



The Meadows Center  
FOR PREVENTING EDUCATIONAL RISK  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN  
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION



# 10 Key Policies and Practices for Social-Emotional Learning

—with strong evidence of effectiveness from high-quality research—



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There is much concern regarding the mental health and social well-being of students today. Schools and districts are using various types of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs to develop a broad range of social, emotional, and behavioral skills associated with positive learning outcomes. SEL programs improve students' thinking and cognition in challenging social situations. SEL programs may be referred to by a variety of names, including character education, positive behavior support, 21st century skill development, and personality development. SEL programs develop a range of skills,

including those related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship building, and decision-making. Generally, these skills are considered vital to succeed in school, work, and life. SEL not only promotes the social and emotional well-being of students, but also improves academic achievement.

This document provides guidance for district and school administrators considering adopting a SEL program. Individual teachers in schools without schoolwide or districtwide programs will also find these basic principles helpful in promoting a positive classroom environment.

## **1** Educators understand that successful SEL programs have the greatest impact when carried out as districtwide or schoolwide initiatives.

Most high-quality research has documented the effectiveness of programs that have been scaled up to districtwide or schoolwide implementation over time. SEL is viewed as a public health approach to education, both to prevent problems and promote positive student outcomes. Consistent schoolwide or districtwide implementation of SEL practices is more likely to have a widespread impact.

## **2** District and school leaders ensure that teachers, staff members, and key stakeholders systematically and carefully plan, including identifying the SEL outcomes of focus, delineating lines of authority and leadership, and establishing roles for everyone in the school.

The first critical step is identifying an overarching vision and specific outcomes of focus, which may involve conducting a needs assessment to garner consensus. Then, a team should map out a plan for implementation that includes the timeline, norms to be established, activities to be conducted, and clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders (leadership, teachers, staff members, parents, and students).

Trying to improve too many outcomes may contribute to a lack of focus. This is why planning is necessary to identify key outcomes and a process for achieving them. Generally, there are broad domains or frameworks of social-emotional functioning and specific competencies or skills within them. For example, a framework might include self-awareness, social awareness, and decision-making, each with specific competencies. Educators can easily access frameworks and competencies in place across the nation. In states with standards for SEL, the standards can be a reference point for identifying relevant outcomes to address local needs.

### EXAMPLE: School-Level Planning Process

Martinborough School District provided guidance and support for districtwide implementation of SEL. School principals were invited to establish SEL leadership teams to attend a district-sponsored training on the basic principles of SEL and how to use school planning tools. Each school team then led a schoolwide planning process that included completing a needs assessment, establishing and defining SEL outcomes, and developing a plan with goals and steps for implementation and evaluation to refine the process.

The following describes the planning process of one school, Susan B. Anthony Middle School.

#### Create a Shared Vision Statement

With guidance provided during the district training, the SEL Leadership Team developed the following shared vision statement about SEL to guide the planning process.

*The parents, teachers, and staff at Susan B. Anthony Middle School will work together to develop students' awareness, understanding, and skills to manage emotions, set positive goals, demonstrate empathy for others, maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.*



#### Conduct SEL Needs Assessment

The SEL Leadership Team introduced the concept of SEL and described their plan to teachers and staff members in school meetings and to the larger school community via an email update to all parents. The vision statement and a working set of skills were used to create a school needs assessment with forms for teachers, school staff members, students, and parents.

#### Identify Desired Outcomes and Competencies

Using the framework presented at the district training and data from the needs assessment, the team created the following set of desired outcomes to be the focus of implementation for the upcoming academic year:

- *Improved social awareness*
- *Improved self-management*
- *Acceptance and respect for others*
- *Reduced behavioral referrals*
- *Improved academic performance*



The team also created competencies that correspond to each outcome. As an example, the following are competencies for the first outcome, improved social awareness.

