

# Social Emotional Learning in Elementary School

## Preparation for Success



This issue brief, created by The Pennsylvania State University with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is one of a series of briefs that addresses the need for research, practice and policy on social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is defined as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

Learn more at [www.rwjf.org/socialemotionalllearning](http://www.rwjf.org/socialemotionalllearning).



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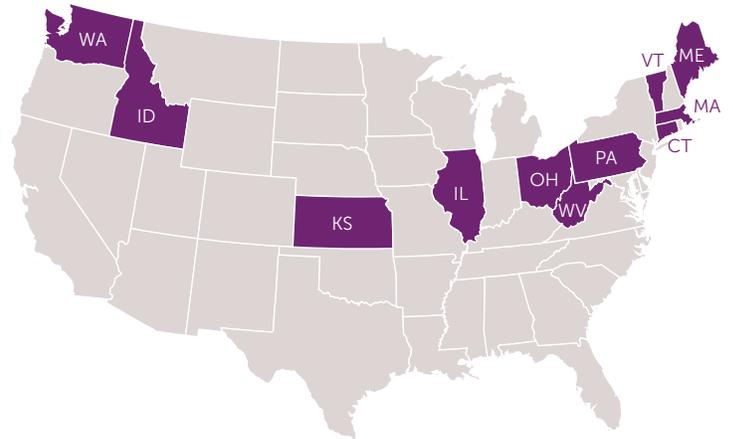
## Executive Summary

At the elementary-school level, social and emotional learning (SEL) enhances students' abilities to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve personal and academic goals, show respect and empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible and ethical decisions.<sup>1</sup> These personal and interpersonal competencies provide a foundation for success in work and relationships as adults.<sup>2,3,4</sup> This brief summarizes several key findings:

1. Extensive research shows that SEL programs can promote academic achievement and positive social behavior, and reduce conduct problems, substance abuse, and emotional distress. Benefits of SEL in the elementary years have been documented in reviews by independent research teams,<sup>5,6</sup> and through meta-analyses which demonstrate the immediate and long-term positive outcomes of well-designed, well-implemented SEL programming.<sup>7,8,9</sup>
2. SEL is critical to student success and shows a positive economic return on investment.
3. Effective SEL programs:
  - use four general approaches, addressing everything from individual student instruction to overall school climate;<sup>1</sup>
  - are evidence-based and reflect an understanding of the process of social and emotional *development* in elementary-school children with appropriate programming for different grade levels;
  - are enhanced by partnering with families;
  - are culturally and linguistically sensitive; and
  - include the implementation of high quality teacher training and professional development.

### Movement Toward SEL Goals

**Eleven states have articulated explicit goals with developmental benchmarks for student SEL at the elementary level.**



Currently, CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) is aware of at least 11 states (CT, ID, IL, KS, MA, ME, OH, PA, VT, WA, and WV) that have articulated explicit goals with developmental benchmarks for student SEL at the elementary level, and an increasing number of states and districts are moving in this direction.<sup>10</sup> Research findings and policy developments therefore support the following recommendations for elementary school leaders and policymakers:

1. Adopt evidence-based SEL programs and activities in order to improve social-emotional and academic success.
2. Provide teachers with ongoing professional development and coaching to ensure high quality implementation.
3. Support and reinforce student SEL school-wide, and in family and community partnerships.
4. Create state, district, and school policies and guidelines to help insure that learning goals for SEL are well developed and aligned with elementary education more broadly.

