reach success in not just school, but in work, relationships, life, and as part of society (InBrief: Executive Function: Skills for Life and Learning).

Which Skills Are Considered Executive Functioning Skills?
Harvard, in 2012, identified three skill families: working memory, inhibitory control/self-regulation, and mental flexibility. EF skill consideration has continued since then, but the list seems not to be entirely definitive yet, as this relatively young field continues to develop, and as many of the lists available come from schools and tutoring organizations. Here is a sample of pieces we found with different lists: Executive Functioning Skills - The Pathway 2 Success; The 8 pillars - LD@School; Executive functioning is key to future success. Here's how educators can embed it in the classroom | K-12 Dive; Executive Functions Explained – Lively Minds Tutoring; Executive Function (EF) and Study Skills | The StudyPro; https://cerebrate.education/; and How Executive Function Links SEL/Academics. (Please see Appendix 6 for examples of different lists of EF skills made by different organizations.)

From the number of lists we consulted, we developed what we might call a "master list," below, for the purposes of this recommending document. Obviously, not all elements of the collection below are on every EF skills list, but we see reason to consider all of those below necessary to academic success. All are closely related to – or even can be considered to be contained within – SEL core competencies, as well:

Attention/attention control/focus
Attention Flexibility
Cognitive Flexibility/Cognitive Shift
Emotional Control
Goal-setting
Metacognition
Managing feelings and emotions
Organization of thoughts & materials
Perseverance
Planning
Prioritizing

Problem-solving
Reflecting on past behavior & outcomes
Remembering what to do & when
Self-control/inhibition control
Self-monitoring
Staying on track
Task Initiation
Time-management
Working Memory

The clear connection of EF skills to SEL presents exciting opportunities to build and improve our students' EF skills while also building and improving their SEL skills. Our research found favorable discussion regarding exactly this, of which the following is an example:

> By intentionally connecting executive functioning skills with SEL competencies, educators can create learning environments that support both academic performance and social-emotional development. This holistic approach:
>
> - **Fosters Relationship Skills:** Students learn to navigate social situations effectively.
> - **Promotes Self-Management:** Students develop strategies to regulate their behavior and emotions.
> - **Supports Responsible Decision Making:** Students make thoughtful choices based on reflection and understanding. (The Intersection of Executive Functioning Skills and Social-Emotional Learning: Foundational Skills As The Building Blocks for Academic and Life Success Part 2 - MCIU - Learning Network)

We also know that the emotional regulation provided by SEL allows greater development of EF skills, providing another powerful connection between the two (The Effect of Emotion Regulation on Executive Function - PMC). Called "emotional competence" in some literature, emotional regulation is necessary for the development and proper function of EF skills (Bridging the Learning Gap | Psychology Today). We also know now that EF skills, and the emotional regulation related to them, are crucial to resilience and developmental success (Enhancing Cognitive and Social–Emotional Development Through a Simple-to-Administer Mindfulness-Based School Program for Elementary School Children: A Randomized Controlled Trial - PMC).

We see EF skills as foundational life skills along with SEL, and see the link with SEL as a source of support for both. We believe teaching EF skills should be a consistent part of what APS does for all students, as part of the curriculum. We also know that coordination among a student's teachers becomes less and less practicable as students move beyond elementary school and through the secondary grades. Also, while IEPs and 504s might often list EF skills whose deficits have become major obstacles, a more consistent approach, early and throughout, and a more deliberate decision to teach EF skills across the board, will help *all* students navigate more independently, manage differing teachers' expectations, exert more impulse control and plan their work, feel greater self-confidence and less stress and frustration as they succeed more in part by building habits and skills through repetition and upward spiraling of skills learning as they progress.

In a November 2025 piece in *K-12 Dive*, two members of CASEL leadership are quoted in addressing the behavioral, self-esteem, and future success they say EF skills teaching can bring:

> Rista Plate, senior researcher at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL] cited literature showing that the development of social-emotional learning skills like organization, planning and self-management that fall under the executive functioning umbrella are associated with higher rates of graduation (by about 23%) and even employment and overall well being later in life….Additionally, research points to "executive-functioning-related skills as being a key mechanism for supporting students' behavior in the classroom, giving them skills and tools that help them engage in learning," she said.
>
> "These are skills that need to be practiced," said Heather Schwartz, practice advisor at CASEL. "They can be learned and strengthened."

