

# Identifying the Essential Components for Effective Delivery of Social-Emotional Learning

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character traits to be socially competent and  
emotionally healthy problem-solvers*

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## Introduction

When the No Child Left Behind Act was signed into law in 2002, the stated goal was to help students learn and succeed by ensuring that teachers were providing the best possible instruction. However, an overemphasis on test scores caused school systems to begin to value data above the person. Over the last few years, the conversation about measuring student success has shifted away from this intense focus on data and evaluation to a whole child approach to teaching and learning that places the needs of students at the center of instruction.

A general consensus among global leaders identifies social-emotional learning (SEL) as a promising framework to help educators, parents, and community leaders care for the whole child. By empowering today's youth with the character traits to be socially competent and emotionally healthy problem-solvers, SEL is not only helping to improve students' overall behavior and well-being, but it is also [improving academic achievement](#) by notable percentage points.

**The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as:**

*“the 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 relationships, and make responsible decisions.”*

## The intersection of trauma and social-emotional learning

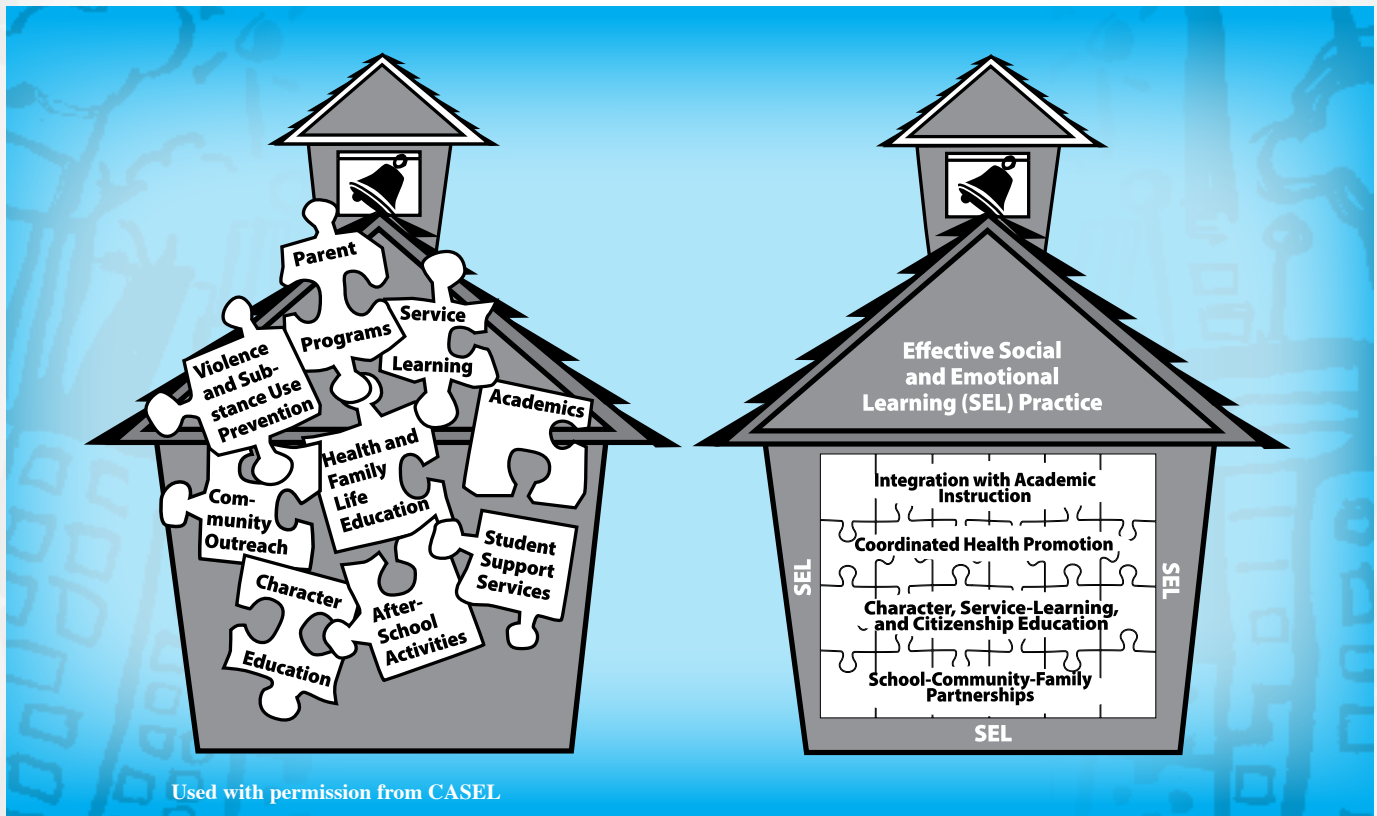
Startling statistics like the ones cited below provide evidence for the importance of a well-rounded education that accounts for children's social and emotional needs. Among the almost 51 million children in the United States that are enrolled in pre K–12 public school:

