



THE MISSING PIECE

A REPORT FOR CASEL

A National Teacher Survey
on How Social and
Emotional Learning Can
Empower Children and
Transform Schools

By Civic Enterprises
with Peter D. Hart Research Associates

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AN OPEN LETTER TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

by Jennifer Buffett and Timothy Shriver

In too many classrooms and schools across America, children are missing a critical piece of their education. Year after year, and test after test, students and their teachers focus on the cognitive elements of education, while other life skills are often absent from the in-school experience. Reading and writing are intentionally taught, but not always resilience and responsibility. Arithmetic and higher math skills are embedded in school goals, but not necessarily persistence and grit. In some classrooms, an “either/or” dynamic has been established where core knowledge is taught, but not the skills to work cooperatively with others, resolve conflicts, and persevere. From the schoolhouse to State House, “academic skills” have been emphasized, tested, and reported upon, but another essential aspect of a child’s education — social and emotional learning (SEL) — has been underemphasized or altogether forgotten — with serious consequences to children, schools, and communities. The divisions that have polarized the debate, and kept SEL on the periphery of education reform, must end to ensure students cultivate the full suite of skills they need to be successful in school, work, and life.

The research overwhelmingly shows the linkages among SEL, student outcomes, and school performance. Now, for the first time, we have strong evidence that those on the front lines of American education — our nation’s teachers — embrace SEL in their classrooms, for *all* students, as well as endorse a more systemic approach to the use of SEL. Many teachers have been taking this approach organically, and many understand that SEL promotes young people’s academic success, engagement, good behavior, cooperation with others, problem-solving abilities, health, and well being, while also preventing a variety of problems such as truancy, alcohol and drug use, bullying, and violence. In recent years, we have seen many promising signs of progress. Schools and districts are increasingly prioritizing SEL, including through the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning’s Collaborating Districts Initiative. Some states, such as Illinois and Kansas, have implemented free-standing social and emotional student learning standards, while others have emphasized the teaching of social and emotional skills across academic subject areas.

Although we have powerful evidence that SEL is gaining momentum across the country, we have more to do. We have seen the country address, only in fits and starts, various aspects of SEL, such as school climate, character education, or bullying prevention. Although valuable, too often these programs are ad hoc or add-ons in schools, in response to a tragic event or because of someone’s passion for the issue. Rather than this reactionary approach, we can take specific and thoughtful steps to help teachers do the work they themselves have identified as important — to cultivate their students’ social and emotional competencies. If we chose to act, together we can help teachers become even better teachers and students reach their fullest potential.

SEL should be embedded throughout the curriculum, pedagogy, and the culture of a school and emphasized in district and state educational goals. We must support teachers in their good work to cultivate the whole child by making sensible policies, promoting proven practices, and providing tools and resources to boost this critical piece of education. In schools across America, SEL should become an integrated piece of the prekindergarten through twelfth grade education experience, considered as essential to education as reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Students growing up today face a more complex, economically challenging, and globally connected world. America has always given priority to unleashing the talents of its citizens to help our communities, country, and world. It is time for our country to move past false choices and ensure SEL is a core aspect of every child’s education. By doing so, we can support teachers in their critical work that helps children thrive not just as students, but also as leaders, dreamers, entrepreneurs, and citizens.



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NoVo Foundation, President and Co-Chair



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The central message of this report is that teachers across America understand that social and emotional learning (SEL) is critical to student success in school, work, and life. Social and emotional learning involves the processes of developing competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Educators know these skills are teachable; want schools to give far more priority to integrating such development into the curriculum, instruction, and school culture; and believe state student learning standards should reflect this priority. Teachers also want such development to be available for *all* students.

These and other findings are the result of a nationally representative survey of prekindergarten through twelfth grade teachers to assess the role and value of social and emotional learning in America's schools. The voices of teachers on SEL are more important than ever, when expectations for classroom effectiveness are higher, the U.S. educational advantage worldwide is slipping, and a skills gap is threatening American economic growth.

SURVEY FINDINGS

The survey's findings have three major themes: (1) *Teachers Understand, Value, and Endorse Social and Emotional Learning for All Students*; (2) *Teachers Believe Social and Emotional Learning Helps Students Achieve in School and Life*; and (3) *Teachers Identify Key Accelerators for Social and Emotional Learning*. Throughout this report, we share the perspectives of teachers and what research tells us about various aspects of social and emotional learning, including the importance of both adopting explicit evidence-based SEL strategies and integrating evidence-

based SEL approaches. These findings are also supported by discussions with students, case studies of successful schools, and conversations with thought leaders. As a result of these insights, the *Paths Forward* section of the report offers recommendations on how to advance the strategic and systemic use of SEL in schools to promote student success as learners, workers, and citizens.

