

REVISING INSTRUCTIONAL Skills & Strategies

Social-emotional learning (SEL) empowers children to participate in classroom activities, strengthen friendships, and maintain positive relationships with teachers. However, virtual learning and reordered classrooms ruptured the very target areas that SEL addresses. Principals from across the nation who were interviewed for this report, including Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative participants, say that devoting strategic attention to student connections signals to learners, families, and staff that SEL remains a priority, even when circumstances change.

Prioritizing SEL Amid Crisis

SEL teaches adaptability. When the pandemic arrived, schools adapted. Those well established in the process discovered the capabilities to prioritize SEL within daily operations.

Encourage student engagement

Classroom engagement can be sustained while delivering instruction across remote platforms.

- Retain classroom routines and rituals, but give teachers the flexibility to recognize when students need a break from the screen. Maximizing synchronous instruction makes room for asynchronous playtime or snack breaks.
- Leverage the home as classroom. Send students on scavenger hunts around the house or let them introduce the family dog.
- Remind children that they are part of the school community. Send a hand-written postcard or drop in on remote classrooms to say hello.



Key Considerations:

While conducting remote learning, watch for actionable insights into aspects of home life that could be adversely impacting a student's social-emotional development and academics.

Build social skills

Virtual and hybrid school days can offer unstructured periods when children learn to navigate social norms.

- Transfer anchor protocols such as restorative circles to remote classrooms. Continue building social contracts and revisit the agreements children make for how to interact.
- As schools reopen and restructure, give teachers the chance to take children out for breaks, during which they can observe student interaction in small groups.
- Maintain links among students who are separated by hybrid learning. For instance, when classes are divided into half-days, post photos of classmates in the rooms.

Expand SEL to all

Pandemic-related pressures are accelerating the awareness that SEL is for all children, including those who don't show outward signs of distress.

- Broadly apply preventive measures from SEL programs that teach students to recognize unhealthy emotions and respond appropriately.
- Train staff to interact across virtual platforms with all students, not just those who manifest certain behaviors. Assessing students across domains of home, mental health, and behavior can reveal why they're struggling academically.
- Create a continuum of support, brainstorming resources that can be called upon from the school, district, and surrounding community.
- Share the self-regulation strategies of SEL with families for transport into the home and rebound back into the classroom.
- Build shared understanding of SEL principles and implementation with out-of-school-time (OST) staff through professional development content applicable in school and OST settings. Offer the training at separate times to accommodate the differing schedules of the two groups.



Key Considerations:

Sustain the common language of SEL among remote learners. Although there might be fewer conflicts to mediate among classmates, clashes with siblings and parents demand resolution.



Reflection Questions:

- Lingering crises can send the pendulum swinging if priorities aren't established. Is the pendulum balanced between SEL and academics at my school?
- How can I better utilize time when the school is not in crisis in order to prepare for the next emergency?

The Shift to Remote Learning

While remote and hybrid learning have disrupted traditional schooling, they also reinforce the importance of SEL by pulling back the curtain on children's lives and daily challenges. Strengthening relationships remains the bedrock of SEL success.

Build student connections

Intentionality prevents SEL practices from losing momentum when school days are disrupted.

- Carve out daily time for SEL practices that encourage discussion. Students can talk about their favorite foods, their feelings about quarantine, or customs in their native countries, all in the effort to build trust and comfort in virtual settings.
- When classroom conflict or bad habits surface, teachers can recircle the group to discuss the matter.
- Before tackling the learning-slide aspects of school shutdowns,

prioritize SEL as a tool for gauging student feelings. Do they feel known, cared for, and loved? Programs that help students label and express emotions create openings to carve out meaningful relationships.

- Provide explicit guidance on integrating SEL instruction into school-day academics and OST activities. Include lesson plans and model activities that instructors can easily implement across subject areas and types of activities.



Key Considerations:

Use age-appropriate approaches when adapting SEL to remote learning. Create small-group breakouts for older students who might shy from speaking up in large groups. Young students might just want time to say hi to each other before diving into lessons.

Principals who had carefully matched SEL programs to their school cultures felt better prepared to pivot when the pandemic disrupted daily routines.

Sustain the school community

Every school is imbued with a culture, and its students adhere to a set of core values akin to SEL competencies—even amid a pandemic.

- Maintain student recognition programs. Use free online survey tools to solicit nominations from teachers of students whose actions demonstrate adherence to school values.
- In reopened schools, teachers who teach half-sized classes in person on certain days can convene the other half—those learning remotely that day—in order to retain student connections.
- Regularly survey parents and staff about changes they see in the children and watch for trends. Survey students about their impressions of the school climate and teacher responsiveness.



Key Considerations:

Children who require intensive interventions can be especially sensitive to disruption. Concentrate school psychologists, nurses, and other health care professionals on their needs. Work through virtual means with families and community partners to provide stability and social supports.

For continuity in students' days, use SEL coaches to support school and OST staff as they implement new SEL programs and practices.

The School as a Community Hub

Whether learning is delivered in person or remotely, the school remains a hub



Key Considerations:

As learning extends beyond the school walls, consider using grant funds for household needs. One principal used CARES Act funds to buy 1:1 devices for her young students whose parents opted out of in-person instruction but lacked adequate in-home technology.

for parents, guardians, and community partners collaborating on the personal and academic growth of children.

Family affair

Parents might be demanding academic rigor in remote and hybrid learning, but educators recognize that many children are in equal need of the safe space they lost. Rebuilding the connections needed for social-emotional stability requires linking with families in meaningful ways.

- Continue teaching parents the tools and techniques of SEL, applying SEL frameworks across platforms. With families spending more time together, attention paid to common language, alternative discipline, breathing exercises, and self-regulation can sustain SEL practices and promote healthier household relationships.
- Recognize that parents feel isolated, too. Partner with parent-teacher groups to hold grade-level remote meetings, allowing parents to



Reflection Questions:

- Am I setting the expectation that all teachers connect with each of their parents?
- Are teachers getting the supports needed to make those calls and contacts happen?

express their feelings and see that other parents—and school staff—share the same struggles.

- When sending parent surveys, explain how the information will be used and share the results.

Reinforce partnerships

The partnerships crucial to SEL success took on heightened importance during the pandemic, helping overwhelmed school staff reach students whose challenges were amplified by quarantine.

- Mental health partners can provide teletherapy for patients from the school community. In some circumstances, school staff worked with partners to help children who were struggling with remote learning.
- To counter the pandemic's intensification of summer slide and loss of relationship-building opportunities, schools work with OST programs to provide programming in small-group settings—which are run according to strict safety protocols—for students known to be at risk academically.
- Apply remote-learning methods to one-on-one and small-group mentorship and tutoring OST programs. ⚙️