

Research in Brief:

Social and Emotional Learning in Preschool and Beyond

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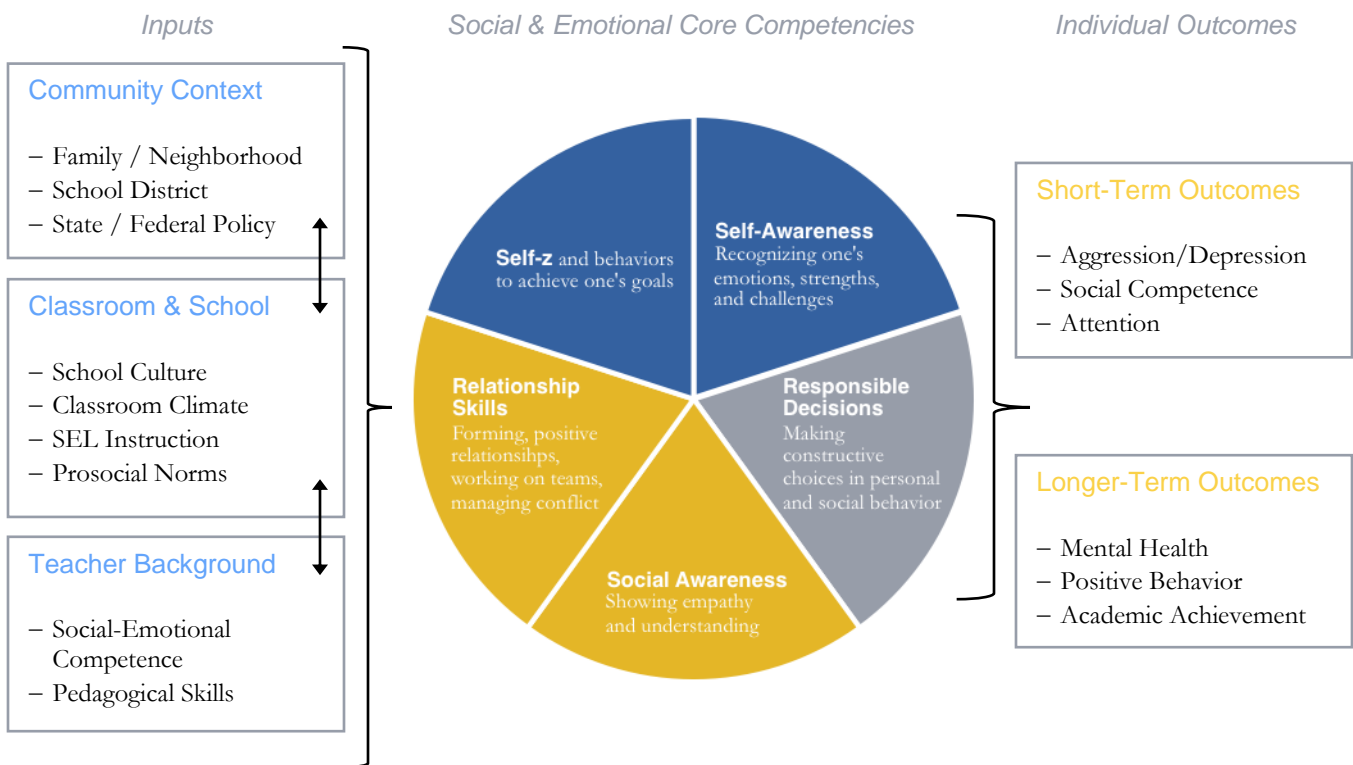
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What is Social and Emotional Learning?

Social and emotional learning (SEL) encompasses a valuable skillset comprising emotional processes, social and interpersonal skills, and cognitive regulation. These skills impact students’ success in school and beyond (see Humphrey *et al.*, 2010; Raver & Knitze, 2002). The substantial publication from the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, presents a cogent review of research from neuroscience and developmental science establishing a link between children’s earliest experiences and relationships and subsequent ability to manage feelings, impulses, and relations with others. It further outlines how such developmental abilities interweave closely with academic learning.

While children’s earliest school experiences set the stage for successfully developing social and emotional core competencies, these competencies impact students’ academic outcomes and beyond. As the figure below illustrates, SEL constitutes a complex, interwoven developmental construct relating to behavioral self-regulation, relationship development, stress management, perspective taking, and listening and cooperating — just to illustrate some areas implicated in SEL. Of course, SEL develops within many contexts from the classroom to school environment, as highlighted in the left column in the figure below.

