

Recommendations for Implementing the New Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards to Affect Classroom Practices for Social and Emotional Learning

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Abstract

The state of Illinois in the central United States has long been a trendsetter both in the development of learning standards and in addressing social and emotional learning in education settings. With a recent revision to the state's early learning standards, published in 2013, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) fully aligned its standards for children's social and emotional development and learning from preschool through high school. In this paper, the authors discuss the social and emotional development components of the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards (IELDS) and make recommendations for ways to ensure that the new standards are fully implemented and have the greatest positive impact on young children's social and emotional learning and development.

Introduction

The state of Illinois, historically a trailblazer in matters related to social and emotional learning (SEL) in education settings, was the first in the United States to draft free-standing SEL standards for K–12 students. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has continued to break new ground in education policy by drafting state standards that reflect careful and purposeful alignment of learning goals starting in preschool. The newly revised Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards (IELDS) mark an important advancement for the field, particularly with regard to SEL. In this article, we will draw attention to the new standards and how they may serve as a model for other states and stakeholders interested in advancing their work in SEL. We will briefly review the literature on SEL and learning standards before discussing the history of SEL standards in Illinois. We conclude with some recommendations for how to maximize the effects these standards may have on classroom practices and children's SEL.

Social Emotional Learning in Early Childhood and Beyond

Social and emotional learning is the process through which children and adults develop competencies needed to effectively manage themselves and their relationships with others, in school, in work, and in life (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). Students who master social and emotional skills also have greater well-being and better school performance (Greenberg et al., 2003). Social and emotional competencies include being able to accurately recognize your own and other's emotions, regulate your emotional arousal, empathize with others, establish and maintain healthy relationships, navigate challenging social situations, and make responsible choices (Denham & Brown, 2010). These abilities are important from very early in life but are especially relevant as children begin to spend time with adults outside the home and to socialize with peers in early education environments.

Social and emotional competence plays a role in how well-equipped children are to meet the demands of the classroom and in whether they are able to engage fully in learning what is required and to benefit from instruction (Campbell & von Stauffenberg, 2008; Denham & Brown, 2010). For example,

children who understand their emotions and those of others may be able to navigate the classroom environment more easily and therefore may perceive the classroom setting more positively (Raver, Garner, & Smith-Donald, 2007). Children with poorer emotional understanding may resort to aggressive responses to social problems and enter the classroom at a distinct disadvantage regarding formation of relationships with both teachers and peers. Such children are not appealing playmates and are challenging to teach, which means that they are likely to experience fewer of the positive, prosocial interactions in the classroom that are key facilitators of learning (Bierman, Torres, Domitrovich, Welsh, & Gest, 2009; Izard et al., 2001). Social and emotional difficulties such as aggressive behaviors tend to increase over the elementary school years (Aber, Brown, & Jones, 2003), so efforts to address them in early childhood are particularly important.

There has long been a focus in early childhood on promoting children's social and emotional competence, but only recently has there been an increase in research aimed at understanding exactly what teachers do to support children's social and emotional learning either through daily interactions and socialization (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012) or through explicit instruction via SEL curriculum (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007). Research demonstrating the importance of SEL for children's school and life success has spurred state administrators and education policy makers to include SEL in their learning standards.

State SEL Standards: What They Are and Why They Matter

Learning standards are statements about what students should know and be able to do as a result of educational instruction; they help to create consistency in education and communicate priorities implicit in policies. When standards also articulate clear goals and provide developmental benchmarks, they can be part of a powerful plan for education, especially if that plan also includes use of evidence-based curricula, high-quality professional development for teachers, and assessment that enables teachers to monitor students' progress toward goals. Well-written, well-implemented standards have been positively associated with greater academic achievement (Finn, Julian, & Petrilli, 2006).

