What Social and Emotional Learning Needs to Succeed and Survive

By Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Frederick M. Hess

April 2019

Key Points

- This report offers seven suggestions for social and emotional learning (SEL) advocates and funders as they seek to deliver on SEL's promise and avoid its pitfalls.
- The case for SEL must not become an excuse to diminish attention to academic skills and knowledge or serve to deflect educators from the centrality of academic instruction.
- SEL will be counted a dismal failure if it encourages educators to settle for pillowy paeans to "happiness," "self-esteem," and "inclusivity" at the expense of harder things such as character, virtue, civility, and self-discipline.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has caught a sizable wave in American K–12 education. Googling the phrase will get more than 400 million hits. It's the focus of a high-profile Aspen Institute national commission that issued its final report earlier this year[1] and of innumerable policy powwows, professional development programs, and philanthropic initiatives. It has its own advocacy group, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), based in Chicago with a 33-member staff and more than 20 blue-ribbon funders.

What is SEL exactly, and what's all the fuss about? CASEL defines SEL as "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."[2] The Aspen Commission frames it as "the integration of social and emotional development with academic learning."[3]

Obvious, you say? Self-evidently desirable? Stuff that good schools (and parents) have always done? An appealing if nebulous concept with much to like for folks on both left and right? Of course, say we. It's all those things plus an attempt at rebalancing an education system that in recent decades has focused overmuch on reading and math scores while giving short shrift to character development, civic formation, and the cultivation of ethics among its young charges.

Hence, superintendents, principals, and policymakers are right to embrace the (age-old) notion put forward by the SEL crowd that schools are about more than academics. The educational experience itself should be engaging, safe, and collaborative, and its goals must transcend the cultivation of literacy and numeracy. As they embrace SEL, however, practitioners and policymakers alike need to be wary of some clear dos and don'ts because their well-meaning efforts could also end up making schools worse.

The case for SEL must not become an excuse to diminish attention to academic skills and

knowledge or serve to deflect educators from the centrality of academic instruction. Sensibly configured, SEL should complement instruction in reading and math, as well as history, science, civics, literature, composition, and the arts. We are persuaded by common sense and some decent research that kids are better able to master academics when they feel safe, valued, emotionally secure, and socially at ease. After all, preparing students to be responsible citizens in a liberal democracy is a vital part of what schools are for. Academic instruction alone doesn't cultivate that sort of competence. Both are essential.

Staying Balanced

Unlike academic achievement, however, for which we have all manner of time-tested (if imperfect) metrics, gauging progress on the SEL front is exceptionally difficult. You may know good SEL when you see it, but it is hard to document gains, much less convincingly and reliably measure them when (and if) they occur. That elusiveness can make it tempting for educators whose schools and pupils are struggling academically to lose their balance and turn to the celebration of SEL as a refuge from mediocre academic outcomes.

One of us recently observed a small instance of this dynamic at an awards ceremony for secondary school principals, where a prize winner took great pains to glowingly, lovingly depict her school as a place with a family-like atmosphere. It does really well, she said with evident and legitimate pride, at making everyone feel welcome and forging a staff-wide commitment to meeting student needs. That, however, was only after she observed—without evident concern—that her school doesn't perform all that well on conventional gauges of academic performance. This, bear in mind, is a principal receiving peer accolades for the great job she's done as a school leader.

A principal's leadership agenda should, of course, incorporate "making everyone feel welcome." But success at SEL must complement and buttress academic learning, not become a substitute or excuse for not having enough of it. In the same vein, SEL will be counted a dismal failure if it encourages educators to settle for pillowy paeans to "happiness," "self-esteem," and "inclusivity" at the expense of harder things such as character, ethics, virtue, and civility.

