

Eric Neal:

Welcome to the State Support Team 11 podcast. I'm your host, Eric Neal, and today our topic is adult social and emotional learning. We're joined by Jo Salazar. She's a licensed clinical social worker and the author of the new book, Better Together. Welcome Jo. Thanks for joining us. How are you?

Jo Salazar:

Thanks for having me. I'm doing great.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, I really appreciate it. We know each other from your time with CASEL. Could you tell us a little bit about the work that you did when you were there?

Jo Salazar:

Yeah. Yeah, we met, gosh, it must've been about three years ago. And like you said, I was working for CASEL. And during my time there, I served as Manager of School Supports and also did a lot of district consulting, and that's how we ran into each other. I was one of your district consultants in region 11, and had the opportunity to do some coaching with your very capable team and several of your school-based teams.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, definitely. It was funny because I was one of those people originally when I heard about social and emotional learning, I was like, "Oh my gosh, it's the touchy feely stuff and I don't really think that's for me." But after experiencing the good it can do and how it helps you just individually as a person in your organization, I've become a Kool-Aid drinker. I've bought in.

Jo Salazar:

Yes. Yeah. And you're right, it is so much more than the touchy feely stuff. It's more than talking about your feelings. It's a system. It's a way of being. It's the way we make magic and education happen. So I'm glad you converted. Welcome to the dark side.

Eric Neal:

Yes. I'm here. I'm here for good. So what have you been up to since then?

Jo Salazar:

Oh, well, I'm no longer with CASEL. I pivoted just a little bit. So in the last few years, I got really interested in adult social and emotional learning specifically, and how the relationships that we have in the workplace ultimately impact the work that we do. And not just in schools, but in any work environment. So, I spent a year diving into that. I did a lot of writing, a lot of researching, some testing, and really trying to find a strategy that would give educators something really hands-on and really practical that they could pick up and use without a whole lot of guesswork.

Jo Salazar:

I wanted to translate a lot of that adult social and emotional theory into practice because I think we talk a lot about adult SEL like, "Oh, you should do it. It's a good idea." But what does it actually look like on

the ground floor? So that's the problem I wanted to solve and that resulted in the book that you introduced. So the book is called Better Together, and it's a discussion series for educators who are looking for ways to grow their social and emotional skills, and build trust with one another, and improved collaboration all for the good of students.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. That really makes a lot of sense to me. I'm still involved with working with district teams, trying to implement adult social emotional, and social emotional learning for their students district-wide. And there is a lot of talk about the structures, and the framework, and how to set things up, and me being a systems person, I'm totally into all of that. But develop your adult social emotional learning, that sounds like an easy task. But it sounds like the inspiration really was, "How do I help people to do that? How can I meet them in a place that guides them through that sometimes really difficult work?"

Jo Salazar:

That's exactly right. Yeah. I think there's lots of different ways that adults can work on developing their social and emotional skills. But a lot of times, if we don't take the initiative to do that ourselves, and do work on ourselves, it just doesn't happen. And so I wanted schools to create a space, dedicated time, and putting specific effort on just this thing. Like, "What if we just focused on us as educators? What if we just said, Hey, we're important. Our relationships with each other are important, and this is how we get the work done." So that's the big ask of this book is, "Let's all sit down together. Let's learn something about ourselves, about each other, and use that new knowledge to help our students."

Eric Neal:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Tell me about the structure of the book. I've looked through it and it makes perfect sense to me, but for those out there who haven't got a peak yet, tell, tell us how the book works.

Jo Salazar:

Yeah, so the book is split into chapters. So there are six discussions that schools can go through, and each chapter begins with just a couple pages of text. So it's not a big, long research paper that you have to read. I don't think any of these chapters are more than two or three pages tops. It's really just some very simple background information on the topic at hand. And you read that text independently, and then you respond to a few writing prompts. And you're responding to the writing prompts in the actual book. So your copy of Better Together isn't just a book to read and discuss as if it were a book club. You're supposed to write in this. It's part journal. So you write in the book to respond to some of these discussion prompts brought up by the topic.

Jo Salazar:

And then you use your responses to those writing prompts, to sit down and have a discussion with your team. And we're not just throwing you into a group and saying, "Okay, so you read them some things and responded to some prompts, now talk about it." The book actually provides you a structure to have that group conversation. So it gives you the welcome activity. It gives you the questions to discuss. It gives you the closing activity. It provides you some extra prompts to really keep the discussion going just in case you run out of things to talk about after you've responded to the writing prompts. So it really gives you everything you need to have a productive, structured discussion about the topic at hand.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, it sounds like you're speaking about those three signature practices and that's one thing that we still practice in all of our internal meetings here at State Support Team 11. I'm still working with the continuous improvement network, which brings together people from all over from our region to talk about things. And that's what really clicked for me about adult social emotional learning, or SEL in general, was not learning about it or the theory. But I remember a lot of these network meetings can be either really dry with a lot of information, or people sometimes because you're coming from all different organizations are not always wanting to jump right out and share things because it's like, "Wow, I'm putting stuff out there."