As part of the educational reform movement in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s, states began developing learning standards for core academic subjects in K–12. Today, learning standards for language arts, math, social studies, and science can be found in every state (Dusenbury, Zadzil, Mart, & Weissberg, 2011). Additionally, many states have developed standards for other subject areas, including health, world languages, performing arts, and most pertinent to this discussion, children's social and emotional development. SEL standards can influence curriculum development and selection, professional development and expectations, and assessment by which young children are evaluated. In essence, they define the goals for social and emotional education within a state. When learning standards include social and emotional domains, state officials are communicating to administrators, teachers, parents, and students that these competencies are important and valued as part of what it means to be ready for school.

Even though preschool teachers have long supported children's social and emotional development, learning standards and guidelines have only recently begun to reflect the importance of this learning area. An increase in research focused on SEL has enabled policy makers to recognize the importance of these nonacademic skills and led them to include relevant domains in standards of learning to varying degrees across the country (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006).

Standards for social and emotional development differ substantially across states. Typically the SEL standards can be described as either integrated (some SEL-related competencies are included within other academic subject standards, such as math) or free-standing (SEL is treated with equal weight as other subjects and has separate learning goals and benchmarks). Additionally, state standards for SEL differ in how many ages or grades they include. Although all 50 states have free-standing standards for social and emotional development at the preschool level (Dusenbury et al., 2015), free-standing SEL standards at the K–12 level are still relatively rare. Rarer still are free-standing standards aligned

across the whole education spectrum—from preschool through high school.

The teaching of social and emotional competencies is an important component of education programs. For many children, preschool represents their first opportunity to socialize with nonparental adults and to form peer groups. In preschool, children work on skills related to sharing, following instructions, and waiting one's turn. However, SEL is not mastered in preschool. Although learning these skills prior to kindergarten can help set children on a path to success in grade school, ongoing and systematic emphasis on social and emotional development is necessary to maximize children's SEL throughout their schooling. Through the establishment of fully aligned SEL standards from preschool through high school, states can create a common language and progressive expectation for children's SEL, ultimately aiding educators and parents in preparing children for success in the social world. Furthermore, the alignment of standards and use of common language related to social and emotional development and learning may facilitate alignment of professional development opportunities for teachers across grades and simplify the selection of curriculum and assessment strategies for children and teachers.

A 2010 overview of state learning standards conducted by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) showed that, at the time, Illinois was the only state to have adopted comprehensive K–12 standards for SEL (Dusenbury et al., 2011). Since that study, Illinois and a few other states have adopted fully aligned and free-standing SEL learning standards that extend from preschool through the end of high school. These states can serve as examples for others involved in the hard work of expanding their SEL standards beyond preschool and either aligning them with SEL standards that are currently embedded within the K–12 academic curricula or developing free-standing SEL standards for all students.

The Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards for Social and Emotional Development

Although Illinois was the first state in the nation to adopt free-standing SEL goals in 2004, the early process for developing SEL standards at the early childhood level was not completely in sync with the process at the K–12 level. The statewide process actually began in 2002 with the formation of a task force on children's mental health. The final report of the task force, *Children's Mental Health: An Urgent Priority for Illinois* (Illinois Children's Mental Health Task Force, 2003), prompted the creation of the Illinois Children's Mental Health Act of 2003. The Illinois Children's Mental Health Act, in turn, called for the development of K–12 SEL standards (Gordon, Ji, Mulhall, Shaw, & Weissberg, 2011).

K–12 SEL standards were then developed in collaboration with more than 60 organizations and agencies in Illinois, including education groups, such as Chicago Public Schools, school counselors, school psychologists, the Illinois Association of School Social Workers, and CASEL. The Illinois SEL standards were adopted in 2004, and schools began receiving support to implement the new standards in 2007.

At the same time Illinois was developing SEL standards at the K–12 level, the Illinois State Board of Education's Division of Early Childhood Education was collaborating with stakeholders and educators to craft a separate set of standards for preschool children in the state. The original Illinois Early Learning Standards (IELS) document was published in 2002. While the IELS was intended to parallel the academic content of the standards for K–12 education, including domains such as language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, the passage of the Children's Mental Health Act in 2003 and subsequent development of free-standing SEL standards at the K–12 level soon resulted in misalignment between preschool SEL goals and K–12 SEL goals.