If SEL does tip toward the lax and banal, history suggests that it will likely have a relatively short shelf life, much like the self-esteem fad of the 1980s. There turned out to be no solid research foundation under the work of California's celebrated Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. To the contrary, its "findings" were ultimately exposed as fraudulent. Long before that, its recommendations were widely mocked for their feel-good soft-headedness. (We suspect this sorry excursion also played a role in the Golden State's long-term slide in academic performance.) Much the same thing sank the nationwide passion for "values clarification" education in the 1960s and "outcomes-based education" in the 1990s. These movements faltered due to a lack of evidence that they worked and became politically untenable once they came to be seen as inimical to "traditional" values and basic skills.

If SEL does tip toward the lax and banal, history suggests that it will likely have a relatively short shelf life, much like the self-esteem fad of the 1980s.

To be clear, today's most thoughtful SEL proponents strike us as serious about seeking to avoid the hostility to academic instruction that bedeviled those earlier efforts. Indeed, the best evidence for SEL concerns its ability to support academic learning. The authors of a worthy research summary developed for the Aspen Commission pay particular attention to "how emotionally safe and cognitively stimulating environments contribute to brain development; how brain development that supports learning depends on social experiences; and how sensitive periods in brain development align with opportunities for learning and needed supports."[4] All well and good.

But while such sentiments are compelling on paper, the question is whether this vision of SEL will win out in practice. As with those earlier failed

efforts, plenty of educators, advocates, funders, and vendors hold their own visions of what SEL is for—and those views may not align with Aspen's no-nonsense mantra. After all, it's quite tempting to allow efforts like SEL to tread a kinder, gentler path. This is because educators (like most of us) would rather be kind than judgmental and gentle rather than hectoring. This is also, however, because of a basic asymmetry in the relationship between SEL and academics: While SEL can serve as an important enabling condition for academic achievement, the converse is not true. One can be in excellent social and emotional shape without knowing how to multiply two-digit numbers, write a cogent paragraph, or explain the causes of the Civil War. We are reminded of the unfortunate but well-documented fact that exceptionally high levels of self-esteem and satisfaction in young Americans often go hand in glove with dangerously low levels of academic success.

A further concern is that, because the metrics currently available for gauging SEL success are limited and subjective, it's possible to assert that things are going well or that "programs are working" largely on the basis of anecdote or cherry-picked survey data—and it's hard for doubters to disprove such claims. This breeds uncertainty over how best to infuse SEL into schools or know whether such efforts are succeeding. Some states are relying heavily on "school climate" surveys, the results of which may figure in the state's Every Student Succeeds Act accountability plan and school report cards. We find ourselves waiting to be convinced that these tools will prove as valid and reliable as advocates hope.

Seven Suggestions

Continued research, experimentation, and evaluation are certainly warranted, and an earnest commitment to these—coupled with candor about what we do and don't know—may help SEL avoid the pitfalls that have undone earlier efforts to advance many of the same intuitions. But there's much more that partisans and funders should consider as they seek to deliver on SEL's promise. In the remainder of this paper, we offer seven suggestions, born of hard experience, that may help.

1. Slow down and focus on getting it right.
2. Be clear about what SEL is and is not.
3. Make sure that character and civic education loom large in the SEL portfolio.
4. Making schools safer is an appealing facet of SEL, so long as the transcendent point is student safety, not adult agendas.
5. Parental enthusiasm for SEL is healthy, but it ought not become a free pass for academic frailty.
6. Make it a priority to develop valid, reliable, intuitive metrics for SEL—and be honest about their limits.
7. In celebrating "evidence-based" practices and encouraging further research, be wary of analysts who give short shrift to how their findings translate to the real world.

Slow Down and Focus on Getting It Right. Approach SEL with the presumption that doing it well is more important than doing it swiftly. Any number of reforms have been brought down when they were used to justify goofy, half-baked, and poorly executed initiatives. Of course, we recognize that waves of reform tend to move at their own speed, especially when passionate believers see a big idea gaining momentum. But previous waves also carry sobering lessons.

