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Original CASEL Definition:

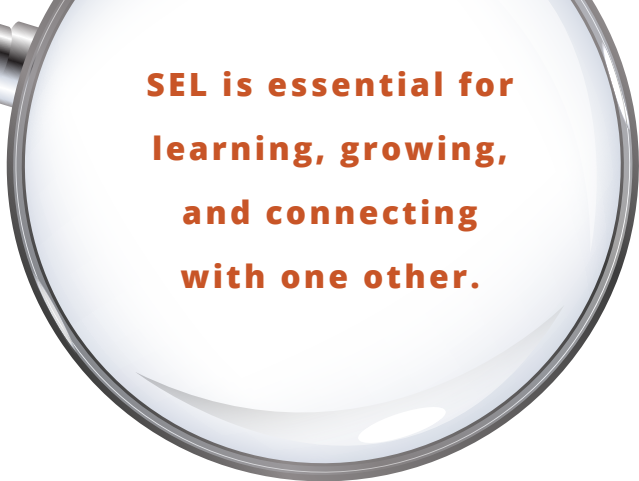
Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

Equity, and Excellence

An expanded definition of social and emotional learning and what it means for school leaders

BY JUSTINA SCHLUND

As a school leader, you've probably recognized the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) for a while now. In fact, an overwhelming majority of school principals surveyed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in 2019 agreed that SEL is critical for the success of students, educators, and schools. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, principals across the country have made it clear that schools need SEL to support students and adults, promote anti-racism, and deepen learning.



**SEL is essential for
learning, growing,
and connecting
with one other.**

And yet, school leaders have faced considerable obstacles to SEL implementation. These include insufficient professional learning, competing district priorities, and lack of funding, not to mention pressing challenges with implementing SEL through distance learning and integrating SEL with needed supports around mental health and trauma.

And as the popularity of SEL has grown, so, too, has the number of SEL programs, initiatives, and best practices pitched to principals. It's no wonder that the most common question we hear from school leaders is, "How do I get started with SEL?"

A good place to start is by clarifying what we mean by SEL. After years of working closely with school and district leaders and reviewing the current research, CASEL last year updated the best-known definition and framework for SEL. As the organization that founded scholarship in the field of SEL more than 25 years ago, we wanted to create a stronger foundation for school leaders to promote SEL in ways that support educational equity and excellence.

CASEL's updated framework continues to demonstrate the importance of enhancing the social and emotional competencies of all young people and adults, while placing more emphasis on how relationships and environments influence learning and development. We continue to highlight the

importance of SEL in classrooms and schools, and we've given additional attention to the importance of authentic partnerships with families and communities.

We also included how we see SEL helping young people and adults learn and work together to develop the knowledge, skills, and mindsets to create caring and just schools and communities. For example, the five core CASEL competencies—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—include reflecting upon personal and social identities, examining prejudices and biases, developing cultural competency, evaluating social norms and systemic inequities, and supporting community well-being.

What does all of this mean for school leaders, who play a central role in shaping SEL implementation? Below, we offer four strategies for principals to integrate SEL throughout their schools:

1. CULTIVATE SHARED LEADERSHIP

SEL involves and affects all members of the school community, including students, teachers, administrators, counselors, support staff, families, and community partners. Shared leadership for SEL means that schools have inclusive decision-making processes that engage all of these different groups in developing and enacting SEL priorities and plans. Here are actions school leaders can take:

- Establish a team that shares leadership responsibility for SEL, including representation from staff, students, families, and community partners.
- Ensure that the SEL team is representative of the school community, including their roles, experience, gender, race, language, culture, etc.
- Create time and space for all students, staff, families, and community partners to learn about SEL.
- Engage all stakeholders in setting a vision for SEL that reflects the school community's collective values.
- Ensure that those who will be affected by decisions are included in decision-making processes.

2. ESTABLISH A FAVORABLE WORK ENVIRONMENT

SEL implementation depends on how well adults work together to facilitate SEL instruction, foster a positive school

Students are most likely to benefit from SEL when it is consistently part of their daily interactions and learning experiences.

community, and model social and emotional competence. Principals set the tone for such a staff culture and create structures that help adults not only develop professional skills, but also reflect upon, and engage in, their own SEL. Here are actions school leaders can take:

- Explicitly model how you reflect on and strengthen your own social and emotional competencies as a school leader.
- Identify opportunities for staff to reflect on their own SEL, including their personal and cultural identities, biases, relationship-building and conflict-resolution skills, and cultural competence.
- Create “protected” time for staff to collaborate and problem-solve with each other regularly.
- Provide all educators with ongoing, scaffolded professional learning opportunities and culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate teaching strategies that promote SEL and establish equitable learning environments.
- Embed intentional opportunities into existing staff meetings for adults to reflect on self-care, connect personally, interact in meaningful ways, and share appreciation and reflections.

