

# G.L.O.B.A.L. JUSTICE

## *THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING ON VULNERABLE STUDENT POPULATIONS*



**By Vanessa Ruiz**  
**Fellow, Education Policy**  
**G.L.O.B.A.L. Justice**  
**September 2020**  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

G.L.O.B.A.L. Justice is dedicated to inform, impact, and inspire the generations to learn, lead, and do justice together. Our programs address a range of local, national and international human rights and humanitarian concerns. Our Vulnerable Populations program is focused on protecting those who are most vulnerable in society.

G.L.O.B.A.L. Justice launched its Fellows Program in Fall 2019 to provide opportunities for post-graduate and seasoned academics and professionals to partner with us on timely and significant research projects addressing justice issues worldwide.

Vanessa Ruiz Salazar served as a G.L.O.B.A.L. Fellow in Education Policy from May to August 2020. Vanessa is an experienced teacher and new Assistant Vice Principal at a predominately Latino public school in San Diego. She brings her educational training and experience and a commitment to students to this research project.

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**ABSTRACT**

Positive emotional well-being correlates with higher rates of academic engagement, a sense of belonging and connectedness in school, and academic motivation, and may reduce conduct problems, drug use, and violence. There is evidence to suggest that integrating social-emotional competencies with academics enhances student learning. Thus, effective education for all students addresses academic performance and achievement—and nurtures their interpersonal and intrapersonal development. Research has shown that social-emotional learning (SEL) skills help reduce violence, enhance cooperation, problem-solving, and foster academic achievement.

Teachers with social-emotional competence (SEC) develop supportive relationships with students, build on student strengths and abilities, establish behavioral guidelines, coach students through conflicts, encourage cooperation, model respect, and appropriate communication skills. Students learn social-emotional skills in the classroom when teachers provide them with opportunities and strategies to learn and apply these skills. Educators can build upon students' individual identities and strengths as they seek to bolster students' overall social-emotional skills. Schools can actively develop students' social-emotional skills by creating an environment where it is safe to express emotions; being emotionally responsive and modeling empathy; setting clear expectations and limits; separating emotions from actions; encouraging and reinforcing social skills such as greeting others and taking turns; and creating opportunities for children to solve problems.

The purpose of this study is to describe the attributes and assess the impact of social-emotional learning on students. Social-emotional learning offers the possibility of acknowledging, addressing, and healing for students impacted by racism and systemic oppression by creating an inclusive learning environment where students develop agency.

*Keywords:* social-emotional learning, social-emotional competence, equity, trauma-informed work

## I. INTRODUCTION

Research on the science of learning demonstrates that effective learning depends on a student's ability to form secure attachments, affirming relationships, hands-on learning experiences, and explicit integration of social, emotional, and academic skills. Given that emotions and relationships strongly influence learning, a positive school climate that emphasizes healthy relationships is at the core of a student's educational experience.[1]

Because of the recent global pandemic, resulting abrupt closings of schools, and the forced shift in online learning, many students from vulnerable populations are falling through the cracks. The practical, technical, and emotional challenges for students of color are far more acute during the times of distance learning.[2]. Children of essential workers are taking on responsibilities at home that prevent them from engaging in online classes.

All of the historic inequities in educational access that students of color already faced are compounded by a pandemic that is particularly devastating for Black and Latinx communities. For many students, concerns over family and community wellness come before school assignments.[3] By examining how social-emotional curriculum can help students increase self-awareness, build relationship skills, and improve responsible decision making, educators can come together to provide students with the proper support and access to resources that benefit their families and community.

[1] SEL Research Group. (2011). Social and emotional learning research group. Retrieved February 2, 2013, from <http://case1.org/wp-content/uploads/meta-analysis-summary.pdf>

[2] SEL Research Group. (2011).

[3] SEL Research Group. (2011).

## II. HISTORY OF INEQUITY IN AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Today, there is vast inequality in educational outcomes in America, and this is a problem because many people consider education to be a means to improve their social and economic status and to enhance the quality of their lives.[4] Depending on their race, students may experience a relative advantage or disadvantage later in their lives. For this reason, I place significant emphasis on the historical disadvantages minority racial groups have experienced in America.[5]

The result of inequality in the quality of education that certain racial groups have received suggests that the inequality in outcome is due to the inequality in opportunities that are available to them. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled against segregation in public schools. Sixty-five years after that landmark decision, schools and educators still struggle with issues of educational equity.[6] In the past, our education system used the educational equality system, which closed disparities that were created before the landmark cases like *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. [7] After the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, the flaws in the “separate but equal” approach were brought to light. Many states fully enforced separate institutions, but did not make them equal compared to white institutions.[8]

[4] Jagers, R.J. (2016). Framing social and emotional learning among African-American youth: Toward an integrity-based approach. *Human Development*, 59, 1-3.

[5] Aspen Education & Society Program and the Council of Chief State School Officers. 2017. *Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Education Chiefs*. Washington, D.C.; National Equity Project. (n.d.). <http://nationalequityproject.org/>

[6] Jagers, R.J. (2016)

[7] Sellers, R. M., Smith, M. A., Shelton, J. N., Rowley, S. A. J., & Chavous, T. M. (1998). Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity: A reconceptualization of African American racial identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2(1), 18-39.