For example, we recall the innocent dawn of charter schooling, when the impulse to launch as many schools as fast as possible in as many places as possible overwhelmed the capabilities of those creating, supporting, or authorizing schools. In states such as Ohio and Texas, dozens of schools opened that fell short on instruction, managerial know-how, integrity, facilities, staffing, financing, curriculum, and much else. More than a few sleazy operators seized the opportunity to pursue their own ends. The result was a mixed track record and a troubling number of outright scandals. This tainted charter schools in a number of states, inviting overregulation, fueling understandable resistance, and providing talking points to political opponents.

A useful counterexample has been the College Board's meticulous ramp-up of its new Advanced Placement (AP) Capstone courses and pre-AP 9th grade courses, both additions to the familiar AP portfolio. Capstone is a pair of advanced research-based courses, meant to ready students for the independent learning obligations of college, while

pre-AP seeks to take underprepared 9th graders and boost them to the point that they can successfully tackle challenging coursework. In both cases, the College Board has striven to ensure school and teacher preparedness before expanding access to these new offerings. While that elongated ramp-up has denied immediate participation to some, growing these programs slowly has made it possible to focus on doing them wisely and well.

Good communication is not only explaining what advocates think good SEL is but also taking pains to point out what it isn't.

When dealing with complex instructional initiatives, where execution is everything and plenty of fervent but ill-prepared advocates, administrators, and educators are keen to jump on the bandwagon, a calibrated rollout can be a powerful force for steering change onto a positive long-term path. There's much to be said for enthusiasm and rapid diffusion, but even more to be said for doing it right, which also demands considerable sophistication and self-restraint on the part of practitioners.

Be Clear About What SEL Is and Is Not. One peril inherent in novelty and widespread ardor is how temptingly easy it can be to build momentum and win allies by offering an inclusive or generic definition of the cause being advanced, which allows others to piggyback their own pet projects, sometimes settling for a couple of spindly trees instead of a healthy forest. Given the raft of malarkey being peddled by consultants, vendors, education school faculty, and plenty of others in the name of SEL (and much else), it's important to develop markers to help serious educators and curious parents know what clears the bar and what does not. Proponents need to make clear that SEL is not just feeling good about oneself and, instead, that it's an essential complement to—not a substitute for—academic achievement, that it rests on legitimate research, and that it's part of preparing competent adults and citizens.

Saying this once, or even repeating it every so often, is not enough. The desire to focus on rapid implementation while genially embracing a big tent approach is natural enough. Sadly, that approach won't safeguard either the perception or the practice of SEL from those with their own agendas. The question is what bona fide advocates are prepared to do when it comes to flagging the frauds, identifying the charlatans, calling out practices that lack evidence, and otherwise helping communities separate the wheat from the chaff. Put another way, good communication is not only explaining what advocates think good SEL is but also taking pains to point out what it isn't. Doing so entails taking the uncomfortable next step of calling out those who are pitching dubious wares under the SEL banner or deploying problematic programs in their schools.

This means that a few days of "professional development" for educators or the simple embrace of some favored "best practice" is inadequate. It will be useful, for example, for SEL proponents to envision how they might certify principals as school-level SEL leaders and teachers as bona fide SEL providers. Maybe schools themselves could get gold stars for doing it right, much as buildings get LEED certified if they're environmentally sound. We're absolutely not suggesting an elaborate system of new governmental regulations or education-school credentials. It would be far better for a competent private organization, backstopped by like-minded philanthropy, to create and confer these additional credentials—and do their best to make them worth earning.

Make Sure That Character and Civic Education Loom Large in the SEL Portfolio. Many who fear that social and emotional learning is "squishy," suspiciously "progressivist," and a potential distraction from academic instruction will be reassured if they see clear signals that among its core elements are promoting character formation and preparation for responsible citizenship. This will take some doing, as nothing of the sort is visible on the much-discussed "wheel" on the CASEL website that depicts that organization's version of SEL's essential elements, but neither is it obviously at odds with the larger mission of SEL.

