

Strategies for Social and Emotional Learning: *Preschool and Elementary Grade Student Learning Standards and Assessment*



Overview

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is an essential component of keeping children and youth safe and healthy. SEL programming delivered in schools helps students succeed in school and in life.

This brief provides Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) project directors (PDs) with information and strategies to implement and assess SEL in their schools and districts. The purpose of this brief is to:

1. Describe SEL student learning standards
2. Introduce a set of universal teacher-rated assessment tools that can be used to measure SEL with preschool through elementary-school children
3. Provide guidance on implementing and assessing SEL in school settings

4. Explain how to effectively use SEL assessment tools to monitor students' progress toward achieving social and emotional development goals

The Importance of SEL

Schools are focusing more on developing SEL programming for students as research highlights the positive relationship of SEL to academic success. Research demonstrates that schools should offer safe and supportive environments to promote the “soft” or “noncognitive” skills that are critical for future success in higher education and business.^{2,3,4} Such social and emotional skills include a strong work ethic, teamwork, self-efficacy, and confidence. Many educators promote accountability in schools for providing the safe and supportive environments — including implementing SEL programs—necessary to achieve these outcomes.⁵

What is Social and Emotional Learning?

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) describes SEL as the process of developing the following five sets of core competencies in the context of safe, caring, well-managed, academically rigorous, and engaging learning environments:

- **Self-awareness**—being able to accurately assess one’s feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence
- **Self-management**—being able to regulate one’s emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles; setting and monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals; expressing emotions effectively
- **Social awareness**—being able to take the perspective of and empathize with others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; recognizing and using family, school, and community resources
- **Relationship skills**—being able to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; seeking help when needed
- **Responsible decision-making**—being able to make decisions based on consideration of reason, ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, respect for self and others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; contributing to the well-being of one’s school and community.¹

One recent analysis of SEL research examined the effect of SEL programs across diverse student outcomes. The analysis reviewed 213 studies that involved over 270,000 students from urban, suburban, and rural schools. The data demonstrated that social and emotional skills could be taught to students. The results also showed that students who received instruction in SEL, when compared with their peers, demonstrated:

- Enhanced skills, attitudes, and positive social behaviors
- Fewer conduct problems
- Lower levels of emotional distress
- Significantly improved academic performance, scoring an average of 11 percentile points higher on standardized tests⁶

Educators who work with preschool-age children have long understood the importance of addressing social and emotional development.^{7,8} In fact, research shows that “one of the most consistent findings in the early childhood literature is that an emotionally warm and positive approach in learning situations leads to constructive behavior in children.”⁸

For older children, improving the emotional quality of classroom interactions positively predicts growth in reading and math achievement from first through fifth grades.⁹ While starting early is important, SEL across all years of schooling can enhance students’ social and emotional behaviors that will impact their success in school and beyond.³

SEL Student Learning Standards

Rigorous standards describing what students should know and be able to do are essential for instruction in any subject area, especially core academic subjects (English Language Arts, math, science, and social studies) and SEL. [The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#) is conducting a review of SEL standards from preschool to high school for all 50 states and the 6 territories.

Preliminary Findings from the State Scan of Preschool SEL Standards

The CASEL state scan of SEL standards is still in progress, but a number of findings have begun to

emerge. Most notably, it appears that the preschool environment is far ahead of the K–12 educational system in establishing comprehensive standards for children’s social and emotional development. The scan conducted by CASEL of preschool learning standards found that 49 states and the District of Columbia currently have standards for children’s social and emotional development.

Additionally, some states also provide guidelines for preschool educators about how to support social and emotional development, and/or how educators can monitor progress toward standards. Below are links to examples of standards in five states:

- [California Preschool Learning Foundations](#)
- [Idaho Early Learning eGuidelines](#) (Domain 3: Social and Emotional Learning)
- [Pennsylvania Learning Standards for Early Childhood](#) (Pre-Kindergarten)
- [Revised Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines](#)
- [Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks](#)

Preschool, Kindergarten, and Early Elementary Education Universal SEL Standards

Some states have developed SEL standards for preschool, kindergarten, and early elementary grades as part of their efforts to integrate these strategies into the early years of education. Below are examples of standards in two states:

- [Idaho Early Learning eGuidelines](#) (First, Second and Third Grades, Domain 3: Social and Emotional Learning)
- [Pennsylvania Early Learning Standards through Second Grade](#)

K-12 SEL Standards—the Illinois Model

At the K-12 level, many states integrate at least a few elements of SEL into standards for curriculum areas such as language arts, social studies, and health. Illinois is the only state that has developed a comprehensive set of free-standing K-12 SEL standards with its [Illinois Learning Standard for Social/Emotional Learning](#).