Classrooms and schools constitute important contexts for students’ social and emotional development. As such, it is not surprising that SEL commands national and statewide policy attention; placing the topic of SEL on the radar of school leaders. This brief presents a scholarly perspective, outlining the necessity for teachers and schools to integrate and foster SEL skills within daily instruction and routines. Below you’ll find key research summarized, resources for implementation, and connections between practice and policy.



Adapted from the Society for Research in Child Development’s *Sharing Children and Youth Development Knowledge*, 26(4), 2012 and the Carthy Foundation’s *Issue Brief: Social and Emotional Learning in Canada*, 2013.

What Research Tells Us

Numerous studies suggest that high-quality SEL programs and instruction in schools do matter. A meta-analysis including 213 school-based quasi-experimental and experimental evaluation studies found significant positive effects, with effect sizes ranging from .22 to .57 (Durlak *et al.*, 2011). These small to moderate effect sizes translate into one-fifth to one-half standard deviation positive changes in areas including social and emotional skills, attitudes toward self and others, positive social behaviors, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance (*e.g.* Jones *et al.*, 2011). However, effect sizes are largest for higher-risk students (Jones *et al.*, 2011).

Durlak and company (2011) report that the most effective SEL promoting programs incorporate four key elements:

1. Coordinate sequenced activities connected to skills
2. Provide active forms of learning
3. Focus on developing one or more social skills
4. Explicit targeting for specific skills

In addition to the key program components listed above, the fidelity of program implementation stood out as the most important factor for efficacy. Though, Durlak and colleagues noted that only 57% of program evaluation studies reported implementation data. At the individual classroom level, teachers that attended more training or taught more SEL units had students with better social and emotional core competencies (Reyes *et al.*, 2012). Research findings suggest that when teachers effectively integrate SEL programs into their practice, students demonstrate more positive outcomes.

Overall, students benefit the most when programs targeting SEL are: intense, interwoven in everyday interactions, reflective of collaborative efforts and school culture, intentionally monitor students outside of the classroom (*e.g.* playgrounds), and include parental involvement (*e.g.* Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010).

A 2012 Society for Research on Child Development [research brief](#), summarizing numerous empirical works, outlines several limitations in existing programmatic approaches targeting SEL, including:

- Insufficient implementation intensity, duration, and effectiveness
- Disjointed implementation, rather than a core change in educational missions
- Focus only in the classroom — SEL skills are needed in the hallway, playground, and cafeteria
- Limited staff training

These limitations stem from concerns and pressures surrounding instructional time, accountability, and lack of resources, not a lack of good intentions or caring staff. As such, research and practice points towards adopting an integrated approach building SEL into the fabric of school life. While SEL skills are accepted key facets of early education (see [SEL Standards in California](#) section below), such a foundation must be maintained with subsequent, ongoing support throughout a students K12 career (Zhai, Raver, & Jones, 2012; Zigler, Gilliam, & Jones 2006).

The core features of emotional development include the ability to identify and understand one's own feelings, to accurately read and comprehend emotional states in others, to manage strong emotion and their expression in a constructive manner, to regulate one's own behavior, to develop empathy for others and to establish and sustain relationships.

— *National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2005)*

The continuity required to successfully develop SEL competencies extends horizontally and vertically. Horizontally across microenvironments within schools such as classrooms, playgrounds, and cafeterias and vertically through curriculum and grades of instruction. Such alignment requires collaboration among school staff at all levels (Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006). But implementing a new program or curriculum requires exhausting effort and resources; halfheartedly implementing a new program likely fosters exhaustion among school staff and does not lead to the desired SEL outcomes. Fortunately, research suggests that SEL and academic skill be taught together, embedded in teaching, and modeled in adult-student relationships (Bailey, Jones, & the Harvard SECURE Development Team, 2012).

What Research Does Not Tell Us (Yet)

Despite these strong research findings, SEL research is incomplete in several areas. Most prominently, CASEL estimates that of over 200 classroom-based SEL programs used in schools many lack empirical program evaluation (see Hoffman, 2009). For example, in their meta-analysis, Durlak and co-authors noted that only 57% of the program studies included in their meta-analysis reported implementation data.

