



WHITE PAPER

Social and Emotional Learning as a Catalyst for Academic Excellence

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Bookshelves are increasingly populated with tomes challenging those committed to improving job performance not to neglect the strong relationship between “soft skills” and success.

Psychologist Daniel Goleman (1998) explains that, in a study involving 15 global businesses, 90 percent of the difference between average and exceptional leaders can be explained by emotional competencies such as self-confidence, empathy, adaptability, and conflict management. Similarly, research conducted by the Weatherhead School of Management of Case Western Reserve University (Bilimoria, 2009) indicates that what is called emotional intelligence is two times as important as intelligence quotient (IQ) and technical expertise combined and four times as important as IQ for overall success. As Bradberry and Greaves (2009, p. 17) explain, emotional intelligence is the “ability to recognize and understand emotions in yourself and others, and your ability to use this awareness to manage your behavior and relationships.”

One characteristic distinguishing emotional intelligence from conventional perspectives of IQ is that most observers agree that emotional intelligence is not static; rather, it can be developed over the course of one’s life. Individuals can experience growth in two broad categories of emotional intelligence: personal and social competencies. The components of each competency are presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Categories of Emotional Intelligence (Segal & Smith, 2010)

Emotional Intelligence and K–12 Outcomes

While the self-improvement and leadership development sections of bookstores are replete with texts advocating for the integral relationship that emotional intelligence plays in the development of an effective workforce, what evidence suggests that these soft skills should become a greater learning priority for K–12 educators across the nation? More specifically, what are schools within the Appalachian



region doing to introduce social and emotional learning (SEL) as a tool to increase student engagement and academic performance? Is there an advantage to developing emotional intelligence prior to entering the workforce?

In this era of high-stakes accountability, educators are increasingly interested in exploring, developing, and applying emotional intelligence as a tool to increase student engagement and academic performance. In fact, educators and researchers have found that integrating emotional intelligence into broader SEL initiatives helps reduce adverse behaviors, including poor attendance and disciplinary infractions such as bullying. In one study cited by Goleman (2008), students who received social and emotional skills instruction scored higher on every administered assessment of prosocial behavior and lower on assessments of antisocial behavior. In addition, fewer students reported being depressed, anxious, or alienated. “What’s more,” says Goleman, “the study showed that the positive gains were biggest among ‘at-risk’ kids, who are most likely to fail in their education. In the era of No Child Left Behind, where schools are rated on how well students score on standardized tests, that’s a huge advantage for individual students and schools alike” (2008).

Likewise, a meta-analysis of research on the effects of SEL initiatives reveals that students receiving such instruction earn higher grades and perform better on standardized tests (11 percentile points higher than students in control groups). Furthermore, students in the treatment groups also demonstrated improvement in five key nonacademic measures, including increased social skills, diminished emotional stress, improved attitudes toward learning, fewer antisocial behaviors, and more positive behaviors such as cooperation. The study also indicated that the effects of the intervention were still observed six months later.

The existing evidence is not conclusive, but it does suggest that SEL initiatives may be used to combat the high student dropout rate in Appalachian states. As the table below reveals, nearly 51,000 students in the region dropped out of high school during the 2008–2009 school year.

Table 1: Number of Public High School Dropouts in the Appalachian Region during the 2008–2009 School Year		
State	# of dropouts	Enrollment grades 9–12
Kentucky	5,673	197,825
North Carolina	22,966	429,719
Tennessee	9,086	287,401
Virginia	9,452	380,787
West Virginia	3,444	83,252

Source: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011312.pdf>

In the report, *Current Distribution of Early Warning Indicators Analysis*, Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes (2010) overview the indicators signaling that middle school students may be at risk of dropping out in West Virginia. Among these are attendance below 85-90%, suspensions or serious disciplinary infractions, semester course failures, and failing mathematics and/or English language arts courses. As the research cited earlier indicates, SEL initiatives impact precisely these indicators, improving student achievement—decreasing disciplinary infractions, and alleviating student stress.