# Introduction

For children to succeed during elementary school, in further schooling and in their careers, they need to be socially, emotionally, and academically competent. Students' SEL competencies are built through policies, programs, and practices that enhance children's and adults' capacities to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.<sup>11,12</sup>

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified five inter-related sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies that comprise social and emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (see next page). These competencies contribute to better adjustment and school performance, including more positive social behaviors, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and improved grades and test scores.<sup>7,8,9</sup> These competencies are critical to academic success and positive adjustment in school<sup>13</sup> and in adult employment.<sup>14,15</sup>

Based on extensive research, at least 11 states (CT, ID, IL, KS, MA, ME, OH, PA, VT, WA, and WV) have articulated explicit goals for student SEL at the elementary level in recent years. Even more states are moving in this direction.<sup>10</sup> (see [State Report](#)) Developing policies and guidelines to support learning goals for student SEL naturally raises a question about whether there are assessment tools available to monitor student progress. A variety of formal SEL assessment tools exist—including teacher ratings, student self-reports, peer and parent ratings, observations, and performance tasks. Leading experts recommend that states:

- a. use direct measures of students' social and emotional skills to inform the teaching and learning process rather than for school accountability, and
- b. consider including student surveys measuring school climate and learning opportunities, along with data on chronic absenteeism, suspension, and expulsion rates as state-reported indicators under ESSA.<sup>16</sup>

A recent report from the Learning Policy Institute points out that indicators of students' social and emotional skills can be powerful levers of change at the classroom or school level, and that states might support these local measures to guide schools' continuous improvement efforts.<sup>16</sup>

This brief examines the evidence of successful, universal SEL programs and practices used to support social and emotional development in students during the elementary years (K-5). Based on decades of research and evaluation in rigorous field trials, these approaches are now widely available to schools, along with teacher training and ongoing coaching to support high quality implementation.

## Benefits of Social and Emotional Learning



## The Five SEL Competency Clusters



### Self-awareness

The ability to accurately recognize one’s feelings and thoughts and their influence on behaviors. This includes accurately assessing one’s strengths and limitations, and possessing a growth mindset, a well-grounded sense of self-efficacy and optimism.



### Self-management

The ability to regulate one’s emotions, cognitions, and behaviors to set and achieve personal and educational goals. This includes delaying gratification, managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating one’s self, and persevering in addressing challenges.



### Social awareness

The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.



### Relationship skills

The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking help when needed.



### Responsible decision-making

The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior, social interactions, and school based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

Note: The five SEL competency clusters as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in the 2013 CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs, Preschool and Elementary School Edition

## Key Findings

### **School-based programs designed to promote student social and emotional development at the elementary school level are effective at promoting academic achievement, reducing conduct problems, improving prosocial behavior, and reducing emotional distress.**

Over the past 20 years, a compelling and extensive body of research for SEL programs (K-12) has been amassed, including replications and longitudinal follow-ups. A meta-analysis including 213 rigorous studies and over 270,000 students demonstrated that students who received SEL programs performed better than students who did not. They showed an 11 percent gain on measures of academic achievement, and similar significant improvements in conduct and discipline, prosocial behavior, and/or emotional distress.<sup>7</sup> A total of 120 of the 213 studies (56%) in the meta-analysis were conducted specifically at the elementary (k-5) level. Independent research groups have replicated these findings. For example, a European team conducted a meta-analysis of 75 studies and reported similarly positive findings.<sup>8</sup>

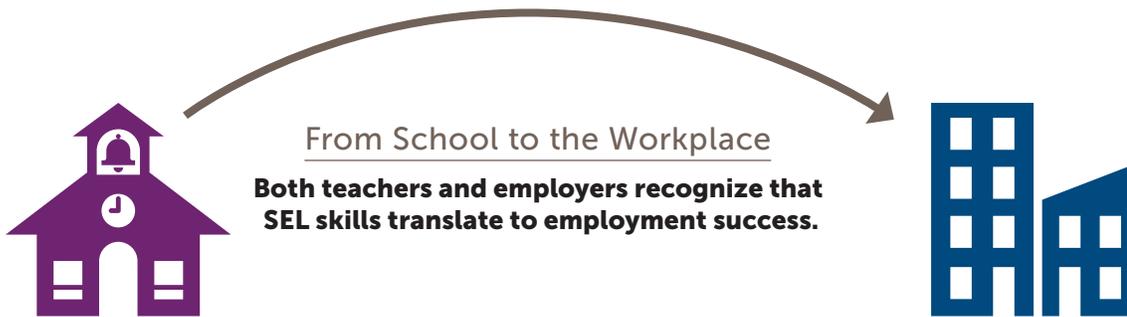
In 2013, CASEL conducted an extensive review of SEL programs designed for use during the elementary school years and identified 19 evidence-based programs. Eight of these programs have now had replications and demonstrated significant positive effects for at least two years: Caring School Community, PATHS, Positive Action, Resolving Conflicts Creatively Program, Responsive Classroom, Second Step, Social Decision Making/Problem Solving Program, and Steps to Respect. Narrative reviews of SEL in elementary school settings identified five of these programs—Caring School Community, PATHS, Positive Action, Responsive Classroom and Second Step—as having at least 3 separate studies demonstrating their effectiveness.<sup>5,6</sup>