[8] Danso, R. (2016). Cultural competence and cultural humility: A critical reflection on key cultural diversity concepts. *Journal of Social Work*. DOI: 10.1177/1468017316654341



The problems that occurred after the end of the Reconstruction Era created inequality between African American and white education was made even worse after the Plessy ruling allowed the inequality to continue.

However, in the late 1900s, the shift towards educational adequacy began to occur and the result was a wide gap in educational opportunities for disadvantaged minority students. Movements such as the Civil Rights Movements of 1964 and court cases that were meant to end inequality and segregation in public policy began to inadvertently affect education. The changes that occurred in the education system after these developments have had lasting effects that can be seen today.[9] Today, they are seen in the wake of the quality of education that minority students receive through issues like median income, employment level, and educational attainment of students. The use of educational adequacy, which creates a minimum standard for children of diverse backgrounds to meet, is currently the standard in American classrooms. In the 1960s and 1970s, the American education system had begun to use the standard of educational equality, but it shifted to the adequacy standard.[10]

Ultimately, educational equity is achieved when all students receive the resources, opportunities, skills, and knowledge they need to succeed in our democratic society.[11] For low-income and minority students, education is the key to success and upward mobility. But evidence has shown in past decades that education has not been acting as the Great Equalizer.

[9] Jagers, 2016; Simmons, D. (2017). Is social-emotional learning really going to work for students of color? Education Week. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2017/06/07/we-need-to-redefine-social-emotional-learning-for.html>

[10] Danso, R. (2016).

[11] Jagers, R.J., Mustafaa, F. & Noel, B. (2017). Cultural integrity and African American empowerment. In M.A. Bond, C. B. Keys & I. Serrano-García (Eds.), *Handbook of Community Psychology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

### **III. THE DUAL PURPOSE OF EDUCATION**

Traditionally, the purposes of education have been linked both to fostering academic achievement and to socializing youth toward improved citizenship. Students benefit from family support at home that encourages a strong work ethic, with school being considered the provider of equal access to the potential rewards of their hard work.[12] For years, policymakers, taxpayers, parents, and community members have harshly criticized public schools with regard to accountability and critique of how they have used money and materials. Students seem to do more poorly on standardized tests with each successive year.[13] Yet, many would debate the definition of educators as simply distributors of knowledge. Proponents of the social-emotional education movement would argue that training teachers in the concepts of SEL and using its framework as an application for schooling will impact not only students' emotional development, relationship skills, and responsible decision making, but also their academic achievement and adult success.[14]

### **IV. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The quality of education in primary and secondary schools reflects the inequality of opportunity that is given to minority students. One of the main reasons it is so important to fix the problem of inequality in education at the primary and secondary school level is because it has a lasting effect in later aspects of life.[15]

[12] Aranson, B. & Laughter, J. (2016). The theory and practice of culturally relevant education: A synthesis of research across content areas. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(1): 163-206.

[13] Chung, S., & McBride. (2015). Social and emotional learning in middle school curricula: A service learning model based on positive youth development. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 53: 192-200.

[14] Rivas-Drake, D., Schaefer, D., Saleem, M., Medina, M., & Jagers, R. (in press). Adolescent intergroup contact attitudes across peer networks in school: Selection, influence, and implications for cross-group friendships. *Child Development*.

[15] Danso, R. (2016).

Cultural differences and educational disadvantages often lead to students being labeled as “at-risk” or as “underachievers.” However, with the help of better learning strategies, time management skills, and culturally sensitive teachers these students could gain opportunities. In the same way that these cultural differences affect the way students think academically, it also exists in classroom etiquette. Traditional schooling teaches students that they are supposed to listen to the teacher, and only speak when teachers call on them. This way of teaching puts power, privilege, and exclusion in the classroom.[16]

When the cultural traditions of people of color are policed in the school, students are negatively impacted both academically and socially. Culture is central to how we think, live, and see the world as humans. As culturally responsive educators, our goal is to tap into this identity causing students to feel engaged with a sense of belonging. It's an uphill climb to help students toward self-awareness without an understanding of the cultural background that they bring to school each day.[17] Social and emotional learning (SEL) has the potential to help mitigate the interrelated legacies of racial and class oppression in the United States. In this time of distance learning, it is ever more necessary for educators to successfully implement an SEL curriculum that is culturally relevant and equity-based.[18]

[16] Chung, S., & McBride. (2015).

[17] OECD (2015). Skills for social progress: The power of social and emotional skills, OECD Skills Studies', OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264226159-en>

[18] Casel. (2012). Casel guide: Effective social and emotional programs preschool and elementary edition. Retrieved March, 15, 2013, from [http://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/CASEL\\_Summary-12-20.pdf](http://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/CASEL_Summary-12-20.pdf)

## V. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As the country and the world absorb the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19), our interconnectedness has never been more clearly on display. SEL offers a powerful means to support one another – children and adults – during this challenging time. Now, more than ever, we understand how important it is to demonstrate empathy and resilience, build relationships across distance, and call upon our collective resolve to strengthen our schools and our communities.[19] Relationships matter. When educators and students practice physical distancing, it does not mean that they must lose social and school connections.[20]

During the Coronavirus response, it is critically important to place adult and student wellness first and foremost to establish a positive, safe, and supportive learning environment.[21] In spite of some critics, it is clear that when kids spend their daytime hours in safe, supportive schools where adults work every day to build strong relationships with every student, they are simply better, more engaged learners.[22] Challengers to social-emotional education would argue that a school's job is only to educate students. However, many educators and community members alike, when asked to clarify the term educate, would include not only academic content areas but also social abilities.[23] We can address and improve these social abilities by giving attention to the explicit teaching of social-emotional development skills that are derived from the framework of Emotional Intelligence (EI).

