Creativity, collaboration, and communication are key skills that will prepare students for the future. Through engagement in real-world problem solving, students can hone such skills while learning that their voice and actions matter.

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PROJECT-BASED LEARNING:
Helping Students Thrive Socially and Emotionally

At the start of this new school year, most educators' attention will be split between attending to students' social and developmental well-being and overcoming pandemic-driven lack of engagement in learning. When these two goals are addressed in tandem, students can be exposed to new challenges and experiences. Let's explore how a combination of social-emotional learning (SEL) and learner-centered education can make a difference for students.

SEL has been getting a lot of attention in the media lately, as many students returning to in-person learning may have trouble readapting to group dynamics after almost a year of social isolation. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL 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."

In the United States, a majority of school districts are already looking to invest their American Rescue Plan (ARP) stimulus dollars into SEL programs, to help students recalibrate when they return to in-person learning. In fact, according to an EdWeek Market Brief survey,[1] 67% of districts plan on spending ARP funds on SEL.

Focusing on SEL does not mean you have to neglect core subjects or abandon efforts to bring innovative activities into the classroom. It's not a zero-sum game. You can do the following simultaneously:

- Re-engage students and reconnect them to their innate curiosity
- Let students learn to innovate and be creative
- Give students experiences that help them collaborate and communicate.

A great way to achieve all three of these goals is through implementation of a project-based, learner-centered education program, such as the Destination Imagination (DI) Team Challenge Experience. In this academic competition offered around the world, students work together to solve an open-ended, STEAM-based challenge and then present their solution at a local tournament.

The Destination Imagination Approach

DI encourages students to explore the creative process, which is important for their future career paths. As they work to create unique solutions to DI Challenges, they are exposed to teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, project management, and hands-on skills that allow them to determine their strengths, weaknesses, and interests.

The Destination Imagination educational pedagogy draws from learner-centered education and project-based learning paradigms. DI principles include:

- **Ultimate Learner Ownership.** Skills and knowledge may be taught, but solutions and ideas may not be provided by an outside source. Adult leaders allow learners to find the answers on their own as they develop new skills and explore areas of STEAM.

- **Resource Awareness.** Learners use all of the resources available to them, including materials, team member strengths, research, and experts. They learn to work within the constraints of a budget and within the requirements and guidelines of an open-ended Challenge.
- **Clarifying Questions.** Learners use questions to ensure understanding and to analyze all potential ideas and solutions. The questioning process allows learner-centric exploration and experimentation.
- **Authentic Self-Expression.** Learners express individual and team creativity and belief systems while working collaboratively to solve a Challenge. Solutions are expected to include elements that express individual and team talents, strengths, interests, and skills.
- **Rapid Ideation & Implementation.** Adult leaders encourage learners to practice quick, creative, and critical thinking.

This entirely learner-focused methodology empowers students to take the lead in managing a project and provides a framework

within which they can take risks and learn from failure. DI participants become life-long problem solvers who are inspired to innovate creative solutions to real-world challenges quickly and collaboratively. Problem solving, team building, and a respect for others and their ideas are at the foundation of all DI Challenges.

An SEL Skill Set

As a parent who has managed 22 DI teams over 15 years, I certainly noticed that social and emotional behaviors improved in most of the students who were on my teams (including my own children). As I became more aware of the educational pedagogy behind DI, I began to recognize that students were practicing SEL competencies that are necessary for their futures as they worked through the creative process during their DI Challenges.

Aperture Education identifies eight SEL competencies, based on the CASEL framework, that can be observed, measured, and improved. The definitions in the graph below are based on information from the Aperture Education: SEL at Home project.

Competency	Definition
Optimistic Thinking	Optimistic thinking is the belief that our efforts will result in something good. This gives us reasons to keep going. This is not magical thinking (e.g., If I put effort in, everything will go my way). It is a positive view of ourselves and our futures.
Self-Awareness	Self-awareness is understanding both our strengths and weaknesses. Too often, the feedback children hear focuses on what they don't do well. What the child does well often doesn't get recognized. Being able to set a path for improvement relies on the child's ability to recognize and use their strengths.
Self-Management	Self-management is the ability to handle emotions and actions to help get something accomplished. Learning how to calm ourselves when we are upset or angry is only part of self-management. It also involves pumping up our emotions so we can accomplish a task or activity that might be boring or difficult. Self-management is a key ability of perseverance.
Social Awareness	Students with social awareness are able to understand the thoughts, experiences, and feelings of other people around them. When you can "walk in the shoes" of another person, you are better able to work together without negative conflict and toward a common goal.
Relationship Skills	Relationship skills are the ability to work well with others as a student makes friends, works on a project, or becomes a part of a team. These skills are necessary for future success.
Goal-Directed Behavior	Knowing how to set goals and follow up on our plans is goal-directed behavior. Goals can help us make decisions about participating in something or how to spend our money. Goals help us spend our time on what is important to us and give our lives meaning and purpose.
Personal Responsibility	Personal responsibility is being purposeful in our actions and keeping our promises to others. It is also owning our mistakes and doing what we can to fix them. This skill is important to our students' future careers, as many employers list personal responsibility as a skill they want in their employees.
Decision-Making	Students with good decision-making skills are able to think about potential consequences and choose an action or response that fits their values. They use their experiences to inform their choices and learn from the effects of their decisions.

