



# The Unexamined Rise of Therapeutic Education: How Social-Emotional Learning Extends K–12 Education’s Reach into Students’ Lives and Expands Teachers’ Roles

By Robert Pondiscio

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## Key Points

- Social and emotional learning (SEL) has drifted ever closer to being a central purpose of education without a full and proper examination of its role or a sufficient discussion about its practices or expectations for its effectiveness.
- To many, SEL is an unwelcome intrusion into what is traditionally the work of families, faith, culture, and other institutions and relationships in American life.
- Ideas and techniques borrowed from popular psychology have aggressively inserted themselves into classroom practice, resulting in the rise of therapeutic education.
- The unexamined rise of SEL has led to schools assuming powers and responsibilities far beyond their brief and educators working beyond their training and expertise.

In some quarters of K–12 education, perhaps most, the increased focus on social and emotional learning (SEL) is viewed as an unambiguously positive development—a welcome course correction after more than two decades of focus on academic standards, testing, and accountability. But SEL, which is typically presented as an academic enhancement, not a distraction, carries more cause for concern than is commonly acknowledged. It represents a different vision for public education.

There is a substantive moral message in SEL that is largely unacknowledged, perhaps unwittingly, by its promoters and enthusiasts. The bland, pseudoscientific, and somewhat inscrutable term

“social and emotional learning” grafted onto the academic effort of schooling masks its nature, which heralds a reimagining of schools’ and teachers’ roles. Advocates insist SEL serves academic outcomes and is thus a natural extension of a school’s mission. But even if this were true, it is an invitation for schools to expand their role and influence in a way that might not be universally applauded, particularly by conservative families and teachers.

Inherent in SEL is an under-discussed change in the role of the teacher, from a pedagogue to something more closely resembling a therapist, social worker, or member of the clergy—no less

concerned with a child's beliefs, attitudes, and values. At the very least, the rise of SEL, under the cover of jargon and educationese, has become a largely unquestioned feature of mainstream education thought and practice, with insufficient discussion and debate about its effect on schools' missions.

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Whether SEL can benefit academic outcomes is an interesting and important question, but it's secondary. The more salient question, which tends to go unasked but must be settled first, is about the appropriate business of a school. Similarly, at what point does a school's concern for its students' emotional health and well-being, however well intended, become too personal, too intrusive, and too sensitive to be a legitimate function of public school and thus the state?

Finally, there is a risk, also too little acknowledged and discussed, that the increased focus on SEL fundamentally changes teachers' responsibilities, forcing them into roles they may embrace reluctantly or not at all and that they are unqualified or unsuited to play, with potential negative consequences for students. As damaging to children as it might be for a teacher to perform poorly at teaching reading, math, or history, the effect of being a poor mental health professional could be even more dire.

## The Rise of SEL

The rise over the past decade of the SEL movement represents a sudden and dramatic expansion of schools' mission, growing to encompass monitoring, molding, evaluating, and assessing students' attitudes, values, and beliefs. To no small number of families, this is an unwelcome intrusion into

what is traditionally the work of families, faith, culture, and other institutions and relationships in American life. Schools have long influenced character formation but in a supporting role, not a leading one.

SEL has drifted ever closer to being a central purpose of education without a full and proper examination of its role or a sufficient discussion about its practices or expectations for its effectiveness. This is the result of efforts to portray SEL as a natural and even obvious enhancement of a school's mission and purpose, whether offered in earnest or evasion.

The rise of SEL is more accurately seen as a profound shift. It raises questions about education's role in society and the assumptions we make, with or without public and parental input, about the social, cultural, and economic roles a school plays—and is permitted or encouraged to play—in a child's life.

Perhaps the most commonly quoted description of SEL is from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Under this description, SEL is

the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.<sup>1</sup>

As Chester Finn and Frederick Hess noted in *Education Next*, CASEL's definition reflects an “age-old” notion that schools are about more than academics. But the pair cautioned school superintendents, principals, and policymakers that “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.”<sup>2</sup>

If anything, Finn and Hess understate the risk. While few reasonable objections will be raised against wanting schools to attend to children's overall well-being, particularly very young chil-

dren, valorizing SEL as a central educational function—either coequal in importance or intimately intertwined with academic outcomes—alters fundamentally the role and nature of schooling.

