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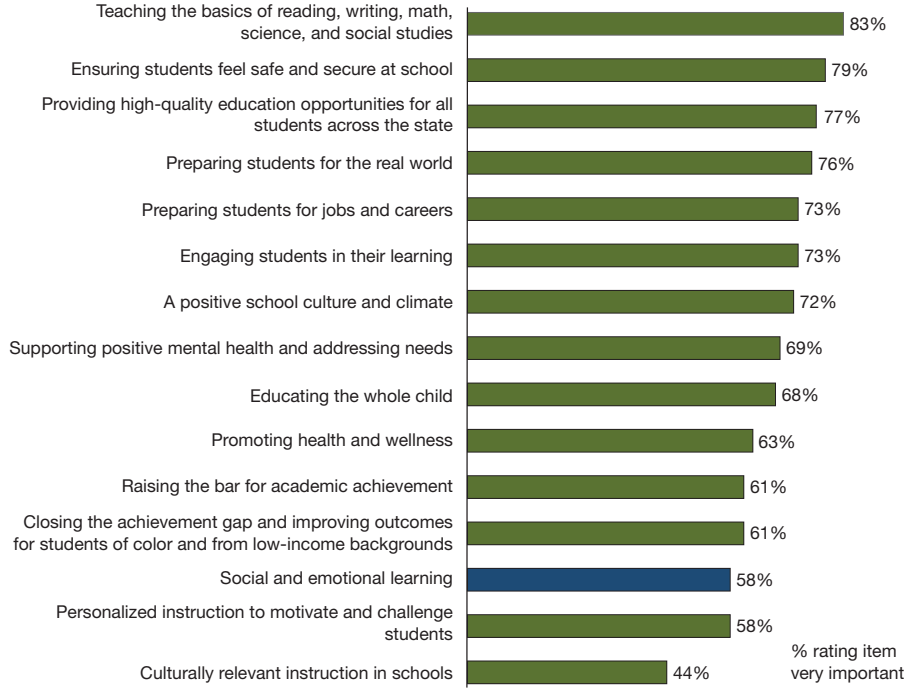
Gauging Support for Social and Emotional Skill Building in School

By Megan Blanco and Valerie Norville

Nearly half of all children in the United States have experienced a traumatic event, and many students express doubts about the capacity of their schools to help them cope.[1] To address these acute needs while also recognizing the key role of social and emotional health in all students' academic success, many state boards of education have adopted or are considering policies to support social and emotional learning (SEL) and are communicating with constituents about those policies.

SEL encompasses skills like collaboration, communication, problem solving, and resilience, which can be attained in an age-appropriate continuum through instruction, curriculum, and daily interactions, ideally with the help of all members of a school community. Developing these skills in school reduces absenteeism, school discipline problems, and substance use and increases graduation rates and academic achievement, according to research.[2] It also delivers economic benefit, with an $11 return for every $1 invested in SEL interventions.[3] Just as the ability to read sets students on a path to mastering other subjects, gaining social and emotional competencies contributes to student success across the academic spectrum.

Figure 1. Top Priorities for K-12 among Community Influencers in NASBE Network States



Social and emotional learning: more important to Parents (62%); Age 18–34 (63%); African Americans (73%); HH <50K (66%); Democrats (65%)

Educators, administrators, and families have long known the value of developing students' social and emotional competencies in and out of the classroom, but the Every Student Succeeds Act provided funding and new emphasis for addressing the whole child. Ongoing opportunities for policymakers to address students' SEL needs vary across states and districts, critically shaped by public opinion.

In 2018, NASBE formed a network of five state teams, all of whom were interested in advancing SEL in their states: Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, and Washington. To help all state boards learn how they can communicate most effectively on policies related to SEL, NASBE asked Edge Research to conduct a survey of community influencers across these states to gauge their understanding of SEL and their support for embedding SEL in K-12 instruction. Respondents were determined to be "community influencers" based on their reported participation in politics, news media, and community organizations. Edge developed the survey instrument based on feedback from the state teams during NASBE's annual meeting. The survey was in the field during January 2019.[4]

BROAD AWARENESS, POSITIVE ATTITUDES

The survey data indicate that state boards are likely to find engaged constituents who are familiar with the term "social and emotional learning" and generally view it positively. Three-quarters of respondents claimed familiarity with the term, and two-thirds had a positive view of it. (A quarter were unsure or not too familiar, and 11 percent perceived SEL negatively.) Parents, millennials, African Americans, urban dwellers, and those in households earning less than $50,000 annually were more positive toward SEL.

