

# Breaking Down the Social and Emotional Gap

Developing soft skills are crucial to sparking genuine learning

**SESSION** *Narrowing and Closing the Achievement Gap Must Begin with Addressing the Social and Emotional Gap* | **Presenter** UW-Milwaukee: Gary Williams, director of the Institute for Intercultural Research (and president of the Brown Deer School Board)

**W**hen talking about closing the achievement gap, people often point to outside factors, such as poverty, that contribute to the gap. However, Dr. Gary Williams, director of the Institute for Intercultural Research at UW-Milwaukee and president of the Brown Deer School Board, said we need to spend more time and focus on what we can do in the classroom to change students' lives.

"Research shows us that effective teaching can overcome the effects of poverty," Williams said.

To Williams, effective teaching begins with building relationships with students. In fact, Williams contends that teachers must close the social and emotional gaps in their classrooms before they can engage and teach students. And, unlike the achievement gap, which is a gap that exists between students, the social and emotional gap is something that exists between students and teachers. To be effective, Williams said, teachers must have genuine dialogue between themselves and their students.

Williams recalled one story in which an elementary school teacher had a student who was disengaged and disrupting the classroom. The teacher sat down with the student and asked him about his interests. The student said he liked snakes. That weekend, the teacher went out

and checked out a pile of books from the library on snakes and handed them to the student the following Monday. The student was interested in the books but kept coming up to the teacher to ask what a certain caption or sentence said and the teacher quickly understood why the student was disengaged — he couldn't read.

Using only books on snakes, the teacher helped the student catch up to his classmates. The student learned how to read two grade levels in one school year.

"That was a teacher who was having a dialogue and discussion with a student and she felt competent enough to do something about it," Williams said. "The role of our teachers is immeasurable."

In this work, the role of soft skills like resiliency, grit, perseverance, civility, grace, making good decisions, and building nurturing relationships are crucial in establishing a classroom where students feel safe and can learn.

"Sometimes these skills are almost viewed as an afterthought," Williams said. "But you have to begin with building these skills before you can help students learn."

Although students come to the classroom at different levels regarding soft skills, Williams said most students have a basic understanding of right and wrong and



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how to play and work with others.

"Maybe they're not fully developed, which is why the role of the teacher is important to develop some of those social-emotional skills," Williams said. "If a student is going to be successful in the classroom and later in life, they need these skills."

Part of this approach is also changing how teachers view students. Williams said we need to look at all of our students and see what they bring to the classroom. For instance, when a student is disruptive or over-energetic in the classroom, it's easy to say that student is unmotivated. In that situation, Williams said, the teacher needs to reach out to the student.

"Get to know that student," Williams said. "Get to know what motivates them and use that to drive learning and engagement."

As to how to promote this approach in schools, Williams emphasized professional development opportunities for teachers. He added that curriculum and resources are available from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) at [casel.org](http://casel.org). ■