Moreover, the tendency to borrow ideas and tactics from therapy carries with it the risk of pathologizing childhood and encouraging educators to view children—particularly children from disadvantaged subgroups—not as capable and resilient individuals but as fragile and traumatized. If a consensus view takes root that encourages educators, even implicitly, to view childhood as a condition that requires intervention, management, and treatment, it pushes teaching into a quasi-therapeutic field.

To be sure, the concern for students’ hearts and souls in addition to their minds stretches back centuries. Moral formation is not foreign to education. The classical and Christian education traditions have long emphasized the “cardinal virtues” of prudence (wisdom), fortitude (courage), temperance (moderation), and justice.<sup>3</sup> The phrase “moral formation” lands awkwardly on modern ears, but only on modern ears.

For centuries, the goal of guiding children to live virtuous lives was the goal of education itself. In 1642, the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony mandated that parents teach their children to read.<sup>4</sup> Five years later, they passed the New World’s first public education law, memorably named the Old Deluder Satan Act.<sup>5</sup> If children could not read Scriptures, the thinking went, they would inevitably fall prey to temptation.

Our founding generation also cited virtue as a necessary ingredient for the success of the infant American experiment. Benjamin Rush, arguing for the establishment of public education, insisted that

the only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in Religion. Without this there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments.<sup>6</sup>

Fifty years later, the father of American public education, Horace Mann, echoed Rush in arguing that

there is no security for a republic but in morality and intelligence. . . . I know we are often admonished that, without intelligence and virtue, as a chart and a compass, to direct us in our untried political voyage, we shall perish in the first storm.<sup>7</sup>

Mann suggests that the link between intelligence and virtue is something about which we are “often admonished.” This broadly assumed and unquestioned coupling of education and virtue persisted well into the 20th century. Over 120 million copies of the McGuffey Readers were sold from the mid-19th century to 1960, making them almost certainly the most commonly used textbooks in American schools.<sup>8</sup> As historian Henry Steele Commager Jr. wrote,

What is most impressive in the McGuffey readers is the morality. . . . There is rarely a page but addresses itself to some moral problem, points up some moral lesson—industry, sobriety, thrift, propriety, modesty. These were essential virtues and those who practiced them were sure of success.<sup>9</sup>

Even today, reprinted McGuffey primers are used by homeschooling parents who prize the traditional virtues they valorize and seek to instill.

As education has become professionalized and secularized, many teachers, perhaps most, have become increasingly ill at ease with the moralizing stances that were both obvious and uncontroversial to education pioneers like Mann and his predecessors. SEL is a return to the character-forming imperative of education but divorced from its religious or classical roots.

Critics have taken note of the blank space. Yuval Levin has observed that “any idea of education that is not connected to an idea of formation—of habituation in virtue, inculcation in tradition, veneration of the high and noble—is unavoidably impoverished.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in a report for the American Enterprise Institute, Jay Greene recognized that SEL had “educational priorities that are as old as education itself” and urged its advocates to embrace the moral and religious roots of their movement.<sup>11</sup>

However, it appears that SEL enthusiasts, “perhaps disliking the moral judgment that the word ‘character’ connotes, wish to downplay SEL’s moral and religious roots and prefer instead to rebrand the concept on a modern and scientific basis,” Greene wrote.<sup>12</sup> Torn from its foundation, SEL “seeks to appeal to elites’ secular and scientific preferences by using psychological concepts, attempting to validate psychological scales to measure those concepts, and then using those measures to centrally manage improvement in SEL goals.” Echoing Greene, my AEI colleague Max Eden observed that “SEL advocates will privately admit that they abandoned the term ‘character education’ because it sounded too conservative. Rather than explicitly extol virtues, SEL promotes ‘competencies’ through role-playing and gamified behavior-management systems.”<sup>13</sup>

In sum, SEL advocates are attempting to update or restore the character-forming role of education but in a manner estranged from its religious and moral roots. This inevitably pushes the field toward therapeutic education.

