ESTABLISHING SEL FRAMEWORKS AND CULTURE IN K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Introduction

Social-emotional learning (SEL) refers to the acquisition of skills and competencies that allow individuals to relate to others, set goals, manage emotions, and resolve conflict. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a leading organization for the practice and research of SEL, defines SEL as: [1]

> [T]he process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

To assist Ohio districts with developing SEL programs and practices, Hanover Research (Hanover) presents this brief, which provides information on SEL core competencies, the relationship between the competencies and student success, and strategies for adopting and implementing SEL programs. Hanover also highlights examples of Ohio districts that have successfully adopted SEL policies and practices.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, Hanover recommends that Ohio School Boards Association support school districts by:

- **Implement CASEL's SEL framework focusing on five core competencies and adhere to the Ohio Department of Education's Social Emotional Learning Standards**. Using these resources will provide schools with an established structure and provide teachers with extensive SEL support tools.
- **Establish that SEL skills are taught via direct instruction and intentional modeling by teachers and other school staff** to ensure that SEL skills are explicitly integrated into curricula and that educators themselves practice effective SEL skills; and
- **Evaluate SEL program effectiveness** via a structured improvement process, inclusive of relevant student assessments, to guide program improvements and ensure positive impacts are achieved and sustained.

o Hanover can administer its standard, validated SEL survey to students, parents, and staff in order to gather perceptions on students' SEL skills aligned with CASEL's core competencies.

Key Findings

- **SEL programs correlate with positive student outcomes, including improvement to academic performance and self-reported SEL skills.** In particular, SEL can drive immediate short-term impacts in terms of students' self-concepts, relationships toward peers, and academic success. Furthermore, effective SEL programming can lead to a variety of long-term effects extending into adulthood such as better physical and mental wellness, lower incidence of criminal or harmful behavior (e.g., drug abuse), and greater likelihood of financial independence.
- **CASEL's SEL framework includes five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.** Students develop these competencies through different channels, including teacher instruction, project-based learning, academic curricula, and school climate initiatives. Acquisition of these competencies allows students to better manage their own behaviors and emotions, communicate and collaborate with peers, and make logical and informed decisions in various areas of their lives (e.g., school, work, personal).
- **Effective SEL programs teach core competencies explicitly through direct instruction and more indirectly via tailored language, school culture, and staff modeling of SEL competencies.** Effective SEL programs intentionally teach SEL skills, ask students to apply these skills in classroom activities, and create safe and supportive learning environments. Schools can also integrate these programs into multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to maximize efficiency and provide more intensive support to students with more serious behavioral or mental health needs.
- **Districts should engage families and the community in SEL initiatives.** Family engagement

allows school districts to develop SEL programs that are responsive to families' needs, goals, and cultural backgrounds and to encourage families to reinforce school-based SEL. Additionally, community engagement allows students and schools to access additional resources and programs. Family events and community-wide media strategies (e.g., press releases and websites) aid stakeholder involvement in SEL.

- **Districts should use SEL assessment systems to promote effectiveness.** Districts should implement a structured improvement process such as the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle to improve the implementation of SEL initiatives using student data. Regardless of the chosen approach, districts should use some combination of data from student surveys, observations, performance tasks, and report cards to monitor and assess the outcomes of SEL programs.

