



No Child Left Behind, National Ambitions, and Local Realities: Implications for Social and Emotional Learning

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Key Points

- Advocates for social and emotional learning (SEL) can learn from the challenges that No Child Left Behind faced in navigating tensions between a national reform effort and local schooling.
- Accordingly, SEL advocates should view the popularity of their initiative with a grain of salt and proceed deliberately when encouraging local communities to reform their schools.
- Specifically, advocates should embrace SEL flexibility on how schools and districts formulate SEL programs, avoid enshrining SEL in federal or state policy, resist the urge to rate SEL's success based on test scores, and take pains to work with—and not around—parents and teachers.

Throughout much of the past quarter century, standards, testing, and accountability have composed the North Star of education reform. But over that time, the string of reform initiatives that failed to live up to their initial promise has effectively extinguished that guiding light. Now focus has turned to social and emotional learning (SEL).

Its appeal is obvious. After the laser focus on reading and math scores that defined the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era, everyone can get behind an initiative that works to educate the “whole child,” developing self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills.¹ But I worry that many of the factors that imperiled earlier NCLB-era initiatives also threaten SEL. In particular, I'm concerned that failing to pay attention to local stakeholders' preferences and priorities

could undermine the significant potential of the broader SEL reform effort.

In a country as diverse as the US, any national reform initiative is going to encounter tensions with local realities, and SEL is no exception. This report takes stock of those pressures and—drawing on NCLB-era lessons—puts forth six concrete suggestions for advocates faced with navigating the tensions that emerge. In doing so, I intend to contribute, however slightly, to advocates' efforts to help SEL achieve its significant promise.

The Road to Reform: From National Initiative to Local Realities

Today, it's hard to find people who, in principle, think the idea of SEL is a bad one. It's clear that the logic of SEL makes sense to many people. But this

broad enthusiasm is partially attributable to the SEL reform effort being in its relative infancy: SEL is in the early “national” stage of the reform initiative, as opposed to the later “local” stage.

Widespread support during the national stage of a reform effort stems from the fact that, because it is not yet implemented, the reform initiative can mean almost anything to anyone. Even if leading SEL advocacy organizations, such as the Aspen Institute and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, are clear on how they define SEL, others can and will project their ideals and preferences onto it. Thus, SEL means different things to different people.

For some, SEL means working to develop skills such as self-control and persistence. For others, communication skills and interpersonal abilities are at the heart of SEL. Still others see SEL primarily as developing citizenship skills. The freedom to align SEL with a variety of goals and priorities undoubtedly engenders broad-based support for the initiative. This near-universal support, though, is unlikely to last once SEL starts to be implemented in classrooms.

Why? Soon, SEL advocates will be tasked with concretely defining the curricula or interventions they hope to implement in districts and schools across the country; they will be forced to transition from the national stage of the reform effort to the local one. And when this transition occurs, disagreements will come into plain view.

Folks who think SEL should prioritize citizenship may not be so keen on prescriptive interventions designed to promote perseverance. Teachers may resent the impact SEL has on their classroom practice. Parents who happily give schools wide discretion to teach reading and math may not feel the same way about the school’s approach to character formation. All these local tensions could generate significant opposition.

We need only look back to NCLB for a cautionary tale of how local realities can spark the downfall of an initiative that initially commanded broad support. It’s easy to forget that NCLB was quite popular immediately following its enactment. In a 2002 PDK/Gallup poll fielded just after the law was enacted, 57 percent of participants indicated that the “federal government’s [increased] involvement in local schooling was a ‘good thing,’” compared to

just 34 percent that thought it was a “bad thing.”² Everyone could support the idea of setting world-class standards, assessing whether students were meeting those standards, and holding schools accountable if even a subset of students failed to meet them.