Taking Action: CASEL’s Commitment to Cultivating Success in School and Life

One organization offers some promising strategies for how SEL can be scaled up to help diminish the likelihood that students will drop out. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), “social and emotional competence is the ability to understand, manage, and express

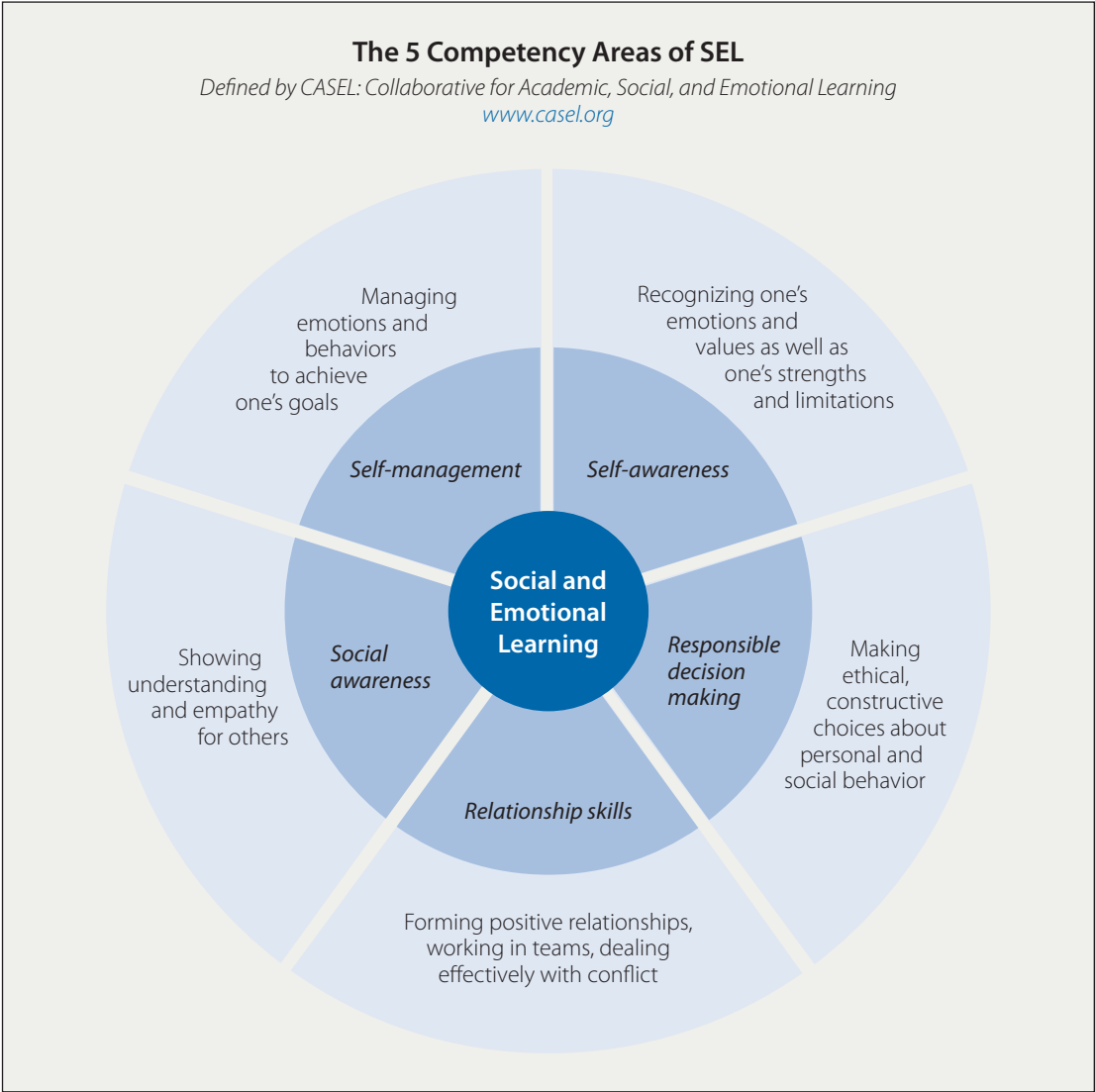


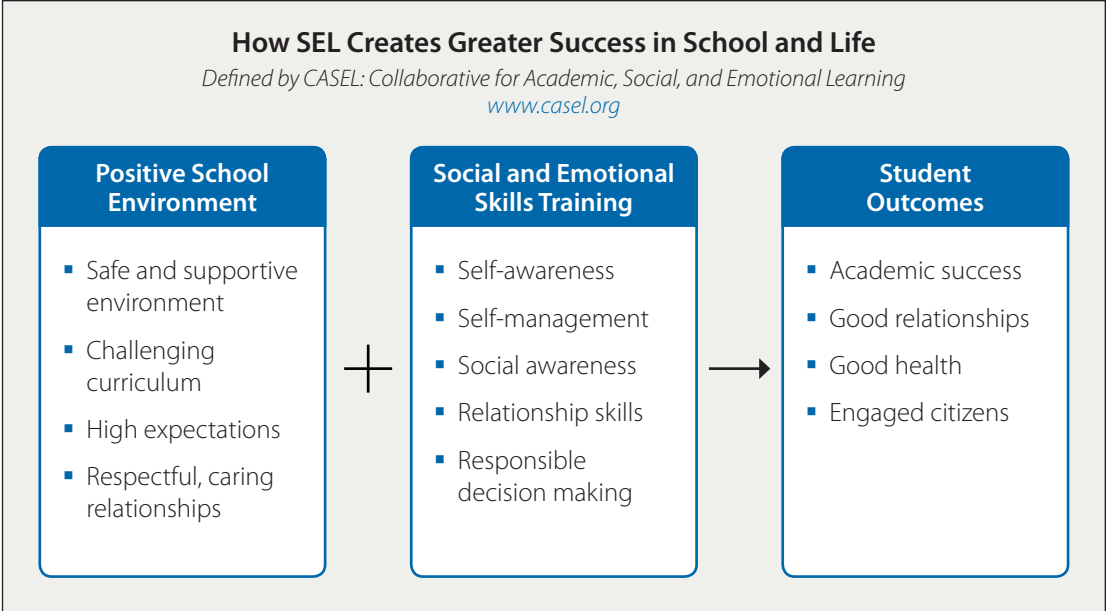
the social and emotional aspects of one’s life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development” (Elias et al., 1997, p. 2). CASEL is the nation’s premier center for SEL research and education, and its organizational vision expresses a commitment to ensuring that SEL is identified as a vital component of education. Interestingly, CASEL presents a vision that is inclusive of both children and adults:

To promote children’s success in school and life.

We envision a world where families, schools, and communities work together to promote children’s success in school and life and to support the healthy development of all children. In this vision, children and adults are engaged lifelong learners who are self-aware, caring, and connected to others and responsible in their decision making. Children and adults achieve to their fullest potential and participate constructively in a democratic society.

Source: <http://casel.org/about-us/mission-vision/>





SEL in the Appalachian Region

Despite growing evidence of the positive relationship among SEL, improved academic performance, and increased prosocial behaviors, the establishment of explicit SEL learning goals appears focused primarily on students at the pre-K level. Little evidence suggests that SEL programs have been brought to scale and introduced to students at all learning levels from pre-K to postsecondary.

