Social-Emotional Learning

In recent years a promising new approach to school improvement has steadily gained traction among the nation's educators, premised on the idea that social-emotional learning (SEL) is every bit as critical to students' success as their mastery of purely academic content and skills.

It can be argued, though, that this approach isn't really new at all. In one way or another, public schools have always sought to provide not only college and career preparation, but also support for young people's social-emotional and character development. For example, past reform efforts have been devoted to everything from the improvement of students' moral values, mental health, and personal hygiene to the teaching of cooperative learning, conflict resolution, community service, and civic engagement. Far from ignoring the "whole child," public education has never stopped looking for new ways to nurture it.

Nonetheless, while current efforts to promote SEL may not be entirely original in their goals, they are entirely unprecedented in their scope, sophistication, and underlying research.

In sharp contrast to the piecemeal initiatives of the past, today's reform movement appears to be an extremely thoughtful, research-driven effort to help educators think more comprehensively about how they address students' social-emotional and intellectual needs. And unlike their precursors, today's advocates have been successful in building coalitions among like-minded educators, creating high-quality teaching models and resources, securing funds for research and evaluation, pilot-ing programs in schools and districts, and educating policymakers about the critical importance of this work.

Moreover, early research findings suggest that the new generation of SEL approaches is having significant and positive impacts on students' overall well-being, their behavior in and out of school, and their academic performance as well.[1]

In short, it appears likely that the movement to promote SEL will continue to grow, and the topic may well play a key role in future policy debates about educational improvement.

This issue of *From Practice to Policy* (the first in a series of NASBE briefs focusing on promising practices in school reform and, in turn, their implications for policy-making) is intended to give state school board members—as well as a broader audience of educators, policymakers, and the general public—a brief but thorough introduction to SEL.

More specifically, the following pages include:

- An overview of the field, including the origins of the SEL movement, its evolution, and its research base;

- Descriptions of current SEL approaches and policy initiatives; and

- Guiding questions for education policy-makers who wish to learn more about SEL in their state—and who may wish to support SEL programs through legislation, board policies, and sponsored initiatives.

I. Social-Emotional Learning—A Primer

Broadly speaking, SEL refers to a holistic approach to education, one that addresses not only students' academic needs but also their development as individuals, classmates, neighbors, and citizens. For example, SEL programs often touch on issues such as character education, conflict resolution, civic engagement, the promotion of good nutrition and healthy personal behavior, the prevention of bullying, and the creation of safe and supportive classroom and school environments.

The precise definition of SEL, however, is somewhat hard to pin down, as the term is meant to serve as an umbrella concept, encompassing a wide variety of specific educational goals and practices. Thus, ever since the origins of the term in the early 1990s, advocates have continually refined it to make sure the definition remains consistent with the many kinds of teaching strategies, supports, and services being provided in its name.

At present, the most widely adopted definition was developed by the Chicago-based Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which divides SEL into five key "competencies":

Self-awareness: The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.

Self-management: The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals.

Social awareness: The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

Relationship skills: The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.

Responsible decision-making: The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

(Definitions excerpted from casel.org/why-it-matters/what-is-sel.)

Origins and Evolution of the Movement

The origins of the SEL movement date back to the early 1990s, when the psychological theory of "emotional intelligence"—up to then a concept discussed mainly in academic journals—began to circulate among the wider public, popularized especially by the science writer Daniel Goleman in a 1995 best-seller.[2] The general idea (which some view as an oversimplification of the research) is that ordinary people can, if they work at it, learn to become more conscious of their own emotional states, more skilled at regulating them, and more capable at navigating interpersonal relationships. By analogy, personal and interpersonal skills can, like many other kinds of intelligence, be deliberately cultivated and improved.[3]

Thus, much as one can learn to be a better architect, ball player, or chemist, one can become a more emotionally balanced individual and a better friend, neighbor, colleague, and worker.

It didn't take long for educators to recognize the implications for their profession: If emotional intelligence can be taught, they realized, then it can be taught in schools. And if SEL (which soon became the blanket term for a wide range of efforts to expand teaching and learning beyond traditional academic subjects) can be taught effectively, the benefits could be dramatic.

