



Evidence for Social and Emotional Learning in Schools

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Abstract

There is a consensus among educators, parents, and policymakers that education should include a focus on supporting essential social and emotional capacities to help children navigate the world successfully. To develop these competencies, many schools adopt social and emotional learning (SEL) programs. The report on which this brief is based reviews the findings from 12 meta-analyses of school-based SEL programs. Across these studies, there is a consistent, reliable effect of tested, evidence-based SEL programs on students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes in PreK–12th grade, including the development of social and emotional skills, improved academic engagement and performance, growth of positive social behaviors, and lower rates of behavior problems and psychological distress. These findings are applicable across gender, ethnicity and race, income, and other demographic variables.

The report on which this brief is based can be found online at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/evidence-social-emotional-learning-schools>.

The Critical Role of Social and Emotional Learning

There is a consensus among educators, parents, and policymakers that education should focus on supporting essential capacities to help children navigate the world successfully. This broad notion of educating the “whole child” generally includes at least the abilities to (1) develop healthy personal relationships, (2) treat others with respect and dignity, (3) develop the cognitive capacity to problem-solve and think creatively, (4) succeed in postsecondary education and the labor market, and (5) be a contributing citizen in a democracy. To nurture these capacities, schools should be healthy, caring spaces that create a climate of support for equitable pathways for children to reach these goals while also creating a challenging and dynamic learning environment. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is critical for the development of these capacities.

In 2017, the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development convened a 28-member Council of Distinguished Scientists to examine the relevant evidence regarding SEL across a range of disciplines. The council concluded that social and emotional competencies are essential to learning; positive development; and success in school, careers, and life. Its report cited research over the past 2 decades that has demonstrated the impact of SEL on a variety of outcomes, including children’s well-being, behavior, and academic outcomes. Research also indicates that high-quality SEL programming is a low-cost intervention that has a positive impact on teachers and other staff and leads to improvements in school culture and climate.

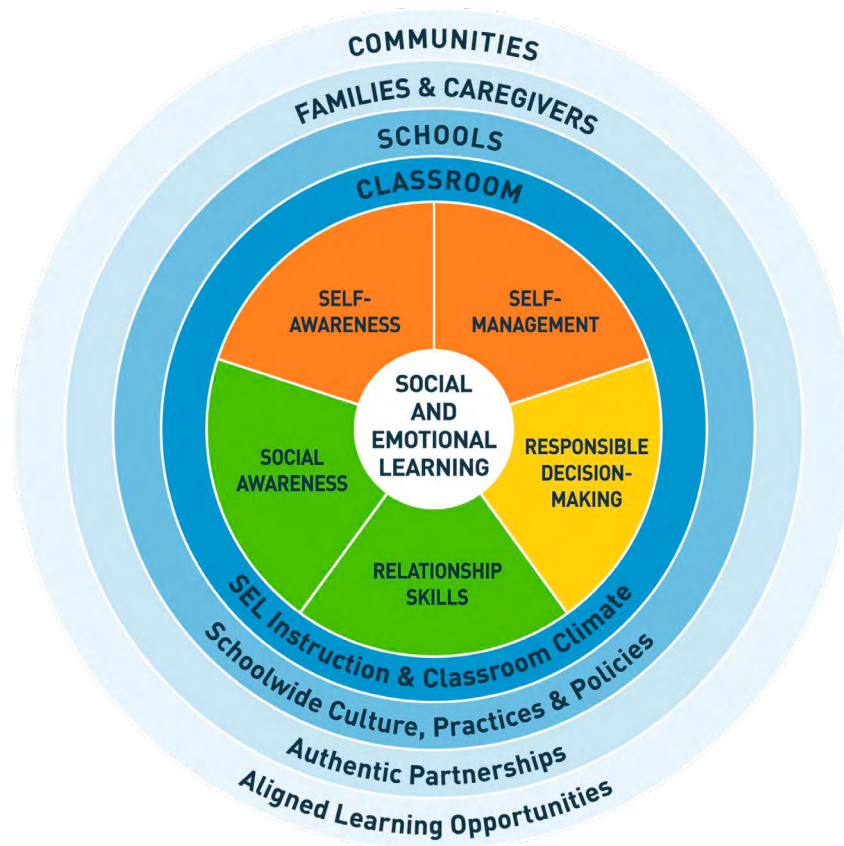
More than half of U.S. states now have articulated learning standards (sometimes called “competencies” or “benchmarks”) for SEL that draw upon different frameworks. The most influential framework (shown in Figure 1) was developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Many states have either adopted the CASEL framework or adapted it to create their own state-specific SEL standards.

