

Principal's Research Review

Supporting the Principal's Data-Informed Decisions

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Social and Emotional Factors in Student Learning

By Nancy Protheroe

Even in an era of intensified focus on academic standards, educators recognize the importance of ensuring that students experience school as a safe and supportive place. A long history of research on effective schools and classrooms demonstrates that attending to students' affective needs enables them to achieve high levels of learning. For example, a study conducted by [Wilcox and Angelis](#) (2007) compared high-performance middle schools in New York State with those with average performance and found that two of the five elements consistently exhibited by the higher-performing schools focused on emotional issues:

- Trusting and respectful relationships, with school staff members expressing the belief that “nurturing these relationships provides the backbone for successful learning” (p. 10)

- Explicit attention that is paid to students' social and emotional well-being in the belief that “creating a sense of security for middle school students provides them with a support network and a connection to their school, removing significant barriers to learning” (p. 10).

A research effort by [Battelle for Kids](#) (2010) focused on identifying the characteristics of highly effective teachers' classrooms. Such classrooms were found to be “collaborative and supportive” places where teachers demonstrated their understanding that “learning is a social activity [with] relationships at the center of this process” (p. 19).

Researchers who studied connections between social-emotional factors and student academic success agreed with the assessment that learning is a social activity and suggested

A long history of research on effective schools and classrooms demonstrates that attending to students' affective needs enables them to achieve high levels of learning.

Just the Facts

- Satisfying the social and emotional needs of students does more than prepare them to learn. It actually increases their capacity for learning ([CASEL](#), 2003, p. 7).
- The research is finally catching up with veteran teacher leaders' observations: developing social-emotional competence is key to success in school and in life ([Elias, O'Brien, & Weissberg](#), 2006, p. 10).
- SEL is sometimes called 'the missing piece' because it represents a part of education that is inextricably linked to school success, but has not been explicitly stated or given much attention until recently ([Schonert-Reichl, & Hymel](#), 2007, p. 21).
- Most states have social and emotional learning content infused to one degree or another in other sets of learning standards ([Dusenbury, Zadzil, Mart, & Weissberg](#), 2011, p. 6).



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that “emotions can facilitate or hamper [students’] learning and their ultimate success in school” (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004, p. 3). In their view, that places social and emotional factors squarely in the educational process.

Educators agree. For example, NASSP (2006) identified “personalizing the school environment” as a core element of both middle and high school reform in its *Breaking Ranks Framework*. In NASSP’s view, “most students require a supportive environment—some more than others” (p. 129). A school’s explicit effort to help each student experience the school this way would, for example, work to provide “opportunities to develop a sense of belonging to the school, a sense of ownership over the direction of one’s learning, the ability to recognize options and to make choices based on one’s own experience and understanding of the options” (p. 129).

Interest in how students’ emotional and social well-being supports learning goes beyond the boundaries of the United States. A central theme of an action guide for schools published by the World Health Organization (*Birdthistle*, 2003) is the belief that “a positive, supportive climate at school can make a critical contribution to the academic achievement” (p. 4).

Social and Emotional Learning

Schonert-Reichl and Hymel (2007) characterize social and emotional learning (SEL) as the missing piece of school improvement efforts “because it represents a part of education that is inextricably linked to school success, but has not been explicitly stated or given much attention until recently” (p. 21). *The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning* (CASEL, 2003) defines SEL as “the process of developing the ability to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively” (p. 1).

CASEL (2003) suggested that SEL should be recognized for its potential impact on student learning, stating that “satisfying the social and emotional

needs of students does more than prepare them to learn. It actually increases their capacity for learning” (p. 7). *Elias, O’Brien, and Weissberg* (2006) concurred: “When it comes to the impact of mental health on academic outcomes, the research is finally catching up with veteran teacher leaders’ observations: developing social-emotional competence is key to success in school and in life” (p. 10).

