Welcome to 2020! As I am sure many of you are aware, we have three finalists for the principal position of Weston High School. We conducted site visits and candidates will have spent a day here in Weston. Opportunities for Parents to meet each of the candidates were posted and we are looking forward to completing the process of hiring a new leader for the High School in the coming weeks.

As a district we have continued to improve and focus on the social and emotional well being of our students. This follows all three of the pillars of our District Strategic Plan:

- **Strengthen educational practices in order to promote intellectual stretch, engaged learning, equitable access, and excellence for every student, every day.** This goal is about student engagement. Fully engaging students in the learning process increases attention and focus and motivates students to practice their higher-order critical thinking skills.

- **Foster students’ well-being in order to develop their emotional resiliency and intellectual curiosity.** This goal is about significance. Feeling significant can arise from making autonomous choices, tracking your improvement, or hearing from someone you love that you are special.

- **Champion a school community committed to cultural competency, trust, and mutual respect in order to prepare students to be citizens of the world.** This goal is about belonging. A sense of belonging makes us feel that the community is behind us. We feel supported, relaxed, and motivated.

To that end, the district has focused resources to educate teachers and staff to support the social, emotional and cultural skills needed to become productive participants in our global society. Initiatives include an Advisory Program at the Middle School (which you will learn much more about later in this issue), Classroom Support Teams at each elementary school, and equity and inclusion at the High School. Almost all of our K-8 educators have experienced at least four days of Responsive Classroom training and we are planning a workshop, Teaching for Equity and Inclusion, for all high school educators this summer. Amy Kelly has led much of the work in the district and, as you will see in this issue of the Gazette, we are making tremendous progress.

—Dr. Midge Connolly

The goals of this publication are to highlight some of the exceptional work that is happening in our schools and to help inform you about pertinent issues and topics. The Gazette is published by the School Administration of the Weston Schools and intended for Weston Parents and Community.

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- Social Emotional Learning
- Advisories Build Community
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What is Social-Emotional Learning and Why is it Important?

In 2018, when the District Strategic Plan was developed, the committee also established the following Vision Statement for the Weston Public Schools:

- Weston Public Schools and the wider community are committed to excellence in learning for all students.
- Students will imagine, reflect, and innovate within a safe learning environment that develops their academic, social, and emotional growth and well-being.
- We will build the critical thinking and collaboration skills necessary to participate positively in a complex and constantly changing, culturally diverse world.

Since that time, our schools have continued a series of initiatives to foster students’ social-emotional learning (“SEL”) and to help them navigate the complexities of childhood and adolescence in the twenty-first century. Building on the foundation established by prior Assistant Superintendent Pamela Bator, current Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning Kimo Carter, and Director of District Advancement Amy Kelly have continued to develop a district-wide continuum of practices to support emotional intelligence and resilience. This has included training K-8 faculty members in Responsive Classroom, professional development focused on cultural humility, anti-bias training, bullying prevention, and collaborative problem solving, as well as work on inclusion, diversity, equity, and access.

The SEL work within the Weston Public Schools is grounded in a national framework and aligned with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Nationally, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has been a leader in SEL, which they define as “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”

CASEL is particularly known for its SEL framework, which includes a “Wheel” and “Competencies,” as shown on the next page.

“Research and experience demonstrate that preparing all students for success (in school, the workplace, civic life, and more) includes attending to their social-emotional and health development.” —MA DESE

“I have always believed that in order to be an effective teacher it is not enough to be well versed in the content I teach, but it is equally important to build relationships with my students. This year I have adopted a new practice from a colleague in my department designed to help make my classroom a more welcoming and supportive environment for my students.

Taking my lead from teacher Abby Gay, I start each class with a sharing circle providing everyone, including myself, an opportunity to share something good that has happened recently. While I have always been comfortable sharing aspects of my life with students, I have never done so in a coordinated way designed to allow my students to get to know me and each other. At this point in the year, if I don’t initiate a circle at the start of class, students ask if we can do one. Students have begun sharing out concerns they have, stresses that they are dealing with, and I am getting to know them as people. My classroom has become a better place for me, and I hope, for all of my students. In such an environment, getting work done is easier and I think that my students are more willing to work hard and stretch themselves because they feel seen and appreciated.” —Steve Ribisi, Science Department Head
The wheel depicts the competencies, as well as how they are reinforced in classrooms through curriculum and instruction, fostered through school-wide practices and policies, and bolstered by family and community partnerships. CASEL has also produced a series of informative videos for those new to this topic:

- CASEL: Overview
- SEL for Parents

Within Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) has developed a comprehensive set of resources and identified SEL as one of its five strategic priorities:

Research and experience demonstrate that preparing all students for success (in school, the workplace, civic life, and more) includes attending to their social-emotional and health development. Furthermore, academic and social-emotional competencies are mutually reinforcing. Key levers in this work include safe and supportive school climate and culture, and effective family engagement. ESE is committed to building out supports and policies in partnership with practitioners in the field and other state agencies to advance this work in the Commonwealth, both in and out of school. It is our goal to promote systems and strategies that foster safe, positive, healthy, culturally competent, and inclusive learning environments that address students’ varied needs and improve educational outcomes for all.