[19] Casel. (2012). Casel guide: Effective social and emotional programs preschool and elementary edition. Retrieved March, 15, 2013, from [http://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/CASEL\\_Summary-12-20.pdf](http://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/CASEL_Summary-12-20.pdf)

[20] Casel. (2012)

[21] Dusenbury, L., Zadzil, J., Mart, A., & Weissberg, R. (2011). State learning standards to advance social and emotional learning. Chicago: Casel and University of Illinois at Chicago. Retrieved from <http://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Brief-on-the-State-Scan-4-18-2011.pdf>

[22] Elias, M. (2008a). Creating better people: SECD can make a difference. Retrieved April, 2, 2012, from <http://www.edutopia.org/social-emotional-learning-evidence-research>

[23] Zins, J. & Elias, M. (2007). Social and emotional learning. Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation, 17(2 & 3), 233 - 255. doi: 10.1080/10474410701413152

## VI. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions that I feel are significant to understanding this shared experience of students are: What elements of social-emotional learning (SEL) are displayed in current distance learning models (i.e., reflectiveness, safe and belonging environment, creative and authentic learning activities, a problem-solving atmosphere, and the building of community/school/home connections)?[24] How does SEL affect students' effort or ability to achieve academically? Why is Social and Emotional Learning important for equity in education?

As educators become increasingly aware of the trauma students carry and the way in which it impedes their learning, understanding and addressing the needs of students is ever more critical.[25][26] Educators must continue to learn about the racial inequities that hamper the success of certain groups of students, acknowledge, and make necessary changes so that all children are able to thrive. There is great overlap across the areas of SEL, trauma-informed work, and equity. For example, a student of color may experience racist taunts, reduced expectations, and microaggressions, as a result, is challenged socially and emotionally, experiencing trauma and suffering inequity all at once. Addressing the social, emotional, and academic needs of students from these historically marginalized groups is a pressing matter.

[24] Casel. (2012)

[25] Casel. (2012)

[26] Zins, J., Weissberg, R., Wang, M. & Walberg, H. (2004). Building academic success on social and emotional learning. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

## VII. SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING STANDARDS

SEL refers to a student’s “ability to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively.”[27] SEL consists of the purposeful adaptation of emotional learning (EL) building blocks into carefully constructed programs intended to enhance students’ social and emotional skills through careful attention to explicit teaching, modeling, and opportunities for practice.

The SEL framework consists of five core competencies. (1) Self-awareness is the ability to accurately recognize one’s emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. It includes accurately assessing one’s strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.[28] (2) 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.[29] (3) 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. (4) 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.

[27] Dusenbury, L., Zadrazil, J., Mart, A., & Weissberg, R. (2011). State learning standards to advance social and emotional learning. Chicago: Casel and University of Illinois at Chicago. Retrieved from <http://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Brief-on-the-State-Scan-4-18-2011.pdf>

[28] Dusenbury, L., Zadrazil, J., Mart, A., & Weissberg, R. (2011)

[29] Dusenbury, L., Zadrazil, J., Mart, A., & Weissberg, R. (2011)

[30] Dusenbury, L., Zadrazil, J., Mart, A., & Weissberg, R. (2011)

(5) 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.

When these elements are present and naturally incorporated in the learning environment and there is a natural interaction between teachers and students, the results can produce improved outcomes in both academic achievement and adult success.[31]

## **VIII. SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR VULNERABLE POPULATIONS**

School readiness reflects a child’s ability to succeed both academically and socially in a school environment. It requires physical well-being, appropriate motor development, emotional health, a positive approach to new experiences, age-appropriate social knowledge and competence, age-appropriate language skills, and age-appropriate general knowledge and cognitive skills. In addition, a child’s home has a particularly strong impact on school readiness. Children from low-income families often do not receive the stimulation and do not learn the social skills required to prepare them for school. Students growing up in poverty face challenges with their cognitive and literary ability and often begin school both academically and socioeconomically behind their peers from higher-income backgrounds.[32]

[31] Dusenbury, L., Zadzil, J., Mart, A., & Weissberg, R. (2011)

[32] McDevitt, T., & Ormrod, J. (2004). Child development. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.

Beyond education-related deficiencies, low-income children can experience inadequacies with physical and cognitive development and disparities regarding access to healthcare and to key resources that help ensure success. [33] Furthermore, data show that low-income students are five times more likely to drop out of high school than those who are high-income and 13 times less likely to graduate from high school on time. Living in daily economic hardship can also adversely affect students' mental health, self-efficacy, self-image, and motivation to do well in school.[34]

Furthermore, the stark disparities in the academic achievement of students of color and low-income students compared to the middle class and affluent white students have a complex history in the United States and are still of utmost concern today.[35] Teachers tend to teach students from historically disenfranchised groups by employing a pathological paradigm that results in low-performance expectations for students of color and poverty.[36] This is not only happening in the classroom but also in the communities where students live. Law enforcement profiling against poor individuals and communities of color is rampant in the news, tragically illustrated by recent high profile police homicides. These cases are evidence of the larger problem of racial and social class disparities in social, economic, and educational opportunities and achievements.[37] Therefore, schools have a great responsibility to make pedagogical changes that address these problems.

