In a national survey of educators by the EdWeek Research Center last year, about 85 percent said one hour should be the maximum amount of time devoted to social-emotional learning per day.
Immerse yourself in the world of social-emotional learning, and one thing quickly becomes clear: What, exactly, social-emotional learning is can be hard to pin down, and people often resort to analogies and examples to explain it.

The ample amount of jargon in the SEL field (and, to be fair, all of education) doesn’t help.

To help clear some of this confusion, Education Week reached out to researchers and practitioners in the field to ask them to define social-emotional learning and compiled their answers here.

This is much more than a fun thought experiment for education nerds. It has real-world consequences: Because social-emotional learning is a nebulous term—in part because of a lack of consensus on everything that falls under the SEL umbrella—it’s easy to misunderstand or even misrepresent the concept.

For some educators, a lack of clarity over what, exactly, SEL is can present significant barriers to teaching it. Fifteen percent of teachers, principals, and superintendents said in a recent EdWeek Research Center survey that SEL being poorly defined in their district presented a major challenge to teaching it.

Parents are also confused about what social-emotional learning is. While they are strongly in favor of schools teaching social-emotional skills such as helping students learn to manage their emotions, set goals, and approach problems with optimism, the term “social-emotional learning” does not poll well with parents, according to a 2021 survey from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the polling firm YouGov. (They prefer the term “life skills.”)

The term has also gotten swept up in political debates over how to teach about topics such as racism and sexuality, and some conservative groups have suggested that SEL promotes political indoctrination of liberal beliefs.

Here are the jargon-free definitions, analogies, and examples of SEL that seven experts shared with Education Week:

“Social-emotional learning is the process by which children and adults learn how to solve inter- and intrapersonal problems in order to maximize their ability to flourish across environments.”

—David Adams, CEO, The Urban Assembly

“Social and emotional learning is the reason my son loves school again and can focus on learning. It is the relationship that he has built with a supportive teacher and the way he has developed skills to process his emotions, make friends, practice curiosity, and solve problems.”

—Aaliyah A. Samuel, President and CEO, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL

“SEL can’t be addressed only in a 10-minute morning meeting or every Thursday, fourth period. It can’t be isolated in occasional assemblies for students or in workshops for teachers. SEL—which includes the principles, tools, and strategies that build self- and social-awareness, healthy emotion regulation, and responsible decisionmaking—has to be an everyday thing and part of the school’s DNA. There needs to be a common language among all stakeholders. It has to be integrated into leadership, instruction, faculty meetings, family engagement, hiring procedures, and policies.”

—Marc Brackett, Professor, Yale School of Medicine, and Director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence

“When I use a metaphor to teach SEL, I use fire fighting versus fire prevention. If I’m a forest ranger, and there are constantly forest fires, yes, I’m going to go put out those fires. But it makes a lot more sense for me to teach everyone at the campsite fire prevention. If I can teach people how to manage their emotions, resolve conflicts, and bounce back from setbacks, I’m going to put out less fires. ... What we need to do is teach, proactively, skills that help kids do fire prevention. Like, how to access mental health resources, how to bounce back from setbacks, how to build healthy relationships.”

—R. Keeth Matheny, Former Teacher, Founder of SEL Launchpad

“Brick-masonry structures are made with bricks bonded together with mortar; these structures can withstand even the most powerful storms. SEL is like the mortar. It connects people together and builds the framework for relationships. SEL is like the mortar. It connects individual bricks of knowledge helping us to effectively apply ourselves and achieve goals. SEL is like the mortar. It creates empathet-
ic, contributing, resilient humans who can withstand even the most powerful storms.”
—Trish Shaffer, MTSS/SEL Coordinator, Washoe County School District

“When you think about setting up a fish tank, you go in and purchase your fish, gravel, filter, little plants, all of that. When you are creating learning environments, you have the curriculum, the Texas essential knowledge and skills, lessons of how students will get an understanding of all these concepts. And you have the water. But if your pH is off, your fish will not survive. You can have great facilities, content, people, but if people don’t feel like they belong, unsafe, disconnected, or unable to regulate their emotions, learning will not take place.”
—Statia Paschel, Director of SEL and Cultural Proficiency and Inclusiveness, Austin Independent School District

For this last example of what SEL should look like, Stephanie Jones, an education professor at Harvard and the director of the EA-SEL lab, asks people to imagine a classroom with a teacher reading to students:

“Just imagine, what does it take for that group to engage in that task together successfully? Think about what those children need to do to hear what’s happening in the book: to hear the words, to hear the meaning, to feel the experience of the characters or the actors in the book, whoever they might be. It takes focused attention. You have to be able to put your attention inside the book and maybe shift it from one thing to another, one chapter to the next or one idea to the next. In a group, typically, you have to be able to manage your behavior. You can’t be bumping everybody all the time because that’s going to disturb their experience of reading the book. You have to be able to understand, experience and manage the emotional world because emotions come up in books. They come up in interactions, they come up in conversations. To understand what is happening in the book, the child needs a sense of ‘What’s the emotion that’s happening for me right now?’ And, what am I noticing about this character in the book and how that is related to the story?’ And finally, the child needs to feel a connection and a sense of trust with that adult. Something that confirms that the child is seen and valued in that setting and can successfully manage interactions with those children and with that adult. The technical (aka skills and competencies) of SEL is all of these things and is deeply woven into all aspects of learning.”
—Jones
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Endria Jones can’t imagine teaching in the Arkansas Delta community where she grew up without sharing her own troubled family history with students struggling with similar circumstances. Jones had a substance-addicted mother and became a single mom after the death of her son’s father. Though her mother has now been in recovery for years, and her son is a college graduate working for his alma mater, Jones believes she has a lot to teach her students at Pine Bluff’s Jack Robey Jr. High School about persistence, resilience, and a willingness to seek help.

Those and other skills that got her through some tough years are now lumped under the catch-all heading of “social-emotional learning.” Jones believes they are as important as anything she’s teaching in her language arts class.

“I’m very vulnerable with them,” said Jones of her students. “I don’t mind sharing my history and things that I’ve endured and why I am where I am now. We get real-life lessons in my room.”

But, even for teachers like Jones who have a deep commitment to teaching those kinds of skills, incorporating SEL into math, science, or even language arts can be a tough task these days. Nearly two-thirds of educators said that weaving SEL skills into academic subjects is challenging, according to a survey of 824 educators conducted by the EdWeek Research Center from Sept. 28 to Oct. 17.

Educators cite pressure to help students catch up academically now that the pandemic has subsided, leaving little time for anything else; insufficient professional development; student emotional needs that go beyond the scope of educators’ abilities; and standardized tests that focus only on core academic material. Some say their own weariness with the demands placed on teachers these days makes them feel ill-equipped to help students cope with stress.

Complicating matters: In some places, politicians—from local school board members to governors—have thrown up roadblocks to anything that smacks of SEL.

Students are best able to master SEL skills when they’re taught as both stand-alone content—perhaps during a morning advisory group before classes begin—as well as woven through academic subjects, experts say.

“Complicating matters: In some places, politicians—from local school board members to governors—have thrown up roadblocks to anything that smacks of SEL.”

While the term “SEL” means different things to different people, it generally refers to helping students control their emotions, empathize with others, set goals, embrace persistence, and think creatively. It does not involve providing formal mental health diagnosis or support for students.

But partly because it is defined so broadly, social-emotional learning is paired in many people’s minds with politically sensitive topics such as racism, sexuality, and critical race theory, an academic perspective that argues systemic racism is embedded in legal systems and policies and not just in individual bias.

More than 40 percent of principals and district leaders who participated in the EdWeek Research Center survey said that parents have raised concerns with their districts that social-emotional learning teaches children values they don’t approve of. But only 14 percent of that group said that this pushback caused their school or district to put less emphasis on SEL.

For their part, educators overwhelmingly think building students’ SEL skills is worth the time and effort. Eighty-three percent of educators surveyed said it had a positive impact on students’ academic outcomes, and a slightly higher percentage—84 percent—said it improved their students’ “soft skills,” such as communication, collaboration, and critical thinking.

For instance, Danielle Wilkes, who teaches language arts at John Paul Stevens High School in San Antonio, Texas, believes SEL skills are a necessary prerequisite to becoming a strong writer.

“You have to connect with them on a personal level’

For instance, Danielle Wilkes, who teaches language arts at John Paul Stevens High School in San Antonio, Texas, believes SEL skills are a necessary prerequisite to becoming a strong writer.

“If you want to get great writing from your students, you have to teach them how to reflect, how to process their own emotions, how to understand the human condition, and you have to connect with them on a personal level in order for them to trust you with their writing,” she said.

Students are best able to master SEL skills when they’re taught as both stand-alone content—perhaps during a morning advisory group before classes begin—as well as woven through academic subjects, experts say.

“If students are learning a lesson about teamwork or collaboration during an advisory class, they’re going to develop those skills better if they have opportunities to practice them throughout their day,” said Justina Schlund, the senior director of content and field learning at the nonprofit Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL. “When social-emotional learning is paired in many people’s minds with politically sensitive topics such as racism, sexuality, and critical race theory, an academic perspective that argues systemic racism is embedded in legal systems and policies and not just in individual bias.”

"You have to connect with them on a personal level’"
learning is integrated into all of the curriculum, it means that they are making real-world connections to what they’re learning.”

Incorporating SEL into academics: It’s complicated

Nearly half of educators in the EdWeek Research Center survey—46 percent—said finding time to focus on SEL amid the drive to help students make up academic ground during the pandemic is a major barrier to teaching those softer skills.

But some are finding ways around that hurdle.

