



Strong Social-Emotional Skills = Student Success

Measuring student SEL can help you target intervention for young learners

By *Danna Grimes*

School readiness has long been attributed to cognitive development and the acquisition of and execution of language. When one mentions IQ, most of us know the two letters refer to intelligence quotient, a widely accepted measurement of academic ability. School systems use students' IQ measurements to aid in creating individualized plans for students with specific learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, and academic gifts. But it is increasingly apparent that some children arrive on the first day of kindergarten without the social-emotional skills necessary to cooperate, learn procedures, and access curriculum.

Educators are finding gaps in students' abilities to self-regulate, persevere through challenges, and empathize with others, thus stagnating potential academic achievement. Teachers are finding themselves ill-equipped to handle the obstacles that arise daily from students with a low emotional quotient, or EQ.

What is the root cause of many children's low EQ? Poverty. In the United States, 15 million children—21 percent, or 1 in 5 of all children—live in poverty. An additional 43 percent live in low-income families, according to the National Center for Children in Poverty. These children are more susceptible to:

1. Lower cognitive development, which can result from poor nutrition before birth, exposure to drugs, alcohol, stress, and violence.
2. Poor oral language development, as students who live in poverty typically hear 32 million fewer words than those students born above the poverty line in the first five years of life.
3. A reduced sense of agency, including a failure to develop a strong self-worth and ability to see themselves overcoming life challenges.
4. A low executive function, in which impulse control, emotional regulation, attention management, prioritization of tasks, and working memory labor from a limited amount of mental energy. This is due to high-stress home environments resulting from being in a continuous survival mode.

Along with these adversities, children of poverty tend to have *very low* food security. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, very low food security is characterized by a reduced normal pattern of eating due to lack of money to purchase food or disruptions in the acquisition of food.

Those living in very low food security reported the following:

1 in 5 American children live in poverty.

- 98 percent worried that their food would run out before they got money to buy more.
- 97 percent reported that the food they bought just did not last, and they did not have money to get more.
- 95 percent said they could not afford to eat balanced meals.
- 97 percent reported that an adult had cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food.
- 88 percent reported that this had occurred in three or more months.
- 95 percent of respondents reported that they had eaten less than they felt they should because there was not enough money for food.
- 68 percent of respondents reported that they had been hungry but did not eat because they could not afford enough food.

With these factors in mind, and the increasing numbers of students arriving at school with scarce cognitive and physical resources, it becomes the educational institution's responsibility to teach with both IQ and EQ in mind. How do educators balance the idea of developing both a child's emotional and intelligence bank, and what deposits need to be made in both accounts to maximize student

achievement? How do educators assess where students are emotionally in order to better target specific needs? Lastly, how do educators collaborate with experts to ensure they are growing their own skills, along with those of their students?

Step 1: Assess SEL

Before educators introduce processes to grow students' EQ, students' social-emotional learning (SEL) must first be assessed. There are several commercially available SEL assessment tools, including Tessera, Panorama, and Apperson's Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA). In Buncombe County Schools, we use DESSA.

DESSA is a standardized, strength-based measure of the social-emotional competencies of children in kindergarten through eighth grade. This assessment tool is anchored in the resilience theory. It is characterized by progress-monitoring applications, and it is CASEL-aligned, multilingual, and personalized. Data is collected in a secure and safe manner.

DESSA pre-assessments of students are completed in the fall of the school year by trained staff, usually a school counselor. The data

Competency	Characteristics of Competency
Self-awareness	Tunes in to feelings of self and others, responds appropriately to different situations
Self-management	Pays attention to own behavior, completes tasks, engages in interactions with appropriate behavior
Social awareness	Possesses awareness of individual differences and similarities, includes others, encourages problem-solving
Relationship skills	Uses appropriate greetings, initiates activities with peers, demonstrates willingness to join activities with peers, uses appropriate assertiveness, demonstrates ability to begin and end a conversation, able to resolve conflict and accept conflict resolution, uses negotiation and compromise, understands body language, demonstrates awareness of personal space, participates in group situations appropriately
Goal-oriented behavior	Focuses on learning and mastering new tasks
Personal responsibility	Focuses on what one can control directly, including one's own thoughts, words, and actions, and controlling one's responses in the face of factors outside one's own control
Decision-making	Identifies when a decision needs to be made, thinks of possible options, evaluates the options, and chooses strategies for making the decision and reviewing how it works
Optimistic thinking	Uses positive self-talk, thinks through options, looks for the lesson, sets realistic goals, and reframes situations in a positive manner

