The Science and Practice of Social and Emotional Learning: Implications for State Policymaking

State education policymakers face many overlapping challenges: enhancing kindergarten readiness, graduation rates, and college and career readiness; closing the achievement gap; and reducing inequalities, particularly in access to mental health support and responses to behavior problems, which primarily affect low-income students and students of color. Underpinning all these challenges is a set of skills that can provide a common foundation for learning, behavior, and lifelong health—and therefore offers a promising target for state policies.

These skills, often referred to as social-emotional or “noncognitive” skills, are tied to important long-term benefits for children as well as society at large. For example, students learn more and classrooms function better when children are able to manage their emotions, focus attention, solve problems, and engage in positive interactions with peers and adults. School-based social and emotional learning (SEL) efforts can lead to increases in a host of short-term, learning-related outcomes. These include improved executive functioning, self-efficacy, and persistence, as well as positive behavior, positive attitudes toward school, and academic achievement.

Promoting SEL skills in children can lead to important long-term benefits as well, such as increased likelihood of college completion, reduced criminal offending and substance abuse, reduced need for publicly subsidized housing, improved mental health, and higher income and job stability in adulthood. Furthermore, a recent cost-benefit analysis concluded that high-quality SEL programming provides a net economic benefit to communities; researchers determined that SEL efforts have an average return on investment of 11:1.

SEL provides a unique opportunity to connect many state efforts already in place related to early learning, college and career readiness, school climate, antibullying, and behavior or discipline initiatives, thereby aligning and making multiple initiatives coherent. State policy action can directly support making SEL a foundation for student success.

What Is Social and Emotional Learning?

SEL refers to the process through which individuals learn and apply social, emotional, behavioral, and character skills required to succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship. Over the years, it has been variously defined and has come to serve as an umbrella term for many subfields of psychology and human development, each with its own focus and related educational interventions—bullying prevention, character education, 21st century learning, employability skills, life skills, and more.

As a result, public discussion about SEL suffers from the same issue that plagues many concepts in education: Not everyone can quite agree on what it is. To some, it involves a set of tools for learning, while others see it as a way of promoting resilience in the face of both normative and traumatic stresses. Others see it as a system of values, virtues, habits, and personality or character traits. Still others focus on the importance of neurocognitive skills such as working memory or cognitive flexibility. This

State boards can do much to embed high-quality SEL in K-12 classrooms, and they should.

Stephanie Jones, Rebecca Bailey, and Jennifer Kahn

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situations and ultimately how they apply skills and competencies. Two concepts are important for understanding social and emotional development. First, social and emotional development is shaped by schools, families, and peers, as well as broader cultural and political factors. School culture and climate are closely related to children's SEL skills. School culture includes norms, beliefs, values, and expectations of a place ("the way things are done here"), whereas climate refers to the perceptions that children and adults have about the impact of the environment on psychological well-being ("how it feels to be here")—including if students and staff feel safe, connected, and engaged. Climate includes the quality of relationships within the classroom as well as daily interactions that occur in hallways, playgrounds, gym, and lunch areas. Therefore, it is important for schools and districts to take a systems approach to promoting SEL—addressing adult skills and beliefs; organizational culture, climate, and norms; and routines and structures that guide basic interactions and instruction.

These efforts have special relevance for low-income children and children at risk for academic or behavioral problems. Children experiencing early adversity are more likely to exhibit challenges with learning, memory, attention, and self-control. Exposure to poverty or trauma increases the likelihood of having lower understanding of emotion, heightened lack of consistency does not mean, however, that SEL is "soft," immeasurable, irrelevant, or faddish. According to the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, "It means that social and emotional development is multifaceted and is integral to academics—to how school happens, and to how learning takes place."

Generally, SEL skills can be grouped into three interconnected domains:

- **Cognitive regulation skills** are the basic cognitive skills required to organize behavior toward a goal. Children use cognitive regulation when faced with tasks that require concentration, planning, problem solving, coordination, conscious choices among alternatives, or exercising self-control.

- **Emotional competencies** include skills that help children understand, express, and manage their feelings, as well as show empathy and perspective taking. Children use these skills when faced with tasks that require dealing with frustration, embarrassment, or excitement, such as persisting through difficult activities or responding appropriately to classroom events. Children with strong emotional competencies recognize how different situations make them feel and address those feelings in healthy, effective ways.

- **Social and interpersonal skills** enable children to interpret other people's behavior, navigate social situations, build supportive relationships, and interact positively with peers and adults. Children use social skills to work collaboratively, resolve conflicts, participate on a team, and demonstrate compassion.

It is worth noting that two additional domains, character and mind-set, are also frequently included in organizing frameworks and programs in this field. Character typically refers to the skills and values that support prosocial and ethical behavior, including respect for others, perseverance, and citizenship. Mind-set refers to the attitudes and beliefs that children have about themselves, others, and their circumstances. There is often significant overlap and interaction between SEL and the values and attitudes reinforced through character and mind-set education. Importantly, character and mind-set play an important role in how children interpret and respond to daily interactions and situations and ultimately how they apply skills and competencies.