Jones, for instance, kicks off her classes each day with what she thinks of as roundtable discussion time, giving her students a chance to talk about what’s going on in their lives, especially if it’s interfering with their ability to learn.

The practice was originally part of a push in her school for a greater emphasis on SEL as students returned to in-person instruction following the height of the pandemic. More recently, though, she was told to use the time to instead focus on reading skills. But Jones has largely kept up the conversations anyway, sometimes connecting them to the texts she’s teaching.

“We really don’t have a lot of time to do what I would love to do, take way more time than 15 minutes to home in on social-emotional learning,” she said. “So, if I can find an article or short story or a novel that we can read that they can see themselves in, I see the emotions coming out. We’ll stop and we’ll discuss it. And I love the responses that they give.”

For instance, her classes recently read “Everyday Use,” a short story by Alice Walker with themes of racism and family strife. She asked her students to reflect on how the mother in the story treated one of her children very differently from the other, something many kids can relate to.

Similarly, Susan Providence, a teacher at Battle Creek Elementary School in St. Paul, Minn., knows math can be discouraging for some students. She prides herself on making her classroom a place where kids feel comfortable sharing their missteps with their classmates.

“Mistakes are an opportunity for learning,” she said. “So, if you make a mistake, that is wonderful, right?” She encourages students to help their peers who might get stuck on a particular problem or skill try a new strategy, even something as simple as showing how they could count on their fingers.

A little over a third of educators identified insufficient professional development as another hurdle to teaching SEL, according to the EdWeek Research Center survey.

In particular, some said they weren’t given much guidance on how to incorporate SEL into academic subjects, particularly at the secondary level.

“I don’t think most teachers get that,” said Louise Williamson, a teacher at Hilltop High School in the Sweetwater Union High School district, near San Diego. “I had to pursue it. It wasn’t something that was offered to me. It was something that I had to go and find.”

“What’s more, she said, SEL experts recommend that schools focus on bolstering adults’ capacity in areas like perseverance, empathy, and communication before delving into how teachers and other school staff can teach those skills to students.

But most schools skip that step, Williamson said.

“My observation has been that nobody does that,” she said. “Everybody is anxious to check the boxes and get [it] done and say that we’re doing [SEL]. And so, they rush into the student SEL and they neglect the adult SEL.”

Williamson has also noticed that “a lot of adults are resistant to it, particularly adults who aren’t feeling so well mentally. Well, I mean, yeah, you’re super stressed and you’re thinking about quitting education. And you have to go to a meeting where they talk about self-awareness. You’re gonna be like, ‘I don’t need this.’”

Treading carefully when it comes to SEL

The polarized political climate has had its own impact on SEL, as parents and community members question whether school is the right place to teach skills like grit and kindness or whether that’s best left up to parents.

The problem is many parents conflate teaching SEL with educating students in anti-racism and sexuality issues.

That kind of thinking has prompted at least one high-profile rejection of curricular materials that incorporated so-called soft skills along with more traditional academics: Last spring, the Florida department of education rejected several math textbooks—which were otherwise deemed as in alignment with the state’s curriculum—in part because they included references to social-emotional learning and its principles.

The department was not specific about why each of the textbooks was scrapped, releasing only four examples of material it considered dubious. But a review by The New
York Times found that some of the rejected textbooks contained references to skills considered central to SEL, such as disagreeing respectfully and having “a growth mindset” or belief that success depends on time and effort, not just innate talent.

Examples like that have teachers in other, more politically conservative states treading carefully.

For example, in Arkansas, Jones and other teachers who work with a nonprofit organization called Teach Plus, which seeks to give educators a voice in policymaking, recently put together a brief calling for more resources for SEL.

They recommended that the state help create school-specific mental health positions, such as a coordinator or coach, who could provide both support to students and professional development to teachers. They also want to see policymakers protect teacher time for SEL lessons and get teachers trained in areas like mental health first aid.

Those requests were based on a survey of Arkansas teachers, fewer than half of whom felt their schools provided adequate social-emotional supports for students.

Now, though, the teachers are thinking carefully about how they want to describe their efforts, to keep from running into political backlash.

At first, the group thought of underscoring their arguments by pointing to remarks by U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona supporting mental health and SEL programs in schools.

But then, they wondered how that would go over in a state that “as a whole, isn’t a big fan of the current [Biden] administration,” said Perla Andrade, an instructional facilitator at Baseline Academy, a public school in Little Rock, and one of the teachers who worked on the brief.

The recommendations were finalized in October, and so far, the group hasn’t talked to policymakers about them. But Andrade is looking at what’s going on in other states, including Florida, and at how lawmakers are “mimicking those states around them” when it comes to skepticism about SEL.

“I do wonder how these conversations are going to go,” she said. “This should not be a political issue, but you know, here we are.”

To view the charts that accompany this article, click here.
How Much Time Should Schools Spend On Social-Emotional Learning?