Understanding and Defining SEL

The Importance of SEL

Effective SEL programs provide students with the skills and mindsets they need to cope with difficulties and regulate their emotions appropriately.[2] For example, a 2017 meta-analysis of research on school-based SEL programs found that SEL programs support long-term improvements in students' attitudes, social-emotional skills, and overall well-being.[3] This study replicated the findings of an earlier meta-analysis, published in 2011, which reported positive impacts of school-wide SEL programs on the outcomes presented below. These outcomes include areas related to mental health, such as a reduction in emotional distress and conduct problems, as well as improvements in academic performance and SEL skills and attitudes.[4]
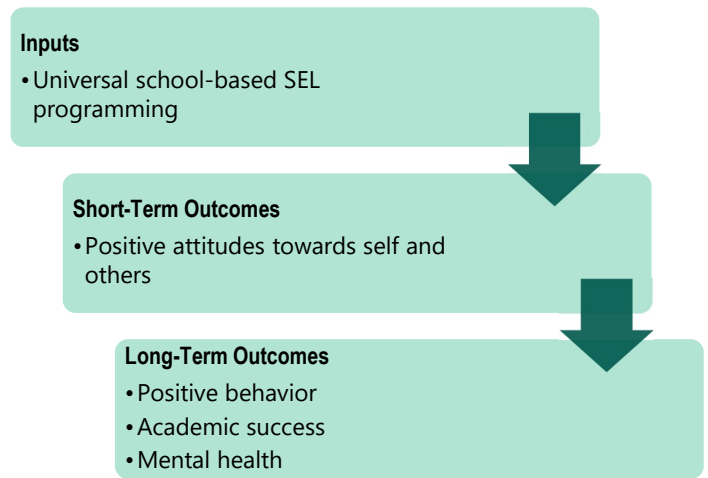
Areas Impacted by Effective SEL Programming

Skills	Attitudes	Positive Social Behaviors
Conduct Problems	Emotional Distress	Academic Performance
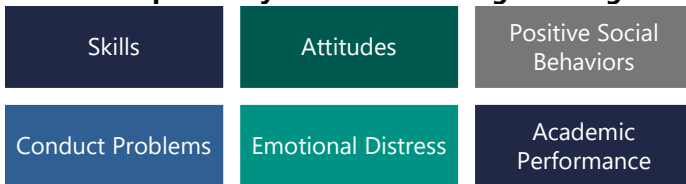
Source: Child Development[5]

Additionally, SEL programs can lead to academic improvements. Across four meta-analyses conducted between 2011 and 2017, student academic performance improved following SEL program implementation. Specifically, students showed improvement in math and reading achievement, grades, and standardized test scores.[6] The figure below shows how SEL can lead to positive short- and long-term results, by first bolstering students' self-concepts and attitudes toward others in the short-term.

Short- and Long-Term Effects of SEL

Inputs
- Universal school-based SEL programming

Short-Term Outcomes
- Positive attitudes towards self and others

Long-Term Outcomes
- Positive behavior
- Academic success
- Mental health

Source: Phi Delta Kappan[7]

Students who participate in SEL programs also experience long-term benefits later in life. For example, children who have more self-control are less likely to face challenges later. As students acquire greater self-control and less impulsivity then can begin building to more advanced skills such as problem-solving and working with others.[8] As adults, those individuals who acquired self-control at a young age are less likely to confront self-control issues relating to physical health, crime, and substance abuse.[9] Early SEL support also reduces adults' chances of requiring public assistance or housing.[10]

Defining the Core Competencies of SEL

CASEL's comprehensive framework for defining and implementing SEL includes five core competencies. *Self-awareness* and *self-management* directly relate to an individual's ability to recognize and regulate their emotional reactions and direct behavior accordingly. *Social awareness* and *relationship skills* impact interpersonal interactions, specifically a person's ability to assess the emotions of those around them and to respond appropriately. *Responsible decision-making* is an individual's ability to make judgments about their and others' emotions and actions to solve problems and facilitate constructive exchanges with others.[11] The figure below describes each competency in greater detail.

The Five Core SEL Competencies

DESCRIPTION	ASSOCIATED SKILLS
Self-Awareness	
Accurately recognizing one's own emotions, values, strengths, and limits and how they influence behavior	▪ Identifying emotions ▪ Accurate self-perception ▪ Recognizing strengths ▪ Self-confidence ▪ Self-efficacy
Self-Management	
Regulating one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations	▪ Impulse control ▪ Stress management ▪ Self-discipline ▪ Self-motivation ▪ Goal-setting ▪ Organizational skills
Social Awareness	
Empathizing with others and understanding behavioral norms	▪ Perspective-taking ▪ Empathy ▪ Appreciating diversity ▪ Respect for others
Relationship Skills	
Communicating clearly, cooperating with others, negotiating conflict, and seeking and offering help if needed	▪ Communication ▪ Social engagement ▪ Relationship-building ▪ Teamwork
Responsible Decision-Making	
Making constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions and evaluating the consequences of actions	▪ Identifying problems ▪ Analyzing solutions ▪ Solving problems ▪ Evaluating ▪ Reflecting ▪ Ethical responsibility

Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning[12]

Reviewing Ohio's SEL Standards

The Ohio Department of Education identifies SEL as one of four equal learning domains, which the department selected as being areas that together enable every child to succeed. [13] To support a standard SEL framework the Ohio Department of Education adopted statewide Social Emotional Learning Standards in June of 2019. Schools and districts can choose if and how they will use these standards, which function as a resource for addressing students' social-emotional needs.[14]

Notably, **Ohio's SEL Standards use the competencies defined by CASEL**: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. However, Ohio divides the competencies into topics and standards for Grades K-2,

Grades 3-5, middle school, and high school. Districts can access a full record of Ohio's K-12 Social and Emotional Learning Standards on the **Ohio Department of Education website**.[15]

Implementing SEL

Adopting SEL Policies and Practices

The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development identifies the three essential elements of effective SEL programs (listed below). Districts should support these elements across learning settings, including core and elective courses, informal learning spaces within schools, extracurricular activities, and out-of-school time (OST) programs.[16]

Essential Elements of SEL Programs

	Children and youth are intentionally taught social, emotional, and cognitive skills.
	Students are asked to exercise SEL skills as they learn academic content and in their interaction with peers and adults throughout the day.
	Students have equitable access to learning environments that are physically and emotionally safe and feature meaningful relationships among and between adults and students.

Source: Aspen Institute National Commission on Academic, Social, and Emotional Development[17]
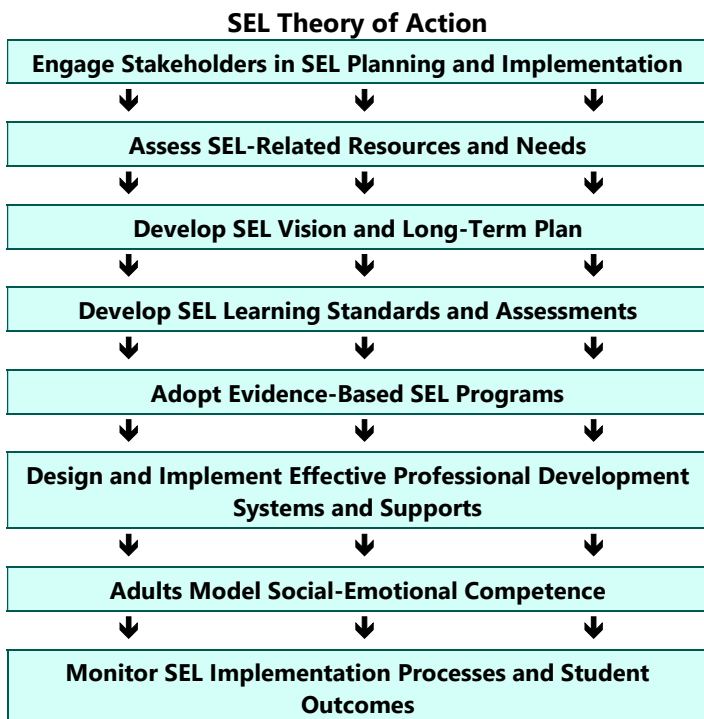
Schools can promote students' SEL development via programs that teach skills, behaviors, and attitudes explicitly during classroom instruction and embed them throughout a school's other activities.[18] Students need explicit instruction in SEL skills and opportunities to build positive relationships and develop vital "soft skills."[19] Districts can teach SEL with a variety of approaches, including:[20]

- Explicit skills instruction in the classroom, such as through coaching, modeling, and practicing skills;
- Instructional practices that promote SEL, such as project-based learning and cooperative learning;
- Integrating SEL skills into the curriculum of core academic subjects; and
- Organizational initiatives to improve school climate and culture.