If you would like to learn more about the research on SEL, Harvard Graduate School of Education Professor Stephanie Jones has gathered resources on the Explore SEL website. In addition, the website Edutopia has compiled a series of videos and articles that demonstrate the impact that SEL practices can have within schools.

Many parents and community members have spoken about the positive impacts they already see from the greater focus on SEL within the Weston Public Schools. For parents of younger students, mindfulness and self-regulation have been key topics at the
elementary schools. Continue reading to learn more about how SEL is informing the lives of students and teachers at the secondary level, with a spotlight on the work at Weston Middle School.

If you have additional questions or comments about SEL within the Weston Public Schools, please reach out to Amy Kelly (kellya@weston.org), WPS Director of District Advancement. As shown in the CASEL competency wheel, we look forward to continuing to work with families and the community in support of all of our students.

—By Christen Lacey and Amy Kelly

“It’s wonderful to see our district taking the social and emotional needs of our students seriously by implementing Responsive Classroom. People might wonder if an increased focus on social and emotional learning could compromise academic standards, but there’s so much data to show the opposite is true. Actively creating a school environment where students feel safe, challenged and engaged leads to both improved emotional well-being and higher academic achievement. I think many parents would agree that you’re only as happy as your unhappiest child—and when our children are in a supportive and dynamic classroom community, we all benefit.”

—Amy Olivier, PTO President

Advisories Keep Traditions Alive and Build Community at Weston Middle School

When Doc Harris began as the principal in the 1970s at Weston Middle School, he pioneered a concept called the House System. This approach to educating adolescents was novel at that time in that it created small communities of learners within the larger context of the school setting. The concept accounted for the unique needs of the 11-14 year-old student and built a school model around supporting them, as opposed to force-fitting a high school model in a “Junior High” structure. It created an atmosphere for learning where the central focus is on the student, and while the academic content was important in each subject area, it always had to be presented through the lens of the whole child. Doc Harris and then Assistant Principal, Linda Butler, worked together to build the structures at Weston Middle School in the 70s, 80s and 90s that still remain fundamental to our school’s core today. Throughout the years, as the Middle School has evolved, the core concept of educating the whole child has been central to our philosophy.

Research on effective middle schools highlights the importance of students feeling connected to adults, their peers, and to the overall school environment in as many ways possible. This theme has been very important to all of us at Weston Middle School over the years, and we have taken pride in knowing our students and building our programs around their needs. Data from our School Climate Surveys and Student Life Surveys supports this idea and our goal has been to further develop our capacity to support our students in as many ways possible. Recently the Middle School faculty and staff have been trained in Responsive Classroom: “a student-centered, social and emotional learning approach to teaching and discipline. It is comprised of a set of research, and evidence-based practices designed to create safe, joyful, and engaging classroom and school communities for both students and teachers.” At a time when the complexities of our world make education more challenging, the Middle School faculty and staff have continued to embrace the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) of our students and the Responsive Classroom model has been a very good fit with an already caring, compassionate team of educators.

A component of the Responsive Classroom model is a practice called Student Advisories, where students meet weekly with faculty and staff members throughout the building in small groups. In our school all grade-level homerooms were divided into 44 Advisory groups -- teacher-led, groups of 10-12 students by grade level, meeting on Wednesdays from 11:58-12:25. In order to create this time in our schedule, we eliminated one of our three grade specific lunch blocks, creating two, all-school, grade 6-8 lunch sessions. This has provided students with a unique opportunity to have lunch together with in a multi-grade period, socializing with different
peer groups each week. Our advisory topics throughout the year have been guided by these purposes: Building Student-to-Student Affiliation, Supporting Academic Readiness, Strengthening Advisor-Advisee Relationships, Developing Communication and Social Skills, Energizing and Re-engaging, Reflecting and Recalibrating, Extending Learning Through Themes, and Special Topics. We began this year with “Building Community” and “Making Connections” themes. The format of the Advisory has enabled our school to discuss subjects that have impacted our school community like racism, antisemitism, and bullying. It has provided our school community with an Advisory platform, linked to our weekly morning grade-level assemblies, that address the SEL needs of students for belongingness, significance and engagement.

