Boosting Social and Emotional Development In and Out of School

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Social and emotional learning (SEL) has become more widely embraced as part of a well-rounded education over the past 20 years, leading to increased discussions among state lawmakers about whether and how to incorporate SEL into school and after-school curriculum.

In a recent public poll, 82 percent of respondents said it is highly important for schools to help students develop interpersonal skills, such as being cooperative, respectful of others and persistent at solving problems. More than nine in 10 Americans polled also reported that they support public schools providing after-school programs, with 77 percent reporting that they strongly support them.

After-school programs, often based in schools or community organizations, offer a variety of academic and enrichment activities and have been found to be effective in supporting children and youth’s social and emotional development. Since young people spend nearly 80 percent of their waking hours outside of school, after-school programs can be a way to complement the social and emotional learning taking place during regular school hours.

Social and emotional learning—sometimes referred to as non-cognitive skills, soft skills, character development or 21st-century skills—refers to a wide range of skills, attitudes and behaviors that can affect students’ academic success, employability, self-esteem and relationships, as well as civic and community engagement. According to researchers, SEL is important to student development and teaches children to manage their emotions, empathize, handle conflicts, persevere and engage in their schools and communities.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), emphasizes five “competency clusters” as the core of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making and relationship skills. Other organizations and partnerships define their own social and emotional competencies, which can overlap or be entirely different from one another. This is further complicated by the fact that researchers are struggling with how to best measure social and emotional competencies.

With a litany of social emotional competencies from which to choose, teachers, schools and after-school programs often pick sets of competencies based on what aligns best with their programs and methods. In the classroom, SEL may be taught with specific curriculum, integrated into academic lessons, classroom norms and expectations, or included in teaching and discipline practices. In a national survey of teachers, 95 percent said social and emotional skills are teachable, and 97 percent said SEL can benefit students from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Since after-school programs have long supported skills-building and positive development in children and youth, they have been a natural partner to many schools in supporting young people’s social and emotional development. After-school programs vary in how they incorporate SEL into programming. Researchers have found that children and youth who attend after-school programs that use evidence-based practices show increased positive social behaviors, fewer problem behaviors, less drug use, and improved test scores, grades and school attendance.

However, some lawmakers and others remain skeptical about the benefits of incorporating social emotional learning in the school setting. They contend that these skills should be taught by parents and families. Additionally, the numerous overlapping definitions and competing assessment tools pose a challenge to measuring and accurately evaluating SEL strategies.
State Action

All 50 states have instituted social and emotional learning standards for preschoolers. Six states—Connecticut, Idaho, Massachusetts, Ohio, Vermont and Washington—have comprehensive SEL standards with developmental benchmarks for early elementary students. Six others—Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Missouri, Pennsylvania and West Virginia—have expanded their SEL standards to encompass grades K-12.

In 2017, lawmakers in 11 states introduced SEL-related legislation. Of those, nine states considered legislation aimed at advancing social and emotional learning in the classroom. Legislation in Indiana and Mississippi, for example, would have required the implementation of SEL curriculum for students in certain optional school programs, while a bill in Illinois would have required a review of current SEL curriculum. A bill in New York would have established a statewide pilot program to improve students’ social and emotional learning. Connecticut, Hawaii and Maryland considered legislation that would have expanded SEL training for educators. Hawaii, Oklahoma and Washington proposed providing optional funding for SEL programming.

Those opposed to teaching SEL in the classroom were also represented in 2017 legislative sessions. Tennessee introduced two bills that would prohibit the implementation of SEL standards, while bills in Minnesota would have established character development education as a shared responsibility of educators, parents and community members.

Federal Action

The greatest federal impact on social and emotional learning could come from the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and was signed into law in 2015. Various sections of ESSA create opportunities for states to further SEL, including allowing states more flexibility in defining and assessing student success. The law denotes “nonacademic” factors—which could include school climate (including social and emotional well-being), school safety and student engagement—as indicators of accountability. ESSA requires states to submit a formal plan to the U.S. Department of Education for approval. Sixteen states plus the District of Columbia submitted their plans in April 2017, and all but four submitted plans in September 2017.

In the spring of 2017, two federal bills that could support SEL were introduced with bipartisan cosponsors. H.R. 1864, the Chronic Absentee Reduction Act, includes mentoring programs that support social and emotional development, connecting students with community-based organizations (which could include after-school programs) and teacher professional development to promote SEL and positive school climates. H.R. 2544, the Teacher Health and Wellness Act, includes a study that would analyze a number of programs, including SEL programs, that help teachers improve student engagement in the classroom.

Additional Resources

NCSL's Social and Emotional Learning webpage
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
Aspen Institute's Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (NCSEAD)
American Institutes for Research (AIR)

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