[33] Neuman, S. B. (2008). *Educating the other America: Top experts tackle poverty, literacy, and achievement in our schools*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

[34] Winters, V. E., & Cowie, B. (2009). "Cross-cultural communications: Implications for social work practice and a departure from Payne." *Journal of Educational Controversy*.

[35] Jones, L. (2009). The implications of NCLB and A nation at risk for K-12 schools and higher education. *Connexions*, 4(1), 1-4. Retrieved from <http://cnx.org/content/m20342/1.1>;

[36] SEL Research Group. (2011). *Social and emotional learning research group*. Retrieved February 2, 2013, from <http://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/meta-analysis-summary.pdf>

[37] Zins, J., Weissberg, R., Wang, M. & Walberg, H. (2004). *Building academic success on social and emotional learning*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.



The school-to-prison pipeline represents a junction between the K-12 schooling system and the juvenile justice system in which students from marginalized populations often land. Mallett (2015) contended that,

The young people caught in the pipeline and in the juvenile courts' detention and incarceration facilities share a number of vulnerabilities. Thus, these punishment policies disproportionately involve certain at-risk groups. The first group includes children and adolescents who are poor, an experience that disproportionately involves families of color-- African American, Hispanic American, and Native American minorities, depending on the community location.[38] (p. 5)

The greater responsibility for changing this pattern of opportunity for some students and discrimination of others rests with teachers and schools, rather than the students themselves.[39] With critical inquiry and understanding, culturally responsive teaching can help students to become change agents who model, advocate for, and develop increasingly equitable ideologies and actions in their schools, communities, and beyond.[40] That is the vision, the dream, and the charge.

As a result, early intervention is necessary to change the trajectory of students from vulnerable populations. Teachers need to reframe their pedagogical strategies to better serve the needs of diverse learners with different cultural heritages and ethnic identities. Teaching with a critical consciousness involves questioning existing hierarchies of power, deconstructing common teaching practices, and promoting more equitable, just, and transformative learning opportunities.

[38] Mallett, C. (2014). The "learning disabilities to juvenile detention" pipeline: A case study. *Children & Schools*, 36(3), 147-155.

[39] Mallett, C. (2014)

[40] Zins, J. & Elias, M. (2007). Social and emotional learning. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation*, 17(2 & 3), 233 - 255. doi: 10.1080/10474410701413152

Teachers who are culturally responsive counter thinking implicit in institutional biases and co-construct classroom cultures with their students that address social differences, and reflect the social and cultural identities of all of their students.[41] It examines power dynamics in society at large, in classrooms, among teachers and students, re-imagines the power balance with increased student agency and empowerment, and cultivates a space where students' ideas are invited, expressed, and given value.[42] Creating inclusive learning classrooms and educational systems requires familiarity with fundamental multicultural beliefs, values, concepts, principles, and methodologies.

## **IX. CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

Culturally responsive teaching refers to practices and approaches that support culturally and linguistically diverse students who have been marginalized in schools and build their skill and capacity to do rigorous work. The term has been used more broadly to describe approaches that demonstrate awareness of and respect for the various social and cultural identities of students, that use students' cultural references as a part of instruction and curriculum to empower and support deeper engagement and learning; that appreciate and honor diversity from a historically-grounded and strengths-focused lens; or otherwise build supportive and caring relationships across cultural backgrounds.[43] This approach is rooted in the view of learning where students' identities, cultures, and experiences are elevated as assets to powerful educational experiences. SEL instruction should affirm and sustain students' unique backgrounds and communities of origin.[44]

[41] Zins, J., Weissberg, R., Wang, M. & Walberg, H. (2004). Building academic success on social and emotional learning. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

[42] Cohen, J. (2001). Social and emotional education: Core concepts and practices. In J. Cohen (Ed.), Caring classrooms/intelligent schools (pp. 3-29). New York: Teachers College Press.

[43] Zins, J. & Elias, M. (2007)

[44] Zins, J. & Elias, M. (2007)

Aristotle said, "Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom." [45] Self-awareness—the ability to recognize one's emotions, thoughts, and values—is a crucial skill for understanding others and the world. When constructing a culturally responsive SEL curriculum, it must provide students opportunities to reflect on identity and equity to build self-awareness. [46] Furthermore, SEL instruction needs to enhance relationship skills through debate. Relationship skills include making and maintaining rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups and being able to communicate, cooperate, and negotiate conflict constructively. [47] When students are asked to play an active role in identifying community problems they want to resolve, collaboratively they can decide how best to solve it, keeping in mind resources, social norms, and ethics. This shared ownership results in an increase in social awareness. Social awareness involves appreciating diversity, building empathy, and respecting others. Finally, a culturally responsive SEL curriculum should allow students to explore different expectations for self-management. [48] A key component of self-management is regulating one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations. Students can investigate the relationship between emotion regulation and race, gender, or other aspects of their identity to explore the different expectations for marginalized groups' self-management.