When asked to rate K-12 priorities, "teaching the basics of reading, writing, math, science and social studies" was the shared priority, with 83 percent saying it is very important (figure 1). Nearly six in ten said social and

emotional learning is a priority, and some components of SEL ranked even higher: ensuring students feel safe and secure at school, preparing students for the real world, engaging students in their learning, and positive school culture and climate. African American respondents prioritized SEL at a somewhat higher rate, 73 percent. Findings were consistent across the SEL network states.

Respondents were subsequently asked, "How much of a priority should it be for K-12 public schools in your state to develop the full range of social, emotional, and academic skills in students?" With this definition before them, nine in ten agreed SEL was a high or top priority. Women, millennials, African Americans, and Democrats held the strongest convictions about SEL development in school.

When it comes to best practices in the school building, majorities rated specific SEL programs as highly or somewhat appropriate in public schools. For instance, at least 90 percent rated as appropriate efforts such as developing students' character and values and shifting focus from discipline/punishment to learning from bad decisions and instilling a sense of accountability. While 84 percent overall rated teaching stress-reduction techniques as highly or somewhat appropriate, support among parents, millennials, and African Americans was higher. In particular, 95 percent of African American respondents found stress reduction appropriate during the school day. In terms of expected behaviors and outcomes, treating others with respect and taking responsibility for one's thoughts and actions were perceived as equally important to knowing basic academic skills.

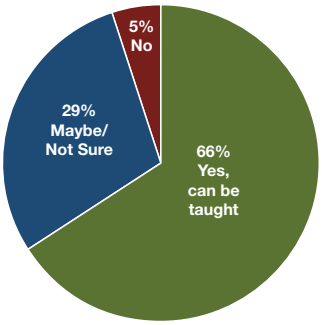
While most community influencers surveyed think SEL can be taught and say it is important to assess students' SEL skills (figure 2), there are limits in support for assessment. Opinions start to break down on specifics. Parents and millennials are more likely to agree SEL can be taught and along with African Americans agree it should be assessed. Measures of school climate and individual student observations were the preferred means of assessment and seen as "somewhat positive." in these community influencers' view, though less than half deemed them "very positive." Respondents were less ready to endorse measures of student outcomes such as school absences and suspensions.

WIDE BUT SHALLOW SUPPORT

Despite a generally positive view of "social and emotional learning," terms other than SEL rate more highly (figure 3). In fact, "social, emotional, and academic development" and "life skills" rise to the top as preferred terms. Other terms used commonly in the education community garner net negative ratings: 21st century skills, social and emotional learning, and workplace skills. It is noteworthy that younger adults preferred SEAD, while adults older than age 45 preferred life skills. In addition, Republicans preferred life skills, while Democrats preferred SEAD.

Toward the end of the survey, respondents were exposed to messages for and against schools reinforcing SEAD, and message testing revealed volatility of opinion on this topic. Based on an index of responses to supporter

Figure 2. Can SEL Be Taught?