COURTESY OF APERTURE

informs educators where students are in several areas (see table, page 20).

The data gives educators a better understanding of the strengths and areas of need in each separate social-emotional area. At the beginning of the year, a baseline data set is analyzed, and this informs instruction of skills. The DESSA gauges progress of the acquisition of social-emotional competence through quick probes of progress monitoring.

DESSA places students in three areas depending on the outcome of the assessment: *Need for instruction* equals low social-emotional skills; as they acquire skills, they move to the *typical range*; and once they master a skill, students will be in the *strength range*. The DESSA is used to identify student strengths as well, so educators can build on these when working in areas of need. The identification of student strengths is vital to the success of a student in the classroom when teaching SEL. Once this information is compiled, educators can execute lessons that will benefit both the whole class and individual students.

Step 2: Teach SEL

What can a school do to teach SEL? What do teachers need to improve their own EQ so they can teach SEL appropriately?

A balanced approach to teaching students social-emotional skills using a strong schoolwide foundation of Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS), coupled with specific curriculum programs such as Second Step, allows both educators and students ample opportunities to grow their EQs. PBIS is “a framework or approach [consisting] of intervention practices and organizational systems for establishing the social culture, learning and teaching environment, and individual behavior supports needed to achieve academic and social success for all students,” and is designed to teach students procedures for all common areas in the school building, while establishing schoolwide expectations for behavior. PBIS is successful with about 80 percent of the student population when delivered with fidelity across all areas of the school building.

Our SEL curriculum is designed to teach specific lessons in skills for learning, empathy, emotion management, and problem-solving, and includes friendship skills for kindergarten. Lessons are taught at least once per week, and then the teacher aids students in practicing the new skill. The program includes intervention components, which consist of classroom lessons

“Social-emotional learning (SEL) is 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 positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”

— *Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)*


and time to review, practice, and reinforce. These lessons lead to:

1. Increased social-emotional competence;
2. Increased self-regulation;
3. Improved classroom behavior; and
4. Increased academic enablers (attendance, on-task, task completion).

Over time, social-emotional lessons can produce:

1. Increased school success;
2. Increased school connectedness and belonging;
3. Improved peer relationships; and
4. Reduced externalizing and internalizing of behavior patterns.

Throughout the implementation of any curriculum or schoolwide program, educators should vet and analyze data to ensure success. When educators internalize the idea that building students’ emotional quotient through social-emotional teaching will positively impact academic achievement, they feel successful.

Approaching this need in so many of our students demonstrates the tenets of *Love them, know them, and grow them*. Educators are asked to be all things to their students—mother, father, nurse, and friend—even before they start being the teacher in the classroom. Providing lessons in classrooms that build the whole child will foster a classroom community of respect, collaboration, safety, and love. This in turn will collectively create a school culture that values all stakeholders, targets specific needs, and grows children who are ready to be contributing members in our diverse society. 

Danna Grimes is principal of Johnston Elementary School in Asheville, North Carolina.



SEL ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Tessera: This SEL assessment measures six character strength sets. [Tessera.proexam.org](https://tessera.proexam.org)

Panorama: Their research-backed survey instruments are open-source and free for educators to use. [Panoramaed.com/social-emotional-learning](https://panoramaed.com/social-emotional-learning)

DESSA: This platform gives insight to student EQ and provides a framework for maximizing potential in both school and out-of-school settings. [Apertureed.com/dessa-overview](https://apertureed.com/dessa-overview)