## **X. SOCIAL EMOTIONAL CURRICULUM**

Findings from neurobiology and the study of the stress response system have illuminated how environmental factors such as poverty, chronic stress, and trauma can affect brain development to influence children's capacity to focus attention, recall information, exercise planning, self-control, and get along with others. [49]

[45] Cohen, J. (2001)

[46] Cohen, J. (2001)

[47] Cohen, J. (2001)

[48] Cohen, J. (2001)

[49] Zins, J., Weissberg, R., Wang, M. & Walberg, H. (2004)

Thereby, these factors affect their lifelong learning, behavior, and health.[50] This research has shed light on a new perspective: paired together, emotions and intellect are the new smart. Traits such as self-control, optimism, perseverance, confidence, and growth mindset are predictors of success in school and life. Furthermore, it's essential for students to understand and develop a growth mindset, similar to self-efficacy, which is the belief that your effort matters and that your intelligence is not fixed but malleable. While cultivating students' tenacity and growth mindset can have powerful and positive effects, doing so can also unintentionally convey that students' ability to thrive is entirely dependent upon their own internal qualities. Internal qualities matter, but our lives are also shaped by external forces such as racism, sexism, and ableism. Without acknowledgment of these external forces, students may blame themselves when they encounter obstacles posed by these forces. In teaching students about self-efficacy, we must also provide them with the ability to recognize and resist the oppressive forces shaping their lives and communities.

As educators understand more about the way toxic stress affects the brain's ability to manage executive function and regulate emotion, they gain a new perspective on student behavior, which may lead them to pursue new approaches that support social and emotional development as well as academic learning. In contrast to a one-size-fits-all approach, schools need to adopt an approach to SEL that is developmental, flexible, and responsive to local needs. As a result, this SEL approach is focused on strategies for teachers to implement as appropriate, rather than a sequenced curriculum for them to follow.

[50] Jones, S.M., Brush, K., Bailey, R., Brion-Meisels, G., McIntyre, J., Khan, J., Nelson, B., & Stickle, L. (2017). Navigating SEL from the inside out: Looking inside & across 25 leading SEL programs: A practical resource for schools and OST providers (Elementary School Focus). New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation.

First, SEL should be organized around a developmental model that identifies specific, age-appropriate skills across TK-12. Social-emotional skills emerge at certain stages of development, and they grow and change over time. A developmental model should articulate which social and emotional skills lay the foundation for others at which age, allowing educators to focus on specific skills during salient times rather than trying to do everything at once. For instance, executive functions improve dramatically during the early childhood period, as a result of rapid growth and reorganization of specific regions and networks in the brain.

Second, SEL should focus on flexible, low-lift strategies and practices, not just curricula. SEL instruction is most effective when children have frequent opportunities to practice SEL skills in various contexts.[51] As teachers integrate SEL strategies into their daily routines or activities in ways that work for them, students have more frequent opportunities to practice SEL skills.[52] This approach can also increase consistency throughout the school community and smooth students' transitions between classrooms and grades.

Third, SEL is most effective when teachers are responsive to students' specific needs and experiences. To provide meaningful learning opportunities, educators must plan instruction that reflects students' lived experiences at school, at home, and in their communities. With a strategy-based approach, teachers are empowered to decide what gets implemented, when, and how. Furthermore, they are encouraged to adopt strategies to accommodate specific student, classroom, and community needs. Ultimately, a one-size-fits-all approach to SEL instruction is not the best fit for learners. The reason for this lies within the fact that our human nature depends on social interactions, behaviors, and emotions that are intricate and fluid; moreover, they are heavily influenced by other factors, such as our cultures.

[51] Aspen Education & Society Program and the Council of Chief State School Officers. 2017

[52] OECD (2015).

## XI. TEACHER TRAINING

Professional learning is critical to the implementation of districtwide SEL. Through effective professional learning, we can ensure that educators understand what SEL is, and how building adult and student SEL competence supports critical long-term outcomes for students. By including professional learning opportunities for all staff who work with students, we will foster a wider understanding of your SEL initiative and empower people to support the mission. These professional learning opportunities can be delivered through a range of experiences including workshops, conferences, online courses, webinars, professional learning communities, and coaching support. Regardless of the method for delivering professional learning, it's important that these opportunities are connected so that participants build on their learning throughout the year and receive ongoing and timely support during implementation.

To ensure professional learning allows for authentic dialogue around students' needs there needs to be trust. Trust, community, and collective efficacy among staff are strong predictors of how well schools can carry out improvement initiatives[53] and impact student achievement[54], and serve as a critical foundation for SEL. Trust between staff is developed over time through many interactions and is essential for creating buy-in, motivating staff to take risks and give extra time and effort, and spreading best practices throughout a school and district.[55] A sense of community among staff refers to a staff culture based on supportive relationships, mutual care and respect, and interpersonal connections. Collective efficacy is one of the most significant predictors of school effectiveness.[56]

[53] Bryk & Schneider (2003).

[54] Donohoo, Hattie, & Eells (2018).

[55] Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2015).

[56] Forman, S. G. (2015). Implementation of mental health programs in schools: A change agent's guide. American Psychological Association. Washington, DC

Staff not only need to feel connected with one another, but also believe that as a group they have the capacity to support students in succeeding and meet their academic, social, and emotional needs.

