



Educators value social and emotional skills. HERE'S HOW TO BUILD THEM.

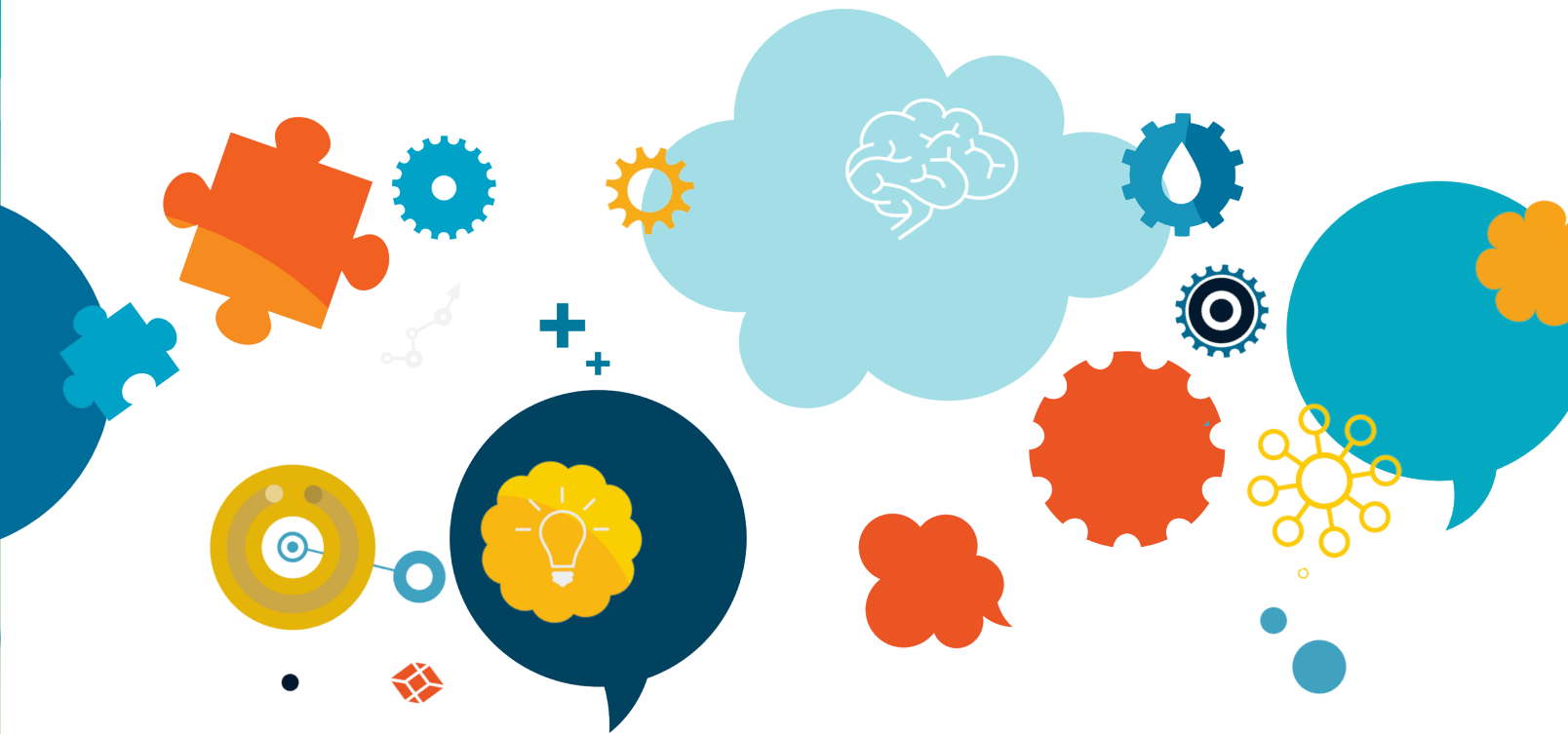
BY SUZANNE BOUFFARD

Most educators believe that social and emotional learning (SEL) skills are a fundamental part of good teaching and learning (Education Week, n.d.; Hamilton et

al., 2019) because they help children and adults set and reach goals, navigate their environments, and thrive in community. SEL includes skills such as paying attention, waiting for one's turn to talk, managing frustration, maintaining a growth mindset,

demonstrating empathy, and getting along with others.

