

# Social Emotional Learning Literature Review

## RESEARCH, EVALUATION, ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

### Defining Social and Emotional Learning

Social Emotional Learning (SEL), broadly defined, is the process for learning the skills necessary to be successful in school, work and life<sup>1</sup>. Generally, SEL is viewed as a larger umbrella framework that has two focuses: (1) teaching social and emotional competencies and (2) fostering a caring, safe learning environment<sup>2</sup>. Clearly defining SEL is one of the many challenges present in the field. The overall goals of social emotional learning have been widely accepted as, “The process through which children enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behaving to achieve important life tasks... to recognize and manage their emotions, establish healthy relationships, set positive goals, meet personal and social needs, and make responsible and ethical decisions<sup>3</sup>”

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a primary organizational leader in this field. As a collective of renowned researchers, policy makers and practitioners, they are recognized both nationally and internationally for their commitment to using SEL as an integral part of education<sup>2</sup>. They are committed to evidence-based approaches, and provide numerous resources to educators, policy-makers, parents, and the general public to ensure that all students become knowledgeable, responsible and caring members of society<sup>2</sup>. They work with a growing number of school districts and states to promote SEL in the pre-k-12 education system. Currently, CASEL is working with the state of Minnesota to establish statewide SEL standards. Subsequently, Minneapolis Public Schools will align to and build upon the CASEL Framework which defines SEL as:

### SEL IN MPS

“Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”

(CASEL, 2016)

## SEL Skills

There is disagreement in the field regarding how to define and measure SEL skills. Despite disagreement, it is imperative to establish a working taxonomy. Minneapolis Public Schools aligns to CASEL's five broad SEL competencies; self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. These competencies serve as larger categories that have evolving definitions (see sidebar), and also encompass numerous levels of both discrete and related skills.

## The Need for SEL

At MPS our goal is to ensure that every student is ready to actively engage and succeed in their college, career and life experiences. Policy makers, educators, and the public agree that SEL is a critical catalyst to reaching this goal<sup>4</sup>. Yet, only 29%-45% of high school students in a nationally representative sample report having social skills such as empathy, decision making, and conflict resolution. Further, less than 30% of these students reported their school provided a caring and encouraging environment.

Many youth today are faced with stress-inducing demands and pressures, including academic pressures from school, household responsibilities, and commitments to extracurricular activities, to name a few. Others face much larger issues including homelessness, poverty, exposure to violence, and systemic oppression<sup>1</sup>. Research demonstrates that as individuals develop and master SEL skills, they are less likely to be predominately controlled by external factors. Instead, they are more likely to use internalized beliefs and values to guide their behavior, exhibit increased caring and concern for others, good make positive decisions, and take responsibilities for their actions<sup>5</sup>.

If our intension is to ensure that each student is college, career and life ready, universal SEL programs are needed in schools. Given that such a large portion of the populatlon experience increased levels of trauma and

### Self-Awareness:

The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and areas for growth and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.

### Self-Management :

The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals.

### Social Awareness:

The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

### Relationship Skills:

The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.

### Responsible Decision Making :

The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions and the well-being of self and others.

CaseL (2016).

stress, it is also essential to provide tiered levels of support.

## Benefits of SEL

### **Instructional time**

Researchers estimate that on average, eight minutes of instructional time are lost to behavior issues each class. That adds up to approximately one month of lost learning each year. Robust SEL programs are shown to minimize behavior issues and “buy back” instruction<sup>2</sup>.

### **College Ready**

In addition to increasing instructional time, strong SEL programs are shown to be associated with increased school attendance and fewer dropouts. Notably, from a policy perspective, SEL programs are associated with significant academic performance improvements. SEL programs demonstrate comparable or higher academic outcomes than other universal interventions<sup>4</sup>. More specifically a meta-analysis of 213 studies involving more than 270,000 students found that students who received universal SEL programming on average ranked 11 percentile points higher on standardized achievement tests than students who did not receive programming.

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### **Career Ready**

According to the US Department of Labor, employers are seeking those with the following SEL Skills: problem solving, self-esteem, self-motivation, goal setting and listening and communication<sup>1</sup>. Further, 12 of the 16 skills identified by the world economic forum as crucial for the 21<sup>st</sup> century work place are categorized as social and emotional skills<sup>6</sup>. SEL prepares students to enter the work force, essentially increasing employability. Each of the skills identified above are encompassed by the 5 core competencies outlined in the CASEL framework. This means that students who attend schools with comprehensive SEL programs receive direct instruction in these areas and have opportunity to practice these skills both in and outside of the classroom.