Once trust has been established, teachers can begin engaging in authentic professional learning for SEL instruction. In order to effectively facilitate SEL, teachers must begin with increasing their own self-awareness of how their various social identities in terms of race, class, gender, language, etc., [57] shaped their own educational experiences and shape their definitions of success and their interpretations of student behavior.[58] Teachers must build their knowledge of and reflect on the history of race, racism, and exclusion in the United States and build their skill for discussing this history with students in the context of lessons and class discussions.[59] Once teachers have reflected and have the proper mindset they will be able to deconstruct, reflect on, and design lessons that support the active valuing, engagement, and development of the whole child.[60] In this process, they will learn about the various signals that trigger a “threat” response especially for students of color as well as strategies explicitly designed to decrease stress and generate a sense of calm and well-being develop a repertoire of approaches for building trust, especially across race, class, and culture.[61]

[57] Humphrey, N. (2013). *Social and emotional learning: A critical appraisal*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

[58] National Equity Project, 2020

[59] National Equity Project, 2020

[60] National Equity Project, 2020

[61] National Equity Project, 2020

## **XII. TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH TO TEACHING THROUGH CORONAVIRUS**

It's also important that educators ensure that the information they provide to students is digestible. Moving to remote learning and having fewer direct interactions can make assignments feel more overwhelming and daunting particularly when several directions are given at once.[62] Break directions down into smaller bites when necessary and encourage students to ask clarifying questions even if it appears they understand. Finally, we can't assume students' experiences with remote learning or their understanding of a global pandemic are universal.[63] Encourage students to lead the way in sharing what they understand and do not understand their current situation. You can do this by asking open-ended questions, such as, "How are you feeling about not being in school?" which can provide insight without letting assumptions guide the conversation.[64] Approach students' experiences with curiosity. Aim to clarify misinformation and connect students with other important adults (such as family) who help them feel safe.

Relationships and well-being can take priority over the assignment and behavioral compliance. In shifts to distance learning, educators will need to actively focus on maintaining attitudes of inclusivity. Now more than ever, students should feel valued and welcome regardless of their background or identity.

When people are facing stress and difficult life circumstances, it can particularly affect three areas: a sense of safety, feelings of connectedness, and feelings of hope. In each of these areas, educators can make an impact.

[62] NCTSN, 2020

[63] Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2007b). What is sel: Skills & competencies. CASEL Briefs. Retrieved July 20th, 2020, from <http://casel.org/publications/what-is-sel/>

[64] NCTSN, 2020



A sense of safety is the belief that your needs, and the needs of those you care about—will be met. It is a belief that you will be protected from harm and that those around you will be safe. Educators can expect that many students' sense of safety will be compromised right now. But there are steps educators can take to support a sense of safety in children. They can reach out, provide space, and encourage students to connect with them or another trusted adult or counselor to talk about their safety concerns. Offer students a way to connect if there is something that they need help with or are worried about. Encourage students to talk to friends or family members on the phone. [65] Help students plan some virtual playdates to distract them from their worries. Recommend or include in lesson plans and packets some fun, free activities that kids can do at home. Encourage families and caregivers to avoid watching the news in front of their children (as that can be upsetting), keep as much of a regular family routine as possible, and plan activities such as going for walks or hikes or playing board or video games together.[66]

Connectedness refers to having relationships with others who can understand and support you. As we are practicing social distancing and have closed most public places, educators will need to get creative to help students feel connected. Plan activities through the use of web-conferencing sites that allow students to see, hear, and interact with each other and their teacher.[67] Talk directly about the importance of connecting with others. Incorporate space for play and fun activities into online lesson plans or take-home packets.

Hope is the expectation that everything will work out and the feeling that things will be alright. Right now, many people may be feeling discouraged, hopeless, or angry.[68]

[65] National Equity Project, 2020

[66] National Equity Project, 2020

[67] National Equity Project, 2020

[68] Cohen, J. (2006). Social, emotional, ethical, and academic education: Creating a climate for learning, participation in democracy, and well-being. *Harvard Educational Review*, 76(2), 201-237.

Adults and students may be feeling a great sense of loss for activities that will not be taking place as usual. Students particularly may be disappointed in missing out on sports, competition, performances, and other important rituals of the spring semester.[69] Have students connect with someone in their family or community to ask a person they respect how they stayed hopeful in troubled times.[70] Teach about other historical times of crisis, including how these ended and communities rebounded. Encourage students to get fresh air and to move when possible. Share some of the many stories of hope and help that have come out of this current crisis.

Now is a time to provide opportunities for students to complete activities that affirm their competence, sense of self-worth, and feelings of safety. There are many social-emotional learning practices and wellness activities that teachers can encourage students to complete independently or online.[71] Promote self-awareness by having students review a feelings chart and share how they are feeling. Recommend quick mindfulness or self-soothing exercises such as smelling a flower or completing four-corner breathing prior to completing the lesson.[72] Model and normalize a range of emotions by giving students opportunities to express themselves in nonverbal ways. Give students the chance to share what they've learned or a chance to teach their classmates.

Finally, we understand that in other countries, rates of domestic violence and child abuse have increased during the COVID-19 crisis.[73] Stress and increased isolation are risk factors for abuse.

[69] Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2007b).

[70] Humphrey, N. 2013

[71] National Equity Project, 2020

[72] Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2015)

[73] Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2015)

Stress and increased isolation are risk factors for abuse. Families experiencing difficult financial issues or job loss during this time might be especially at risk. But all families will be under increased stress and isolation with varying levels of support and resources.[74] For more information about child trauma and child traumatic stress, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network has many resources to help educators and caretakers better understand the impact, consequences, and resilience of children and families exposed to trauma.

## **XIII. RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **A. EDUCATION**

As of now, all 50 states have developed SEL standards for preschool students, and some have developed standards for students in early elementary school or in grades K–12, according to CASEL. Educational leaders can begin the process of building in SEL instruction by finding out what their state's standards are and using them to implement a culturally responsive program.