Importantly, SEL programs are most effective when implemented according to the following practices, referred to in existing literature and policy guidance as SAFE: [21]

- **Sequenced**: connected and coordinated activities to foster skills development;
- **Active**: active forms of learning to help students master new skills;
- **Focused**: emphasizes developing personal and social skills; and
- **Explicit**: targeting specific social and emotional skills with explicit learning goals.

To support school districts' efforts to plan and successfully implement SEL initiatives, CASEL recommends districts adhere to an established theory of action. The theory of action is a systematic process that supports districts as they make decisions regarding funding allocation, program selection, and support areas. Having such a process for expanding schools' SEL capacity allows for more effective programs.[22] The figure below outlines the CASEL theory of action, which enables districts to determine their current status in the larger development process and move forward.

SEL Theory of Action

Engage Stakeholders in SEL Planning and Implementation
⬇   ⬇   ⬇
Assess SEL-Related Resources and Needs
⬇   ⬇   ⬇
Develop SEL Vision and Long-Term Plan
⬇   ⬇   ⬇
Develop SEL Learning Standards and Assessments
⬇   ⬇   ⬇
Adopt Evidence-Based SEL Programs
⬇   ⬇   ⬇
Design and Implement Effective Professional Development Systems and Supports
⬇   ⬇   ⬇
Adults Model Social-Emotional Competence
⬇   ⬇   ⬇
Monitor SEL Implementation Processes and Student Outcomes

Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning[23]

Most importantly, **districts should select and use an evidence-based SEL program.** CASEL strongly recommends that districts use evidence-based SEL programs, emphasizing the "benefits of using programs that embody years of scientific program development, evaluation, and evidence" over school-developed programs.[27] To support adoption of effective practices, CASEL identifies research-based instructional programs for SEL in preschool and elementary, middle, and high school. Each program has demonstrated positive impacts on student outcomes in at least one rigorous evaluation.[28]

Detailed program information is available in CASEL's **Effective Social and Emotional Programs: Preschool and Elementary School Edition** and **Effective Social and Emotional Programs: Middle and High School Edition**. Examples of established SEL models include the 4Rs Program, PATHS, and Expeditionary Learning. Common elements identified in these and other SEL curriculum models include direct instruction of SEL skills, integration with academic subjects, active learning activities (e.g., literary analysis, projects), and supplemental home-based activities.[29]

When choosing which evidence-based SEL approach to implement at their schools, districts should follow the succeeding steps: [30]

- Seek funds to support initial exploration and installation of evidence-based programs;
- Engage principals, support staff, teachers, and community partners in choosing programs;
- Use teams at the district and school levels to champion adopted programs, guide implementation, and ensure sustained support;
- Roll out programs slowly and identify early adopters who can test and refine implementation of models, and incorporate lessons learned as programs are scaled up;
- Leverage partnerships to gain additional resources for implementation;
- Move beyond silos and integrate SEL as core instruction;
- Sustain evidence-based SEL programs by integrating SEL into district strategic plans and policies; and
- Collect data to identify whether programs are being implemented effectively and making a difference.

Aside from program selection, district and school administrators can support teachers implementing SEL programs by allocating resources, creating a culture of high expectations, and modeling SEL practices. Administrators help to create a climate that supports SEL by modeling SEL language and endorsing SEL practices.[31] Similarly, before implementing an SEL program, administrators should determine how it supports their organization's mission and day-to-day activities. Specifically, administrators should consider connections between the program and school and district vision and mission and how to allot appropriate time, space, and resources to support effective implementation.[32]

Districts should also recognize certain classroom and school community conditions as necessary for successful SEL implementation in addition to a sound curriculum or program. The following figure outlines several integral conditions that support SEL implementation.