By Lauraine Langreo

How much time should educators spend during the school day helping students develop healthy social and emotional skills?

It’s an important question as school districts across the country invest more money in social-emotional learning programs and some communities face parent pushback against those efforts. Plus, local and state policies—as well as differing levels of sophistication in how social-emotional learning is integrated at the classroom level into academic subjects—make the question difficult to answer.

“There isn’t a time limit for it,” said Juanny Valdespino-Gaytán, executive director of engagement services for the Dallas Independent School District. “When we talk about social-emotional learning in Dallas, we’re not talking about SEL happening at one time of the day. SEL has to be taught and embedded throughout the entire day in order for students to really have the opportunity to develop those skills and apply these skills to everyday life.”

That may be the case in Dallas. But in a national survey of district leaders, principals, and teachers across the country by the EdWeek Research Center last year, about 85 percent said one hour should be the maximum amount of time devoted to social-emotional learning per day.

In interviews with Education Week, social-emotional learning experts said that spending some classroom time explicitly teaching social-emotional skills is important, but what matters even more is effectively integrating the skills—such as time management, collaboration skills, and responsible decisionmaking—into everything that students are learning in school and in after-school programs.

“Social-emotional learning can be applied in a lot of different ways,” said Justina Schlund, senior director of content and field learning for the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning or CASEL. “I often describe this by looking at three things: One, are there some really intentional efforts to build positive relationships among teachers and students? Two, is there some dedicated time to teach social and emotional skills? And three, are there really intentional efforts to integrate social and emotional learning practices throughout academic instruction?”

School district leaders also recognize that social-emotional learning needs to not only be taught explicitly at times but also be embedded throughout the school day. And some even said an hour a day would be excellent.

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School district leaders also recognize that social-emotional learning needs to not only be taught explicitly at times but also be embedded throughout the school day. And some even said an hour a day would be excellent.

“Well, if we had an hour a day to explicitly support SEL, that’d be amazing,” said Jill Bryant, assistant director of social-emotional learning for the Portland Public Schools in Oregon. “But then I would just go a step beyond that. It really needs to be woven into the fabric of everything we do all day, even after-school programs as well.”

Valdespino-Gaytán pointed out that educators might be more likely to dismiss SEL or say only an hour or less should be devoted to it if they don’t understand how social-emotional skills can be integrated into the lessons they’re already teaching.

It’s not only during “circle time” in the early elementary grades that students are building their social-emotional skills. Before students take a test, teachers can teach them techniques to calm themselves; before working in teams, students can talk about what makes a good team member; when discussing a story, students can reflect on how they connected to it personally.

There are still some people “who silo SEL in a way that I wouldn’t like to see,” said Lynn Lawrence, SEL and mentoring coordinator for LaGrange School District 102 in Illinois. “They’re going to do that circle, check it off, and then do the rest of the day. Trying to get everybody to see that this is just the way we approach everything, this is our lens through which we view everything, is still something we continue to work on.”

Teachers struggle to find the time to fit anything new into their days

Time might be the biggest challenge for teachers when thinking about how to integrate SEL into their lessons.

Consider, for instance, that the typical teacher works 54 hours a week and just under half that time is spent directly teaching students, according to the 2022 Merrimack College Teacher Survey that was conducted by the EdWeek Research Center. “Time’s the most finite resource we have, really, even more than money,” said Mary Tagg, a professional learning lead for the Center for the Collaborative Classroom, which develops literacy and SEL programs. “We can always try to get some grants and get more money, but you can’t get more time. That is something we hear from educators all the time.”

District leaders agreed. Valdespino-Gaytán said a lot of teachers are probably more
worried about the core content that students are being tested on and that teachers are being held accountable for than the potential SEL skill development that could be integrated into those lessons.

Bryant said that if districts are emphasizing explicit SEL instruction as opposed to integrating it across the curriculum, then it makes sense when teachers voice concerns about not having enough time.

**Reframing the thinking to weave SEL into academic content**

If districts “reframe” their thinking and see that SEL is “woven into everything that we do in creating those conditions for students to thrive,” then the priority stops becoming about the number of minutes spent on SEL, Bryant said. Instead it just “becomes how we do things” and then can have “a more sustaining and significant impact for students and staff.”

According to CASEL research, students participating in SEL programs showed improved classroom behavior. District leaders who spoke to Education Week have seen similar effects.

If kids are feeling like they belong, if they’re feeling more cared for, and if they’re feeling more respected, then they are willing to cooperate with their teachers or peers, said Jennifer Heckmann, an instructional coach for the Vinton-Shellsburg Community School District in Iowa.

Before working at the Center for the Collaborative Classroom, Tavegia was a principal at an elementary school in Illinois. She said when the school started implementing an SEL program, many teachers were concerned about not having enough time to get it done. But after a semester, she said teachers found that they had gotten “further and deeper into the curriculum” because students were learning how to better manage themselves.
Keeping schools connected during Covid-19 and beyond

How one organization’s embrace of the cloud led to short and long-term solutions in education.