Indeed, SEL can be seen as a way for educators to recover and propagate—sans religion—

the emphases on virtue, integrity, and empathy that were long ago flagged by scholars such as James Coleman, Valerie Lee, and Tony Bryk as core traits of successful Catholic schools. It is also a path toward the strengthened civic education that almost everybody agrees is sorely lacking in today's America (and the absence of which is painfully evident in our public square), encompassing issues of civic consciousness, civil engagement, and civilized behavior. Those are links that SEL advocates should forge as energetically as they do the connection between SEL and academic achievement.

Making Schools Safer Is an Appealing Facet of SEL, so Long as the Transcendent Point Is Student Safety, Not Adult Agendas. Kids who are at peace, comfortable in their own skins, and able to get along with others are not likely to disrupt their classrooms, bully other kids, or defy their teachers. This implicit emphasis on cultivating responsible behavior is yet another facet of SEL that is intuitive, genuinely important in its own right, and apt to legitimize SEL in the eyes of folks who may otherwise be inclined to dismiss it as touchy-feely. After all, just about everyone wants safe, orderly schools full of eager, well-behaved pupils. And the more of that we get, the less fraught will be our political and legal debates over discipline policy and practices.

At the same time, some SEL proponents seem particularly invested in "discipline reform" and "restorative justice" as the way to help students feel comfortable and promote school safety. They do so in a manner that to us seems to egregiously overstate the evidence regarding the efficacy of those approaches while dismissing concerns or contradictory data. At issue is whether SEL will be defined by its goals or by the preferred tactics of some devotees. How faithfully will it hew to the evidentiary standards that the Aspen Commission championed? And how vigorously will proponents challenge those who would exploit a unifying concern such as "safe schools" to advance their own favorite strategies, even when those strategies prove disappointing or divisive? We encourage thoughtful SEL advocates to be clear that the overriding goal is to help students feel safe and valued, to insist that all strategies for doing this be held to similar standards of evidence, and to reassure skeptics that they are not putting a thumb on the scale for strategies that they happen to find ideologically congenial or politically useful.

Parental Enthusiasm for SEL Is Healthy, but It Ought Not Become a Free Pass for Academic Frailty. Parents are natural SEL allies for obvious reasons. They care deeply about the emotional well-being and social milieu of their children and about the security and climate of their schools. Sometimes, it must be said, parents can care so much about those things that they, like educators, lose balance. After all, in both district-based and school choice environments, recent years have demonstrated the proclivity of many parents to judge schools "good" if they are seen as safe, responsive, and welcoming—whatever their academic performance. Consider the low-performing charter schools that parents are content with because—they say—the schools are safe and friendly. Now, in no way do we fault moms and dads for prioritizing security and friendliness in their schools. Indeed, a core rationale for choice is that it allows parents to get their kids out of places that are neither safe nor friendly. Moreover, we recognize that reading and math scores on state assessments are limited measures of school quality.

All that said, schools must be places of learning. From parents' perspective, the long-term prospects of their daughters and sons hinge in large part on how they fare academically. While the conviction that SEL and academics are inseparable may incline SEL advocates to wave off concerns about any latent tensions, they would do well to keep loudly insisting that an emphasis on social and emotional considerations must be tightly linked to a focus on children's academic learning, and they should do their best to help parents insist on that linkage in their children's schools. Policymakers can help by making those connections vivid on school report cards and accountability systems. And outside groups that rate and compare schools—organizations such as GreatSchools—can assist (as they typically already do) by paying equal attention on their information pages to "academics" and "environments."

Make It a Priority to Develop Valid, Reliable, Intuitive Metrics for SEL—and Be Honest About Their Limits. It will be important to identify and insofar as possible develop bona fide outcome measures that feel credible to a broad swath of parents and educators. This will lend legitimacy to the insistence that SEL be evidence based, while enabling its measures to be viewed alongside measures of academic performance. Most importantly, this will enable parents, educators, policymakers, and researchers to talk about school quality in ways that span the realities of actual schools and the lives of real children.

