



—Louis DeLuca/Education Week

# SEL for Emotional Intelligence

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Social-emotional learning can grow student's emotional intelligence by helping them to understand their emotions, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. This Spotlight will help you identify what classifies as SEL; implement an effective SEL program; understand how educators view SEL; best practices for helping English learners master a second language and develop SEL skills simultaneously; tips for engaging families to promote SEL; and more.

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## What Does SEL Mean Anyway? 7 Experts Break It Down

By Arianna Prothero

**I**mmerse 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



—Louis DeLuca/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 by teaching how to develop and maintain relationships even when we disagree or are different from one another. SEL is like the mortar. It connects practices, skills, and emotions to help us create a healthy identity. 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 empathetic, 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* ■

# Reduce School Violence and Improve Student Outcomes with Mindsets-Based Learning

Concerns about school violence are widespread, but there is evidence that mindsets-based learning programs can help districts counter this violence.

By empowering students to live lives of passion and purpose, mindsets-based learning can positively change the way students think about themselves, so they make positive choices for their future.

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“We need to teach kids how to love themselves. For me, that was the number one most important thing because kids that love, appreciate, accept themselves, then can do that with others, are not going to want to cause harm to themselves or to others.”

SCARLETT LEWIS, FOUNDER  
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Published November 7, 2022

## Building an Effective SEL Program: Lessons From 3 Districts

By Arianna Prothero

**F**lush with COVID-19 relief aid and scrambling to meet students' soaring emotional needs at the height of the pandemic, many school districts invested heavily in social-emotional learning.

And that momentum doesn't appear to be slowing down: 61 percent of school and district leaders said in an EdWeek Research Center survey this fall that they expect funding and resources for SEL to increase over the next two years.

But how can schools ensure that those investments are sustainable and lead to results? Education Week spoke with three districts that have been implementing social-emotional learning districtwide for at least a decade to learn what has worked, what hasn't, and what are the key elements to success. Among them: getting input from students, figuring out how to measure the seemingly unmeasurable, and focusing on adult SEL.

These districts—Austin Independent in Texas, Warren City in Ohio, and Washoe County in Nevada—have done this work while overcoming leadership turnover, staff skepticism, and, of course, a life-altering pandemic.

"When we started this work, nobody knew what social-emotional learning was and it really invoked thoughts of rainbows, and holding hands, and singing kumbaya, and connecting it to academic and life outcomes was a huge challenge back then," said Trish Shaffer, who is in charge of social-emotional learning for the Washoe district. "Now ... talking about adult social-emotional competence and adult well-being is something that is commonplace. And we have parents and families who understand the need for social-emotional well-being, and they're moving beyond this idea that social-emotional well-being is for others or indicates that something is wrong."

Even with a surge of interest and funding, schools are still battling headwinds when it comes to teaching social-emotional learning—a concept that involves teaching kids non-academic skills, such as resiliency, empathy, goal setting, responsible decisionmaking, and emotional management to be successful in school, work, and life.

Nearly half of educators surveyed by the



—Daniel Lozada for Education Week

Third-grade teacher Stephanie Brugler works with her class during an SEL lesson in November at the Jefferson PK-8 school in Warren, Ohio.

EdWeek Research Center this fall say that trying to catch students up academically is a major challenge to teaching SEL. Insufficient professional development and students' overwhelming social-emotional needs rounded out the top three barriers to teaching social-emotional learning, according to the survey.

More than half of educators describe efforts to incorporate social-emotional learning into academic subjects as challenging. Fifty-three percent said it is "somewhat challenging," and 9 percent said it is "very challenging." Twenty-nine percent indicated it is "not very challenging," and 9 percent said it "not at all challenging."

The vast majority of educators indicate that the impact of SEL on students' academic outcomes has been positive, with 83 percent saying that is the case. But the force of that impact is somewhat muted: 51 percent say it has been only somewhat positive, and 32 percent say the impact of SEL on classrooms has been very positive.

### 1. Start with the adults

There are some key factors that contribute to the success of social-emotional learning,

such as high-quality, evidence-based curricula; integrating social-emotional learning into academic subjects; and, finally, a school culture and climate that supports social-emotional learning.

Leaders in all three districts that Education Week spoke with were emphatic on this point: The adults in the school building need to build their social-emotional competencies before they can impart these skills to students.

It's a lesson several of them said they had to learn the hard way.

"We focused a lot on the children at first, and we had quite a few principals tell us that they felt the adults—the teachers and administrators—really needed to do their own SEL work and evaluate what their skill sets were and the areas they needed to work on in order to be able to effectively model and teach those skill sets to the kids," said Caroline Chase, the former assistant director of SEL for Austin schools. "That was a huge one we learned, early."

That means professional development is a must—and not just one-time PD, but a continuous drip, said Stacia Paschel, the current director of social-emotional learning for the Austin district. Like any other subject, edu-

cators need to have a solid understanding of what social-emotional learning is in order to feel prepared to teach these skills.

But according to the EdWeek Research Center survey, not all educators are describing their SEL professional-development experiences as home runs. Nearly 3 in 10 described their experiences as “ineffective.”

Putting SEL to work with adults doesn’t just mean professional development around how to teach social-emotional skills, it’s also important for educators to know how to incorporate those skills into their daily lives and interactions, said Mike Gifford, the principal of the Academy of Arts, Careers and Technology in Washoe County.

“One thing I think we could have done a better job of is prepping the school leaders with why we were doing this work and how they could incorporate it into their daily interactions at school,” said Gifford, who used to work in the district’s SEL department. “It doesn’t have to be this brand-new thing; it can be how you greet people in the hallway.”

## 2. Get teacher and principal support in meaningful ways

In addition to robust professional development, coaxing out teacher and principal buy-in instead of strong-arming educators into taking on SEL is another important strategy.

The Washoe school district started rolling out its social-emotional-learning initiative first with the principals and teachers who were interested in it—an approach Gifford said created a lot of SEL ambassadors and organically seeded interest in the idea.