(1) Teachers Understand, Value, and Endorse Social and Emotional Learning for All Students

Teachers recognize the benefit and need to incorporate SEL into the student learning experience — for all students, from all backgrounds. Furthermore, teachers have a clear understanding of what SEL is and they believe it is teachable.

Teachers Understand, Value, and Endorse SEL

Teachers define SEL as: “the ability to interact or get along with others;” “teamwork or cooperative learning;” “life skills or preparing for the real world;” and “self-control or managing one’s behaviors.” **When the survey then offers the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)’s definition of SEL (see sidebar), nearly all teachers (93 percent) believe SEL is very or fairly important for the in-school student experience.**

Teachers Endorse SEL for All Students
Teacher endorsement of SEL holds true across education levels and school types.

DEFINING OUR TERMS: WHAT IS SEL?

Social and emotional learning (SEL) involves the processes through which adults and children develop social and emotional competencies in five areas:

- Self-awareness, like knowing your strengths and limitations
- Self-management, like being able to stay in control and persevere through challenges
- Social awareness, like understanding and empathizing with others
- Relationship skills, like being able to work in teams and resolve conflicts
- Responsible decision-making, like making ethical and safe choices

(For more information, see page 9.)

Nearly all teachers (95 percent) believe social and emotional skills are teachable and report that SEL will benefit students from all backgrounds, rich or poor (97 percent). Research shows that among students from grades five through twelve, positive emotions such as hope, well-being, and engagement account for 31 percent of the variance in student's academic success (hope is 13 percent, engagement 10 percent, and well-being 8 percent).

- Only a small minority believe it is definitely true that SEL should not be taught in schools (19 percent) or think it should only be taught in high-poverty schools (18 percent definitely/probably true).

Teachers Report SEL Should Be Given Greater Emphasis in Schools

Nearly all teachers (88 percent) report SEL occurs in their schools on some level, although **less than half (44 percent) of teachers say social and emotional skills are being taught on a schoolwide, programmatic basis.** Research suggests that a strong, evidence-based SEL

program can help reduce student absenteeism and improve student interest — both strong indicators of a student being on track to graduate.

Teachers See the Importance and Benefits of SEL

Research finds that SEL programs are frequently associated with positive student outcomes such as an increase in pro-social behaviors and improved academic performance. **More than three-quarters of the teachers believe a larger focus on SEL will be a major benefit to students because of the positive effect on workforce readiness (87 percent), school attendance and graduation (80 percent), life success (87 percent), college preparation (78 percent), and academic success (75 percent).**

(2) Teachers Believe Social and Emotional Learning Helps Students Achieve in School, Work, and Life

SEL ADDRESSES THE NATIONAL CHALLENGE THAT AMERICA'S EDUCATIONAL ADVANTAGE IS SLIPPING

Recent international findings illustrate that America's advantage of a highly educated labor force is shrinking as more countries reach and surpass America's education levels. This, however, is a solvable problem, and SEL is a key part of the solution. Research shows that students receiving high-quality SEL demonstrate better academic performance, motivation to learn, school behavior, and attendance — and teachers agree. For example, studies find that engaging young children living in poverty in high-quality preschool programs that incorporate SEL themes positively contributes to their school success, social development, crime prevention, and economic performance.

SEL Boosts Academic Performance

A majority of teachers report that SEL can help move the needle on key academic factors. **Eight in ten teachers think SEL will have a major benefit on students' ability to stay on track and graduate and will increase standardized test scores and overall academic performance (77 percent). Three-quarters (75 percent) believe SEL will improve student academic**



achievement. Research supports teachers' views in this regard. A 2011 meta-analysis found that students who receive SEL instruction have academic achievement scores an average of 11 percentile points higher than students who did not participate in SEL programs.

- Schools where SEL is taught schoolwide are more likely to report their school is successful at developing key content knowledge (85 percent) compared to schools where SEL is ad hoc (72 percent) or not happening at all (63 percent).

SEL Increases Student Interest in Learning

Nearly seven in ten teachers (69 percent) report student lack of interest as at least somewhat of a problem in schools and among these teachers who see students' lack of interest as at least somewhat of a problem, three-quarters (73 percent) report SEL is very important. **Nearly eight in ten of all teachers (77 percent) say SEL will improve academic performance.** Research corroborates teachers' views: A recent meta-analysis found that students who received explicit SEL skills instruction with evidence-based SEL programs demonstrated improved attitudes and behaviors, including a greater motivation to learn, improved relationships with peers, and a deeper connection to their school.