Durlak, Weissberg, Schellinger, Dymnicki, and Taylor (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of research on 213 school-based, universal SEL programs. The meta-analysis “explored the effects of SEL programming across multiple outcomes: social and emotional skills, attitudes toward self and others, [and] positive social behavior” (p. 407). They concluded that “compared to controls, SEL participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement” (p. 405). They commented on the finding about the achievement effect:

Although based on a small subset of all reviewed studies, the 11-percentile gain in academic performance achieved in these programs is noteworthy, especially for educational policy and practice. Results from this review add to a growing body of research indicating that SEL programming enhances students’ connection to school, classroom behavior, and academic achievement. (p. 417)

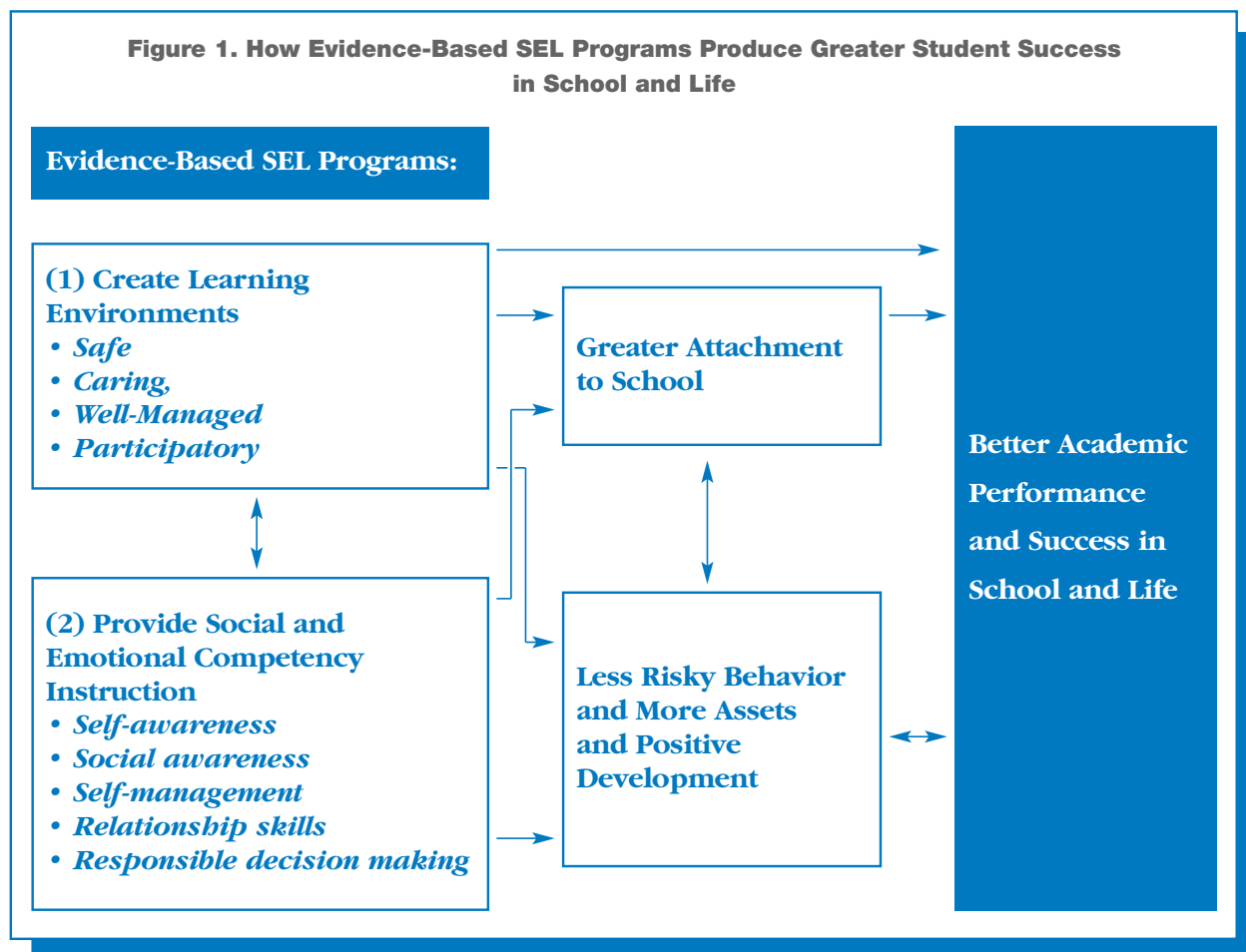
Other researchers who studied school-provided SEL opportunities and student academic outcomes identified a variety of ways by which SEL creates a potential path to higher levels of student learning. For example, students with access to effective SEL programs in their schools demonstrated higher levels of decision-making and goal-setting skills, as well as increased confidence in their own ability to learn (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

Other agencies confirmed the multiple links between SEL and student learning. For example, in its

summary of research on “school connectedness,” the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2009) reported “a strong relationship between school connectedness and educational outcomes” (p. 5) and suggested that schools “provide students with the academic, emotional, and social skills necessary to be actively engaged in school” (p. 9) as a way to increase students’ feeling of connectedness.

