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Get Smart About Social and Emotional Learning Measurement

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Key Points

- How advocates choose to measure social and emotional learning (SEL) will play a critical role in shaping the effort's goals and success.

- The lack of clarity and consensus around SEL creates a specific challenge when it comes to devising credible measures, so schools must be mindful of using instruments carefully and avoiding overreliance on formal assessments.

- District and school leaders should take care to solicit feedback from teachers and families about how to customize SEL measures when needed and evaluate what is and isn't working.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has become popular among many education scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, as evidenced by the attention and praise bestowed on the final report of the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (SEAD).[1] State and federal education agencies have signaled to educators that they value SEL-related practices and outcomes, and professional organizations' journals are increasingly filled with SEL content.[2]

SEL is typically defined as the process through which students develop interpersonal skills, such as social awareness, and intrapersonal skills, such as emotion regulation.[3] This definition is quite broad, and educators have access to a mind-boggling number of frameworks that list and define specific skills.[4] Regardless of which definitions or frameworks educators adopt, they need ways to monitor and measure their SEL practices and assess whether these practices are actually helping students.

As with most approaches to school reform, SEL has the potential to be beneficial or harmful, depending on how it is defined and practiced. Well-designed assessments that help educators monitor instruction, school environments, and student outcomes can help ensure that SEL benefits students, enhances rather than detracts from other important activities (particularly academic instruction), and wins families' and educators' support.

SEL Measures Address Practices, Climate, and Student Competencies

As with SEL practices in general, there is no commonly accepted approach to SEL measurement. Although the number and type of SEL measures increases by the day, we find they typically belong to one of three categories:

1. Practice and implementation measures monitor how educators deliver SEL. Examples include teacher or student surveys about classroom practices and checklists of how often teachers engage in specific activities.

2. Climate and culture measures describe the learning environment in which instruction occurs. These include surveys about aspects of school environments, such as safety and relationships, and observations of classroom conditions, such as emotional climate and student-teacher interactions.

3. Student competency measures document students' development of desired skills. These include teacher ratings of student behaviors, student self-report surveys, and direct (often technology-based) assessments that ask students to apply specific SEL skills.

These three categories cover most approaches to measuring SEL, though they're not exhaustive. Educators can and do consult other data sources, such as information on students' academic skills, attendance, disciplinary infractions, or exposure to trauma. And some measures may fall under more than one category. Nevertheless, we find that these three encompass the main types of measurements schools should consider when developing an SEL assessment strategy.

The volume and diversity of potential SEL measures, combined with a lack of guidance about what these measures can and can't do, creates challenges for schools and districts.[5] While it's still unclear exactly which measurement tools are the "right" ones or ones that always "work," in this paper we suggest how districts and schools should engage in a thoughtful process to choose SEL measures and communicate why they are doing so to teachers and families.

Measurement Matters

Without a high-quality SEL assessment strategy, educators will not be able to figure out which instructional strategies are most helpful, and SEL efforts will risk going the way of other well-intentioned but ultimately unsuccessful reforms. For teachers, collecting SEL data is nothing new: In fact, most educators report they are already doing so.

In nationally representative surveys from spring 2018, 70 percent of teachers and 86 percent of principals indicated that their schools measured SEL.[6] However, we know little about the quality of these measures or how educators use them. What we do know, based on decades of research, is that assessments influence what teachers actually do and which skills they emphasize.[7]

We also know from prior research that data-driven approaches have in many cases led to a sense of overload while failing to address teachers' most pressing decisions.[8] Whether schools or districts collect SEL data through student assessments, classroom observations, or staff surveys, it's important for those who mandate or encourage data collection to be clear about its purpose. This clarity will help ensure that everyone involved understands why data are collected and how to use them appropriately.

Four Ways to Be Smart About SEL Measurement

Interest in measuring SEL is growing rapidly, and it's not surprising. Policymakers want data to point to, teachers want information to guide their instruction, and researchers want concrete measures for their projects. Meanwhile, assessment developers are increasingly marketing SEL-related tools to educators. But enthusiasm risks putting the cart before the horse, and we first need to ask: Are we doing this right?

Schools' and districts' experiences with academic assessments point to numerous potential pitfalls. These include inflated test scores and a narrowed curriculum in which students spend less time engaging in activities that don't mirror a test format (such as reading novels) and more time engaging in test-like activities (such as identifying the main idea in isolated text passages). High-stakes testing is also associated with a reduction in teacher and student morale and, in a few high-profile cases, outright cheating.[9]

Other measures of school performance and progress raise different challenges. For example, efforts to track differences in suspension rates across schools can be misleading if interpreted as an indicator of student behavior, due to inconsistent definitions of infractions and well-known disparities in how students from different racial and ethnic groups are disciplined.[10]

Given the relative novelty of SEL student assessments, concerns about likely negative

impacts are especially warranted. We've identified four lessons to help reduce risks:

1. Identify your SEL focus before selecting measures.

2. Adopt new SEL measures only if they add value.

3. Know limitations of current measurement tools and seek guidance to adapt or develop measures.

4. Engage teachers and families in discussions of how and why to measure SEL.

Identify your SEL focus before selecting measures. Accurate measurement is impossible if you don't know what you're trying to measure. Even though nearly all teachers and principals we've surveyed say they are addressing SEL, educators often have a hard time describing what this means concretely.[11]

This is not surprising, given the wide-ranging set of skills and practices that can conceivably be considered SEL. Without a clearly defined, manageable set of student skills to develop and measure, educators can end up adopting a misaligned or incoherent approach to instruction and confront excessive and confusing data. Educators need support from school, district, or state leaders to identify manageable priority areas and adopt clear definitions of student outcomes they are promoting. Although educators should consider their local needs and context when deciding what to emphasize (more on this below), a few general guidelines help inform the decision.

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First, it can be helpful to identify SEL competencies that align with state or locally adopted standards and frameworks, including academic content standards. As the SEAD Commission and others have made clear, SEL need not detract from core subject areas and, in fact, can support students' academic growth.

Second, schools should focus on SEL skills such as conflict resolution, self-awareness, and impulse control that are valuable for students' future success and that teaching can influence. As Russ Whitehurst, former commissioner of the Institute of Education Sciences, has said, "SEL programs could accomplish much more by shifting their focus from abstract traits and dispositions to specific skills that are observable, close to the classroom, teachable, and linked in straightforward ways to the mission of schools."[12] For success in measuring SEL, advocates and schools should heed such advice and focus on such concrete competencies.

Third, rather than taking on a long list of competencies right away, a district or school might start by emphasizing a small number of specific skills at a given time and sequencing their focus so that educators roll out their work in manageable chunks. For example, educators could start with naming and understanding emotions, then move to emotion regulation, empathy, and responsible decision-making later.

Finally, once districts or schools have a manageable list of specific skills, they need to identify high-quality curricula and instructional guidance that includes well-specified definitions of each desired competency and suggested age-appropriate lessons to teach them. This type of instructional guidance can help concretize the message that educators are not expected to change everything at once, that SEL can and should be embedded into academic instruction rather than displacing it, and that an explicit, well-defined focus is important.

This does not mean that central offices must take a prescriptive approach to curriculum and instruction; instead, they can create a frame and leave room for school and educator discretion. Such a balanced approach to instructional guidance can facilitate good measurement use by clarifying the skills, practices, and aspects of school and classroom environment that educators are expected to address and monitor.

Adopt new SEL measures only if they add value beyond data schools already have. Once educators know which competencies they're addressing and which programs and practices they'll adopt,

they need to decide how to monitor teaching and learning. Good measurement requires a clear set of expectations about the skills students should develop, the behaviors educators should expect as students develop these skills, and the actions educators should take to promote those skills. For instance, if teachers want to measure how student self-management has improved, they need to look for a reduction in class disruptions and increased focus on academic tasks and make regular use (such as once a week) of specified SEL lessons or instructional practices that address self-management.

A primary consideration is whether a formal assessment is needed at all. Teachers can tell whether kids have trouble with social interactions or lack persistence when working on assignments. They often draw on this knowledge when supporting students and sometimes include this information on report cards. For some purposes, these informal assessments might be adequate, making formal assessment unnecessary and potentially disruptive. Leaders considering requiring teachers to measure SEL should first consider what teachers are already doing and if formal measurement tools will add value.

This judicious approach to adopting new measures is crucial in light of the growing availability of and pressure to adopt SEL assessments. Educators and leaders need to recognize the pitfalls of overuse of data rather than promoting strict adherence to data-driven practices that have been a fad in SEL and education more generally. Adopting many measures can hinder educators' ability to track and use information, and it can result in overly burdensome and thus poorly implemented data collection. Considering newly adopted measures' added value can mitigate this risk.

Know the limitations of current measurement tools and seek guidance to adapt or develop measures. If districts and schools decide to collect new data, they should select measures with strong evidence of validity and reliability. The question is *how* to obtain such measures. This doesn't mean merely consulting a technical manual to find validity or reliability coefficients.

Validity and reliability evidence needs to be interpreted in light of intended uses; an assessment that is validated for monitoring classroom-level progress on a skill, for example, might not have evidence to support its use as a screening tool. And a single validity coefficient is generally insufficient to justify confidence in an assessment. It is important to remember that no SEL measures have been validated for high-stakes uses, such as teacher or principal evaluation, and most are easily manipulated to raise scores.

The good news is educators can consult several sources to identify and review measures and learn to use them.[13] To use these tools appropriately, educators need to specify which decisions the measure should inform, to whom it will be administered, and what scores they need. For instance, are individual student scores necessary, or is a classroom-level average sufficient?