- Nearly 13 million of these children go hungry each day;
- Nearly 2.7 million have a parent in prison;
- Report of child abuse is made every 10 seconds;
- One in five will likely be diagnosed with mental illness or a learning disorder by the age of 25; and
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among children ages 12–18

All of these statistics fall under the category of adverse childhood experiences, which are commonly referred to as ACEs and greatly impact. While the first study on [Adverse Childhood Experiences](#) was conducted in the mid-1990s, it was not until around 2012 that the concept began to [gain widespread attention](#). Since then, [conversations regarding SEL have evolved into](#) formal classroom procedures to help these students process any challenging experiences and subsequent negative emotions. The problems associated with ACEs transcend race and socioeconomic status, providing support to the notion that every child is vulnerable to experiencing trauma in some way.

## Moving to a unified school action plan for SEL instruction

Almost every initiative a school undertakes—whether it is violence prevention, school-family-community partnerships, substance abuse prevention, health and sex education, academic intervention, bullying prevention, or drop-out prevention—is related to SEL. What is needed is a common framework—a common language—to move from separate initiatives to a comprehensive, unified school action plan. The first image below shows all the programs a school may be implementing when it does not have an overarching framework in place; the second image illustrates how all of these initiatives can be organized within the framework of a comprehensive SEL program.



At its core, SEL is about helping kids identify what is going on in their heads and in their hearts, so they can use their hands to build up and not tear down. In order to help kids process in this way, educators, youth workers, and parents—all together referred to as caring adults—must invest time in meaningful conversations to help our youth understand and manage their emotions. The question many school leaders find themselves asking is how to equip their students with social-emotional competencies.

One way educators can help meet the needs of their students is to adopt positive development and universal prevention strategies (Kutash, Duchnowski, & Lynn, 2006). Recognizing that many students spend more awake time at school than they do at home, it is time to accept and *embrace* that the role of educators includes partnering with parents to support all aspects of a child’s development. Promising SEL programs help facilitate meaningful relationships between caring adults and students through meaningful social-emotional learning activities that are grounded in research-based best practices.

## Components of effective SEL programs

The purpose of this white paper is to draw from research findings outlined in *What Works in Prevention: Principles of Effective Prevention Program* to highlight strategies for successful interventions (Nation et al., 2003). By integrating research-based SEL materials that take a whole child approach in designing classroom instruction and the learning environment, educators can begin to invest time in meaningful conversations and meet students where they are, accelerating the development of positive relationships and leading to a better understanding of students' lives.

In effort to surface components for effective SEL programming, the nine principles listed below are pulled directly from the framework for effective prevention programs provided by Nation et al. In addition, each principle includes promising research studies about SEL and leverages feedback gathered from more than one hundred educators and parents across the world.