## When Education Becomes Therapy

The fault line between academics and concern for student well-being, which observers like Hess and Finn counsel SEL proponents to tread lightly on, reflects a tension that has existed for at least a century between progressive and traditional views of education. The traditional view sees a school’s mission as prioritizing academic knowledge and skills organized by subject-matter disciplines. It is teacher-centric, favors the transmission of “the best that has been thought and written,” and sees schools as institutions that promote character formation and the development of basic critical thinking skills to pass on and preserve Western civilization.<sup>14</sup>

The competing, progressive view is child centered. It tends to concern itself with educating the “whole child,” which means ensuring each child is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. Progressive education sees schools and education as a mechanism for *cultivating*, not transmitting, skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and communication. This holistic concept is thought to

promote “sustainable school improvement” and provide “for long-term student success.”<sup>15</sup>

In any given school or classroom, orthodoxy is rare. Schools and teachers tend to borrow ideas and elements from these competing visions, often impressionistically, blurring the distinctiveness of each and making it hard to distinguish between the two. Teacher and author David Didau has suggested that the long-standing debate between traditional and progressive education might have outlived its usefulness. “I now think we might do better to reframe the debate as being between the aims of therapeutic and academic education,” he wrote.<sup>16</sup>

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Didau’s comment was a reflection on *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education*, a 2009 book by British education professors Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes. The book described how ideas and techniques borrowed from popular psychology have aggressively inserted themselves into classroom practice along with the idea that “emotional well-being, emotional literacy and emotional competence are some of the most important outcomes of the education system.”<sup>17</sup>

Published in England, the book takes its title and thesis from “the emergence over the past 40 years of a ‘therapeutic ethos’ throughout Anglo-American culture and politics.” One feature of this ethos is “an exponential extension of counseling, psychoanalysis and psychology into more areas of social and personal life, policy and professional practice.”<sup>18</sup>

Central to Ecclestone and Hayes’ premise and with profound ramifications for education is their observation that the rise of therapeutic education both reflects and reinforces the concept of a “diminished self.” Its increasing dominance “reflects deeper cultural disillusionment with ideas about

human potential, resilience and capacity for autonomy.” They regard this as “profoundly anti-educational,” since it promotes and valorizes a “curriculum of the self” that lowers expectations and aspirations, replacing them with a conception of schooling that strives to be “more ‘personally relevant’, ‘inclusive’ and ‘engaging’ and to reflect students’ ‘real needs’.”

This anti-educational trend has two effects. The first is that, in the name of inclusion, tolerance and empathy, a curriculum of the self introduces activities that encourage people to reveal their vulnerable selves to professionals and a growing array of peer mentors, lifecoaches, counsellors, psychologists, and therapists employed as ‘therapeutic support workers’. Far from being empowering, this invites people to lower their expectations of themselves and others, and to see others as similarly flawed and vulnerable. . . . Therapeutic education is profoundly dangerous because a diminished image of human potential opens up people’s emotions to assessment by the state and encourages dependence on ritualised forms of emotional support offered by state agencies. Therapeutic education replaces education with the social engineering of emotionally literate citizens who are also coached to experience emotional well-being.<sup>19</sup>

While the Ecclestone and Hayes book received almost no attention in the United States, the rise of therapeutic education by other names has garnered at least some negative attention on our shores. In 2019, a comprehensive report by the Pioneer Institute characterized the increased focus on SEL in K–12 education as heralding a “new age nanny state.”<sup>20</sup> Kevin Ryan, an emeritus professor of education at Boston University, described it as “progressive education’s greatest victory in its 100-plus-year campaign to transform our public schools, and, thus, the nature of America itself.”<sup>21</sup> Such claims may be overheated, but that does not render them unserious or insubstantial.

Neither is it hard to find examples of therapeutic education celebrated in media accounts and

affirmed by policymakers, schools of education, and influential philanthropists. The most obvious example is restorative justice practice as an alternative to traditional student discipline measures such as detentions, suspensions, and expulsions, which have fallen out of favor and come under civil rights scrutiny. CASEL links restorative practice and SEL explicitly, noting both “are used to systematically and intentionally build equitable learning environments in schools. While differing in their approaches, they share many common characteristics,” including “the acquisition and application of mindsets, attitudes, knowledge, and skills on the part of young people and adults.”<sup>22</sup>

Whether one is inclined to view the SEL movement as benign, beneficial, or malign, there can be no doubt about its increasing centrality in American education. In 2016, CASEL announced that eight states would be working collaboratively to create and implement SEL plans for schools in their states.<sup>23</sup> (Two of those states, Tennessee and Georgia, withdrew from the effort after negative responses from school boards, parents, and others.)<sup>24</sup> Another 11 states would have access to the materials produced by the effort.