Important Conditions to Support SEL

⏱	Allot the time required to implement the program sufficiently and effectively
🗺	Extend SEL beyond the classroom
🖥	Apply SEL strategies and skills in real-time
🧑‍🏫	Ensure sufficient staff support and training
👥	Facilitate program ownership and buy-in
📊	Use data to inform decision-making

Source: Harvard Graduate School of Education[33]

Schools should combine SEL with a school-wide multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) to address students' behavioral and academic needs. An MTSS provides a school-wide framework for teaching and reinforcing SEL competencies . Additionally, implementing SEL within MTSS can enhance program implementation and efficiency, increase alignment, and ensure effective resource use.[34]

In particular, SEL and behavioral MTSS frameworks such as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) fulfill complementary roles within schools. PBIS focuses on increasing positive behaviors within school settings, while SEL focuses on developing skills that students apply both within and outside school settings. Both approaches incorporate a focus on skill development, creating positive learning environments, and using data to inform decisions.[35] Thus, combining SEL with PBIS can improve student behavior and mental health more than when either approach is implemented alone.[36]

At the same time, schools should integrate SEL into MTSS to avoid confusion and uncoordinated or redundant programming.[37] Schools can integrate initiatives by reflecting on the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes of the core curriculum to identify areas of improvement related to instruction, intervention, identifying students in need of additional support, and program evaluation.[38] The following figure presents ways in which teachers can connect SEL and an existing PBIS framework.

Linking SEL and PBIS

Implement Social-Emotional and Behavior Support through a Single Team	Expand the Data that Teams Use to Identify Which Skills to Teach
Teach Social-Emotional Competencies Using PBIS Instructional Systems	Promote Adult Wellness by Creating a Nurturing Staff Environment

Source: Office of Special Education Programs Technical Assistance Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports[39]

Exploring Instructional Implications

Explicit skill instruction is an effective strategy to boost students' SEL competencies. Teachers can specifically address how a given skill applies in daily life and break down strategies into smaller, more manageable components. A teacher can then model the skill for students and clarify specific situations where students would use the skill. As the lessons progress, students should receive opportunities to practice target skills and receive corrective feedback until proficiency is evident.[40] Teachers can further facilitate student SEL aptitudes—specifically regarding interpersonal interactions—through cooperative learning tasks. In these tasks, students navigate peer relationships, communicate effectively, and monitor progress toward formative and summative goals. To incentivize participation, teachers can establish collective and individual accountability measures.[41]

Even when school staff and teachers recognize the value of SEL, they may find it difficult to implement properly due to a lack of time and resources.[42] Teachers most often cite time as the largest barrier to appropriate SEL implementation. Instructors often skip or shorten SEL lessons due to tight scheduling constraints or favor core academic content. Therefore, schools should set aside specific times for teachers to plan and deliver SEL content so that it does not compete with their core content area instruction.[43]

Relatedly, **districts should consider how to horizontally align SEL curricula and practices across school contexts and levels.** SEL programs should be "intentionally connected and consistent" from the classroom to the cafeteria to the playground, as well as between schools encompassing the same grades and schools along the PK-12 pipeline.[44] Such programs should be vertically aligned, with ongoing instruction building on itself from early childhood (i.e., where foundational skills will be formed) to high school (i.e., where advanced applications of SEL competencies will occur). Such

alignment is essential to support teachers in knowing what areas to focus on in their classrooms.[45]

In aligning curricula and instruction for SEL across school sites and levels, districts should emphasize the importance of positive classroom culture and tailor language to support SEL. That is, districts should select classroom tools and materials that stimulate constructive conversations and define language and expectations throughout the district.[46] This is essential for teachers seeking to promote SEL in day-to-day activities and situations, as they must have the SEL skills and overall commitment to communicate behavioral expectations, promote a positive and supportive school and classroom climate, and respond to conflict and SEL challenges. Students develop social and emotional competence by watching how teachers model skills and respond to stressful and challenging situations, and teachers must remain cognizant of setting a good example throughout their daily interactions with students, families, and colleagues.[47] The following figure presents teacher-specific actions that foster a productive SEL culture in addition to modeling exemplary social and emotional skills.