### 1. Comprehensive

According to Nation et al, the most successful interventions have multiple components and address a variety of critical domains (e.g., family, peers, community) to influence the development and perpetuation of positive behavior traits. In the context of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), the world is comprised of five interworking systems. They are the microsystem—our immediate connections; the mesosystem—how our immediate connections interact; the exosystem—media and politics; the macrosystem—our cultural norms and beliefs; and the chronosystem—time and transitions. Since people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are truly impacted by the influences of our multi-layered world, SEL must be integrated into every context.

*Schoolwide* means that SEL needs to be adopted by all stakeholders, including principals, office staff, teachers, janitors, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, school counselors, non-profit partners, volunteers, coaches, and family members. Not only can associations with positive character traits be made with the formal learning environment, but application can also be made to every place and situation outside of school. Caring adults must seize a variety of teachable moments and be deliberate in their discussion of the practical application of character traits in various scenarios. All of these caring adults are there for one reason—to help children learn and grow.

*Love In A Big World's* comprehensive curriculum and resource product provides explicit SEL instruction and supporting materials to enhance student and teacher engagement. Social-emotional learning does not only happen within the context of a single class; rather, the 24 character traits can be incorporated throughout all classes. The programs are designed to easily integrate throughout a variety of classroom settings and across multiple disciplines. For example:

- When studying the Civil Rights Movement, history teachers can talk about the **courage** of Rosa Parks.
- In music, teachers can discuss the lives of great composers and the character traits that made them great, like Mozart's **creativity** or Beethoven's **perseverance**.
- A dialogue can occur in science class about how the **patience** of scientists led to innovation, such as Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone.



## 2. Varied Teaching Methods

Diverse teaching methods include a variety of instructional practices, such as classroom conversations, cooperative learning, project-based learning, and reflection (Yoder, 2014). SEL programs that are designed to integrate into all types of learning environments ensure that every teacher can begin incorporating these lessons into their class. Interdisciplinary activities are useful for teaching positive character traits as well. These activities can be directly related to a narrative through which the character trait is taught, or they can be a broader application of the character trait across the curriculum. Using a cross-curricular approach to tell stories helps the students understand how the values (social-emotional competencies) taught by these stories apply to many different situations and opens up more space for conversation between caring adults and students. Activities with broader application involve applying the learning of a character trait to another subject, such as a current events report or a research project.

Here are a few ways that explicit SEL instruction can happen in a variety of classroom activities:

- *Facilitate conversations.* These discussions may start with the academic focus, then evolve into life application. Give time and space for students to use their voices and share their opinions.
- *Structure cooperative learning experiences.* When working in groups for project-based learning and service learning, students learn how to work as a cross-functional team by brainstorming ideas, fine-tuning communication, disseminating tasks, and meeting deadlines.
- *Dedicate time for self-reflection.* As John Dewey says, “We do not learn from experience. We learn from [reflecting](#) on experience.”
- *Utilize literacy and arts.* Stories, music, and creative expression can be used to unlock the thoughts and feelings of your students.

Reputable SEL programs also incorporate service learning, which takes students outside the formal classroom to partake in meaningful community service activities that provide “instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (National Service Learning Clearinghouse). Eugene C. Roehlkepartain says that service learning increases students’ self-efficacy, problem-solving skills, and teamwork (2007). Furthermore, he states that the purpose of service learning is to empower students for mobilization, challenging them to serve their community and give to those in need.

## 3. Sufficient Dosage

A critical component of any effective intervention is ensuring a program is being used with fidelity in terms of time spent interacting with the materials. Elias notes that 30-45 minutes of instruction per week for the entire school year is the minimum dosage for effective social-emotional learning (2004). Additionally, Durlak points out that SEL initiatives have greater success with at least two years of implementation (2011).