Participation in DI can be highly effective in helping students build their SEL skill set, as can be seen when viewed through the lens of Aperture's eight competencies:

- **Optimistic Thinking.** In DI, a student will work together with teammates to create a solution that has been dreamed and designed solely by their team. Adults are not allowed to give direct input of any kind into a solution. It is owned by the students. As I have worked with teams, I have watched several students continue to push forward with an idea even through several failed attempts. Since the idea is theirs, they believe that their efforts will result in success and so they keep trying. When students meet their individual and team goals, they gain significant pride in their work. Even when the team doesn't advance to the next level of competition at the end of the season, the team members encourage each other and vow to try again next year.

- **Self-Awareness.** As individual team members attempt solutions to the DI Challenges, they learn through trial and error what works and what doesn't. As they try out new skills, they learn what they are good at doing. They also learn which tasks may be more of a challenge for them, and they learn about their interests. My daughter was not the best at school subjects (other than language arts) and she often felt less smart than her teammates. However, she learned that she is gifted at creating a vision and inspiring her teammates to keep working to reach their goals.

- **Self-Management.** Students on a DI team will learn how to manage their emotions when a project is not going as expected and to celebrate when their project is going well. A DI team member learns to ignore distractions and focus on getting the task completed. I had one team member who would only do the amount of work that was strictly necessary, never putting his entire self into the project. His team asked him to create a model of a helicopter to add to a large platform. He created one, but it was poorly done and not up to the team's standards. The team asked him to try again and explained that they knew he could create something better. He took the time and built a better helicopter model that was detailed and had moving rotors. He pushed himself and his creation to another level, and the team loved his work. DI team members learn to support each other, ask for help from other team members when they need it, and follow through on their promises.

- **Social Awareness.** Watching teams work together on an Instant Challenge (a 5- to 7-minute Challenge that students solve on the spot), on their solutions during meetings, and at tournaments, I have heard DI team members say things like: "You are much better at this than I am, you should do it" or "Does anyone have any ideas? John, you

haven't said anything, and I know you are good at building things." DI team members become aware of their team members' strengths and learn to trust them to complete the task. Many of the solutions I have observed tackle current social issues and emotional issues like families dealing with cancer, and show concern for the self-esteem of others. When we give students the responsibility for creating their own solutions, they show us how much they are aware of the world around them.

- **Relationship Skills.** Creating a solution to a DI Challenge can bring up powerful emotions, especially for younger students or for students who are new to DI. Team members get angry with each other at times or may not even like each other on some days. The common purpose and goals of a team can help students overcome those differences and learn to get along. They learn to listen, to be kind, and to rely on others.

- **Goal-Directed Behavior.** DI teams set their own goals that align with the Challenge they have decided to solve. Working on goals that are team-determined allows team members to practice meeting goals without pressure from teachers and parents. Team Managers guide their

team members as they set goals and make their project plans. Team Managers also remind their team members of the goals and help them stay on track. However, the team members do the work on their own and decide together if the goal needs to change. The Team Manager models what a team leader does, and the team members experience working together. In their future endeavors, students with DI experience will be able to join a work team and help that team be successful.

- **Personal Responsibility.** In DI, students learn to own their own mistakes. Individual behaviors can have an impact on the entire team. A former Team Manager told me about a student on his team who really had trouble accepting responsibility for his actions. While the team was solving an Instant Challenge at a tournament, the student started jumping up and down, which caused the tower to fall. The team didn't get any points for their tower. The student realized that he had caused the problem, apologized to the team, and vowed to pay better attention next time. His team accepted his apology and were kind to him about the mistake. The entire team learned how to accept personal responsibility and forgive each other for mistakes.

- **Decision-Making.** There are many decisions involved in creating a DI Challenge solution. DI participants learn to weigh their decisions against the requirements of the Challenge, the time they have available, the skills and abilities of their team members, and whether or not the decision advances the team's goals for their solution. Team members also learn to let go of their individual ideas for the good of the team. This skill gets easier as the team gains experience and they practice group decision-making. Learning to analyze the consequences of decisions and choose a path is one of the most important skills DI participants learn.

Social-emotional skills, compromised during the months of pandemic-related isolation, are necessary for our students' futures. Imagine how students will feel when they walk into their first job interviews and are able to describe how they work on a team, get along with others, and set and meet goals. The DI Challenge Experience allows students, beginning in kindergarten, to learn and practice workforce skills without even knowing it.

Go to info.destinationimagination.org/sel to download our SEL handout and learn how educators use DI as a fundamental tool to help students blossom socially and emotionally. Destination Imagination's Team Challenge Experience is available for K-12 and university students. Unlike traditional afterschool programs, anyone can create a team of up to seven children with one adult Team Manager. DI provides training and support to ensure both Team Managers and students have transformational experiences.

To learn more about Destination Imagination, visit destinationimagination.org/cein or contact info@dihq.org.

Note:

[1] EdWeek Research Center nationally representative survey of 321 district administrators, April 2021.

About the Author:
Kris Beisel is a parent of three adult children (all DI alumni), a former Destination Imagination team manager, and the Director of Educational Alliances and Training for DI. She has a bachelor's degree in human services and a master's degree in organizational management.