

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the importance of social and emotional learning has received considerable attention among education stakeholders, policymakers, and the general public. Broadly speaking, social and emotional learning (SEL) is defined as “a set of skills that individuals need to succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenships” (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). In other words, SEL refers to managing one’s emotions and engaging with people in a positive and healthy manner. A sizable body of research has found that social and emotional competence is critical for academic performance, student well-being, and life success (Goleman, 1995; Hymel & Ford, 2014; Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996; McClelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2000; Raver, 2002; Wentzel & Asher, 1995).

These findings have caused education practitioners to expand beyond the usual focus on student academics. By adopting an SEL approach, schools can serve and invest in students more holistically. Nurturing social and emotional development has broad implications and long-lasting effects, such as reducing risky behaviors, decreasing drop-out rates, and reducing depression and anxiety in adulthood (The Aspen Institute, 2016). Schools, educators, policymakers, and youth-serving organizations have integrated social and emotional learning – identified by some as a “missing piece in efforts to reach the array of goals associated with improving schooling in the United States” – into schools (Elias, et al., 1997). The increasing emphasis on “non-academic” factors that can bolster social, emotional, academic, and life-long outcomes has led to recent changes to federal policy, expanding opportunities to address SEL in schools. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which was signed into law in December 2015, encourages the use of SEL in academic settings by requiring that schools be held accountable for measuring and reporting on “at least one non-academic factor” (Sparks, 2016).

“Because relationships and emotional processes affect how and what we learn, schools and families must effectively address these aspects of the educational process for the benefit of all students.”

– Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011

Communities In Schools (CIS) is well-positioned to address many of the social and emotional needs and challenges facing students. The mission of CIS is to surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life. CIS takes a holistic approach to education with

our unique model of Integrated Student Supports (ISS), which means that we focus on “developing or securing and coordinating supports that target academic and non-academic barriers to achievement” (Moore & Emig, 2014).

Many of the students served by CIS are from impoverished, low-income backgrounds¹. Research suggests that students living in poverty are more likely to experience both acute (i.e., single traumatic event) and chronic stressors (i.e., sustained stress over time), which can influence children’s psychological development and result in social and emotional difficulties (Jensen, 2009). For these students, building social and emotional skills through SEL is exceedingly important.

This research brief provides an overview of SEL, describes the impact of SEL on student outcomes, and shares how Communities In Schools can leverage SEL to help students graduate and live more fulfilling and healthy lives.

WHAT ARE THE KEY CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING?

Researchers, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders use a variety of terms to distinguish social and emotional learning from academic content knowledge traditionally taught in school. Social and emotional learning is most often interchangeable or synonymous with ideas and concepts like “soft skills, emotional intelligence, [...] personal qualities, character, virtue, non-cognitive skills, 21st century skills, and so on” (Whitehurst, 2016).

Common Social and Emotional Competencies

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a leader in advocating for SEL, categorizes and defines skills in 5 competency areas:

- **Self-awareness:** the ability to accurately recognize the impact of emotions and thoughts on behavior
- **Self-management:** the ability to regulate one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations (i.e. managing stress, controlling impulses, working toward achieving goals)
- **Social awareness:** the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, ability to recognize the resources for support from family, home, and community
- **Relationship skills:** the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding connections with diverse individuals and groups (i.e. communicating effectively, active listening, conflict resolution)

¹ For the 2017-2018 school year, 92% of CIS case-managed students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL), which is a proxy for poverty.

- **Responsible decision making:** the ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012; Duffell, et al., 2016).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), defines social and emotional learning as involving “the processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (2012).

HOW DOES A FOCUS ON SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IMPACT STUDENT SUCCESS?

The benefits of SEL are substantial and impact not only students’ academic success but students’ overall life success and well-being. The skills, characteristics, and behaviors addressed through SEL positively influence youth in the social, emotional, academic, and occupational aspects of their lives.

Social and Emotional Outcomes

High-quality SEL interventions and programs have the ability to significantly enhance social and emotional skills and foster improvements in attitudes and behavior (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011), and research has shown substantial gain for students following involvement in SEL programming. For instance, a meta-analysis conducted by CASEL in 2011 found that high-fidelity implementation of SEL programming was associated with a decline of 9 percentage points in students’ problem behaviors and an increase of 9 percentage points in students’ prosocial skills (i.e., the ability to appropriately manage emotions and conflict) (Duffell, et al., 2016).

Students in kindergarten through 8th grade that participate in SEL programming have been found to develop better social and emotional skills, including more positive attitudes toward themselves, school, and others, improved social behaviors, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and ultimately demonstrate improved academic performance (Payton, et al., 2008).