For example, if students become more skilled at monitoring and regulating their emotional impulses, then they should become less likely to cause disruptions in class, get into fights on the playground, bully other children in the hallway, experiment with drugs, and commit crimes. And if teachers become more skilled at creating safe, supportive, lively classroom environments, then students should experience less performance anxiety, better relationships with their classmates, more engagement in their

school work, greater motivation to learn, and—in turn—greater academic success.

In the mid-1990s, Goleman and other leading researchers and advocates recognized that the nascent effort to promote SEL would benefit from an institutional base of support. As a result, CASEL was formed to serve as a national hub for research, program design, professional development, and policy discussion in the field.

Since that time, the SEL movement has grown with remarkable speed. Over the past several years, for example:

- CASEL has been joined by several new research centers and institutes, such as the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the University of Washington's Social Development Research Group.

- Several major foundations, including the NoVo Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, have made it a priority to support research, program design, and the implementation of SEL programs and materials.

- Public attention to the prevention of school bullying—an issue frequently addressed by SEL programs—has skyrocketed due to events such as a 2011 White House Conference on the topic and the 2013 national Beyond Bullying Summit held at Columbia University.[4]

- Dozens of SEL programs and modules—both stand-alone programs and curricula designed to integrate SEL into content-area instruction—have been developed, published, and piloted in elementary and secondary schools (as described on page 4).

- And (as described on page 6) interest in, knowledge about, and support for SEL has grown rapidly among teachers, administrators, elected officials, and other policymakers in many parts of the country.

Why So Much Interest in SEL?

In trying to account for the recent surge in attention to SEL, some observers point to high-profile school tragedies at Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary, and elsewhere, as well as growing public awareness of issues such as bullying, eating disor-

ders, depression, and suicide among children and teens. In short, the concept of *emotional intelligence*— and the SEL movement based on it—may have appeared at a time when Americans happened to be especially alarmed about the various dangers and difficulties that young people face, and especially receptive to the idea that schools can and should do more to address them.[5]

Some point to the recent history of education reform, suggesting that SEL's growing popularity might be viewed as a reaction to the No Child Left Behind Act as well, which has placed a very heavy emphasis on students' academic achievement, especially in reading and math, while doing comparatively little to promote their civic responsibility and their social, emotional, physical, and mental health. In short, the growing interest in SEL—much like recent interest in community schools, "wrap-around" services, college counseling programs, and the teaching of personal traits such as grit and determination—may be fueled by the belief that federal education policy has tipped the balance too far in the direction of academics alone, and that a corrective is needed.[6]

SEL has also been related to some of the nonacademic 21st-century skills that employers say they want in their workers—skills that enable employees to manage their emotions and make wise choices, work effectively with their colleagues and on teams,

The Voices of Skeptics

As might be expected for an idea that is still relatively new, the concept of emotional intelligence as a viable, measurable construct has its detractors among social scientists and educators. The publication *An Intelligent Look at Emotional Intelligence,* which was written for educators and commissioned by Great Britain's Association of Teachers and Lecturers, includes chapters on "Critical Questions about Emotional Intelligence" and "What Do Scientists Say?"

An Intelligent Look at Emotional Intelligence is available for free download at www.atl.org.uk/ publications-and-resources/classroom-practice-publications/ emotional-intelligence.asp.

understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and maintain high ethical and personal safety standards.[7]

High emotional intelligence has also being linked, by Goleman and others, with effective organizational leadership, whether in schools or businesses—although this claim has been disputed by some social scientists, and finding valid ways to measure this link has proven to be difficult.

Whatever the reasons for the recent growth of the SEL movement, though, it's worth noting that it has occurred at a time when most state and local education budgets have been squeezed, suggesting that if not for ongoing fiscal crises, the SEL movement might have grown even faster.

What Does SEL Look Like in Practice?