In one [2013 policy brief surveying Canadian educators](#) reports that proliferation of programs combined with competing views and limited evidence-based programs impedes implementation and degrades efficacy. As one individual interviewed stated: “Schools are open to SEL but do not know what the evidence says, cannot distinguish between good programs and bad ones, and often invent it themselves. This is problematic as there is no fidelity; they do not know if they are doing any harm, [or] wasting a lot of time and energy building something untested” (p. 5).

The research discussed above provides evidence connecting key concepts of SEL to important indicators of academic success and beyond. Additionally, core strategies of successful high-quality approaches to integrating SEL into instruction were presented. However, research to date does not prescribe or support most available SEL programs. Further, research and effect sizes — like those presented above — supporting specific programs for high-quality preschool likely do not extend to programs implemented more casually or with less fidelity.

So, what prudent actions should a teacher, school administrator, or LEA leader follow? Clearly, as discussed below, lawmakers are creating policy relating to SEL; this, and other articles referenced in this brief, attempt to present viable directions for astute SEL integration; and SEL-related programs and curricula continue to be developed.

Research summarized in Raver & Knitze (2002) adds urgency to addressing this question: What direction should school instruction take to promote SEL outcomes? We know there is a need for promoting SEL learning early in children’s education. Kindergarten teachers note this need as well. In one study, Kindergarten teachers rated approximately 20% of all entering students and fully 30% of the very low-SES students entering kindergarten with poorly developed social skills (Raver & Knitze, 2002). Students rated as having low social skills may struggle to maintain focus, play appropriately, or remember information. Not only does this disrupt the foundation for learning and subsequent individual academic achievement, but also, such struggling students disrupt the entire classroom. Social and emotional learning deficits present before and after early education cause concern overall, but do not elucidate a specific course of action or

remedy.

Additional Research Summaries Covering Social and Emotional Learning

- National Institute for Early Education Research: [Promoting Children’s Social and Emotional Development Through Preschool Education](#)
- Society for Research in Child Development: [Social and Emotional Learning in Schools From Programs to Strategies](#)
- Carthy Foundation and Max Bell Foundation *Issue Brief: Social and Emotional Learning in Canada*
- National Conference of State Legislatures: [Helping Young Children Succeed: Strategies to Promote Early Childhood Social and Emotional Development](#)

SEL Standards in California

California Preschool. California adopted the [California Preschool Learning Foundations](#), which outline key knowledge and skill achievements most children should develop in preschool. The California Department of Education also provides the [California Preschool Curriculum Frameworks](#) — companion volumes to the Learning Foundations that provide strategies for educators. In Volume 1 of both the Learning Foundations and Curriculum Frameworks, social and emotional learning is highlighted as a key element of preschool development. Stated in the Curriculum Frameworks is a central assumption that social and emotional competencies are integral to school success: “school readiness consists of social-emotional competencies as well as other cognitive and motivational competencies required for success in school” (California Preschool Curriculum Framework, Volume 1, p. 1).

Like [most States](#) California follows freestanding SEL standards for preschool. However, also like many other States, California [joins 40 States](#) that do not have any SEL standards for K12.

Transitional Kindergarten in California. A [2014 report](#) from the American Institute for Research, surveying first year implementation of Transitional Kindergarten (TK) in California, reports that most standalone TK teachers used a social-emotional curriculum they designed themselves, and further reports that TK teachers employ social-emotional instruction more than other traditional kindergarten teachers. By 2012-2013 89% of California school districts provided TK.

Transitional Kindergarten, like traditional preschool, includes strong ties to SEL. The California Department of Education’s [Transitional Kindergarten Implementation Guide](#), explicates the connection between TK and SEL, stating:

“Starting kindergarten at an older age will also allow children to further develop their social and emotional skills and be ready to actively engage in academics at the kindergarten level. Because of the increasing academic demands placed on kindergarten students, there is less and less time to nurture social and emotional skills. Deficiencies in these areas tend to inhibit learning in younger kindergarten students, which causes them to fall behind academically.” (p. 3)

More Transitional Kindergarten Topics:

- Cabinet Report: [Small, rural LEAs can struggle with transitional kindergarten](#)
- PACE: [English Learners and Full-Day Kindergarten](#)
- WestEd: [Policy Brief on Full-Day Kindergarten](#)

Social and Emotional Learning in Policy

California Legislation: An emphasis on the social and emotional aspects of early learning is not a recent development in state kindergarten and preschool legislation. A 1997 California Research Bureau report, [Readiness for Kindergarten: What Does it Mean?](#), provided a literature review on school readiness to the California Assembly Education Committee. Throughout the report, school readiness differences are highlighted, especially social and emotional developmental readiness.