Making sense of available validity and reliability evidence can be challenging because most educators haven't received training on measurement and because this information, if it exists, might not be presented clearly and accessibly. Educators searching for measures can use the tools mentioned above or seek guidance from trusted colleagues or partners, such as technical assistance providers, preferably ones who do not have a vested interest in recommending a specific product. Such guidance can be especially valuable for helping educators align assessments to their specific school contexts and SEL goals.

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Depending on the intended purpose and students' characteristics (e.g., their age), educators might find that few or no assessments have substantial evidence of validity and reliability. The lack of a validated measure doesn't necessarily mean educators shouldn't measure SEL. But it does suggest that they should be extra cautious in how they interpret and use the data. For example, it would be prudent to supplement such measures with other data sources and use the data for only

the lowest-stakes decisions. It is also important to recognize that even existing validated measures might fit poorly with students' cultural backgrounds and norms.[14]

In cases of no validated measures of instruction, climate, or student competencies, educators might modify an existing tool or create a new one. There will always be tension between using previously developed, standardized measures that compare data across schools, districts, or states and the need to customize items to adapt to a specific context.

Educators typically lack the time, financial resources, and expertise to develop and test measures on their own, while assessment developers and researchers don't always understand the contexts in which measures will be used or the specific goals educators are trying to achieve. Support for collaborations between researchers and practitioners could promote higher-quality, more useful approaches to SEL measurement, provided those collaborations are designed to allow for frequent, substantive interactions between both groups and multiple rounds of classroom testing and revision.

Regardless of the approach educators take to identify or develop measures, it's highly unlikely they'll end up with something that does everything they want. Whether a measure is purchased or self-developed, users should continually evaluate how well it's meeting their needs and revisit their decisions. Failure to do so is a sure way for SEL measurement efforts to fall flat.

Engage teachers and families in discussions of how and why to measure SEL. With any education policy initiative, everyone says they want to involve families and teachers—and they should. But what does that actually mean for measuring SEL? As we noted earlier, effective teachers have always monitored their students' interpersonal and intrapersonal skills informally and will undoubtedly continue to do so. Education leaders should engage teachers in staff meetings to decide what additional SEL measurements to incorporate and how, and they should work with teachers to ensure the rationale is clear.

The specific approach to this involvement will depend on local norms and context but could include committees that involve teacher representation in the initial selection of SEL measures, along with a method for seeking teacher feedback on selected measures once in use. Regardless of the approach, it's crucial that it includes opportunities for all affected teachers to contribute to initial and ongoing SEL measurement decisions.

Families also play a crucial role in supporting children's social and emotional development. Educators should anticipate some families' objections to school-based efforts to promote and measure these skills. Although parents want their children to develop nonacademic competencies that will prepare them for work and life, they don't always understand SEL terminology, and they have significant concerns about how SEL assessment data might be used (e.g., for diagnosing disabilities or problem behaviors).[15] Whether via family nights, written communication to parents, or parent-teacher conferences, educators must be clear and direct when explaining to parents what SEL means and how assessments will help rather than harm students.

A comprehensive SEL measurement approach that incorporates information about school practices and climate in addition to children's competencies can help alleviate family concerns about potential misuse by reinforcing the message that measurement is intended to promote school improvement rather than diagnose children. But this will only happen if the approach and rationale for it are clearly communicated to *all* families rather than just the small number that might already be highly involved in school activities.

Mechanisms could involve school-based events scheduled around families' availability, individual parent-teacher conferences, or materials sent via communication systems that reach all families. As with teacher involvement, any effort to engage families in SEL measurement decisions should be attuned to local norms and context and families' needs (e.g., offering materials and discussions in languages other than English).

One major benefit of engaging teachers and families in SEL measurement discussions is it tempers expectations about rapid change. In their report, Checker E. Finn, Jr. and Frederick M. Hess pointed out the need to "slow down and focus on getting it right."[16] SEL data will inevitably lead to

questions about whether scores are high enough or growing at the expected rate. If data don't live up to expectations, educators might be tempted to either double down on their efforts or abandon them.

Everyone involved in interpreting and using these data should understand what inferences the data support and should recognize that score changes alone are not sufficient to determine what is and isn't working. Instead, schools and districts should model for families and other interested groups how to use limited data sources that address student outcomes, school environment, and SEL practices to provide a holistic picture of a school's SEL approach.

Conclusion

If done well, measures of a limited number of important, malleable, and well-defined SEL skills, combined with instruction and climate indicators, can help educators assess their own practices and support their students. But decades of research on assessment and data use in education have made it clear that measurement poses risks and benefits. Those who support teachers need to learn from lessons of the past to avoid vaguely defined goals and excessive data collection. An effective approach to SEL measurement is likely to include a small number of low-stakes measures of climate, student assessments, and teacher SEL instruction, with the goal of promoting students' development of competencies that will ultimately help them thrive in school, work, and their broader lives.

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Notes

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