But sentiment began to change when parents and teachers saw how that actually looked in their own schools and districts. Indeed, results from the annual PDK/Gallup poll on education revealed that the percentage of the public viewing NCLB unfavorably grew from 27 percent in 2005 to 46 percent in 2010.³

Growing discontent was due, in part, to parents feeling that the NCLB they saw in their child’s school was not the one they had initially signed up for. They began to realize that setting “world-class standards” actually meant implementing the Common Core, which spurred some curricular changes that parents weren’t thrilled about. Informational texts crowded novels out of the curriculum. Parents saw math principles taught with techniques completely foreign to them. These sorts of changes planted seeds of doubt in the minds of some parents over the wisdom of both the new standards and NCLB more generally.

Standards were not the only aspect of NCLB that encountered resistance when it came time for local implementation. Parents quickly realized that assessing whether students were meeting high expectations involved their child spending several days taking banal, multiple-choice assessments. More than that, though, it often entailed their kid’s school devoting several weeks to test preparation, teaching test-taking strategies in place of music or art. Parents and teachers soon saw that holding schools accountable didn’t actually mean taking any tangible action to help schools improve but rather simply labeling them as “in need of improvement” and imposing punitive sanctions.

That label—and more than 80 percent of schools would’ve worn this label by 2011, if not for NCLB waivers—did not sit well with parents. They have the optimal vantage point for assessing the pluses and minuses of their kids’ schools, and survey results routinely make clear that parents judge the good to far outweigh the bad. For example, in the 2018 PDK poll, 70 percent of parents gave their child’s school an A or B grade.⁴ And at the end of

the day, parents tend to trust their own judgment, rather than some generic, bureaucratically imposed label.

It turns out that teachers, too, don't like when you call their school "failing." Their daily experiences—bonding with their students and seeing the proverbial light bulb flicker on—leave them confident that their school isn't failing. And they're not going to change their minds just because an act of Congress tells them otherwise.

Both parents and teachers felt that the NCLB implemented in their local schools was not what they had hoped for when they supported the general notion of setting world-class standards, assessing whether students were meeting those standards, and holding schools accountable for doing so. Politically, this local discontent signaled the beginning of the end for the NCLB era.

Given the broad-based enthusiasm for SEL, it may not seem likely, or even possible, that this latest reform initiative could also fall victim to pushback as advocates work to scale it down to schools and districts across the country. The specific tensions that SEL will likely encounter differ from those that plagued NCLB, but the underlying sources of these local tensions—teachers and parents—will be the same. As with any national reform initiative, SEL initiatives will most likely rub these two constituencies the wrong way. And one of the biggest threats to SEL's long-term success is teachers and parents feeling that the SEL they see in their school differs from the SEL they were originally sold.

SEL's Threat to Teacher Autonomy

The teaching profession was forced to navigate a barrage of reform initiatives throughout the NCLB era. Teachers were asked to realign their instruction with new standards, sometimes multiple times in just a few years. They had to ensure their students were prepared to take redesigned assessments. And they had to endure the results of these assessments being inputted into rigid teacher evaluation systems that would be used to identify and, ultimately, dismiss ineffective teachers. The continual wave of reforms targeting teachers understandably left many educators feeling disempowered.

Throughout this reform-driven turbulence, though, teachers' relationships with students remained an area generally not subject to some sort of formal evaluation or observational rating. For many educators, the connections they forge with their students—and the ability to use those connections to drive growth in their students—are the most rewarding aspects of their job. They are the essence and joy of teaching. And whether by accident or not, that facet of the job remained relatively unaffected by the avalanche of NCLB-era reforms.

But SEL initiatives threaten this remaining area of teacher autonomy. Successful student-teacher relationships are formed organically; they can't be built through some sort of external intervention. More than that, though, teachers may resent efforts to systematize and formalize student-teacher interaction. This type of resentment often metastasizes into loud and organized opposition, and recent history demonstrates that such opposition is potent.