As schools begin to develop a framework for SEL it will be critical to scale the initiative. Educational leaders do not have to do everything at once. In order to implement an SEL initiative school leaders can begin with a small group of teachers. Then, the next year, expand it, continuing to grow the program each year. Scaling the program will ensure a smooth implementation and foster teacher buy-in.

In the first year, it is important to select teachers who believe in the benefits of SEL. School administrators can begin by interviewing teachers to determine who might be best suited to be pioneers for their school.

[74] Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2015)

During that first year, gather regular feedback and tweak program elements as needed. By forming an SEL committee, school administration and SEL teachers can work collaboratively to discuss how the pilot is going. Frequent check-ins and responsive changes will result in smoother implementation when it expands to the next group of teachers.

Furthermore, these teachers will need professional development that supports the initiative. Teachers need to understand SEL before explaining it to students. They must also understand how to integrate it into academic instruction. By providing adequate dedicated time to teach staff about SEL and how to understand and strengthen their own social and emotional competencies they will be better equipped to lead this work.

Administrators must remember that piling more work onto busy teachers' shoulders is no way to get buy-in. In developing professional learning opportunities, school leaders must organize training and respect the time of their staff members'. Instead of expecting them to adjust their cramped schedules to plan SEL lessons and administer SEL assessments, set aside time for faculty meetings or staff development sessions on SEL. My recommendation would be for schools to provide teachers with faculty meeting time and professional development time to teach each other about SEL. As well as provide an hour of common planning time to administer SEL assessments.

### **School Administration & Teachers**

In order for an SEL initiative to be successful, it is essential that the school administration involves its staff with the implementation. The CASEL principal survey notes that a lack of time and funding is a common challenge to SEL implementation. In order to overcome this challenge school administrators must build capacity in their teachers.

Positive word of mouth will help other teachers get on board. In addition, having this core group become the trainers will help reduce costs.

Assessing and reassessing your program is essential. A great implementation typically doesn't happen the first time around. It takes practice. Allow flexibility in your plan to adjust your program along the way. Pay attention to what is working and what is not. School site administrators can qualitatively measure their program's strengths by administering SEL assessments to students, but it is critical they use an evidence-based assessment that is aligned to standards and measures the core SEL competencies outlined by CASEL. It should also measure progress over time. Change doesn't happen overnight. But when an initiative is implemented well, it does happen.

With solid training, teachers can have a profound impact on students' lives, becoming critical champions of social-emotional learning (SEL) practices and principles. Without genuine teacher buy-in and understanding, SEL has limited ability to improve academic achievement, attendance rates, and school culture. Research shows that teachers are truly interested in leveraging SEL to benefit students. Administrators who are hopeful that SEL will bring about lasting change in their schools would be wise to capitalize on this organic interest.

When implementing a new initiative, it is easy to focus on the “how” and overlook the “why.” In the book titled *Lessons in Leadership*, the author explains that too many organizations rely on tools like procedure manuals or step-by-step-guides. Yet, this type of “rules and compliance” model rarely works when it comes to SEL. Administrators need to remember that, at its core, SEL is all about personal transformation. SEL challenges people to think beyond the status quo, set goals, and cultivate perseverance.

From day one, it's essential to share a clear vision of how the school will feel as an SEL program is adopted by students, teachers, and faculty. This vision should be vivid, alive, and inclusive so that teachers can see themselves as crucial agents in creating a dynamic future. School leaders should also invite questions and dialogue. After all, administrators are not the ones who will be responsible for directly implementing SEL principles in the classroom every day. Teachers need to feel a sense of ownership of the SEL vision in order to effectively and pass it on to students.

One important reality to acknowledge is that teachers could be suffering from “change fatigue.” Year after year, teachers must adapt to new programs, technologies, and organizational structures. To help get teachers on board with SEL, school districts can emphasize how teacher support for an SEL program directly improves classroom dynamics and school culture. In an Education Week study of teachers and administrators, more than three-fourths agreed that SEL was effective in three crucial dimensions: 80% agreed that SEL reduces school discipline problems 77% agreed that SEL leads to improved student achievement 76% agreed that SEL fosters improvements in school climate. When discussing real-life SEL outcomes, emphasize that the selected endorsements are coming from teachers, colleagues, and peers who have walked the SEL path before them and remind them that student motivation and morale can improve dramatically with SEL.

Many teachers entered the profession with the dream of making a difference in the lives of young people. Unfortunately, too many teachers may lose sight of this dream and start to experience dissatisfaction and burnout. In fact, research from the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) found that 19 to 30 percent of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years.

At current attrition rates, LPI projects a nation-wide shortage of more than 100,000 teachers each year. SEL is a potent antidote to the teacher attrition problem. Through SEL professional development, teachers can re-ignite their passion for education. Teachers can learn new mindsets, tools, and frameworks that help them become agents of change in the classroom and in their own lives. They can learn how to navigate stress, deepen relationships, set new goals, and envision the next phase of their teaching career. Often, school districts give teachers access to professional development courses to gain knowledge of foundational SEL practices. And SEL is a natural fit for a professional learning community in which teachers collaborate to assess educational strategies and student achievement as a part of a continual improvement approach.

In every district, leaders must be clear about the focus and intent of their SEL initiative if they want true teacher support for an SEL program. They must provide teachers with a common language that they can use when talking with students, parents, and each other. With a shared language, schools can define benchmarks that help ensure students develop age-appropriate SEL skills. They can clarify where students should be with regard to specific SEL principles at every grade level. When this happens, stakeholders are well-equipped to know when students are successful in applying SEL skills in the school.