In a series of publications, CASEL has identified dozens of school- and classroom-based programs that meet its criteria for high-quality approaches to SEL. That is, such programs must offer systematic support for SEL over multiple years, they must include ample resources for training and implementation, they must be grounded in high-quality research, and they must demonstrate at least some initial evidence of effectiveness.[8]

Beyond the CASEL criteria, however, all SEL programs vary considerably in their goals, activities, and overall design:

• *Some programs are meant to integrate SEL into the regular academic curriculum.*

For example, in a program called 4Rs (for Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution), students in grades K-8 participate in roughly 35 lessons per year—taught within their language arts classes—featuring opportunities to read, write about, and discuss books that raise complicated questions about topics such as empathy, diversity, and bullying. Teachers are trained to guide discussions toward students' own values and behavior, and lessons are reinforced through parent workshops. (See www.morningsidecenter.org.)

Similarly, the Voices Literature and Writing program— a supplemental ELA curriculum for grades K-6—integrates SEL and character education with language and literacy. It uses six themes (identity awareness; perspective taking; conflict resolution; family, friends, and community; social awareness; and democracy) that build over the grades in age-appropriate ways. (See www. zaner-bloser.com/media/zb/zaner-bloser/R1466/index.html.)

• *Some are stand-alone programs, meant to address a specific issue, such as student health or conflict resolution.*

For example, in the Michigan Model for Health (the state's health curriculum for grades K-12), teachers are trained to guide students through roughly a dozen lessons (including short lectures, discussions, simulations, and other activities) spread out over the year, with each grade level focusing on a specific theme (such as nutrition, drug abuse, and various topics related to interpersonal intelligence, such as goal-setting and problem solving). (See www.emc.cmich.edu/mm/default.htm.)

And in the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, students in grades PreK-8 participate in 16 lessons per year, including group activities and discussions focusing on themes such as empathy, social responsibility, stereotyping, harassment, and bullying. The program includes options to connect the lessons to literature assigned in language arts classes, and it requires the school to create and use a peer mediation system to address conflicts among students. (See www.morningsidecenter.org/node/56.)

• *Other programs are designed to improve the classroom environment and the whole school climate.*

In the MindUp program, for example, students in grades preK-8 receive roughly 15 lessons per year exploring recent brain research touching on issues such as

Eight District-Wide Initiatives to Watch

In 2011, CASEL launched the Collaborating Districts Initiative, meant to support comprehensive SEL programs in eight urban school systems:

Anchorage, AK
Austin, TX
Chicago, IL
Cleveland, OH
Nashville, TN
Oakland, CA
Sacramento, CA
Washoe County, NV

For more information about the initiative as a whole, how each district is implementing SEL, and how the initiative is being evaluated, visit casel.org/collaborating-districts-initiative.

self-awareness, attention, stress, and learning. Further, all students learn a simple form of meditation (i.e., deep breathing and attentive listening), which they practice at school as part of an effort to improve attention, lessen anxiety, and reduce disruptions in content area classes. (See www.thehawnfoundation.org/mindup.)

And in the RULER approach support is provided not only to students, but also to the adults who work with them. Over two years, teachers and other school staff participate in a series of nearly a hundred lessons, meant to introduce them to recent research findings about the role of emotions in learning, as well as to help them integrate specific teaching strategies into their own instruction, with the goal of improving the classroom learning environment and helping students become more self-aware, empathetic, and able to see things from others' points of view. (See www.therulerapproach.org.)

Are SEL Programs Effective?

Research into the effectiveness of SEL programs is still in its early stages, given that many SEL programs have only recently been developed, piloted, and implemented in schools. However, many researchers are currently engaged in, or have recently completed, rigorous evaluations of specific SEL programs, teaching modules, and curricular materials, and the evidence base is expected to grow dramatically over the next few years.