### My SEL Journey:

My drive to develop effective SEL programming grew out of time spent in the classrooms and communities of the large urban district here in Nashville, Tennessee. As a teacher, I promised my middle school students that if they behaved for me, I would sing for them at the end of the day . . . and sing we did as we waited for dismissal. The music opened them up to deeper conversations about their lives and their futures. At that time, many of my kids couldn’t envision a future that included college or dream about an exciting career. They had witnessed too much violence in their neighborhood to think that anything more was possible for them. Right then I dedicated myself to making a positive difference in the lives of children by using literacy, arts, and service learning—the heart of Love In A Big World.

## 4. Theory-Driven

Positive youth development works to decrease risk factors and increase protective factors in the lives of young children. Therefore, effective initiatives address the many risk factors children face in life rather than focusing on only one (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002; Rutter, 1979; Sameroff & Fiese, 1990), especially since multiple risks tend to cluster in the same individual (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Focusing on the needs of the whole child by including his/her strengths and resiliency can be a way to increase protective factors (Catalano et al., 2002).

As Durlak notes, time spent on SEL, which includes culture, climate, and relationships, improves achievement (2011). Therefore, in order for SEL implementation to be successful, it must be schoolwide and comprehensive, with strategies for transferring the message to families at home and members of the larger community (Nation, 2010). If culture is *what* stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, parents, and students, do at school, then climate can be described as *how* a school feels. In an effort to narrow the research-to-practice gap, the U.S Department of Education in 2008 disseminated a dropout prevention guide encouraging schools to address school climate intentionally. The guide suggests the following:

- Implementing comprehensive interventions to strengthen students’ social, emotional, and behavioral skills
- Creating personalized learning environments that increase student engagement and learning

## 5. Positive Relationships

Resiliency has been defined as the ability to bounce back from adversity. According to Hawkins and Catalano (1992), there are three elements that must be in place in order to help children move from risk to resilience:

1. A caring, nurturing environment
2. High expectations
3. Meaningful engagement

In other words, relationships, common language, and purposeful activities—all of which are at the foundation of effective SEL programs—are key to building resilience, especially for [students who have experienced ACEs](#).

The key to building resilient students is relationships. It is critical for children to have a strong relationship with at least one adult (Nation, 2003). In fact, improving children’s relationships with their teachers and peers has profound effects on school success (Hawkins et al., 1999). Open communication with a teacher fosters greater engagement in school (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992), and mutual caring and respect increase motivation (Vondra, 1999). Additionally, positive student-teacher relationships appear to contribute to peer acceptance (Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994; Taylor, 1989; Taylor & Trickett, 1989). Research has shown that merely having a friend in school promotes better outcomes (Ladd, 1990) and that “mutual friendships reduce the probability of maladjustment” (Ladd and Burgess, 2001, p. 1585).

Children’s behaviors can also serve as a risk or protective factor. Aggressive or withdrawn children are at risk for school failure (Catalano et al., 2002; Vargo, 1995), and children with aggressive or antisocial behaviors experience greater teacher and peer rejection and poor school outcomes (Pollard, Hawkins, & Arthur, 1999). Since children exist within a context, these patterns tend to be reciprocal, either promoting or hindering children’s success in school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, SEL programs must be designed to provide a common language to help students manage their emotions in an effort to foster positive relationships with caring adults and peers.

*“While most of today’s jobs do not require great intelligence, they do require greater frustration tolerance, personal discipline, organization, management, and interpersonal skills than were required two decades and more ago. These are precisely the skills that many of the young people who are staying in school today, as opposed to two decades ago lack.”*

-James P. Comer

## 6. Appropriately Timed

Recognizing that people continue to develop and mature their social-emotional competencies throughout their lifespan, SEL instruction in school should be differentiated and administered based on age and grade level. Research shows that programs work best when initiated early enough to have an impact on the development of the problem behaviors and are sensitive to the developmental needs of participants. Offering a safe place for critical conversations with children about what is going on in their heads and their hearts is crucial as they explore identity development, particularly in transitional years from elementary school to middle school and middle school to high school (i.e., grades 5–8).