But even with the best strategy, there will be holdouts and people who push back, he said. As a principal, Gifford makes time to meet with them individually to hear their concerns.

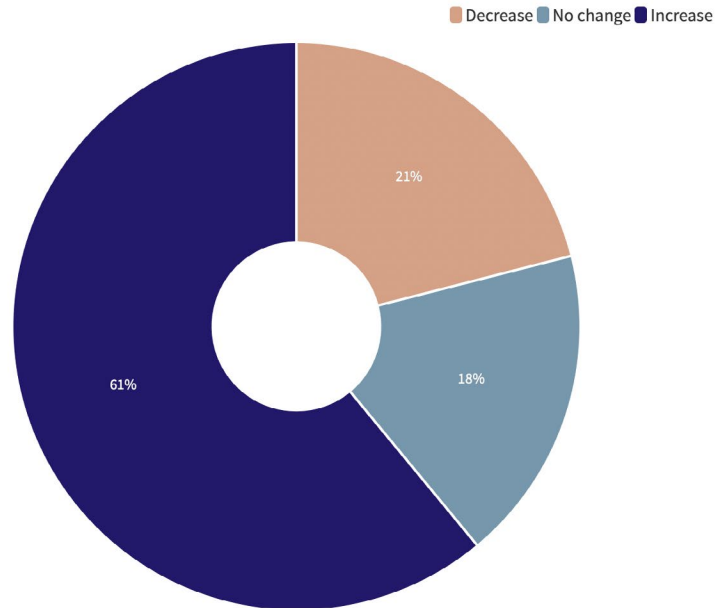
“A lot of people who are skeptical of SEL are numbers people, and they don’t see the numbers in SEL, so you have to show them what the data says,” he said.

School and district leaders shouldn’t expect to get 100 percent buy-in, but they can get close, Gifford said.

And it’s important to emphasize that teaching SEL skills isn’t a job limited to just the teaching staff—it’s something every adult in the building can impart and model, said Shaffer.

“Each role, from the superintendent to bus drivers, to principals, to teachers, needs to understand what piece of social-emotional learning they own,” she said.

## How, if at all, do you expect the funding/resources invested in social-emotional learning in your district or school to change in the next two years?



\*Results show responses from principals and district leaders. SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, October 2022



A Flourish chart

In addition to buy-in, school and district leadership should also seek educator input. That’s something Jill Merolla, the SEL coordinator for the Warren City schools said she wishes her district had done. In hindsight, she said it would have helped if her district had identified teacher advisers to work along with district leadership and outside consultants when it first started implementing its social-emotional-learning programs.

“I was a teacher a long time ago; I don’t live in that world anymore,” Merolla said. “We did include our school counselors who are in our school buildings, but they aren’t teaching. I think we’re ... maybe backtracking a little bit on going a little deeper into [teachers’] view of what we’re doing and how [SEL] can be improved.”

## 3. Seek out and use students’ input

Using students’ perspectives, concerns, and feedback to help guide implementation and continue to fine-tune the evolution of SEL in schools—or student voice, in SEL parlance—has been another crucial piece to establishing programs that deliver results, according to leaders from all three districts.

Promoting and using student voice can take a variety of forms.

The Austin schools recently created a student-equity council that has a representative from each high school in the district. The council helps advise and inform decisions at the district’s upper-leadership level.

In addition to creating student-advisory committees on topics such as mental health, student engagement, and safe and healthy schools, the Washoe County school system also holds an annual student conference. Students give presentations and lead breakout sessions with staff and community members to discuss challenges in their schools.

In the Warren City schools, students participate in focus groups where they provide insight to educators and district leadership.

Finally, regularly surveying students—a strategy used by all three districts—gives educators valuable insight into students’ experiences in the building, said Dante Capers, the associate superintendent of student services, wellness, and success in the Ohio district.

He’s found that the solutions to the problems and concerns students raise in the surveys are often relatively low lifts and that addressing those issues is an important way to create an environment where social-emotional learning can thrive. On some recent surveys, Dante said, students requested changes to improve school climate and safety—from

creating more opportunities for positive celebrations to having adults more visible in the hallways.

“Our students, especially in the middle and high schools, had a really high response rate about their academic goals for this year,” he said. “The challenge that was given to the buildings was, ‘OK, how do we leverage that? Let’s identify what those goals are, let’s have kids talk about those goals so we can support and hold them accountable to those goals throughout the year.’”

#### 4. Figure out how to measure impact as best as you can

Measuring the success of social-emotional learning in schools has long been a challenge. How does a teacher, school, or district gauge improvement in intangibles like emotional self-control or persistence without a concrete measurement tool like a test?

The short answer: It is not easy. But between student surveys and data that schools are already collecting, it can be done, according to the educators from these three districts.

Twenty-three percent of educators say their school or district has not evaluated the impact of social-emotional learning on students at all in the past two years. A quarter said their school or district has placed “a little” emphasis on evaluating the impact of its SEL programming, and 33 percent indicated there has been “some” emphasis. The smallest share—19 percent—reported their school or district has put “a lot” of emphasis on evaluating SEL.

One way the Washoe County district approaches the challenge is through surveying students on their social-emotional skills.

Asking students how well they rate their own abilities is an imperfect measure, but the district has found that students who report higher social-emotional competencies on their annual student survey have significantly higher reading- and math-test scores and high school GPAs, as well as lower rates of suspension and absenteeism. They are also less likely to drop out and more likely to graduate on time.

Schools can also use students’ ratings of their social-emotional skills to figure out where students’ weaknesses and strengths are.

“Our kids tell us overwhelmingly that being polite to an adult whether they know them or not is very easy for them because from the time they are in kindergarten we teach them that,” said Shaffer. “But they also tell us that talking to someone they don’t know or invit-

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Turning that responsiveness into passion and giving them space to lead ensures that the work endures and doesn’t rest with just one leader or one person.”