The CASEL framework (also widely known as the “CASEL wheel”) is organized around five competence clusters that include thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. It also includes the four key settings that children encounter in their educational and personal lives and the relationships that are involved in establishing and coordinating SEL practices.¹

Research regarding the effects of SEL programs has grown dramatically over the past 2 decades, providing strong scientific evidence to support the use of SEL programs in schools.

This brief summarizes the findings from 12 independent meta-analyses of hundreds of school-based SEL programs in PreK–12th grade.² It also describes some of the crucial elements needed for implementing high-quality, evidence-based SEL programs in schools and for successfully sustaining effective SEL programs.

Figure 1: Social and Emotional Learning Competencies



Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2020). Reprinted with permission.

The Evidence Base for Social and Emotional Learning

Each of the 12 meta-analyses empirically synthesized a set of high-quality studies, most of which used methodologically rigorous randomized controlled trials and other controlled comparison group designs that meet the Tier 1 and 2 criteria for evidence-based interventions under the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Six of the meta-analyses examined programs at all grade levels (PreK–12). Four focused on preschool children. Two focused on secondary school students. The meta-analyses were conducted in Australia, the Netherlands, Romania, the United Kingdom, and the United States and featured studies from around the world.

In all 12 meta-analyses, effect size was used to measure the impact of SEL programming on various outcomes. Based on hundreds of studies spanning six continents, the findings indicate that there is a consistent, reliable effect of tested, evidence-based SEL programs on students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes at all grade levels (PreK–12th grade) and across gender, ethnicity and race, income, and other demographic variables. The effect sizes are classified as medium to large, indicating that the SEL programs studied were substantially beneficial to children. In addition, two of the meta-analyses found that stronger

implementation of programs was associated with stronger effects. A summary of the outcomes measured in these meta-analyses and the effects of the SEL programs studied is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Meta-Analyses of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Outcomes at Post-Test

Authors (by publication date)	Number of Studies	Education Level Studied	Effect Size of Outcomes Measured				
			SEL Skills	Positive Social Behaviors	Reduced Conduct Problems	Reduced Emotional Distress	Academic Performance
Durlak et al., 2011	213	K-12	0.57*	0.24*	0.22*	0.24*	0.27*
Sklad et al., 2012 ^a	75	K-12	0.23*	0.13*	0.20*	0.10*	0.26*
Wiglesworth et al., 2016 ^b	85	PreK-12	0.53*	0.33*	0.28*	0.19*	0.28*
Boncu et al., 2017	37	PreK-12	0.36*	0.20*		0.17*	
Yang et al., 2019	29	PreK (children from low-income families)		0.24*	0.15*		
Blewitt et al., 2018	63	PreK-K	0.30*	0.24*	0.19*		0.18*
Corcoran et al., 2018	40	PreK-12	0.30*	0.24*	0.19*		Reading 0.25* Math 0.26*
Goldberg et al., 2019	45	K-12 (whole-school approaches)		0.22*	0.13	0.10*	0.19
van de Sande et al., 2019	40	Secondary	0.24* to 0.58*	.	0.33*	0.31*	
Murano et al., 2020	48	PreK	0.34*		0.32*		
Mertens et al., 2020	104	Secondary		.	0.15*	0.19*	
Luo et al., 2022	33	PreK	0.42		0.31		

^a 63% of studies assessed outcomes at post-test only (within 6 months of the end of intervention).

^b 73% of studies assessed outcomes at post-test only (within 6 months of the end of intervention).

Note: * is $p < 0.05$

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2023).