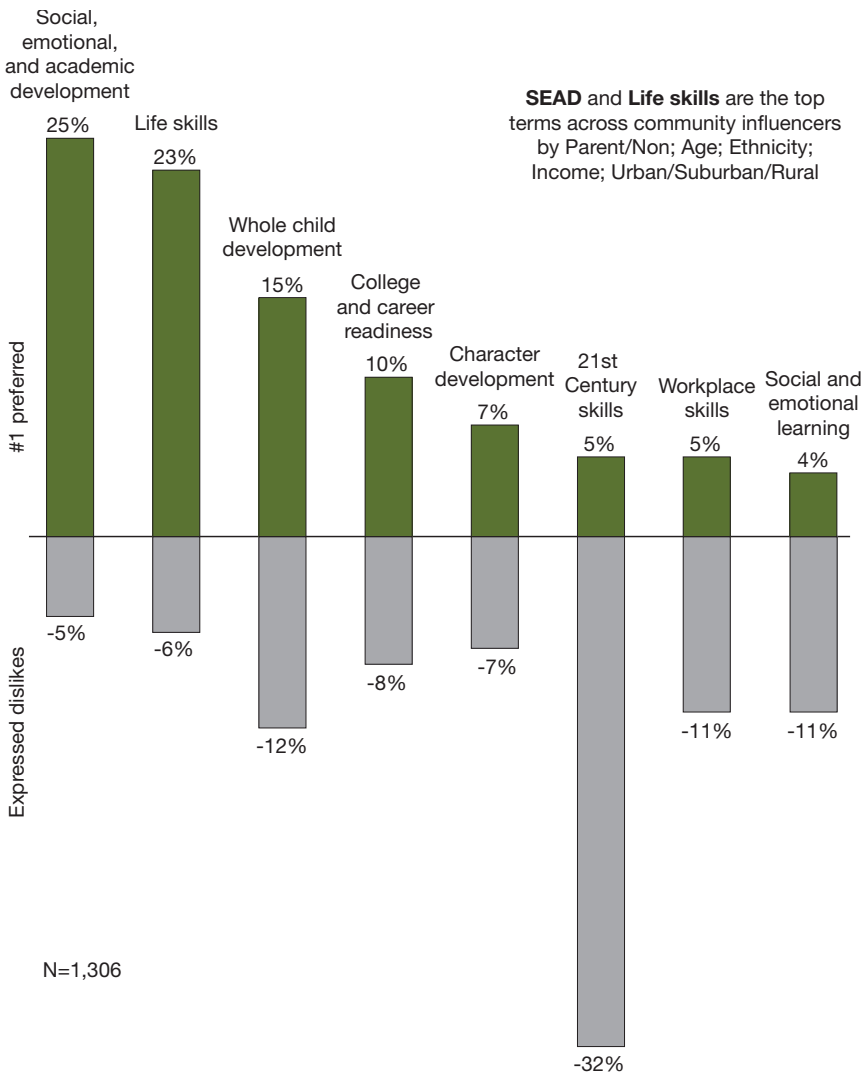


CT	IL	KS	MI	WA
66%	66%	61%	68%	70%

% say yes

Can be taught (higher among): Parents (72%); Age 18–24 (75%); Age 25–34 (76%); Age 35–44 (71%); Democrats (71%)

Figure 3. What to Call It



and opponent statements, 42 percent of community influencers were "strong supporters" of SEL. Only 8 percent were true opponents. However, half were in the moveable middle, meaning that they agreed with some aspects of both supporter and opponent talking points and could be swayed either way.

Several supporter messages attracted strong support. For example, 91 percent of respondents agreed that "teaching real-world skills and traits helps students be better prepared for college, the workforce, and life." Even two-thirds of the opponent subgroup agreed with this statement. Other statements that tested well and could help rally support for SEL included the following: "We need to make sure that all children—no matter who they are, where they're from, or how much money their family makes—develop the social, emotional, and academic skills they need to succeed in life"; and "children equipped with social, emotional, and academic skills are ready to learn and do better in school."

While fewer respondents overall agreed with opposition messages, more than half were swayed by worries about evaluation, concerns for overworked teachers, and a perceived danger of labeling students. For example, 59 percent agreed with this statement: "I worry there will be standards and that students will be graded or judged on their feelings." Fifty-five percent agreed that "teachers are overworked already—they don't have the time or resources to do this well for all students and cultures." Even among the strong supporters' subgroup, roughly a third agreed with these statements.