Long before the pandemic, surveys showed that teachers believed these skills were essential for students to learn at school (Bridgeland et al., 2013), and research confirmed that



they are linked with measures of academic success (Jones & Kahn, 2017). But there’s reason to believe those skills have become even more important as students and teachers recover from the setbacks and trauma of the pandemic. There’s also reason to believe those skills are less developed now because many students — and adults — got out of the habit of using them, lost opportunities to strengthen them, or experienced trauma that dampened them.

As researcher and SEL expert Stephanie Jones explained in a recent episode of the “Let’s Talk Social and Emotional Learning” podcast, remote learning and the bumpy transition back to in-person learning helped many teachers realize that SEL is key to how instructional work happens in the classroom and with their students (Held, 2022).

Recognizing the importance

of SEL is an important step, but embedding it in schools and classrooms is not an automatic process. Educators need knowledge and skills to intentionally embody, model, and teach the social, emotional, and cognitive skills that enable students to engage in and succeed at academic work. That’s partly because SEL is more than a series of discrete lessons. It lives in the way educators interact with students and each other, including how they listen to one another, give feedback, express empathy, create opportunities for productive struggle, and beyond.

If educators can’t give students social and emotional skills, or ensure that they use the ones they already have, what can they do? What does it take to make SEL a meaningful part of schools in a way that supports learning and development? Researchers, educators, and leaders have been

working to answer these questions and share strategies with teachers, administrators, and others who work with young people.

One initiative that is pointing the way is the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative, a multiyear, multisite effort supported by The Wallace Foundation. The initiative provided four years of support and tools, based on research, to help school and out-of-school time programs strengthen students’ social and emotional learning skills. Extensive research, including in-depth case studies of the sites’ work and participants’ development from the RAND Corporation, has illuminated some key lessons about how to make a difference for students.

All of those lessons point to the importance of building adults’ understanding of and capacity for modeling and encouraging social and

emotional learning. One of them — which the report’s authors refer to as “sequencing” SEL — emphasizes the need to focus on building adults’ SEL skills before implementing strategies to encourage students’ SEL development. Together, the findings suggest that professional learning on SEL is an essential strategy for ensuring that everyone can thrive in the classroom — especially in a time of stress and recovery.

SEL INITIATIVE OFFERS LESSONS FOR EDUCATORS

Starting in 2017, The Wallace Foundation awarded implementation grants to partnerships between school districts and out-of-school time intermediaries in six communities: Boston, Massachusetts; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Palm Beach County, Florida; Tacoma, Washington; and Tulsa, Oklahoma. Each community site focused on an initial cohort of five to seven school and out-of-school time program partnerships. Altogether, 38 elementary school and out-of-school time program partnerships implemented SEL strategies over four school years.

Research on the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative included multiyear case studies of the six sites. A summary of the findings highlighted two overarching elements of success for SEL — establishing a supportive climate and taking a consistent approach across a campus or program — and eight common themes, each of which was observed at two or more of the sites (Tosh et al., 2022):

1. Committed school and out-of-school time program leaders took concrete actions that laid the foundation for SEL.
2. Establishing trusting relationships was a necessary first step to building an effective school-program partnership.
3. SEL committees guided and

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4. Starting with adults’ own SEL skills proved central, followed by professional development about developing students’ skills.
5. Short SEL rituals were often the first and most widely adopted strategy, setting the stage for formal instruction.
6. Prioritizing time for SEL in schedules was important to making implementation consistent and routine.
7. Formal SEL resources facilitated a consistent approach within and across settings.
8. Distributing ownership of SEL across staff and students increased buy-in and sustainability.