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) does not explicitly reference SEL, but a report by the RAND Corporation, funded by the Wallace Foundation, outlined how states could use ESSA funds to support SEL interventions that meet ESSA evidence requirements under Title I, Title II, and Title IV.<sup>25</sup> More recently, over \$130 billion of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act funding is for education, including more than \$13 billion for K–12 schools. Twenty percent of district funds must be used to address “learning loss” and “to meet students’ mental health and social, and emotional needs in response to COVID-19.”<sup>26</sup>

## **Selling SEL**

SEL is clearly more at home in the child-centered or whole-child vision long favored by progressive educators. Mindful of the tension between traditional and progressive approaches to schooling and decades of public policy that have emphasized academic achievement measured by standardized tests, proponents have taken pains to place SEL

squarely in the realm of academics—neither in tension with it nor at cross-purposes. Its leading advocacy organization, CASEL, has the word “academic” in its name. To ensure the point was lost on no one, the Aspen Institute similarly created the high-profile National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (NCSEAD), rebranding SEL as “SEAD” to underscore the words “academic development.”

In a series of influential reports and papers, NCSEAD has played a high-profile role in promoting SEL as a “broader vision of student success.”<sup>27</sup> There are a “variety of skills, attitudes, and character traits that are embedded in and support learning,” argues its “practice agenda,” which emphasizes three broad categories: skills and competencies; attitudes, beliefs, and mindsets; and character and values. The NCSEAD report concluded,

Research has made clear that social, emotional, and cognitive skills work in concert to build students’ success in school and in life. Employers have emphasized that they need young people with these skills. Families and educators have long recognized that students learn best when they are recognized, engaged, and supported as whole people. And every school and learning setting is already shaping these skills all day long, whether the focus on such development is intentional or not. The question is not whether to make students’ holistic development a priority of schools and communities. The question is how to do this work well.<sup>28</sup>

Note the dismissal of any question of whether a student’s holistic development is an appropriate focus for schools. At a stroke, more than a century of tension and debate between traditional and progressive views of the proper sphere of education is pronounced resolved and waved aside. The only question that remains is “how to do this work well.”

As even sympathetic observers acknowledge, this declaration is both presumptuous and premature. Yong Zhao, Foundation Distinguished Professor in the School of Education at the University of Kansas, has noted there is much less consensus

around SEL than supporters would like to believe; NCSEAD’s description of a “remarkable consensus” is far too optimistic,” he noted. Writing in 2020 in the *Phi Delta Kappan*, he predicted SEL could trigger “another education war, one that could easily become as nasty, divisive, and damaging as the reading wars, the math wars, and—the mother of all education wars—the war between progressive and conservative philosophies of education.”<sup>29</sup>

Engaging in warfare may be too much, but conducting scrutiny and debate is not. Even if one accepts the premise that academic success is linked to social-emotional factors, it does not follow that every influence contributing to a “broader vision of student success” must therefore reside in a school’s sphere of influence.<sup>30</sup> Neither is it consistent to ignore evidence that could be equally powerful in shaping students’ academic and life outcomes but which takes a more traditional moral stance, thus running afoul of SEL’s therapeutic ethos.

AEI scholar Ian Rowe frequently points out, for example, schools’ reluctance to teach the “success sequence” to students most likely to benefit from it, citing the work of the Brookings Institution’s Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill.<sup>31</sup> The pair have documented evidence of a reliable path out of intergenerational poverty: Among US adults who graduated from high school, worked full-time (or had a partner who did), and delayed having children until after they were 21 years old and married, only 2 percent lived below the poverty line; more than seven in 10 ended up in the middle class or above.

As Rowe has pointed out, educators tend to be uncomfortable discussing issues of lifestyle, personal conduct, and habit related to marriage and child-rearing, fearing it may patronize low-income families and “blame the victims” of institutionalized racism. Valorizing traditional habits related to marriage and child-rearing represents the kind of moralizing that SEL has largely tried to scrub away in favor of neutral, nonjudgmental ideals or “performance traits” such as grit and tenacity.

But in its commitment to cultivation of optimal student attitudes, beliefs, and mindsets, SEL can take on dimensions that are no less personal, judgmental, or intrusive. If the reticence Rowe per-

ceives is correct, then Zhao’s analysis is also correct: SEL proponents may be guilty of trying to talk the “remarkable consensus” into existence, relying on the bland, vaguely technocratic, and somewhat inscrutable term “social and emotional learning” for cover.