Sample Actions to Successfully Model SEL and Improve Classroom Culture

Action	Description
Establish a Common Language	Define and communicate SEL vocabulary. It is not enough to say, "Be responsible!" What does responsibility mean?
Institute Classroom Norms	Use positive and motivating language along with your SEL vocabulary, such as "I can be respectful – value myself and others."
Schedule Conversations	Whether part of Morning Meeting, Advisory Period, or a specific subject, take time to hear what students are thinking and feeling. Let them know that their thoughts and experiences matter.
Incorporate Interdisciplinary Activities	Give students an opportunity to work in groups and create. They are more inclined to engage and work diligently when given a clear deliverable.
Focus on Relationships	Let your students know that you care about them as human beings, not just data points. Get to know their likes and dislikes.

Source: Getting Smart[48]

Selected SEL instructional programs and practices used in all contexts must include "a set of focused, high-quality, research-based teaching strategies" to effectively develop students' SEL skills.[49] Such strategies include discussion,

role-playing situations, and the use of songs, videos, and visuals to promote understanding. A more extensive list of practices for developing SEL skills is accessible **in this document, created by The Wallace Foundation**.[50]

Districts and their teachers should also engage families in SEL through targeted activities and events to reinforce the learning that happens in the classroom. For example, teachers may send home worksheets for parents to complete with students targeting a specific SEL skill. Similarly, the district may host a family workshop about emotional and behavioral development.[51]

Further, **districts can implement a communication initiative to increase family and community investment in SEL programs.** When developing communications, districts should consider the intended audience, desired message, and medium of delivery. A successful communication campaign can help increase awareness, encourage family and community enthusiasm, and invite stakeholder participation in SEL programs. Possible strategies that comprehensive communication plans might include are: [52]

- Introductory presentations for key stakeholders;
- Print material provided at district events and at school sites;
- Promotional videos;
- Public websites;
- Press releases or interviews with local and education media;
- Materials designed specifically for parents and students; and
- Social media.

Assessing SEL Implementation

School districts should implement a structured improvement process, such as the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle.[53] Ongoing improvements ensure that schools make necessary adjustments to SEL programs quickly and that programs support strategic district goals for SEL. The figure on the right presents an example of the PDSA cycle.

PDSA Cycle Improvement Process
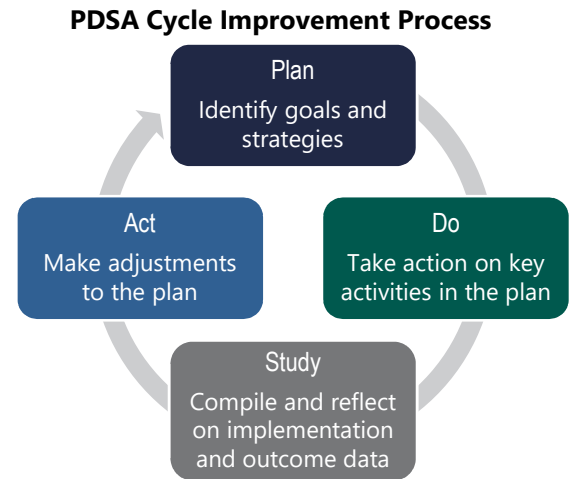
Source: CASEL District Resource Center[54]

SEL improvement requires districts to collect data on the implementation and outcomes of SEL programs.[55] In addition to supporting internal district improvement efforts, collecting data on SEL outcomes can help districts communicate the value of SEL initiatives to stakeholders such as families and the public.[56] However, these stakeholders must understand that SEL competencies develop in students over time.[57]

Schools can monitor the implementation of SEL at the classroom level by incorporating support for SEL skills into their teacher evaluation protocols. The **2014 AIR report** on SEL provides a crosswalk illustrating the alignment between classroom practices to support SEL and three commonly used teacher observation protocols.[58] Districts can use this crosswalk to provide teachers with feedback on their support for SEL skills, identify professional development opportunities, and set goals for SEL programs.[59]

