

A Dubious Consensus on 'Social and Emotional' Learning

National Review, by Frederick M. Hess & Amy Cummings, of American Enterprise Institute, March 21, 2018



The Aspen Institute's ideological approach to education 'consensus' seems geared to alienate teachers and conservatives.

The Aspen Institute is big on finding “consensus” when it comes to education. And consensus can be a fine thing. Unfortunately, in the case of Aspen’s push to promote “social and emotional learning” in schools, “consensus” takes on an unsavory cast. Indeed, Aspen’s new statement of principles, “The Practice Base for How We Learn” (touted as “Educators Reach Consensus on What It Takes to Integrate Social, Emotional, and Academic Development in Schools”), is emblematic of where consensus-seeking can go wrong.

Released last week, Aspen’s report purports to proffer a national consensus on how the nation’s schools ought to go about recasting classrooms in order to address the social and emotional needs of students. Herewith are the document’s five big declarations to that end — endorsed by its panel of 34 teachers, counselors, principals, system leaders, superintendents, and “community partners”:

1. Social, emotional, and academic development is for all students.
2. Social, emotional, and academic learning for students starts with adults.
3. Strong leadership is central.
4. Explicit and embedded instruction and a caring classroom and school climate develops social, emotional, and academic competencies.
5. Home-school-community partnerships matter.

Obviously, this is mostly a list of banalities — and it would be tough for anyone to take issue with any of it. Indeed, Aspen’s declarations are so vague and all-encompassing that it’s nearly impossible for anyone to disagree, unless they’re hell-bent on being actively hostile.

And that leads to the real concern, which is how these kinds of “consensus” documents get used in schooling. After all, buried amid the lugubrious banalities are difficult questions about how we understand “social development,” how adults support “emotional” learning, what constitutes a “caring” climate, how much deference schools owe to parents, and so on.

Aspen purports to provide “profound wisdom” and “clear guidance” on all of this. But asking educators to take responsibility for “expressing empathy, maintaining positive relationships, and making responsible decisions” is well-trod terrain. So, what does Aspen think schools should be doing differently?

On that count, Aspen’s recommendations are strewn with the buzzwords of education-school progressivism. While there’s little more than a solitary late-report nod toward personal responsibility, self-discipline, or delayed gratification, the report is rife with references to “cultural identities,” “culturally relevant materials,” “affirming diverse cultures,” “inclusive classrooms engender[ing] respect for diverse cultural identities,” and so on. While there’s nothing wrong with “cultural relevance” in the abstract, what’s offered here is a familiar shorthand for identity-driven, ideological agendas.

Meanwhile, behind the boilerplate talk of caring classrooms and safe school climates, Aspen calls for schools to reject traditional school discipline in favor of Obama-era enthusiasms such as “restorative practices” and “developmental discipline.” Anyone who raises concerns about the unintended consequences of “restorative justice” is presumably opposed to “caring classrooms” — and on the wrong side of the new “consensus.”

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Other examples of “clear guidance” are anything but. Aspen calls on teachers to “create an inclusive environment where each student feels affirmed and valued, receiving the supports and developing the competencies to be successful,” and to provide opportunities to “share ideas, discuss differing perspectives, work cooperatively, and engage in group projects.”

This is where experience is such a bummer. It teaches that life will be breathed into these vapidities by education professors, consultants, and district administrators — who will be happy enough to heed the call for more funding, programs, and bureaucracy. Aspen urges states and districts to adopt new “standards” for social and emotional learning, new dedicated-funding initiatives, new school-improvement plans, and new administrative positions such as “director of social and emotional learning.” School leaders are encouraged to “organiz[e] educators to review curriculum materials for the explicit integration of social and emotional dimensions of learning” and “adapt scope and sequence documents, unit guides, lesson plans, and student tasks in order to make integration more visible.” It’s remarkable how much paperwork and how many meetings five banal assertions can occasion.

In a polarized era, efforts to find common ground are healthy and useful. But it matters much how such exercises are done. This one feels more like a partisan’s attempt to squelch inconvenient questions under jargon and gibberish than a serious effort to address hard questions about how to serve children well. Such gambits are unlikely to foster agreement; they’re more likely to transform “social and emotional learning” into a polarizing battleground. We might have learned this lesson from the unraveling of the supposed “consensus” around No Child Left Behind, the Common Core, or test-based teacher evaluation — but it looks like the champions of “social and emotional learning” will need to learn it yet again.

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