

Indicators of School Quality: Social and Emotional Learning

What is social and emotional learning (SEL)?

SEL is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions and handle challenging situations constructively. Although SEL is not a program, many available programs provide instruction in and opportunities to practice, apply and be recognized for using SEL skills. Competence in the use of SEL skills is promoted in the context of safe and supportive school, family, and community learning environments in which children feel valued and respected and connected to and engaged in learning. SEL is fundamental not only to children's social and emotional development but also to their health, ethical development, citizenship, motivation to achieve and academic learning.¹²

Why is SEL important?

Research shows that large numbers of children are contending with significant social, emotional and mental health barriers to their success in school and life. In addition, many children engage in challenging behaviors that educators must address in order to provide high quality instruction. Providing children with comprehensive SEL programs characterized by safe, caring and well-managed learning environments and instruction in social and emotional skills addresses many of these learning barriers. It does so by enhancing school attachment, reducing risky behaviors and promoting positive development, thereby positively influencing academic achievement.

Effective social and emotional learning programming involves coordinated classroom, schoolwide, family and community practices that help students develop the following five key skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, positive decision making.

SEL can have a positive impact on school climate and promote a host of academic, social and emotional benefits for students. Well-implemented SEL programming is associated with the following outcomes:

- **Better academic performance:** achievement scores an average of 11 percentile points higher than students who did not receive SEL instruction.
- **Improved attitudes and behaviors:** greater motivation to learn, deeper commitment to school, increased time devoted to schoolwork, and better classroom behavior.
- **Fewer negative behaviors:** decreased disruptive class behavior, noncompliance, aggression, delinquent acts and disciplinary referrals.

¹ Durlak J. A., Domitrovich C. E., Weissberg R. P., and Gullotta T. P. (Eds.) Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice. New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2014.

² Durlak J. A., Weissberg R. P., Dymnicki A. B., Taylor R. D., and Schellinger K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. Child Development, 2011; 82: 405-432.

- **Reduced emotional distress:** fewer reports of student depression, anxiety, stress and social withdrawal.³

How is SEL measured?

The most commonly used measures of social and emotional skills are student self-reports and teacher reports on students, such as rating scales of students' social-emotional competence. These survey-based measures may be subject to various biases, including the tendency for respondents to report what they think others want to hear and the challenges of interpreting survey questions and the data produced from them. Although there are concerns with the validity and reliability of student self-reports, many experts believe it is important to acknowledge the students' perspective in the assessment of their SEL competencies starting in third grade.

Other data that can potentially be used to assess SEL include proxy measures based on data states are already collecting. This includes absenteeism, suspension, disciplinary actions, truancy, dropout rates and other nonacademic indicators. However, experts have found it difficult to determine which of these may be appropriate, and concern remains that these measures do not assess the actual skills and competencies that are core to SEL.

How has this school quality measure been used to date?

To date, one of the primary examples of using SEL measures in accountability systems comes from California's CORE districts, a collaboration of 10 California school districts representing more than one million students. A key component of the CORE districts' accountability framework is the School Quality Improvement System, which is a measure of school performance used for accountability and continuous improvement.

The School Quality Improvement System has two main domains: an academic domain and a social-emotional/culture-climate domain. Within the academic domain, the accountability metrics include assessment results (both current performance and growth); a high school readiness indicator that captures the percentage of eighth graders who meet criteria predicting that they are likely to graduate from high school on time; and graduation rates. The social-emotional and culture-climate domain includes a chronic absenteeism rate, suspension and expulsion rates, school climate survey responses, and student self-responses on surveys that ask about their social and emotional skills. For the student surveys, students in grades five to twelve are asked to self-report on a series of behaviors (e.g., coming to class prepared, following directions) and beliefs (e.g., whether it is more important to be talented or to put forth a lot of effort) that, taken together, have been validated as indicators of social-emotional skills.

It is also important to note that only three states (Illinois, West Virginia and Kansas) have SEL standards that span all grade levels. While work is taking place to support additional states in developing SEL standards for K-12, a significant amount of work remains to be done.

³ Durlak J. A., Domitrovich C. E., Weissberg R. P., and Gullotta T. P. (Eds.) Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice. New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2014

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