The first large-scale review of existing research into SEL was published in 2011,[9] and it has given the field a great boost of confidence, leading many advocates to believe they were justified in their initial predictions about the impact of SEL on students. Specifically, the review (a meta-analysis of data from 213 school-based programs involving close to 300,000 students in grades K-12) found that among the various empirical studies conducted to date, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that:

- Relative to their peers, students who were randomly chosen to participate in SEL showed significant (if modest) improvements in their social and interpersonal skills, behavior in and outside the classroom, attitudes about school and life in general, and especially in their academic performance.

Further, recent research has begun to identify some key features of effective SEL programs.[10] For example, the evidence suggests that the most successful SEL programs tend to be those that:

> *"Extensive developmental research indicates that effective mastery of social-emotional competencies is associated with greater well-being and better school performance, whereas the failure to achieve competence in these areas can lead to a variety of personal, social, and academic difficulties."[11]*

- Continue across multiple grades, rather than being offered in a single grade alone—to date, advocates have had far more success introducing SEL at the elementary level than in secondary schools. Ideally, though, the skills that students learn in kindergarten should be reinforced and practiced all the way through the 12th grade.

- Reinforce lessons across a number of school settings (as when students are expected to observe the same norms of conduct in the playground, cafeteria, and hallways as they do in their classrooms).

- Reach out to parents and other caregivers so they can participate in defining the school's goals for children's emotional and interpersonal learning as well as teach and reinforce the same lessons at home.

- Are integrated into the regular academic curriculum—for example, after studying the ways in which arguments proceed in Congress, students in a 9th grade U.S. history class might come up with their own rules for acceptable conduct during classroom debates. While it can be valuable to offer a discrete SEL unit (such as a multi-day workshop meant to reduce playground bullying), the general trend is to look for opportunities for schools to blend academic and social-emotional learning together.

- Help all school staff learn and practice the very same emotional and interpersonal skills they are supposed to help students develop. All too often, the adults in the school building are just as much in need of SEL as are the students.

- Adhere to a well-designed and realistic implementation plan, including everything from an initial needs assessment to efforts to choose appropriate

SEL goals and programs, secure buy-in among all parts of the school community, train faculty and staff, provide them with ongoing support, give them opportunities to adapt the program to the needs of their particular students, monitor their progress, and conduct a program evaluation.

II. Moving from Practice to Policy

While the SEL movement has grown rapidly, and while SEL has become a hot topic among many school reformers, it still remains unknown to many Americans, educators included.

That said, the SEL movement has been quite successful in the policy arena over the past several years. For example:

- Forty-nine states have social and emotional learning standards for early childhood and prekindergarten education, according to a 2011 policy scan.[12]

- The states of Kansas, Tennessee, Vermont, and Washington address specific parts of SEL in their standards documents for free-standing subjects such as communication and service learning.[13]

- Various elements of SEL can be found in nearly every state's K-12 standards framework and in the Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts.

- In 2004 Illinois became the first state to adopt stand-alone K-12 standards for social and emotional learning. It requires districts to take specific steps to address SEL in their curricula, provide teachers and other staff with relevant professional development, collect performance data related to SEL, and hold schools accountable for students' growth in this area.[14]

- New York's Office of Mental Health adopted a statewide Children's Mental Health Plan in 2008—including a section dedicated to SEL—meant to provide guidance for a number of state agencies and departments, including public education.[15]

- The Pennsylvania State Board of Education published model School Climate Standards in 2010 that address a number of aspects of SEL.[16] Further, in 2012 it adopted a set of Standards for Student Interpersonal Skills for grades preK-12, focusing on topics such as resiliency, goal setting, managing conflicts, and understanding social norms.[17]

- The Kansas State Board of Education adopted a set of Model Standards for Social, Emotional, and Character Development in 2012, integrating SEL with existing approaches to character development.[18]

- In May 2013 a bipartisan group of U.S. Representatives introduced legislation—the Academic, Social and Emotional Learning Act (HR 4223)—meant to support SEL programs in the nation's public schools.[19]

Key Policy Questions for State Policymakers to Consider

Policymakers who want to learn more about the status of SEL in their state and, perhaps, promote statewide SEL policies or initiatives or build on existing ones, might consider asking the following questions as they navigate the policymaking process:

➢ *What is the current level of knowledge about and support for SEL among education policy leaders in your state?*

You might start by conducting informal enquiries among board members, department of education leaders, governor's advisors, heads of local education associations and teachers unions, and other key stakeholders in order to get an initial sense about their level of interest in making SEL a priority. If resources permit, consider conducting a more formal survey of educators in the state, eliciting their thoughts as to SEL's relevance, value, and importance.