Teacher opposition contributed to the demise of several NCLB-era efforts, with test-based teacher evaluation systems serving as Exhibit A. These systems were a centerpiece of the Obama administration's education reform agenda and were strongly backed by a number of heavy hitters in the education policy space, with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation perhaps the most visible supporter. From the beginning, though, teachers united in vocal opposition to these systems. They argued that test scores were a poor measure of teacher quality. They exploited the opacity of teacher value-added measurement, referring to it as "voodoo value-added."⁵ The persistent teacher opposition took a toll and undoubtedly contributed to the downfall of test-based teacher evaluation systems.

There is reason to fear a similar dynamic playing out with SEL. Teachers consider their relationships with students as special, off-limits from the reach of education reform efforts. So the minute someone shows up in classrooms with a rubric or survey designed to measure teacher-student relationships or, even worse, a curriculum designed to structure them, teachers will immediately become wary and may shut their doors to the reform effort. Even more problematic, at least from SEL advocates' standpoint, is a situation in which the threat to teacher autonomy sparks organized opposition to

SEL initiatives. And if teacher resistance could help turn the tide against using reading and math scores as a measure of teacher effectiveness, just imagine what will happen when they train their sights on measures of student-teacher relationships.

SEL’s Potential to Catch Parents Off Guard

Historically, US public schools placed at least as much emphasis on developing citizenship skills, character, and a common set of values as they did on preparing individuals for postsecondary education or the workforce. Over time, that balance has shifted dramatically, with many considering “college and career readiness” the primary purpose of K–12 schools. With this shift in focus came a shift in parental expectation: Parents now expect that schools will focus almost exclusively on imparting knowledge and skills that will facilitate success in postsecondary education or the labor force.

SEL’s promise to expand the focus of schooling is popular, but moving the school environment beyond a narrow focus on academic achievement—reading and math, in particular—may also catch some parents by surprise. Even if this broadened focus is intended to return us to a concept of schooling that was dominant only a few decades ago, parents may be hesitant to cede responsibility to schools to help develop their child’s character, values, and citizenship skills. They will question whether an institution designed to impart academic skills can really know what values and character traits their child needs and, even if it does, whether it can effectively instill them.

Along with general discomfort in ceding schools a larger role in their child’s character development, parents will likely object to aspects of the specific initiative implemented in their child’s school. These objections will come in three primary forms. First, at least some parents will object to the content of SEL initiatives, feeling that they promote values that conflict with their own. And even without such direct conflict, some parents will object to the relative emphasis placed on each value. Some parents may want more focus on social awareness and less on responsible decision-making, while others will prefer the exact opposite.

Second, a selection of parents won’t object to SEL-promoted values *per se* but will disagree with the specific lessons and methods schools use to teach those values. Many SEL values and competencies can be taught from secular and religious standpoints. Of course, the US Constitution mandates a secular grounding, but as two previous reports in this series point out, this doesn’t change the fact that a nontrivial portion of parents will strongly prefer a religious perspective.⁶ And these parents will surely make their preferences known.

Third, certain parents will judge the particular SEL program implemented in their child’s school as ill-suited for their child’s context or personality. A child who obsesses about getting every little aspect of his or her homework assignment absolutely perfect doesn’t need to hear about the importance of perseverance. Or consider the competency of responsible decision-making across the urban-rural divide. In rural areas, this might include waking up early enough to feed the animals and still get to school on time. Such a reality is entirely foreign to students in urban or suburban areas, where responsible decision-making entails completely different considerations. At the end of the day, it is easy to think of dozens of other bases for contextual objections. And although each one may arise only in a relatively small set of cases, together they represent a real threat to the success of the broader SEL movement.

Six Suggestions for Navigating Local Tensions

Tensions will inevitably arise as SEL advocates work to scale the reform effort down to schools and districts across the country. These tensions represent a very real threat to SEL’s long-term success. But there’s good news: SEL advocates can do several things to minimize the threats these local tensions pose. Here are six suggestions to maximize SEL’s chances of achieving its potential.