A broadly representative group—teachers, school administrators, student support staff, human services professionals, and parents, all with expertise

in child development and learning, curriculum design, and instruction—developed these SEL goals, standards, benchmarks, and performance descriptors.

The Illinois standards are focused on three overarching goals:

- Goal 1: Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.
 - » Learning standard A: Identify and manage one’s emotions and behavior.
 - » Learning standard B: Recognize personal qualities and external supports.
 - » Learning standard C: Demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals.
- Goal 2: Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.
 - » Learning standard A: Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others.
 - » Learning standard B: Recognize individual and group similarities and differences.
 - » Learning standard C: Use communication and social skills to interact effectively with others.
 - » Learning standard D: Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways.
- Goal 3: Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.
 - » Learning standard A: Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions.
 - » Learning standard B: Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations.
 - » Learning standard C: Contribute to the well-being of one’s school and community.

A number of other states have also developed a set of free-standing K-12 standards that address one of more important aspects of social and emotional development:

- [Kansas Standards for Communication](#)
- [Oklahoma Rubric Describing School Climate](#)
- [Pennsylvania School Climate Standards \(Draft\)](#)
- [Pennsylvania Interpersonal Skills Standards \(Draft\)](#)
- [Tennessee Service-Learning Standards](#)
- [Vermont’s Vital Results Standards within its Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities](#)
- [Washington Communication Learning Standards](#)

Measuring Progress in Adopting SEL Standards

As research emphasizing the importance of SEL for academic progress becomes more widely known, and standards for what social and emotional competencies students should exhibit become more prevalent, measuring students’ progress toward standards becomes a vital task.

As with standards adoption, movement toward the widespread use of reliable and valid measures of social and emotional competencies is much more advanced in the preschool domain than it is in K–12 education. Quality improvement and accountability initiatives in programs such as Head Start, state-funded pre-kindergarten, early childhood special education, and child care have led to a variety of direct (administered to children) and indirect (administered to adults who know the children) assessments.

The National Research Council’s review of early childhood assessment indicates that any measurement of children should be guided by two principles: (1) *purposefulness*, in which the measure is designed or selected based on how it will be used (such as to evaluate program outcomes or to assess a child’s functional capacities); and (2) “*systematicity*,” in which assessments are only given in the context of care and educational supports that can constructively use the data to promote children’s optimal development.¹⁰

Within the early childhood arena, several compendia of early childhood measures, including SEL assessments, have already been developed, including the following:

- [Early Childhood Measures Profiles](#)
- [Quality in early childhood care and education settings: A compendium of measures \(2nd edition\)](#)
- [Resources for Measuring Services and Outcomes in Head Start Programs Serving Infants and Toddlers.](#)
- [The Compendium of Screening Tools for Early Childhood Social-emotional Development.](#)

For elementary age students, fewer such compilations of measures exist, but include:

- [Scales from Student Questionnaire, Child Development Project for Elementary School Students \(grades 3–6\).](#)
- [Individual Protective Factors Index.](#)
- [Compendium of Social-emotional Learning and Associated Assessment Measures.](#)

SEL Assessment

As SEL standards become more widely adopted, it is increasingly important to develop tools to measure SEL. In order to identify and develop measures of SEL for practitioners, in 2008, CASEL convened the Preschool to Elementary School Social and Emotional Learning Assessment Work Group to consider how best to assess SEL among preschool through grade 5 children, including identifying several quality teacher-rating measures, for assessing students' SEL.

