

# NC ACCESS BEST PRACTICES



Office of Charter Schools  
**NC ACCESS PROGRAM**  
NC Department of Public Instruction

## School Culture

## Social Emotion Learning

### It's Wildcat Time

#### Implementation Description

Sugar Creek Charter School in Charlotte, NC is passionate about the social and emotional well-being of their students. Prioritizing socio-emotional learning (SEL) has been a long-time practice of the school as they have always dedicated 20% of the daily schedule to social emotional learning. However, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a change in the way in which the staff met students' SEL needs.

Sugar Creek sought to maintain consistency and normalcy for students to the greatest extent possible. School administration observed that their student population was "very hard hit" with COVID-19 (C. Turner, personal interview, June 2, 2021). Though the pandemic necessitated a virtual environment for most of the year, school leadership was intentional about keeping the curriculum and daily schedule consistent with a typical academic year so as to minimize the feeling of total upheaval for their students. Research has proven that school is often a place of safety and structure for students living in poverty and dysfunction (Moshman, N.d.), so maintaining consistency was a necessity during this time. SCCS prioritized live, face-to-face time that targeted Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) enrichment, which has the "potential to promote the academic, social and emotional development of all children" (Nieme, 2020).

SCCS's School leaders knew the importance of continuing socio-emotional learning, especially when students were experiencing disruption in their lives. During virtual learning, the SEL dedicated time transitioned to "Wildcat Time" which occurred Friday mornings from 9:00 AM - 12:00 PM. The first part of Wildcat Time consisted of a school-wide virtual pep rally that celebrated student, teacher, administration, and family successes. Afterwards, the school hosted Challenges, in which students participated in activities of their choice, such as zumba, cooking, painting, talking to a therapist, and more. Every teacher facilitated two Challenges each week. Students were expected to attend at least two, but many students chose to do more. High school students were

August 2, 2021

#### About This School

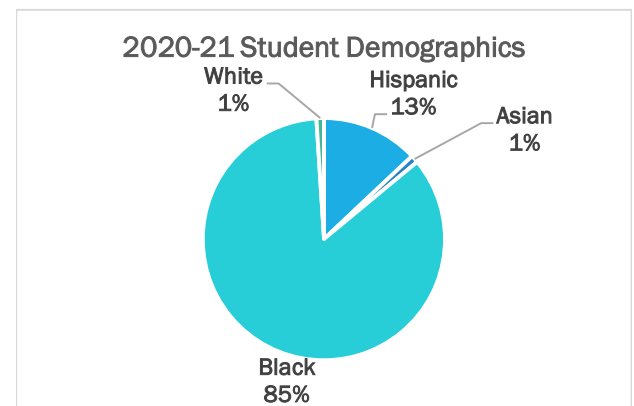
##### Sugar Creek Charter School

Sugar Creek's mission is to eradicate generational poverty by providing a college and career preparatory education from kindergarten to 12th grade. Sugar Creek's vision is to serve as many children as possible and to work with them in their formative years so that they become well educated and productive citizens as adults.

**Year School Opened:** 1999-2000

**Grant Awarded:** 2020-21

**Initial Grade Levels Served:** K-12



**% ED Student Population:** 94%

**Urbanicity:** Urban / Charlotte, NC

**Persons in Poverty (Mecklenburg County)<sup>5</sup>:** 11.7%

particularly engaged in Wildcat Time and commented to staff that they were excited to be provided with time to spend with their friends (C. Turner, personal interview, June 2, 2021). The time spent with friends provided the stability and familiarity the students needed during uncertain times. Providing this time for students is critical, because studies have shown that strong friendships have a variety of benefits, including aiding in the development of important social skills and contributing to academic success (Futterman, 2016).

## Results

Sugar Creek's success with their SEL focus during the pandemic is evidenced by their high student engagement, consistent attendance, and an increased number of students on the honor roll during the 2020-2021 school year.

Participant surveys revealed that students find SEL at Sugar Creek to be an extremely valuable piece of their education.

## Challenges

The SCCS administration found that Wildcat Time was successful and relatively easy to implement, because of the amount of student and teacher buy-in. Teachers and participants chose activities that were of interest to them. Providing choice promoted ownership and reduced potential implementation challenges.

## Future Modifications

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Sugar Creek scheduled Club Time on Wednesdays, similar to the Challenges offered during virtual learning. School leadership plans to transition back to the club model during the 2021-2022 school year, while implementing some of the strategies and activities gained during virtual learning. Having dedicated time in the weekly schedule for socio-emotional learning will remain a priority at SCCS.

## Critical Components

### Getting Started

School leadership asserted that it was critical to inquire what activities were of interest to teachers and students in order to ensure engagement. They also commented that building on an existing school culture that promoted connection and celebration of others aided in the success of Wildcat Time.

### Ongoing Supports

The school will continue to spend 20% of each day on SEL, because they believe it is critical to ongoing student engagement and success.

## Equity Connections

Research has shown that schools can provide a safe place for students living in poverty by *“creating [a] positive school environment, providing opportunities for academic growth, and teaching positive social*

behaviors” (Sloan, 2019). Sugar Creek provided support and connection to students through their SEL-focused Wildcat Time during the tumult of COVID-19.

## Research

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3. Nieme, K. (December, 15, 2020). “CASEL Is Updating the Most Widely Recognized Definition of Social-Emotional Learning. Here’s Why”. *The 74*. Accessed on May 10, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.the74million.org/article/niemi-casel-is-updating-the-most-widely-recognized-definition-of-social-emotional-learning-heres-why/>
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5. United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts North Carolina, Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NC/PST045219>