#### DANTE CAPERS

Associate Superintendent,  
Warren City, OH

ing a student they don’t know into their friend group is difficult or telling a friend when they are upset or stressed is difficult.”

In addition to examining survey data, the Washoe district also considers data on academic achievement, attendance rates, behavioral referrals, graduation rates, and participation in sports and other extracurricular activities.

Measuring the impact of social-emotional learning, said Paschel, is a qualitative exercise that requires looking for trends and connections in a smorgasbord of data.

“Let’s take discipline referrals for example. How do I look at discipline referrals that I have for this cohort of students as they move throughout their day?” she said. “What is it about when these students are in this area, or this time of day, or with this teacher that is different than when they are in this area, or this time of day, because the students are the same. What is the difference with campuses that explicitly plan for transformative SEL practices versus the academic outcomes in campuses that do not?”

#### 5. Build programs that will survive school district leadership turnover

To see results, social-emotional learning must be sustained. And that can be a challenge with inevitable turnover in most school districts, especially at the leadership level.

“[Superintendents] have a shelf life of three to five years,” said Shaffer. She said the key to SEL’s longevity in her district is that,

even though she oversees it, it’s collectively owned. “Principals own it in their building, teachers in their classrooms, our families own it in their homes, students own it within our student voice work.”

Deeply embedding SEL in school and district culture insulates it from turnover and changing priorities, said Shaffer. In the Washoe schools, Shaffer said SEL is now embedded in nearly everything—from principals opening a meeting with their staff with a warm welcome to teachers ending class on an optimistic, forward-looking note.

“It’s who we are,” she said.

Building that deep commitment among principals, teachers, school counselors, and other staff who will champion the work through leadership turnover has also been instrumental in sustaining social-emotional learning in Warren City, said Capers.

“Turning that responsiveness into passion and giving them space to lead,” he said. “That ensures that the work endures and doesn’t rest with just one leader or one person.”

As Warren City’s SEL program has matured, the district has moved toward doing more of its training in-house. Investing in school counselors and having them act as SEL coaches not only makes the training more relevant and tailored to each school, said Merolla, it also makes delivering professional development more sustainable over the long run when the district doesn’t have to hire expensive consultants.

Outside investment in SEL—whether through grants or partnerships—also helps provide a powerful incentive for new leadership to continue to invest in social-emotional learning, said Merolla.

The resources and personnel a district or school puts into its social-emotional-learning initiatives not only helps anchor SEL in the district, said Paschel, it also sends a silent but clear message about leadership’s level of commitment to the idea.

“Organizational charts speak to your values as a district,” said Paschel. “If you have one person who is trying to do this work for the whole district, that says something. You have to have the manpower to support this implementation until campuses have sustainability to keep going.” ■

#### Additional Resource

To view the charts that accompany this article, click [here](#).



—DigitalVision Vectors/Getty

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## Make SEL Work by Applying These 6 Best Practices

By Libby Stanford

**D**istricts have incorporated social-emotional-learning principles into programs and curricula for decades as an effort to teach students how to manage emotions, achieve goals, show empathy, and build strong relationships. But there is still plenty of room for improvement.

Eighty-six percent of teachers, principals, and school district leaders told the EdWeek Research Center that their schools or districts teach social-emotional learning, according to a survey of 824 educators conducted Sept. 28 through Oct. 17. And 83 percent of survey respondents said that SEL has had a positive impact on their students' academic performance.

Putting in place SEL programs that are effective depends on a few key factors, including how they're implemented, whether the needs of all students are being considered, and whether the program is universal, researchers say.

"Effective SEL can be consolidated into one concept, and that is implementing SEL systematically across all the schools and the district rather than just within the classroom," said Julia Mahfouz, an educational leadership professor at the University of Colorado-Denver.

Researchers recommend the following best practices for teachers, principals, and district leaders looking to implement or revitalize SEL programs and curricula:

### 1. Use evidence-based practices

SEL is most effective when it's backed up by research and data, researchers say.

Organizations like the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, and the Committee for Children provide a host of resources on their websites to help districts develop evidence-based SEL practices.

"It's really important that if you're going to develop a program or use a program, that it's really based in research and that there's a good translation of research into practice," said Tia Kim, the vice president of education, research, and impact at Committee for Children, a Seattle-based nonprofit that offers SEL programs to school districts.

Over time, districts should also be using their own data collection to assess the effectiveness of SEL even though evaluating that impact can be messy and imperfect. It's important for schools and districts to evaluate whether students are engaged in SEL content

and how easy or difficult it is for teachers to adapt SEL principles to their own teaching styles, Kim said. Equally as important, school and district leaders should use the findings from that data to adjust and adapt their programs to ensure they're effective.

Committee for Children has also started working with districts to survey students to assess their schools' SEL programs, she said.

"Sometimes, we are missing the youth voice and we're really trying to develop programs for kids, so you need to know how it's resonating with them," Kim said.

### 2. Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. That will help prioritize equity

A one-size-fits-all approach won't work when it comes to SEL. Instead, it's necessary for school and district leaders to ensure that SEL meets the individualized needs of their community and the students they serve, said Sherrie Raven, the director of SEL implementation at CASEL.

One of the best ways to go about that is to set up a steering committee or advisory board made up of stakeholders from all parts of the school or district community, including parents, teachers, and school and district staff members.

"We know that social-emotional learning isn't one-size fits-all," Raven said. "And we know that it is, necessarily, shaped and determined by the community that it's in."

For example, school and district leaders can customize SEL based on a school's racial demographics, socio-economic statuses, and knowledge of potentially traumatic events that have occurred in a community. All of those factors can inform how teachers approach SEL, what SEL-specific lessons are taught in the classroom, and what kind of misconceptions surrounding SEL might be prevalent in a community.