Recommendations for assessments to review were based on the Work Group members' experience and knowledge of available assessments and a broad search of the literature. In selecting assessments, the Work Group sought assessments that:

1. Addressed most of the five SEL core competencies
2. Were appropriate for the pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade student population
3. Had an established track record

Teacher Behavior Rating Scales Of Students' Social-Emotional Competence

One advantage of teacher rating scales is that teachers are good informants about their students because they are familiar with children's behavior in an important environment (school), and teachers are generally skilled raters because they know a large number of children with whom to compare any one student's skills or behaviors. Furthermore, teacher SEL assessments that are in line with state SEL standards will enhance teachers' capacities to observe and enhance students' skills and dispositions in the social-emotional domain.

The SEL Assessment Rating Approach

The Work Group identified teacher rating scales meeting the following criteria:

1. The assessment should measure SEL constructs. It should have some documentation (e.g., a manual) that contains a description of the measure, the constructs assessed, and any assignment of items to scales.
2. The assessment should be appropriate for the grades pre-k through five.
3. The assessment should be able to be administered within a reasonable time frame (e.g., 10–20 minutes). The reasonableness of administration time depends on whether all children in a school or classroom, or only select children, are assessed. (Collecting ratings for all students will produce as complete a profile as possible of a school's SEL competencies, but time constraints may indicate that only rating a random sample of students in each classroom is possible.)
4. The assessment should have adequate reliability and validity.
5. There should be standards data or benchmarks available to help interpret results. (Although not all reviewed measures had norms or benchmarks, their presence was noted.)
6. Where possible, the measure should be available for electronic administration and scoring, which is both faster and less expensive than paper-based administration and hand-scoring.

Additionally, the Work Group noted the cost of the assessment per student, manual, assessment form, and other services.

Table 1 lists the reviewed assessments, the grades they cover, and the constructs that they assess. Schools can benefit from using any of the assessments reviewed. All of the assessments have the following strengths:

1. All of the teacher versions were appropriate for students in grades pre-kindergarten through eight.
2. They can be administered by teachers, school personnel, and mental health professionals.
3. They can be completed in 10-20 minutes per student.
4. They provide standards or benchmarks that can be used to compare individual student scores.
5. According to their manuals, they have established reliability and validity.
6. They state that they can be used for multiple purposes, including student assessment, screening, and evaluating program effects.

Schools may decide to select other assessments if they feel that a particular measure is appropriate for their environment and students.

Implementing SEL in Your School or District

Collecting and Reviewing Data

It is imperative for administrators, teachers, and staff to routinely collect and review data about the social and emotional competencies of their students and then use those data to inform decisions about how to increase successful outcomes for their particular population.

The basic process in using data about students' social-emotional competencies is to:

1. Understand the facts
2. Share the facts with program implementers and key stakeholders (e.g., school administrators)
3. Act on the facts

Using one of the teacher-rating tools identified in this brief, the school team can systematically

Table 1. Summary of Grades and Constructs Assessed for Teacher Ratings of Students' SEL Competencies

Assessment Name	Grade Level							Constructs Assessed				
	Preschool	Kindergarten	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth	Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Social Awareness	Relationship Skills	Responsible Decision-Making
Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS)												
Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA)												
Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA)												
Social-Emotional Assets and Resilience Scale (SEARS)												
Social Skills Improvement System (SISS)												

measure and track their students' social-emotional competencies at the classroom, grade, school, and district levels. For each survey scale, the team should look at the overall results, as well as results for important subgroups of students.

When examining SEL data you can expand your understanding of results by doing the following:

- **Look for connections across scales for different groups of students.** For example, students who are English language learners or students with disabilities may have strikingly different profiles of social-emotional competencies than other students.
- **Look at trends.** Student competencies may increase, decrease, or stay the same over time. Examining trends helps focus on growing issues and make adjustments in SEL programming to address these issues
- **Look at the social-emotional competence data in conjunction with other school data.** Reviewing other data, such as attendance,

grades, disciplinary referrals, and achievement, can help you understand the big picture

Developing an SEL Action Plan

The team should then identify and prioritize areas for improvement that are grounded in the data and consistent with the vision for SEL. Teams may want to capitalize upon existing resources, or may choose to start fresh. Solutions should be systematic and meaningful (not “quick fixes”), be theoretically sound, and use evidence-based approaches that have been proven in real-world settings.