- **A correlation was found between lack of student interest and schools with less of a schoolwide emphasis on SEL.** Only 61 percent of teachers who report SEL is implemented on a programmatic basis schoolwide also report lack of interest in learning as a problem, compared to 74 percent of teachers in schools where SEL is only taught by some teachers and 77 percent of teachers in schools where SEL is not taught.

SEL Improves Student Behavior

More than half (57 percent) of teachers believe poor student behavior is at least

somewhat of a problem. Majorities of these teachers believe SEL is a solution. **Of the teachers who list poor student behavior as at least somewhat of a problem, three in four (78 percent) say SEL is very important and 79 percent think it will improve student performance.** Students in SEL programs enjoy, on average, a 9–10 percentage point improvement in positive attitude, addressing conduct problems and reducing emotional distress, compared to students not participating in SEL programs.

- **Poor student behavior is a bigger problem in schools with limited focus on SEL.** Teachers who work in schools that they report place too little emphasis on SEL are more likely to say that poor student behavior is at least somewhat of a problem compared to teachers at schools that place the right amount or more emphasis (68 versus 53 percent).

SEL Prevents and Reduces Bullying

Nearly half of teachers (42 percent) list bullying as at least somewhat of a problem, and three in four of these teachers (75 percent) think SEL is very important. Research supports this finding. Various SEL programs have been found to decrease by half the annual number of student fights, decrease violent behaviors by 19 percentage points, and reduce classroom hostility.

- **There is a correlation between higher rates of bullying and schools with limited SEL focus.** More than half of teachers (54 percent) who say there is too little emphasis on SEL also say bullying is at least somewhat of a problem, compared to only 37 percent of teachers in schools with the right amount of emphasis on SEL. On the other hand, only 26 percent of teachers in schools successful at developing SEL say bullying is a problem.

SEL Improves School Climate

The survey finds that of the teachers who view negative school climate as a problem, 80 percent view SEL as a solution. Teachers in schools that report successful SEL programs are half as likely to say their school has a negative school climate compared to teachers in schools without successful SEL programs (21 percent versus 44 percent). Fifteen years of school reform research supports teachers' opinions on SEL and school climate. Studies identified five essential supports for effective school change — one of which is a learning climate that is safe, welcoming, stimulating, and nurturing to all students. In a recent small sample study, 25 percent of the studied SEL programs were directed at making a change in school culture and climate.

- **Teachers in schools where social and emotional skills are not taught are nearly twice as likely to report school climate as a problem as teachers in schools where it is taught on a systemic basis (43 versus 28 percent).**

SEL ADDRESSES THE NATIONAL CHALLENGE THAT MANY GRADUATES DO NOT HAVE THE SKILLS TO BE SUCCESSFUL

Across multiple measures of education, the American advantage of a highly educated labor force is quickly eroding and America has a skills gap. These trends start early in the educational pipeline and persist. For example, college attainment rates in the U.S. are growing at a below-average rate compared to other peer nations, and there are approximately three million jobs for which the U.S. is not training qualified workers. Only 78.2 percent of American students graduate from high school on time, and fewer than 40 percent of 25–34-year-olds have some postsecondary degree. Most jobs today and in the future require not only a high school diploma, but also some college. SEL is part of the solution to address these challenges — and teachers agree.



Teachers Believe Social and Emotional Skills Will Help Prepare Students for the Real World

Research supports this finding. On average, students participating in SEL programs have better social skills than 76 percent of comparison-group students and have an average 23 percentage point gain in social-emotional skills relative to students not participating in SEL programs.

- **A majority of teachers believe SEL will be a major benefit in preparing students for the workforce (87 percent). Nearly eight in ten teachers believe a larger focus on SEL will have a major benefit on students' ability to stay on track to graduate (80 percent), prepare for college (78 percent), and become good citizens (87 percent).**
- A majority of teachers (86 percent) believe teaching skills to apply to real-world situations should have a great deal of emphasis in schools. When surveyed, more than 80 percent of dropouts said their chances of staying in school would have increased if classes were more interesting and provided opportunities for real-world learning.

(3) Teachers Identify Key Accelerators for Social and Emotional Learning

SEL provides an opportunity for a powerful, student-centric approach to education that puts the social and emotional development of the child at the heart of every classroom, school, and district nationwide. SEL helps teachers become more effective by fostering their own social and emotional development and supporting a caring and challenging classroom climate. SEL programs are gaining in popularity and are increasingly being integrated into school curricula. In the survey, teachers identified key means to accelerate the use of SEL in classrooms, schools, and communities.