Schwartz said classroom jobs (as an example) give students an opportunity to practice those roles. “It also creates a strong sense of belonging when kids understand that they all have important roles in the classroom,” Schwartz said. “The students who are struggling the most with self-management benefit from both having the jobs to practice those skills, but also being seen for their strengths in the classroom.” (Executive functioning is key to future success. Here’s how educators can embed it in the classroom | K-12 Dive.)

APPENDIX 4
EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS – SAMPLE LISTS

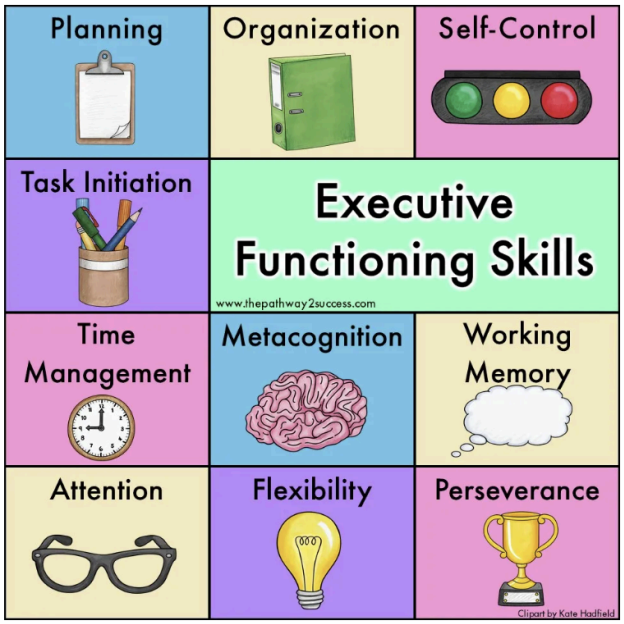
As you can see, lists of executive functioning skills differ in their exact content, most likely as the field moves towards a more definitive and agreed-upon list, but has not developed it yet. Here is a list of six competencies, followed by a somewhat differing list of 8 executive functioning skills:

A closer look at what's involved in EF

Executive function is a set of cognitive processes that not only provide the ability to control thoughts and behavior but also emotions. I like to concentrate on the following six:

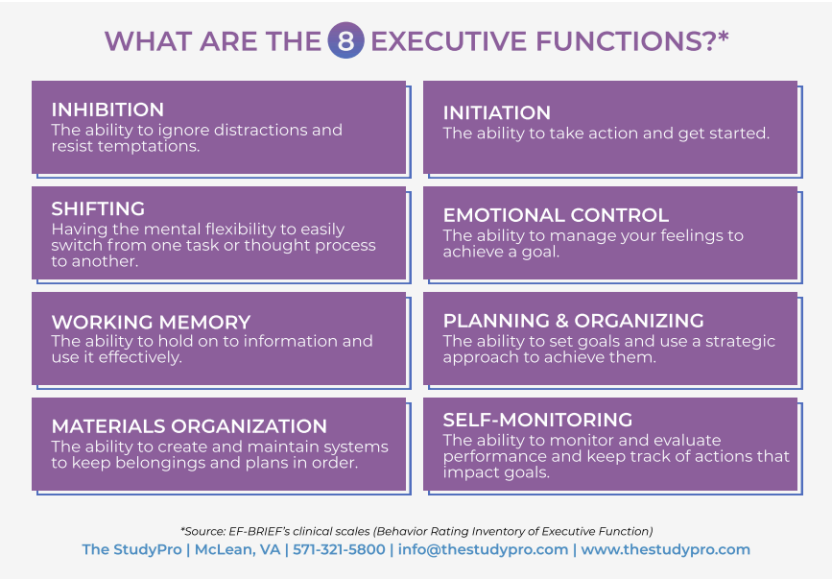
1. *Attention and focus:* The ability to tune in and stay on task.
2. *Working memory:* The small amount of information that can be held in mind and used in the execution of cognitive tasks.
3. *Cognitive flexibility:* The ability to switch between thinking about two different concepts or to think about multiple concepts simultaneously.
4. *Planning and organization:* The ability to sequence your steps to reach your goal.
5. *Impulse inhibition:* The ability to inhibit natural, habitual, or dominant emotional or behavioral responses in order to select a more appropriate emotion or behavior that is consistent with completing our goals
6. *Self-monitoring:* How we understand our behaviors and how we adjust to make changes for the future.

