



Social and Emotional Learning Implementation with Latinx Learners: Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

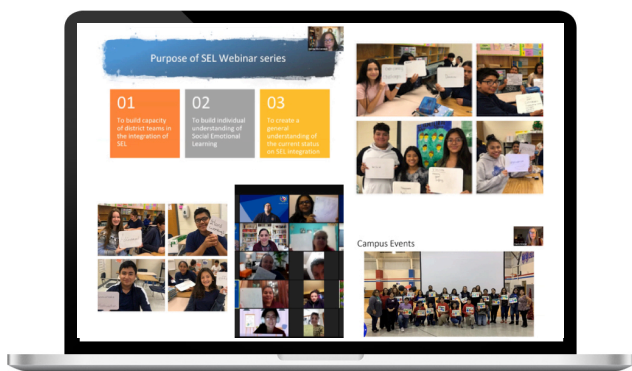
This executive summary highlights key findings and implications from research conducted by ACT in collaboration with Region One Education Service Center, a provider of educational services to over 430,000 students in South Texas who are primarily Latinx and from low-income communities. The research was funded by a NewSchools Venture Fund grant awarded to ACT's Center for Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning and ACT's Center for Equity in Learning. The overarching goal of the research was to gain a better understanding of factors related to social and emotional learning (SEL), including program efficacy, program implementation, and family engagement. All results from the research are reported in a five-part series of issue briefs that are linked throughout this document.

So What?

Taken together, these studies unpack factors related to successful SEL implementation with diverse learners who have been historically underserved. While SEL interventions are effective at improving student outcomes, we know that barriers often stand in the way of successful schoolwide implementation. Understanding these mechanisms, particularly in communities with large numbers of students of color, English language learners, or students from low-income communities, can foster the development of best practices and result in improved student learning outcomes and college and career readiness.

Now What?

Practitioners, researchers, and policymakers can all take action based on findings from these studies. Practitioners can embrace schoolwide SEL efforts and engage in needs assessments in order to provide the necessary supports for implementation. Researchers can continue to study the effects of SEL programming in flexible collaborations with practitioners and develop study designs that consider the role of implementation. Policymakers can ensure adequate and sustainable funding is in place for schools to support the implementation of SEL programming. Together, all stakeholders can take steps to successfully implement SEL programming in an effort to improve learning outcomes for diverse students.



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Introduction

Starting in the 2019–2020 school year, NewSchools Venture Fund awarded a research grant to ACT to better understand factors related to social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL lessons were implemented in schools serving students who were 96% Latinx, 85% economically disadvantaged, and 38% English learners during the 2019–2020 school year. The overarching goal of the research was to determine the efficacy of SEL lessons while also examining factors affecting SEL implementation. To understand the factors related to successful implementation, ACT sought perspectives from multiple stakeholders, including students, educators, administrators, and families. Findings are reported in a series of issue briefs, and each brief highlights findings gleaned from various stakeholders involved (see Table 1). This executive summary provides a broad overview of each component of the research, underscores key findings from each brief, and provides implications for research and practice.

Table 1. Brief Titles and Overviews

Brief Title	Overview
Brief 1: Ready for Implementation?	This brief reports on a survey of educators' and administrators' attitudes and perceived challenges for implementing SEL in districts with a high percentage of Latinx students from low-income communities.
Brief 2: Effects on Student Engagement and Perceived Learning Gains	This brief reports on students' reactions to SEL lessons, including whether they found the lessons engaging, whether they acquired knowledge and skills, and whether they were able to apply content from the lessons in and out of school.
Brief 3: Effects on Academic and Social and Emotional Outcomes	This brief reports on the effects of SEL lessons on social and emotional skill development and a variety of school-reported outcomes: grades, attendance, and conduct. In addition, the brief contrasts SEL lesson dosage with other services designed to promote college readiness received by students who participated in the study.
Brief 4: Status Quo and Next Steps for Schoolwide Social and Emotional Learning	This brief reports on a set of educators and administrators who attended a webinar series focused on implementing schoolwide SEL. Participants were surveyed to determine progress and areas of need in implementing schoolwide SEL.
Brief 5: Family Knowledge and Engagement	This brief reports on surveys of parents' and family members' familiarity with and attitudes toward SEL for themselves and for their school-age children.