Academic Outcomes

The classroom environment often poses a challenge for students who struggle to control themselves and their emotions, lack positive peer relationships, or are in emotional distress. These students are less able to focus and more likely to be disruptive or distract from the learning of others. In such cases, effectively addressing the social and emotional needs of students through SEL supports can improve students’ perfor-

mance in the classroom. A large-scale study of over 270,000 students from kindergarten through high school showed that students who participated in an SEL curriculum improved their academic achievement by 11 percentile points compared to students who did not participate in an SEL program (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011)

Additionally, addressing students’ self-views and self-beliefs can improve academic performance. In other words, students’ performance in the classroom improves when they believe in their ability to succeed through effort. Research has shown that students with greater self-efficacy participate more readily, work harder, persist longer, and have fewer adverse emotional reactions when they encounter difficulties than do students low in self-efficacy who doubt their capabilities (Bandura, 1997; Zimmerman, 2000). Academic self-efficacy is associated with greater academic achievement independent of intelligence, personality traits, and global self-esteem (Marsh & Craven, 2006; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Robbins, et al., 2004; Valentine, DuBois, & Cooper, 2004; Zuffiano, 2013).

Relatedly, changing students’ beliefs about their capacity to improve their skills or abilities with hard work or effort holds promise as a means of improving academic performance. Specifically, students with growth mindsets have been shown to perform better and persist longer over time in academic tasks than with students with fixed mindsets (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). Students from lower-income families have been found to be less likely to hold a growth mindset than more affluent peers, but those who do hold a growth mindset appeared to be buffered against the negative effects of poverty on academic achievement (Claro, Paunesku, & Dweck, 2016). Thus, enhancing growth mindset is a promising avenue for promoting the academic success of all students.

Life Outcomes

By implementing SEL programming in schools to address social and emotional challenges at an early age, providers can offer “a more unified and coordinated approach that targets a broader spectrum of positive youth outcomes that extend into lifelong success, including enhancing the social-emotional climates of classrooms, schools, and districts” (Greenberg et al., 2003). Promoting healthy and adaptive social and emotional skills and behaviors has implications for students’ long-term outcomes, including relationships, job prospects, and overall well-being. Indeed, “[these] and other characteristics influence people’s educational attainment, employment and earnings as much as or more than academic achievement as measured by standardized achievement tests” (AEI/Brookings Working Group on Poverty and Opportunity, 2015). SEL has the power to establish life-long patterns of positive social behavior and adaptive emotional skills, equipping individuals with the means to address and overcome challenges to live a healthy, fulfilling life.

COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE SEL PROGRAMMING

SEL programming and interventions vary greatly in their content, structure, and implementation. However, research highlights several components that have been found to enhance the effectiveness of SEL programming and increase the likelihood of building students' social-emotional skills. Such components include:

- Implementing a whole-school approach rather than a single program as a silver bullet (Jones & Bouffard, 2012)
- Reaching out to and including people beyond students and teachers, such as members of the community, other school staff, and parents (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Shafer, 2016)
- Embedding the programming into school climate and culture (Jones & Bouffard, 2012)
- Focusing on building SEL and academic skills concurrently (Jones & Bouffard, 2012)
- Weaving SEL programming into curriculum throughout the school day rather than teaching it in short, targeted sessions (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).
- Developing SEL skills “in the context of daily life as social challenges and other teaching opportunities arise” (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).
- Embedding SEL programs within the framework of a formal school-family partnership to allow students to apply their developing social and emotional skills in school, at home, and in the community (Duffell, et al., 2016)
- Creating learning environments where students feel safe, feel that they belong, and feel a sense of community (Brackett & Rivers, 2013)
- Considering the SEL skills of school staff, as it is important for adults to take care of and develop their own SEL skills and needs (Shafer, 2016).

Implementing SEL effectively requires a substantial investment on the part of the school, as “SEL should exist everywhere at school, across the building – with every adult in the building on board.” (Shafer, 2016). With a commitment to helping students succeed in school and life, Communities In Schools can serve as a valuable partner and resource for schools implementing SEL.

THE CIS MODEL AND SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

As CASEL points out, “SEL programming is based on the understanding that the best learning emerges in the context of supportive relationships that make learning challenging, engaging, and meaningful” (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012). The foundation of the CIS model is based on our belief in the transformative power of a

student’s one-on-one relationship with a caring adult. At the center of the CIS model is a site coordinator who works inside schools to coordinate and provide integrated student supports. Site coordinators provide individual case management for students in need and also bring students into contact with other caring adults and peers. As part of the CIS model, site coordinators often broker in adult mentors, volunteers, and counselors, bring in professionals or members of community-based organizations to provide supports, and advocate on behalf of students by helping to forge positive relationships with school staff and/or family members. This is an important component of SEL because, according to research, social support from peers, parents, and/or educators is a crucial protective factor for youth. Social support may increase academic performance by buffering against stress and emotional distress, and thus enhancing focus, motivation, and attention in the classroom (Garnefski & Diekstra, 1996; Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Wang, Selman, Dishion, & Stormshak, 2010; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Social support may be even more important for students living in poverty. Research suggests that the effect of social support on academic performance may be influenced by socioeconomic status (SES) such that the social support has a stronger effect on academic performance for students from low SES backgrounds than for students from middle or high SES backgrounds (Malecki & Demaray, 2006).