### **SEL programs produce positive long-term student benefits and offer a strong financial return on investment.**

Teachers view social and emotional competencies as critical for college and career success, and support educational approaches designed to promote SEL in their students.<sup>13</sup> Research has shown that SEL skills are critically important to success in work, especially for higher paying jobs, and employers strongly advocate that education should promote these important “21<sup>st</sup> century skills.”<sup>14,15</sup> Recently, a meta-analysis of follow-up studies (6 months to 18 years after the intervention) of 82 SEL interventions (97,000 students; 38% were elementary students) found the benefits of SEL programs to be durable over time and across diverse samples.<sup>9</sup> A recent study showed an excellent return on investment for six evidence-based SEL programs (five of which were elementary). Specifically, for every one dollar invested, there was an \$11 return.<sup>17</sup>

Students who get SEL programming showed

**11% gain  
on academic  
achievement.**



**Four distinct, but often inter-related, approaches are effective in promoting social and emotional development.**

A review of common themes and practices across evidence-based programs indicate that there are four approaches that are effective in promoting SEL in the elementary years:<sup>18</sup>

- **Free-standing lessons that provide step-by-step instructions to teach students' SEL competencies** (e.g., lessons that help students identify and effectively label their feelings, lessons on goal setting, communication, and decision making).
- **General teaching practices that create conditions in the classroom and school designed to support SEL.** These include classroom routines and teaching practices such as cooperative learning that help students build positive relationships and forms of inquiry that create student-to student dialogue to help students reflect and develop greater self and social awareness.
- **Integration of SEL skill instruction, general teaching practices, or both, as part of a broader academic curriculum.** For example, integrating SEL lessons with language arts, social studies, or science and math.
- **Establishment of school-wide organizational structures and policies, as well as leadership, to support SEL systemically.**

Oberle and colleagues<sup>19</sup> provide a comprehensive framework for understanding systemic implementation of SEL (see graphic on page 7) that encompasses all programs and activities in a school—from academics to student supports to prevention to discipline and beyond. In such a framework, schools are intentional about promoting positive school climate; promoting conditions for academic, social, and emotional learning across all school settings (classroom, playground, cafeteria, bus stop, office, etc.); and creating connections to home and community, including afterschool settings.<sup>20</sup>

Ideally, schools that promote SEL create a comprehensive plan to coordinate all school activities through the lens of SEL. SEL is informed by and connects to virtually all important movements and frameworks in education, including school climate, teacher stress, and equity (a brief discussion of equity is included below in the discussion of cultural and linguistic sensitivity).

For example, SEL and school climate are inextricably interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Positive school climate creates environmental conditions likely to support healthy social and emotional development in students, and when students have strong social and emotional skills they are likely to contribute to positive school climate.

