

Literature Review – Student Social and Emotional Needs: Best Practices

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September 2022

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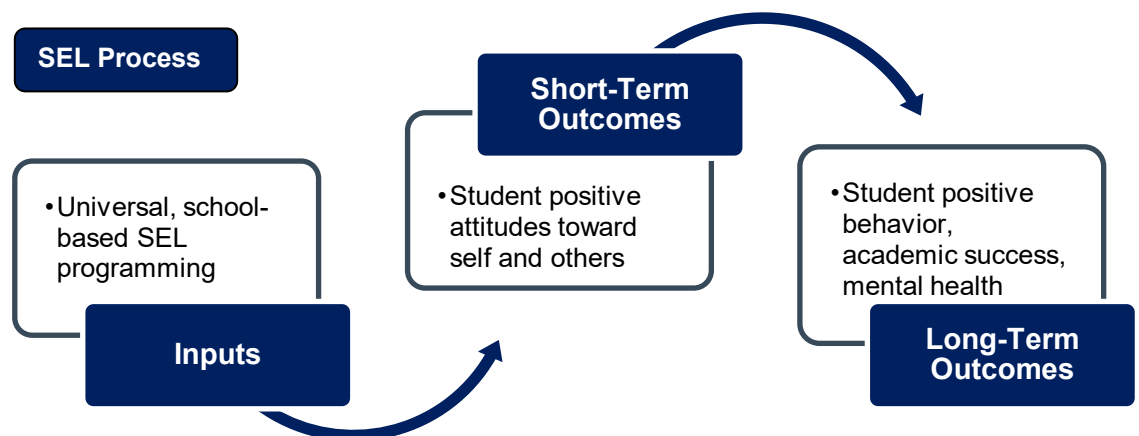
The contents of this publication were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

Introduction

Social emotional learning refers to an array of knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for students' academic and overall success. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social emotional learning "in terms of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills and social awareness (Hanover Research, 2017).

The skills cover a broad range to include analysis, emotional awareness, problem-solving, conflict resolution, cooperation and decision-making (Oliver, 2018). These are skills necessary for emotional growth and success in life, but they also can be difficult to measure and have traditionally not been a part of purely academic assessments.

In practice, social emotional learning should not just be relegated to specific lessons. Social emotional learning principles and strategies should be used across the board to underscore student learning, especially because effective teaching strategies already line up with social emotional learning skills (Hanover Research, 2017; Oliver, 2018; Snyder, 2017; Snyder & Gouveia, 2018). Additionally, students who struggle with behavioral or emotional issues greatly benefit from social emotional learning supports (Levenson, 2018).



(Mahoney, Durlak & Weissberg, 2019)

Over time, social emotional learning has become a focus of necessary and equitable education. When President Obama signed the bipartisan *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) in 2015, it contained several elements that supported social and emotional learning and flexibility for states and local districts to assess student success. The act included an emphasis on programs that provide safe, healthy, supportive environments, and building skills to prevent bullying and

harassment (Hanover Research, 2017; Oliver, 2018).

Research shows the academic benefits of social emotional learning (Hanover Research, 2017; Mahoney, Durlak & Weissberg, 2019; Schlund & Weissberg, 2020). A 2011 meta-analysis of 213 studies involving over 270,000 students showed that campuses that participated in evidence-based social emotional learning saw an 11-point gain in academic achievement for students compared to schools that did not participate in social emotional learning programs. Meta-analyses of social emotional learning programs found significant short-term benefits for students, but social emotional learning is most effective when it is implemented in planned, systemic ways from preschool through high school, and they support whole-child development and success (Mahoney, Durlak & Weissberg, 2019).

Use of social emotional skills and practices can result in improvements in the following (Hanover Research, 2017; Oliver, 2018; Blum):

- **Attitudes:** Better sense of community, higher academic motivation, better understanding of consequences, improved coping skills, increased attitude toward school and learning.
- **Behaviors:** More class participation, improved attention, stronger pro-social skills, improved attendance, reduction in discipline referrals, on track to graduate.
- **Emotional Skills:** Improved recognition and understanding of emotions in both the student and their peers, increased emotion and behavior regulation, increased empathy and perspective-taking.
- **School Performance:** Improved math, literacy, and social studies skills, higher achievement test scores, higher grades, improved metacognition skills, improved problem-solving skills, improved planning, use of higher-level reasoning skills, improvement in reading comprehension, better memory.