CASEL recommends that schools create robust partnerships with parents and community groups, have regular meetings and calls with families and parents to provide updates on students' SEL progress, and develop relationships so that teachers and school leaders understand the cultural differences between a student's home life and school experience.

By gathering feedback from stakeholders, school and district leaders can have a better understanding of the cultural context for their schools and communities, which will ultimately lead to a more equitable implementation of SEL, Mahfouz said.

“You can’t just bring any kind of SEL and say, ‘I’m implementing SEL,’ when there are certain specific needs within that school,” she said. If school and district leaders don’t apply cultural context and have an equity mindset when it comes to SEL practices, they won’t have effective SEL, Mahfouz added.

To take it further, schools and districts should embed SEL into the mission, vision, and strategic plan of the school and district, Mahfouz said. That way, it’s communicated to all stakeholders that SEL is a part of the everyday operations of a school.

Ultimately, if SEL isn’t equitable, it shouldn’t be considered SEL, Mahfouz said.

“Equity is embedded in SEL,” she said. “The idea of, let’s say, inserting equity language without actually doing the inner work is not SEL.”

### 3. Embed social-emotional learning into both daily lessons and standard curriculum

Researchers say SEL should be systemic and embedded into all parts of the school system. That means it should include both lesson plans specific to the practice and a curriculum that has SEL embedded within it.

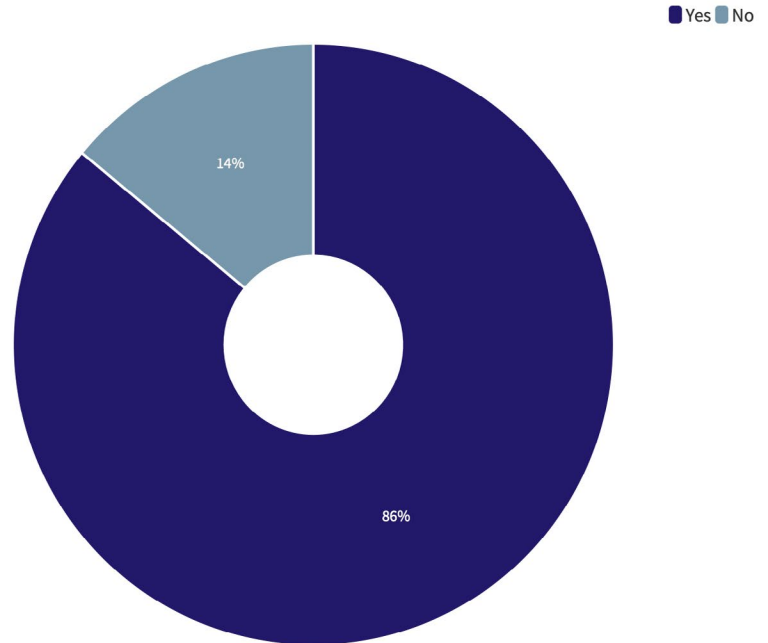
In the October EdWeek Research Center survey, 38 percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders said their school or district “both set time aside during the school day to explicitly teach social-emotional skills and integrates social-emotional learning into academic subjects.”

A third of the respondents said social-emotional learning is integrated into academic subjects but their school or district doesn’t set aside specific time for teaching social-emotional skills. Nearly a third of respondents said the opposite—time is set aside to explicitly teach SEL but it’s not integrated into academic subjects.

“If social-emotional learning is only these 30-minute lessons ... and then you turn around and ignore it, it’s not going to stick because students aren’t practicing it,” Raven said.

Integration of SEL into the curriculum can take many forms. For example, it can be as simple as a teacher helping a student who is struggling with a math problem by reminding the student how they can persevere to get through hard things. Or it can be a little more involved, such as providing a forum for students to debate curriculum topics or creating opportunities for group work in lesson plans so students can learn to work as a team and create social connections.

## Does your district or school teach social-emotional learning?



\*Results show responses from teachers, principals, and district leaders. SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, October 2022



A Flourish chart

“You can’t just bring any kind of SEL and say, ‘I’m implementing SEL,’ when there are certain specific needs within that school.”

**JULIA MAHFOUZ**  
Professor of Education Leadership,  
University of Colorado-Denver

### 4. Ensure everyone is involved, not just the students

When done right, social-emotional learning should involve everyone in a school environment, not just the students. Raven, Mahfouz, and Kim all recommend that school and district leaders ensure their school staff are participating in their own social-emotional

learning so they can be equipped to both teach SEL and model it for students.

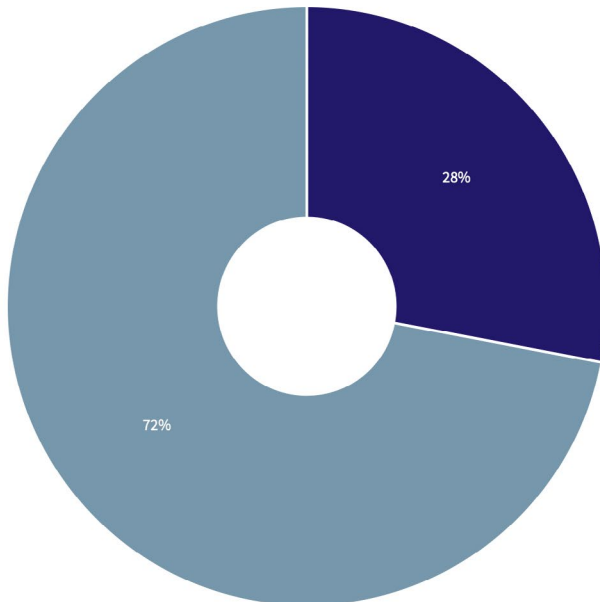
While most people think of SEL as a way to help students learn “soft skills,” it can also be greatly beneficial for teachers, principals, district leaders, and even support staff. In the classroom, teachers can use the tenets of social-emotional learning to improve classroom-management skills, learn how to better engage students of different backgrounds in learning, and have fair and clear behavioral expectations, Kim said.