[How Executive Function Links SEL/Academics](#).



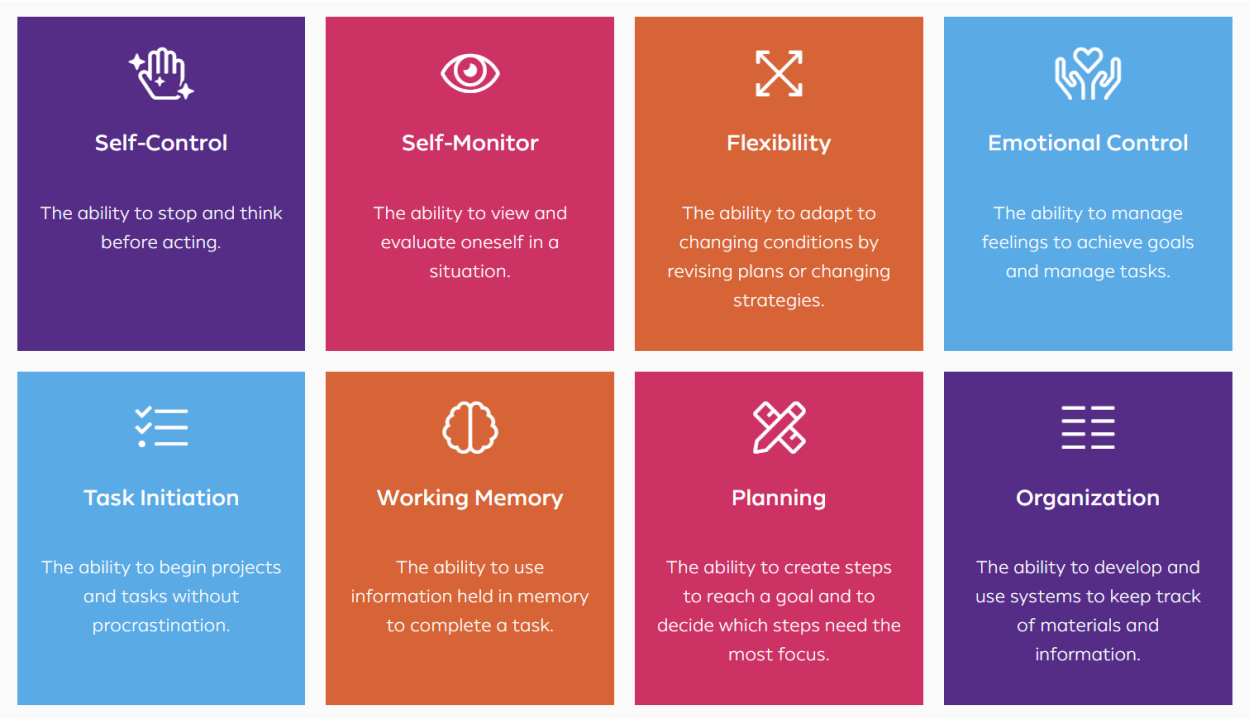
[Executive Functioning Skills - The Pathway 2 Success](#)

We often see lists of eight executive functioning skills or competencies:



https://thestudypro.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Quick-Guide-to-Executive-Functions-and-Study-Skills.pdf

However, they do not necessarily agree on the exact skills or wording:



https://cerebrate.education/

For this reason, we've combined those we found from different lists below, preferring to err on the side of perhaps a touch of redundancy over excluding anything:

Attention Flexibility
Cognitive Flexibility/Cognitive Shift
Emotional Control
Goal-setting
Metacognition
Managing feelings and emotions
Organization of thoughts & materials
Perseverance
Planning
Prioritizing
Problem-solving
Reflecting on past behavior & outcomes
Remembering what to do & when
Self-control/inhibition control
Self-monitoring
Staying on track
Task Initiation
Time-management
Working Memory

APPENDIX 5
POTENTIAL QUESTIONNAIRES TO SEND TO STAFF

WE RECOMMEND CHECKING IN WITH STAFF FOR THE PURPOSES OF ASSESSING HOW MUCH OUR SCHOOLS ALREADY HAVE KINDNESS AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS INITIATIVES, AND COLLECTING AN INVENTORY OF GOOD IDEAS, LESS SUCCESSFUL IDEAS TO AVOID, AND FREE RESOURCES OTHERS IN APS CAN USE

We recommend inventories on current levels of both kindness and EF skills. We are aware that schools within APS sometimes differ in their approaches, and hope this effort could help all to see what is available to them. Below are draft questionnaires to send to school leaders such as principals, Student Services staff, SEL leads, and any interested teachers. We would expect that the questions might be changed to suit APS more closely, but they serve as an example.