When schools throughout the country transitioned to online learning in March 2020, they had to quickly address two challenges. First, they had to rapidly provision devices to students, teachers, and staff and make sure the entire school population was connected to the internet. After deploying these devices, they needed to ensure employees had access to the school’s network so they could access files and applications and continue to collaborate with one another from home.

The South Central Regional Information Center (SCRIC) had to address both of these challenges on an extremely large scale. SCRIC provides technology to 50 school districts across three Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) in the south-central region of New York State. Twenty-seven of those school districts are supported by a Managed Information Technology Support (MITS) model in which SCRIC collaborates with one of the BOCES, Broome-Tioga (BT) BOCES, to handle all Information Technology (IT) administration and management decisions, allowing district leaders to focus on their primary task: educating students.

To support this network of students, teachers, and administrators, SCRIC and the SCRIC/BT BOCES teams needed to immediately provide desktop access for remote work. One of their priorities was getting all administrative employees access to the network as soon as possible. At the start of the pandemic, network access was particularly important for finance staff.

“It just so happened that COVID-19 lined up with the end of our fiscal year,” says Philip Sage, manager of project design and development for SCRIC. “April is a busy time of year for our business office. They needed access to our financial systems to issue purchase orders and do billing. Getting them onto our machines was really important.”

SCRIC had used other network solutions, including virtual private network (VPN) accounts, when dealing with desktop access on a smaller scale in the past.

“We seek to adopt the native, cloud way of doing things, rather than pushing everything we already have on premises here, as it is, into the cloud. For every project we do, we first consider how we can do it more effectively in the cloud.”

Philip Sage, Manager of Project Design and Development, SCRIC

Typically, there were a few users in each district who needed remote access,” Sage says. “It might have been an operations person who needed to get on the network to look into an HVAC system, or a superintendent who needed to go in and get some files.”

However, VPN accounts would not work for the unique situation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It takes time to set up hundreds of VPN accounts, and...
there is more risk involved by setting up a VPN from a home machine into our network,” says Sage.

SCRIC also didn’t want a solution that would require extra hardware, which would take time to procure. With pressure mounting to quickly solve this issue of network access, SCRIC needed a turnkey solution.

Turning to the cloud

SCRIC decided to turn to a cloud-based solution, Amazon WorkSpaces, to provide staff with desktop access. Amazon WorkSpaces is a desktop-as-a-service (DaaS) solution that provides users with virtual desktops, or WorkSpaces, they can access from any supported device — anywhere, anytime.

Amazon WorkSpaces was the ideal choice for SCRIC because it fit into the organization’s cloud-first approach to education. “We seek to adopt the native, cloud way of doing things, rather than pushing everything we already have on premises here, as it is, into the cloud,” says Sage. “For every project we do we first consider how we can do it more effectively in the cloud.”

Security was also a key factor in SCRIC’s decision. Unlike VPN accounts, Amazon WorkSpaces allowed SCRIC to control the access that administrators had to the network, removing the risk of setting up hundreds of VPN accounts on home devices. Amazon WorkSpaces gives employees a true in-office experience from home, complete with the security and the capabilities they would find in the office.

Without the need to purchase and install hardware or deploy complex virtual desktop infrastructure, SCRIC could install DaaS solutions quickly, which was critical during the rapid transition to working from home in March. SCRIC/ BT BOCES deployed 270 Amazon WorkSpaces in a single weekend, providing 10 Amazon WorkSpaces for each of the 27 school districts in their MITS model. SCRIC had a total capacity of 530 Amazon WorkSpaces — 10 for each of the 50 districts.

“The ability to just flick a switch and have all that in place to support staff was really great,” says Sage.

Amazon WorkSpaces has helped SCRIC and its partner districts in both the short and long term.

“Amazon WorkSpaces ended up being a really good stopgap to help us get something out really fast, something that could be really useful,” says Sage. “It gave the organization time to understand who would be working from home for the long term, who would be coming back into the office, and what kind of long-term supports they would need to put in place.”

From a tweet to a partnership

Another benefit of turning to Amazon WorkSpaces was the responsive and thorough support from Amazon Web Services (AWS) during rapid deployment. The SCRIC/ BT BOCES team recalls a moment early in the deployment of Amazon WorkSpaces when they wanted to increase the limit on the number of their virtual desktops. Needing a fast response, they turned to social media to contact AWS.

“We worried that we weren’t going to get approval for the limit increase on time. But we jumped on Twitter and reached out to AWS. Sure enough, we had a couple people respond right away,” Sage says.

Andrew Defoe, technical business development manager, end user computing for AWS, reached out to SCRIC on LinkedIn saying he heard they were looking for some support. According to Ben Kolb, network engineer at BT BOCES, Defoe’s response was swift: “He said, ‘I’m the right guy to talk to; let me put you in touch.’ That morning they had worked everything out for us.”

