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**The Other Side of the Report Card: Assessing Students' Social, Emotional and Character Development**

Elias, M. J., Ferrito, J. J., & Mocerri, D. C. (2016). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin

**Reviewed by Dale Starcher**

It is a privilege to write this book review on social-emotional learning and character development (SECD) and its specific application to the report card. Dr. Elias is one of the early theorists and developers of SECD for school-based settings. His contributions have garnered a deep respect among school psychologists and other educators who have a real interest in his insights, collaborations and recommendations.

**A Cultural-Historical Context**

It is helpful to place this text within a larger cultural-historical context. Over the past two decades we have witnessed a true global movement related to researching and teaching the kinds of skills Dr. Elias and colleagues are talking about. This is driven by broad cultural changes. In the previous 100 years, education and industry around the world focused only on “hard” or technical skills related to academics and other knowledge-based skills. This is no longer the case.

Today, we are in a service-oriented industry and a media-driven culture. This necessitates the inclusion of what, in business and industry, are called “soft” skills, such as communication, leadership, creativity, problem-solving and decision-making skills (Crosbie, 2005; Rao, 2012). Research by business institutions has found that soft skills are more important for success in one’s job and in life than are hard skills (Cherness, 2000). It may be noted that business and industry are spending billions of dollars each year teaching these skills, and are urging schools to take on this role before students enter the world of work.

These soft skills in the business world are, of course, referred to in education as SEL and character-based skills. These same skills are also found in the neurosciences, where they are referred to as “brain-based” skills (Martín-Loeches, 2015; Zadina 2015). This global movement is mentioned to help the reader appreciate the wide range of support for these skills, and the reason educators need to incorporate

these skills within the classroom and across the school.

When we consider culture, we also need to take into account the culture of schools. Once schools accept the idea of including SECD skills alongside academic skills, the real task begin: how to achieve this within the context of this school. As the authors explain, individualizing a program to fit the demographics and uniqueness of each school is essential.

### **The Book's Purpose**

The authors first clarify the importance of SECD skills in schools and provide research to support the benefits. Second, they introduce the reader to the concept of the report card and provide rationales why this is helpful. Third, we are guided step by step in how to design a report card which will communicate these skills along with academic skills.

In essence, the report card is conceived as an important document for both schools and families because it encapsulates how schools have evaluated each student across a particular period of

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### **The Other Side of the Report Card:**

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time. Bringing home a report card is not a minor event; rather, it often triggers a range of emotions, attitudes and communicative responses. Therefore, we want to make sure that something as important as SECD skills is part of this significant dialogue in a family's life.

### **Is an SEL Report Card Realistic?**

Chapter One begins by asking the question as to whether it is realistic to include SEL and character-based skills in report cards. Before an answer is given, the authors first review these skills, based on CASEL's (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; [www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org)) five categories and character development ([character.org](http://character.org)). In addition, over 200 studies are referenced to support the benefits of these skills.

Considerations related to feasibility, acceptance of this approach, and practicality, provide solid justification for adding SECD to report cards. Examples of benefits include: teachers already add comments so it becomes more of an extension to what they do; it doesn't take that much time; it is not a financial issue; it doesn't require formal measurements; it can improve communication between school and home; the ratings can

serve as early indicators of students at risk; and, the ratings can help emphasize positive behaviors.

Chapters Two and Three explore adaptations of the report card to include SECD. Numerous examples give the reader a sense of what could be developed within one's own school. Chapters Four and Five discuss implementation and provide case study examples for schools new to SECD. The last three chapters address frequent

challenges, a checklist of considerations and a literature review. **Summary Analysis of The Other Side of the Report Card**

Most educators will like the fact that this text is not about theory, but about practice. While practical, it is also not a pre-given set of procedures; rather, it reminds us throughout that we need to be flexible because each child, each practitioner and each school is different. The reader will appreciate the abundance of real school examples related to different programs, variations and obstacles which he or she might face along with positive suggestions.

*The Other Side of the Report Card* is well-written, as comprehensive as needed in accomplishing its goal; it doesn't give you any additional "fluff." While under a hundred pages, you might think of it as a condensed handbook on report card design for SECD principles. By the way, you can also download a guide which will help you analyze your own school's report card related to the comment section where this additional information would be added (<http://www.edutopia.org/resource/measuring-SEL-download?adl=1>).

In some ways the report card may seem like a fairly simple approach to SECD. But, as you read this book, you realize that it is deceptively simple. There is much that goes into this adapted report card within the context of the school. This effort is then streamlined into key statements for students and their families. As mentioned previously, the adapted report card offers an opportunity to further open lines of communication and to broaden conversations between school and families. For example, the idea that SECD skills

could be given similar value as academics requires a real shift in our mindset. For parents and students, it can help with the overemphasized attention to strong conceptual skills at the neglect of other important skills.

It may be mentioned that many of the larger universities have recently made broad changes in admission standards. They are moving away from emphasizing SAT scores and long lists of accomplishments. Instead, they are looking for a wider range of skills, some of these paralleling SECD skills. **Conclusion**

This book opens with two quotes. The first is by Aristotle: "Educating the mind without educating the heart is not education at all." The second quote is by Theodore Roosevelt: "To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to create a menace to society." There is a particular reason why these quotes are the first entries in this text about SECD: SEL speaks to the heart and CD speaks to our morals.

*Together, they speak to our need to focus on the whole child. If not, we have not educated; we may have created menaces to society.*

Heavy words indeed! But given the percent of children in our society suffering from a wide range of learning, social, emotional and behavioral issues, we have already waited too long. Let us not wait any longer.

We have various models of what to do. In the quest to implement an SECD program, the use of what may be called the “whole child report card” is an excellent communicative instrument for connecting home and school; it can be added to whatever model you are currently using.

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