



Social and Emotional Learning

Context

Our public schools face a critical challenge – creating a safe and respectful school and classroom climate where students can learn. Evidence-based programs that foster students’ social and emotional learning (SEL) not only contribute to a positive classroom climate, they also provide young people with skills they can use throughout their lives: managing feelings, relating well to others, making good decisions, dealing well with conflict and other life challenges, respecting diversity, and responsibly contributing to their community. Students who participate in SEL programs improve not only their social and emotional competency but their academic performance as well. The value of fostering SEL is widely accepted; New York State has adopted voluntary SEL standards for schools.

Evidence

1) A meta-analysis published in 2011 reviewed 213 positive youth development, SEL, character education, and prevention interventions designed to promote personal and social skills in children between the ages of five and eighteen. The analysis looked at the impact of SEL programs on students’ SEL skills, attitudes toward self and others, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance. The analysis found that SEL programs:

- Are effective in both school and after-school settings and for students with and without behavioral and emotional problems.
- Are effective for racially and ethnically diverse students from urban, rural, and suburban settings across the K–12 grade range.
- Improve students’ social-emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, connection to school, and positive social behavior; and reduce behavior problems and emotional distress.
- Significantly improve students’ achievement test scores.

2) Another study focuses on an SEL program being implemented in the New York City public schools: The 4Rs (Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution). The 4Rs integrates SEL into the language arts curriculum for grades Kindergarten through eight. This major experimental study was conducted by researchers from New York University, Fordham University, and Harvard University. Researchers found that compared with their peers in non-4Rs schools, students in 4Rs schools had:

- Lower levels of teacher-reported aggression.
- Less tendency to ascribe hostile motives to others in ambiguous social situations.

- Fewer symptoms of depression.
- Fewer symptoms of attention and hyperactivity problems.
- Increases in social competence.

The program had the strongest effects on the most at-risk students. Children at greatest behavioral risk showed marked improvement in:

- Attendance.
- Academic skills, as reported by their teachers.
- Scores on standardized reading and math achievement tests.

In addition, “blind observers” using a research-based classroom observation tool to assess classroom quality found that classrooms in The 4Rs schools had higher levels of emotional and instructional support and better overall classroom quality than classrooms in the control schools. Past research has associated this better classroom quality with students’ higher academic performance.

3) Research suggests that school leaders who lead with emotional intelligence – and teachers who use SEL practices in their interactions with students and colleagues – contribute to a high-functioning school. Anthony Bryk and the Chicago Consortium for Schools Research identified 100 elementary schools that had substantially improved – and 100 that had not. In their 2009 book, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, they describe what successful schools do to accelerate student learning, including developing positive school leadership, developing the professional capacity of the faculty and staff, and developing a student-centered learning climate. Bryk concludes that “relational trust” and collaboration are key elements in successful schools, pointing to the need for adults as well as children to possess such skills as active listening, the ability to respect those with different backgrounds, and conflict resolution.

There are some challenges to implementing SEL. Research shows that the most effective SEL programs are sustained and carefully sequenced. Classroom-based SEL programs are only effective when they are consistently implemented. Effective SEL programs require time that teachers and school leaders are hard-pressed to find, given the current focus on preparing students for standardized tests. Fortunately, however, research also shows that educators don’t have to choose between fostering students’ social and emotional development and improving their academic performance: teaching students these skills, and creating a respectful school-wide environment, contributes significantly to students’ academic learning and to school success. For instance, in the meta-analysis described above, Durlak et al found that SEL programs improved students’ achievement test scores by an average of 11 percentile points.

Bottom Line

Fostering social and emotional learning improves the classroom and school climate for learning and leads to better student outcomes, including greater social, emotional, and academic competency.

Related Research

Meta-Analysis

Durlak, J. A., R. P. Weissberg, A. B. Dymnicki, R. D. Taylor, and K. B. Schellinger. 2011. "The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions," *Child Development* 82:405–432.

4Rs Study

Jones, S. M., J. L. Brown, and J. Lawrence Aber. 2011. "Two-Year Impacts of a Universal School-Based Social-Emotional and Literacy Intervention: An Experiment in Translational Developmental Research," *Child Development* 82:533–554.

Classroom Observational Study of 4Rs

Brown, J. L., S. M. Jones, M. D. LaRusso, and J. Lawrence Aber. 2010. "Improving Classroom Quality: Teacher Influences and Experimental Impacts of the 4Rs Program," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 102, no.1:153–167.

Chicago Consortium for Schools Research

Bryk, A. S., P. B. Sebring, E. Allensworth, S. Luppescu, and J. Q. Easton. 2010. *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Changing Children's Trajectories of Development

A quasi-experimental two-year study by researchers at Columbia University of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, a collaboration of New York City public schools and Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility.

Lawrence Aber, J., S. Pedersen, S. Jones, and E. T. Gershoff. 2003. *Changing Children's Trajectories of Development Two-Year Evidence for the Effectiveness of a School-Based Approach to Violence Prevention*. Downloadable PDF available at: www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_554.pdf. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty.

Examples of Best Policy and Practice

Collaborative for Academic, Social, & Emotional Learning (CASEL)

www.casel.org

Educating the Whole Child, Engaging the Whole School: Guidelines and Resources for Social and Emotional Development and Learning (SEDL) in New York State

www.p12.nysed.gov/sss/sedl/SEDLguidelines.pdf

Illinois State Mandated SEL Standards

www.isbe.net/ils/social_emotional/standards.htm

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

www.morningsidecenter.org/

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