Phil Oates, WMS Assistant Principal, who has been instrumental in developing our program, shared, “Advisory is so important to our school because it is a time carved out to talk about non-academic learning. We have so many issues that we need to help kids understand better, and this gives us a vehicle for it. So far this year, we have talked about all of the things that we have in common, we have celebrated our differences, we have taught about the effect of having a swastika appear in our community, we have focused on eliminating the n-word, we have learned about goal setting, and we have had fun connecting with students in a new way.”

Grade Seven House Director, Caryn

Angst Screening Follow-up and Anxiety Resources

As a piece of the SEL work, in November 2019, the Weston Public Schools and the Weston PTO hosted a community film screening of the documentary film, *Angst: Raising Awareness Around Anxiety in the Weston High School auditorium*.

The event began with the film screening, which included stories of young people who have struggled with anxiety and how they have found solutions and hope in addressing their challenges. After the film, a panel of educators and counselors discussed the topics raised in the film with families and community members.

For those of you interested in learning more about this topic, please see the resources below, which are provided for informational purposes. If you have concerns about your child or teen, please contact the adjustment counselor at your child’s school.

General Information:
- Child Mind Institute - [https://childmind.org/topics/concerns/anxiety/](https://childmind.org/topics/concerns/anxiety/)
- MGH Clay Center - [https://www.mghclaycenter.org/topic/anxiety/](https://www.mghclaycenter.org/topic/anxiety/)
- UCLA Center for Child Anxiety Resilience Education and Support [http://carescenter.ucla.edu/](http://carescenter.ucla.edu/)
- [Understood.org](https://www.n4s.org)

Signs of Anxiety in Young Kids

Signs of Anxiety in Teens and Tweens
Grozalsky reflected, “Having a set time each week to meet as a group gives students a stronger feeling of security and a true sense of a community. Advisories at the Middle School help students navigate the complexities of the social and emotional issues that extend beyond the academic walls. There is no judgement in these groups, no grades, yet only an avenue for students to personally grow and learn as a group.” Fellow Grade Eight Director Michael Brown said, “Advisory is a place to connect more closely with students!”

Elizabeth Heichelbech, Instructional Coach, stated, “I love my advisory group. It’s such a different way of connecting with middle schoolers than in a content-area class. My favorite part is the check-in, where we get to find out what’s on each others’ minds. They crack me up, make me think, and melt my heart. I feel like I can bring my whole self to advisory, and I hope they do, too. I’m so glad we are doing this.”

School Counselor Kimberly Roślonek has enjoyed connecting with her students. “I have been able to sit in on and support several Advisory groups this year. Each group has its own vibe, energy and flavor. The common thread is sharing, listening and connecting with some laughter and fun sprinkled in. The faculty have done an amazing job owning this and making it a meaningful experience for them and their students.”

Faculty ownership of Advisory has been essential, and the Middle School faculty has embraced it. They participated in a four day training in the Responsive Classroom model and Advisories last summer. To sustain the momentum throughout the year, Phil Oates and Art Teacher Bekki Kowalski have led weekly Advisory Think-Tank meetings with faculty and staff to build each month’s Advisory Roadmap for the school. This inclusive model has factored in teacher input and student voice.

Middle school students are embracing the new model. Eighth-grader Fin Fox stated, “I Love it! I love meeting with my friends in small groups.” Andrew Orio commented, “It helps us build new allies in our school in a new way.” Jonah Backer stated, “I love the small groups and it is always great to have a few friends in it. I think in the future maybe we could give students some more choice to have a few friends in them.” Fellow classmate Layla McLain shared, “It is a safe space for kids to share, and can be productive if people participate openly.” Amani Lopes-Mercury felt that, “It works best when our groups are balanced so that multiple perspectives can be shared.” Lily Kacyvensky likes “the topics for discussion, but also likes the open time for discussion.” Sixth-grader Layla Linnard said, “The advisories have helped me set goals for myself that I can actually achieve. Sometimes we have addressed hard topics and the advisory has given us a safe place to have our discussions.” Zoe Smallman said, “I like how we meet once a week, but I wish we had a little more time. Just when we get into things the bell rings so I wish they were longer.” And she added, “They are similar to our grade-four class meetings and circle groups, and like cabin meetings at summer camp.” Annie Rassiger felt that “It has been very nice to connect with different people and build trust within our school.” Seventh-graders Eric Willi and Ilyan Qureshi felt that advisories are like family meetings: “We sometimes have to discuss things and put things on the table to resolve.” Eric added, “It’s very similar to sports team meetings when the coach pulls us all together to go over what we did well and need to improve upon.”