In the Appalachian region, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia have state-level pre-K standards but none for elementary or secondary students (CASEL, n.d.). However, several districts in the region are pursuing SEL initiatives. In Kentucky, for example, Jefferson County Public Schools, which serves more than 99,000 students, began implementing the CARE for Kids program for all pre-K, elementary, and middle school students during the 2008–2009 academic year. CARE, an acronym for Creating A Respectful Environment, includes the following components (CASEL, 2010):

- Morning meetings—community building time to set the climate for the classroom
- Implementation of high-quality SEL curricula
- Home-to-school activities that stimulate conversations and strengthen the link between the classroom and students’ families
- Engaging students in service projects
- Continual focused assessment

Among the key findings linking SEL to academics, SEL:

- Improves academic performance and education outcomes
- Promotes deeper understanding of subject matter
- Helps students learn well from others
- Increases student engagement in school
- Decreases behaviors that interfere with learning

Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (www.casel.org)



At all grade levels, the CARE program is designed to help students develop social responsibility and positive relationships with both adults and classmates. Proactive SEL strategies are integrated throughout the day in all classes. Sheldon Berman, former superintendent of Jefferson County Schools, remarked, “As I see it, the social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum. . . . An elementary teacher wouldn’t say, ‘I don’t teach math.’ And a teacher shouldn’t be able to say, ‘I don’t teach social development’ because we all teach social development (CASEL, 2010).” Alicia Averette, Principal of Breckinridge-Franklin Elementary School emphasizes the connection between SEL and teaching and learning. “By taking a proactive approach and meeting the social and emotional needs of our students, we lose less instructional time because students are able to solve their own conflicts if they arise” (Jefferson County Public Schools, n.d.).