Who participated in the research?

Region One Education Service Center (Region One ESC), a provider of educational services to more than 430,000 students in South Texas, collaborated with researchers from ACT to engage in a study on SEL implementation. Region One ESC is a long-standing recipient of federal Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) funding, and focuses on efforts to improve educational outcomes for historically underserved learners. These students are typically first-generation college students, often are of Latinx origin, and

predominantly come from low-income households. This study focuses on SEL implementation and was completed within the context of a long-term collaboration between Region One ESC and ACT. Through this collaboration, schools within the region engaged in a cycle of assessing and improving SEL through concentrated efforts with a longitudinal cohort of students. Students in the longitudinal cohort were in seventh grade during the 2019 data collection period and in eighth grade during the 2019–2020 school year. A subset of these students, along with educators and families from schools within Region One, participated in various components of this research.

What were the goals of the research?

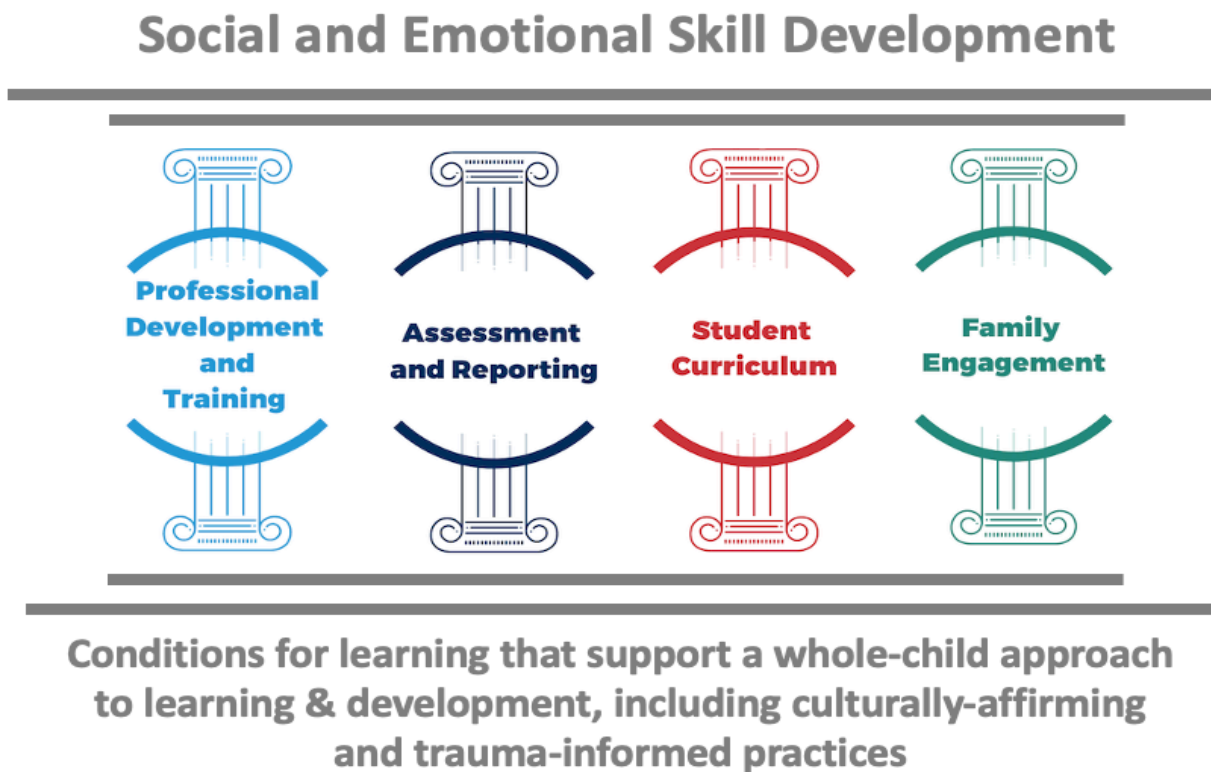
The research initially began as an implementation study in which educators from 14 schools within the region were given SEL lessons to deliver to students throughout the 2019–2020 school year. The goals of the study were to examine the following: educator and administrator attitudes and beliefs toward SEL ([Brief 1](#)); student reactions, attitudes, and perceived gains in social and emotional (SE) skills stemming from engagement in SEL lessons ([Brief 2](#)); and efficacy of the SEL lessons on student outcomes such as SE skill development, academic performance, and student behavior ([Brief 3](#)).