The 2002 IELS included two SEL goals: (31) Develop an awareness of personal identity and positive self-concept, and (32) Demonstrate a respect and a responsibility for self and others. In contrast, the K–12 standards adopted two years later reflected the CASEL competency model and specified three different goals for SEL: (30) Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success, (31) Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive

relationships, and (32) Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.

States routinely review and adjust their learning standards as new research and policy emerge regarding children's education and development. The Illinois State Board of Education undertook such a revision process, drafting the new Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards (IELDS) and releasing them for review in January 2013. This revision of the standards (Illinois State Board of Education, 2013) reflects the alignment of the state's academic expectations for preschool learning with both the kindergarten standards and the Common Core State Standards. In addition, a major revision aligned the IELDS with the three-goal structure of the K–12 standards for social and emotional development (see [Table 1](#)).

With this alignment, Illinois now has clear, comprehensive, free-standing SEL standards that are aligned across a common framework from preschool through 12th grade. In the next section we will describe the framework for SEL that is employed in Illinois, then describe in-depth the current early learning standards for social and emotional development.

The Illinois Framework for SEL

Illinois has adopted the CASEL framework that defines social and emotional learning as a process of helping children develop specific fundamental competencies. The five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) are summarized under three learning goals in the Illinois standards (see [Table 1](#)).

These three goals were included in the 2004 K–12 standards but make their first appearance in Illinois' early learning standards in the 2013 IELDS. As can be seen on the right side of [Table 1](#), the IELDS divide each of the three goals into multiple standards, each of which also aligns with the K–12 standards. Within each standard, the IELDS standards outline a series of benchmarks that are intended to "provide teachers and caregivers with objective means of evaluating a child's progress" (Illinois State Board of Education, 2013, p. 7). These descriptive benchmarks are devised to be developmentally appropriate for each grade-level cluster: preschool, early elementary (grades K–3), late elementary (grades 4–5), middle/junior high (grades 6–8), early high school (grades 9–10), and late high school (grades 11–12). Benchmarks increase in developmental sophistication and become more rigorous from one grade-level cluster to the next. In addition, the SEL benchmarks can be integrated with standards in other learning areas. For example, Goal 32, Learning Standard C, "Contribute to the well-being of one's school and community," is cross referenced with Social Studies Goal 14, Learning Standard A, "Understand what it means to be a member of a group and community."

With the adoption of the three-goal framework into the IELDS, Illinois became one of only a few states to fully align its SEL standards from preschool through 12th grade. Alignment of the IELDS was complex and necessitated collaboration both within and outside the state Board of Education. Comments and feedback were solicited to enable continual improvement to the draft documents. Now that Illinois has engaged in the hard work of crafting these fully aligned standards, the process and the resulting IELDS document can serve as strong models for other states engaged in standards work.

Recommendations for Strengthening the IELDS

As we consider how this document will be used in the classroom, it is important to consider ways to ensure that the standards and benchmarks are fully implemented and have the greatest possible impact on children and families in Illinois. Based on a review of the literature on learning standards, Dusenbury et al. (2015) have identified key components of high-quality learning standards. Specifically, they argue that SEL learning standards should:

- Be clearly written and comprehensive to include children from preschool through 12th grade.

- Strive for cultural and linguistic sensitivity.
- Include guidelines for practitioners on how to form positive environments and how to support children's social and emotional development.
- Include discussions of strategies for enhancing implementation.

With the release of the new IELDS, Illinois has successfully created a fully aligned, clear, and comprehensive set of free-standing social and emotional developmental standards with age-appropriate benchmarks for preschool through high school. Going forward, work remains on the final three recommendations. We will review each in turn below.