Schools can facilitate social emotional growth in students by intentionally teaching these skills, implementing data-driven strategies for emotional growth and wellness, practicing culturally-responsive classroom management, and approaching the work of educating students with a growth, asset-focused mindset (Oliver, 2018).

In addition to the benefits provided to students and academic performance, social emotional learning skills and practices are associated with improved outcomes for teachers, to include lower job-related anxiety and depression, improved student-teacher interactions, enhanced teacher engagement and increased perception of job control (Oliver, 2018).

SEL Strategies

A positive and welcoming school environment is a foundational aspect of student success that provides both physical and emotional safety for all students. The climate reflects the norms, goals, values, relationships, education practices and organizational structures inherent in a particular campus (Oliver, 2018).

When social emotional learning practices are embedded within the school climate, it facilitates strong relationships between students, families, teachers and administrators. In turn, this enables social emotional learning to facilitate a positive school climate (Olivier, 2018).

Some strategies to improve students' connectedness to school include the following.

School Communities: As they suit student needs, create “school-within-a-school” programs, such as small learning communities, magnet schools, or career academies (Blum).

Streamline Meetings: Principals and administrative staff should streamline and reduce the number of mandatory meetings teachers must attend to maximize their time in the classroom and with students (Levenson, 2018).

Multidisciplinary Team Teaching: This strategy can help groups of teachers to get to know every student, and the team can confer about students to target areas where they may need more support (Levenson, 2018; Blum).

Smaller Student-to-Adult Ratio: Make use of volunteers, paraprofessionals, teacher aides, and family and community volunteers to provide individual students more attention, especially when they are having a difficult time academically or emotionally (Blum, nd). Mentorship programs also enable students to connect personally with adults in their communities or who share their interests.

Student Contact: Ensure that there is at least one trusted adult each student connects with for check-ins (Blum, nd).

Consult Behavior Experts: Counselors and behavioral management specialists should be available to consult with teachers on how to craft strategies that promote student emotional and behavioral health (Levenson, 2018). This requires that schools be provided the funds to hire these specialists or partner with college, universities and community partners.

Preventative Discipline Strategies: Targeting problem behavior should be about addressing the root of the problem. Exclusionary discipline should be reduced or eliminated in the interest

of student engagement and academic achievement (Grayson & Johnson, 2018; Levenson, 2018).

Nurturing Climate: Ensure that the school climate is nurturing for all students. This is an ongoing process that ranges from simple strategies, such as putting up posters and setting classroom rules, to providing everyday emotional support and practices that let all students know they are safe and welcome in the learning environment (Snyder, 2017).

Mutual Respect: Ensure that respect is a primary aspect of social emotional learning. Respect is vital for achieving equity and to ensure that all students are engaged and receive a quality education. Mutual respect in the classroom is built upon the consideration of personal beliefs, values and action. It is shown through care, assistance and concern for others. In the school setting, this encompasses respect for one's self, among students, between students and staff, between parents and staff, and between staff members (Snyder, 2017).

Strategies to improve and encourage social emotional learning in the classroom include the following.

Clear Social Emotional Learning Commitment: A committee of primary stakeholders should convene and agree on a philosophy and specific plan for social emotional learning (Hanover Research, 2017). Definitions of social emotional learning can vary, so schools should stick to a clear, agreed-upon definition and follow evidenced-based programs for social emotional learning (Hanover Research, 2017).

Noise Levels: Ensure that shared spaces are not too loud to enable students to concentrate on their tasks or smaller conversations during group work (Blum, nd). Additionally, schools should provide quiet spots or rooms for student use, particularly for students with learning disabilities.

Quick Response: Problems should be immediately addressed. This extends to the school environment itself – graffiti or trash should be immediately cleaned (Blum, nd).