3. ALIGN POLICIES, PRACTICES, AND PROGRAMS

Students are most likely to benefit from SEL when it is consistently part of their daily interactions and learning experiences. Principals lead the integration of SEL throughout the school's academic curricula and culture, across broader schoolwide practices and policies, and through authentic partnerships with families and communities. Here are actions that school leaders can take:

- Work with the SEL team to take inventory of any existing initiatives and programs aimed at promoting student achievement and well-being, and use SEL as a framework to help create common language and goals between programs.
- Review and adopt an evidence-based SEL program that aligns with your schoolwide vision and ensures that all students have consistent opportunities to learn and practice social and emotional competencies. Ensure that staff have access to resources and guidance that support SEL programming.
- Regularly visit classrooms to provide supportive feedback on the learning environment, instructional practices, and SEL lessons. Even a quick, positive note about something the administrator sees can help bolster commitment to SEL.
- Establish disciplinary policies and practices that focus on helping students express and reflect on their feelings and behaviors, rebuild relationships, and resolve conflicts. Review and revise punitive and inequitable disciplinary policies and practices that undermine SEL.
- Engage regularly with families as experts in their children's lives, and learn and share strategies for promoting SEL in ways that resonate with their experiences, cultures, and values.
- Develop partnerships with community and out-of-school-time providers, and align strategies for promoting student SEL.

A New Definition for SEL

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals; feel and show empathy for others; establish and maintain supportive relationships; and make responsible and caring decisions.

SEL advances educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation. SEL can help address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities.

For more, visit casel.org/what-is-sel.

4. CREATE A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

To advance equity and excellence, principals must work closely with members of the school community to continuously track SEL implementation, examine data, and adjust course as necessary.

This process of continuous improvement relies on a strong foundation of trust and shared purpose so that students, staff, families, and community partners feel comfortable giving and receiving feedback, reflecting on data, and working together to improve practices. Here are actions school leaders can take:

- Model your own reflective practice with data and demonstrate openness to feedback and learning from others.
- Ensure that the SEL team has access to high-quality, real-time data that can be disaggregated to uncover disparities in students' experiences or outcomes (for example, data on school climate, student growth in social and emotional competence, quality of SEL implementation, attendance, discipline, and/or feedback surveys from students, families, and staff).



Learn More

For additional resources and guidance, visit CASEL's Guide to Schoolwide SEL at [schoolguide.casel.org](https://casel.org).

- Articulate a structured process to learn from data in a low-stakes, improvement-focused way.
- Offer opportunities for students, staff, families, and community partners to cultivate knowledge and skills for analyzing data and presenting it to others.

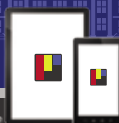
The research on, and demand for, SEL have become clear over the last few decades. In this most challenging school year, we've seen that SEL is essential for learning, growing, and connecting with one other. Our schools need leaders who can create caring, engaging, and inclusive learning environments that prioritize SEL so that all students and adults can thrive. ●

Justina Schlund is CASEL's senior director of content and field learning.

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Moving away from “fixing” kids to creating an equitable learning environment

Supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development with an equity lens calls for a shift in focus: from “fixing” kids by narrowly teaching them specific competencies to a broader approach that concentrates on adult mindsets and creating equitable learning environments that support holistic student success.

Studies show a strong relationship between social and emotional skills and academic outcomes, and the hope is that social and emotional learning will contribute to educational equity by benefiting children from low-income communities. But this can reinforce biases by assuming these students don't have these skills and “just need to learn to work harder,” when in fact, many already do so in the face of systemic barriers. Teaching students self-management and self-efficacy will have little impact if school leaders fail to address an atmosphere that has become toxic due to discrimination or systemic racism.

In fact, such a strategy sends the message that if children can control their behavior and believe in themselves, they can overcome racism, sexism, homophobia, lack of food or housing, or any other disadvantage. Worse, it can put educators and school leaders in the position of continuing that harm. That's why approaches to supporting social-emotional learning should be based on addressing the learning environments students experience and should make them compelling and meaningful for historically marginalized students.