All eight themes rely, to varying degrees, on investments in capacity building for teachers, leaders, and other staff. For example, leaders cannot set the vision for SEL and allocate the resources to achieve it if they do not have opportunities to develop their own understanding and skills. But the importance of building educators’ capacity was clearest in theme No. 4: sequencing SEL competencies to focus on adults’ skills first before focusing on students’

TULSA FOCUSES ON SEQUENCING SEL SKILLS

As often happens with new initiatives, some of the sites learned what to do the hard way — by first trying to do something else. Although some sites started with adults’ SEL skills and knowledge right away,

others tried to jump in with student strategies and found that they had missed a critical step. This was the case at the Tulsa site, especially at Whitman Elementary School and its partner out-of-school time program, Youth At Heart.

According to the case study, “Whitman and Youth at Heart had uneven success when they started their effort to teach students social and emotional skills in the 2018-2019 school year” (Christianson et al., 2022). Although teachers had participated in some professional learning that introduced several SEL rituals and routines, they rarely implemented those practices. A survey in spring 2019 found that only half of teachers reported using rituals, such as a morning meeting, and only 17% reported using written SEL plans that had been provided. When researchers observed the classrooms, they observed explicit instruction about SEL in only 25% of the 17 classes they visited.

A lack of understanding of SEL appeared to contribute to this low level of implementation, and that, in turn, was related to a lack of high-quality professional learning. Teachers reported that the learning they had engaged in did not contain enough information, and they requested more opportunities to see others modeling the use of the SEL resources.

Some of the leaders of the site suggested this may have been a result of the train-the-trainer model they had used for professional learning, which they said caused confusion and felt, as one put it, “like a game of telephone” (Christianson et al., 2022). In addition, many of the teachers who were struggling with the SEL practices were relatively new. The school had been experiencing high levels of turnover and had higher than usual numbers of new teachers.

When school leaders put the brakes on the student SEL strategies to focus on adults’ SEL skills instead, they had several goals in mind. They hoped that building teachers’ SEL

skills would increase their coping abilities and capacity to support struggling students, especially for the stressed new teachers. They had observed that some teachers were struggling to regulate their own emotions in the classroom and felt they needed support to embody and model better self-regulation. They also hoped this focus on social and emotional skills and well-being would increase teachers' sense of belonging and community and therefore increase teacher retention.

The pivot began with an optional SEL book club that one of the teachers started with a group of peers that grew to include 10 teachers. By the following fall, one of the SEL project leads partnered with that teacher to co-lead professional learning for teachers focused on self-care, self-regulation, and coping with stress.

At the same time, administrators aimed to foster stronger relationships and a sense of belonging among staff. The school and out-of-school time program also hosted joint professional learning on adult SEL. The timing was good because all of this focus on relationships and coping was under way by the time the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to close and heightened everyone's stress.

The sequencing approach to building SEL continued with helping the adults understand the importance of SEL, especially in the face of trauma. Professional learning in fall 2020 helped educators in both settings understand why consistent routines and classroom management — key elements of the student SEL strategies — matter and help create a safe and stable learning environment.

The change in approach, to focusing first on adults' SEL skills, made a noticeable difference quickly. Both school and out-of-school time program staff reported improvements in educators' social and emotional skills over time, and they saw it pay off in classrooms. In both the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years,

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administrators reported that they were observing teachers demonstrate more patience and positive interactions with students, and they believed student behavior improved as a result.

Researchers noted some examples of the change as well. For example, "we observed a teacher modeling how to calm herself when her class became noisy. She told her class that she needed to decompress, set a timer, and instructed students to work independently on their computers as she sat at her desk" (Christianson et al., 2022).

As school leaders had hoped, staff burnout and turnover decreased. The percentage of staff reporting they felt burned out dropped markedly, from 62% in spring 2018 to 29% in spring 2020 (before the pandemic), and turnover dropped from 33% to 23%.

