



REPORT

Applied Learning in School Design

The following article is provided by Platinum Corporate Partner DLR Group

Our approach to school design incorporates spaces that provide learners opportunities to discover what they aspire to be. Implementing applied learning principles for all ages and tailoring environments to the specific needs of students empowers them to dream big. Inquiry-based learning thrives in inspiring environments. These spaces cultivate skills by encouraging learners' curiosity, knowledge, and hands-on experience. We design diverse and flexible learning spaces that reflect student needs and open doors to new possibilities.

Diversity of Space

Having a variety of spaces that cater to a diverse set of teaching and learning needs allows for a seamless utilization of space. At Storm Lake Early Elementary School, grade-level classroom neighborhoods are organized around a flexible discovery area that encourages student engagement and allows educators additional space that accommodate changes in the curriculum. The centrally located STEM lab provides powerful opportunities for these young learners to explore careers and ignite passion for learning. For advanced learning opportunities, like at Ottumwa Career Campus, career and technical education opportunities immerse students in real-world experiences and unique career paths. A variety of spaces ignite a learner's drive for exploration and keeps curiosity alive as they move through their day and through their educational experience.

Flexible and Adaptable

Applied learning spaces are flexible, enabling interdisciplinary and team-teaching opportunities, as well as diverse curriculum opportunities. Flexible and modular furniture is a key component in giving students autonomy and choice. Some students learn best at a desk, while

others do their best sitting on the floor. Teachers can move furniture around to best accommodate their lesson plans and encourage students to experiment with what suits them best. As students grow, so does the furniture. Elevated seating and lounge areas are more suited to older learners. CTE spaces have furniture that looks more like what's in the workforce and each piece is tailored to a career path. Technology is paramount to the success of a learner's future. We keep this in mind when designing spaces for all ages by incorporating enough storage and power for technology.

Career Ready

Our design sparks moments of discovery and inquiry, by providing spaces that speak to a learner's curiosity, exposing them to a world of education and career possibilities. For students in career and technology programs, community and industry partnerships help with employability and post-secondary skills that help students make real-world connections. Well-equipped and tailored spaces foster these partnerships and provide students with the room to experiment with their learning and connect it to their passion. For young learners, exposing them to a variety of hands-on creative thinking and technology gives them the chance to see themselves as a scientist, a veterinarian, or any other potential career. These spaces provide educators with power to influence the next generation of learners with the drive to learn and the knowledge to adapt and grow into their passions.

As designers, we provide students and educators with spaces that enable them to unlock moments of discovery through inquiry. We give students the ability to be lifelong learners, which empowers them to take on their future with confidence. Learn more about us at dlrgroup.com.



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Executive Director's Message from Lisa Remy



Key Steps to Rebuilding Broken Trust

My hope with my columns is to share some ideas or thoughts on leadership each month. I have always valued the advice and perspectives of fellow practicing leaders and I want my monthly columns to be meaningful to you as well.

Last month, I wrote about building a culture of trust—a foundation we all recognize as essential to effective leadership. Yet, we also understand that trust, once established, can be broken. While there are many reasons this can happen, my focus today is on how to rebuild trust when it has been damaged.

Trust is the foundation of any successful organization, but it can be fragile. In education, where collaboration and shared purpose drive student success, broken trust can impact morale, decision-making, and overall effectiveness. Whether trust has eroded due to leadership changes, miscommunication, or unmet expectations, restoring it requires intentional action. Here's how I believe you can rebuild trust and strengthen your school communities. I must admit, I have had some experience in this area over my years as an administrator.

Ignoring broken trust only deepens divisions. As the leader, you must acknowledge what happened, take responsibility, and communicate your commitment to making things right. Whether addressing staff, families, or the community, honesty and transparency are key. A clear and sincere acknowledgment signals a willingness to repair relationships.

Trust cannot be rebuilt without understanding the concerns of those affected. It is important to actively seek out the concerns through open forums, surveys, one-on-one conversations, etc. This allows people to share their perspectives. Being an active listener, without being defensive or providing immediate solutions, demonstrates respect and validates their emotions. By engaging in meaningful dialogue, you can identify specific issues that may need to be addressed.