*Susan B. Anthony Middle School students will:*

- *Focus attention, plan, and solve problems in challenging situations*
- *Consider the alternatives and choose a positive response*
- *Recognize and understand their own and others' emotions and points of view*
- *Effectively interpret and navigate social situations*
- *Interact positively with peers and adults*
- *Demonstrate empathy for others*

### **Develop an Implementation Plan Based on Data**

The team used data from the school system and responses from the schoolwide needs assessment to draft goals and a plan for implementation that included roles and responsibilities, a timeline, ongoing communication, support, and evaluation. The plan was widely disseminated to parents, staff members, and teachers, and meetings were scheduled to map out roles and responsibilities.

**3**

**District or school leaders identify an approach to measure the outcomes that is reliable, valid, and within budget.**

There is not much point in focusing on an outcome that cannot be measured. Fortunately, the last decade has seen the emergence of the type of group-administered assessments that districts and schools need. Instruments now exist that fit within the typical SEL outcomes identified in district or school planning processes and that can be administered with low to moderate burden. Materials and tools are available to help identify a measurement approach, and as more information and findings from research are factored in, new and better options are becoming available.

A helpful tool with information about such assessments is available on the RAND website: [www.rand.org/education-and-labor/projects/assessments.html](http://www.rand.org/education-and-labor/projects/assessments.html)

**4**

**Educators select SEL programs that have evidence of effectiveness.**

Hundreds of studies have measured the effectiveness of SEL programs. These studies have shown that student age matters for choosing the right SEL approach. Younger students benefit from programs to develop social and emotional skills. Older students benefit from programs that develop sense of self-efficacy and identity.

Educators should seek out studies conducted by research teams rather than program developers to ensure objectivity of the findings. Also, educators should prioritize studies conducted in a similar context, geographic area, and with similar demographics to their own district. Enlisting the help of a trained methodologist to evaluate effectiveness helps to avoid weak programs. Educators should avoid focusing exclusively on studies that have the largest effect sizes, as those vary considerably between different contexts. It is best to focus on programs that show a pattern of positive effect sizes, regardless of context.

If district or school leaders design their own program, a helpful reminder is to follow the SAFE guidelines:

- **Sequence:** Activities are **sequential, connected,** and **coordinated** to foster skill development.
- **Active learning:** Students **actively engage** in learning skills.
- **Focused time:** Activities foster **practice and application** of skills.
- **Explicit definitions:** The program targets **specific and well-defined** social and emotional skills.

## 5

### Effective SEL initiatives take a preventive approach.

Regardless of the SEL program—districtwide, schoolwide, or in an individual classroom—a proactive, preventive approach is essential. It is not effective to wait until there are problems to solve. Effective SEL approaches do not bring students together when things go wrong to try to drive home “lessons.” Instead, **effective SEL initiatives promote social and emotional competencies for all students at all times.**

Effective SEL programs proactively teach skills in the following ways:

- Using a specific curriculum
- Managing the school environment through teachers’ practices and style of interacting with students, school rules, and expectations
- Fostering positive student mindsets by focusing on students’ perceptions of themselves, others, and their environments

#### How do SEL programs fit with other schoolwide support systems?

SEL programs can be a viable part of schoolwide approaches to academic and behavioral support commonly found in today’s schools. Three widely used approaches—multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), response to intervention (RTI), and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS)—typically include three tiers of instruction to proactively teach essential skills and follow up with intervention and support for students who are having difficulty. RTI focuses on academic skills such as reading and mathematics, PBIS focuses on positive student behaviors, and MTSS incorporates both academic and behavioral components.

These schoolwide models focus on preventing academic and behavioral problems before they escalate and putting resources in place for when problems occur. In MTSS, teachers provide Tier 1 (also called universal or core) instruction in academic and behavioral skills for all students. Tier 1 encompasses academic content and positive behavior strategies for all students. Educators establish behavioral expectations for all students and incorporate instruction on these positive behaviors into the classroom and school environment. SEL programs teach students how to manage social and emotional situations and achieve positive behavioral outcomes, making them a natural fit for Tier 1 instruction.