Schools and districts should organize their SEL work around trainings and materials that are developmentally sequenced and age appropriate.
emotional reactivity, and difficulty with regulating emotion and behavior. At the same time, SEL programs tend to have their largest effects among students who face the greatest number of risks, including those with lower socioeconomic status and those who enter school behind their peers.

**Approaches to SEL**

Interest in SEL is high among education leaders, practitioners, and policymakers. Fortunately, there is clear evidence that promoting SEL via high-quality programs, systems, and strategies in both school and out-of-school settings can be effective. In a seminal review of more than 200 school-based universal SEL programs spanning grades K-12, Durlak and colleagues demonstrated that participating students showed significant improvements in social and emotional skills, behavior, attitudes, and academic performance, as well as reduced emotional distress and conduct problems.

Programs were most effective when they included (S) sequenced activities to teach skills, (A) actively engaged students in learning skills, (F) focused time on SEL skill development, and (E) explicitly targeted SEL skills, encapsulated in the acronym SAFE. A follow-up study revealed that students retained benefits for an average of 3.75 years following participation. Furthermore, SEL interventions benefit recipients of varying race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Other approaches that emphasize just one aspect of social, emotional, or cognitive development — executive function, mindfulness, or growth mindset, for example— were also effective.

There are multiple ways that schools and districts approach SEL. Most common are school-based prevention and intervention programs, typically comprehensive, scripted curricula with sequenced lessons and explicit instruction in SEL skills—some emphasizing conflict resolution, others focused on empathy, and others targeting a range of skills and competencies. Some programs also focus more specifically on character development and may include lessons or activities that address values (ethical, performance, civic) and/or mind-sets (e.g., optimism, gratitude, self-confidence). This set of skills may be particularly important for helping children to use SEL skills in prosocial ways. SEL programs include varying approaches to professional development, some offering one-day teacher trainings and others providing ongoing coaching and support. Programs also vary in terms of whether they involve parents and families or include a community service component.

Many schools and districts also employ schoolwide behavioral management systems to promote SEL skills. These approaches typically focus on establishing systems and structures that support the development and maintenance of a positive school culture and learning environment. They emphasize clear norms, expectations, and logical consequences as well as classroom routines and structures. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), one such widely used approach, provides schools and districts with a tiered framework for building teacher and administrative capacity to track, manage, and improve student behavior and maximize learning and achievement. Another, Responsive Classroom, focuses on training teachers to use strategies such as morning meetings and academic choice to improve the educational environment.

In many settings, it can be difficult to implement comprehensive SEL programs, which often offer teachers and schools inadequate flexibility or adaptability. Moreover, limited time and resources, lack of local buy-in, and poor integration into everyday practice undermine efforts to bring programming to scale, and these barriers are likely exacerbated in low-income settings. However, low-cost, targeted strategies — sometimes called kernels — may provide a feasible, flexible, and cost-effective approach to promoting social and emotional development in such settings. Kernels are strategies that teachers and students can readily integrate into daily routines and academic instruction, including across classroom, lunchroom, hallways, and gym settings. Teachers can flexibly select strategies that best fit their students’ learning styles, skill levels, and interests and decide when and how to implement them.

**Considerations for Policymakers**

State policymakers can use the following guidelines to shape and make decisions about
SEL efforts that do not change adults’ own thinking, skills, or behavior are not likely to have a lasting impact.

Statewide SEL efforts. These guidelines are organized around four actions: conduct a needs assessment, align approaches, focus on adults, and develop and communicate a plan.

Conduct a needs assessment. SEL needs assessments identify state-specific SEL goals, opportunities, and identified challenge areas (e.g., attendance rates, discipline disparities, school safety, achievement gaps). The needs assessment will help states understand key features of their landscape, develop an effective plan for their context, and create buy-in and engagement with stakeholders and state leaders.

Use SEL needs assessments to address the following questions:

- Why is SEL important to K-12 students in our state? What SEL skills and competencies do our students need—for school and for work and life?
- Who are the key stakeholders in our state, and how will they be involved? Why is SEL relevant for families, educators, and employers?
- What SEL efforts already exist? Where are they successful (e.g., “bright spots” to build upon and extend) and where have they struggled (e.g., attempts we can learn from)?
- How can SEL efforts build upon work happening across agencies and sectors (e.g., education, early learning, out-of-school, college readiness, workforce development, health and human services, business)?
- Where are the potential roadblocks? How can we build relationships in critical places to overcome these obstacles (e.g., create “SEL champions”)?

Align approaches. One of the key opportunities involves breaking down silos. Cross-sector and interagency collaboration is essential because SEL skills build across time and over diverse environments and because SEL efforts affect a wide range of outcomes that are important to educational, health/mental health, economic, and criminal justice systems. Aligning SEL approaches can reduce the burden of a new initiative and can lead to bigger impact, whereas the absence of continuity or coherence can waste time and money.