Given the challenges brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2019–2020 school year, ACT expanded the scope and reach of this research to account for additional factors in SEL implementation and to help address the increased needs for students' social and emotional support during school closures and remote learning. For example, we collaborated with Region One ESC to deliver an SEL professional development series in September of 2020 and aimed to understand necessary factors for schoolwide SEL implementation ([Brief 4](#)); also studied awareness of SEL and family engagement within the context of an SEL webinar series tailored for families and delivered in both English and Spanish ([Brief 5](#)).

This series of studies executed within the context of a research-practitioner collaboration reflects a four-pillar approach to SEL (see Figure 1). This approach has evolved organically throughout the years of the collaboration between Region One ESC and ACT, and it emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive commitment to SEL involving multiple stakeholders, including educators and families, in addition to student SEL curriculum and assessment. Results gleaned from various components of this research highlight the importance of each pillar in students' social and emotional development.

Where did the research take place?

All components of the research took place in public schools served by Region One ESC. Region One includes 38 school districts and 10 charter systems in eight counties in rural South Texas, spanning from the city of Laredo to the Gulf of Mexico along the United States–Mexico border. Students in Region One schools are 96% Latinx, 85% economically disadvantaged, and 38% English learners. Furthermore, the students might also be described as underserved, meaning they may be first-generation college students, have a family income of less than \$36,000 per year, or be African American, Latinx, Native American, or Pacific Islander (ACT, 2018; Green, 2006).

Figure 1. A Comprehensive Approach to Building an SEL System

When did the research take place?

The efficacy component of this study took place during the 2019–2020 school year ([Brief 1](#), [Brief 2](#), [Brief 3](#)). The professional development series and surveys took place in September 2020 ([Brief 4](#)), and the family engagement webinar series and surveys took place between February and March of 2021 ([Brief 5](#)).

Why is this research important?

Decades of research show that core academic skills are necessary but not sufficient for student success. Specifically, SE skills have shown to be key constituents of student success and are associated with improved academic performance, behavior in school, positive attitudes toward school, and well-being (Mahoney et al., 2018). These skills are arguably even more pivotal for traditionally underserved learners who face barriers to high quality curriculum, robust school supports, and access to diverse extra-curricular and elective programs as compared to their more privileged peers, often resulting in lower college readiness (ACT, 2016). In past work within this research-practitioner collaboration, students within Region One have shown tremendous gains in academic readiness despite school resource challenges and barriers to comprehensive college and career counseling (Albert et al., 2020). Much of this success has been attributed to SE skill development as well as additional supports received through GEAR UP programming. Therefore, the purpose of this series of studies was to better understand the effects of SEL programming and factors related to SEL implementation at the student, family, educator, and school community levels in order to identify optimal conditions for successful

implementation. Doing so can be pivotal in supporting Latinx and other students' success and help to design more equitable learning environments.

How were the studies executed?

For the efficacy study ([Brief 1](#), [Brief 2](#), & [Brief 3](#)), 14 schools from the larger GEAR UP cohort of Region One schools were selected to participate in an SEL implementation study. Educators at participating schools were given a selection of SEL lessons and guidance on how to implement them with students. Before starting any lessons, educators and administrators were surveyed about their attitudes and beliefs toward SEL, as these were hypothesized to be important factors for implementation ([Brief 1](#)). After lessons were implemented, students were surveyed about their reactions to the lessons and asked to report their perceived gains as a result of participating ([Brief 2](#)). We also obtained school-reported outcome data on participating students' grades, attendance, and discipline records to examine if the SEL lessons had an effect on SE skill development and other academic outcomes ([Brief 3](#)). Following a professional development webinar series focused on implementing schoolwide SEL, we surveyed participants to learn more about their current progress toward SEL implementation in addition to their current supports and perceived needs ([Brief 4](#)). Last, we surveyed two samples of families—one within Region One who had participated in an SEL webinar series and one larger national sample—to gain an understanding of their knowledge levels, beliefs, and attitudes regarding SEL ([Brief 5](#)).