YOUNG CHILD (4–7 YEARS OLD)	OLDER CHILD (8–14 YEARS OLD)
<p><b>SEL Development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imitates behavior of adults</li> <li>• Begins to ask questions</li> <li>• Expresses wonder, joy, thanksgiving, and praise</li> <li>• Begins to use SEL language</li> <li>• Obeys to avoid punishment</li> <li>• Understands the significance of intention</li> <li>• Begins to see consequences of actions</li> </ul>	<p><b>SEL Development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begins to identify with “my” community</li> <li>• Learns stories about SEL</li> <li>• Understands SEL in concrete terms</li> <li>• Begins to engage in acts of service</li> <li>• Concrete thinkers</li> <li>• Reciprocal sense of justice</li> <li>• Strong belief in “the rules”</li> <li>• Sees consequences of actions and understands the significance of intent</li> </ul>
<p><b>Mental and Intellectual Development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Episodic thinking</li> <li>• Begins to differentiate reality from imagination</li> <li>• Learns best from concrete activities</li> <li>• Recalls, invents, begins to converse</li> </ul>	<p><b>Mental and Intellectual</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stories have meaning and coherence to life</li> <li>• Developing the ability to memorize</li> <li>• Learns through projects, games, songs, and stories</li> </ul>
<p><b>Interpersonal Relationships</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships with adults primary</li> <li>• Parallel play moves to relational play</li> <li>• Develops relational skills through group experience</li> <li>• Increasing empathy</li> <li>• Sees “big” people as good</li> </ul>	<p><b>Interpersonal Relationships</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing empathy</li> <li>• Cliques of same gender</li> <li>• Begins to develop loyalty</li> <li>• Peers become important but still wants to please significant adults</li> <li>• Belonging to the group is important</li> </ul>

## 7. Socioculturally Relevant

In order to be socioculturally relevant, The Research Alliance for New York City Schools suggests that schools offer reading material by authors of color and featuring protagonists of color, as well as activities and materials that reflect youth culture (2016). Additionally, Allison and Rehm point out that multicultural and multilingual students respond well to visuals and cooperative learning (2007). The most effective SEL programs help students embrace the diversity of today’s communities and learn from each other’s unique and shared experiences.



## 8. Outcome Evaluation

SEL programs must have clear goals and objectives and make an effort to systematically document their results relative to the goals. Because SEL skills and competencies develop over time, they can be a challenge to measure. Outcomes for improvement may include increased attendance and decreased behavior referrals. When students feel they belong, they want to be at school, and they have fewer disruptions.

## 9. Well-Trained Staff

In order for SEL initiatives to be effective, there must be strong principal leadership and teacher buy-in. As Nixon mentions, “Given the intense pressure of high stakes accountability, very little happens in schools that is not supported by principals. We’ve noted that effective school improvement programs exist in schools with principals who explicitly ‘bless’ an intentional focus on school climate. While . . . these principals most often exude a whole child, ecological approach to education, they do not need to be, and are often not, experts in school climate reform” (2015). Additionally, Bryk points out that teachers need ongoing professional development in order to increase their capacity “to work together to improve instruction” (2010).

*In addition to the nine principles outlined by Nation et al., additional research indicates rest and play are both critical component for helping students dedicate time to managing their emotions and offers a safe space to explore new social-emotional competencies.*

### Rest and Play

Part of doing the work of SEL is taking the time to attend to one’s emotional needs, and that means making space for conversation and reflection. Many SEL programs accomplish this by helping schools identify times to allow students to slow down, giving their students and themselves permission to rest. This particular focus of effective SEL instruction is a response to the fact that people are constantly in process, which requires time to identify and understand our emotions. Being authentic and sharing this process with students is a gift. This is not about rules—this is about the relationship.



*Love In A Big World* offers a variety of teacher-led activities and guided discussions that allow students time to rest in order to check in with themselves and monitor their emotions on a regular basis. For example, during this time of rest the program may ask students to self-reflect by answering the question “*How is your heart today?*” and, most importantly, encourages students to accept the fact that some days are better than others.