Following these improvements in adults' SEL and well-being, the sequencing of SEL proceeded to include more educators teaching SEL skills to students. The percentage of teachers who reported incorporating short SEL rituals, using an SEL lesson plan, or integrating SEL into academic instruction increased significantly from spring 2019 to spring 2021. And by spring 2021, all teachers who responded to the survey said they were incorporating SEL into their academic instruction.

As a result, Whitman — which initially had the lowest implementation of SEL practices among the district's participating schools — now had higher implementation levels than the other schools.

In turn, educators began reporting that students' SEL skills, such as regulating emotions and maintaining healthy relationships, improved, as did students' classroom behaviors. From spring 2018 to spring 2021, adults' responses to the following survey items increased noticeably:

- "Students treat teachers with respect" increased from 24% to 79%.
- "Students treat students with respect" increased from 14% to 89%.
- "Students care about each other" increased from 38% to 95%.

The percentage of student suspensions dropped in the 2019-20 school year. According to interviews with school staff, in that same period, fewer teachers called the office for discipline support and there were fewer fights among students.

The data speak volumes, but so do the voices of the educators who participated in the sequenced approach to SEL. Administrators attributed the improvements in their schools to the adult SEL investments. One said, "If we could start over again, we would start with adult practices before we tried to roll it out to the building. [By] rolling it out to the building and then working backwards to adults, we lost some of the buy-in. I wish we had done it differently from the beginning" (Christianson et al., 2022).

SITES LEVERAGE PARTNERSHIPS

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Partnerships were key. One reason the initiative focused on school and out-of-school time partnerships is that community-based programs, such as afterschool and mentoring programs, have a long and successful history of promoting youth development,

including life skills, personal development, and SEL. Shared professional learning across school and out-of-school time settings helped all the adults involved in the initiative learn from one another and leverage each others' strengths.

Different sites found creative ways to weave such sharing into professional learning. For example, in Palm Beach County, a school and its out-of-school time partner paid for out-of-school time program staff to attend the school's grade-level meetings throughout the year. Other sites used summer professional learning time to bring staff members together. In Denver, an out-of-school time program used grant funds to cover shared professional learning that was held during summer and winter breaks to overcome the common barrier of schedule conflicts caused by the fact that school and out-of-school time staff tend to work different hours.

The case studies also found that it was important to have people who are specifically charged with overseeing professional learning. In particular, the researchers found, SEL committees composed of multiple leaders and staff helped keep things on track. The researchers pointed to an example at the Tacoma site, where an SEL committee developed a set of SEL lessons and resources and engaged in professional learning with all school staff in how to use them consistently.

Some sites, such as the Boston site, incorporated coaching on the SEL practices. Coaches from the school district and the out-of-school time intermediary coordinated with one another to create consistency and ensure that all staff had support. The coaching helped leaders feel comfortable giving staff some autonomy in how to incorporate the SEL practices.

Finally, processes for input and feedback were important for ensuring that professional learning was meeting educators' needs, that staff

understood how to use the rituals and routines consistently, and for ensuring educators' buy-in and support.

SEL IS 'PART OF OUR HUMANNESST'

The Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative lessons are valuable for schools and communities far beyond the six study sites because they suggest ways that educators can build adults' SEL capacity to build students', especially if they work in partnership with community organizations and youth development professionals. Educators are hungry for these strategies.

Teachers say they could use more support on SEL strategies (Hamilton et al., 2020), and some settings and communities appear to be struggling more than others with how to implement SEL. For example, SEL implementation is far less frequent in middle and high schools (Schwartz et al., 2022), despite the fact that social and emotional skills continue to develop in adolescence. In fact, the increasing importance of social relationships and the emotional changes of adolescence make it especially important to attend to these dimensions of learning and development at the secondary school level.

The Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative makes clear that SEL is not an either/or proposition. SEL skills develop in and are applicable in schools and community settings and homes — and all of the other places where young people spend their time. As developmental psychologist Stephanie Jones put it, SEL “can't only be in one place because it is part of our humanness and our human interactions” (Held, 2022).

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