Professional development is “key to having good implementation and sustainability of SEL programs, not only within a school year but through multiple school years,” she said.

Learning how to put these skills to work is especially important for principals because they can influence the overall climate of the school, Mahfouz, the CU-Denver professor, said. Mahfouz, alongside Susan Davis, an SEL coordinator at St. Vrain Valley School District in Longmont, Colo., Melissa Lettis, dean of students at St. Vrain Valley Schools, and Margaret Vaughn, an education professor at Washington State University, found that principals with these skills are more prepared to handle inequitable situations by helping teachers recognize their own implicit biases toward students.

## How would you describe the professional development you—or if you are an administrator—the teachers in your district or school have received on teaching social-emotional skills?

■ Ineffective ■ Effective



\*Results show responses from teachers, principals, and district leaders.  
SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, October 2022



A Flourish chart

“Principals’ social-emotional competencies, well-being, and leadership form that foundation that influences the overall climate, teacher functioning and well-being, the family and community partnerships, and the whole downstream to student outcomes,” Mahfouz emphasized.

Raven also discovered the value of involving adults in more meaningful ways when she was the SEL director for the Austin Independent school district. At the time, Raven and her team thought they would be able to create effective social-emotional-learning strategies by simply teaching them to the students.

“The biggest misstep we made at the beginning was thinking we could start a social-emotional-learning program for students without doing the work with the adults first,” Raven said.

### 5. Develop strategies that address all student age groups

When people think of SEL, they often limit themselves to imagining how it’ll look

for students at the elementary school level with children learning how to read emotions, practice their handshakes, or craft sincere apologies. But effective approaches should go beyond elementary school and be implemented throughout the curriculum at all age levels, Raven said.

“I don’t think [SEL] ever ends,” she said. “As adults, we’re always learning, too, but I think the look of it might change. The instruction might be more explicit when you’re in elementary school. When you’re in middle school and high school, it might be more about integrating it into the academics and reinforcing what you’ve already learned.”

Social-emotional learning can take many forms at different points in the education journey. For secondary students, it can include allotted time for self-reflection or group discussions about real-world events and how students are responding to them, Kim said.

“Historically, what we find is that there seems to be a lot of engagement and buy-in at particularly the elementary school level in teaching social-emotional learning,”

Kim said. “But we do know social-emotional learning and development is a lifelong process and that we have to be constantly honing the skills and learning about them and supporting the skills both inside the classroom and out.”

### 6. Be proactive by being more transparent about what is being taught

In recent years, SEL has become tied up in political arguments over racism, sexuality, and gender identity and critical race theory, the academic concept that says race is a social construct embedded into legal systems and policies. In some instances, conservative political groups and politicians claimed social-emotional learning and equity are linked to critical race theory, which schools and experts say they are not.

Forty-one percent of school and district leaders said they’ve received feedback from parents concerned that SEL is teaching their children values they don’t approve of, according to the EdWeek Research Center’s October survey. Of those 41 percent who received pushback, 58 percent said they haven’t changed their emphasis on social-emotional learning, 28 percent said they’ve started emphasizing SEL more, and 14 percent said they’ve emphasized it less.

“When we think about all of the, in many ways, false conflicts that have been created and brought up around social-emotional learning and all of the rhetoric about what social-emotional learning is that’s not accurate, we know that people in districts are having to deal with that,” Raven said.

Involving the community and knowing it well can help school and district leaders navigate concerns, she said. Sometimes, that means being more transparent about curriculum and allowing parents and community members to view the exact lessons students are learning.

It could also mean being more proactive on the front end by clearly explaining to parents and the community that SEL teaches students basic life skills such as communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving, Kim said.

“If people start to really understand what it is, then I think some of the misconceptions around it can kind of go away,” Kim said. ■

#### Additional Resource

To view the charts that accompany this article, click [here](#).

# Using Mindsets-based Learning to Counter School and Community Violence

Over the past decade, many school districts across the country have embraced social-emotional learning (SEL) programs to promote positive behavior among students and address conduct problems such as bullying. The COVID-19 pandemic further popularized these programs because remote learning and isolation caused many students to suffer both academically and emotionally. SEL programs have shown potential to address yet another challenge: They can serve to combat school- and community-based violence as an integral part of a district's comprehensive antiviolence efforts.

Concerns about school- and community-based violence are widespread. While data show that incidents of bullying decreased during the pandemic, that trend reversed as students returned to in-person learning. School shootings continue to impact communities nationwide, and violent crime such as homicides affects increasingly younger individuals.

School-based SEL programs can deter violence by helping youth develop social skills and self-awareness. They also shift the focus toward positive student behavior and away from negative attitudes and behaviors that can result in conflict.

There's evidence that SEL programs can help districts counter school and community violence. **One evaluation** of more than 200 school-based SEL programs showed that the programs helped students to not only improve relationships and their academics but also reduce conduct problems, substance use, and emotional distress. By empowering students to live lives of passion and purpose, SEL can positively change the way youth think about themselves so they make positive choices for their future.

## *10 Ways SEL Counters School and Community Violence*

Educators and advocates who have developed SEL programs and implemented them in schools and districts have seen the results in terms of improved student behavior as well as significant decreases in community violence. While SEL programs vary, there are several commonalities and overlapping strategies that can help young people manage their emotions, feel connected, and have healthy relationships with themselves and others.

**“ We need to teach kids how to love themselves. For me, that was the number one most important thing because kids that love, appreciate, accept themselves, then can do that with others, are not going to want to cause harm to themselves or to others.”**

– Scarlett Lewis, Founder  
Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement

How can SEL counter violence? By proactively focusing on prevention and root causes. The most successful school-based SEL programs:

### *1. Address the mindset of youth.*

One effective program confronted the issue of gun violence in the community by starting with how young people think, helping students to focus on what they value. If young people can identify what's most important to them – sports, family, getting into college – they are less likely to make choices that could jeopardize their futures. By homing in on what students feel passionate about, SEL lessons can remind youth what matters to them and motivate them to protect it. Educators implementing SEL in schools have observed that when young people learn to value, love, and accept themselves, they intentionally put themselves in favorable situations and make better decisions.