Schoolwide Programming Could Support Teacher Interest in SEL Implementation

Teachers report that while SEL is occurring organically, there is a disconnection between the demand for SEL that teachers report and schoolwide programming available to students. SEL programming decreases as students

advance through the grades: only 28 percent of high school teachers say it is occurring schoolwide, compared to 43 percent of middle school teachers and 49 percent of prekindergarten and elementary school teachers. Only 39 percent of teachers in high-poverty schools report schoolwide SEL programming compared to 53 percent of teachers in low-poverty (where less than 30 percent of the student body are on free or reduced-price lunch).

- **A majority of teachers (81 percent) rank time as the biggest challenge to implementing SEL, although research shows SEL can support increased time on task.** Schoolwide initiatives may support teachers in their interest in implementing SEL, as resources could be shared and lessons reinforced.

Embed SEL in Student Learning Standards

Two in three teachers (62 percent) think the development of social and emotional skills should be explicitly stated in their state education standards. Research suggests that student learning standards

may increase the likelihood that students will receive better instruction in SEL, experience improved school connectedness, and become better learners.

- This sentiment is shared by teachers across grade levels and income levels of their students: **More than half of teachers in prekindergarten and elementary school (65 percent), middle school (64 percent), and high school (55 percent) want SEL in their state standards. Furthermore, more than half of teachers in high-poverty (68 percent) and low-poverty (59 percent) schools want SEL in their state standards.**

Improve and Increase Professional Development for SEL

The survey finds that SEL training is lacking in most schools. Four in five teachers (82 percent) report interest in

receiving further training on SEL, with 61 percent “fairly” or “very” interested.

Only half (55 percent) of teachers receive some form of SEL training, and of that 23 percent is in-service. Preschool and elementary school teachers are the most likely to receive SEL training (60 percent) while high school teachers are the least likely (47 percent).

Professional development to support teacher knowledge, effective pedagogy, and practices enhances effective SEL implementation. Research also shows that SEL programming is more effective when evidence-based programs are adopted and implemented with quality.

Engage Parents and Families

Teachers surveyed report that “students not learning social and emotional skills at home” was among the top reasons to teach SEL in school, and therefore

a potential area for growth. **Eight in ten teachers (81 percent) say a lack of skills reinforcement at home is a big challenge for their school trying to implement SEL, and more than half of teachers (66 percent) list it as the biggest challenge. A similar majority (80 percent) who view SEL as very important and think it definitely improves student academic performance (80 percent) say lack of reinforcement at home is a big challenge.** Research finds that children whose parents are more involved in their education, regardless of their family income or background, are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, enroll in higher-level classes, attend school and pass their classes, develop better social skills, graduate from high school, attend college, find productive work, and become more caring individuals and productive citizens.



PATHS FORWARD

As a nation, we have the opportunity to change the lives of millions of American youth with the use of a very powerful strategy: social and emotional learning. SEL provides students with the fundamental skills to achieve in school and succeed in life. Research consistently shows the benefits of SEL, and in many schools teachers are incorporating transformative strategies into their curricula. We now have powerful evidence that teachers across the country endorse and advocate for an increased emphasis on these key tools. We also have models of effective policies and practices that could be replicated across the country, to better support teachers in this important work.

Although SEL is starting to be incorporated in federal policies and initiatives, such as the Race to the Top District requests for proposals and the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2013, it has not been sufficiently prioritized. Federal, state, and local education policy is not yet aligned with the rich insights of the SEL field, and there is a gap in the public's understanding of what SEL means; why it is important for education and life; and what parents, citizens, and young people can do to become effective SEL advocates and role models. In order to maximize its benefits, key policies and strategies must be pursued that promote, strengthen, and sustain social and emotional learning initiatives across the country. The following recommendations were guided by the opinions of more than 600 teachers in the nationally representative survey and informed by a variety of leading social and emotional learning organizations and education-focused research groups.

Promote Social and Emotional Learning in Classrooms, Schools, and Communities

Link SEL to Schoolwide Activities and Other School Services

Teachers can incorporate social and emotional skills into all school topics across all grades. For example, they can use goal-setting instructions and focus on problem-solving strategies and the decision-making process. Across the school, educators can stress the importance of access and opportunities to learn and practice SEL in the classroom as well as at home and in the community.

Conduct Resource and Needs Assessments in Schools

For SEL to be a success systemically, the school and the community must determine the resources, needs, and readiness of the school and identify SEL best practices and measures that fit their school. This can be accomplished through resource and needs assessments that build on evidence-based SEL programming that is already being implemented and appropriately addresses the needs identified by students, parents, and school staff.