SEL’s constructivist approach to learning also lends itself to play. Play is a way to connect with others and practice social and emotional skills, behaviors, and competencies. Play provides a safe space—a microcosm of society in which students learn to cooperate and compromise with one another. One of the keys to creating a safe environment for rest and play is ritual. Providing familiar activities in a dependable order establishes clear boundaries. These boundaries serve as an invitation for the students to explore rest and play. For example, the boundaries and rituals of the typical school day can inspire this exploration of work and play if the opportunity for such exploration is provided.

### **Love In A Big World helps foster meaningful relationships between students and caring adults**

While the components of effective SEL programs are critical for success, the foundation of it all is **building relationships**. Love In A Big World is a tool for creating a common language to foster meaningful conversations in

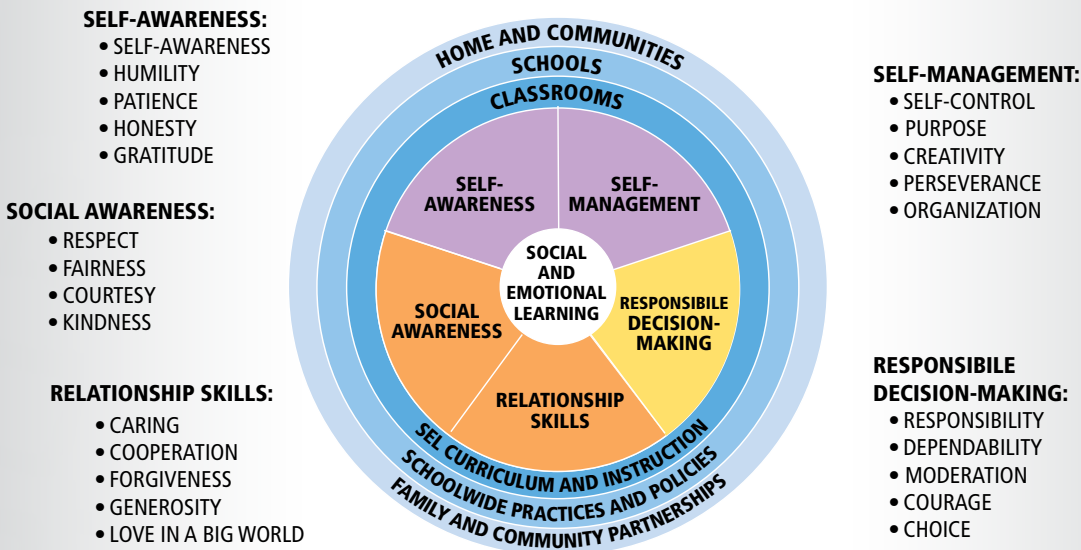


school, at home, and throughout the community. Based on literacy, arts, and service learning, Love In A Big World integrates social-emotional learning into the fabric of the school day by providing 24 character traits as the common language for the entire school community.

Integration of social-emotional learning requires intentionality with incorporating content—in the form of a common language that names positive and desired behaviors which can be used for framing core curriculum and instructional practices—and defining the process. The result is strong connections between students and caring adults. These positive relationships become the first means of protection for a child when he/she is encountering a new challenge. Either through conversation or observation, the teacher knows what is going on and can then alert support staff of the need for specific and designated intervention. By adopting this approach to teaching and learning, educators and other caring adults are preparing students for real life.

Love In A Big World addresses the classroom and school environment by targeting children’s relationships with their teachers and peers. In fact, the program has been mapped to the five competencies identified by the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#), which include self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship management, and social awareness. By mapping the 24 character traits Love In A Big World uses to CASEL’s competencies, pictured below, the program helps to develop a common SEL language for an entire school community.

## LOVE IN A BIG WORLD & CASEL’S CORE COMPETENCIES



Used with permission from CASEL.