## *2. Help students separate impulse from action.*

In the heat of the moment, a young person in crisis might make a choice they regret and one that can impact them for the rest of their lives. An SEL culture and lessons can help students to pause between the impulse to act and the action itself. With that skill, students have the opportunity to think critically about their decisions before, or instead of, simply acting on them. Notably, when youth start to make healthier decisions, their behavior, relationships, and grades benefit.

## *3. Increase emotional intelligence and empathy.*

Educators recognize that young people often don't know what they're feeling or how to cope with strong emotions. With the structure and support of daily or weekly SEL sessions, they can learn how to name their feelings, share them with others, and ask for help. This insight is the first step to coping more effectively and positively with emotions rather than reacting to them. Once students learn to understand their own feelings, they can begin to advocate for themselves and others. When a school creates opportunities for students to share their experiences and perspectives, it also fosters community.

## *4. Address all students.*

Some anti-violence programs target students who are most at risk of committing or becoming victims of violence, for good reason. But there are other students who may be just one bad decision away from making the wrong choice. To prevent violence throughout a school and community, the SEL program should engage those students who are also making good choices so they have the foundation and skills to stay on the right path. One SEL leader used a color-coded system – green, yellow, and red – to categorize students from least at risk to most to address them all.

## *5. Show data-driven results.*

To be an effective part of an anti-violence effort, the SEL program should include an evaluation process to measure results. In a district that saw a dramatic reduction in community violence, administrators tracked student misconduct, including referrals, suspensions, and incidents of bullying and fighting. The programs that demonstrate concrete results should be continued. The data can also be used to make a case for introducing or replicating a program in a community.

## *6. Infuse SEL throughout the community.*

When an SEL curriculum proved effective and popular in one school, an educator spread the word districtwide and recommended the program to other schools, youth organizations, and sports and summer programs. As the word got out, the community embraced the approach and wanted to learn more. The educator offered an open training and even invited parents. The reach and pervasiveness of the program had tangible results in reducing crime in the community by 21 percent and homicides by 66 percent.

**“ Our focus is to place the value on young people, have them value themselves, and they intentionally make better decisions.”**

– JoJuan Armour, Former Program Manager  
Mayor's Initiative to Reduce Gun Violence, Toledo, OH

## *7. Promote post-traumatic growth.*

Both victims and perpetrators of violence experience pain and trauma. An SEL program provides youth with the skills, tools, and self-awareness to work through that pain. Rather than resisting or avoiding pain, young people can build the courage to face it and learn from it. Instead of being destroyed by painful experiences or acting out aggressively, they can grow stronger and more resilient.

## *8. Build a compassionate, connected school culture.*

To the extent that SEL programming emphasizes allowing students to safely air their grievances and be heard, it supports a positive school culture. Every child should have a caring adult they can turn to. A school or district that creates a culture of psychological safety teaches children they are going to be listened to, respected, and protected. In that environment, students can learn how to positively advocate for themselves and others.

## *9. Use positive peer pressure.*

One SEL education leader enlisted high school students to facilitate the curriculum for elementary and middle school students. It was beneficial in part because young children are more likely to listen to an older child or teen than to an adult. These older students reminded the younger ones of a sibling or cousin, increasing their engagement. The real improvement in behavior came when the older kids began to model respectful behavior for their younger peers.

## *10. Foster forgiveness and gratitude.*

Instead of holding on to grudges, an effective SEL program promotes forgiveness, which benefits both perpetrators and victims of violence. Forgiveness helps release pain and rebuild relationships. From a place of forgiveness, young people can shift the focus of their thinking from the negative, seek the positives from everyday experience, and even be grateful in the face of adversity.

**Watch the Webinar!** To learn more about using SEL to counter school and community violence, view the webinar, **Using SEL to Counter School and Community Violence** presented by Scarlett Lewis and JoJuan Armour.

### **About 7 Mindsets**

Founded in 2009, 7 Mindsets is the only highly researched education company offering mindsets-based solutions proven to drive happier, healthier, and more successful outcomes for educators and students. These comprehensive PreK-12 programs include a digital curriculum in English and Spanish, professional learning, adult SEL, progress monitoring, and assessments to ensure educators can easily and effectively deliver 7 Mindsets in their classrooms. Proven to improve student engagement, behavior, and academic success, 7 Mindsets has supported millions of students and hundreds of thousands of educators in urban, suburban, and rural districts in all 50 states. [Learn more.](#)

Published November 7, 2022

# How Educators View Social-Emotional Learning, in Charts

By Kevin Bushweller

**Y**ou might think that the politically charged attacks against social-emotional learning highlighted in the news media would be chipping away at educator support nationwide for the approach.

But, so far, that appears not to be the case, according to recent survey data from the EdWeek Research Center. More than a third of the teachers, principals, and district leaders surveyed said social-emotional learning, or SEL, was one of many strategies available to them; more than a quarter said it was a transformational way to improve schools; and almost a quarter said it was a promising idea. Just 9 percent said it was a passing fad.

It's important to remember that social-emotional learning differs from providing mental health services. SEL teaches skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, and collaboration to help students develop into well-rounded, confident people who can work well with others. It does not provide diagnostic or clinical treatment for mental health conditions.