POTENTIAL KINDNESS QUESTIONNAIRE:

- What work on kindness at your school are you proud of?
- Is kindness part of your SEL work, or is it a separate initiative?
- What could be replicated in other schools? (We are doing data gathering for our recommendation.)
- What materials do you have access to/do APS schools have access to for free?
- Do you have a kindness initiative, and if so, what is it? What's working; what isn't?
- Do you have thoughts on an easy way to quantify or measure success?
- Does your initiative tap into student groups – Nat'l Honor Society; Youth Advisory Bd? Kindness Club? Senior Project?

POTENTIAL EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS QUESTIONNAIRE:

- Do you teach any EF skills? If so, which ones and how?
- How are they being incorporated into the curriculum? Are they part of your SEL work, or separate?
- In what classes or at what levels are they being taught?
- Is this teacher-specific, or do all teachers teach EF skills?
- Approximately what percentage of kids are struggling with EF skills at your school?
- In which EF skills would you say your students most need improvement?
- What materials do you/your teachers use? What can be replicated throughout your school or at other schools?
- Survey to all teachers? Must be easy/quick: check boxes, like 25%/50/75% struggling, check box
- Connection between homework and EF skills?

APPENDIX 6

THE RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS FOUNDATION'S KINDNESS FRAMEWORK

Below are some features of the free Kindness Curriculum that we recommend APS use in the kindness initiative we recommend (with agreement from the Office of Student Services, including Mr. Jeffrey Carpenter, Jr., Executive Director of Student Services, and Ms. Jennifer Gross, Coordinator, Social-Emotional Learning):



The Kindness Framework

There's a lot to read about kindness here on our website. But one of the most beautiful things about kindness is its ease and simplicity.

That's reflected in our "Kindness Framework", which is what we call the simple, five-step cycle that we follow in each of our lesson plans. Here's how it works:

Kindness in the Classroom lessons teach kindness skills through a step-by step framework of Share, Inspire, Empower, Act, and Reflect. Each lesson starts with the 'share' step to reinforce learning from previous lessons. The 'act' piece is woven into the lessons but really takes place in the projects.

STEP 1: SHARE

Each of our lessons starts with a 'share' where the class can share what they've learned and experienced with others since the previous lesson. This reinforces what they've learned and experienced, helps others to experience it and makes it far more likely that they'll express kindness again!

STEP 2: INSPIRE

Through various modalities, each kindness lesson is designed to inspire students and allow teachers to feel inspired as well!

STEP 3: EMPOWER

Inspiration is good—but transformation begins to happen when students are given the tools that will let them act on that inspiration. The 'empower' step is for teachers to lead the class through discussions designed to empower students to find ways to be kind in their daily lives.

STEP 4: ACT

The opportunity to act exists throughout the lessons, but it really comes into play in the projects. Once students have the ideas and the tools, they put it all into action. The unit projects will have students bringing real, tangible kindness into the world.

STEP 5: REFLECT

At the end of each lesson and project, students will have experienced how great it feels to perform acts of kindness. And what does everyone want to do after doing something that feels great (besides 'do it again')? Talk about it, of course! At the end of each lesson, teachers guide students to reflect on what they've just experienced and learned & identify how doing kindness affects their own lives and the lives of those around them.

What makes our lesson plans unique?

100% FREE
CASEL SELect® Program
Rooted in Kindness
Focus on Teacher Self Care
Mapped to Standards
Strong Equity Lens
Teacher Approved
Available In Over 100 Languages

Note: We use Google Translate to create translated materials, so please be aware that translations may not be 100% accurate.

The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation
FREE K-8 Kindness in the Classroom® Curriculum

APPENDIX 7
THE TREVOR PROJECT AND ANTI-BULLYING

Regarding students with LGBTQ+ identities, recent studies by The Trevor Project have examined social and community support, as well as anti-bullying policies in schools, to see their impact on the mental health of transgender and nonbinary youth. The goal of kindness initiatives and anti-bullying policies are the same: ensure that students feel safe in school.