"Uncertainty and misinformation thrive in silence. Regular transparent communication builds confidence and helps restore credibility. This means clearly explaining decisions, sharing the reasoning behind changes, and being upfront about challenges."

Uncertainty and misinformation thrive in silence. Regular transparent communication builds confidence and helps restore credibility. This means clearly explaining decisions, sharing the reasoning behind changes, and being upfront about challenges. When people feel informed, they are more likely to reengage and trust their leader.

Words alone will not restore trust—consistent, intentional actions must follow. You as the leader must model the behavior you would like to see from those you serve. If commitments are made, they must be honored. If changes are promised, they must be implemented. You should provide updates on progress, demonstrating accountability and reinforcing your commitment to rebuilding trust. Being approachable, showing empathy, and treating others with respect set the tone for the entire organization. When you acknowledge mistakes and demonstrate a willingness to improve, you encourage a culture where trust can thrive. Even small, visible steps can make a big impact over time.

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Rebuilding trust requires creating opportunities for shared decision-making and authentic engagement.

When educators, staff, and community members feel their voices matter, trust strengthens. Involving stakeholders in discussions on policies, curriculum, or school initiatives fosters a sense of ownership and partnership.

Rebuilding trust is not a quick fix—it's a process that takes time, consistency, and resilience.

People may remain skeptical initially, and setbacks may occur. However, by staying committed to transparency, follow-through, and relationship-building, trust can be restored, creating a stronger, more united educational community.

Continue your learning on this topic by clicking on any of the links below.

<https://www.newleaders.org/blog/building-trust-the-most-important-back-to-school-initiative>

<https://www.k12insight.com/news/building-trust-custom-er-service-in-schools/>

<https://learningforward.org/journal/december-2018-volume-39-no-6/lets-get-specific-about-how-leaders-can-build-trust/>

<https://leadershipnow.com/CoveyOnTrust.html>

Upcoming Events

April

2: Take 30: Effective District/School Communications #1

10: Virtual Spring Legal Lab

15: In-Person Spring Legal Lab

16: Take 30: Effective District/School Communications #2

30: Take 30: Effective District/School Communications #3

In Memoriam

Please email lbuck@sai-iowa.org to share In Memoriam names that we can include in future publications.

The SAI Report is published for association members and select community and business leaders by School Administrators of Iowa. The views expressed in the SAI Report do not necessarily reflect SAI opinion nor does acceptance of advertising imply SAI endorsement. Your comments and suggestions are welcomed.

Laine Buck
Communications Director
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Legal Vortex with Matt Carver, legal services director

What's Santa Claus Got to Do with Liability?

Santa Claus is the most effective psychological operation (PSYOP) for hundreds of years, so do you really blame parents and other adults for using it to control the behavior of children?! How would world history be different if children were not fearful of receiving coal as a present, or no present at all, if they were naughty?! Who knows what chaos would be unleashed if not for this brilliant PSYOP?

Why this focus on Santa and PSYOPS in April?! Because our fear of school liability may not be all that different than our childhood fear of being placed on Santa's naughty list. Yes, there is a greater possibility of school or employee liability than receiving coal from Santa, but the concerns about liability are often overblown. Now, if utilizing talk about liability is effective in helping to control behavior in a positive manner, then absolutely take advantage of that technique, but I will hopefully share in this column that concerns about liability, especially for employees, are often exaggerated.

Let's go over some things to consider.

First, we have case law to consider when discussing negligence and liability concerns. In general, the school will not be found negligent if school officials took "reasonably prudent" steps to safeguard students, employees, or visitors. For instance, let's imagine that two students have been having regular arguments with each other and building administrators direct the students not to interact with the other; while also changing their locker locations so they are less likely to interact. Despite these actions, the two students end up getting into a fight one afternoon in the hallway.