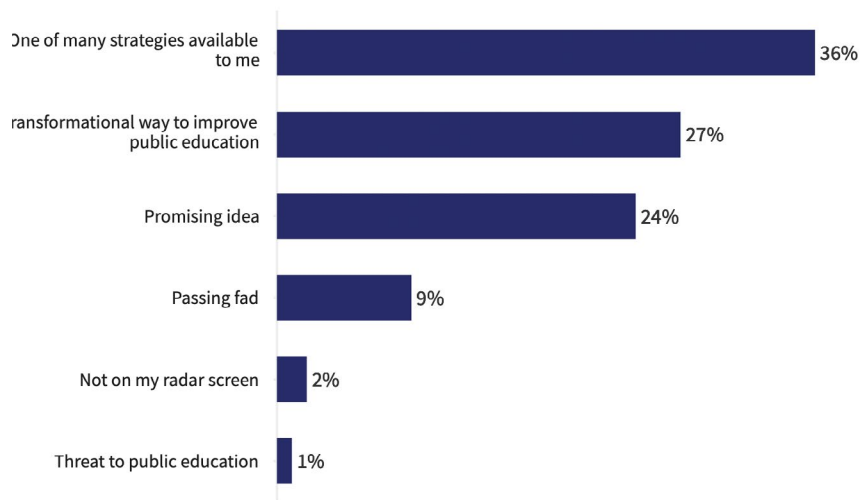
But some school district SEL programs have run up against intense opposition from parents and politicians, who take issue with how SEL development is being linked to learning about racism, sexism, and LGBTQ issues.

Even so, as the following charts show, support for SEL among educators remains strong across the country and is seen by many as a strategy that will also help improve academic performance. ■

### Additional Resource

To view the charts that accompany this article, click [here](#).

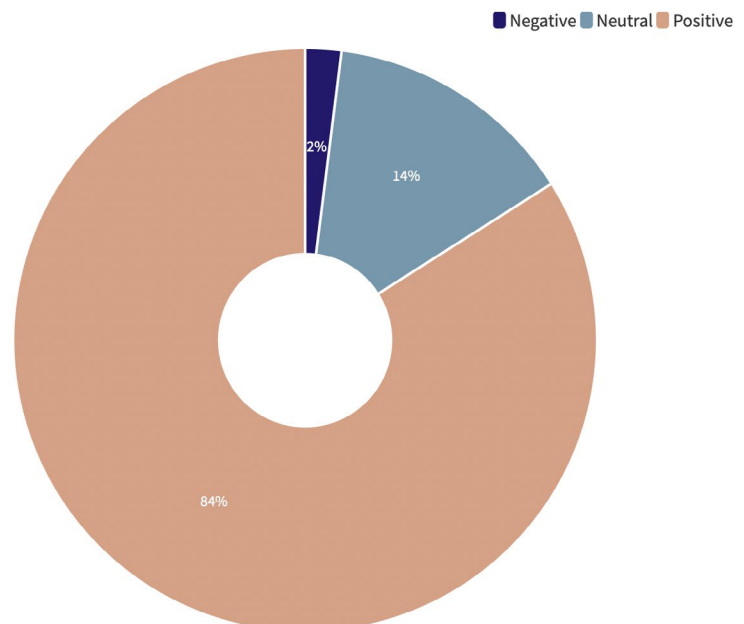
## Which of the following statements best describes the way you view social-emotional learning?



\*Results show responses from teachers, principals, and district leaders. SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, October 2022



## In your opinion, what kind of impact does the social-emotional learning conducted in your classroom, district, or school have on students' so-called "soft skills"—such as the ability to collaborate, communicate, be creative, and think critically?



\*Results show responses from teachers, principals, and district leaders. SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, October 2022



Published December 9, 2022

## 4 Ways to Build Social-Emotional Skills for English Learners

By Alyson Klein

**W**eaving social-emotional learning into academics is hard. But schools with high populations of English learners have an extra challenge: They are working to build up students' mastery of a second language, even as they are trying to teach them skills like persistence, collaboration, and stress management.

Londyn Lallavais is a dean of students at Metro Nashville's McMurray Middle School, where 98 percent of students are English learners. Recent research has shown that SEL is particularly powerful for this population of students.

The school has gone deep on SEL over the past couple of years, with support from Kyla Kregel, the district's director of social-emotional learning.

Lallavais and Kregel were featured guests for an online panel discussion about SEL on Dec. 8 that was part of an Education Week K-12 Essentials Forum.

"Just from last year, to where we currently are, we have seen a decrease in our number of office referrals. We've seen an increase in student engagement," she said. "We've seen an increase in attendance. And we've seen an increase in students wanting to be here and wanting to be involved in extracurricular activities, to be a part of band and all the different clubs that we have."

Here are four tips from Lallavais and Kregel for helping English learners—and students more generally—develop SEL skills:

### 1. Make SEL both a regular part of the schedule and part of each academic class

Teachers may already be integrating SEL into academics, at least to some extent, Kregel said. But often "they need to be more explicit with their language and/or interactive pedagogy to connect what they're doing specifically to social-emotional learning," she added.

Teachers should ask themselves if they are "providing time for their students to reflect on the SEL skills that they're learning as well as the academic skills?"

SEL integration can also happen in stages, Kregel said. "It is a process and takes time, so you don't have to do it all at once. Some teachers struggle with where to start."

Her recommendation? Start with helping



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students feel seen and emotionally safe with a "welcoming ritual" and end with an "optimistic closing" before moving on to deeper integration.

Lallavais' school initially tried to pair SEL skills development just with language arts classes. Now, those skills are integrated throughout the day across academic subjects. Plus, there's time set aside on Fridays just for SEL.

### 2. Provide more hands-on learning experiences

Students who are still working to build English proficiency need more than just to hear a word like "persistence." They need to be able to experience the concept for themselves.

During the school's dedicated time for SEL, "we try to make sure that we're strategically integrating some type of hands-on, tangible 'I can feel it, I can do it' activity," Lallavais said. That "helps our students make that connection" between the English word for an SEL skill and how it feels to put it into practice.

For example, when learning about persistence, Lallavais' students were given a fun, but tough task: Build towers out of dry spaghetti and marshmallows, not exactly the world's most stable materials.