A graphic developed by CASEL (2003) describes “the logic and mechanics of the relationship between SEL programs and students’ school and life success” (p. 8). (See figure 1.) It also makes clear that the SEL component works in tandem with other efforts to provide a supportive learning environment. CASEL goes on to describe SEL’s role in more detail:

Evidence-based SEL programs have two characteristics, each of which leads both directly and indirectly to better academic performance and other positive outcomes. By establishing safe, caring, well-managed learning environments, SEL programs lead to greater student attachment to school, which in turn is associated with less risky behavior and better academic performance. Similarly, by teaching children a range of social and emotional competencies, SEL programs result in decreases in risky behaviors and support positive development, greater attachment to school, and academic success. (p. 8)



Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2003). *Safe and sound: An educational leader's guide to evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) Programs* [p. 7]. Chicago, IL: Author. Retrieved from http://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/1A_Safe_Sound-rev-21.pdf

Preparation for Adulthood

In addition to the increasing awareness that social and emotional factors affect students' ability to learn, schools are encouraged to include SEL as part of their role in preparing students for life after graduation. Research has found that students who master the SEL competencies possess good communication skills, know how to have their needs met in healthy ways, have satisfying relationships with peers and adults, are able to solve conflicts and problems creatively and cooperatively, are genuinely concerned about others' welfare and feel confident about the future. (Fredericks, 2003, p. 6)

Such SEL skills parallel the characteristics that

representatives of the business world indicate they want in future employees: "employers have made it abundantly clear that they now expect from high school graduates a level of social and emotional competency as high as—if not higher than—the level of any technical skill" (Beland, 2007, pp. 68–69).

The Anchorage School District, which has incorporated standards and benchmarks for SEL in its K–12 curriculum, drew from work done by the Alaska Process Industry Careers Consortium (APICC) to emphasize the importance of SEL skills to its students' future employment opportunities by highlighting SEL-related skills and characteristics that the employers identified. (See figure 2.)

Figure 2. **SEL Supports What Employers Want**

SEL Skill	How do students demonstrate the skill?	What do employers look for?
Student demonstrates awareness of their emotions	Acknowledge an emotion and determine the appropriate time and place to safely digest it.	Employee does not let personal problems interfere with getting the work done, either by being distracted at work or by failing to come to work or be on time.
Student uses effective decision-making skills	Consider ethical, safety and societal factors when making decisions. Apply decision-making skills to develop responsible social and work relationships and to make healthy life-long choices.	Employee can identify source of problem; demonstrates good common sense; is creative and innovative.
Student demonstrates ability to set and achieve goals	Set goals for life after high school, with action steps, timeframes and criteria for evaluating achievement.	Employee sets personal goals. Able to see long-term results of efforts on the job and put in time and effort before expecting a promotion.
Student demonstrates awareness of other people's emotions and perspectives	Identify verbal, physical and other cues that indicate how others may feel. Can talk with people to understand their perspective. Express empathy towards others. Value and learn from the perspectives of others.	Employee understands customer's expectations.
Student uses positive communication and social skills to interact effectively with others.	Demonstrates strategies for working as a team with peers, adults and others in the community. Offer and accept constructive criticism in order to make improvements. Use assertive communication to get their needs met without negatively impacting others.	Employee expresses ideas clearly and concisely to individuals and in groups; has good customer communication skills. Able to comprehend what is said and take action. Able to work as a productive team member. Shares information, works well and credits other workers.

Developed by Anchorage School District using information from "Want a Great Career? Alaskan Employers Expect" published by the Alaska Process Industry Careers Consortium.

SEL Instruction in Schools

Although the research demonstrates the possible positive effect of SEL, most schools are already working at full capacity to address high standards. So is there a strong enough case for SEL to channel school resources toward SEL instruction? In Fredericks' (2003) view, "academic knowledge is obviously indispensable, but so are the many social, emotional and behavioral skills that allow students to be successful in life" (pp. 3–4). In addition, [Beland](#) (2007) suggested that "educators need not view academic learning and social and emotional learning as opposite ends of a tug-of-war. When both support each other, students are more apt to be engaged in learning and develop themselves personally" (p. 69).