The result of this brief Twitter encounter was the development of a long-lasting, collaborative relationship between SCRIC and AWS. AWS works with various educational services agencies, and SCRIC has now joined the AWS Partner Network (APN), which helps companies successfully build AWS solutions through technical and business trainings, marketing support, and more.

As an APN Partner, SCRIC regularly collaborates with the AWS direct team and partner team to develop and deploy other cloud solutions to improve educational services for its partner districts.

“Going down the partner path with AWS has given us an opportunity to be a leader throughout New York state,” Sage says. “We are on the leading edge in our educational community, which is exciting.”
Looking toward the future

As school districts look toward the fall and the start of a new school year, SCRIC is working with AWS to consider adopting cloud-based services that will support students, teachers, and staff in the long term, whether they are working from home, in a school, or in a hybrid setting.

When schools initially transitioned to online learning, students could not access certain applications on their Chromebooks. For example, south-central New York high school students supported by SCRIC have many science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) applications they use for their career and technical education (CTE) courses, including Adobe Creative Cloud, AutoDesk AutoCAD, Revit, Inventor, SOLIDWORKS, and Unity3D.

These applications, which include computer-aided design (CAD), mechanical engineering, and electrical engineering apps, are often only available to students in a computer lab on school property.

“You simply cannot run those applications on Chromebooks, nor are the devices powerful enough to properly support the apps,” Kolb says.

SCRIC is considering an application streaming service like Amazon AppStream 2.0, which would allow students working from home to access needed applications from any device. This way, students can get the tools they need for these specialized classes, regardless of whether they are in the classroom or at home.

Leveraging Amazon AppStream 2.0 can also help SCRIC evolve the way it approaches education beyond the pandemic. By providing students access to these applications anytime, anywhere, from any device, schools can save physical spaces like computer labs for other purposes. They can also save money on hardware costs. Students who might need extra time to complete assignments (whether due to absences or 504 accommodations) will be able to do this work from home, without relying on school labs that are only open during specified hours.

“AppStream 2.0 is the perfect solution to solving some of these scenarios,” says Kolb.

Enriching education

For SCRIC, an accelerated move to the cloud and cloud-based solutions has been one positive that has come out of the turmoil of the pandemic.

SCRIC sees a clear connection between its collaboration with AWS on various solutions and achieving its mission of empowering schools by delivering innovative technology solutions and exceptional support.

With standardized solutions across its school districts, SCRIC can also put more energy into providing an even better learning experience for students.

“We are here to help our learners learn and our teachers teach,” Sage says. “And that has been the mission of everything we are doing with AWS. How do we improve the ability for the teachers to get access to their materials easier, share their materials easier, have faster and better infrastructure? Everything we’re doing behind the scenes is trying to position technology to make their lives a little easier.”

This piece was developed and written by the Center for Digital Education Content Studio, with information and input from AWS.

"Going down the partner path with AWS has given us an opportunity to be a leader throughout New York state. We are on the leading edge in our educational community, which is exciting."

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Want to Support English-Learners? Prioritize SEL, New Study Finds

By Ileana Najarro

When students test out of an English-learner program, or are reclassified as proficient in English, they report a higher sense of self and a greater belief in their ability to complete challenging academic tasks, a new study finds.

Past research has examined how exiting students out of English-learner programs—and removing the label of English-learner—impacts students’ academic outcomes. Monica Lee, a senior research associate at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, and her co-author James Soland of the University of Virginia, wanted to look at what reclassification means for social-emotional learning, or SEL, outcomes.

Their study suggests that SEL strategies for English-learners should be prioritized, not sidelined, in the discussion of how to support this growing population.

It’s an especially relevant insight as more evidence emerges of how virtual learning impacted the services these students received at the start of the pandemic.

“I know it’s tempting to focus with the English-learner population on what they’re missing. They need to catch up and become proficient in this language,” Lee said. “But I do think the social-emotional aspect of this is hugely important.”

How English-learner programs overall impact students’ sense of self

English-learner programs typically consist of extra support for students mastering the English language alongside academic subjects such as math and reading. Students in these programs accounted for 10 percent of public school enrollment or 5 million students in 2019, according to the latest federal data. Policies vary across states and within school districts for determining how students exit out of the extra services.

Lee’s study analyzed survey results from English-learner students in three large school districts in California in 2014-15. The surveys asked students about their SEL skills in growth mindset, academic self-efficacy, self-management, and social awareness. The study compared results for students who were still in English-learner programs with those who tested out the prior school year. In all, the study examined results from about 10,600 students.

The researchers found that multilingual students who tested out of the English-learner programs rated themselves significantly higher in academic self-efficacy upon reclassification than did students who remained in the programs. These reclassified students reported about eight percentage points higher on that measure than the average of all the multilingual students observed. There weren’t notable differences in the other measures.