### 3. Share relevant, human experiences

Relationships resonate for middle schoolers, Lallavais said. It never hurts to make sure that kids realize that their teachers and school leaders are real people with real emotions too.

For instance, Lallavais told her students that she sometimes gets so frustrated when she gets stuck in traffic that "I want to run a red light, but I can't because I'll get a ticket." The kids responded with "Oh, you too!"

"I think the students feel like we're so above them that we don't have emotions as well," and it's smart to dispel that belief, Lallavais said.

### 4. Create opportunities for student feedback

McMurray Middle School regularly surveys students to see if they are getting what they need out of SEL instruction. The goal is to understand "how they're feeling, do we need to change anything?," she said. If the survey picks up that something isn't working, then "it's OK to go back to the drawing board and to change things up a little bit," Lallavais said.

One of her favorite recent survey responses from a student? "I can tell you how I feel, and you listen." ■

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OPINION

Published December 14, 2022

# 'There's No Such Thing as Bad Emotions' and Other Truths Students Need to Know

By Marc A. Brackett

**H**ow 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, high energy, you're in the yellow—the generally happy emotions. 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*.*



—Vanessa Solis/Education Week and iStock/Getty Images

## OPINION

Published October 19, 2022

# Families Are Students' First SEL Teachers. Here's How to Engage Them

By Alexandra Skoog-Hoffman

**W**e know students need support from schools and their families to cope with academic and mental health challenges. We've seen over and over that children's academic learning can't be separated from their social and emotional lives. In the wake of pandemic disruptions to schooling, it's more important than ever for families and educators to come together and form meaningful partnerships that nurture children's social, emotional, and academic development.

Parents and other caregivers are children's first teachers, from whom they begin to learn critical social and emotional skills like respect, empathy, and perseverance. Substantial research demonstrates the positive impacts of parent engagement on children's academic achievement and social-emotional development. When family members model the social-emotional skills through their parenting practices, they help reinforce what children are learning at school. When surrounded by positive social-emotional

support, students are much more likely to develop important skills that lead to improved peer relationships and social skills.

But creating this sort of positive environment doesn't just happen—it requires an intentional partnership among schools, families, and communities. And by investing in these multidirectional partnerships, schools have the opportunity to learn from families that are the experts in their children's lives.

The majority of parents already support social-emotional learning for their children. By partnering with them, schools can continue to build on that support while learning from the strategies that families are already using to teach SEL and leveraging that expertise to foster more inclusive school environments. And when families feel valued as partners in the school, they can also learn how to support and build on school-wide SEL practices in their homes. In fact, decades of research suggests that evidence-based SEL programs are more effective when they extend into young people's home lives.

Partnerships between schools and parents is not always easy, and SEL researchers and educators alike know that families are far more likely to

form partnerships with schools when the school's norms, values, and cultural representations reflect their own experiences. Because of this, it is important that schools promote a culturally responsive and welcoming environment in order to authentically engage families in promoting students' SEL. In our work at CASEL (where I serve as the director of research-practice partnerships), we have been partnering with schools, districts, researchers, and community organizations to study innovative family-engagement practices that embody social- and emotional-learning principles.

We've found four research-based actions that make it easier for school leaders and staff to build authentic school-family partnerships.

### 1. Cultivate trusting relationships between educators and families.

School staff should begin every school year seeking input on family priorities, concerns, interests, knowledge, and resources. This creates an opportunity to build trust between families and schools. For example, the Michigan chapter of the dropout-prevention organization Community in Schools fields an annual needs and assets inventory asking for family and community feedback, which schools then use to inform policies such as early/late pickup times and enrichment programming.

### 2. Build the confidence and skills of both staff and caregivers.

When school and district leaders reconsider existing structures and policies driving school improvement efforts, they can embed families into decisionmaking processes more effectively. Remember, schools can be a place of learning for everyone. Consider investing in opportunities for parents to develop their own skills, as well as for educators looking to learn more about partnering with diverse populations, including through culturally responsive pedagogy practices and recognizing parents as assets and “funds of knowledge.” For example, one Chicago public high school set up the opportunity for a group of parents to complete CASEL's SEL Dialogue Series for Caregiver-School Partnerships, a 10-session training designed to help caregivers learn about and practice social-emotional skills.

### 3. Reposition families' roles from spectators to collaborators.

Educators and parents alike should feel connected as partners and stewards of students' education. In doing so,

they are able to determine shared goals and outcomes for their students while planning and strategizing as equal partners. These connections are not limited to just parents and educators but among families as well. Families seeing each other as sources of knowledge and collaborators can produce empowering spaces where they can coordinate and enact the change they wish to see for their children.

**4. Involve families in interpreting data and posing solutions.** Traditionally, we see families' voices captured in surveys or through traditional means of gathering parent feedback, such as town halls, PTA meetings, and parent-teacher conferences. Getting families involved in reviewing data can foster even greater agency, trust, and communication, leading to equitable school improvements. Parents may identify inconsistencies in what and how data are gathered relative to them or their children's cultural understandings, offer context, and propose solutions that can create more supportive and nurturing schools. For example, the Minneapolis district's Parent Participatory Evaluation program partners a group of "parent researchers" with educators to improve their children's learning. Parents have access to district data and receive training on culturally relevant data collection and evaluation. Parents identify a research question and plan how to collect and analyze data to address the issue. Then, the parent group advises school- and district-level stakeholders on how best to make the data accessible to other parents and community members.

Speakers and participants at the recent 2022 CASEL annual summit—which was centered around the understanding that school-family partnerships are integral to a child's success—confirmed what we know: We're all stronger when we work together for our children. With parents overwhelmingly supportive of SEL, educators should take advantage of the moment to build these partnerships to ensure children are set up for success. When families and educators work together, we can set students up for success to rise to any challenge in school and in life. ■

Alexandra Skoog-Hoffman is the director of research-practice partnerships at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, a nonprofit organization focused on evidence-based social and emotional learning.

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