

Open Doors

Season 1 Episode 2: The SEL Movement

Shannon Fagan 0:05

Welcome to open doors a podcast from the Allegheny intermediate unit that explores the people, programs and partnerships making a difference in students' lives. I'm your host. Shannon Fagan, together, we're opening doors to learning, support and connection so every student can thrive.

Shannon Fagan 0:27

Dr Shannon Wanless, Director of the Center for Social and Urban Research at the University of Pittsburgh, believes social emotional learning starts with supporting the adults who care for kids. Shannon is helping lead a county wide movement to make SEL a shared responsibility. In this episode of open doors, we will find out how this growing movement is building relationships, fostering belonging and creating a system of support for every child.

Shannon Wanless 0:56

Hi, Shannon, how are you today? Hi Shannon, good to see you. I'm excited for our conversation,

Shannon Fagan 1:01

so am I and our conversation? It's called open doors, and what I've really grown to love about your work in social emotional learning is how open that is to everybody, and how important it is to teach skills from the very beginning. So I just want to have this conversation with you. Can you share with me your passion for social emotional learning, and I know you've just had a career change too, so I want to bring that into the picture too, because I think it's going to be able to expand the work you've done absolutely.

Shannon Wanless 1:31

So my passion for social emotional learning goes way back, and I started my career after college as a head start teacher. And if anyone's worked with three and four year olds, the whole day is social, emotional. You toss in a little other a few other subjects on the side. But really, if you're going to get anywhere, you have to figure out, as a room full of three and four year olds, how are we going to function together? And come to learn, you know, you could really understand over time, this is a microcosm of society, you can't really be productive and solve big, challenging problems unless we figure out, how are we going to be humans together? And so that's where my work began, and it is settled in early childhood for a long time, and now in my new role expands across the community. Yes.

Shannon Fagan 2:19

And so tell us a little bit about your new role and how you see that integrating social emotional learning.

Shannon Wanless 2:27

So my new role is as director of uxor at the University of Pittsburgh. Uxor is the University Center for Social and urban research, and our goal is to become the home of community engaged research at Pitt so partnering with the entire region and listening and hearing what is most important to you. What do we need to be able to thrive in this region? How can we build an agenda that is CO created with the community and then insert all of our researchers and our expertise to be of service in all of those different areas, and it connects to social emotional learning, because the way we learn how to work together is how we'll actually solve those problems. Yes, we need the studies along the way, but if we'll do them in a way that listens to each other and actually gets implemented in a way that creates big change, it's going to have to be full of perspective taking, full of inclusion of diverse voices, and full of empathy for many different ways of experiencing western Pennsylvania,

Shannon Fagan 3:29

I know that your work at the office of child development really took off when you've been doing a great job, so don't take that

Shannon Fagan 3:38

when we were able to bring you together with our seeks programs, we saw a shift in my mind of universities coming together, talking about social emotional learning, which is now more social emotional wellness, but talking with them, and bringing our school districts together to share like how this term isn't threatening, It's really a way that we work together, and how we teach important skills so that we have those resources available, whether we're two, 510, 3550,

Shannon Fagan 4:12

so can you explain a little bit about some of those goals that you had to build that capacity within Allegheny County?

Shannon Wanless 4:18

Yes, so we approached the program, and yes, it did help us take off. Thank you. We approached all of our work from an ecosystem perspective. So how do we look at all of the people around the children, not just children, and figure out what social, emotional skills do they need to develop in themselves? What are they seeking support to develop, to be able to show up and be as well and available and present for children as possible. It is sort of interesting to me how little we talk about the fact that we're trying to teach children social emotional skills when most of the adults actually did not have any training in social emotional skills anywhere in their schooling. I mean. If we all of a sudden said, Let's teach everyone astrophysics, you wouldn't just jump in, right? You do some learning first before you did that. And so I think in some ways, we've kind of assumed that adults are ready to take this on. And when we had the very large convenings across universities and with many community partners through seeks, what we heard over and over again is we need this for the adults. We need this for the adults so they can be there for themselves and for the children. Did you see an impact? Oh, absolutely. But the conversation around we need this for adults, the impact was hearing that loud and clear and getting a network built of people that I can now pull up my cell phone and just call at other universities, at other organizations and say, Okay, how are we going to do this for adults? But I will say we're living in challenging times. Funding is being cut left and right. People who had great aspirations to add something to their plate, or saying I'm now doing two jobs, I can't add this to my plate. And so I think we're at a point now where it's clear what the agenda around social, emotional well being is. The question is, how are we going to find times, time and capacity in our systems to take it on in a way that isn't one person's hobby. This isn't a

teacher's side activity to bring this into her grade level. It is a systemic change that is taken up across the community. That's where the big impacts