## **B. GOVERNMENT**

In an era when it feels intensely focused on academic scores with programs like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, leaders are recognizing that we may not reach those performance goals unless we help students and families develop socially and emotionally along the way.

Research shows that building the capacity of students to develop social and emotional skills, and take responsibility for their community, can reduce bullying, violence, and aggressive behaviors, and ultimately make schools safer. Addressing the social and emotional climate is an important part of creating healthy schools that support student health and academic performance. Great strides have been made in the development of evidence-based programs and practices that enhance the behavioral, social, and emotional health of our most vulnerable youth.

School policies and practices that support social and emotional learning (SEL) can help meet the needs of the psychosocial aspects of students' educational experiences. Recently, a movement to teach students social and emotional skills has taken hold in many districts across the U.S. These "universal" prevention programs are provided to all children in a classroom, not only those who have manifested behavioral problems or risk factors. But a number of potential barriers exist to expanding effective school-based social and emotional learning programs to larger numbers of children, including the availability of funding for system improvement.

The majority of these programs are part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), which was most recently amended in 2002 by the No Child Left Behind Act. Although ESEA is overdue for reauthorization, Congress continues to appropriate funds for these programs. Some ESEA programs explicitly mention prevention-related activities as a purpose for which funds may be used. In addition, funds under several programs that explicitly allow prevention-related activities can be used only for specific populations, such as Indian students, migrant students, neglected and delinquent children, or homeless children, rather than on interventions benefitting all students in a school.



## C. COMMUNITY

Social and emotional learning starts at home. Parents and families are critical partners in helping their children develop social and emotional skills. They can model the kinds of skills, attitudes, and behaviors we want all students to master. And they can be important advocates for SEL at school. In addition, community organizations that partner directly with schools offer students opportunities to practice the SEL skills they are learning at home, throughout the school day, and in their afterschool programming. These may include out-of-school-time providers (before and after school programs), community-based nonprofit organizations such as the YMCA, and health care providers. Helping students engage with their community. Identity and community are central themes in the lives of young people, especially during adolescence. Helping students learn more about this important part of themselves promotes both self-awareness and social awareness. Students can explore their community's history, assets, and needs through community research, interviews, and community tours.

Parents have a dual role to play in raising a self-aware, respectful child who knows how to manage his or her emotions, make responsible decisions, and resolve conflicts nonviolently. At home, parents should strive to create an environment of trust, respect, and support. The first step in nurturing emotionally intelligent children is modeling emotionally intelligent behavior at home. At school, parents can work with other members of your school community to create a climate that supports social and emotional learning - in and out of the classroom. Unfortunately, it's not always practiced by parents or children. Model the behavior you seek. Whether it's apologizing when you're in the wrong or treating others with respect and kindness, children learn a great deal about relationships from observing the behavior of their parents or guardians.

Nurture your child's self-esteem. A child with a good sense of self is happier, more well-adjusted, and does better in school. Strategies for fostering self-esteem include giving your child responsibilities, allowing her to make age-appropriate choices, and showing your appreciation for a job well done. Respect differences. Every child has their own unique talents and abilities. Whether in academics, athletics, or interpersonal relationships, resist the urge to compare your child to friends or siblings. Instead, honor their accomplishments and provide support and encouragement for the inevitable challenges they will face. Take advantage of support services. Seek the advice and support of school counselors or other social services during times of family crisis. Remember that no matter how close you are to your child, they may be more comfortable discussing a troubling family situation with another trusted adult.

## XIV. CONCLUSION

At the school level, SEL strategies typically come in the form of policies, practices, or structures related to climate and student support service.[75] Safe and positive school climates and cultures positively affect academic, behavioral, and mental health outcomes for students.[76] School leaders play a critical role in fostering schoolwide activities and policies that promote positive school environments, such as establishing a team to address the building climate; adult modeling of social and emotional competence; and developing clear norms, values, and expectations for students and staff members.

[75] Meyers, D., Gil, L., Cross, R., Keister, S., Domitrovich, C.E., & Weissberg, R.P. (in press). CASEL guide for schoolwide social and emotional learning. Chicago: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

[76] Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Gulley, S., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2013). "A review of school climate research." Review of Educational Research, 83(3), pp.357-385.

An important component of schoolwide SEL involves integration into multi-tiered systems of support. The services provided to students by professionals such as counselors and social workers should align with universal efforts in the classroom and building. School leaders can organize activities that build positive relationships and a sense of community among students through structures such as regularly scheduled morning meetings or advisories that provide students with opportunities to connect with each other. Often through small-group work, student support professionals reinforce and supplement classroom-based instruction for students who need early intervention or more intensive treatment. Furthermore, family and community partnerships can strengthen the impact of school approaches to extending learning into the home and neighborhood. Community members and organizations can support classroom and school efforts, especially by providing students with additional opportunities to refine and apply various SEL skills.

There is much untapped opportunity for SEL to serve as a lever for equity, addressing issues such as power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination. Addressing the SEL needs of vulnerable populations is complex work that requires the alignment of frameworks, programs, practices, and professional learning, as well as formative and summative assessments. Rather than a “quick fix” approach to SEL, advancing social emotional learning in service of equity requires rigorous commitment to ongoing continuous improvement and implementation backed by data. More research is needed to better understand the impact of the strategies that districts and schools are using to promote SEL in service of equity.

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