## Trauma-Informed Education and Pathologizing Childhood

In their 2018 book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt traced the rise of “safetyism,” which they defined as “a culture or belief system in which safety has become a sacred value.” Raising children under conditions that make a virtue of emotional safety, they argued, sets up a feedback loop: “Kids become more fragile and less resilient, which signals to adults that they need more protection, which then makes them even more fragile and less resilient.”<sup>32</sup>

Haidt and Lukianoff traced the evolving definition of the word “trauma,” which was once used in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) to refer exclusively to physical damage, such as a traumatic brain injury. The 1980 revision of the DSM recognized “post-traumatic stress disorder” as a mental disorder—the first use of the term in relation to a nonphysical injury.<sup>33</sup>

However, the manual “emphasized that the event was not based on a *subjective standard*. It had to be something that would cause most people to have a severe reaction,” Lukianoff and Haidt observed. War, rape, or torture were, by this definition, traumatic experiences. Divorce or bereavement, by marked contrast, may be sad or painful, but these were “normal parts of life, even if unexpected.” But this, too, evolved over time into a more capacious definition in the DSM, as Lukianoff and Haidt explained:

By the early 2000s, however, the concept of “trauma” within parts of the therapeutic community had crept so far down that it included anything “experienced by an individual as physically and emotionally harmful . . . with lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.” The *subjective experience* of

“harm” became definitional in assessing trauma.<sup>34</sup>

People in situations that are sad and painful but don’t fall into the trauma category might benefit from counseling, but they generally recover without any therapeutic interventions, Haidt and Lukianoff observed. “In fact, even most people who do have traumatic experiences recover completely without intervention,” they wrote.<sup>35</sup>

The principal object of Haidt and Lukianoff’s book was the culture of higher education, but there has been a concomitant rise of safetyism in K–12 education under the umbrella of trauma-informed practice, which focuses on providing safe spaces and environments for students. Trauma-informed teaching encourages “approaching kids with empathy and understanding, validating feelings and behavior, and building relationships.”<sup>36</sup>

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According to commonly cited estimates from the Department of Health and Human Services, more than two-thirds of US students experience at least one traumatic event before their 16th birthday.<sup>37</sup> Alarming data points such as these and an emerging literature on the effects of toxic stress on learning have led to an explosion of interest in trauma-informed practice—a clear example of the rise of therapeutic education and popular concepts from psychology racing into classroom practice ahead of supporting evidence.

K–12 education’s interest in trauma-informed practice can be traced to a 1998 study conducted by Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which looked at the long-term health outcomes of more than 17,000 patients and found links between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction and a broad range of mental and physical health problems.<sup>38</sup> Negative life out-

comes, including crime and incarceration, homelessness, and early death were all found to correlate to childhood adversity; adults with four or more ACEs were far more likely to suffer from depression or attempt suicide. In an echo of the expanded definition of “trauma” Haidt and Lukanoff traced, the study posited that a broad number of childhood misfortunes—such as growing up around substance abuse and witnessing domestic violence or divorce—all contribute to one’s ACE score.

An article in the *Review of Research in Education* in March 2019 described the “emerging discourse in schools” related to trauma-informed teaching. The authors concluded that educators must “recognize the role and accept their responsibilities to ameliorate the consequences of trauma on youth.”<sup>39</sup> Yet the report paints a troubling picture of schools fumbling haphazardly into this work.

Seemingly, the emergence and rapid growth of trauma-informed care into the educational realm . . . has occurred with no standard, formally agreed upon terms or framework when it comes to implementing trauma-informed practices in districts and schools specifically. While there are some commonly identified foundational resources and frameworks promoted through grants, legislation, and institutions, there in fact is currently no consensus on use or clear operationalization of the terms “trauma-informed approach,” “trauma sensitive,” [or] “trauma-informed system.”<sup>40</sup>

Overuse and overdiagnosis of ACEs prompted the publication of an article in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* in 2020. This article sounded important cautions, particularly since it was written by some of the same researchers who published the original 1998 study, the source of so much of K–12 education’s rush to embrace trauma-informed practice.

The ACE score is a powerful tool for describing the population impact of the cumulative effect of childhood stress and provides a framework for understanding how

prevention of ACEs can reduce the burden of many public health problems and concerns. However, the ACE score is neither a diagnostic tool nor is it predictive at the individual level. Thus, great care should be used when obtaining ACE scores for children and adults as a part of community-wide screening, service, or treatment. Inferences about an individual’s risk for health or social problems should not be made based upon an ACE score, and no arbitrary ACE score, or range of scores, should be designated as a cut point for decision making or used to infer knowledge about individual risk for health outcomes.<sup>41</sup>

The *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* article was not aimed at educators (or, presumably, read by them), but its implicit critique of ACE screening seems to speak directly to its use and overuse in school settings. ACE scores, the authors suggest, are misused *when applied to individuals* but are useful when discussing effects across populations.