In another example of an SEL initiative in the Appalachian region, Tennessee’s Metro Nashville Public Schools held the district’s first Social and Emotional Learning Conference in partnership with Alignment Nashville in 2011. Alignment Nashville is a local group working to bring community organizations and resources into alignment so that their coordinated support of Nashville’s youth has a positive impact on public school success, children’s health, and the success of the community (Alignment Nashville, 2011). Denise Rollins, Metro Nashville’s SEL Director, led development of the conference; her goal was to help educators gain an improved understanding of SEL, a common language of SEL, and an understanding of how SEL impacts school climate. During the same year, Alignment Nashville published *Social Emotional Learning: A Resource Guide to Behavioral Health*, a comprehensive handbook including descriptions of SEL, along with a list of behavioral health resources available to local staff and their students.

States in the Appalachian region are among 48 states with SEL learning standards in place at the pre–K level.

- **Kentucky:** standards include concepts such as “shows social cooperation, applies problem-solving skills, and demonstrates understanding of the relationships within family and community.”
- **Tennessee:** standards address social and emotional development and learning through documentation of pre–K students’ approaches to learning (self-concept, self-control, cooperation).
- **North Carolina:** standards are organized around a student’s sense of self and others.
- **Virginia:** SEL standards are organized around pre–K students’ self-concepts, self-control, approaches to learning, interaction with others, and social problem solving.
- **West Virginia:** standards are based on development of self-concept, prosocial behaviors, cooperation skills in social relationships, and independence/intrinsic motivation to learn.

Source: <http://casel.org/policy-advocacy/sel-in-your-state/>

Emotional Intelligence and Increased Postsecondary Possibilities

Reflecting its core mission, CASEL explains that SEL does much more than help students succeed in their pre–K–12 academic experiences—it prepares them for life. “SEL helps students become good communicators, cooperative members of a team, effective leaders, and caring, concerned members of their communities. It teaches them how to set and achieve goals and how to persist in the face of challenges. These are precisely the skills that today’s employers consider important for the workforce of the future” (CASEL, n.d.).

As such, SEL may have value beyond the secondary level, with applications for postsecondary efforts and work environments. A casual review of several mission statements of postsecondary institutions in Appalachia suggests that the collegiate experience offers rich resources for preparing students for meaningful lives and work. However, there is little evidence that SEL is being implemented and studied as extensively at the postsecondary level as it is at the pre–K to secondary levels (Sherman, 2011).



Of course, there are some examples of postsecondary SEL efforts. Funded by a Title V grant to improve the academic success of first year students, the Javelina EI Program was developed and implemented at Texas A&M University–Kingsville, receiving national recognition in 2003 by the American College Personnel Association. Based on the Emotional Learning System created by Nelson and Low, the Javelina EI Program integrated the academic and student development sectors of the university to help improve academic achievement and retention of freshmen. Table 2 provides an overview of the five steps of the Emotional Learning System (Low & Nelson, 2006), which served as the theoretical foundation of the program.

Table 2: Emotional Learning System (Nelson & Low, 1999, 2003)	
1. EXPLORE (Self-Assessment)	Person-centered assessment as a foundational discovery process for the learning system
2. IDENTIFY (Self-Awareness)	Identification of strengths and weaknesses from personal assessment; an action plan is developed
3. UNDERSTAND (Self-Knowledge)	Reflect on assessment and action plan; develop an understanding of how EL can help guide self-directed experiential learning, goal setting, personal responsibility and goal achievement
4. LEARN (Self-Development)	Completion of lessons and practice sessions to develop and strengthen skills
5. APPLY (Self-Improvement)	EL skills become embedded in daily activities/routines of students such as everyday decision making

Evaluation of the program revealed that 73 percent who participated earned GPAs above 2.0 compared to 62 percent of students in the control group (Low & Nelson, 2006, p. 5). In addition to higher academic achievement, freshmen participating in the EI curriculum as part of their first year experience (FYE) also were more likely to remain in school compared to those not exposed to the program. For example, 59 percent of the students participating in the EI program were retained versus 53 percent of those in the control group.