Curriculum Opportunities: Ensure that lessons promote social emotional learning skills and provide opportunities for students to discuss their feelings of physical and emotional safety with trusted adults (Blum, nd). Whenever possible, integrate social emotional learning strategies into instruction. Social emotional learning should not be a single lesson or activity, but the curriculum and instruction strategies should include elements of SEL so that it is a robust part of every lesson. Strategies for instruction, perseverance, decision-making and behavior management are easily streamlined with social emotional learning education (Snyder, 2017).

Social Emotional Learning Modeling: Staff and teachers should model social emotional

learning competencies in their daily interactions with students (Hanover Research, 2017). Teachers should be given training on social emotional learning to incorporate in their teaching practices and the district should employ social emotional learning strategies when communicating with families and the community (Hanover Research, 2017).

Social Emotional Learning Evaluation: Educators can gather and provide feedback on student social emotional learning competencies using tools, such as narratives, checklists and surveys. Regardless of the method of providing feedback, students should be given continued support for social emotional learning (Hanover Research, 2017).

Social Emotional Learning Expertise: School districts should be in contact with or have already trained educators, counselors and professionals well-versed in social emotional learning techniques who can provide professional development to educators who have questions about how to integrate social emotional learning strategies into their lessons and help them plan on how to do so in an online setting (Schlund & Weissberg, 2020).

Explicit Social Emotional Learning Instruction: Provide explicit social emotional learning skill guidance. While adults are more cognizant of mental and emotional strategies and processes, students are still learning and will need extra support. Specifically (Snyder, 2017):

- **Provide a Rationale:** Explain necessity of social emotional learning education and offer real world examples of its benefits.
- **Define the Skill:** Use clear, decisive language to define the skill. Provide examples and check in with students to ensure they understand.
- **Model the Skill:** Offer students examples of how the skill can be used in different contexts and ask students to help role-play and come up with scenarios of their own where the skill would be helpful.
- **Present Opportunities for Use:** Class activities or games provide ample opportunities for students to try and master social emotional learning skills. The more opportunities, the better.
- **Revisit:** Using social emotional learning skills should not be relegated to one subject or lesson. Check in on student progress and remind them throughout the year that the social emotional learning skills they learned can be used in numerous different scenarios.

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See IDRA's *Interrupting Bullying & Harassment in Schools – Online Technical Assistance Packages* for more strategies and resources.

Student Participation Strategies

In general, students perform better in school if they feel welcome, safe and secure. Some specific strategies that teachers can use to promote connectedness and develop a positive teacher-student relationship are as follows.

Learn About Students: Educators should review their students' files to be aware of all pertinent information in the interest of supporting them (Blum, nd).

Assign Work to Promote Interests and Histories: Assign work to encourage students to talk about themselves and their interests. This can include creating an autobiography and writing essays or poems about topics important to them (Blum, nd). Set aside a time to highlight student projects and successes.

Consistent Availability: Ensure that there is time set aside each day or a set time each week for them to share thoughts or concerns (Blum, nd).

Time Management: Ensure that time set aside to ask questions or listen to their concerns will not be interrupted or shortchanged (Blum, nd). Ensure that students have more than one method of contacting you.

Constant Evaluation: Educators should consistently diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses so that they may appeal to their best ways to learn and provide assistance in areas where they may struggle (Blum, nd; Snyder, 2017).

Be Welcoming: Make a personal effort to welcome, communicate and connect with parents and students (Blum, nd).

Be Respectful: While compliments on student work and strengths can be provided at any time in the classroom setting, keep criticisms to private, teacher and student conversations. Empathize with students when they face problems (Blum, nd). Additionally, teachers should model how to provide appropriate criticism when it does happen in the classroom so that when students make mistakes in front of their peers, the other students respond or correct respectfully (Snyder, 2017).

Use Student Input: Consider students' interests and suggestions when planning activities to improve attention and make them feel like they are an active participant in their lessons (Blum, nd).

Encourage "Student Talk": Time in the classroom should reduce "teacher talk" by incorporating

peer review, group work, and student discussions (Blum, nd; Snyder, 2017).

Allow for Correction: Students should be able to correct their mistakes, which also shows the teacher's faith in their capabilities to do the work (Blum, nd).