Shannon Fagan 6:32

will come, right? And how do we even start?

Unknown Speaker 6:36

Was that rhetorical?

Shannon Fagan 6:40

Yeah, like, I do think there are times when I look at it and it seems so big, and I know you've taken steps to make it reasonable and approachable. So what would you say to a brand new educator out there about bringing social, emotional, well being into their room, into their space, when maybe there's a district that's not quite there yet. So how do you keep that momentum?

Shannon Wanless 7:05

I would say on two different levels, because I do get this question often, so I practice with this one on two different levels. One very basic, one foot in front of the other, right? What? What can happen this week that didn't happen last week that will center social, emotional learning more, and it could be in a math activity you already have considering, how might I have the students talk to each other as they're doing it? How might I have them consider, what do their stress levels feel like as they're about to start this test? You know, baby steps, everything doesn't have to be enormous, and I think we get sometimes caught up in big programs with big implementation strategies and school wide efforts that have been shown in the research to be most impactful. But that doesn't mean we can let go of each of us waking up each morning and saying what might be different today that could add more to social, emotional learning, to my space with children and then on the the second level, I think awareness and networking across fields. I love Allegheny County, but we are so rich with different organizations and different initiatives and different people doing different things, that if we actually came together and saw that teaching our children how to be fully human together is the goal we're all talking about, and pooled some of our resources and

pooled some our efforts and worked together and compromised some of our agendas so we weren't individually in silos doing work, we would actually have everything we need to Move systemic change?

Shannon Fagan 8:41

Yeah, I know a lot of counties, a lot of communities have a lot of resources, but connecting the dots and then helping our families and our youth find those dots to make sense for themselves and everyone's individual, where I think sometimes we try to fit people to a mold, and that doesn't always work.

Shannon Wanless 8:58

Well, certainly the challenge is, how do you hear someone who has a different dream for what Allegheny County or Western pa looks like, something different than you and no, actually, we're both here together, working together toward a better future, even though your definition is different, and we're in such a polarized state that I think we have to face the fact that all our dreams are not the Same, and yet we're all on the same team.

Shannon Fagan 9:22

Yeah, yeah. When I think about social, emotional wellness, I think of that term, it takes a village. And I saw that happening in action when we were all meeting at the IU and doing the book series. And then I worry what happens to that when it's done. So what are your plans for sustainability. Now that the project is coming to an end, what do you see happening going forward?

Shannon Wanless 9:47

Well, a few different things. One, I keep that list of people who were at those two events you're talking about at the AIU close to my heart. They're on my desk to hold myself accountable. These people were. There they were in front of me. They told me they care deeply about this. I heard that loud and clear. I am not disappearing. And so there is no program as of today, but there is a lot of work happening behind the scenes to figure out, how do we push this agenda forward? And so first, there is a Pennsylvania wide effort to bring more social, emotional and mental well being forward, and so we've put together a

network of universities from different regions throughout Pennsylvania. I'm so proud of this, even though we're at the very beginning to think about how might we be of service to our communities. What does it look like to be a community engaged university focused on social, emotional and mental well being. And all of the people at each of these universities that are involved specialize in social, emotional, mental well being. They see the big picture. They care deeply, and they none of them have worked together before. And so we found each other and thinking about, what does it look like to do a scan of the entire state, that is our first step to understand where are the bright spots, where are the challenges? Whose voices are at the table and who need to be at the table, who's not being listened to enough? And how do we build on our strengths and convince our policy makers that this is worth investing in?