Tiers 2 and 3 provide increasingly intensive interventions for smaller groups of students who need more academic or behavioral support, including specific interventions to remediate problems and assessments to monitor progress toward individual learning or behavior goals. Educators may find SEL strategies and concepts useful in designing targeted interventions to help students cope with social and emotional difficulties that often accompany academic and behavioral difficulties.

## 6

### Educators are committed to schoolwide implementation.

The most effective SEL programs operate throughout the entire school, not just in the classroom—for example, on the playground, in the lunchroom, and anywhere students interact with each other and adults. When all staff members are informed about the SEL outcomes of focus and teaching approach, students have a consistent message and know how they should respond in social situations.

For example, there are multiple opportunities to promote social awareness. A school bus driver may encourage students to welcome a new student as a seatmate, a cafeteria worker might point out how it feels when someone cuts in line, or an office worker may encourage a peer to sit with a student whose parent is delayed in picking up after school. The point is consistency. Students need to see that the competencies they are learning apply universally.

## 7

### All staff members, and particularly classroom teachers, model positive SEL behaviors.



Modeling is one of the most effective teaching techniques. Every day, classroom teachers show students how to solve math problems or how to break down big words. The same holds true for SEL. Setting an example is one of the critical elements of a successful SEL approach. All school personnel should consciously and intentionally model the exemplar behaviors for the desired program outcomes.

For example, responding too harshly to a student's misbehavior or making a sarcastic comment about a student's effort does not deliver an example of regulating emotions. Instead,

a teacher or staff member should show students how to respond appropriately. Other examples include a cafeteria worker inviting a student sitting alone to sit next to her and then asking students at a nearby table whether they might do the same tomorrow. A classroom teacher might demonstrate how to handle frustration by saying, "Sometimes, I get stuck when working out a problem. Here's what I do when that happens. I shut my eyes for a second, take a deep breath, and try it again. If I still can't get it, I ask for help."

## 8

### Educators incorporate SEL into academic content.

Teachers are always concerned about the academic demands of in-class time, but SEL can easily be part of regular classroom instruction. It may be necessary to allocate some time to introducing SEL concepts, but it is also possible, and even effective, for teachers to integrate SEL concepts into academic instruction. Teachers must be familiar with SEL lessons and concepts to take advantage of opportunities to reinforce these concepts while teaching academics.



For example, teachers can lead an interactive discussion about how characters in literature regulated their emotions or how they might have responded differently. Physical education can emphasize the value of teamwork and being aware of others' feelings. History lessons offer opportunities to empathize with those in difficult situations in the past.

## 9 Educators understand that fidelity and ease of implementation matter.

Studies clearly indicate that well-implemented programs are more effective in achieving desired outcomes. When school leaders, teachers, and staff members deliver the SEL program and strategies well, with skill and enthusiasm, and maintain fidelity to how the program was meant to be used, the impact of the program increases significantly. When using an established SEL program, it is important for all involved to receive excellent training and implementation support.



## 10 Educators evaluate program impact by measuring the focus outcomes and examining the effect on academic achievement.

Though the main focus of SEL is social and emotional functioning, a secondary benefit is improved academic outcomes. Evidence of academic gains will help build support among school staff members, students, families, and community members for continuing the SEL program. It is sometimes difficult for educators to commit to SEL programs because of high academic demands. However, SEL is complementary to the cognitive development that typically occurs in academic instruction, and successful SEL implementation can lead to academic gains, as noted in recent studies. As students gain SEL competency, they are more able to focus on academic learning.

### Tips for Recognizing and Supporting SEL in Remote Classrooms

- Understand that students lack typical social opportunities in a remote learning environment and intentionally create ways for real-time contact with peers. Synchronicity matters; teachers and students need opportunities to interact in real time.
- Create a safe online space for students to discuss or ask questions about nonacademic issues.
- Integrate SEL concepts into lessons through teacher-led discussions, peer discussion, writing, and assignments.
- Ask students to write about their experiences in using SEL concepts and skills in their daily lives.
- Provide resources to parents regarding students' mental and social well-being.
- Establish peer support through mechanisms such as an online buddy system or learning partners.





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