



K-12 EDUCATION

BEST PRACTICES FOR MEASURING SOCIAL- EMOTIONAL LEARNING



INTRODUCTION

State and federal agencies are increasingly holding schools accountable for their role in influencing students' **social-emotional learning (SEL)** skills. These skills include a wide range of abilities that help students succeed in college and careers, such as working well with others, understanding and managing emotions, and setting and achieving goals. Teachers increasingly consider SEL to be an important part of students' educational experience and believe that SEL can drive students' current and future academic, professional, and personal success.

All 50 states have developed SEL competencies or standards for preschool students, and 14 states also outline SEL competencies and standards for all students in grades K-12. While several states initially considered using measures of SEL as part of their plan to address the non-academic indicators of student success demanded by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), ultimately none chose to do so due to issues with assessing SEL. This universal exclusion of SEL measures results from a vacuum of proven assessment and measurement tools—research shows that SEL is “harder to assess than academic outcomes” and that “research and development of valid, reliable, and fair measures of SEL are in their infancy.”

While experts agree that states should avoid SEL as a high-stakes accountability measure, they also acknowledge that such measures can be valuable in informing teaching and learning at individual districts and schools. Furthermore, teachers consider SEL to be an important part of students' educational experience and believe that SEL can drive students' current and future academic, professional, and personal success. Formal assessment of SEL outcomes enables districts to measure students' SEL skills and implement targeted supports to increase those skills while sending an important message to students, families, teachers, and staff that non-academic outcomes are a priority.

To assist districts in tackling these challenges, this brief provides strategies that school and district leaders can use to prioritize SEL skills to measure and select assessment methods and instruments. Districts can then use the included diagnostic to effectively plan their SEL assessments.

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Contributions to this publication were made by the following Hanoverians:

Chief Content Officer: Anil Prahlad

Project Leads: Leila Nuland, Meagan Gregory

Contributors: William Wilson

Editorial Team: Amanda Lockhart, Jordan Wells, Sarah Jacques

Designed by: Johanna Mora, Louisa Smith

I. WHAT TO MEASURE: SEL SKILL PRIORITIZATION

When selecting SEL skills to assess, leaders should choose skills that are meaningful, measurable, and malleable.

1. MEANINGFUL

To be meaningful, skills in SEL programs, policies, and standards should predict important academic, career, and life outcomes.

2. MEASUREABLE

To be measurable, SEL skills should be feasible to assess in the school setting using validated instruments.

3. MALLEABLE

To be malleable, SEL skills should be able to be taught and learned in the school setting; students' skill levels can change over time.

Examples of meaningful, measurable, and malleable SEL competencies include:



Growth mindset: The belief that academic or personal abilities can grow with effort. Students with a growth mindset see effort as necessary for success, embrace challenges, learn from criticism, and persist despite setbacks.



Self-control and self-management: The ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes skills like controlling one's impulses, delaying gratification, managing frustration and stress, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward goals.



Self-efficacy: The belief in one's own ability to succeed in achieving goals and controlling one's life outcomes. Students with high self-efficacy are confident that they can influence their external environment as well as their own motivation and behaviors.



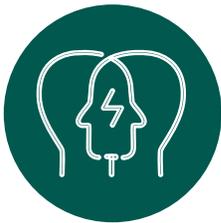
Social awareness: The ability to recognize emotions in others; to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures (perspective-taking); to evaluate the social consequences of individual actions; to understand and resolve interpersonal conflicts (social problem-solving); to understand social and ethical norms for behavior; and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

SEL skills included in student assessment systems should also reflect school and district priorities and goals, such as those outlined in the district's vision statement and state learning standards for SEL. To ensure that districts prioritize outcomes that meet these standards, leaders can involve teachers and other staff in the prioritization process.

II. HOW TO MEASURE: BEST PRACTICES FOR ASSESSING SEL

Schools can and should measure students' SEL skills using multiple methods, such as (1) observing students' behaviors; (2) using academic and behavioral indicators as proxies for SEL; and (3) surveying students, teachers, or families.

METHODS FOR MEASURING STUDENTS' SEL SKILLS



METHOD 1: OBSERVATIONS

Teachers or administrators observe students' social behaviors, such as conflict resolution strategies or aggressive behaviors.



METHOD 2: ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Schools track behavioral indicators—such as absences, suspensions, expulsions, and dropout rates—and academic performance, which are often linked to SEL skills.



METHOD 3: SURVEYS

Schools administer student surveys, in which students self-rate their own SEL competencies, and teacher or parent surveys, in which respondents provide ratings of students' skills.



METHOD 1: OBSERVATIONS

Observations are the most common method for measuring students' SEL skills. Observable skills include social behaviors, such as conflict resolution or non-aggressive behavior, and self-management behaviors, such as delaying gratification. For example, a teacher can unobtrusively observe a student having a disagreement with another student about a particular topic and can rate the student on whether they are using conflict resolution strategies that were taught or modeled as part of an SEL-focused lesson. Notably, observations are best conducted using a preset protocol and accompanying rubric to direct the observer's attention to specific competencies, skills, and behavioral evidence.



METHOD 2: ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Several data points already collected by many schools—attendance rates, disciplinary referrals, suspensions, course grades, and graduation rates—can serve as proxy measures for SEL. Such measures are indirect outcomes of SEL and important indicators of overall school climate. For example, districts such as California’s CORE Districts and Austin Independent School District in Texas have found that higher rates of absences and suspensions and higher academic performance are associated with lower self-reported SEL skills and lower levels of SEL integration into the academic curriculum.