Shannon Fagan 11:16

I've often thought and you know my history, I was the Children's Behavioral Health Director for the state for a few years, and just growing up in the mental health field as a profession, I've often thought, if we could teach those social, emotional wellness skills from the very beginning, we may not see as many children in juvenile justice, child welfare, mental health. What are your thoughts on that?

Shannon Wanless 11:38

I mean, absolutely, you know, you can never just blame one factor, right? Say this is the one thing that's going to make a difference. But figuring out how to regulate your emotions, how to regulate stress, how to take others perspectives, how to have empathy, these are essential human skills. And at the same time, I do look at, you know, children I remember from my own classroom when I was a head start teacher, yes, you're trying to teach. Trying to teach them self regulation. And at the same time, why is there so much to regulate against? And I'll say that's one of the things I'm most excited about in my new job. Although I'm always focused on making this community a better place to raise children, we're looking much more broadly than just early childhood, what about housing? What about the criminal justice system? What about aging in this area? What are all the factors we need to be considering, because they're creating a society where kids have too much to have to manage. So yes, we want them to have the skills to handle the things that are hard that come in all of our lives, but we also want to decrease the number of hard things that they have to face. And so you need both happening at the same time.

Shannon Fagan 12:48

Yeah, I was thinking to an earlier conversation about just general wellness. Like, do you have, like you said, housing? Is there food on the table? Is it accessible? Is it my neighborhood safe? Do I feel safe? Are my parents in my home or my caregiver in my home? And those are all really important things. And then I think about what we just experienced with covid, and I know it's been five years, and part of our grant started because of that, but when I think about the adults that are supporting children, we had a lot of teachers, a lot of staff in schools that said, I'm just I can't, because kids were coming in so dysregulated, so not sure what to do and how to do it. I think we're over that hump a little bit, but I think there's still residual pieces left. So what would your advice be to maybe a teacher that's facing that right now, like, you know, there's still kind of burnout. There's still a lot of emotions that aren't regulated in the classroom. There's not enough hours. We don't have the teachers that we need.

Shannon Wanless 13:51

So I know, I guess the first, the first advice is, you are not crazy. You don't have as much help as you need. This is a very, very hard to ask in front of you. And you know, on the second piece of advice, I would say, I think we need to consider what, what we define as reasonable or unreasonable behavior for children. So just because someone, a child, is being difficult in your classroom for you, and you feel like, how am I supposed to manage this classroom with all these behaviors going on doesn't mean what they are doing is not reasonable, considering the situations they might be in or developmentally appropriate. And so, you know, that is why we need more support in schools, because we need to have more capacity to handle the full range of behaviors that come in and then the ones that feel like this is out of development, this is beyond what's appropriate for this developmental stage, or we have given lots of supports for the situations that this child is facing. It seems to be getting better, and yet their behaviors are not getting better. Then you need extra help in those areas. You need. Specific folks. You can come in and work with them, possibly one on one, but our teachers are clearly having a lot to handle. My first year, I had nine three year olds in my class, and I thought that was a lot, so I can't even imagine. You know, over time, I moved in to classrooms with more, but it is a heavy weight we put on our teachers. They need more support, and I think they also need more training to handle the own, their own things that are going on in their lives.

Shannon Fagan 15:27

Yeah, we've added a lot of training over the years in both just social emotional learning, but trauma informed care, Youth Mental Health, first aid. I could just name all these trainings that are available, but getting the time to actually take them and then to practice them, not always easy, right?

Shannon Wanless 15:46

I mean, how many of us are on for that many hours a day? If you really think about the task of the job of being on, interacting with high energy children trying to enact all of these learning goals that are put in front of you at a certain schedule, no matter what's happening around you, it's a tall order, and so it's training, but it's also maybe the task needs more support.

Shannon Fagan 16:09

Yeah, yeah. And I've seen a big change in some of our superintendents, not just in their mindset, but we have a lot of newer superintendents coming in, and I often bring up the term social emotional learning or social emotional wellness, and I think they they truly believe that they need to address it. I think they just like everybody else, they have so much on their plates. So what would your advice be to maybe a newer superintendent or maybe a school board when things come up around this topic, because we want to keep the conversation going. And I think people are still afraid of the conversation.