In 2025, The Trevor Project released a study examining, in part, the effect of social support from friends and community. To measure social support, the researchers used the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, which asks these 12 questions. (Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) - Scale Items and Scoring Information)

1. There is a special person who is around when I am in need.
2. There is a special person with whom I can share joys and sorrows.
3. My family really tries to help me.
4. I get the emotional help & support I need from my family.
5. I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me.
6. My friends really try to help me.
7. I can count on my friends when things go wrong.
8. I can talk about my problems with my family.
9. I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.
10. There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings.
11. My family is willing to help me make decisions.
12. I can talk about my problems with my friends.

Using this scale, researchers determined that youth with self-reported high levels of social support was associated with 28% lower odds of considering suicide in the past year. This suggests that programs designed to create more positive interactions as measured in this scale could improve the mental health of LGBTQ+ students.

The Trevor Project (2025). Friends, Family, and Community: Social Support and the Health of Transgender and Nonbinary Young People of Color. https://doi.org/10.70226/WKQJ1410

Similarly, another 2025 study from The Trevor Project that looked at anti-bullying policies in schools is relevant to a kindness initiative. This study found that:

- LGBTQ+ young people who reported that their school had an anti-LGBTQ+ bullying policy reported the highest rates of feeling that their school affirmed their LGBTQ+ identity (69%).
- LGBTQ+ young people who reported that their school had an anti-LGBTQ+ bullying policy reported the lowest rates of being bullied at school (28%).
- Past-year suicide attempts were lowest for those reporting a policy prohibiting anti-LGBTQ+ bullying (10%) and those who did not know their school's policy (11%).

Together these studies indicate that schools can undertake affirmative programs that should have a positive impact on students' mental health.

The Trevor Project (2025 study). Anti-Bullying Policies in School and LGBTQ+ Young People

APPENDIX 8

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING CORE COMPETENCIES

CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

RESOURCES TO SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS AND WELL-BEING, An APS-CASEL Brochure, p. 7

CASEL's Five Core Competencies

SELF-AWARENESS SE

The ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior. The ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a "growth mindset."

- Identifying emotions
- Accurate self-perception
- Recognizing strengths
- Self-confidence
- Self-efficacy

SELF-MANAGEMENT SM

The ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations — effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself. The ability to set and work toward personal and academic goals.

- Impulse control
- Stress management
- Self-discipline
- Self-motivation
- Goal-setting
- Organizational skills

SOCIAL AWARENESS SO

The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

- Perspective-taking
- Empathy
- Appreciating diversity
- Respect for others

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS RS

The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.

- Communication
- Social engagement
- Relationship-building
- Teamwork

RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING RM

The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms. The realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and a consideration of the well-being of oneself and others.

- Identifying problems
- Analyzing situations
- Solving problems
- Evaluating
- Reflecting
- Ethical responsibility

Resources to Support Student Success and Well-Being: A Social-Emotional Learning Reference Guide | March 2019

APPENDIX 9
SELECTED RELEVANT LINKS AND PAST RECOMMENDATIONS

ACSS Past Recommendations:

- Final ACSS Recommendation 2024-25
- Final ACSS Recommendation 2022-23
- ACTL Recommendations, 2020-22 **(ACSS p. 5)**
- FINAL ACSS Recommending Report 2019-2020jh (2)[2319].docx
- ACSS Recommending Report, 2017-18
- **(Student Services Recommendations missing on ACTL website, 2014-19)**

SEL & School Community:

- **ACSS High School Listening Session**
- 2017 Brief Interview on Creating Supportive School Community with the Late All-Star Principal, Andrea Taylor
- Student Services Internal Briefing Summary, Heading Towards CASEL Audit, February 2021
- SEL STUDENT ESSAY (permission to share was granted)

Student Stress:

Sources of Student Stress Compilation Draft, Student Services Subcommittee Internal Submission, November 2017

Staff Morale:

Conversation with Josh Folb, APS Teacher & AEA Officer

CONVERSATION WITH AEA PRESIDENT JUNE PRAKASH, April 2025

Teacher/staff morale -- this has been a focus area for all committees, one that a number of committees expressed interest last year in pursuing. We believe the changes and concerns this year for committees might have decreased overall capacity, but the interest seemed strong from some committees last year. Toward this end, we conducted two interviews last year, with the intention of submitting them to the group of committees for possible further discussion. While we acknowledge fully that teacher/staff morale has far more of an HR focus, and we now offer this information up, we believe there is a way in which it has fallen within our purview, in the stress and concern felt at times by staff that might hamper them: as we ask staff to create supportive school cultures, with as little stress and as much help as possible for students, we hope that staff have the emotional reserves themselves to be able to contribute all we believe they would wish to contribute, and we believe morale plays a significant role in determining what they have in the tank, so to speak, to give to their students and schools.