More recently, during the 2013-2014 legislation, Assembly members Buchanan and Weber introduced [Assembly Bill 1719](#) to modify California Education Code with wording that would have required school districts to provide full-day kindergarten programs. The bill analysis referenced a 2005 WestED policy brief, [Full-Day Kindergarten: Expanding Learning Opportunities](#), which cited research that full-day kindergarten benefited children's social and emotional development as part of the rationale for longer kindergarten school days. However, in the final, approved version of the bill, the full-day required extension had been eliminated, replaced by a requirement for a sample of LEAs to provide a report on full and part-day kindergarten programs. (In a similar vein, also during the 2013-2014 legislative session, Assembly Members Buchanan and Weber introduced [Assembly Bill 1444](#) proposing one year of kindergarten be mandatory prior to first grade — Governor Brown vetoed the bill in September 2014.)

In the present legislative session, Assemblyperson McCarty — the recently appointed chair of the Assembly's budget subcommittee for education finance — introduced [Assembly Bill 47](#) on December 01, 2014, proposing preschool for eligible 4-year-old children in California. The proposed legislation would make state preschool available to all eligible low-income children. Throughout the text of the bill the focus surrounds the presence of gaps between low- and higher-income present at the beginning of Kindergarten. Though social and emotional readiness is not mentioned, the bill points towards research on language development and school readiness as the discrepancies feeding subsequent “achievement gaps.”

Federal Government: The Obama administration made early learning, including SEL, a national priority. At the [White House Summit on Early Education](#), on December 10th 2014, [President Obama stated](#): “Early education is one of the best investments we can make — not just in a child's future, but in our country.” Bolstering this claim Obama introduces a funding package totaling more than \$1 billion in federal and private funding for expanding preschool and early childhood programs throughout the United States. (California [was not among the 18 states](#) receiving preschool grant money.) This emphasis on early learning places SEL in the national spotlight; for example, the White House's [Early Childhood Learning](#) plan, which includes Preschool For All, references social and emotional learning several times.

Implications for Programs and Policy

Promising Approaches for Integrating SEL with Schooling

Many programs exist to integrate SEL instruction in to early education and beyond. However, as discussed previously, many programs lack strong empirical support. Though research clearly links SEL to learning success and other outcomes, many programs designed to promote SEL lack validation. Thus the section below discusses several core features that promote and inform SEL integration giving a specific programmatic example for each one. Integrating these recommendations into curriculum design and linking them to outcomes using Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) provide a start to integrating SEL into schooling.

Routines: Adding another stand-alone program likely burdens an already stretched system and, in addressing day-to-day needs, adds to the sediment of well meaning reforms and curriculum enhancement. Incorporating SEL instruction into classrooms and schools can take the form of routines that promote SEL skills. For example [SECURE](#) — a program implemented in pre-k through 3rd grade trials — integrates SEL promoting routines with easy to adopt games built on more familiar games like Red Light, Green Light or Simon Says that target skills like impulse control or memory. Throughout, the school prompts and reminds greet students and staff with messages like “Stop and Stay Cool” (see Bailey *et al.*, 2012).

Training and Support for All Teachers, Staff, and Administrative Leadership: Staff should be supported in developing SEL skills that can eventually become natural parts of everyday instruction. Topics to cover include connecting SEL and academic instruction, how to select a “program” or wisely adopt elements of programs marketed to promote SEL, how to foster personal SEL skills to lead by example, and how to collaboratively support other teachers and staff. The [CASEL Practice Rubric for School-wide SEL Implementation](#) (2006) provides an excellent blueprint for implementation.

Support for Teacher and Staff SEL: Jennings and Greenberg (2009) model teachers’ SEL skills as a feedback loop that augments or deteriorates classroom results. They propose that teachers’ with strong SEL skills engage in more positive relationships with students, more skillfully and effectively manage their classroom, and implement SEL curricula more effectively. One example of a SEL related training framework for teachers is Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education or [CARE](#), which promotes mindfulness training and aims to reduce burnout.