Shannon Wanless 16:47

I mean, I know the immediate reaction to anything new coming up is we don't have any room on our plate for something else. I understand that. I completely understand that. And I remember hearing a social emotional coach saying, once, this is not another thing on your plate. This is the plate. And that was such a great phrase in my mind, because it depicts the way we talk about the first week of six weeks of school, and the research on the first six weeks of school, if you can get your classroom to a place where there are routines, where kids feel comfortable and they feel seen and heard and known, and they're working together. Well, if you focus intensely on that at the beginning, you'll reap the rewards and get much further in academic achievement as the year goes on. And the same thing is true school wide. You know, if you spend some time at the beginning of the year with deep investment in building community, the academic learning is so much easier. And I'm not speaking off the cuff. There is research showing that you can increase the amount of time

for social emotional learning, which inevitably will often decrease the academic focus time, because there's only a finite amount of time, and still, your scores on academics will go up. And I think it's seeing. Seeing is believing, right? And it takes a while to invest in it and cultivate that until you know, okay, that actually works, yeah,

Shannon Fagan 18:06

teaching our kids those confidence skills, those skills like how to negotiate, how to understand, how to deal with I could see where that would lead to, like, less test frustration, less absenteeism, the things that keep them out of school. So, so important. I also wonder what your thoughts are on our newest teachers. So the teachers in those programs like yours at the university, how do we get them invested in this notion of the whole child?

Shannon Wanless 18:39

Well, I can tell you from teaching. I'm no longer my new position teaching in the School of Education, but I was for a long time, and you can hear over the last decade, the increase in awareness among students of the importance of mental health and social emotional skills. They know this matters. Teachers have known it forever, and it's been I remember 20 years ago reading a research article that is the number one demand for professional development, but I wasn't always seeing it when students would first start in the teacher education program. Now you see it right from the beginning, and I think there is a cultural awareness of mental health is a topic we can talk about out loud. It is something we can see, seek help for. And in fact, it is a very reasonable thing for a healthy, functioning person to seek out social, emotional supports. Yeah, and so I don't know if that's, you know, more normalized, more language for it, but I don't feel like I have to sell it with the early childhood teachers, there is no selling. They're saying, How do I do this?

Shannon Fagan 19:43

How do I do this? That's amazing. I'm so glad to hear that shift. I know working in the field for a long time myself. It's, I called it the pendulum, like we never get to the middle ground. It's always here or there. Hurry up and learn this, because, you know, next week it's going to change. Change, and we're going to move into a different direction. So I feel like that pendulum is actually coming to the middle when it comes to mental health. And I think if we can keep promoting social, emotional wellness and well being that, it's going to stay

there. It's not going away. I think some of our we have a lot of crisis in our world right now, but teaching children and adults that take care of them these skills is so essential. So I appreciate your work in all of this, and I'm guessing you probably have a few more things to say about social, emotional wellness. I kind of want to hand it over to you. What would you like people to know that maybe we haven't discussed already? Are there any other ideas or concepts you want to share?

Shannon Wanless 20:44

I have one to share, and first, I have to pick up on what you said about hurry up and learn. So in class, I was often telling the students, the biggest threat to your teaching is the clock on the wall. If I could get rid of all the clocks in schools, that might be my first agenda item. There is so much focus on, what can you get done in what amount of time? And then you have to move to this. And humans do not work on a certain schedule. And certain young, certainly young children, do not move at a certain time. So if you only have a gym slot from x time to x time, which I realize is a logistical, you know, decision, of course, you have to do that if you're sharing the gym, but and they're deeply engrossed in reading, you can't stop that moment's happening, but you know you have to, because that is the only way you're going to get them some movement. And so how you figure out how to be in flow with your clock, be more aware of okay, when transitions need some time to prepare for because you can't just switch 100 times a day and keep a flow and be present and have relationships with everyone around you. Listening to all these students, I feel like I don't hear enough people talking about the pressure the clock puts on presence with each other. But that wasn't the thing I was going to tell you. That was just a fuck. Okay. Okay. So another thing I am very focused on, and I'm writing a book on, and I'm thinking about how to bring into my new role, is this idea of future building with social, emotional learning. And I've been talking with my students for years about what is the future you dream of, best case scenario, Western Pennsylvania, 100 years from now, what does it look like? And we do a lot of different exercises, trying to push our thinking, refine our thinking, share it with each other. They make newspapers that you might look at 100 years from now, of stories when you wake up in the morning and you have your coffee, even though I know newspapers probably won't your tablet. Yes, whatever your tablet, what stories are you going to read? What are our policymakers doing? What are our schools doing? What's happening down the street in your neighborhood, development organization, what's going on in sports, and it is so much fun to dream with them and to figure out, how do we stretch our imaginations beyond what's right in front of us and think boldly? I think we don't do that enough, and I'd like to bring a lot more of this future building dreaming to our area. What does it look like to have