Robert F. Anda, coprincipal investigator of the landmark 1998 study, has expressed concern that assigning risk and making clinical decisions for individuals based on their ACE score is a “misapplication” of his study’s findings. The questions commonly used to measure ACEs, Anda notes, cannot adequately assess the frequency or intensity of an adverse experience. “How many times did these adversities happen, the intensity of that experience, how intense was the adversity when it occurred? Was it chronic?” he asks. “Or did it happen day after day, week after week or month after month?” Neither is a score of four or more ACEs a “magic number,” he says, given individual variability in stress responses. “If it’s a crude measure, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they’ve had the same biologic exposure to stress.”<sup>42</sup>

Misuse of ACE scores also carries a significant risk of stigmatizing entire school populations and lowering academic expectations. If high rates of violence, crime, unemployment, and poverty with limited educational and economic opportunities in a community are risk factors for ACEs, the concept



could easily encompass every child in a high-poverty school.<sup>43</sup>

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There is an obvious risk of viewing entire classrooms as stocked with children traumatized *by definition*, disregarding (as Anda cautioned against) the frequency or intensity of an adverse experience and giving insufficient weight to protective factors, such as safe and stable family relationships and social support networks, that mitigate the effect of ACEs. The danger, as Didau observed, is that “it leads us to label certain families—particularly working class families—as unable to deal with children’s emotions and invites schools to intrude ever further into children’s lives.”<sup>44</sup>

At a moment when schools are focused on equity issues, the risks of overdiagnosing trauma and stigmatizing entire populations of disadvantaged children seem particularly acute. Likewise, as districts and schools recover from COVID-19, it is practically a given that greater numbers of students than ever will be perceived to have been traumatized by disruptions related to the pandemic. The momentum behind SEL and trauma-informed practice, already prodigious, may become a runaway train, and their critics risk seeming unempathetic and hard-hearted by even raising questions about them.

## Conclusion

Not everything that benefits children or contributes to improved educational outcomes is schools’ proper or obvious responsibility to address. Regardless of good intent, the fundamental claim SEL proponents make—that a child’s attitudes, values, and beliefs affect his or her academic performance—is not a permission slip to subject those things to state measurement, monitoring, and manipulation, with or without the informed consent of the child’s parents.

Legitimate concerns that the increasing centrality of SEL is an unwelcome expansion of the authority of public education also cannot be dismissed, as Kevin Ryan argued in the foreword to the 2019 Pioneer Institute report.

By what right does the government establish approved mindsets to be inculcated in children? By what right does it deputize minimally trained personnel to measure children’s adoption of those mindsets and memorialize their “progress” in an eternal, loosely secured data system? By what right does it employ such amateur mental assessments to set children on the road to over-diagnosis and perhaps over-medication with potentially harmful psychotropic drugs? By what right does the government wield these techniques not to genuinely educate children to fulfill their dreams, but to mold them into the kind of human beings it deems more useful to the workforce or service to the state? And by what right does it do any of this without notifying or obtaining consent from the children’s parents? The SEL movement implicates all of these questions.<sup>45</sup>

However devoutly it may be wished, SEL proponents cannot declare the tension between the traditional and progressive views of schools resolved.

In the final analysis, the under-examined rise of SEL and therapeutic education portends a not-universally welcome expansion of the role of education into the domains of the family and other institutions and professions, even usurping their roles. The risk is that schools are assuming powers and responsibilities far beyond their brief and asking educators to work beyond their training and expertise.

To state the matter bluntly: Regardless of good intent, teachers are not mental health professionals, counselors, or clergy. They should not be asked—nor is there any reason to expect them—to perform competently in those roles. Neither should we ignore the concern of those who see schools’ attention to SEL coming at the expense of

academic outcomes, despite proponents' insistence that SEL is an academic feature or enhancement, not a distraction.

With every new demand or concern placed in the laps of schools and teachers, the likelihood decreases that they will be effective at any of them. "One of the dangers that we face in education is when we jump on the latest idea from the field of

psychology and try to deploy it in the classroom," cautions teacher and researcher Greg Ashman, concisely summing up the dilemma. "Teachers are not therapists and the more we venture into an area for which we are not trained, the greater the chance that we mess it up."<sup>46</sup>

## About the Author

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