Districts may choose to use multiple student assessment strategies such as observations, surveys, performance tasks, and character report cards to evaluate students' SEL competencies and the overall program impacts.[60] Through observations, an administrator, teacher, or staff member watches a student during instructional activities or unstructured time (e.g., recess, lunch).[61] Observers often use a combination of anecdotal narratives, behavior frequency counts, and behavior checklists to assess students' SEL. Some observers will even interview students to ask them open-ended questions about their cognitive processes or emotions to acquire more data during the observation.[62]

Observations are especially useful as students may be unaware that teachers are assessing them, resulting in a more genuine evaluation of SEL. For example, a teacher

8

might observe two students role-playing a disagreement and assess whether students are using conflict resolution strategies as modeled during direct instruction.[63]

Surveys and questionnaires are another common method for assessing SEL. [64] An example of an SEL assessment survey is the publicly available Child Trends survey.[65] This 14-item instrument for students in Kindergarten through Grade 5 and a 12-item instrument for teachers assess student SEL competencies. Survey items relate to self-management and self-awareness.[66]

Teachers can also assess student SEL skills through a series of simulated "performance tasks." One model for assessment is SELweb, a web-based program that asks students in Grades K-3 to complete tasks assessing social awareness, social meaning, social reasoning, and self-control.[67] The following figure provides an overview of the SELweb performance tasks.

SELweb Performance Task Summary

Social Awareness	Students rate a set of 10 faces with different facial expressions as happy, sad, angry, scared, or just okay.
Social Meaning	Students are presented with illustrated and narrated vignettes in which a character may be disappointed, scared, sarcastic, lying, hiding feelings, or harboring a false belief. The student is then must correctly answer questions about the character's mental state.
Social Reasoning	Students are presented with illustrated and narrated vignettes involving "ambiguous provocation" and "peer entry." After each vignette, students must describe the problem, social goal, and preferred solution in each story.
Self-Control	Students complete a "choice-delay task" and a "frustration-tolerance task" (e.g., games with intentional glitches built in).

Source: Rush University Medical Center Department of Behavioral Sciences[68]

SELweb also features a module that asks students to answer questions regarding their peer relationships to provide insight into students' perceived levels of acceptance by others. After a student completes the task, teachers receive a report with scores in each area, as well as an overall SEL score. Teachers who have used data from these reports have generally found the information to be valuable for informing instruction. For example, the

reports allow teachers to identify students who need more social connections or would benefit from small-group support.[69]

Further, integrating SEL indicators into student report cards provides a viable avenue to track student growth within SEL competencies. Report card may spur more frequent conversations about student behaviors among students, families, and teachers and help identify students requiring targeted SEL interventions. The inclusion of SEL competencies in report cards provides an efficient assessment and reflection tool, as schools already devote time and energy to completing report cards.[70]

SPOTLIGHT: Warren City School District (OH)

In 2010, the Warren City School District (Warren City) implemented a new SEL program that focuses on CASEL's 4R's literary curriculum (Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution) and teacher awareness.[71] In particular, Warren City focuses on three areas in which they continue to work to achieve SEL in the district:[72]

- **Climate**: Creating a safe and respectful learning environment, which is well managed, supportive, and engaging with active participation;
- **Direct Instruction**: Using a variety of programs to deliberately teach the SEL skills students need to be successful learners; and
- **Infusion**: Integrating SEL skills throughout the day and in all curriculum areas through modeling of instructional practices that promote SEL skill and practice and maximize learning.

Warren City Schools also highlights SEL as a topic during professional development sessions. During these sessions, teachers learn skills and strategies for staying calm, choosing safe decisions, solving disputes, and making friends. Teachers then incorporate these strategies into the classroom, which has resulted in fewer suspensions and expulsions and more time spent on learning.[73]

After two years of SEL program implementation, Warren City Schools teachers experienced the following outcomes:[74]

- Positive changes in student behavior and classroom climate;
- Increased social and emotional learning effectiveness and more mindfulness about interactions with students;
- Significant changes in classroom behavior management effectiveness after the first year of implementation; and
- Significant improvements in knowledge of training topics after one year with the greatest gains in knowledge in topics related to improving social-emotional competencies.

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Endnotes

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