

## Emotional Intelligence

*Meet the new dean helping students balance academics with social/emotional learning.*

Starting a new job at any stage in life, in any field, can be overwhelming, or at least a bit stressful—and all the more when that job involves working with young students on the West side of Chicago, during a global pandemic and a national reckoning for racial injustice.

But surprisingly, Justin Walker, who joined CWSCS as the new Dean of Students in June 2020, isn't intimidated by the challenge.

"I've always been passionate about full-fledged restorative justice," explains Justin, who views his role as ministry. "In most places that is often done without any mention of faith.... So having a space where I don't have to put my faith in my back pocket, or talk around it when influencing young minds, is great. It's the reason I'm here."

A former police officer, Justin has also worked as an educator at an alternative school and served in youth residential facilities—positions that have prepared him to head up CWSCS's security, safety, and emergency protocols. But one of his most important responsibilities is shaping CWSCS's social/emotional learning (SEL) curriculum and implementing it across grade levels. A recent article from The National Education Foundation (NEA) highlights the importance of SEL, especially during a crisis like COVID. Beyond academics, educators need to prioritize tending to students' emotions, including "self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making."<sup>1</sup>

So what does SEL look like at CWSCS? For students in grades K-3, it is doing emotional awareness and emotional vocabulary development—developing the language to talk about the way they feel, says Justin. In grades 4 and 5, it is discussing ideas around citizenship: *What does it mean to be a good friend? What does it mean to be a good person? How do we address conflicts and disagreements?* For students in grades 6-8, it is growing in social justice awareness, discussing such questions as *What is justice?* and *What is the difference between a right and a privilege?*

Justin adds that helping students establish standards for their own lives and behavior, instead of "talking at them all day long," is key to empowering them to be problem solvers. "There are times that we might not feel like we can talk to one of our teachers," says 8th-grader Reede Johnson. "Even if it's not SEL time, Mr. Walker will let us get on a Zoom call and voice our opinions. And in the next day or two, the problem is solved."

Justin's vision is a school where students become empathetic enough to handle most conflicts on their own, and that older students would even be able to mentor those in the lower grades.

"I want to try and take credit for helping them cope, but I think that a large part of their coping has been knowing that they have someone who trusts them with themselves and is willing to be honest and transparent," observes Justin, who likes to use the story of the woman at the well in John 4 as an illustration.

In the passage, Jesus holds a woman accountable for her past without being judgmental, reminds her of and reinstates her humanity, and gives her a sense of purpose.

"So often our students are pathologized, looked at as broken, and treated as if they aren't whole people, that we somehow have to fix— as opposed to acknowledging and respecting their humanity, their truth, their voice, their story, and figuring out how to stand in solidarity with them," Justin explains.

"Jesus doesn't view us as broken, partial people. He sees how he can make us the best version of ourselves."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/social-emotional-learning-should-be-priority-during-covid-19>