Eric Neal:

But doing those welcoming activities and it just completely opened up the way those meetings felt. We have a real core group of people that show up all the time. And I feel like we really know each other really well, and people are really wanting to share. And when I felt what it really did, that's what really got me bought in. And so I loved seeing that in the book, and how that was structured for whoever the facilitator was going to be because that can also be kind of an intimidating role sometimes.

Jo Salazar:

Absolutely. Yeah. I think you picked up on the big impact that those three signature practices have. They build relationships and they help bring people out of whatever shell they brought with them, and really help people kind of step out and be ready for vulnerability. And that's how I tried to structure each of these topics. So we start off with some light things. And then as you get further into the guide, you're talking about really sometimes difficult things to talk about. We're talking about race. We're talking about identity. We're talking about our own lived experiences, and these are not easy things to tackle. But if you provide a safe structure, if you ease into these things, if you give people a long enough runway, they'll get there and there'll be ready to have these vulnerable conversations. And you have to have these vulnerable conversations, right? Because good work doesn't get done until people can really connect with one another, collaborate effectively, trust each other enough to say, "I'm with you. Let's do this together." That's what it takes. And it all starts with just being able to start the conversation.

Eric Neal:

Absolutely. Being a person that played team sports my whole life, I mean, if you don't have that kind of feeling, you'll never be successful as a team. And it's the same at work. If everyone's not getting along or there's back fighting and all these different things, it really can hamper the work you're trying to do. One of the topics that really stood out to me, that it just connected with me, was the stories of us. I found that sharing those personal parts of ourselves, it really does build that trust, but also helps us empathize with people who we don't have a lot in common with.

Jo Salazar:

Yes, yes. Pack your tissues for that chapter because inevitably it brings out a lot of emotion to talk about how hard you had to fight to get to where you are today. Because a lot of educators didn't just go through an easy path to become teachers, to become principals, to become security guards. You go through something. This is a passion occupation. You don't just show up to work and do a job. Like you're here because you mean it. You're here because you want it. And chances are that most of us fought through something to get there. And to be able to tell that story to each other, just really opens up the flood gates. You do learn things about people that you never thought... You make connections

with people that you probably didn't think you had anything in common with. It's a powerful exercise. It's one of my favorite chapters.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. I really connected with that. Speaking of things that are difficult, with everything going on in the world right now, adult SEL is more important than ever. How have you seen it make a positive impact in the last year?

Jo Salazar:

Yeah, this year, this year... I think this year, maybe more than ever adults in schools are really being asked to be everything for everybody, everything for everybody. And the ability to navigate that kind of demand really takes a tremendous amount of social and emotional skills. And I don't mean, I'm not suggesting that we break ourselves to be everything to everybody. That's not what I mean. What I do mean is that if we're able to set boundaries for ourselves, if we're able to know ourselves well enough to know when we need to take a break, if we have the kind of support networks among our peers, if we have the professional networks we need to lean on, if we can hold on to our ethical principles... And all of these are social and emotional skills, right?

Jo Salazar:

This is what it takes. This is what allows us to survive in this season of education. And that's adult SEL. Like we, we have to, to know ourselves. We have to know each other. We have to lean on each other to be able to meet the demands that exists today. And until we can arrive out of the season, then this is where we are, and this is what we've got to do. And it's adult SEL, that's what it takes.

Eric Neal:

Absolutely. So you and I have a common interest in systems work and change management. And I've noticed that successful organizations, they dedicate time, people, and resources to their continuous improvement efforts. What is the importance of dedicating these resources to adult SEL to make your organizational culture thrive?