See IDRA's *Ready – Reopen – Reconnect! Proven Strategies for Re-engaging Students Who Need You the Most* that describes key factors that keep students coming back and schools can help them feel a sense of success day after day.

Social Emotional Learning and Distance Education

As schools took on the daunting task of educating students during the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing student social emotional needs was key. Additionally, as educators across the nation scrambled to provide the best online learning experience they could for their students, addressing emotional needs may have taken a less prominent role in lessons (Walker, 2020). As in-person instruction resumed, students carried with them the social emotional scars of the experience.

Though distance learning is no longer widespread, it is in use for students in special circumstances. Specific steps that teachers and administrators can take to try and support student SEL and general academic success during include the following.

Maintain Continuity: Whenever possible, students should keep to similar routines and relationships while they are engaged in distance learning (Pitts, 2020; Teaching Tolerance, 2020). Educators can help maintain these connections via creative solutions, such as a pen pal program or unstructured, virtual recess. Helping students maintain peer connections is also important. Educators can maintain online continuity in these relationships by considering keeping students in the same breakout groups or setting time for students to interact outside of classroom time. Teachers can also create continuity by replicating some of the common aspects of class time, such as circle time, check-ins, common greetings and opportunities to share (Pitts, 2020).

Be Flexible: Teachers are obviously aware of the new issues and anxieties that students are confronting and should not expect learning to be as streamlined as it is during in-person learning. Assignments and deadlines should be flexible, and learning should be focused around the classroom community and connectivity to ensure that students can learn to their best ability online (Pate, 2020). Information also should be digestible. Students may be under more stress with the pressure of learning a new routine and health or family worries, which will make it more difficult to focus for longer periods (Learning for Justice, 2020).

Provide Choices: Students should have a variety of ways to complete assignments to suit different learning styles and allow them to practice skills and academics in ways that benefit their competencies and interests (Pate, 2020).

Check in Often: Online interactions between teachers and students should not be solely teacher directed. There should be time set aside for students to talk about how things are going so that the educator is aware of issues and help address them (Walker, 2020).

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Encourage Connectivity: Beyond regular connections with students, educators should encourage their students to speak online or over the phone with friends and family to maintain those connections (Learning for Justice, 2020; Pate, 2020).

Flexible Behavior Management: In distance learning during the pandemic, students were adjusting to or dealing with varied family situations and new stressors at home. Teachers needed to be more patient with deadlines and behavioral issues and support and connect with their student to be fully aware of these complications (Learning for Justice, 2020). This is true during other distance learning situations. Teachers should also be mindful of responses or behaviors that trigger irritation in themselves and reflect on how to better respond to students when these happen. Teacher-led reflections on anxiety and worry can be used as example for students as well so they can identify when they also feel overwhelmed and seek help (Pate, 2020).

Model Metacognition: Both students and educators respond to the new stresses of social distancing in different ways. When isolated, how a person engages with their own thoughts may matter more than how they engage with others. When students are learning in novel ways, behind a computer screen, they need guidance on how they think about these transitions they are going through. For an educator, modeling how and why to use metacognition is a vital component of digital instruction (Pitts, 2020). For example, after guiding students through new class content, the educator can ask students to record their answers to reflective questions, such as “What did I feel successful with during this new learning and why?” and “What was challenging during this lesson and why?”

Support the Entire Family: Online learning is challenge. Principals and superintendents can consider how to create systems that provide opportunities for teachers to engage families in schoolwide SEL approaches, to include providing fun activities for a family to do together (Learning for Justice, 2020). One benefit of the unexpected online learning was the opportunity for greater communication between teachers and some of their families. As educators and administrators plan during the fall semester, they should reach out to their parents and students via phone or traditional surveys to understand their school’s community’s experiences with school closures and economic changes (Pitts, 2020). Additionally, teachers and administrators need to be aware of families with multiple children who will be learning online and stagger meetings to meet the needs of all learners in the household (Schlund & Weissberg, 2020).

Incorporate Time for Play: Ensure that fun activities are included in lesson plans and packets for students for them to play in the classroom, in smaller groups with their friends or at home with their families (Learning for Justice, 2020).

