



# Social and Emotional Learning: A Policy Vision for the Future

*Clark McKown*

The social and emotional learning (SEL) project is nearing a critical moment. Depending in large part on what policy makers do next, it will either fulfill its potential to create a great public good, or it will fizzle. To fulfill its potential will require a coordinated SEL policy framework. Such a framework should achieve four things: set clear standards, create incentives for rigorous adoption of evidence-based SEL programs, require SEL coursework in teacher training programs, and support sustained investment in SEL research and development. To accomplish any of these things, we also need to develop rigorous, scalable, and useful SEL assessment systems that span prekindergarten through high school.

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Social and emotional learning, or SEL, refers to the thinking skills, behavioral skills, and regulatory skills needed to interact effectively with others, and to make, form, and deepen relationships. In the worlds of educational research and practice, SEL has received increasing attention; it's fair to call it a hot topic. Many developments, unfolding over many years, have contributed to SEL's momentum: after rigorous vetting, a growing number of school-based SEL programs have been found to be effective; states have adopted SEL standards; and school districts have implemented effective SEL programs. SEL also enjoys bipartisan support, perhaps because of strong and consistent scientific evidence that it helps children and provides an underpinning for productive citizenship.

The SEL project is nearing a critical moment. Depending in large part on what policy makers do next, it will either fulfill its potential and create a great

public good, or it will fizzle. Many educational movements have found themselves in such a moment, only to be relegated to the annals of bygone fads, leaving uncertainty about whether they made a difference. The question this policy brief asks is, what policies would advance the field of SEL in a way that helps fulfill its promise to create a measurable and lasting benefit for today's children—who are, after all, tomorrow's workers, voters, parents, and citizens?

I see four achievable policy aims whose benefits would far outweigh their costs: (1) adopting SEL standards, (2) creating incentives to adopt and rigorously implement effective SEL programs, (3) delivering more SEL coursework for teachers in training, and (4) investing in research and development. For these policy aims to succeed, we would need to vigorously develop and deploy social and emotional assessment systems that share the quality and rigor of the very best achievement tests. The good news is that much high-quality work is already under way. Yet there's much more to be done.

## **Why Care about Children's SEL?**

SEL skills are meaningful. Because humans are a supremely social species, social and emotional skills are strongly associated with success in school and in life. We know, for example, that from preschool through high school, the better young people are at self-control, at recognizing others' emotions, at taking others' perspectives, at solving social problems, at engaging in socially skilled behavior, and at refraining from socially aversive behavior, the better they fare in their peer relationships, their academic development, and their life outcomes. One study vividly illustrates how important SEL skills are to later outcomes. After following more than 1,000 participants from birth to adulthood, the study found that when they became adults, those who had exhibited the most self-control as children scored substantially higher on measures of health and wealth than their peers who had shown the least self-control.

SEL skills are malleable. For example, researchers have consistently found that what children experience at school is associated with, and contributes to, their social and emotional development. We know that children who

participate in well-implemented, evidence-based SEL programs do better on measures of social, behavioral, and academic outcomes than children who aren't exposed to these programs. Programs that set clear behavioral expectations and respond in consistent ways to positive and negative behavior are also beneficial. For example, children in schools that use a program called Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports display more positive behaviors and fewer problem behaviors than children in schools that don't use the program. Classroom management strategies, such as the Good Behavior Game, also significantly increase positive behavior and reduce problem behaviors.

The bottom line is this: high-quality SEL programs are a wise investment. When taught well, they produce many benefits. A Columbia University cost-benefit analysis of six widely used SEL programs found that for every dollar spent on SEL programming, society reaps an average benefit of \$11. That figure arises from fewer negative outcomes such as substance use and delinquency and increased positive outcomes such as academic achievement and social skills.

## **You Can't Move the Needle if There Is No Needle**

In addition to being meaningful and malleable, SEL skills are measurable. For example, my colleagues and I created a web-based assessment system called SELweb to assess social and emotional thinking skills in children from kindergarten to third grade. SELweb measures social and emotional skills with a consistency and rigor comparable to that of many achievement tests. Other social and emotional assessments have also achieved this level of precision. Simple behavioral challenge tasks that build on the now-famous marshmallow test, for example, measure self-control in preschool children very well. Beyond preschool, direct assessments have been developed to measure mental aspects of SEL. Teacher rating scales can also measure important, largely behavioral dimensions of SEL.

Unfortunately, these examples are the exception, not the rule. In fact, we're woefully behind in developing rigorous, scalable, and useful assessment systems that span prekindergarten through high school. Developing such assessment systems is critical to the entire SEL endeavor. If we want to

make a measurable difference, we need to develop SEL assessment systems that are usable, feasible, and psychometrically sound.

What is the current state of assessment? At this early stage, social and emotional assessments can only be used for limited purposes. Many teacher rating scales, and some direct assessments in some grades, can guide instruction, because they help teachers understand students' strengths and needs (this is called *formative assessment*). Other assessments may be useful for monitoring progress, for guiding the development of special education interventions, or for evaluating programs and tracking students' social and emotional development over time. Even for these specific purposes, however, the range of options is limited.

Furthermore, fewer SEL assessments possess the rigorous psychometric properties we demand of assessments used for high-stakes accountability. One important question regards the extent to which SEL assessment should be used to measure teacher or school accountability. That said, important work is under way in California, as part of the CORE district experiment, to explore the use of students' social and emotional self-reports as one part of a multifaceted district accountability plan. The CORE experiment will provide real-life lessons about the promises and pitfalls of SEL assessment for accountability purposes.

Compared to curriculum development and even policy efforts, which have proceeded fairly systematically, social and emotional assessment is a small and more ad hoc field. Despite some promising developments, there's still little sense of unity or progress. Next, I describe policy priorities in the field of SEL. Though I don't always use the word "assessment" in my descriptions of those priorities, good assessment is a foundational requirement for any of them to succeed.

