

# SUSTAINABILITY HEROES

## May 2020



Patricia C. Heindel, Ph.D.

& Elizabeth Warner

Co-Founders, School Culture and Climate Initiative  
at the College of Saint Elizabeth

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Liz Warner and Patricia Heindel are nationally recognized for their exemplary achievements in the field of social-emotional learning and school climate. For over ten years, Patricia and Liz have championed school culture and climate initiatives serving in leadership roles and raising the level of excellence in this work. Through their tireless work and visionary focus, these sustainability heroes have developed one of the most comprehensive initiatives in New Jersey to both improve school climates and promote students' health and wellness from kindergarten through 12th grade. Patricia said, "We're passionate about what we do. It's rewarding to work toward achieving our mission where we see the positive outcomes of our efforts." Liz and Patricia attribute their success to their mentor and colleague, Maurice Elias of Rutgers University who is a thought leader in social-emotional learning and school climate work.

Their initiatives to support, connect and empower New Jersey schools, have provided a foundation and resources that are invaluable as schools seek to navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis. Patricia and Liz have been leading virtual gatherings of educators, administrators and teachers to provide support during this time of social distancing. Liz explained, "Building social and emotional skills and a positive climate has never been more important. With teachers instructing remotely and students learning at home, we're asking an extraordinary amount from everyone in a stressful, traumatic time. Just as students need to learn how to read and write and solve math problems, they also need to learn how to manage their emotions. There are tremendous challenges and opportunities moving forward."

Patricia added, "Teaching is about relationships-student to teacher, teacher to families, administration to teachers and more. These personal connections are growing stronger, from the principal who is providing daily videos of his morning announcements with his dog as co-anchor and ending with mindfulness exercises, to the teachers hosting remote lunch bunches with students, connections are being made." She added, "As our colleague Shileste Overton-Morris says, 'When we get back, I hope we don't go back,' stressing the renewed shift to improve school climates and connections is positive." Both women are also quick to note that there are many growing challenges as well, such as the widening equity gap experienced by many students.

**School Culture and Climate Initiative:** Patricia is a professor of psychology and Dean of the School of Professional Studies at the [College of Saint Elizabeth](#) located

in Morristown, New Jersey. She said she was originally drawn to the college's mission and social justice focus. Founded in 1899 by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, the College of Saint Elizabeth has a strong tradition of concern for the poor, for developing leadership in a spirit of service and social responsibility.



**School Culture &  
Climate Initiative**

In 2010, Patricia and Liz were connected by a mutual colleague who realized that they were pursuing similar goals. With complementary skill sets, Patricia and Liz are a powerful duo. Liz has a strong background in community outreach and coalition building and Patricia brings the expertise of a researcher and professor.

Since 2010, Patricia has served as the director of the College of Saint Elizabeth Center for Human and Social Development where she and Liz founded and now co-direct the Center's [School Culture and Climate Initiative](#). Liz provided some background, she said, "We began by asking a seemingly simple question, 'What do students need in order to thrive?' That initial inquiry coupled with best practices and research from the fields of school climate, social-emotional learning and character development, led to the conclusion that schools need to be inspiring, challenging and respectful places where all individuals feel safe and supported."



The School Culture and Climate Initiative helps schools become learning environments that are positive and engaging for all and where the development of a student's social, emotional and physical well-being is equally as important as their academic achievement.

Patricia said, "The schools involved in the initiative engage the entire school community—students, parents, teachers, staff and administrators—in a survey that asks each group about its perceptions of the school's climate and culture. Survey results are then analyzed by the Saint Elizabeth's Center to provide schools with an analysis of their strengths, but also opportunities for improvement." She added, "Next, a school climate team is formed with representatives from each interest group as well as a student climate team. With data, leadership and coordination in place, the school is ready to begin developing an improvement plan." Consultants help to guide the conversations, but it is the students and educators who develop the plans for positive change—a key component of ensuring the change is sustainable.

**Social Emotional Learning Alliance for New Jersey:** In 2012, Liz founded the New Jersey School Health and Climate Coalition which is the predecessor to the Social Emotional Learning Alliance for New Jersey (SEL4NJ), a state affiliate of [SEL4US](#). Liz serves as the president and Patricia is a founding member.



[SEL4NJ](#) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as an umbrella term that includes social and emotional development, character education, positive youth development, whole child/whole school approaches, caring schools and communities and efforts to create a positive school climate and culture. SEL also includes efforts to promote mental and physical health and to prevent substance use and bullying.

On the inaugural International SEL Day which was held on Friday, March 27, 2020, New Jersey led the way and had more schools and organizations signing up and participating than any other state in the country. In fact, New Jersey had two and a half times as many schools participating than the next most active states of California and Texas. This outpouring of support from schools and local groups is a testament to the commitment and years of work schools, educators, organizations, associations and the New Jersey Department of Education have done to promote and infuse SEL into the fabric of the education system.



Liz said, “To successfully accomplish the goal of promoting SEL for all students, collaboration is required within schools, across schools and among child-serving organizations and agencies.” A partnership between schools, health and mental health organizations, professional associations, higher education, corporate/business organizations and the local community is necessary. Liz continued, “SEL4NJ provides a framework for this partnership by bringing together these institutions and organizations to form one strong voice advocating for SEL.” In 2019, SEL4NJ held a large-group meeting to review the progress made by six work groups on the Landscape Analysis Project. The landscape analysis informed the strategic decision-making and operational priorities of the group; [click here to access the report](#).