Were administrators aware of an issue between the students? Yes. Did the students still get into a fight? Yes. Will the school district be found liable for injuries resulting from this fight? No, not unless there are additional aggravating facts that I did not provide. Why is the school not liable? Because considering the circumstances relating to the disagreements between the students, there is a high likelihood that the court or a jury will find that school administrators' actions of directing the students not to interact and even moving locker locations will be viewed as taking "reasonably prudent steps" to prevent further conflict between the students.

When considering whether your actions or the actions of other employees will be viewed as reasonably prudent, I encourage you to imagine that other administrators in your athletic conference or nearby districts had the same facts available to you and your colleagues. Next, ask if those administrators would be likely to agree that the actions taken by educators in your district were reasonable considering the circumstance. It is not a matter of whether other educators might have done things a little differently, but whether steps taken or not taken were reasonably prudent given the facts involved in the matter.

What else are we able to glean from liability case law? There is a decent chance that a school district WILL be found liable if school officials acted in a "deliberately indifferent" manner about a given situation. It takes some real effort to be "deliberately indifferent." Here is a classic example of "deliberate indifference" regarding a bullying scenario. A student and parent of the student in a middle school repeatedly share concerns about other students bullying said student. The building principal hears these repeated complaints, but takes no action or very little action considering the alleged bullying. Furthermore, the principal tells the parent that "boys will be boys" or something to that effect regarding the bullying activities. The student then continues to get bullied and requires mental health counseling while also missing school as a result of the severe bullying. These are the type of facts often found in case law where school officials are found liable due to "deliberate indifference." Now you understand why I shared it takes some real effort to be "deliberately indifferent." After thousands of interactions with Iowa school administrators, I just have not experienced this level of indifference from Iowa administrators or teachers.

Immunity and Other Statutory Protections

Beyond the relatively high threshold for plaintiffs to overcome if they desire for the court to find school officials liable for their behavior, there are numerous protections for Iowa educators and other public employees in code.

Immunity Answering Questions in Reference Check — Iowa Code §91B.2 Information provided by employers about current or former employees — immunity.

1. An employer or an employer's representative who, upon request by or authorization of a current or former employee or upon request made by a person who in good faith is believed to be a representative of a prospective employer of a current or former employee, provides work-related information about a current or former employee, is **immune from civil liability** unless the employer or the employer's representative acted unreasonably in providing the work-related information.

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2. For purposes of this section, an employer acts unreasonably if any of the following are present: a. The work-related information violates a civil right of the current or former employee. b. The work-related information knowingly is provided to a person who has no legitimate and common interest in receiving the work-related information. c. The work-related information is not relevant to the inquiry being made, is provided with malice, or is provided with no good faith belief that it is true.

3. For purposes of this section, “employer” and “employee” are defined as provided in section 91A.2.

Immunity Regarding Physical Contact with Student — Iowa Code §280.21(2) A school employee who, in the reasonable course of the employee’s employment responsibilities, comes into physical contact with a student **shall be granted immunity from any civil or criminal liability** which might otherwise be incurred or imposed as a result of such physical contact, if the physical contact is reasonable under the circumstances and involves any of the following: a. Encouraging, supporting, or disciplining the student. b. Protecting the employee, the student, or other students. c. Obtaining possession of a weapon or other dangerous object within a student’s control. d. Protecting employee, student, or school property. e. Quelling a disturbance or preventing an act threatening physical harm to any person. f. Removing a disruptive student from class or any area of the school premises, or from school-sponsored activities off school premises. g. Preventing a student from the self-infliction of harm. h. Self-defense. i. Any other legitimate educational activity.

Immunity Reporting Violence and Threats — Iowa Code §280.27 Reporting violence — immunity. An employee of a school district, an accredited nonpublic school, or an area education agency who participates in good faith and acts reasonably in the making of a report to, or investigation by, an appropriate person or agency regarding violence, threats of violence, physical or sexual abuse of a student, or other inappropriate activity against a school employee or student in a school building, on school grounds, or at a school-sponsored function **shall be immune** from civil or criminal liability relating to such action, as well as for participating in any administrative or judicial proceeding resulting from or relating to the report or investigation.