➢ *What is the status of SEL in your state?*

Request that your state education agency (SEA) put together a full report on SEL in your state, including detailed information about existing resources and activities (everything from full-blown, holistic SEL initiatives to stand-alone programs focused on bullying prevention, mental health counseling, or other discrete issues). This should include performance data and information about each initiative's evaluation plans. Further, the SEA should call attention to any newly launched school- or district-wide SEL initiatives in the region, and it should identify local experts in SEL, such as researchers based at nearby universities.

➢ *What actions have other states taken to support SEL?*

In order to see if any policies and initiatives might be valuable—and realistic—for your state to adopt, consult with CASEL or other SEL experts to learn about current

state- and district-level initiatives and policies in place around the country.

➤ *Should the board conduct a work session on SEL?*

One purpose of such a session is to ensure that all board members are familiar with SEL and its place in contemporary debates about school improvement. Further, members might examine how SEL relates to the board's current priorities and strategic plan—for example, what role does social-emotional intelligence play in college and career readiness?

➤ *What are the policy levers that can be used to support SEL in your state?*

These could include state standards, model standards for districts, guidance for school programs (including bullying prevention programs), teacher and principal training and licensure, professional development, and data collection and reporting.

➤ *What other means—beyond policymaking—can the board use to support SEL?*

For example, the board might commission guidance documents on SEL for schools, educators, and children's health workers, create pilot programs and initiatives, sponsor statewide meetings and conferences on the issue, and create a communications plan to inform the public and build support for SEL programs. Further, the board might work with the SEA to promote public awareness, knowledge, and buy-in for SEL across the state.

III. Resources

Good Places to Start

Beyond Bullying—Safe Schools, Successful Students: An Educational Summit (January 2013). This website includes SEL research materials and a full collection of presenter videos from the summit. www.beyondbullyingsummit.org

Character Education Partnership (CEP). CEP is an umbrella organization for a number of groups working on issues such as school climate, bullying prevention, and service learning. www.character.org

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL's website is rich in resources, including the *2013 CASEL Guide to Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs*. www.casel.org

National School Climate Center (NSCC). NSCC provides a wide range of resources and services, including professional development programs and tools for evaluating school climate. www.schoolclimate.org

Social-Emotional Learning: NASBE Annual Conference Session (July 2013). Includes PowerPoint presentations and podcasts from the session. www.nasbe.org/conference-materials/2013-annual-conference-materials

SEL Research and Policy Centers

Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA
smhp.psych.ucla.edu

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) at Vanderbilt University
csefel.vanderbilt.edu

Developmental Studies Center (DSC)—a nonprofit educational publisher dedicated to children's academic, ethical, and social development
www.devstu.org

FuelEd—a Los Angeles-based center for teacher professional development related to SEL
fueledschools.com

International Bullying Prevention Association
www.stopbullyingworld.org

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility
www.morningsidecenter.org

Prevention Research Center at Penn State University
www.prevention.psu.edu

Rutgers Social and Emotional Learning Laboratory
www.rci.rutgers.edu/~melias

Social and Emotional Learning Research Group at the University of Illinois-Chicago
www.uic.edu/labs/selrg

The Social Development Lab at the University of Virginia
www.socialdevelopmentlab.org

StopBullying.gov—hosted by the U.S .Department of Health and Human Services
www.stopbullying.gov

Yale Child Study Center
http://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy

Zaner-Bloser, *Social Development Research: Impact on Academic Achievement and Literacy Development.* An anthology of independent research articles. shop.zaner-bloser.com/p-6111-social-development-research-impact-on-academic-achievement-and-literacy-development.aspx

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