In a similar vein, approaches to reduce teacher stress recognize that teacher equanimity and self-regulation are likely to promote student SEL as teachers model greater positive self-management and social awareness. Thus, strategies to reduce teacher stress can also contribute to an overall positive school climate where students are also likely to grow and develop socially and emotionally.<sup>21</sup>

**Evidence-based SEL programs reflect an understanding of the process of social and emotional development in elementary-school children, and provide appropriate programming for different grade levels.**

Prior to elementary school, most children develop basic relationship skills and the ability to control their emotions, although they rely more on adults for support. At the elementary level, effective SEL approaches help students achieve key developmental competencies, such as the ability to identify and express emotions and to establish and manage peer relationships and friendships with less support from adults.<sup>22</sup> Students also become increasingly able to take the perspective of others, to understand when and why others might feel different emotions, and apply problem-solving strategies. The activities and practices found in effective programs reflected a deep understanding of how students develop socially and emotionally over time.

Executive function skills also develop rapidly during the elementary years, and are critical to students’ self-regulation as well. Executive function includes student ability to focus attention, intentionally shift attention, and resist distractions.<sup>23</sup> A review of evidence-based SEL programs at the elementary level found that the majority introduce practices (such as deep

**CASEL’s comprehensive framework for systemic implementation of approaches designed to promote social and emotional development**

- Intrapersonal skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Responsible decision-making skills



breathing and focus on breathing), that facilitate self-regulation. Further, some evidence-based programs at the elementary level<sup>24</sup> are specifically based on early research in mindfulness and developmental contemplative science, and establish regular practice of deep breathing and attentive listening (multiple times a day) to promote self-regulation that ultimately supports executive functioning.<sup>1</sup>

**Research has shown that social and emotional learning programs are enhanced when schools partner with and involve families.**

Students develop social, emotional, and academic competencies in their relationships with adults,<sup>25</sup> both at home and at school.<sup>26,27</sup> The opportunity for positive social and emotional development will be greater when adults who are important in a child’s life are intentional and coordinated about supporting SEL. Also, open communication between families and educators<sup>28</sup> is vitally important. School-family partnerships (SFP) to enhance children’s social, emotional, and academic learning—especially during the preschool and elementary years—are becoming more common.<sup>28,29</sup> Indeed, the CASEL review<sup>1</sup> found that 17 out of 19 evidence-based programs included activities designed to involve families in supporting student SEL.

Albright and Weissberg<sup>29</sup> identify three types of school-family partnership activities that may be especially helpful in organizing SEL programming:

1. Two-way school-home communication which informs and empowers families to be actively and effectively involved in their children’s education,
2. Family involvement at home which helps families extend and reinforce school-based learning, and
3. Family involvement at school which engages families to participate in classroom- and school-based activities.

There is a growing evidence base that these kinds of school-family partnerships enhance students’ school achievement and positive behavior.<sup>28,30,31</sup>

**Evidence-based programs are likely to be more effective when they are culturally and linguistically sensitive.**

SEL develops within the cultural context of the child’s family and community.<sup>32</sup> Effective SEL approaches recognize that different groups of students have different experiences and needs based on their background and culture. Research in SEL, and in child and adolescent development more broadly, has consistently found that young people learn best when education is relevant and appropriate to their cultural and linguistic context. Equity in education can be critical in ensuring that educational approaches are culturally responsive to meet the needs of ALL students in the classroom and school, to effectively engage them in learning.

School–Family Partnerships for Organizing SEL Programming



**School–home communication that empowers families to be involved in their children’s education**



**Family involvement at home that reinforces school-based learning**



**Family involvement at school**

Most U.S. schools are culturally diverse and typically have multiple cultures represented in any single classroom. Best practices in SEL encourage program providers and schools to employ a variety of different strategies to ensure cultural and linguistic appropriateness. It can be helpful, for example, to know if an approach has been evaluated with populations similar to the one in a particular school, and program evaluations usually provide information about the cultural and linguistic appropriateness of an approach for different groups of students.<sup>1</sup>

When cultural adaptations of program materials, language, stories, and activities are appropriate, developers of evidence-based programs can help. However, in our multi-cultural society and classrooms, it may not always be feasible for programs to be specifically designed or adapted for every culture represented in a classroom. Perhaps more important in the multi-ethnic contexts will be teachers' awareness, openness, and respect for all of the cultures represented in their classrooms, and their skill in effectively engaging the whole student—the academic, social, and emotional sides of a student—in learning.