While the study couldn’t explain how or why those students who were reclassified reported these higher levels, Lee suggests three possible reasons based on past research:

• The label of English-learner might change the way students see themselves. It’s a label associated with something they cannot do, so removing it could have an impact.

• English-learner programs often offer less-rigorous academic coursework. So when a student tests out of the program and gains access to more-challenging course work, it can impact their sense of self.

• Because of the label, peers and teachers might have lower expectations of students in English-learner programs. Testing out can expose students to higher expectations, and in turn a higher sense of self.

The way an English-learner program is run can even impact students’ sense of self. For instance, some programs separate or pull out these students from mainstream classes, further stigmatizing them. But research shows that students need to be immersed in English and provided scaffolding and support at their level. Teachers, must continually monitor how they are improving and make adjustments as needed, said Megan Waugh, director of the department of English-language development for the Washoe County school district in Nevada.

The study also points to the need to address students’ social-emotional needs well before they test out of the English-learner label, Lee said.

What integrating SEL within English-learner programs looks like

Waugh and her colleague Trish Shaffer have been working on that goal for years.

For SEL strategies to work for English-learners and others, they need to be continually embedded within the school day.
That means putting them at the forefront of the planning process for content and curriculum, Waugh said.

But Washoe County schools, where 14 percent of students are in English-learner programs, take it a step further. They make sure the SEL strategies educators use in their day-to-day work is also culturally responsive and relevant to the schools’ racially and ethnically diverse student body, said Shaffer, a multi-tiered system of supports and SEL coordinator for the district.

This helps address cultural nuances. While SEL strategies for English-learners don’t fundamentally differ from those for other students, some concepts such as self-efficacy or self-awareness don’t translate neatly to other cultures, Shaffer said.

For instance, many of the district’s English-learners are Latino, and Latino culture places a greater emphasis on collectivism over individualism. So practicing self-efficacy may look more like practicing collective efficacy, such as using “we” statements rather than “I” statements.

These kinds of investments pay off in increased student engagement and student ownership of their learning, Shaffer added.

For those educators looking to dive into SEL strategies that are culturally responsive, Shaffer recommends getting stakeholder buy-in; establishing why they’re doing this work; finding evidence-based strategies that can be integrated throughout the academic day; and modeling the strategies for educators.

Lee, the researcher, was an English-learner herself back in the day, so she understands the link between social-emotional skills and academic outcomes.

“Students should flourish in ways beyond what is measurable by test scores,” Lee said.
Is Petting a Guinea Pig SEL? It’s Time to Call Out the Quacks

By Rick Hess

I recently got a marketing pitch for the Pets in the Classroom grant program. Now, classroom pets are swell. They’ve been with us since time immemorial, and I’m a fan of the assorted bunnies, hamsters, guinea pigs, and occasional reptile. But my eyebrows were raised at the PR hack’s timely new hook: “As the need for social and emotional support for students increases, teachers are turning to classroom pets.”

The press release touted the “increase in grant applications for the 2022-23 school year, issuing 15,500 grants in two short months.” It announced, “As studies prove and teachers confirm, classroom pets serve as a much needed resource for students who are experiencing anxiety, difficulty focusing, self-control problems, or who just need a friend.”

The teacher testimonials were striking in their over-the-top fervor. In the press release, one teacher was quoted enthusing, “Two students that I tested this year were eased by holding and petting the guinea pigs while they completed their evaluation.” She added that “a group of 5th graders come[s] in before school starts and during some of their recesses to spend time with guinea pigs. This group whether they know it or not are building social skills.”

There were also some remarkable survey results. A survey of teachers in the U.S. and Canada conducted by Pets in the Classroom found that “interacting with pets in an educational setting” led 98 percent of teachers to report a rise in “empathy and compassion,” “student responsibility,” and “student engagement.” I’d encourage readers to check out the survey results and accompanying research. I think it’s fair to say the proffered evidence wouldn’t pass muster with a savvy 8th grader.

Well, this is the kind of dreck we had in mind. Those with longer memories, in fact, may recall how the rush of publishers and hucksters to brand everything as “Common Core-aligned” (including some truly silly worksheets and sorry textbooks) was one of the forces that helped alienate parents and poison the well for the Common Core.

“The question,” Checker and I asked, “is what bona fide advocates are prepared to do when it comes to flagging the frauds, identifying the charlatans, [and] calling out practices that lack evidence.” Leadership entails not only explaining what advocates think SEL should be but also what it isn’t. That means, Checker and I noted, doing the uncomfortable work of “calling out those who are pitching dubious wares under the SEL banner.”

And I can tell you that the Pets in the Classroom grant program is far from the only pitch I’ve gotten like this recently. As an Ed Week blogger, a Forbes contributor, an Ed Next editor, and such, I get a lot of pitches. And I think it’s fair to say that I probably get a handful of shady “SEL-aligned” pitches every single day.