An example of postsecondary SEL programming in the Appalachian region was an aggressive effort to combat the high rate of freshmen attrition; the effort was led by Doug Walters, former dean of students at the University of Charleston in West Virginia, in the early 2000s. At the core of the initiative were assessments of the emotional intelligence of new students to identify those who might be at risk of dropping out of the university and integration of SEL into the FYE. The effort also included seminars and support classes to help students improve their social and emotional skills. Prior to the incorporation of the SEL initiative, the fall to fall retention rate was 70 percent. After six years, freshmen were retained at a rate of 89 percent. Walters attributes much of the increase in student retention to SEL. Walters explains, “The areas of greatest success were in the areas of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Once the student or employee had those areas identified as challenges for them, they were able to seek assistance from within each organization. The confidence level became higher, and the student and/or employee felt they had been empowered by the system. This enhanced their personal adaptability, which brought greater consistency into their understanding of role and function in a more deliberate manner. I am convinced that those students exposed to SEL over the course of their collegiate experience performed better in and out of the classroom. Those students exposed to SEL reported feeling more aware of personal strengths and areas in need of attention and confident in their ability to perform well in their new careers.”



Moving Forward

Recommendations for K–12 Educators

Evidence of the positive contribution of social and emotional skills to academic success is promising. Although most SEL research and practice has focused on young children, there are increasing incentives to explore how SEL can strengthen graduation rates among high school and college students. For instance, CASEL is “leading efforts to significantly scale SEL in school districts across the United States. This new strategy involves identifying and involving superintendents ready to mount school districtwide SEL programming, bringing evidence-based SEL to students somewhat seamlessly in grades Pre–K–12” (Sherman, 2011, p. 5).

States in the Appalachian region have established pre–K standards for SEL. Some districts in the Appalachian region are also implementing SEL initiatives to address SEL of older students as well as strategies to identify gaps in services and resources.

Given this momentum and promising evidence that SEL can improve a variety of outcomes for students and adults alike, expansion of SEL for all learners could be established as a significant regional and national priority. In line with this thinking, a 2009 conference—*Social and Emotional Learning: Ready! Creating a National Initiative*—convened by CASEL brought together small working groups charged with developing recommendations for working with districts, developing partnerships with stakeholders, and bringing SEL practices to scale. Key recommendations included:

K–12: (CASEL Report)

- Building an effective districtwide SEL initiative requires an investment of the district’s own resources and a long-term commitment of time and money.
- The message that SEL will enhance academic achievement should be central to communications about SEL throughout the district.
- Districtwide standards and assessment methods should be built into the plan.
- SEL should be implemented districtwide and at all grades, pre–K–12.
- Districtwide implementation of SEL should be planned as a sustained effort over a minimum of three years, preferably at least five years.
- To sustain a successful districtwide initiative, support for SEL is needed from a broad-based communitywide coalition that understands the importance of SEL and wants effective SEL programming for all children.
- The SEL initiative is more likely to succeed if it starts in several schools—not just one school—and if those schools are highly receptive to SEL.

Recommendations for Postsecondary Educators

While some evidence suggests that SEL initiatives implemented within the postsecondary context can improve academic and retention outcomes, further research is needed to better understand how emotional intelligence can be used as part of larger student engagement and retention initiatives. This could be accomplished through randomized control trials (RCTs) at public and private four-year institutions as well as community colleges and vocational training centers. Both the Javelina EI Program at Texas A&M University–Kingsville and the FYE at the University of Charleston share some common components that postsecondary educators may want to consider as they explore the benefits of implementing an SEL program at their institution.



- The Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQI) provides useful information about student strengths and vulnerabilities. This information can help faculty and student services personnel (Residence Directors, Career/Behavioral Counselors, First Year Experience Coordinator) better target assistance and support to students.
- Universitywide commitment to SEL and agreement on common terminology are key.
- Connectedness between SEL and academic success and career readiness/success should be made explicit to the university community. In other words, the abundance of research describing the close correlation between strong SEL competencies, academic achievement, and workplace effectiveness should be articulated to the entire campus community to generate interest and momentum for SEL initiatives.
- Early identification of at-risk students and timely intervention are necessary to minimize student attrition.

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