Because many districts already collect these data, incorporating related indicators into SEL measurement systems would not create additional assessment burdens for teachers and administrators. However, educators should recognize that many factors can impact outcomes related to these data points beyond implemented SEL programming, necessitating additional measurements to supplement existing academic and behavioral data.



METHOD 3: SURVEYS

Schools can use surveys to gather information from a variety of respondents—students, families, and school staff—to evaluate SEL. Student surveys ask students to self-report on their social-emotional skills, whereas family and staff surveys help determine adult perceptions of students’ social-emotional competencies.

School climate surveys are also a useful tool for district leaders to assess supports for SEL development. While assessments of individual students’ SEL skills are useful, it is equally important to ensure district leadership has data that school and district staff can directly impact. Specifically, school and district leaders should be able to identify strengths and weaknesses in student support services, academic programming, and professional development needs through an annual school climate survey.

EMERGING METHOD: PERFORMANCE TASKS

An emerging method for measuring SEL skills is the use of performance tasks. Performance tasks measure student behaviors in contrived or simulated situations that require demonstration of a specific set of behaviors or competencies. Although few performance task assessments currently exist, one promising assessment is SELweb, an online assessment for grades K-3 students. Students complete web-based tasks designed to measure social skills and self-control. To assess social awareness, for example, students are presented with photographs of different facial expressions and are asked to describe the emotion on each face.

To speed the development of performance task-based SEL measures, CASEL held design challenges in 2017 and 2018 to generate innovative proposals for direct assessments of student SEL. Winning proposals include a “direct assessment for [grades 6-10] that uses challenging puzzles to measure persistence, effort, resilience, and challenge-seeking” and a “text-based decision game for high school students where they walk through scenarios, earn points, and are connected to resources to help them along their pathway.”

DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT



WASHOE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT: FROM ASSESSMENT TO ACTION

Washoe County School District in Reno, Nevada implemented district-wide SEL learning standards and an SEL curriculum in 2012 as part of its strategy to increase its graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020. The district uses multiple methods—including surveys, behavioral indicators, and performance tasks—to evaluate students' SEL skills. The district:

- Incorporates SEL-related measures in its annual climate survey;
- Uses an Early Warning Indicator to identify at-risk students based on grades, attendance, and suspensions;
- Administers the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment to grades K-8 students; and
- Administers SELweb to grades K-3 students.

Although SEL instruction and measurement is a key focus for the district, leaders noticed that some students and teachers were resistant to completing SEL surveys. Focus groups with students revealed that they were frustrated because they had taken surveys for multiple years and had not seen changes in their schools. They wanted to know what was being done with the results, and why the surveys were worth their time.

To address this issue, the district provided training to its "SEL Lead teams" on how to debrief survey data with teachers, staff, and students. The district's Accountability Department now works more closely with district administrators, school SEL teams, students, and families to use SEL data in the district's planning process, and the district holds regular student data summits to discuss survey results. Notably, at one past summit, leaders shared the finding that students scored themselves poorly on managing and expressing emotions. Students explained that they felt teachers did not actually instruct them on how to express their emotions. As a result, schools began developing plans for increasing this type of instruction in its existing SEL curriculum and improving SEL professional development provided to teachers.

DIAGNOSTIC: M.A.R.E CHECKLIST FOR SELECTING OR DEVELOPING SEL ASSESSMENTS

Circle your answers in the checklist below to make decisions regarding which instruments to use and which qualities to assess when internally developing your SEL assessment.

| Is the assessment MULTI-FACETED? | | |
|--|-----|----|
| • Can the chosen assessment be used in conjunction with one or more additional assessments to assess the target competency? | Yes | No |
| • Do teachers intend to deploy additional assessments to assess the target competency? | Yes | No |
| • Do the assessment and any related assessments generate data that are complementary of one another? | Yes | No |
| Is the assessment ACTIONABLE? | | |
| • Will the data collected via the assessment be specific enough for teachers to identify the strengths and needs of their students in relation to target competencies? | Yes | No |
| • Will the data collected via the assessment provide students with insight into actions they can take to improve their social-emotional skills? | Yes | No |
| • Will the data collected via the assessment allow teachers to make tangible adjustments to their practice to better support students? | Yes | No |
| Is the assessment RELIABLE? | | |
| • Does the assessment minimize bias that could potentially arise from students' or teachers' demographic or socio-cultural background? | Yes | No |
| • Is the assessment designed to measure the target behaviors, skills, and/or competencies? | Yes | No |
| • Do performance indicators for the chosen assessment relate directly to the target behaviors, skills, and/or competencies? | Yes | No |
| Is the assessment EXECUTABLE? | | |
| • Is the assessment practical to deploy in a classroom setting? | Yes | No |
| • Does the assessment place an excessive burden (e.g., time, mental stress) on students or teachers? | Yes | No |
| • Is the assessment appropriate for students' age and learning needs? | Yes | No |
| • Do administering staff have the appropriate training to deliver the assessment? | Yes | No |

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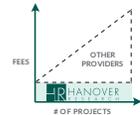
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www.hanoverresearch.com
P 202.559.0050
E info@hanoverresearch.com



Headquarters

4401 Wilson
Boulevard
4th Floor
Arlington, VA 22203

Charlottesville

609 E Market Street,
Suite 302
Charlottesville, VA 22902

New York City

42 Greene Street
4th Floor
New York, NY 10013