Jo Salazar:

Yeah, I think you and I are probably on exactly the same page here in that we both know that systems don't change unless the people within the systems change themselves, right? Like it's not systems that change. It's people that change. And so people aren't going to change unless they trust the people asking them to make the change. And so how do we build that trust? I think trust is a result of strong relationships, it's-

Eric Neal:

I got what you mean with that, that we got to build those things up. Part of what's really stuck out to me is that we have more research, and we have more information, and skills, and professional development, and all of these things. And I look at things like social and emotional learning that sometimes get sidelined off over to like... Or they just get put on someone's plate like, "Hey, you're the SEL guy now. Make sure that everyone feels good about stuff or whatever." And I think, like you said, that the people are what changed the system. And so I really feel like the more we can coach people and build up their capacity, and then allow them the time and space to really dig in and do this work, the

better chance we have of actually having it catch on system-wide. It's really about finding... I mean, everyone's pulled in so many different directions and resources and all this, but to me, it's that importance of dedicating the time, and effort, and people to the work.

Jo Salazar:

Yeah. And that's exactly what it takes, time, effort, and people, and all of those things are in such short supply right now. And we're being asked to do more with less and yet that's exactly what it takes. It takes time, effort, and people, and it's hard.

Eric Neal:

Yeah.

Jo Salazar:

And that's what it takes.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. I feel like there's things you can cut corners on. I feel like this really isn't one of them right now. I feel like if you want to be... And you see a lot of times in the news, these organizations that just get completely torn apart with bad reviews from their employees on Glassdoor, or different things and all this. And they think, "Well, we didn't even realize we had a problem." It's trying to make sure that you're not doing it just to do it, but you realize that you can't do all of these other things that you want to do unless the people are right.

Jo Salazar:

Yes. There are no shortcuts here. And I feel compelled to bring up this quote because it became kind of like the cornerstone, the thing that I kept coming back to every time I went to work on this book. And the quote comes from a 2003 study from Brewster and Railsback, and what they say is, "While trust alone does not guarantee success, schools with little or no trust have almost no chance of improving." That's a seriously big stake in the ground. Right? That's a big statement, and yet it's true. If we don't take the time to invest in each other, in our relationships, improvement is going to skip us every single time. We've all got to be rowing in the same direction, and it's the relationship that gets us there.

Eric Neal:

Oh, absolutely. You know, MTSS is a framework that applies to a systems approach to meeting the needs of all students. SEL would fall on the PBIS climate culture side of the pyramid. Do you see adult SEL housed also in that area of the framework? Or do you see it more as an overarching strategy to help your organization really do MTSS well?

Jo Salazar:

Oh gosh. I've actually thought about this a lot and it's tough. I don't know that there's a right answer. I think MTSS and PBIS, they're really nice for helping us hold all of these concepts in our mind and like organize things so that we make sure that we get all of the work done. Right? And I think if we had to like wedge this into a box, as humans are want to do, I think we could probably wedge it into that climate culture side. And I say that though, knowing that both sides of the triangle are dependent upon one another. They hold hands with each other. They're intertwined. They dovetail, whatever way you

want to say it. Like we can't do one without the other. Correction, we can't do one well without the other.

Eric Neal:

Right.

Jo Salazar:

So I think you could probably wedge it in there. But when I'm thinking about adult social and emotional learning, I'm thinking about it as the way we accomplish everything in the triangle. I'm thinking about it as the thing that we must do to do everything else well. So that's how I make sense of it in my head. But if you had to categorize it, I think there's a place for it. It's just, I don't like to do that.

Eric Neal:

Well, I'm with you and I think it can work both ways. I imagine it kind of more the way that you're talking about as a vehicle to really do that work well, but having it live over there is better than having it not be there at all.

Jo Salazar:

Yes. Absolutely.

Eric Neal:

It's still very valuable and still very useful.

Jo Salazar:

Yeah. Yeah. And that's the value of a framework, right?

Eric Neal:

Right.

Jo Salazar:

It makes sure that things don't get left out, left off the page. So-

Eric Neal:

Absolutely.

Jo Salazar:

... it's got to be somewhere, might as well be there.

Eric Neal:

Right. So if people would like to get more information about your book or have questions, where should they go?

Jo Salazar:

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Yeah. Well, the book is available now on amazon.com and you can also check out josalarcoaching.org, if you want to learn more about me and some research behind the work that I do. So you can visit me there, sign up for my mailing list. But if you're looking to pick up Better Together, Amazon's the place.

Eric Neal:

I highly recommend it. Well, once again, I'd like to thank Jo Salazar for joining us today. Jo, it's been a real pleasure. If you'd like to know more about a social and emotional learning and the other work we do here at the State Support Team 11, go to our website. It's S-S-T, one, one dot O-R-G. Give us a call at (614) 753-4694, or hit us up on Twitter. We're @SSTregion11. Or if you'd like to get ahold of me, you can reach me at my email. It's E-R-I-C dot N-E-A-L at E-S-C-C-O dot O-R-G. Until next time, I'm Eric Neal.

Thanks for listening.