By equipping students with these traits, the program helps students avoid social isolation or peer rejection. In fact, positive relationships children have with a competent adult, such as their teacher, increase their resilience to adversity (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). This program utilizes teacher training workshops, curricula workbooks, and classroom aids to promote student-teacher interactions, encourage warm nurturing environments, and enhance communication. In addition to regular discussions about how to interact with others, resolve conflicts, and communicate well, Love In A Big World encourages daily prosocial behaviors.

Love In A Big World is designed to meet the ten components required for effective SEL in the following ways:

1. Offers **comprehensive curriculum** resources that provide explicit SEL instruction and supporting materials to enhance engagements between students and caring adults.
2. Includes interdisciplinary activities that are designed to organically fit into a **variety of teaching methods** and encourage differentiated instruction for every unique learning context.
3. Provides **sufficient dosage** of instruction with flexible intervention that can last 15–30 minutes or longer, depending on the length of the day and the responses of kids.
4. Programs are **theory-driven**, with a foundation in established sociological and developmental frameworks.
5. Exposes students to caring adults and peers in a way that promotes **strong relationships that support positive outcomes** and is nurtured with regular interaction over time.
6. Ensures that all content is age- and grade-level appropriate so that instruction is **appropriately timed** to meet the unique needs for K-8 learners.
7. **Embraces the diversity of today's communities** by equipping all students with the ability to learn from one another's unique experiences and engage in meaningful shared experiences together.
8. Offers a **battery of measures** that includes surveys for educators, students, and parents. These provide insight into beliefs about SEL and the impact of the program on the school community.
9. Supports **staff training** to ensure buy-in from all classroom leaders by encouraging schools to incorporate professional training opportunities prior to implementation.
10. Prioritizes both **rest and play** as critical for helping students dedicate time to managing their emotions and offers a safe space to explore new social-emotional competencies.

**Over 15 years ago, I wrote a song called “State of Emergency.” The lyrics of the chorus and bridge are:**

*Children crying: State of Emergency  
I hear their voices calling  
Children dying: State of Emergency  
Let’s stop their tears from falling*

*The situation calls for immediate action  
Hand in hand let’s take our stand  
It’s time, it’s time for a revolution*

*Gotta stop the madness  
Gotta start the love*

These words were true then, and they are even more true today. My team and I have spent much of our time recently talking with hundreds of educators and parents across the country and around the globe. We hear educators and parents agree that children need social-emotional learning. One consistent question: How do I teach it? The answer always comes back to relationships.

At its core, SEL is about helping kids identify what is going on in their heads and in their hearts, so they can use their hands to build up and not tear down. In order to help kids process in this way, educators, youth workers, and parents—all together referred to as caring adults—must invest time in meaningful conversations with them, starting with establishing a common language.

I look forward to having you join us on this mission!

*Tamara Fyke*

### **About Love In A Big World**

Love In A Big World provides K–8 educators and other caring adults with the structure, scope, and sequence of 24 essential character traits to provide meaningful activities that help support students’ development of social-emotional competencies. The program’s SEL curriculum is research-based and practical and includes the supporting resources necessary to empower students to be socially competent, emotionally healthy problem-solvers who discover and maintain a sense of purpose and make a positive difference in the world.

The goal of SEL is to equip students with skillset to identify, process, and manage their emotions to help them succeed in school, and beyond. Before this can happen, caring adults must incorporate a framework to facilitate lessons that attend to the needs of the whole child – academically, physically, emotionally and socially. By developing a common language to outline and teach SEL competencies, Love In A Big World sets behavior expectations for students and creates stronger family-school partnerships.

Love In A Big World is about meeting students where they are in order to teach them social and emotional skills and offer support and guidance throughout the stages of identity development. As students become part of the Love In A Big World movement, it becomes a lifestyle they take outside of the classroom.

**Learn more about Love In A Big World by visiting [loveinabigworld.org](http://loveinabigworld.org).**

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