Response to Potential Advisory Changes:

Why Should the Student Services Committee Continue to Exist? Unanimous Vote October 2025

Comments from Student Services Advisory Committee on Proposed Advisory Restructuring/Reimagining 10-16-25

ACTL Chairs' 10/25 Response to Advisory Working Group Recommendations PDF

APPENDIX 10
PAST ACSS RECOMMENDATIONS

2024-25 RECOMMENDATION:

Student Services Advisory Committee
Recommendation Final – March 13, 2025

Recommendation: Ensure that every APS school has at least one full-time social worker and one full-time school psychologist, as required by the 2024 APS Planning Factors Study Final Recommendations, Slide 10, by hiring an additional 5.3 elementary school social workers and 4 elementary school psychologists. *(Please see highlighted portions below for changes that have been made since the Committee's initial recommendation submission and Work Session.)*

SUMMARY

When mentally able/ready, students can participate in educational activities, and learn to the best of their ability. Factors that may interfere with their learning include unmet needs such as food/financial/housing insecurity, family disruptions, social-emotional concerns such as bullying/anxiety/depression, and unmet educational needs requiring an IEP or other educational intervention. In addition to teaching staff, all of these needs can involve the support and intervention of the School Social Workers and School Psychologists.

In addition, it is essential that the experts be on hand, already in the building, when an emergency arises. Support from the trained mental health professionals will be needed immediately, by students and likely by teachers and other staff members, as well. The on-site presence of the psychologist and/or social worker can affect whether an emergency's outcome is positive or negative, and to what degree. Our school system and its students are no strangers to tragedies, and we feel that adequate staffing is an absolutely necessary part of preventing tragedy where possible. The increasing student need at the elementary level is made starkly and frighteningly clear by these APS elementary numbers:

1. Since the start of the 2023-24 school year, **69.6% of all APS Threat Assessments were for elementary students.**

2. Since the start of the 2023-24 school year, **35.3% of all APS Suicide Risk Assessments were for elementary students.**

It is our belief that, due to the potential harm that could come to students if their schools are not properly staffed with these important experts, APS should approach this additional staffing as something it can't afford *not* to do:

- Young lives and futures can be changed for the better with early intervention
- Crises can be averted and/or mitigated
- Viewed from a financially pragmatic perspective, catching problems earlier allows for earlier intervention, which saves potentially much greater amounts of staff time and effort, therefore financial and other resources, later.

School psychologists and social workers also help to reinforce and create the protective factors children and youth need, so that they can be more resilient in the face of our current societal climate and past pandemic effects. The increasing insecurity of Federal jobs due to changes in policy and procedures are already impacting families, an issue that *we know* is trickling down to children. The current political turmoil and the intolerance shown to migrant, minority, and LGBTQIA families and students and those with disabilities, and losses of students in recent years, all contribute to increasing feelings of insecurity as well.

APS elementary schools are the only APS schools without a full-time school social worker and school psychologist in each building. Additionally, our ratios of students to psychologists and social workers far exceed those recommended by their professions (see below).

Finally, adding elementary school psychologists and social workers was ranked as **one of the top 10 recommendations overall,** in the most recent APS Planning Factors Study Final Recommendations, as can be seen on Slide 10, entitled, "The Design Team's ranking represents a prioritization of APS' neediest student populations and teacher support," where the design team, in fact, **recommended more additional staff than our own recommendation requests**. Adding the staff we request would begin phasing in those positions whose need has been recognized and demonstrated.

We therefore recommend hiring 5.3 social workers and 4 psychologists so that every APS school will have at least one full-time social worker and one full-time psychologist. While this also does not bring APS to the ratios recommended by the professional associations (see below), it recognizes APS budget difficulties while providing one of each professional, full-time in each building, allowing more staff hours for these professionals' large and sometimes overwhelming workloads. Crucially, as we've emphasized above, it also assures that when emergencies arise, the experts are on hand, rather than at another school that shares them.