Avoid NCLB-era advocates’ rush to dismiss criticism. When opposition to SEL initiatives forms—and the formation of opposition is a question of *when*, not *if*—how SEL advocates respond

will be a crucial determinant of SEL's future success. If experience with past reform initiatives is a prologue for SEL, advocates may be quick to downplay criticism, waving it off as off base and irrelevant. Whether we look at teacher evaluation, Common Core, testing opt-outs, or responses to any number of other NCLB-era initiatives, reform advocates have tended to proceed with something of a "trust us, we know best" attitude, often dismissing even serious and legitimate critics as not having kids' best interests at heart.

Perhaps the most infamous example of this genre came from former US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan when he attributed some portion of Common Core opposition to "white suburban moms who—all of a sudden—their child isn't as brilliant as they thought they were, and their school isn't quite as good as they thought they were."⁷ History suggests that flippantly dismissing critics can generate short-term political gains but over the long term can actually jeopardize the reform effort.

With these past mistakes in mind, the best-case response for SEL would be for advocates to respectfully engage with critics, seeing them as well-intentioned men and women who simply have different views on the best approach to educating children. It's OK, even healthy, to have disagreements over whether, for example, resources devoted to SEL initiatives might be better allocated.

Similarly, the principled disagreements that SEL is almost certain to evoke should be embraced as an opportunity to constructively engage one another. SEL advocates could actually create such opportunities by holding listening sessions designed to elicit what various stakeholders—parents, teachers, district personnel, and others—want out of an SEL initiative. Or advocates could proactively organize a series of events where they invite skeptics and critics to systematically lay out their concerns with SEL, which could lay a foundation for thoughtful engagement between advocates and critics. Such exercises might be frustrating or even confrontational, but they can also allow various participants to air their grievances and concerns, which is better than letting them boil beneath the surface, waiting to explode.

Embrace flexibility in SEL schools and districts. SEL advocates argue that their initiative involves lots of local effort. The challenge here is that SEL is also largely driven by a national campaign. How the advocates plan to resolve that tension will prove telling.

Advocates have a chance to prove their localist bona fides by conceding that any given initiative isn't the answer for everyone and that SEL shouldn't be regarded as a near-universal solution for schools and districts. American school districts are, after all, remarkably heterogeneous, and it's likely that an SEL initiative that excels in one place will fall flat in another. To succeed, SEL advocates must assess the conditions likely to both facilitate and impede the success of specific SEL initiatives.

More importantly, advocates should tell us *how* SEL will bend and adapt to local sensibilities. If SEL becomes something that's advanced at the state level, advocates will need to go one step farther and make sure that state boards and activists understand why one-size-fits-all SEL—even at the state level—is unlikely to succeed.

Don't enshrine SEL in federal or state policy. The temptation to enshrine SEL in federal or state policy will undoubtedly be strong at times; policy is uniquely suited to making people do things you'd like. But SEL advocates should resist this temptation. Precisely because policy is uniquely effective in making folks do things, it is also uniquely effective in mobilizing opposition. Look no further than testing. Schools have administered tests for years, even standardized ones, but it wasn't until testing requirements were codified in federal law that opposition began to form. To keep SEL from experiencing the same blowback as testing, advocates should keep SEL as far away from policy as possible.

This means no efforts to specify any SEL-related measure as the "fifth indicator" under the Every Student Succeeds Act. It means not advocating for any SEL measure to serve as an input to school report cards. This does not mean that SEL measures can never be used as indicators—teachers and principals should be free to use them in ways they find valuable—only that states and, especially, the federal government need to avoid mandating them.

In addition to this instrumental reason for keeping SEL out of federal and state policy, there

is also a second, more powerful rationale for doing so. And that is the simple fact that SEL is not amenable to measurement and codification. Most people view the competencies that SEL initiatives seek to promote as personal values and virtues, not scientific constructs to be measured and codified. If we want to go down the road of measuring the constructs underlying SEL, we need to do so in a manner that maximizes our confidence in their validity and reliability. If NCLB testing and accountability provisions taught us anything, it is that things will go wrong when we enshrine half-baked measures into policy.