Immunity Reporting Alleged Bullying — Iowa Code §280.28(5) Immunity. A school employee, volunteer, or student, or a student’s parent or guardian who promptly, reasonably, and in good faith reports an incident of harassment or bullying, in compliance with the procedures in the policy adopted pursuant to this section, to the appropriate school official designated by the school district or accredited nonpublic school, **shall be immune from civil or criminal liability** relating to such report and to participation in any administrative or judicial proceeding resulting from or relating to the report.

Iowa Code §670.8 Officers and employees defended. **1. The governing body shall defend its officers and employees, whether elected or appointed and shall save harmless and indemnify the officers and employees against any tort claim or demand, whether groundless or otherwise, arising out of an alleged act or omission occurring within the scope of their employment or duties.** However, the duty to save harmless and indemnify does not apply to awards for punitive damages. The exception for punitive damages does not prohibit a governing body from purchasing insurance to protect its officers and employees from punitive damages. The duty to save harmless and indemnify does not apply and the municipality is entitled to restitution by an officer or employee if, in an action commenced by the municipality against the officer or employee, it is determined that the conduct of the officer or employee upon which the tort claim or demand was based constituted a willful and wanton act or omission. Any independent or autonomous board or commission of a municipality having authority to disburse funds for a particular municipal function without approval of the governing body shall similarly defend, save harmless and indemnify its officers and employees against tort claims or demands. **2. The duties to defend and to save harmless and indemnify shall apply whether or not the municipality is a party to the action and shall include but not be limited to cases arising under 42 U.S.C. §1983.** **3. In the event the officer or employee fails to cooperate in the defense against the claim or demand, the municipality shall have a right of indemnification against that officer or employee.**

While I don’t have space to share all of the instances of immunity for school employees in the Iowa Code, the above are the sections that arise most frequently, and should provide you with additional assurance that you will not be personally liable for actions taken in good faith, even if those actions might be deemed negligent. In particular, please note the last section from Iowa Code Chapter 670. Not only must the district hold you harmless for most acts relating to official duties, but it also must defend you or other school district employees if an action is brought by an outside party, unless an exception from the above subsection applies. This section is unknown by many in the Iowa education communication.

I’m going way over my word limit for this column, so I will end by hoping that you and your fellow educators stay off of Santa’s naughty list.

Until next month, Let’s Go Cubs! Please start scoring more runs!

In Brief

Executive Committee March Highlights



- Approved Feb. 12, 2025 meeting minutes.
- Approved the 2025-26 meeting dates.
- Executive Director Lisa Remy shared about possible BDEI Committee changes; announced plans to provide a draft 2025-26 budget for review at the April meeting; attended a teacher of the year luncheon; introduced a possible new service to members using AI bots, then asked the committee for feedback.
- Government Relations Director Dave Daughton shared information from his report highlighting recent legislative updates and priorities.
- Finance Director Debbie Wrenn shared membership grew to 2,221. She also shared her monthly financial report.
- Professional Learning Director Dana Schon highlighted recent input from the mentor committee to improve the Mentoring and Induction program; highlighted current and upcoming events.
- Associate Professional Learning Director Al Neppi explained the Professional Learning Advisory Committee will review Promising Practices submissions; discussed updates for the 2025 annual conference.
- Communications Director Laine Buck shared the 2026 Administrator of the Year nominations were now open; congratulated Jayme Braida on Elementary Principal of the Year selection; asked the committee to select the NAESP State Representative, and the committee approved Dana Nally with Bedford Community School District.
- Legal Services Director Matt Carver mentioned the recent legal conference was a success; received numerous calls from members about recent legislation; shared an IPERS update regarding an interview subcommittee for the new chief benefits officer.



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Legislative Notes

from Dave Daughton, government relations director

April's Legislative Notes includes the content from the March 28 Legislative Update, a weekly publication sent to members from January-early May.

This was week eleven of the legislative session. Next week is the second funnel week, meaning bills must pass out of one chamber and out of committee in the other to remain alive. While bills are never truly dead, their progress becomes more difficult after this deadline. Bills involving appropriations or taxes can still be discussed. Amendments can also incorporate bills into other legislation.