Staff Response

Staff is supportive of these recommendations, particularly as they are in alignment with the APS Planning Factors priorities established during the 2023-24 school year.

APS has done a great deal to support the social emotional and behavioral health needs of students at the secondary level over the last several years, including adding additional substance abuse counselors and creating intervention counselor positions for the middle and high schools. However, given increased needs amongst elementary students and families since the pandemic, there remains a need for additional staffing to ensure that the appropriate staff are available to assist with student behaviors, mental health, and barriers to attendance for our youngest learners.

As noted in this document, there are a significant percentage of student behaviors at the elementary level that rise to the level of requirement for a threat assessment:

- These situations are not specific to certain schools within the division, but rather occur across the district.
- It is challenging to develop comprehensive plans to support students in the development of new strategies and skills when there are not consistent providers at all elementary schools, five days a week, to provide intensive support to the student and to teachers.

Currently, factors such as school enrollment, percentages of students identified as economically disadvantaged, and percentages of students with disabilities are used to determine the percentages of a school assignment for psychologists and social workers. This does leave some elementary schools with fewer resources to address student mental and behavioral health challenges, particularly those that require more intensive and potentially daily intervention, support, and reinforcement. By establishing a baseline of at least one psychologist and one social worker at each school, APS would be able to better ensure a steady quality of services across the district.

(Most relevant sections are highlighted in pink below.)

2023-24
Recommendation 2:

Ensure Adequate Staffing and Role Definitions as set forth below: Hire one Director of Student Wellness & Support, two Student Services Specialists [Descriptions], and additional school-based Student Services professionals (consistent with nationally-recognized professional organization ratios). Additional Student Services professionals are needed district-wide to ensure ALL schools meet the recommended ratios of their respective professional organizations.

Need: Adequate staffing within Student Services is vital to APS' ability to effectively support students. APS must have enough staff who serve schools full-time, regardless of funding source, and central office staff dedicated to supporting school-based staff, and ensuring APS can provide all students with equitable access to student services professionals, support, resources and a foundation crucial to their overall wellbeing and success. This cannot happen without sufficient school staffing. APS must prioritize mental health by seeing the need for more Student Services staff so that they can deliver comprehensive school services.

We are in a mental health and substance abuse crisis that is killing our students. Low-income students in particular lack access to and availability of therapists. Coordination with community mental health providers and incorporating DHS staff into schools helps to ensure equitable access, but it is not a substitute for school-based mental health services. We need more Student Services staff to meet recommended ratios AND to meet the ratios set forth by APS. Without sufficient APS staffing, programs cannot be effectively implemented; students cannot be known by name, strength, and need; and student sobriety and mental health cannot be prioritized. Current ratios are inadequate to student needs and lead to decreased retention of staff.

Solution: Hire a sufficient number of school Student Services staff to meet professionally recommended staffing ratios in recognition of APS' diverse student needs.

Hire three new Syphax FTEs to provide support to school based staff in the implementation and management of various student services programs in schools. The proposed Syphax staff should help coordinate and integrate SEL, drug prevention, and mental health support in

Prioritize filling the current vacancies of school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers and substance abuse counselors. The School Board has previously acknowledged the importance of providing these positions by including them in the budget. **All schools must have full-time, daily coverage of school psychologists, social workers, school counselors, and substance abuse counselors consistent with national ratio standards.** This is crucial to the effective implementation and integration of SEL throughout the system, and to the wellbeing of Arlington students that these positions are filled. **The School Board should make filling existing Student Services vacancies an HR priority, and assess what changes might be needed for the effective recruitment and retention of these staff (including compensation and benefits commensurate with area localities).**

Budgetary Implications and/or Implementation
Needs: 3.0 FTE, potentially fully-or-partially offset by Medicaid reimbursement funds.

Strategic Plan Alignment:
Core Values Supported: Excellence, Equity, Inclusivity and Integrity.
Goals Supported: Student Wellbeing
Strategies Supported: Student Wellbeing Strategies 2, 3, 4 and 5.
https://www.apsva.us/strategic-plan/student-well-being/

Committee vote: Unanimous

Staff response: Per the Arlington School Board's Strategic Plan, APS is working to implement evidence-based social-emotional learning programs and evidence-and-research-based interventions for students who need more targeted or intensive support in the areas of behavioral health and wellness. Further, due to higher levels of need for intensive supports as substantiated by data, APS has also entered into multiple partnerships that expand opportunities for students to access mental health services within the community. Additionally, Medicaid reimbursement is changing to allow for more services, including those for general education services, to be eligible. In order to support implementation, coordination, and training, to include on-site side-by-side coaching, of all of these initiatives, and to align them with ongoing work around the Arlington Tiered Systems of Support, additional staff are needed.