## **A Vision of SEL Policy**

A coordinated SEL policy framework could build on progress to date and greatly benefit both individuals and society. Though there are many ways to meet a policy goal, such a framework should achieve four things: set clear standards, create incentives for rigorous adoption

of evidence-based SEL programs, require SEL coursework in teacher training programs, and support sustained investment in SEL research and development.

First, we should develop standards and implementation guidelines that specify the SEL skills children should know and be able to demonstrate, and describe how to enhance those competencies. Standards set expectations that guide decision-making about what is taught and what is assessed in schools. They do the most good when they're aligned with evidence-based curricula and instruction, professional development, and assessments that can be used to guide instruction so that it enhances students' social, emotional, and academic learning.

At the state level, good work is happening in this area. Four states have adopted comprehensive SEL standards spanning prekindergarten through high school, and 11 more states have adopted standards for some grades or some aspects of SEL. Also, 17 states have joined in a collaborative whose working groups are considering and drafting policies, SEL standards, and/or implementation guidelines to foster quality programming at the district, school, and classroom levels. Continued momentum in establishing state support for systemic schoolwide and classroom implementation will increase the likelihood that SEL will become ingrained in practice. In that context, policy makers need to ask what incentives or consequences, if any, these standards should incorporate to stimulate deep integration of SEL practices in schools. And standards and guidelines should still allow latitude for local control so that state policies encourage the right balance between consistent implementation and sensitivity to community contexts and needs.

Second, we should create incentives. Standards alone aren't enough to make a measurable impact on children's SEL. Only if those standards lead to changes in the classroom, particularly the adoption of curricula and instructional practices, can we reasonably expect them to improve students' outcomes. We also know that for programs to be effective, they must be implemented with rigor. The best policies, therefore, will give school districts incentives to adopt and rigorously implement effective SEL programs.

What form should incentives take, and what measurable standards of adoption and rigorous implementation will states use to determine whether a district has earned its incentive? These are not trivial questions, and they're likely to figure prominently in any debate about how to enact such policies.

Third, districts that implement evidence-based SEL programs will likely succeed in direct proportion to how well their teachers are trained to implement the programs. To that end, we should require greater representation of SEL in the curricula of teacher training programs. As with learning standards, there is much to build on in this endeavor. For one thing, educators are likely to agree that this is a good idea—most education professionals believe that SEL is an important component of education. At the same time, the vast majority of American teacher-preparation programs neither require nor offer coursework on how to teach social and emotional skills. Required preservice and in-service professional development on strategies to support children's SEL would surely magnify the impact of standards and incentives.

Fourth, sustained investment in research and development will keep the SEL project moving forward. Investing in continued programmatic innovation will be important, but as policies and programs are implemented at ever-larger scale, new and unanticipated problems may arise that will benefit from further research and development. For example, districts in states with SEL policies may face barriers to implementation

that will require investigation and experimentation to overcome.

We also urgently need to invest in assessment. Developing and validating rigorous assessments will strengthen SEL efforts across the board, from policy to classroom practice. We will only know how well our students are achieving standards when we can measure their progress towards those standards. Teachers can use good assessment to guide their use of evidence-based programs and to measure how students grow when they're exposed to SEL instruction. Preservice teachers should learn how to assess social and emotional skills, and how to use social and emotional assessment data to guide instruction. Finally, good assessments are critical to evaluating how experimental forms of curriculum and instruction affect students.

What would it take to create rigorous, scalable, and useful SEL assessment systems that span prekindergarten through high school? A consortium of foundations has come together as the Funders' Collaborative for Innovative Measurement to support the efforts of a group of practitioners, scholars, and others to come to grips with this very question. (Full disclosure: I am a member of this group's steering committee.) The group's work is not yet complete, but it's reasonable to assume that we would need an investment comparable to that required to create rigorous, scalable, and useful assessment systems for an academic content area spanning early childhood through high school. As a point of reference, it took hundreds of millions of dollars to develop the PARCC tests used to assess progress toward Common Core Standards.

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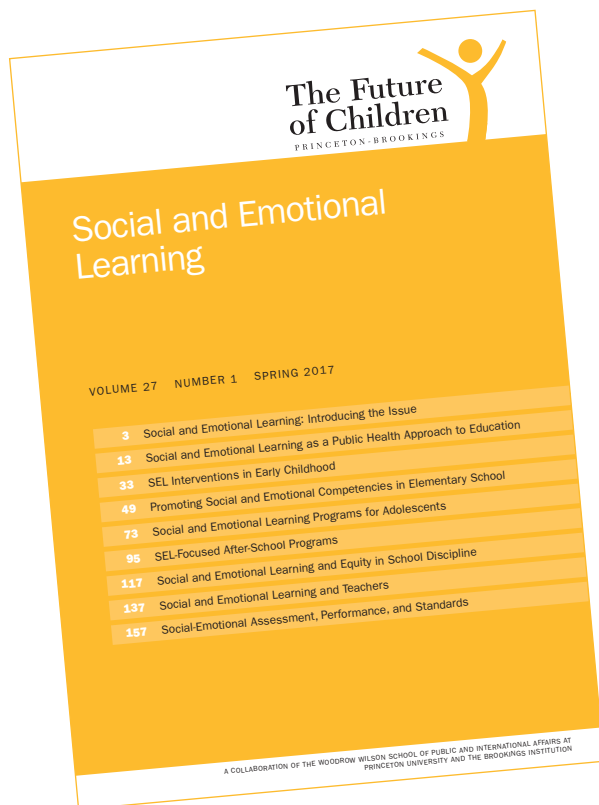


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