

**Q&A with Lauren Puzen,
Director, Sanford Harmony Program**

Q. You are joining Sanford Harmony, a program that helps children learn to build relationships, at a time when everyone is told to practice social distancing. Can you explain to the Sanford Harmony community why their work is so important now?

A. Today, we all feel isolated for good, public-health reasons. But children and adults need to be connected to others. Young people, in particular, need the sense of well-being and safety that comes from connectedness. That's why the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) came out so strongly in saying that, once key safety conditions are met, children need to be back in school.

But other things are happening that makes social and emotional learning more important now. Racial, political, economic, social, and ideological divides are tearing us apart. We all need to learn what Sanford Harmony teaches—how to communicate clearly and with good intentions, resolve conflicts and listen to each other, and to appreciate the diversity and uniqueness of others and each of our importance to the fabric of our communities. We need to build these skills as early as possible so that children are prepared as they get older and conflicts become more difficult to resolve.

Q. What attracted you to the job?

A. While the mission of Sanford Harmony is so crucial to kids and this country, I was drawn by the fact that the program is particularly helpful for resource-strapped schools and nonprofits. Very few have enough money, resources or time to do SEL well. But three things make Sanford Harmony a leading provider: 1) it is high quality 2) it is free and accessible 3) it offers really great training and supports to those implementing the program.

I also appreciated the fact that everyone involved in Sanford Harmony and the Sanford Programs have high social and emotional competence themselves. This is a strength-based and positive environment that reflects what Sanford Harmony values.

I thought that this would be an opportunity for me to use the skills I've gained in my career in youth development, school and public health. I've worked inside and outside of schools to advance physical, social and emotional health and learning. I think I can help make Sanford Harmony even more available, accessible and more integrated into the work of schools, community-based nonprofits, homes, and communities.

Q. How did your previous job prepare you for this one?

A. I worked at the Alliance for a Healthier Generation for seven of the 15 years it has been in existence. The purpose of Healthier Generation initially was to address childhood obesity. But in recent years its mission evolved to better serve the needs of thousands of schools and local nonprofits concerned about children's overall physical, social and emotional wellbeing. We saw that children were not only affected by limited access to nutritious foods and opportunities for physical activity, but also trauma and mental health issues. They needed tools to help them address those needs. So it was natural that Healthier Generation integrated social and emotional health and learning to address whole child development. Sanford Harmony was a key vehicle to make that happen. Driving the change and witnessing the expansion of Healthier Generation gave me lots of experience and ideas about helping Sanford Harmony further evolve to better serve children across the country.

Q. What are some of the things that Sanford Harmony can do to be even more effective in producing desired outcomes for the children and in working with schools and community-based organizations?

A. I can see a next generation of implementation in schools and community organizations that will:

- **Create a continuum of social and emotional learning through more comprehensive implementation and introduction across all grades in elementary school.** Many schools focus on Sanford Harmony in the earliest grades, yet students need to continue social and emotional growth at different stages and ages. It is important that Harmony is remaining age appropriate and grows with the youth. I would like to see Harmony explore opportunities to ensure there is flow from 5th and 6th grade through middle school. We also need to encourage greater flexibility while retaining fidelity in implementation of Sanford Harmony in classrooms. When implemented fully, as designed, Sanford Harmony helps students develop a broad set of social and emotional skills and achieve deeper levels of competency. But Sanford Harmony also needs to explore and research what elements of the program can be utilized as components without use of the full curriculum and still remain effective in development of social emotional skills.
- **Make Sanford Harmony learning materials more versatile for use in recreation centers, after-school programs, and summer camps.** Elements of Sanford Harmony like Meet Up and Buddy Up can be used anywhere and at any time, and we can continue to repackage other elements of the program to make them ready to use on the playground, in afterschool programs and on the field.
- **Build a virtual implementation community.** We want to do more to support those implementing the program and share Sanford Harmony digitally and virtually to meet people where they are at, especially in our education sector today.
- **Expand access to children who lack technology and/or speak multiple languages at home.** While becoming more digitized in delivery, we need to be mindful at this moment that many low-income children (and especially BIPOC children) don't have technology at home and sometimes don't speak English as their first language. We need to support teachers and program providers in delivering SEL in ways that do not depend on technology, and raise awareness among teachers and parents that Sanford Harmony is available in both Spanish and English.
- **Help parents extend SEL lessons that students learn in school.** We have new tools for parents to help them take on a bigger role in SEL. We know that parents are exhausted, in need of support and their own mental health resources. So we want to help them by making it more convenient for home use, so they can do activities with their kids or supervise, knowing that the program is well researched and widely trusted.
- **Build the social and emotional competence of teachers.** When the people delivering an SEL program have high levels of social-emotional competence, Sanford Harmony can be even more powerful. That's why Sanford Harmony is working with and will continue to explore more areas for collaboration with the Sanford Inspire Program, which studies how to develop strong SEL skills in teachers and produces trainings and tools to help teachers become more effective.
- **Create a more closely connected SEL ecosystem inside and outside of school.** Families are getting information from and interacting with community organizations, principals, and teachers. Sanford Harmony can be a great vehicle to help connect and integrate in-school and out-of-school activities with families and to build connections from the school day to after- and

out-of-school programs and summer learning. By providing a coherent set of SEL activities across these settings, we can promote continuous facilitation of social and emotional learning

Q. How do you envision that this integration of SEL efforts across different aspects of children's lives might happen?

A. Inside schools, Sanford Harmony can be used at more times during the day and can be integrated into the work of the SEL council or the school's committee on school health and wellness and with other SEL activities or initiatives. If a school is partnering with an afterschool program or community health organization for referrals to mental health services, those organizations can be encouraged to know more about what students are excited about in their school's SEL program. We can introduce them to Sanford Harmony and provide the learning modules and training so they can reinforce learning and create a continuum across settings. We can do the same for afterschool, summer, and youth programs including in their faith communities.