Subcommittee and Education Committee meetings are scheduled for next week as lawmakers prioritize bills.

Process Overview

In recent weeks, we have focused on educating legislators about various bills. Before floor debate, legislators caucus on bills listed on the debate calendar. During these closed-door meetings, they discuss talking points and assess support.

If there is significant opposition, the majority party will pull a bill from the calendar. The minority party is then notified. We provide information to support or oppose legislation. Amendments are frequently filed to bills, some beneficial, others not. Minority party amendments are rarely approved. It is really a fascinating process, and many times a frustrating one.

We try to provide as much input as possible on our priorities, as we go along. A reminder that you can view [SAI's legislative priorities](#) on the website.

Superintendents received a memo from Director Snow of the Iowa Department of Education regarding its request to the U.S. Department of Education to consolidate Elementary and Secondary Education Act grant programs. If approved, the consolidation should streamline the process and increase funding flexibility. We will need some more information on how it will work.

Legislation

There has been no progress on SSA. We continue to advocate for its consideration. The second most frequent question concerns the school start date. House leadership has indicated it will not advance legislation on this issue.

Bills that moved Out of the Senate

- **HF 783** — Establishes a Conference Realignment Committee for extracurricular activities, addressing districts without conferences. (Passed 47-1; sent to the governor.)
- **HF 782** — Requires school boards to develop cellphone and device policies restricting usage during instructional time. The Iowa Department of Education

must issue model policies by May 1. (Passed 49-0; returned to the House.)

- **HF 574** — Reduces construction project retainage fees from 5 percent to 3 percent. (Passed 45-4.)

Bills that moved Out of the House

- **HF 395** — Addresses bus driver licensure courses. (Passed 94-1.)
- **HF 706** — Increases fines for board members who knowingly violate open meetings laws and requires training for new board members. (Passed 95-0.)
- **HF 471** — Allows psychologists to participate in concussion protocols. (Passed 97-0.)
- **HF 785** — Addresses charter school board members. (Passed 60-36.)
- **HF 884** — Allows school districts to employ chaplains as staff. (Passed 57-39.)

Subcommittees

We had significantly more subcommittees this week, as they were trying to get bills to and out of committee and therefore be 'funnel proof'.

- **SF176** — Open-enrolled virtual students and athletic participation in resident districts. (In the House.)
- **SF 277** — Addresses chronic absenteeism, removing the certified letter requirement, clarifying exempt absences, and providing administrative discretion. (In the House.)
- **HF 393** — Eliminates the two-time student dropout policy. (In the Senate.)
- **HF 369** — Agriculture Education grants for extended contracts; supplement/not supplant.
- **HF 392** — Allows year-round calendars for high schools. (In the Senate.)
- **HF 870** — Allows students to attend religious instruction during the school day and makes it an exempt absence. (In the Senate.)
- **HF 189** — Allows nonpublic school students to participate in public school extracurricular activities under certain conditions. (In the Senate.)
- **HF 865** — Redefines bullying. (In the Senate.)

HF 603 — School Safety and Security bill

This bill came about as a result of the School Safety Task Force that met in the interim. It encompasses the vast majority of recommendations from that group that included two superintendents and two school board members. It establishes a grant program to help districts to pay for some of the recommendations. The recommendations have to do with doors, windows, vestibules, video and communication systems, and others. There have been some amendments drafted that will improve the current version of the bill. Many of the items should apply to new construction or renovation only. We will share more on this one as it moves through.

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Dana Nally to Serve as NAESP State Representative

The School Administrators of Iowa (SAI) Executive Committee has selected Dana Nally, principal of Bedford Elementary PK-5, to serve as the next National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) State Representative, with her term beginning July 1.

Nally brings over 25 years of educational experience to the role, beginning her career as a math and special education teacher before transitioning into leadership. Since 2007, she has served as the PK-5 principal for the Bedford Community School District, where she has spearheaded numerous initiatives, notably leading the school to receive National Blue Ribbon School recognition in 2010 and again in 2021.

