



Guidance Document:
**Understanding Social Emotional
Learning (SEL):
Practice Considerations for Schools**

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is an area of skill development increasingly moving to the forefront in education. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes a focus on promoting students' positive behavior and social interactionsⁱ; characteristics fostered through direct SEL instruction. Moreover, SEL is indicated as an essential component to the development of resilience, a trait attributed to protecting against negative outcomes associated with chronic stress, trauma, and mental illness.ⁱⁱ

The mental health needs of students are multifaceted and can have a significant impact on academic and social success,ⁱⁱⁱ suggesting that a strong SEL curriculum could be effective for mental health prevention. While, primary grades may be considered low risk for mental health concerns, they are often viewed as essential for SEL and development. Programs aimed at mental health prevention are often implemented in isolation at the secondary level; however, early SEL education can be fundamental to the healthy development of resilience. Resilience has been identified as essential to lifelong success regardless of trauma, crisis, or chronic stress; however, if students lacking the skills central to the development of resilience aren't identified early, they may not benefit from prevention programs implemented at the secondary level.

While it is important to consider SEL in school culture, climate, and integration of instruction, providing direct instruction and monitoring skill acquisition is essential to successful outcomes. Implementing SEL curriculum and screening K-12 can help build the foundations students need to be academically successful and to develop strong coping skills should mental health issues arise.

What is SEL? The [Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#) defines social and emotional learning as, “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 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.”^{iv} CASEL identifies five core SEL competencies: *Self Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision Making*. Within an educational setting, these core competencies impact a student's ability to learn successfully and encompass more than just how we feel and manage our feelings.

- **Self-Awareness:** Self-Awareness includes being aware of one's feelings, but it also includes understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses, understanding how culture and background impact one's view of the world, and understanding that one can improve abilities they may otherwise see as impossible. Instructionally, this is important

because a strong sense of self-awareness can help a student persist with difficult concepts, feel more comfortable asking for help when they don't understand a concept, and communicate their thoughts and feelings more clearly.

- **Self-Management:** Self-Management includes being able to manage one's feelings, but it also includes being able to work through difficult tasks. Instructionally, this is important because a student with strong self-management skills is more likely to work through difficult problems even when they are frustrated, work more productively in a group, and be able to have respectful conversations when conflicts arise.
- **Social-Awareness:** Social-awareness includes perspective taking and empathy. These two traits are foundational to many of the instructional best practices viewed as essential for learning. Understanding that others have a different experience and being willing to view a situation through their perspective can improve outcomes in project-based learning, group work, and classroom culture. It can also help students better understand instructional content like inferential text and author's purpose – helping students learn content more deeply.
- **Relationship Skills** - Relationship Skills include being able to build healthy and meaningful relationships with others. For students, this includes peers and adults. Much like social awareness, these skills are essential for classroom strategies that rely on students working collaboratively. These skills are also important for building positive school climates and culture.
- **Responsible Decision Making** – Responsible Decision Making is important for helping students make safe and responsible decisions, but also includes analyzing and synthesizing information in a broader sense. Instructionally, students with strong responsible decision-making skills are more likely to critically analyze text, synthesize data to make predictions, and are better at planning and organizing tasks and materials.

While SEL is often viewed as “soft skills,” they are really the foundational skills needed for students to learn academic content and generalize that content into meaningful analysis and action efficiently and effectively. It is important to recognize that SEL and academics are not in competition with each other. SEL is how students are prepared to access academic and instructional content. It is important that these competencies are reinforced throughout instructional strategies, but it is also important that students are provided with direct instruction in SEL to build these skills.

SEL curriculum and screening: CASEL is recognized as the leading clearinghouse for SEL research and implementation. As SEL emerges as an academic game changer, companies are lining up to take advantage of this booming market and it is easy to see why. Social and Emotional curriculum and screening can provide educators the opportunity to identify and intervene with students who need support building social and emotional skills. SEL screening is becoming more prevalent as schools and districts work to objectively identify student needs.