### **High quality implementation is critical to program success.**

Research has shown that the success of evidence-based SEL programs depends on high-quality implementation<sup>33</sup> or “implementing the program as intended by its developers.” High-quality implementation includes following program instructions, following the sequence of activities and lessons, completing most lessons, and using prescribed teaching practices. A recent review concluded, “SEL interventions do not work if they are adopted but not fully utilized in the classroom...the efficacy of SEL practices hinges on high fidelity of implementation.”<sup>5</sup>

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*“...the efficacy of SEL practices hinges on high fidelity of implementation.”*

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An analysis of 213 studies concluded that problems with implementation ultimately reduced program effectiveness.<sup>7</sup> While some adaptation may be necessary to make practices culturally and linguistically appropriate in different contexts, it is important that teachers understand the purpose and intent of activities as they make adjustments for their own classrooms, so that the integrity of the evidence-based program is maintained. It is important, most of all, that they understand that fidelity is important. Ideally, when cultural adaptations are necessary, teachers will work with coaches or developers from the evidence-based program itself, to ensure that their modifications are not undermining the intent of an activity, or diminishing the effectiveness of the approach.

There are a variety of ways high quality implementation may be promoted, starting with clear, easy-to-understand instructions and detailed manuals. However, professional development and ongoing support, including coaching,<sup>34</sup> is key among the most effective strategies for promoting high quality implementation. Training is also important in preventing “drift” away from the intended purpose or approach of a program. Because of the importance of high quality implementation to program success, to be included in CASEL guides programs are required to have the capacity to provide teacher training and ongoing support.<sup>1</sup> Administrator support appears critical in achieving desired program outcomes, as well as sustaining effects. It is important that principals and other administrators also attend training, and otherwise communicate that the program is a priority for the school.<sup>35</sup>

## Future Research

To advance the quality of SEL programming for elementary-age students, researchers should address several key issues.

- Studies are needed to determine the characteristics of students who benefit most and least from universal interventions.
- There needs to be clearer logic models of how SEL interventions lead to longer-term changes in students (e.g., improved self-regulation or relationship skills) and in the environment (e.g., improved instruction or school climate and culture).
- Research needs to identify the best ways of promoting equity and cultural competence as part of evidence-based practices and programs, which will likely involve thoughtful adaptations of programs for different contexts and cultures.
- It is critical to explore how teacher, administrator, and school characteristics influence implementation quality and impact on students' behavior and academic achievement.
- Studies should explore the value-added benefits to student achievement and behavior that school-family-community partnerships may produce, above and beyond evidence-based classroom and school programming.
- Research is needed to determine how school district factors and state policies and guidelines influence school-based SEL programming and impact.
- It is critical to develop scientifically sound, practical, and actionable social-emotional competence assessment tools and to examine how using them formatively can improve classroom teaching and learning of social, emotional, and academic skills.
- It is important to determine the best ways to scale and sustain quality SEL programming that is planned, ongoing, and systemic.



## Conclusions and Implications

The goal of education is to prepare students—academically, socially, and emotionally—for success, now and in the future. More specifically, the goal is to help every student reach his or her own full potential—consistent with his or her own personal interests and aspirations—and to interact well with others. Research over the past two decades has provided substantial evidence regarding how to create effective educational approaches, programs, and practices to support student SEL. Research findings and policy developments, including an increasing number of states and districts articulating explicit goals for student SEL, support the following recommendations:

- Adopt evidence-based SEL programs and activities in order to improve social, emotional, and academic success.
- Provide teachers and administrators with ongoing professional development and coaching to ensure high quality implementation.
- Support and reinforce student SEL school-wide, and in family and community partnerships.
- Create state, district, and school policies and guidelines to help insure that learning goals for SEL are well-developed and aligned with elementary education, more broadly.

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