These meta-analyses provide evidence of SEL program effectiveness for students in every grade level (PreK–12) and have shown medium to large effect sizes on the following outcomes:

- SEL programs, usually taught by classroom teachers, promote the development of social and emotional competencies.
- Fostering these competencies facilitates positive, prosocial behaviors and positive relationships with others.
- SEL programs reduce disruptive behavior problems and emotional distress.
- Fostering these competencies increases students' engagement in learning and subsequently improves students' cognitive and academic performance.

Longer-term effects were studied in two of these meta-analyses, finding evidence for sustained positive impacts.

Effective Implementation in Schools

Although many schools have adopted SEL programs to foster the development of students' social and emotional competencies, SEL programs are not always well implemented in schools. Research indicates that they are more effective when they are:

- **Sequenced:** They involve a developmentally coordinated set of activities.
- **Active:** Active learning helps students master new skills.
- **Focused:** Programs intentionally develop personal and social skills.
- **Explicit:** The specific skills taught are clearly identified, taught, and practiced.³

To effectively deliver programs that have these four components, teachers usually require substantial training and support. Unfortunately, it is common for schools to adopt SEL programs without providing the essential initial training, ongoing coaching and mentoring, or technical support. Thus, one key aspect of successful SEL implementation is to improve instructional practices through the use of effective ongoing professional development.

Supporting teachers' own social and emotional competence through training that includes emotional awareness, stress management, and mindfulness has also shown great promise in reducing teacher stress and improving classroom instruction. There are now four meta-analyses showing the effectiveness of focusing on teachers' own SEL for their well-being and teaching quality and for improving outcomes for students.

This is particularly important in this moment, as teachers have reported that stress—which results in negative consequences for teachers, lower achievement for students, and higher costs for schools—has been the primary reason for leaving the profession during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A principal's active support for implementation of SEL programming is essential. Principals themselves must be knowledgeable about evidence-based SEL models and how to effectively provide support to teachers. However, like teachers, principals generally receive little or no training or mentoring in how to create a caring, supportive environment in which SEL is infused throughout the school.

In addition to demonstrating a need for more training and support for teachers and principals to effectively deliver SEL programs, research demonstrates that comprehensive SEL programs produce broader behavioral and academic improvements than those that are more narrowly targeted.

Systemic Support for Social and Emotional Learning

It has long been noted by scholars and practitioners that SEL is more effective and sustained in schools in which SEL and whole child development are integrated and reinforced throughout the entirety of the school environment. Policymakers can support this broad vision of SEL by creating infrastructures and processes at the state and district level that support successful and sustainable SEL in schools.

Research indicates that systemic efforts to promote SEL include the following core features:

- developing a shared vision that prioritizes fully integrating SEL with academic learning for all students;
- identifying and building on existing strengths and supports for SEL at all levels;
- establishing infrastructure and resources for professional development—both in the central office and at the school level—that can build SEL awareness, enhance adults' own social and emotional competence, and cultivate effective SEL instructional practices;
- establishing student learning standards for SEL that guide the scope and sequence of SEL programming;
- adopting and aligning evidence-based programs to develop social and emotional skills in classrooms and throughout the school;
- integrating SEL and the development of a supportive climate into all school goals, priorities, initiatives, programs, and strategies;
- creating effective strategies to communicate frequently with parents to establish partnerships to enhance children's social and emotional competence and positive behavior;
- coordinating with specialized mental health services to create aligned approaches for building children's skills and managing their behavior in different contexts; and

- establishing a learning community among school staff to encourage reflection and the use of data to improve SEL practice and student outcomes.

Finally, to improve SEL programs and make informed decisions about their effectiveness in a particular school context, leaders should continuously assess stakeholder perspectives, program implementation, children's outcomes, school and district resources, new state and federal policies, and scientific advances.

Conclusion

Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs are a low-cost educational intervention that can create substantial returns on investment. Evidence from hundreds of studies indicates a consistent, reliable effect of SEL programs on students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes at all grade levels and across gender, ethnicity and race, income, and other demographic variables. As SEL programming continues to go to scale across schools and districts, teachers and principals will need training and preparation to ensure effective implementation. Policymakers can support SEL in schools by creating state and district infrastructures that advance whole child development.

Endnotes

1. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. *Fundamentals of SEL*. <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/>
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