Her exceptional leadership has been recognized with the 2023 National Distinguished Principal award and the 2023 Iowa Elementary Principal of the Year award.

As she considered the NAESP State Representative position, Nally shared, "I am seeking to serve in this

leadership office to leverage my expertise and passion for advancing education. My goal is to contribute to systemic improvement, mentor educators, and ensure the success of students and communities across the state. I am particularly motivated to address educational challenges by collaborating with key stakeholders at SAI and NAESP to drive meaningful change."

As State Representative, Nally will be responsible for fulfilling duties outlined in the NAESP bylaws, policy, affiliation agreements, and Delegate Assembly rules and procedures, as well as serving as a liaison between NAESP and SAI, working in close collaboration with SAI's Executive Committee and executive director.

"Dana brings a wealth of experience and a deep commitment to education that will greatly benefit SAI and NAESP. Her insight and dedication will bring value to our organization, and her connection to our national affiliate will continue to provide valuable perspectives and learning for Iowa's school leaders." said SAI Executive Director Lisa Remy.

Janelle Brouwer Elected as SAI Vice President

Janelle Brouwer, superintendent of Marion Independent School District, has been elected vice president of School Administrators of Iowa (SAI) for the 2025-26 term.

In this role, Brouwer will serve on the SAI Executive Committee, working to advance the association's mission of developing Iowa's educational leaders and learners. Her term begins Sept. 1.

"I'm excited to collaborate with Janelle to strengthen our association so that we can support the professional growth of both current and future educational leaders through impactful professional learning and meaningful networking opportunities," said SAI Executive Director Lisa Remy.

Brouwer has served in various SAI volunteer roles, including the Professional Learning Advisory Committee and the Legal Lab Advisory Committee, and has mentored superintendents. She also has been on the IGHSAU Representative Council and has served on advisory boards for Northwestern College and the University of Iowa. She is active in the Marion community,

participating in Rotary and serving on the city's economic development corporation board.

Brouwer has been with the Marion Independent School District since 2016, first as assistant superintendent and then as superintendent since 2019. Previously, she was a special education coordinator at Area Education Agency 267 in Cedar Falls and a principal in the Western Dubuque County Community School District. She began her teaching career in Boyden, Iowa, and also taught in Idaho.

Brouwer holds a bachelor of arts degree from Northwestern College, a master of education from Idaho State University, an education specialist degree and a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Iowa.

Brouwer reflected on this opportunity. "I am incredibly honored to serve as the next SAI Vice President. The opportunity to support and advocate for school leaders in this way is truly meaningful. I look forward to collaborating with colleagues across the state for the benefit of our profession, our students, and our communities."

SSB 1208 — Property Tax bill and

HSB 313 — Property Tax bill

There were a lot of questions about these two identical bills. There is still a lot of discussion to take place. We appreciate that the education groups have been able to provide input and be a part of the conversation. My suggestion is to just take a deep breath, as the committees continue to listen and adjust their thinking, and hopefully address some of the concerns that many have. When we have more solid answers, we will provide more information.

Advocacy Points

- As always, communicate with your legislators if at all possible.
- Stay aware of any communication from the education groups asking for some quick action, in case it is needed.

Final Thought

The lack of a decision on SSA has produced some frustration, along with the uncertainty of the property tax situation. We have been told that over 100 education related bills made it out of committee. We believe that the majority of those will not become law...both good and bad. So, with the start of baseball season (Go,Cubs, Go!) I urge you to keep your eye on the ball and focus on what is truly important.

Administrator of the Year Highlight: High School AOY Nicole Roder

We [announced in February](#) that Nicole Roder, Rock Valley Community Schools high school principal, was named the 2024-25 High School Administrator of the Year by School Administrators of Iowa. To get to know Nicole better, read her response to the following question.

What about your school are you most proud of?

"Rock Valley is a proud, hard working and committed community, and its schools are the same. The district has done an excellent job for years hiring quality teachers who are amazing people.

When I started this journey (job), in 2009, I was starting young and had never done anything else besides teach Spanish to high school kids and coach. I could have never imagined I would be so very welcomed with open arms and hearts by the whole staff, and 16 years later feel that same way every single day.