What did we learn?

Several main overarching findings are summarized below. We encourage interested readers to consult each respective brief for more detailed findings from each component of the research.

- Both educators and administrators held positive values and attitudes toward SEL and intended to implement the lesson content. On average, administrators perceived schoolwide conditions for SEL implementation more positively than educators did. Despite reporting positive attitudes toward SEL, both educators and administrators reported lower perceived control over implementation and buy-in from other stakeholders within school systems, suggesting potential roadblocks to implementation ([Brief 1](#)).
- Students reacted positively to lessons on three SE skills: Sustaining Effort, Maintaining Composure, and Getting Along With Others. Despite challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, educators still implemented these lessons with relatively high fidelity, and students saw value in them, self-reported learning gains, and demonstrated increased knowledge in respective SEL areas ([Brief 2](#)).
- Students who received SEL lessons did not show significant growth in SE skill levels, school climate, or course grades from 2019 to 2020, and change did not differ between the comparison students and those in the intervention group. An important caveat is that students in both the intervention and comparison groups were still receiving GEAR UP services designed to foster college and career readiness. Time spent on GEAR UP activities in 2020 significantly predicted several important outcomes, including higher grades in math and English in 2020, higher Sustaining Effort and School Safety Climate scores in 2020, and fewer absences in 2020, while controlling for initial levels of each outcome in 2019 and time spent on SEL lessons. Overall, relative consistency in student

outcomes from 2019 to 2020 may be considered a positive outcome given that larger and more consistent declines may have been expected because of the effects of COVID-19 on student learning and social and emotional well-being, in addition to developmental trends in this age range, which typically trend downward ([Brief 3](#)).

- Time spent on, or dosage of, SEL lessons did not significantly predict SE skill levels or school climate in 2020 when accounting for initial skill levels in 2019 and time spent on GEAR UP activities. In two cases, time spent on SEL lessons predicted target outcomes including math grades in 2020 and a lower likelihood of a discipline incident in 2020. Replicating these results is an important next step for research. Still, these initial results are promising given the relatively low dose of lessons received and the disruption faced due to COVID-19 ([Brief 3](#)).
- From participants in the webinar series focusing on schoolwide SEL implementation, we learned that most schools are in the early stages of SEL implementation. The top needs that emerged from participant responses include more and regular professional development sessions, a detailed plan for implementation, establishment of an SEL team that meets regularly, more instructional time for SEL, and additional budget and resources to support SEL ([Brief 4](#)).
- From family members who were surveyed, we learned that families believe developing SE skills is important for their students and for themselves. When compared to a nationally representative sample of families outside of Region One, we saw that families within Region One had less familiarity with certain SEL-related terms but also agreed more strongly with the statement that teaching parents and families about SEL can help to improve student social and emotional development. Both samples are concerned that school closure will have a negative effect on academic preparation and the development of SE skills ([Brief 5](#)).

Implications for Research and Practice

Overall, results from these studies show that educators, administrators, students, and families all hold positive perceptions toward SEL. All stakeholders across samples see value in social and emotional learning and endorse its role in academic success and overall well-being. As schools move to implement SEL programming, it is important to keep in mind that implementation is likely to involve multiple components (as illustrated by the four pillars in Figure 1) and that these components rest on a holistic approach designed to create positive conditions for learning. Providing resources and ongoing professional development can empower educators to implement SEL in their classrooms as well as inform ongoing (or future) assessment and intervention efforts. Educating and engaging families in SEL practices can further enhance the value proposition of SEL, serve as an additional way for educators and families to come together around the goal of supporting successful student outcomes, and contribute to overall positive conditions in which students' academic and social and emotional development can occur. Some of the barriers to implementation identified in [Brief 1](#) and [Brief 4](#) (e.g., providing additional supports for those teaching SEL in schools, improving family knowledge of SEL) can serve as initial "problems to be solved" as educators, administrators, and other key stakeholders redesign how schooling can best address the needs of all learners.