Trust teachers to tell us what does and doesn't work. It seems that SEL advocates are confident they understand that teachers will be instrumental in SEL's success. They promise they recognize the need to work hand-in-hand with teachers throughout the design and implementation process.

But the NCLB era illustrated that this sort of collaboration is much easier said than done. Time and again, teachers warned us about problems with earlier reform efforts, serving as the proverbial canary in the coal mine for the perils of over-testing, the perverse incentives of NCLB accountability systems, and flaws in teacher evaluation systems, among others. Instead of heeding these warnings, however, advocates tended to proceed full speed ahead without adjusting either substance or strategy. And we saw how that worked out.

For SEL advocates to avoid the pitfalls of the past, they should start by creating formal processes—such as advisory boards—for eliciting and incorporating teachers' ideas and judgments into SEL initiatives. More important than simply creating these processes, though, is taking action when teachers tell us what will and won't work. This means scrapping rubrics or surveys—even cherished ones—when teachers make a compelling case that they will disrupt the classroom dynamic. It means scaling back or overhauling initiatives when teachers tell us they don't fit the realities of their students' lives. More generally, it means respecting teachers' professional judgment, even if that judgment is at odds with the preferences and priorities of SEL advocates.

Don't pull a bait and switch by judging SEL's success on its ability to increase reading and

math scores. At this early stage in the SEL movement, many advocates may be tempted to link SEL initiatives to reading and math scores. The urge to make such connections is entirely understandable, given the policy focus of the past two decades. But the appeal of SEL stems from its promise of broadening the educational focus beyond reading and math scores.

Assessing the efficacy of SEL initiatives by maintaining focus on the same outcomes that have dominated discourse for the past 20 years could leave teachers wary that SEL initiatives are little more than a Trojan horse designed to maintain focus on increasing test scores. Indeed, walling off SEL from reading and math scores will help minimize the chance of parents and teachers feeling that the SEL in their schools differs from the SEL they were originally promised. It will reduce the likelihood that local stakeholders will feel that they were sold a bill of goods.

Provide parents with control over their child's SEL experience. A big problem with NCLB-era reforms was that, to many observers, advocates seemed to treat parents as problems, not partners. They dismissed parents' concerns about the Common Core, over-testing, and other reforms with a quick wave of the hand, telling themselves that parents just didn't understand. And maybe parents didn't know all the details of each reform initiative. They did know, however, that they didn't like someone telling them that they didn't have their child's best interest at heart.

For SEL's long-term success, advocates need to avoid coming off as elitist scolds who know what is best for everyone's children. To do this, they need to design SEL initiatives in a manner that provides parents with control over their child's experience. This means having an opt-out process in place that parents are aware of and can easily access. It entails regularly soliciting feedback—via surveys, focus groups, or some other format—about parents' likes and dislikes of the initiative and changing course when the feedback dictates. Providing parents with some agency over their child's SEL experience certainly won't eliminate all objections, but it will reduce the chance that parental opposition strikes a fatal blow.

Conclusion

After years of devoting policy attention almost exclusively to initiatives and interventions designed to boost reading and math achievement, the promise of SEL to expand the educational focus in schools and districts is undeniably appealing. Working to instill students with a broad set of characteristics and skills to facilitate their success in life is a worthwhile goal. The education system stands to benefit, perhaps significantly, if SEL can deliver on its promise. As the NCLB era demonstrates, though, achieving the promise of SEL is by no means assured. Hurdles will pop up, and the way advocates clear these hurdles will determine

whether SEL survives and thrives or is just another flash in the pan.

In closing this report, I return to the celestial metaphor that opened it to provide one final suggestion: Do not treat SEL as a new educational North Star that must be pursued at all costs. Instead, treat it as one of the planets—as a key part of the educational solar system, but a part about which we have much left to learn. Indeed, the only time I’m confident that someone in the education policy arena is wrong is when they are absolutely certain they know what should be done and the optimal way of doing it. Pursuing SEL with a bit of humility promises to facilitate discussions, debates, and compromises that lay a foundation for long-term success at the local level.

About the Author

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Notes

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