Many state departments of education seem to agree with the importance of providing SEL opportunities for students. In 2011, CASEL conducted a study to identify whether states were moving toward establishing SEL standards. At that time, [Illinois](#) had already developed "comprehensive, free-standing [K-12] learning goals and benchmarks for Social and Emotional Learning" with a few other states moving in that direction ([Dusenbury, Zadrazil, Mart, & Weissberg](#), 2011, p. 5). In addition, "most states have social and emotional learning content infused to one degree or another in other sets of learning standards" (p. 6), including [Common Core State Standards](#):

For example, 42 states and two territories are in the process of adopting the Common Core Standards in Math and English Language Arts, which contain standards on communication (especially speaking and listening), cooperation skills, and problem solving. National model standards in Social Studies (used by most states to develop state standards) help students recognize the influence of groups and emphasize responsible decision making and good citizenship. National model standards in Science, used by 42 states, address problem solving. (p. 6)

CASEL (2003) has developed the framework of

skills that is most used by many schools and other education agencies that are increasing their SEL focus, drawing from "extensive research in a wide range of areas, including brain functioning, and methods of learning and instruction" (Elias 2003, p. 9). Five core groups of competencies, each with essential skills, are included in the framework:

- **Self-awareness:** accurately assessing one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence
- **Social awareness:** being able to understand the perspective of and empathize with others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; recognizing and using family, school, and community resources
- **Self-management:** regulating one's emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles; setting and monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals; expressing emotions appropriately
- **Relationship skills:** establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships that are based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; seeking help when needed
- **Responsible decision making:** making decisions on the basis of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; contributing to the well-being of one's school and community (CASEL, 2003).

Effective SEL Instruction

If SEL skills are to be taught in schools, it is important that it be done well. The [Illinois State Board of Education](#) describes quality SEL instruction as an approach "in which students learn to process, integrate, and selectively apply SEL skills."

In addition to assessing SEL effects, the meta-analysis of studies on SEL conducted by [Durlak et al.](#) (2011) looked at issues that were important to successful program implementation. In their view, “given time constraints and competing demands, educators must prioritize and effectively implement evidence-based approaches that produce multiple benefits” (p. 406). The researchers found it important that “classroom teachers and other school staff effectively conducted SEL programs. This result suggests that these interventions can be incorporated into routine educational practices and do not require outside personnel for their effective delivery” (p. 417).

The researchers also concluded that the most successful programs incorporated four key elements:

- Sequential instruction, designed and provided in a step-by-step fashion
- Opportunities for active learning
- Focused and sufficient time for each lesson
- Explicit learning goals.

SEL instruction was also found to be more effective when “it was “treated as a regular part of the curriculum rather than as something extraneous to it” ([Fredericks](#), 2003, p. 11).

[Durlak et al.](#) (2011) provide some possible reasons for less-than-successful implementation. Specifically, the researchers stated that “schools may not be aware of effective programs, fail to choose them from among alternatives, do not implement the interventions correctly, or do not continue programs even if they are successful during a pilot or demonstration period (p. 420).

In addition, [Elias](#) (2003) suggested that a school’s implementation of a program to support students’ social-emotional learning may have to be done gradually—possibly over several years. Finally, [Payton et al.](#) (2008)—researchers who summarized research from multiple studies on SEL and SEL instruction—recognized that more research is needed. In their view,

future studies will help to determine...which combinations of social-emotional skills most effectively influence which outcomes for

various subgroups of students; how to prolong program impacts; how best to support school staff as they implement interventions; and whether combining SEL programs... would produce even greater benefits than implementing a single program (p. 11).

In Summary

School efforts to provide a supportive environment should be purposeful, with some of those efforts a formal part of the school program, such as creating small communities or providing SEL instruction. Attention must also be paid to small opportunities that can provide SEL lessons for students. [Elkind and Sweet](#) (2004) wrote:

Whether you are a teacher, administrator, custodian, or school bus driver, you are helping to shape the character of the kids you come in contact with. It’s in the way you talk, the behaviors you model, the conduct you tolerate, the deeds you encourage, the expectations you transmit.

In another practical example of informal SEL instruction, [San Antonio and Salzfass](#) (2007) suggested that staff members should intentionally focus on good as well as inappropriate student behavior:

School classrooms and corridors contain a full spectrum of behavior, from countless everyday small acts of kindness to serious acts of aggression. In our effort to mitigate negative student behavior, a commonly overlooked but essential aspect of creating emotionally and socially safe environments is noticing, acknowledging, and actively drawing out acts of kindness.

As the research makes clear, SEL instruction should work in concert with other school efforts to make school an emotionally supportive place for students. Together, those efforts provide a strong foundation for student learning. [PRR](#)

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