Cultural and linguistic sensitivity. Dusenbury et al. (2015) recommend that SEL standards should be culturally and linguistically sensitive because research has consistently suggested that cultural sensitivity in program policies and staff interactions is associated with overall program effectiveness (Bond & Hauf, 2004). The IELDS make efforts to include topics of culture and language. This can be seen especially in the social studies domain where Goal 18, "Explore people and families," was written to align with the culturally attuned K–12 standard "Compare characteristics of culture as reflected in language, literature, the arts, traditions and institutions" (Standard 18.A). Despite this, there may be additional ways to build cultural and linguistic sensitivity into the social and emotional development standards for preschoolers through family-school partnerships. Such partnerships can enhance sensitivity to children's home language and cultural practices surrounding social-emotional development and may reinforce SEL learning through active participation in programming by parents (Christenson & Havsby, 2004).

Positive environment and practitioner guidelines. SEL standards are also likely to be enhanced when they include guidelines for practitioners about how to create positive learning environments. Children experience greater success when they learn through social interactions with peers and teachers (Zins et al., 2007) and when their learning environment is positive and supportive (Greenberg et al., 2003; Mashburn et al., 2008; Payton et al., 2000). To maximize the effectiveness of SEL standards, Illinois may need to consider providing guidelines or outlining expectations for classroom emotional environments as well.

In addition to helping teachers maintain positive learning environments, strong SEL standards include guidelines about teacher practices that support social and emotional development. Such guidelines are not yet part of the IELDS, but should they be included eventually, they would lay the foundation for SEL-focused professional development opportunities.

Strategies for enhanced implementation. Standards are also strengthened when they include strategies to support high-quality implementation, including adoption of evidence-based SEL programs; use of SEL assessment that allows teachers to monitor student progress; and high-quality professional development. The value of the IELDS social-emotional standards might be further enhanced if they included guidelines on the following elements.

Selecting SEL curricula. The most beneficial school-based SEL programs provide sequential and developmentally appropriate instruction for children, coordinated implementation by program directors, and ongoing relevant professional development for teachers. Children's SEL is supported when teachers extend in-class direct instruction on topics such as self-control with emotionally supportive interactions throughout the school day. Take-home materials can help parents be involved in sustaining children's SEL. Illinois administrators may find themselves searching for new curricula that align with the new IELDS for social and emotional development. The [2013 CASEL Guide](#), the first review of its kind in nearly a decade, identifies 23 SEL programs for preschool and elementary school that successfully promote students' self-control, relationship building, and problem solving, among other social and emotional competencies. Educators may find such guides helpful in identifying and selecting evidence-based programs.

Assessing SEL. In terms of assessment, it is helpful for states to recommend reliable and valid methods of SEL assessments that teachers can use to monitor student progress toward achieving

standards. Although the new IELDS include benchmarks that are intended to help teachers and caregivers objectively evaluate children's progress with regards to SEL, the research to create and disseminate valid, reliable, and practical assessments of young children's SEL is lagging. There are resources that may be helpful; for example, Denham, Ji, and Hamre (2010) created a [compendium of assessment tools](#) available to measure children's SEL.

Professional development. A recent meta-analysis indicates that research has consistently and clearly demonstrated that students whose teachers implement programming and practices well are likely to perform better on a variety of academic and behavioral outcomes than students whose teachers do not implement with high quality (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Professional development that is aligned with standards and provides guidelines about teacher practices is likely to be critically important to equipping teachers with the tools and resources they will need to support development of children's SEL.

Conclusion

Social and emotional competencies undergird children's successes in (sometimes) challenging classroom environments. As they grow, SEL continues to support children's achievement through high school and life. By investing efforts into the development of students' social and emotional competencies, teachers are better able to effectively manage the classroom, indirectly enhancing the learning environment for all students (Raver et al., 2007). Therefore, it is necessary that schools provide the structural support for teachers to promote the development of these competencies in a consistent manner through the academic life of a student. States such as Illinois that have created standards aligned from the beginning to the end of a child's schooling are at the vanguard of ensuring positive academic outcomes for the greatest number of students. Schools within the state that effectively adopt these standards and integrate SEL competencies into the educational process will do so to the benefit of all students (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). The recently revised Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards provide a strong structural model that may help other states integrate and align standards for children's social and emotional development.

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