

Skills for Life

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How principals can promote social and emotional learning in their schools.

Students need safe, supportive learning environments to thrive in school—and to prepare for life. This is exactly the type of experience that principal Flavia Hernandez is establishing for the students at the school she leads in Chicago, McCormick Elementary. There, Hernandez has made social and emotional learning (SEL) a priority. A committed SEL leadership team with diverse stakeholders guides the planning, implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement of SEL in the classroom, throughout the school, and in partnership with families and community organizations.

Fortunately, the Every Student Succeeds Act and the introduction of college- and career-ready standards now provide school leaders with a unique opportunity to improve education so that it will focus on learning environments and more fully equip students for the future. According to the *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice*, many states have begun the important task of developing learning standards that articulate what students should know and be able to do—not only academically, but also socially and emotionally.

What Is Social and Emotional Learning?

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 positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. CASEL has identified five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies related to SEL:

- Self-awareness—including recognition and labeling of one’s feelings and accurately assessing one’s strengths and areas for growth;
- Self-management—including emotion regulation, delaying gratification, managing stress, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving goals;
- Social awareness—involving the ability to empathize and take others’ perspectives and recognize and mobilize diverse and available supports;

- Relationship skills—among which are clear communication, accurate listening, cooperation, nonviolent and constructive conflict resolution, and knowing when and how to be a good team player and leader; and
- Responsible decision-making—involves making ethical choices based on consideration of feelings, goals, alternatives, and potential outcomes, and planning and enacting solutions.

Simply put, these social and emotional skills are critical to being a good student and citizen. Ultimately, it is a combination of academic, social, and emotional competence that prepares students for the complex world they are going to inherit as adults.

What Does SEL Look Like in Practice?

Schools that are organized to promote student social and emotional development coordinate everything that happens in the school through the lens of SEL. As Eva Oberle and her colleagues explain in “Establishing Systemic Social and Emotional Learning Approaches in Schools: A Framework for Schoolwide Implementation,” that includes discipline, student supports, prevention, and academics. Systemic SEL works to deliberately create positive conditions for social and emotional development in every setting where children spend their time, with intentional strategies to connect to and partner with the family and community. This includes the classroom and even the broader school environment—the hallways, cafeteria, and playground—and even beyond to time after school.

Promoting SEL intentionally requires creating positive learning conditions and a school climate that are filled with kindness and mutual respect. Such schools teach students skills for getting along with others and solving problems. They work to cultivate individual student interests and talents, so that students become motivated lifelong learners who are committed to completing their education.

Schools that purposefully foster SEL recognize that, if students are to be motivated to stay in school and complete their education, they must feel safe in, and love, school. To achieve that purpose, schools that promote SEL work hard to build positive relationships with families and the community, so that everyone in a child's family feels respected and valued.

In "Examining the Role of Implementation Quality in School-Based Prevention Using the PATHS Curriculum," Chi-Ming Kam and colleagues say that SEL should be an explicit priority that principals clearly communicate in a variety of ways, through a clear vision and mission statement, and in simple and important ways—such as attending SEL trainings for teachers and ensuring that teachers have dedicated time to teach SEL during the day.

In schools where SEL is an intentional part of education, teachers promote collaborative learning. They invite students to participate in creating shared classroom rules and are continually creating opportunities where students can develop positive relationships—including in strategic use of teaching practices such as cooperative learning and project-based learning. They establish classroom routines that help students develop socially and emotionally, such as morning meetings that allow students to reflect on their feelings and connect to others. And they explicitly teach students skills to manage their own emotions (including anxiety and anger) so that they can sit still, pay attention, and collaborate with others in learning.

Guidance for teachers on how to promote student social and emotional development in their classrooms includes:

- Free-standing lessons that provide step-by-step instructions to teach students' social and emotional competencies;
- General teaching practices to create general conditions in the classroom and school that facilitate and support social and emotional development in students; and
- Integration of skill instruction or general teaching practices that support SEL within the context of an academic curriculum.



Why Be Intentional About Promoting SEL in Education?

Extensive research by Joseph Durlak and his team, including a meta-analysis of 213 studies and more than 270,000 K-12 students, has shown that programs designed to promote social and emotional competence in students produce important outcomes such as improvements in standardized academic test scores that are, on average, 11 percentile points higher for students who received SEL programming compared with students who did not. The study, “The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning,” also found that high-quality instruction in SEL improved students’ self-esteem, connection to school, and relationships, as well as reduced conduct problems, aggression, and emotional distress.

Further, the 2015 study *The Missing Piece* revealed that 93 percent of teachers want a greater focus on SEL in classrooms. However, the teachers also indicated that they want principal support, quality professional learning, and a school commitment to SEL to help their students become college, career, and life ready. Surveys of employers repeatedly show that they seek the very skills that SEL programs foster: problem-solving, communication, teamwork, and grit. The cost-effectiveness of these approaches has also been established in the 2015 report *The Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning*, which found that programs designed to promote social and emotional competence produce, on average, a benefit-to-cost ratio of 11:1.

What Principals Can Do

Based on research, and on CASEL’s reviews of evidence-based programs that are effective at promoting student SEL, we have observed the following strategies principals can use.

Provide leadership. Communicate in everything and at every opportunity that SEL is an explicit part of the school’s mission. Work with your leadership team to create a vision for SEL. Create professional development opportunities in SEL for staff. Attend workshops along with teachers who are being trained in how to implement SEL programs. Be aware of district or state standards, policies, or guidelines to support SEL, and promote them.

Conduct a needs and resource assessment to consider all the programming in the school and


how it supports SEL. Identify and address gaps in SEL, and coordinate everything in such a way as to take full advantage of opportunities to promote SEL in students.

Make sure teachers and other staff receive professional development, coaching, and ongoing support for implementing SEL programming. Evidence-based programs included in the CASEL guides all provide training and ongoing support that can be helpful for this purpose.

Build a positive school climate that creates optimal conditions for student social and emotional development. Help students feel safe, welcomed, and respected in school—so that they love school and want to come, bond to school, and are motivated to complete their education. Begin by modeling respect for all teachers and students.

Select an evidence-based SEL program to get all the adults in the school on the same page, using common language and strategies to promote social and emotional development in students. The CASEL guides can help, and even include guidance on how to select programs that will meet the needs of your particular community—including culturally and linguistically.

Create opportunities that help all the adults in the school develop social and emotional competence themselves. Thus, they become good models of SEL.

Create active partnerships with the community, and especially with families. Social and emotional development is grounded in each child’s cultural identity and family. Create an environment that celebrates diversity, where every child and family feels respected. Be curious to learn about your students’ lives. Show parents and caregivers you care by visiting as many families as you can in their homes in a year. 

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REFLECT ON THIS

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