School climate surveys are a start, but let's not kid ourselves. They share the vulnerabilities of all subjective "how do you think things are going" polls and questionnaires, including selective answers by adults who want their school to look good (or bad!) and plain old game-playing by students. SEL needs more reliable instruments. Just how practical it will be to develop them remains an open question, which should be addressed with a transparency and modesty too often absent in recent years in high-profile efforts to promote other sorts of novel measures such as student assessment and teacher evaluation.

It's also vital to resist overselling the instruments that we do have. Some of what we most value in SEL may ultimately prove difficult to measure systematically or credibly. Indeed, it is easy to imagine scenarios in which shoddy instruments are clumsily applied, disrupting healthy routines and relationships. Transparency and a willingness to continuously solicit feedback from skeptical students, parents, and teachers—not just supportive ones—will prove invaluable in addressing these tensions. A relentless commitment to evidence will help guard against goofiness while also helping reassure parents and educators. When the evidence is shaky or uncertain, SEL advocates need to forthrightly acknowledge the fact—not duck it or downplay it. Sometimes the best data we have when forming a judgment about something—as with reviews of movies, books, and restaurants—is the judgment of others in the form of expert or crowd-sourced opinion (think Zagat and TripAdvisor). The duty of advocates is to emphasize transparency and integrity, which includes distinguishing between "solid evidence" and "thoughtful opinion."

In Celebrating "Evidence-Based" Practices and Encouraging Further Research, Be Wary of Analysts Who Give Short Shrift to How Their Findings Translate to the Real World. Researchers in education (as in other fields) have an understandable proclivity to pursue work that gets funded, gets published, and gets them tenure, promotions, and awards. This leads many to focus on large data sets that can yield "causal findings" about the impact of "intervention" X or "best practice" Y. Such findings get repeated and celebrated, winning their finders attention and new funding opportunities. This is all natural enough, except that it tends to curb research interest in—or popular attention to—the laborious work of examining how well something is being done and what is needed to do it better. Indeed, that kind of murky, hard-to-quantify, and hard-to-publish stuff mostly gets dismissed as "implementation" and left to practitioners, who tend to believe that what they're doing is being done well (whether or not that's the case).

School climate surveys are a start, but let's not kid ourselves. They share the vulnerabilities of all subjective "how do you think things are going" polls and questionnaires.

This dynamic also means that evidence-based recommendations can wind up being helplessly naive about the challenges of how some program or intervention that works well in a controlled setting will play out in less hospitable environs. SEL does not yet have much by way of large data sets, and of course it needs to acquire them. But it neglects at its peril the unsexy study of implementation, the careful evaluation of efficacy, and the creation of unpopular but vital experiments that yield solid information about which interventions actually make what differences under what conditions. Those commissioning and engaging in SEL research will need to seek feedback and evidence

that helps anticipate what can go wrong in the real world.

Conclusion

Social and emotional learning may become a durable pillar of American K–12 education. Or it may prove faddish, contentious, and evanescent. Which of those futures lies ahead depends in significant part on the choices made by supportive educators, advocates, policymakers, funders, and scholars in these early days of the SEL movement. We hope that they choose wisely.

About the Authors

Chester E. Finn, Jr. is a distinguished senior fellow and president emeritus at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and a senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution.

Frederick M. Hess is director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

Notes

1. Aspen Institute, "From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope," January 15, 2019, http://nationathope.org/.
2. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, "What Is SEL?," https://casel.org/what-is-sel/.
3. Aspen Institute, "What Is Social, Emotional, and Academic Development?," https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/national-commission-on-social-emotional-and-academic-development/social-emotional-academic-development/.
4. Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Christina Krone, "The Brain Basis for Integrated Social, Emotional, and Academic Development: How Emotions and Social Relationships Drive Learning," Aspen Institute, September 20, 2018, https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/the-brain-basis-for-integrated-social-emotional-and-academic-development/.