Currently, within schools, the most prevalent method of identifying social and emotional and mental health needs relies on school-based nomination and Office Discipline Referrals; however, systematic screening using established rating scales has been found to be more

reliable in identifying students otherwise overlooked by school-based nominations.^v SEL screening can be utilized within a tiered-support model, providing immediate support in schools to supplement limited community resources.^{vi}

With so much emphasis on SEL and with so many companies hoping to break into this burgeoning market, it is important to consider what makes SEL curriculum and screening good. Here are some important considerations for choosing a curriculum or screening for schools or districts:

Curriculum

- **Is this curriculum research based?** Is there independent research that supports the validity and utility of this curriculum? Even if this curriculum claims to be aligned to our district's chosen SEL framework (e.g., CASEL Core Competencies), is there independent evidence that supports these claims?
- **Does this curriculum have a strong scope and sequence?** SEL curriculum should be viewed the same as your ELA or Math curricula. The scope and sequence should be clear, should be consistent, and should build horizontally and vertically to ensure that students are continuing to build skills each year.
- **Can teachers implement this curriculum with fidelity?** Fidelity is essential for implementation. If a curriculum isn't a good fit for your school (e.g., requires more instructional time than you can provide, requires too much teacher prep, or requires more training and professional development time than you can provide), it will likely sit on a shelf. Perhaps bits and pieces will be used, but students will not benefit from a curriculum that is too complicated to implement.
- **Does this curriculum promote a healthy sense of self and community?** It is essential that the curriculum you choose celebrates and includes various cultural perspectives. SEL is a great way to highlight and celebrate differences that make our society vibrant and whole. Students should see healthy and successful versions of themselves within the SEL lessons.

Screening

- **Is this screening research-based?** This is where every decision should begin, but especially with SEL screening. The decisions that are made using these screenings can have significant impacts for your students. It's essential that those decisions are based in reliable and valid data.
- **Is this screening strength-based?** SEL screening is different from many of the behavioral or mental health rating scales used in schools. Ideally, the purpose of SEL screening is to identify skills that students have, and skills they may need to develop through high quality instruction. By identifying student strengths, educators will be able to see what their students can do and what they need to learn. This is a powerful shift from deficit thinking to instructional design and allows SEL screening to be used as a progress monitoring tool throughout the year.
- **Can this screening be implemented with fidelity?** If the screening is too long, too complex, or makes educators or families uncomfortable the data collected will be

useless. When choosing screening tools be sure that there will be time, training, and support for educators to ensure that the data gathered can help drive decision making.

- **Does this screening store student data securely?** With all the decisions that come with curriculum and screening, don't forget about protecting student data. While using a strength-based approach can help mitigate deficit thinking, SEL screening can still have long term impacts if not appropriately secured.

These are only a few of the considerations related to SEL implementation, curriculum, and screening. School psychologists are experts in research, data analysis, social and emotional development, and RTI/MTSS. Including school psychologists and other school-based mental health professionals in a district's SEL implementation plan can help build a robust foundation for supporting the development of SEL and reinforcing a foundation that improves academic and mental health outcomes for students.

For more information on SEL and mental health resources from the Florida Association of School Psychologists (FASP), visit www.fasp.org.

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ⁱ Vaillancourt-Strobach, K., & Cowan, K.C. (2016). The Every Student Succeeds Act: Opportunities for school psychology. *Communique*, 44(6).

ⁱⁱ Reivich, K. & Gillham, J.(2010). Building resilience in youth: The Penn Resiliency Program. *Communique*, 38(6).

ⁱⁱⁱ Elias, M.J., Zins, J.E., Graczyk, P.A., & Weissberg, R.P.(2003). Implementation, sustainability, , and scaling up of social-emotional and academic innovations in public schools. *School Psychology Review*, 32, 303-319.

^{iv} Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2022). *Fundamentals of SEL*. <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/>

^v Eklund, K., & Dowdy, E.(2014). Screening for behavioral and emotional risk versus traditional school identification methods. *School Mental Health*, 6, 40-49.

^{vi} Miller, F. G., Cohen, D., Chafouleas, S. M., Riley-Tillman, T. C., Welsh, M. E., & Fabiano, G. A. (2015). A comparison of measures to screen for social, emotional, and behavioral risk. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 30(2), 184. Rones, M., & Hoagwood, K.(2000). School-based mental health services: A research review. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 3, 223–241.