The following activities can be used to support alignment:

- Close coordination with school discipline and classroom management. Some approaches to behavior undermine SEL, while others complement and boost it.23
- Creation of a “map” of current efforts in the state that are related to SEL. Which agencies are involved? What are the existing relationships and history of collaboration? Can SEL be used to build common ground and seek joint funding rather than compete for resources?

- Generation of a list of potential partnerships and integration/coordination opportunities. What frameworks, products, or activities could become joint initiatives supporting SEL (e.g., state standards, teacher training, preK-3 efforts)? How can existing efforts be reframed or adapted to emphasize SEL-related work across agencies or systems?

- SEL initiatives can be supported using a variety of funding streams (early learning, innovation grants, Title II funds, health and human services funding, workforce development grants).

Focus on adults. Most SEL programs are organized around student activities, but adult SEL is the foundation for effective teaching and learning—in school and beyond.24 Educators and parents need SEL skills in order to be effective in their relationships with children and to model and use the skills daily. SEL efforts that do not change adults’ own thinking, skills, or behavior are not likely to have a lasting impact. State policymakers can advocate for training and professional development opportunities that aim to support SEL implementation and teachers’ own SEL competencies in ongoing ways, including both pre-service and in-service experiences.

Keep in mind the following:

- State standards for SEL can articulate not just what children should know and be able to do but also specific teacher practices that support social-emotional development. Standards can also identify features of the classroom and school environment that promote SEL and guidelines for how adults can create positive learning environments.

- Frameworks can be used to highlight how SEL is central to high-quality teaching and instructional practices, such as those that deliberately integrate academics and SEL.
There are existing platforms for parent and family engagement that can be leveraged. Which ones could be integrated with SEL?

School leader and educator/staff training around SEL can integrate SEL with academics, behavior management, or other initiatives that the state has identified as priorities. These efforts are most beneficial when all adults in schools and related settings participate.

Many excellent resources help state policymakers introduce, expand, or embed SEL in K-12 settings (see box 1).

**Develop and communicate a plan.** Statewide SEL efforts require a compelling message and a clear plan of action. Developing a plan in turn

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**Box 1. SEL Initiatives and Resources**

**The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development** seeks to fully integrate social, emotional, and academic development in K-12 education so that all students are prepared to thrive in school, careers, and life. The commission includes representatives from education, research, business, policy, and the military. The commission aims to (a) establish a shared understanding of social, emotional, and academic development in K-12 education; (b) set the foundation for a community-driven movement that acknowledges and supports the central role of local communities in this work; and (c) develop recommendations in research, practice, and policy.

**The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning** (CASEL) launched the Collaborating States Initiative in 2016 to help states ensure that preK-12 students are prepared academically, socially, and emotionally to succeed in school, at work, and in life. Teams from 25 states are developing plans and standards, and CASEL aims to share research and information about best practices for integrating SEL into academics, facilitate sharing across states, provide technical assistance, document implementation, and share key findings. In partnership with 20 districts across the country, CASEL’s Collaborating Districts Initiative has been working to support and promote systemic SEL. Participating districts receive funding and other resources and tools to help them to make strategic, informed decisions about embedding SEL in instruction across their schools.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) instated key provisions that support SEL. The law provides states with greater flexibility in how student success is defined and measured. States now include at least one “nonacademic” indicator, such as school climate. ESSA also expands and encourages professional development, which could be used to enhance SEL supports for teachers.

Developed by the EASEL Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the Taxonomy Project organizes, describes, and connects SEL taxonomy across disciplines. This project aims to create tools for navigating, understanding, and comparing commonly used frameworks.
requires building long-term partnerships with a variety of stakeholders: legislators, agency and department heads, early education providers, K-12 educators, families, business leaders, and others in the community. Authentic engagement will increase the likelihood that SEL efforts are successful and sustained.

Develop an SEL plan that articulates the following:

- SEL efforts include a commitment to give educators, principals, and other adults the time, resources, training, and ongoing support to develop SEL skills in students and to increase their own knowledge and capacity.
- SEL efforts are not perceived to be an add-on or a threat to time spent on academic content. SEL is integrated into daily practice and routines.
- SEL standards, benchmarks, and learning progressions need to be flexible—the development of SEL skills is sensitive to a variety of factors, including exposure to trauma and stress. Adults working with children will need knowledge and training to understand the normal range of behaviors and to set realistic expectations for children of different ages and life experiences.
- SEL child-level assessments are in the early phase. More time is needed to ensure they are valid and reliable, and therefore states must be careful when using SEL assessments for accountability purposes. Instead, many experts suggest using school climate surveys, observations of teacher practices or classroom strategies that promote SEL to evaluate and document SEL efforts.

6Jones and Kahn, “The Evidence Base.”
10Ibid.

cont’d on pg 44
cont’d from pg 24

17Durlak et al., “The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning,”
19Ibid.; Durlak et al., “Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions.”

cont’d from pg 38

30Haverinen-Shaughnessy and Shaughnessy, “Classroom Ventilation Rate and Temperature.”
31Alexander, “Condition of America’s Public School Facilities.”
39Bakó-Biró et al., “Ventilation Rates in Schools.”