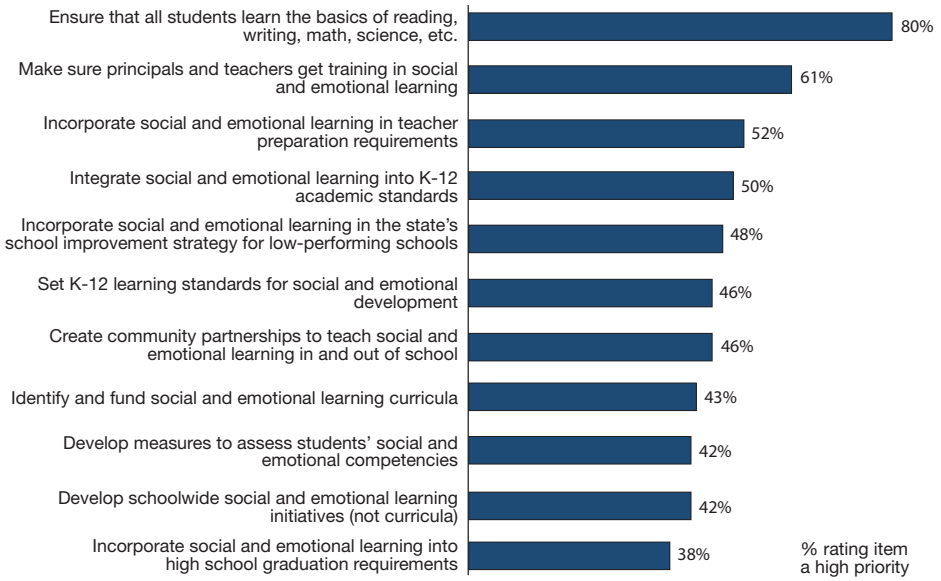
IMPLICATIONS FOR STATE BOARDS

The survey showed that community influencers are open to state board leadership on SEL. About half of respondents were somewhat or very familiar with their state board and had an understanding of the board's role in K-12 education policymaking. More than half trusted state boards to ensure that local public schools are developing students' social and emotional skills. In comparison, 44 percent had confidence in the governor's office and 40 percent in elected officials, state or local. When asked in a follow-up question to select up to three groups seen as the leaders in social and emotional learning, community partners like Boys & Girls Clubs, parent groups like the PTA, and faith-based leaders rose to the top.

A portion of the survey was dedicated to rating policy priorities (figure 4). Highest priority (as rated by 80 percent) was ensuring that "all students learn the basics of reading, writing, math, science, etc." Making sure principals and teachers are trained in SEL was a high priority for 61 percent, and incorporating SEL in teacher preparation requirements was a high priority for 52 percent. Setting K-12 learning standards for social and emotional development was a high priority for 46 percent of respondents, and developing measures to assess students' social and emotional competencies was a high priority for 42 percent.

Throughout the data, community influencers agree on the importance of equity in opportunities and students treating others with respect. Nearly eight in ten said that providing high-quality education opportunities for all students across the state was a priority for public schools, and six in ten rated closing the achievement gap and improving outcomes for students of color and from low-income backgrounds as "very important."

Figure 4. Top SEL Policy Priorities among Community Influencers



The survey data point to several lessons for state boards as they communicate about SEL skill building and policy development.

- Community influencers can be motivated supporters for SEL, especially when SEL is tied to other policy issues they hold dear. Highlighting the interconnection of SEL with academics, students' perceptions of feeling safe at school, and preparation for the real world, for example, can speak powerfully to these audiences.
- In talking with these audiences about related policies, the terms SEAD and life skills rally support with this group more effectively than does SEL.
- State boards are in a good position to highlight SEL skills and behaviors that can be reinforced in school, again by tying them to behaviors that are highly valued, such as responsible decision making.
- If a state board is interested in assessment, it should tread lightly, assuring audiences that students will not be labeled or graded on SEL skill attainment.
- How policymakers talk about SEL matters. Couching policy priorities in "real-world skills" and "making sure all children develop the social, emotional, and academic skills they need to succeed in life" resonates best with the full spectrum of the audience.
- State boards should be ready to address concerns about evaluation, labeling, and teacher training and capacity.
- Community influencers aged 18–24 are an important constituency. These recent students and up-and-coming parents are consistently more informed and engaged on this topic, and they will continue to play a role in the years ahead.

Understanding constituents' beliefs about and policy priorities for helping students with their nonacademic needs can aid state boards in making better policy to serve the students in their states. And communicating about policies in a way that resonates with school communities can help to sustain ongoing support.

Megan Blanco is NASBE's senior policy associate, and Valerie Norville is its editorial director. *This work is made possible by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and NASBE thanks them for their support. NASBE also thanks Pam Loeb and Stacia Tipton at Edge Research for their expert work on this study.*

NOTES

1 Deborah A. Temkin et al., "Creating Healthy Schools: Students, Educators, and Policymakers Name Priorities," *State Education Standard* 19, no. 1 (Alexandria, VA: NASBE, January 2019).

2 Rebecca D. Taylor et al., "Promoting Positive Youth Development through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects," *Child Development* 88, no. 4 (2017): 1156–71; Sean Grant et al., "Social and Emotional Learning Interventions under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).

3 Clive R. Belfield et al., "The Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning," *Journal of Benefit Cost Analysis* 6, no. 3 (2015): 508–44, doi:10.1017/bca.2015.55.

4 The online survey included a total of N=1,036 respondents, with a minimum of 200 community influencers in each network state. The survey was in the field on January 3–29, 2019. Edge Research worked with an established industry sampling partner, consisting of opt-in research participants. This is a nonprobability/convenience sample. Quotas were set to ensure incoming data (prior to screening for "community influencers") was census representative in terms of age and gender, region and race/ethnicity. A little more than a third were parents. Respondents spanned the political and demographic spectrum, and most were affiliated with local civic, community, or religious organizations.

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