the best possible Allegheny County 100 years from now? I don't hear a lot of people talking about that regularly. To me, that seems like a daily conversation. What are we aiming toward? And then talking to each other to figure out, Okay, what if we have totally different ideas about that? There is no one right answer about the future we're working toward, but we need some clarity about something so that we can share it with someone else and get feedback and hear different ways of thinking and continue to refine and what I've discovered, as you start dreaming about the future with groups that I've done this with is almost always it is full of social emotional skills. People who can disagree and stay in relationship. That seems like the challenge of our decade. How do we love our century? How do we learn how to do that right? People who can figure out how to actually have an inclusive society? What does that look like? We've been trying for centuries. What does it look like to actually live and care for all of us together? These are things that are straight out of a social emotional playbook. But I feel like when we're trying to master one skill at a time with an activity from a program that we implemented on Tuesday, we lose sight of, why are we even learning this stuff? Because we are the ones in charge of creating the world that our grandchildren are going to live in, right and somebody else's grandchildren. And so what can we do while we're on our planet to make sure that we are dreaming of big, bold futures that everybody can thrive in? And get really serious about working together, using social emotional skills to get there.

Shannon Fagan 25:05

I would love to see a third grader response to that.

Shannon Wanless 25:09

That's not abstract me too. I've been, I was just on a call with someone trying to imagine how to do that across K through 12.

Shannon Fagan 25:16

Very cool. That would be awesome. Well, I have one last question for you, if you were to give one word or maybe two about your experience so far building social, emotional wellness and well being, what would those words be, or that word be one word to describe it?

Shannon Wanless 25:40

The one word I would use is yes, and the reason I say that is because, as we started with the seeks work talking to people, I had been doing research on social emotional learning outside of the area for a decade. And I would have said, I don't see a lot of people talking about social emotional learning around here, but I had to drum up some people for the Sikh story, and so I started getting around and talking to people, and I got the word yes every time, every time, I was blown away by what a huge community of people are interested in how we can learn how to be human together, fully human together in our region, and they may not have been using the same words I was using. I didn't hear a lot of people using the phrase social emotional learning. However they all said yes, and that is what really motivates me to figure out, how do we continue to mobilize all of these people? Because we're all on the same team. I could feel it. I felt that energy, and it has really fueled my dreaming about what the next few years are going to

Shannon Fagan 26:47

look like. That's wonderful. I think just that idea of being human with each other is so I don't know, just puts the bow on, if you will. Well, I really appreciate you taking time to be part of our podcast today. Thank you for the invitation. Oh, and the work that you're doing and continue to do, I'm glad I'm still a part of it. I'm glad we're still moving forward with everything. Yes, and your new role is really going to help expand this work, and I hope the state keeps moving in this direction. All right, thank you, Shannon. Thank you, Shannon. You

Shannon Fagan 27:31

open doors is produced by Emily Wiley at the Allegheny Intermediate Unit. Thank you to the Center for Creativity at the University of Pittsburgh for use of their podcast studio. I'm your host. Shannon Fagan, join us next time when we explore another inspiring program that's helping youth build resilience, empathy and emotional intelligence. Until then, keep the doors open. The content shared in this podcast is for informational purposes only. The Allegheny Intermediate Unit does not endorse or promote any specific program or service mentioned in this episode.

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