

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Skills for Navigating Life's Challenges

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The 2013-2016 cycle of the Minnesota 4-H Foundation's Howland Family Endowment for Youth Leadership Development is dedicated to understanding social and emotional learning and its contribution to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps. This series of issue briefs is designed to help people understand, connect and champion social and emotional learning in a variety of settings and from a variety of perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Young people need to develop a wide array of skills to navigate everyday challenges. These include challenges along the path to high school graduation, college success, career satisfaction, engaged citizenship, and life in general. These skills go beyond the academic material taught in schools. They include skills related to managing one's own emotions and behaviors, developing healthy relationships, and making good decisions. The concept of "social and emotional learning," or SEL, includes many of these non-academic skills that young people need to succeed. The *Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning* (CASEL) offers this depiction of key SEL skills.



CASEL defines social and emotional learning as
“the processes through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging social situations constructively”
 (www.casel.org).

Over the past decade, attention has focused on social skills (how we get along with others) and emotional skills (how we manage our own emotions) as a way to improve young people's abilities to navigate their lives. While the development of these skills has not traditionally been a primary focus in schools, there is increased understanding that SEL skills are key to improving achievement outcomes and reducing involvement in risky behaviors like bullying, substance abuse, and dropout. Recent research also reveals that these skills are not just fixed characteristics of a person but can be changed through experience. How

young people think about their own abilities (their mind set) and the determination they bring to learning matters a great deal as they navigate everyday challenges.

IMPROVING ACHIEVEMENT OUTCOMES

Strong evidence indicates the importance of social and emotional learning for achievement, healthy development, and college and career success. In fact, many of these skills are better predictors of college and career success than achievement test scores¹. Fortunately, these skills can be learned and can improve over time, especially when they are intentionally taught to young people. An analysis of 213 programs shows that compared to control groups, participants in SEL programs demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, as well as improved academic performance as reflected in an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement². Because disparities in SEL skills correlate with the racial/ethnic achievement gap in school achievement, investments in these skills may help to reduce this gap.³ In the absence of developing young people's navigational skills, other educational reform efforts are unlikely to succeed at increasing readiness for college⁴.

REDUCING RISKY BEHAVIORS

Not only do social and emotional skills support achievement —they also make it less likely that youth will participate in bullying, drug and alcohol use, and gangs⁵. Programs that focus on SEL enable schools and other youth-serving organizations to take a skills-based approach, where the goal is to develop important competencies that are valuable across settings, instead of just focusing on reducing risky behaviors.

Efforts to reduce bullying involve teaching the same skills needed for broader social and emotional competence. SEL skill development helps potential victims, bullies, and bully-victims learn safe and effective ways of navigating social challenges in and outside of school. The most effective SEL interventions for reducing bullying include a school-wide approach that includes skill-building for all students, conflict resolution training, and individual-counseling for students most affected by bullying⁶. Such interventions help bullies, victims, and bystanders develop skills to prevent, cope with, and respond to incidences of bullying in ways that do not escalate or prolong the bullying behaviors.

While the research base is limited in examining how SEL skill development reduces risky behaviors besides bullying, intentionally developing strong skills in managing oneself, strong relationships and effective communications skills, and making responsible decisions help support youth being less inclined to use drugs and alcohol or be involved with gangs.

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN MINNESOTA

SEL skills are learned and reinforced at home, in school, and in out-of-school time programs. Currently in Minnesota, social and emotional learning standards are only required for early childhood education, pre-school, and kindergarten. While early childhood is a key time for learning basic social and emotional competencies, youth need the opportunity for these key life navigation skills to be expanded and reinforced throughout childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Youth are most likely to succeed when they have reinforcing experiences and continuous support for SEL skill development throughout their lives.

REFERENCES

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² Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., and Schellinger, K.B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405-432.

³⁻⁴ Farrington, C.A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Keyes, T.S., Johnson, D.W., & Beechum, N.O. (2012). *Teaching adolescents to become learners. The role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance: A critical literature review*. Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.

⁵ Wilson, D. B., Gottfredson, D. C., & Najaka, S. S. (2001). School-based prevention of problem behaviors: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 17, 247–272.

⁶ Vreeman, R. C., & Carroll, A. E. (2007). A systematic review of school-based interventions to prevent bullying. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, 161(1), 78-88.