As a staff, we have come together more times than I can count to rally around our kids and staff in times of need. We have worked hard for many years to meet the students' needs, especially when we had a large group of non-English speaking students all enroll in one year. This last summer... and all year long... we've had to recover from a devastating flood that ravaged over 500 homes in our community and two of our schools. We never gave up. We never will.

We are resilient, proud, and passionate about providing a place for kids where they know they are loved, prayed over, and their education is a priority. What happened to all of us last summer is something none of us will ever forget, and we will never be able to thank all of those friends in surrounding communities that came to the rescue. I'm blessed beyond measure for sure!"



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The Latest in Learning with Dana Schon, professional learning director

What's your Level of Emotional Fitness?

How physically fit are you? I'm imagining a quick response or retort, perhaps a groan accompanied by a pained expression. You probably didn't have to stop to consider the question much. You're clear about what it means to be physically fit and have a rough estimate about where you are on your fitness journey.

But what if I ask that same question regarding your emotional fitness? You might find yourself hesitating, wondering, *"What does she mean by emotional fitness?"* Does this mean when I get triggered (and we all do — it's our human nature), I don't overreact? Or, does it mean that when an angry parent/guardian leaves a cutting and curt message, I give it some time for things to cool down before returning the call? Or, do I pick up the phone immediately to calm my overwhelming worry about "fixing" the problem? Shouldn't I confront issues in the moment rather than let them potentially fester? Or, is emotional fitness about responding with no emotion at all?

Though our brains want to simplify the answer into yes or no, *this or that, avoid or confront*, the reality is that emotional fitness involves flexibility and a both/and approach. At the crux is the question: What emotional state and response will contribute to things going better in this situation or for this relationship? We've had those moments where we're triggered and ready to respond without reflecting, but the other person isn't available. So, we're forced to wait; and in the waiting, something magical seems to happen. The intensity of our emotional experience diminishes and we gain a new perspective, then respond accordingly. What if it weren't about magic at all, but rather about gaining skill and confidence in managing our response to our emotional experience?

Psychologist Ethan Kross, who directs the [Emotion and Self Control Laboratory](#) at the University of Michigan, discusses emotional fitness as having a tool box approach to managing your emotions and the flexibility both to express and suppress emotions as best serves the situation. He explains that developing emotional fitness is similar to developing physical fitness. You choose exercises that work for you, and you change them up when your needs or the context changes. For example, your best friend might be a runner and chooses to hop on the treadmill, but you detest running and much prefer the elliptical. Regardless, you both get what you want — physical fitness.

Emotional fitness works the same way. Not all of the tools available to develop emotional fitness appeal to everyone. Kross notes it's about acquiring flexibility with as many tools that work for you. Flexibility includes intentionally choosing the emotional state that will serve you and the circumstance best at any given point and being able to shift authentically into that state.

Kross discussed three tools for "shifting" in a recent [Coaching for Leaders podcast](#) episode. "Shifters," he explains, alter the trajectory of emotions and push them in the direction you want them to go.

1. **Music** has incredible power in shifting emotions. You may have a workout playlist that shifts you into a hyped up emotional state. You feel motivated and empowered. Kross suggests creating playlists that target the emotional state you want, not the one you may be in. For example, when you're down, listening to sad music is not going to help you shift; you need a playlist that picks you up!
2. **Time Travel** takes two forms. You can peer into the future and ask yourself: How will I feel about this in one week, one month, one year, or 10 years? Or, you can reflect on a past success and push your emotions in the direction of feeling successful.
3. **Shifting language** from "I" to "you" when talking to yourself puts you in the position to give yourself advice like you would a friend. Kross explains that it's easier to process through an issue when you take yourself (i.e. use of the word "I") out of it.

Tools that support emotional fitness do not have universal application. Different people benefit from different tools, and different tools work more effectively in different situations. The key is to develop your flexibility in using a variety of tools so that you can intentionally shift into the emotional state best suited for the circumstance.



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