SEL Standards and Assessment: As previously discussed, California along [with 49 other states](#) includes SEL standards at the preschool level. However, to date, California omits any K12 SEL standards. Standards create a level of comparison for school self-evaluation and guidance in integrating SEL core to instruction. Educational administrators can also support SEL skill development by promoting reliable and valid measures of student, teacher, and staff SEL skills for formative development.

Cross-Sector Collaborate and Network: Professional associations or informal inter-school partnerships provide a learning community to galvanize successful SEL practices. Venues may include meetings, joint professional development, online communities, or time for informal resource sharing. (A 2014 report

prepared for the Stuart Foundation by CAP-Ed catalogues the collaborative networks in California — access it [here](#).)

Support and Enlist Parents: SEL skills develop through social interaction. For young students, teachers provide one adult-child relationship. However, parents and caretakers are another source clear source and opportunity for SEL development. The [Parent Toolkit](#) website is one guide for parents describing social and emotional development and providing resources.

SEL related Policy Needs

As discussed previously, strengthening State Standards beyond preschool presents one policy area ripe for attention including attention to applying funding to SEL implementation to support school climate and student engagement. A connection between standards and funding provides strong support for successful and continuous implementation efforts — limited, perhaps, only by the current lack of SEL program evaluation research.

Preschool standards, national preschool attention, and the SEL focus in Transitional Kindergarten provide an excellent starting point in developing SEL. However, policy can continue to improve access for high-quality preschool with SEL foci to low-income students, continue to improve preschool and kindergarten quality, and extend support to LEAs developing and implementing continued SEL supports beyond early learning.

Resources

Early Learning, Social & Emotional Learning Resources

- U.S. Department of Education: [Early Learning Resources](#)
- The [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#) describes itself as the nation’s leading organization for advancing the development of academic, social and emotional competence for all students. They seek make evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) a foundational part of education from preschool through high school through research, practice and policy.
- [CASEL Library](#) for documents and resources on academic, social, and emotional learning
- Institute of Education Sciences’ “What Works Clearinghouse” provides [early childhood instruction resources](#)
- [Measures of Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood, by Subdomain](#)
- [California Preschool Instructional Network](#): This network is organized into 11 regions throughout the state to disseminate information, training, and resources within each region with a focus on providing high quality professional development for preschool administrators and teachers.

- Institute of Education Sciences’ Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research initiative released, in 2008, a report on preschool curriculum which deeply covers social and emotional learning as important facets of any preschool curriculum: [Effects of Preschool Curriculum Programs on School Readiness](#).
- EdSource: [Articles on Preschool](#)
- A [2007 survey of California preschool directors](#), conducted by Policy Analysis for California Education research center at Stanford, covers issues of size and scope, financing, demand and enrollment, training quality, government oversight, teacher unionization, and more. Issues relating to social and emotional learning or specific curriculum were, surprisingly, not covered or elicited in the survey.

Legislation and State Standards

- Legislative Analyst Office report, [The 2014-2014 Budget: Child Care and Preschool Programs](#), summarizing state budget and funding changes.
- California Department of Education: [The Alignment of the California Preschool Learning Foundations with Key Early Education Resources](#)
- The National Institute for Early Education Research publishes a yearly State preschool [yearbook](#), most recently [The State of Preschool 2013](#), profiling the condition of preschool education in each state. In their latest report covering the 2012-2013 school year California met only 4 out of 10 quality standard benchmarks and served less than 20% of 4-year-olds.
- CASEL resources on [State Standards for Social and Emotional Learning](#)

Transitional Kindergarten

- [TK California](#) — Resources for Transitional Kindergarten Instruction
- American Institute for Research, [2013 Research Brief on Transitional Kindergarten in California](#)
- California Department of Education: [Transitional Kindergarten FAQs](#)
- EdSource: [Articles related to Transitional Kindergarten](#)

SEL Beyond Early Education

- In [A Climate for Academic Success](#), WestED explores the school climate factors that relate to school success, especially exploring non-academic factors that contribute to success in a handful of extraordinary secondary schools.
- Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice (2014): [The Power of Social-Emotional Learning in Secondary Schools](#)
- [Parent Toolkit](#) for Social and Emotional Development

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