Hopeful Activities: Encourage students to communicate with a family member, trusted adult, or public figure to ask how they stayed hopeful during troubled times. Educators can also teach

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about other historical times of crisis, how they were resolved and how the people persevered. Students should be encouraged to go outside and get fresh air as often as possible (Learning for Justice, 2020).

Additionally, while the focus has understandably been on the struggles that students and their families were enduring as they adjusted to the necessity of immediate distance education, teachers also had a difficult time adjusting to being separated from their students and learning communities. Connection between teachers is a vital component of meeting the social and emotional needs of all stakeholders who are disconnected physically (Walker, 2020).

Supporting Students with Special Needs

Of particular concern is how to best engage students who may have trouble focusing or engaging in online learning. Strategies include the following.

Help Students Develop New Routines: Students with special needs may struggle with changes in routine and the loss of the structure of in-person school. Teachers can take advantage of the opportunity to help them develop new strategies for focus and learning (Kaufman, 2020). Teachers can even make planning and adjusting to a new routine and schedule as an assignment or lesson. There are numerous different methods or tricks students can use to try and retain focus and settle into a new routine, including:

- Scheduling work and break times.
- Setting up a physical timer and working until it goes off.
- Experimenting with different apps to help with focus.
- Setting a short, realistic goal, such as “I will write one paragraph before I take a short break.”
- Creating a checklist.
- Working on the hardest or easiest task first.
- Putting the student’s phone in a different room or in their backpack while they are concentrating on work.
- Finding a quiet space in the house or using headphones to cancel out noise.

Simplify Directions and Use Best Practices: Students with special needs do not all have the same coping strategies as adults, and they may struggle with finding good places to break assignments down into chunks or planning their time while working alone (Kaufman, 2020). Teachers should use evidenced-based practices for breaking down lessons, keep directions simple, and be consistent in how materials are organized and presented to students.

Find New Ways to Meet Student Needs: Regardless of the setting, students with individualized education programs (IEPs) and 504 plans must still get the accommodations they need during distance learning, though these needs and accommodations might look different in the new environment (Kaufman, 2020). Teachers should connect with their students and families to find creative solutions, to include daily check ins, timers, or a tangible goal tracker. Teachers should ensure that their students have the right tools to be able to learn, such as having access to a screen reader or text-to-speech tools if necessary (Kaufman, 2020). Differential learning processes should appeal to individual needs and provide an opportunity to practice SEL skills (Snyder, 2017).

Ensure Students Meet their Sensory Needs: Students with sensory issues may need

specialized equipment such as fidgets, ball chairs or movable seating (Pate, 2020).

Maintain Positive Relationships: This is an essential component of successful distance learning, regardless of the educational needs of students. Students with special needs require more frequent check-ins than students in general education. Teachers of students with special needs should use these check-ins to (Kaufman, 2020):

- Ensure students understand lessons.
- Find out if their students have the right tools to complete their classwork.
- Help students develop learning strategies.
- Check in on accommodations and necessary supports.
- Better understand their student's social-emotional wellbeing.

SEL Distance Learning Resources

The larger education research and practice community has provided numerous resources and guides for how to cope with distance learning during the pandemic. CASEL Cares has a wide-ranging bank of resources for students, teachers, and schools. Highlights include:

- Free Remote Learning SEL Resources <https://selproviders.casel.org/sel-resources/>
- Practices/Activities for Learning and Well-Being During the Coronavirus Crisis https://ggie.berkeley.edu/school-challenges/supporting-learning-and-well-being-during-the-coronavirus-crisis/#tab__2
- Education Week: How to Teach Social-Emotional Learning When Students Aren't in School <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/30/how-to-teach-social-emotional-learning-when-students.html>
- COVID-19 Learning Keeps Going <https://www.learningkeepsgoing.org>
- Taking School Online with a Student-Centered Approach <https://www.facinghistory.org/books-borrowing/taking-school-online-student-centered-approach>
- Caring for Preschoolers at Home <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/20/03/caring-preschoolers-home>
- Building Positive Conditions for Learning at Home: Strategies and Resources for Families and Caregivers <https://www.air.org/resource/building-positive-conditions-learning-home-strategies-and-resources-families-and-caregivers>

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