**Academy for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools:** Patricia is the co-project leader with Maurice Elias, Ph.D. of the [Academy for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools](#) which is a collaboration between the College of Saint Elizabeth and Rutgers University. Dr. Elias is known nationally and internationally for his ground-breaking work with students’ emotional intelligence, school success and social-emotional and character development. He provided the founding leadership and shared resources that have contributed to work that Patricia and Liz are doing now.



The Academy for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools is a professional learning community dedicated to supporting educators and administrators in the creation and implementation of social-emotional learning and character education in schools. It is a non-credit, continuing education unit (CEU), program that offers all educational staff, school mental health professionals and those working in out-of-school programs the opportunity to enhance their professional skills in the field of social-emotional and character development. Liz serves as a facilitator for this program.

**Sustainable Jersey Schools Culture and Climate Actions:** As members of the School Climate and Culture working group of the Sustainable Jersey for Schools Health and Wellness Task Force, Liz and Patricia developed three School Culture and Climate Actions that schools can document as part of their application for Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification. Liz and Patricia also review the completed actions that schools submit in this category.

Sustainable Jersey for Schools encompasses the three equal, interrelated components of sustainability: people, prosperity and planet. The School Culture and Climate actions contribute to the people category because they help build a strong civil society. Liz said, “The addition of these actions into Sustainable Jersey for Schools is a good way to promote the work we are doing to the nearly 1,000 schools participating in the program. I’m impressed by Sustainable Jersey for Schools because it inspires schools to be better and go beyond regular benchmarks. The actions provide a practical step by step model that make it easy for schools to follow.” Patricia agreed, she said, “Sustainable Jersey for Schools has been a tremendous vehicle to help bring these best practices state wide.”

The [Inclusive Environments Where All Can Thrive](#) action recognizes schools that have implemented efforts to identify, understand and address the needs of students and parents/guardians who may feel isolated in their current school environment. To successfully complete this action, schools demonstrate they have been proactive in seeking to understand their school population better and implement approaches to reach out and engage those who are vulnerable in a systemic and sustainable way. The [School Culture and Climate Needs Assessment](#) program action awards points for completing a comprehensive assessment of a school’s culture and climate such as an inventory of the school's programs and practices and a survey of student, staff and parent perceptions of school culture and climate, or a focus groups with key stakeholders in the school community.

The [Social Emotional Learning Integrated Unit](#) program action awards points for a Pre-K-12 unit that educates for sustainability and focuses on explicit social-emotional skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. The unit plan, integrated with Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Education for Sustainability (EFS), must educate about and assess student learning of at least one SEL core competency ([NJDOE SEL Competencies](#)) and at least one Enduring Understanding for Sustainability ([Cloud Institute EFS Standards & Performance Indicators](#)). Patricia said, “A school considering these actions should first decide if the action makes sense for the school; determine if the school is passionate and interested in doing the work. If the answer is yes, then I say go for it. Sustainable Jersey for Schools and the action reviewers provide a lot of support for schools to help complete and accomplish the work.”

**More about Liz:** Liz, known for her upbeat personality and ability to motivate others, started her work in New Jersey at United Way where she founded the Youth Empowerment Alliance, the School Support Networks and in partnership with the Center for Human and Social Development at the College of Saint Elizabeth, continued the work of Dr. Maurice Elias’s, Developing Safe and Civil Schools’ project under the name of the School Climate Assessment and Improvement Process. Liz often speaks both regionally and nationally on collaboration building as well as the importance of a coordinated approach to SEL and school climate improvement.



Before moving to New Jersey 14 years ago, Liz spent 16 years in higher education publishing and although originally from Wisconsin, she spent almost 19 years living on the other side of the Atlantic in the United Kingdom and Denmark. In her spare time, Liz loves to travel and has been known to share her remarkable story of attempting the ‘Last Degree’ in 2005 — her ten-day unsupported trek trying to reach the North Pole. She spent nine months training, three nights in Svalbard, one night at Ice Station Borneo on route to the start of the expedition. She experienced severe unprecedented conditions throughout the ten days on the ice including blizzards, white-outs, open water and high winds. Liz often gives talks on the power of commitment and trust in oneself as well as geography, polar bears, climate change and lots of adventure and excitement. She lives in Morristown, New Jersey and has two daughters in college, one is at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the other at McGill University in Montreal, Canada.



**More about Patricia:** Patricia served as Psychology Program Chair at the College of Saint Elizabeth for 21 years before becoming Dean. In 2007, Patricia was recognized as Teacher of the Year by the New Jersey Psychological Association. Patricia sits on many regional and statewide committees including the New Jersey Department of Education Social Emotional Learning Standards Advisory Group, Health Impact Assessment of ESSA Rulemaking Advisory Group as well as the National Collaborative on Education and Health. She presents regionally and nationally on social-emotional learning, school culture and climate and the importance of data-informed school improvement planning.



Patricia was born in New Jersey and has lived in Morris County, New Jersey most of her life. She lives with her husband Salvatore and they have two grown children, Michael and Allison. Patricia may have honed some of her relationship skills in childhood as she is the eleventh of twelve children in her family. Her qualities of persistence and strength are also reflected in her hobby; she is an avid runner and she has completed nine marathons including the New York, Chicago, Boston and New Jersey marathons. She loves to travel and hopes to do a marathon in another country one day.