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2022-23
Recommendation 2:

The committee has previously recommended adjusting the staffing ratios for school psychologists and social workers to allow for one full-time psychologist and one full-time social worker assigned to each elementary, middle, high, and alternative program school. In the meantime, APS has begun a pilot program adding SEL school leads and support in the central office. The committee believes APS should be prepared to continue this additional SEL support in the future. The SEL leads have been able to provide additional help to the schools in the handling of SEL, for example:

- Provide communication to parents and families around SEL survey results (interpreting the report) and in general information and knowledge
- Help increase the overall survey response rates (89% response rate vs. 60% prior to having the leads)
- Help principals in schools review survey data, and use the information to assist the school in decision making, not just in SEL areas.

As noted before, the strategic plan has goals and objectives around student well-being, and furthermore a mission that all APS students learn and thrive in safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments across the entire system (and in each school). Adequate support in the implementation, rollout and continuing management of SEL is vital to this goal. We believe that adding specific central office leadership and paid school based support will be important. A future recommendation may be to allocate the following resources to schools and central office:

- SEL leads in schools. Need additional funds moving forward. Make sure additional funds in stipend are included in the student services operating budget
- Central Office Director of SEL programs, with a specific focus on student well-being goals.
- Central Office Specialist to support the universal roll out of the SEL curriculum and CASEL recommendations.
- Give parents resources to help them know how to build student well-being skills at home (as community support/services is limited)

Adequate staffing in this area (including school-based staff and central office staff that will provide vital support to staff based in schools) will help APS provide all students equitable access to student services professionals. In addition, it can ensure equity between all schools in supporting all of our students at a time when mental health related issues for students are on the rise, and at a time when crucial mental health referral services are limited. There is not sufficient mental health care available to our children locally to meet the needs that already exist and are expected to continue. This makes it more important than ever that APS have adequate internal resources to address rising needs for students. Not all elementary schools currently have full time services for their students, and some school Psychologists and social workers have multiple school responsibilities. Student needs for school psychologists and social workers do not match the availability of these professionals.

The budget expense for additional full-time social workers and psychologists was estimated to be $2,160,000/year. The projected budget for the School SEL leads and central office SEL support staff is $400,000 to $500,000 per year. We are aware of the budget constraints that APS faces, but we believe this need is too great to be left unmet.

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2015-2019
Summaries of Recommendations, Responses, and Actions Taken:

2018-19 Non-recommending year: Counselor-to-student ratio in elementary schools, 1:444, and in secondary schools, 1:244; the American School Counselor Association recommends 1:250. Psychologist-to-student ratio, 1:775; the National Association of School Psychologists recommends 1:650. Social Worker-to-student ratio, 1:850; the recommended ratio is 1:400. SAC-to-student ratio 1:2,000; there is no ratio recommendation for SACs.

2017-18 Recommending year: Recommended

1. Increase the number of counselors across all elementary schools with the goal of improving the counselor-to-student ratio by reducing the ratio from 1:470 to 1:371 over a 2-year period.
2. Continue to increase the number of school psychologists and social workers across all schools to support the improvement in the ratio.
3. Expand the number of APS substance abuse counselors,(SAC) with the goal of one full-time SAC serving each middle school, high school, and secondary program in order to address the growing student, family, and staff needs for critical substance abuse prevention and intervention services. (At the time, there were 6 SACs providing services to 12,000+ students in the 13 APS secondary schools.)

2016-17 Non-recommending year: APS trained 380 teachers and staff in MHFA; Hired 6 additional psychologists and 6 social workers; and added the "In Crisis/Need Help Now?" button to the APS website.

2015-16 Recommending year: Recommended

1. Provide Mental Health First Aid training (MHFA) for all APS teachers and administrative staff;
2. Reduce social worker and psychologist ratios from 1:1650 to 1:650;
3. Expand the reach and impact of youth social-emotional and mental health/resiliency resources, and develop new resources and accessible formats in collaboration with community partners. SSAC also asked for a "In Crisis/Need Help Now?" "button" on the APS homepage and school homepages, linking to county-wide services, programs, and information.

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