Ensure Effective Coordination with Out-of-School Partners

Family involvement facilitates a child's academic, social, and emotional learning and functioning. A successful school-family partnership (SFP) must be based on the idea that all families can contribute to a child's learning and development, and parents as well as teachers share the responsibility. Likewise, community-school partnerships can help to better facilitate a child's progress through school. To facilitate the

creation of student-family-community partnerships, schools must create an SEL or SFP coordinator to serve as a liaison with families and community partners. Teachers should also share SEL strategies, tools, and resources with parents to help with at-home reinforcement.

Strengthen Social and Emotional Learning by Investing in Educators

Provide and Fund Integrated Professional Development to Educators

Educators should be provided high-quality professional development on teaching social and emotional skills during both pre-service and in-service (professional development) training. Professional development for teachers, principals, and professional and paraprofessional staff should focus on teaching explicit core social and emotional skills, embedding SEL in regular instruction, and creating opportunities for students to apply social and emotional skills throughout the day.

Tie SEL to Classroom, School, and District Goals

School, district, and state education leaders should work to align systems of reporting and accountability to clearly defined goals. Modifying report cards to reflect SEL goals and focusing on data collection and review to create tailored and adjustable SEL action plans can accomplish this. District support and leadership for SEL is critical and will determine the extent to which teachers and other school leaders can plan and proceed.



Sustain Social and Emotional Learning through High-Impact Levers

Create State Student Learning Standards and Connect with Common Core State Standards

Standards can provide clear expectations of what students should know and be able to do. State legislators should connect social and emotional development in existing state education standards and/or create stand-alone prekindergarten through twelfth grade social and emotional standards. Connecting social and emotional standards to common core standards and assessments will further incentivize schools, districts, and states to incorporate SEL into their education policies and practices.

Ensure Sustainable Funding

Public and philanthropic investments, including Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), should identify SEL professional development and program implementation as funding priorities and provide funding preferences in competitive grants to reward states, districts, and schools with a clear SEL plan.

Support Federal Policies that Promote SEL

The Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2013 will expand the availability of programs that teach students skills such as problem-solving, conflict resolution, responsible decision-making, relationship building, goal-setting, and self-discipline. This bipartisan model legislation supporting students' development through academic, social, and emotional learning has been introduced in Congress and should be passed, or its language incorporated into other key pieces of legislation, like ESEA.

Advance a Robust Research Agenda

A robust pool of research is required that practitioners and policymakers alike can draw from and learn. The Institute of Education Sciences can prioritize research on districtwide, schoolwide, and classroom programs to enhance academic, social, and emotional learning and its effects on key issues, such as school climate, bullying, student well-being, and academic performance. Research on the impact of schoolwide SEL programming versus classroom programming and explicit SEL skills instruction versus intentional pedagogical integration would fill important research gaps. Furthermore, states or districts with comprehensive SEL student learning standards should be studied. It is also critical to develop SEL assessment tools that educators can use to measure students' social and emotional competence.

CONCLUSION

The lack of urgency around social and emotional learning implementation in schools threatens the future success of America's children. SEL is a proven strategy that is endorsed by teachers across the country. Yet too few schools and far fewer school systems are adopting explicit evidence-based SEL strategies or integrating evidence-based SEL approaches — both of which are needed. SEL has been underutilized for too long. Our lack of action inhibits students across the country from fully realizing their potential as knowledgeable, responsible, caring, and contributing individuals. The time has passed to debate whether schools should make SEL a central focus. Now we must act to ensure our students and teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in school, work, and life.



WHAT IS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING?

Social and emotional learning (SEL) involves the processes 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. SEL programming is based on the understanding that the best learning emerges in the context of supportive relationships that make learning challenging, engaging, and meaningful. Social and emotional skills are critical to being a good student, citizen, and worker; and many different risky behaviors (e.g., drug use, violence, bullying, and dropping out) can be prevented or reduced when multiyear, integrated efforts are used to develop students' social and emotional skills. This is best done through effective classroom instruction; student engagement in positive activities in and out of the classroom; and broad parent and community involvement in program planning, implementation, and evaluation. Effective SEL programming begins in preschool and continues through high school.

CASEL has identified five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies (Figure 1), which framed the survey development (for additional information on CASEL, please see Appendix 2 of the full report). The definitions of the five competency clusters for students are:

- **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 limitations and having 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 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

FIGURE 1



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.

The short-term goals of SEL programs are to (1) promote students' self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship, and responsible decision-making skills; and (2) improve student attitudes and beliefs about self, others, and school. These, in turn, provide a foundation for better adjustment and academic performance as reflected in more positive social behaviors and peer relationships, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and improved grades and test scores (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
Outcomes Associated with the Five Competencies



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