If the more serious proponents can’t keep the quacks from selling their wares under the SEL shingle, the whole enterprise is in trouble. Indeed, as Checker and I noted, “If SEL does tip toward the lax and banal, history suggests that it will likely have a relatively short shelf life, much like the self-esteem fad of the 1980s.”

When 19,000 grants are going out under the banner of SEL in order to help students visit guinea pigs during recess, it’s fair to say that the hucksters are riding high. The question is what SEL’s more responsible leaders are prepared to do about it.

Rick Hess is a resident scholar and the director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. He writes the Education Week opinion blog “Rick Hess Straight Up.”
‘There’s No Such Thing as Bad Emotions’ and Other Truths Students Need to Know

By Marc A. Brackett

How do I help students talk about their feelings?

Kids are not going to talk about their feelings unless you talk about your feelings. I answered questions about this topic for Character Lab as a Tip of the Week:

Most people want to be more emotionally intelligent, but how do we do that?

I use the acronym RULER to talk about five essential skills. The first R is recognizing emotions in myself and others. That’s paying attention to my physiology, to where my brain is taking me. It’s paying attention to your facial expressions, vocal tone, body language—trying to make meaning out of that.

The U is understanding emotion—the causes and the consequences of feelings. What makes me feel angry? What makes you feel angry? Anger is about injustice, but what I see as an injustice and what you see as an injustice might be different.

L is labeling emotions—having that precise word. E is expressing emotions—knowing how and when to express emotions with different people across contexts and cultures. And then the final R of RULER is the regulation of emotion. These are the strategies we use to help us prevent or reduce unwanted emotions and initiate the ones that we want to have.

Where do you think people have the most trouble?

Labeling. Most people have not been brought up with an advanced emotional vocabulary, and even when they learn words, they don’t really know what they mean. Everybody’s stressed. Or anxious. But do they know the difference? My research shows that most people clump together the anxiety, the stress, the fear, the pressure, the overwhelm, the worry. It’s all one big clump of red on our mood meter. That makes it hard to find the best strategy to regulate those feelings.

What’s the mood meter?

The mood meter is a tool that helps you plot how you feel as a product of two dimensions: pleasantness and energy. If you’re high pleasant but low in energy, you’re in the green—chilled out. If you’re unpleasant with a lot of energy, you’re in the red—the angry emotions. And if you’re unpleasant with a little bit of energy, you’re in the blue—sad.

The mood meter helps us take all the complexities that are in our minds and bodies and put it into an emotion space. It’s easy for people to say, I’m in the yellow or green or blue or red. And then from there, we can get more granular by asking people questions. “Well, what’s happening for you right now?” “Oh, I’m doing an interview, that’s exciting.” “I’m about to go to bed. I’m tired.” “I’m about to do a presentation—I’m overwhelmed.”

How can I better understand my emotions?

Download the app How We Feel, which provides definitions for 144 emotions and 36 research-based strategies. The app can help you build a more advanced emotional vocabulary and understand how your feelings are linked to things like the people you’re with and what
you’re doing. And you can track that over time. If you set reminders throughout the day—you’re at home, you’re at school, you’re at the gym—and you’re plotting your emotions over the course of a month, you can analyze your data to see what color quadrant you’ve been in and in what context with whom.

It can be very eye-opening because some people think, “Oh, I’m always in the red.” And that might be because they only think about their feelings when they’re in the red. Whereas, when they use the tool and plot themselves throughout the day, they start realizing, “Actually, I do experience wider and more pleasant emotions.”

What do people get wrong about emotions?

People sometimes think of anger and stress and anxiety as bad. But there are no bad emotions. All emotions are information. Let’s say you have a kid or a significant other and you’re plotting yourself in the red with those people, you’re angry. That’s an indication that you’ve got to work on your relationships. It’s not a bad thing.

You’ll want to ask yourself, what’s going on in your life? Is it that you have no space? Is it the people you’re with who are bringing you into the red? Is it your work? And then start setting goals—say, I want to be 5 percent less red next week. You’re not going to get rid of your red. Because life is about being in the red and blue. We’re complex people who should feel the full range of emotions.

How can we teach kids about emotional intelligence?

Be a role model. Parents and teachers want me to teach them the tricks of nurturing an emotionally intelligent child. And what they don’t realize is that the real trick is their own development of the skills and modeling them.

Kids are not going to talk about their feelings unless you talk about your feelings. Not when your head is spinning out of irritation. But maybe in the morning you can say, “Hey, how are you doing today? Last night, I didn’t sleep so well, and I’m kind of irritable this morning. I just want to let you know that if I look a little off today, it’s not because of you. It’s just that I’m trying to get myself together.” Talking about feelings every day—it’s just part of who we are. We talk about feelings here.

Marc A. Brackett, the founder and director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and a professor in the Child Study Center of Yale University, is the author of Permission to Feel.
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