### **Life Ready**

SEL results in a variety of improved life outcomes . Most studies conclude that students who participate in strong SEL programs, on average exhibit improved behaviors<sup>4</sup>. Several studies note much deeper health impacts than improved in-school behavior such as improved physical health, reduction of violence and reduction of substance abuse<sup>1</sup>. This shows that SEL as both a universal and tiered support can be used to improve students overall quality of life, not just their time in school.

## Factors for Programmatic Success

Positive outcomes associated with SEL programs rely heavily on effective implementation. While effective implementation looks different across programs and contexts, extensive studies confirm four key strategies to promote effective implementation of universal SEL programs. These strategies form the acronym SAFE; **S**electing and following a curriculum that contains a scope and sequence, utilize **A**ctive forms of learning, allocate sufficient time to **F**ocus on skill development, and develop and monitor progress towards **E**xplicit learning targets<sup>4</sup>.

When reviewing 213 studies involving 270,034 diverse kindergarten through high school students, researchers found that programs that implemented all four of the implementation strategies were significantly more impactful than those that did not follow one or more of these strategies<sup>4</sup>. **This suggests that these strategies are crucial for implementation in combination with each other opposed to as independent factors.**

**S.A.F.E**  
SEL Program Implementation Strategies

**Sequenced:**  
Does the program utilize a curriculum that applies a planned set of activities to develop skills sequentially in a step by step fashion?

**Active:**  
Does the program ensure students have opportunities for active forms of learning such as role-play?

**Focused:**  
Does the program devote sufficient time exclusively to develop social and emotional skills?

**Explicit:**  
Does the program target specific Social and Emotional Skills ?

Durlack et.al (2011)

## Comprehensive Implementation of Social Emotional Learning in Schools

To ensure each of the S.A.F.E strategies are implemented, we must focus on reaching the whole school, the whole child, the whole day. That is, it is imperative for SEL frameworks to have a strong direct instruction component, embed SEL content throughout all academic content areas and throughout the school day, and focus on building a safe and engaging school climate. As the district works to promote SEL in each of these three areas, it will be crucial to monitor student and system-level progress.

### Direct Instruction

Research shows that in order for children to acquire various social skills, educators must help teach youth to combine, chain and sequence behavior<sup>4</sup>. Evidence-based direct instruction curriculums offer a scope and sequence that aligns to social and emotional developmental trajectories. This helps teachers strategically break down the material to help students build upon what they already know

while preparing them to develop new behaviors and increasingly complicated skills. Curriculum that contains lesson plans for each distinct grade level help schools and districts meet the varying developmental needs of students<sup>7</sup>. When selecting a curriculum, it is imperative to ensure that the scope and sequence encompasses all five of the SEL competencies and demonstrates proven outcomes for all students. This type of instruction should begin in early childhood and continued through graduation.

### **Embedding SEL Strategies**

Research demonstrates that the use of a universal social skills curriculum is less effective if students don't have opportunities for active forms of learning<sup>4</sup>. Thus, students should have opportunities to build SEL skills throughout the whole day. This means educators must intentionally embed practices that build SEL skills into all academic content areas. For example as students work in groups or teams, educators should prompt students, or set up activities and expectations in a way that will help students build social awareness and relationship skills. Additionally, it is critical for social emotional learning to be used as an instructional tool throughout the entire school day. This includes embedding SEL practices during instructional transition times and in for student success in non-classroom settings such as at recess, in the hallway, and on the bus.

### **School Climate**

Direct social skills instruction and embedding SEL strategies are not sufficient to ensure optimal academic and social outcomes for students<sup>8</sup>. Educators must also promote SEL by building and sustaining a school climate that is safe, welcoming and inclusive<sup>1</sup>. This requires offering students opportunities to actively engage and contribute. When students are actively engaged in their school and broader community they, experience satisfaction, have an improved sense of belonging and even show enhanced motivation<sup>9</sup>. Further, maintaining a school climate with abundant opportunities for students to develop SEL skills is demonstrated to help establish safe and nurturing learning environments, and improve engagement among families and the broader community<sup>4</sup>.