Two CASEL publications are designed to assist in the selection of programs or strategies and can help inform your action plan:

- [Sustainable Schoolwide Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\): Implementation Guide and Toolkit](#)
- [Safe and Sound: An Educational Leader's Guide to Evidence-based SEL Programs](#)

Other SEL Assessment Methods

In addition to teacher behavior rating scales of students' social-emotional competence, there are other relevant SEL assessment methods:

1. **Student self-report.** Although there are concerns with the validity and reliability of this assessment method especially for this grade range, many experts believe it is important to acknowledge the students' perspective in the assessment of their SEL competencies starting in third grade.
2. **Third-party Observational Methods and Performance-based Assessments.** These methods are valid, but require trained observers and administrators and considerably more time to administer than teacher ratings or self-report. As such, their cost is relatively higher. However, one observational measure, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is notable in the context of SEL assessment. The CLASS is a proven observational instrument assessing classroom quality in preschool through 12th-grade classrooms focusing on the quality of teachers' emotional, organizational, and instructional interventions with students. The CLASS is being used around the country. It has been adopted into every Head Start classroom in the United States, is used in more than 700 pre-kindergarten classrooms in the Chicago area, and will be integrated into over 4,000 classrooms in Georgia. Training sessions for the CLASS observers have been conducted in nearly every state.

Monitoring Results

Students' social and emotional competencies should be measured each year. The results will provide valuable information about whether an SEL program is on track. Additionally, other indicators that are readily available can be useful in assessing SEL programming outcomes. These include:

- Student grades
- Student attendance
- Number of disciplinary referrals (office visits, detentions, suspensions, expulsions)
- Achievement test scores

By using multiple sources of information instead of using one data source, PDs have a deeper insight into the school. Ensuring access to multiple sources of data builds a culture that values the use of reliable, complete information to guide decisions and solve problems.

Guiding Principles for SEL Assessment

Assessing SEL is crucial for improving implementation, evaluating if the programming is working, and documenting improvements for funders and other stakeholders.

The following set of guiding principles for SEL assessment will help you become familiar with the purpose and use of the measures and their associated SEL programming.

1. **Maximize benefits and avoid harm.** Conducting assessments takes valuable time and energy, and may overburden staff or cause anxiety among students. Therefore, SEL assessments should only be conducted for a specific, defined purpose (such as to evaluate or improve a program or curriculum). The results from these assessments should help schools make data-informed decisions with the goal of creating realistic SEL implementation plans to enhance educator performance and the academic, social, and emotional growth of students.
2. **Clarify and communicate goals of SEL assessment.** The goals of SEL assessment are to: better understand children's strengths and areas of need; improve students' SEL skills and competencies; and to help students reach successful academic and life outcomes. It is important that everyone involved in the assessment process understands how evaluating the programming is necessary to help reach these goals, and the important part they play in doing so.
3. **Implement specialized SEL training.** School and program staff should receive appropriate SEL assessment training so that they can administer the assessment fairly and use the assessment results constructively.
4. **Understand the strengths and limitations of individual assessment tools.** SEL assessment tools are not one-size-fits-all, and understanding the specific SEL needs of your population through data collection and analysis is important in choosing the right tool. SEL assessments should be selected based on:
 - » The appropriateness of the measure to your students' developmental level and needs
 - » Ease of use
 - » Cost considerations
 - » Provisions for reporting and interpreting results
 - » Programmatic planning needs of the school
5. **Use evidence-based assessments.** SEL assessments should have strong data supporting their effectiveness for your proposed uses. Standards data, reliability and validity evidence, and data about the cultural and linguistic appropriateness of the assessment should be strong.

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Please visit the following resources for more information and guidance on SEL.

Related Resources

[The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#)

[Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\) and Student Benefits: Implications for the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Core Elements](#)

[Element 3: Student Behavioral, Social, and Emotional Supports](#)

[Element 5: Early Childhood Social and Emotional Learning Programs](#)

[Leading an SEL School: Steps to implement social and emotional learning for all students](#)

[Youth and Schools Today: Why SEL Is Needed](#)

[Social and Emotional Learning](#)

[Positive Impact of Social and Emotional Learning for Kindergarten to Eighth Grade Students: Findings from Three Scientific Reviews](#)

[Sustainable Schoolwide Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\): Implementation Guide and Toolkit](#)

[Safe and Sound: An Educational Leader's Guide to Evidence-based SEL Programs](#)

Endnotes

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