Site coordinators in the CIS network deliver and/or broker services in **Three Tiers of Support**:

Tier One supports are school-wide services that are available to all students, regardless of their risk for developing serious problems. A site coordinator partners with school staff and administrators on whole-school initiatives. In a school implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a site coordinator can reinforce school-wide expectations, foster a positive school climate, and promote SEL characteristics school-wide.

Tier Two supports are targeted programs and sustained interventions provided for specific students over an extended period of time. These services are often provided in a group setting for students with a shared need or goal. To build SEL skills, students may participate in support groups or evidence-based programming.

Tier Three supports are high-intensity, individualized services provided in a one-on-one setting to students with highly specified needs. For example, CIS of Chicago site coordinators will provide individualized counseling or refer case-managed students to professional mental health providers.

Many CIS affiliates are already partnering in schools to implement SEL with the students they serve. [CIS of Chicago](#) has been a recognized and approved provider of SEL services through the Chicago Public Schools’ Office of Social Emotional Learning. As a Tier 1 support, site coordinators conduct a school needs assessment to help identify SEL priorities across the school community and support the school in sustaining and expanding existing schoolwide SEL initiatives (such as PBIS).

Site coordinators also case-manage up to 50 students at each site. As a Tier 2 support, case-managed students may engage in small group interventions based on their SEL needs. The groups utilize evidence-based models or curricula such as Rainbows, Bounce Back, or Cognitive Behavioral Interventions for Trauma in Schools (CBITS). Additionally, case-managed students with intensive needs may receive individual counseling as a Tier 3 support. Depending on the needs of the individual student, CIS of Chicago site coordinators either provide counseling through evidence-based interventions to build SEL skills or refer the student to an outside provider of professional mental health services, in which case the site coordinator continues case-management and reinforces the student's skills.

[CIS of Central Texas](#) serves the Austin Independent School District (AISD), which participates in a CASEL pilot program to develop a model for systemic SEL. In some AISD schools, CIS staff members assist with overall school planning and implementation by training teachers about the effects of trauma on students and how to educate and care for students experiencing trauma. CIS staff also reinforce school-wide SEL lessons and concepts with groups of students and case-managed students. CIS of Central Texas also developed a program known as [XY-Zone](#), which is used as a Tier 2 support that helps adolescent men develop social and emotional skills so they can be successful in school and beyond. The program focuses on the 5Rs: Respect, Responsibility, Relationships, Role Modeling, and Reaching Out. Students set goals, hold peers accountable, practice their social and emotional skills, and learn how to apply those skills as they transition into manhood. Through CIS of Central Texas, XY-Zone serves 450 adolescent men per year – 4,866 total as of the 2015-2016 school year. The program is also implemented at several other CIS affiliates across the network.

[CIS of the Charleston Area](#) implements [Second Step](#), a social and emotional curriculum suitable for students in preschool through 8th grade that utilizes repetition, music, visual stimuli, brain busters, and short, informative lessons to teach students valuable social skills. CIS of Charleston implements Second Step for case-managed early learners, as a Tier 2 intervention for students in preschool through 3rd grade, and a Tier 1 support for elementary school students.

CIS is well-poised to play a part in a school-wide commitment and implementation of SEL. Site coordinators work as champions for students, providing support and encouragement in an effort to build important social and emotional skills. Additionally, site coordinators collaborate with school leadership to determine the best approaches or programs to meet the social and emotional needs of the school and student body. The CIS model of ISS aligns directly with research on SEL and can be leveraged to ensure that students have the social and emotional skills to succeed in school and throughout life.

A recently-released randomized control study of CIS case management found that students receiving case management support from CIS:

- Reported being **more connected** to adults
- Maintained **more positive and supportive relationships** with their peers
- Were **more engaged** with school
- Had **more positive attitudes** toward school
- Held stronger beliefs that **education has value** for their lives

(Parise et al., 2017)

FURTHER RESOURCES

The [Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development \(SEAD\)](#) is comprised of leaders in education, science, policy, and research. SEAD's website includes resources, videos, and presentations to help schools support the whole student.

[CASEL](#) has published guides with evidence-based programming recommendations and resources for implementing effective SEL programs:

[Preschool and Elementary Edition](#)

[Middle and High School Edition](#)

[SEL – Why Students Need It. What Districts Are Doing About It](#) is a report by Education First and the NoVo Foundation that explores three different school districts' efforts to implement school-wide SEL.

[Virtual Lab School's Social and Emotional Development Modules](#) is a website that provides 5 lessons on social and emotional development. The modules include videos, opportunities for application, interactive exercises, and additional resources.