### **Professional Development**

Research indicates that when trained appropriately, classroom teachers are most effective at implementing SEL programs opposed to consultants or mental health practitioners<sup>4</sup>. Successful implementation of SEL frameworks require that educators receive training in SEL and child development more broadly. In addition they need training on how to implement direct instruction curriculum with fidelity, as well as strategies for integrating SEL skills into core content curriculum. Further, educators will also need training on any specific school climate programs they intend to implement. Finally, research indicates that ongoing technical assistance and performance feedback are vital components of professional development in regard to SEL programs.

## ASSESSMENT CRITERIA CONSIDERATIONS<sup>10</sup>

### Intended Population

- Developmentally appropriate
- Universal assessment - not designed for specific groups including clinical or targeted groups
- Not designed to evaluate a specific program
- Culturally relevant

### Monitors Change Over Time

- Assess population-level change
- Able to monitor program level outcomes
- Sensitive to change

### Scientifically Sound

- Tested on normative sample of racially and economically diverse students
- Good reliability – both internal consistency and test-retest reliability
- Strong evidence of validity – both criterion related validity and convergent and or discriminant validity
- The constructs assessed should align directly to skills identified in the framework

### Practical Administration

- Content format and scoring are appropriate for school administration
- The assessment tool and information on the tool is readily available and easy to access
- Reasonable administration time
- The assessment should be aligned to benchmarks or standards to increase ease of interpretation

## Measuring readiness, progress and impact

Measurement tools can help schools and districts determine a school's readiness to implement SEL programs and evaluate fidelity<sup>7</sup>. This process is crucial to identify factors that promote or inhibit effective implementation and programmatic impact. While monitoring programs or larger systems, educators can use tools such as self-assessment surveys and observations to collect information on student skill development. These data can be used as early identification to inform instructional strategies.

It is important to note that measurement in this field is still in its infancy. Careful consideration should be taken when selecting an assessment to ensure it measures the specific constructs aligned to the SEL skills of interest. Further, it is essential to ensure the measure is appropriate for the intended population, monitors change over time, is scientifically sound, and has a practical administration process<sup>10</sup>.

Some tools that currently exist to measure students' development of SEL skills include the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS), Social Skills Improvement System (SIS), The Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) and the Social-Emotional Assets and Resilience Scale (SEARS). Additionally, some districts make their own surveys to measure SEL constructs. Currently, MPS uses a variety of tools created by researchers in the field and REAA staff.

However, as noted above, attempts to measure these skills in students have only recently begun to be developed, and there is no agreement among researchers on which assessments accurately measure SEL skills. Furthermore, without proper training, educators may have a challenging time interpreting results and introduce significant amounts of bias when using results. Therefore, educators should use caution when using any measurement tool at the student level. Most tools have not been validated against diverse samples and may not be culturally relevant or appropriate<sup>11</sup>. Further, at this point, the field does not agree on whether a student's score on such an assessment should or can change over time.

**Given this information, the district should prioritize evaluating system level readiness for universal SEL implementation instead of focusing solely implementing new SEL measures that assess student skills.** Prior to implementing any new student assessments tools, the district needs to evaluate the measures to see if they are scientifically sound, culturally appropriate and aligned to the district's priorities. Additionally, it is necessary to develop plans for how to use data without furthering bias. The plan should include protocol for buildings to use to identify students for MTSS/ RTI and how to use data to inform instruction

## SEL Standards

Over last decade, research and policy experts have made advancements in implementing SEL standards. CASEL has worked with a number of states and districts to establish these standards. They cite the following considerations as essential to support maximum impact of District and State SEL standards<sup>12</sup>:

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1. **Free standing and comprehensive standards** establish SEL as a clear priority. Standards must include **developmental benchmarks**.
  2. SEL standards should be **integrated into other subject areas**.
  3. Standards that provide **guidance on how adults can support students** through teaching practices are more effective.
  4. Standards should provide guidance on how to build and sustain overall **school climate**.
  5. Standards should provide guidance on how to make instruction **culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate**.
  6. Standards that **provide tools that support high quality implementation** are more likely to have a positive impact.
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## Conclusion

Educators, families, and policy makers agree that universal SEL is a critical catalyst for student success both in school and in life broadly. To achieve student and system level outcomes associated with SEL, the district must aim for comprehensive implementation aligned to researched best-practices; reaching the whole school, the whole child, the whole day. To do this, schools should prioritize direct instruction, work on embedding content and building positive school climate. Meanwhile the district should direct its efforts towards securing more resources, continuing deliberate collaboration and focus on measurement.

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