The Middle School Advisory program is an essential part of the Responsive Classroom model. It has provided a strong platform for the Weston Middle School to foster student connections further and continually build a positive school culture. It has built upon our original foundations focusing on the whole child, and fosters a true community that allows everyone to connect, reflect and learn together, keeping the social-emotional needs of students at the core of our work. ◊

—by John Gibbons
Responsive Home Workshops for Pre-K-5 Parents/Caregivers

(Workshops for Middle School Parents/Caregivers TBA later this year)

Do you want to know more about Responsive Classroom? Come to one of our Responsive Home workshops!

Responsive Home workshops will provide insight for families seeking to “translate” our district’s Responsive Classroom approach to home, too. These research based practices have been designed to teach social and emotional competencies, increase academic achievement and reduce anxiety and depression.

Open to Country, Field and Woodland parents, guardians and staff members, we will be offering this workshop several times throughout the school year, hoping that one of these dates will work for you. Feel free to attend any of these sessions, regardless of your school.

February 6th  9:00am-11:00am, Woodland School
February 27th  9:00am-11:00am, Country School

Join us and learn useful tips for creating a “Responsive Home” including:

• Positive Language
• Family Meeting
• House Rules
• Logical Consequences
• Interactive Modeling

—Amy Kelly
Presenter & Consultant

Our mission: To educate, equip, and inspire all students to achieve their full potential and enrich their communities.
Upcoming events

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Details</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, February 5</td>
<td>HS - MCAS Biology Test</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, February 5</td>
<td>Early Dismissal - Elem at 11:30; MS/HS at 12:45 PM</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday, February 6</td>
<td>HS - MCAS Biology Test</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday, February 6</td>
<td>Legally Blonde - MS Theater Production MS APC</td>
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<td>Friday, February 7</td>
<td>Legally Blonde - MS Theater Production MS APC</td>
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<td>Saturday, February 8</td>
<td>Legally Blonde - MS Theater Production MS APC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday, February 10</td>
<td>School Committee Meeting/Budget Hearing, MS APC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, February 12</td>
<td>Incoming Kindergarten Information Night CS Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday, February 17</td>
<td>PRESIDENTS DAY -- ALL SCHOOLS AND OFFICES CLOSED</td>
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<td>Mon., Feb. 17 - Fri.</td>
<td>SECOND WINTER RECESS - NO CLASSES</td>
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<td>Tuesday, February 25</td>
<td>8:30 AM Math Program Review Parent Forum FS Cafeteria</td>
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<td>Tuesday, February 25</td>
<td>7:00 PM School Committee Meeting MS Library</td>
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<td>Thursday, February 27</td>
<td>7:00 PM High School Winter Play HS Auditorium</td>
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<td>Friday, February 28</td>
<td>6:00 PM Field School Diversity Fair FS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday, February 28</td>
<td>7:00 PM High School Winter Play HS Auditorium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday, February 29</td>
<td>7:00 PM High School Winter Play HS Auditorium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, March 4</td>
<td>Early Dismissal - Elem at 11:30; MS/HS at 12:45 PM</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, March 4</td>
<td>7:00 PM Spring Sing (Grades 3-12 Chorus) Field School Gym</td>
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<td>Monday, March 9</td>
<td>7:00 PM School Committee MS Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday, March 10</td>
<td>7:00 PM String Fling (Grades 3-12 Orchestra) HS Auditorium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, March 11</td>
<td>7:00 PM Band Fest (Grades 4-12 Band) HS Auditorium</td>
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<td>Friday, March 13</td>
<td>NO CLASSES - TEACHER WORKSHOP DAY</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday, March 19</td>
<td>5:30 PM Woodland School Bingo Night</td>
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<td>Friday, March 20</td>
<td>6:30 PM METCO Potluck Dinner WMS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday, March 23</td>
<td>7:00 PM School Committee Meeting MS Library</td>
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<td>Tues. March 24-Weds.</td>
<td>Grade 10 ELA MCAS</td>
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<td>March 25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday, March 24</td>
<td>6:00 PM Field School Game Night</td>
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<td>Thursday, March 26</td>
<td>6:30 PM Field School Grade 5 Wax Museum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday, March 28</td>
<td>7:00 PM Weston Wingding - WEEFC Fundraiser Weston Golf Club</td>
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Please see the [Weston Public School’s website calendar](#) for more details.