Implications for Researchers

When conducting primary studies, researchers would do well to intentionally track and report the implementation dosage and fidelity. While fidelity was relatively high in this research, dosage of SEL content received was somewhat low, particularly when compared to additional services already being administered through GEAR UP. Thus, implementation dosage and fidelity can provide important context for interpreting study results as well as for iterating on future research designs.

Implications for Practitioners

Practitioners should be fully aware that SEL implementation takes time, resources, and persistence to be successful. While research shows positive effects of SEL programming for students, practitioners must first establish conditions for learning in which SEL can be successfully implemented, starting with professional development. Again, these conditions can most likely be bolstered by involving all key stakeholders. CASEL's [Guide to Schoolwide SEL rubric](#) is a freely accessible resource that provides a detailed set of steps and recommendations that schools and districts can use to implement SEL. We encourage practitioners to use this tool, regardless of where they are in their implementation journey.

Implications for Research-Practitioner Collaborations

For collaborations between researchers and practitioners to be truly effective, it is pivotal to be responsive to ongoing situations and to continually consider and adapt to the shifting needs of educators and students, particularly those coming from groups that have been historically underserved. The scope of this work expanded from its initial focus on efficacy once the COVID-19 pandemic began. The pandemic brought forth school closures, continually shifting instructional modalities, and an increased need for educators to support a wide range of students' needs: academic, technological, and social and emotional well-being. Because of ACT's strong working relationship with Region One ESC and funding from NewSchools Venture Fund, we were not only able to study SEL implementation but also to pivot and provide additional programming to support educator and student needs during a universally challenging school year. Although efficacy findings are confounded by the onset of the pandemic, we were still able to gather an abundance of knowledge that can inform future work in SEL.

Implications for Policy

Shifts in policy are key to better enabling future SEL work, which is likely to become pivotal in redesigning educational systems to better address the needs of all students, particularly Latinx students, English language learners, and/or students from low-income households. Below, we outline three policy recommendations that can help advance SEL work.

1. Provide adequate funding. The first policy implication is the need to consistently allocate funding for services such as SEL curriculum, SEL assessment, professional development, and services that can educate and involve families. With the passage of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act of 2020 and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, schools have the discretion to spend relief dollars on SEL solutions. This is a good start, but it will be up to state houses, local governments, and school districts to figure out how to finance these solutions on a long-term basis once the one-time stimulus dollars are spent.

2. Prioritize effective SEL solutions. Ensure that funding mechanisms prioritize evidence-based SEL solutions and that teachers and schools have the resources necessary to implement these solutions with fidelity. Selected SEL programming should be inclusive and culturally affirming (particularly for specific populations served by a school or district), and it should include components of trauma-informed practices to better serve the many students, families, and communities whose experiences have historically been neglected and who, to this day, are sometimes marginalized.

3. Provide flexibility for partnerships. As evidenced by the findings in each research brief and the emergence of the four pillars depicted in Figure 1, successful SEL implementation requires extensive coordination between interconnected components and among a variety of stakeholders. Schools and districts need to coordinate with a variety of internal and external partners and solution providers to implement effective SEL programming. They must strive to remove unnecessary barriers or silos and encourage policymakers to provide the flexibility and supports that schools and districts need to build these types of partnerships.

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About Region One Education Service Center

The Region One Education Service Center is part of a state-wide system of 20 regional education service centers created in 1965 by the 59th Texas Legislature to assist school districts across the state. Originally slated to work with school districts as a media center, the role of the education service center has expanded to work alongside school districts to carry out the three main objectives as stipulated in the TEC §8.002: to assist school districts in improving student performance in each region of the system; enable school districts to operate more efficiently and economically; and implement initiatives assigned by the legislature or commissioner. Located in South Texas on the United States/Mexico border, Region One ESC serves 38 school districts and 10 charter school systems in the eight county areas of Brooks County, Cameron County, Hidalgo County, Jim Hogg County, Starr County, Webb County, Willacy County, and Zapata County.

For more information, visit www.esc1.net/domain/3