

# *Building* **PEOPLE**

**SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING**  
for Kids, Families, Schools & Communities



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### Editor's Reflection Questions

- What SEL strategies do you have that are focused on prevention?  
What SEL strategies do you have that are focused on intervention?  
What ties your prevention and intervention efforts together?
- What practical and hands-on tools for caring adults, including teachers, youth leaders, and families, do your SEL efforts have?
- How do you measure culture and climate?

## NOTES

1. For more information about Love In A Big World, consult [LoveInABigWorld.org](http://LoveInABigWorld.org). More information about Love In A Big World can also be found by connecting with me on LinkedIn and following [@entrepreneurgirl](https://www.linkedin.com/company/entrepreneurgirl) and [@loveinabigworld](https://www.linkedin.com/company/loveinabigworld) on Twitter.
2. The Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools is now defunct. For archived information about the program and its efforts, consult [www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osdfs/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osdfs/index.html).
3. For more information about Communities That Care, consult [www.communitiesthatcare.net/about](http://www.communitiesthatcare.net/about).
4. Albert Bandura. "Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change." *Psychological Review* 84, no. 2 (1977): 191-215.
5. For more information about No Child Left Behind, consult <https://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>.
6. The annual funding appropriated for state grants from the federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities program was reduced by over 100 million dollars between 2003 and 2006. For more information about this program and its funding, consult "Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities: State Grants," U.S. Department of Education, last modified November 1, 2011, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/dvformula/index.html>.
7. For more information about the Center for Safe and Supportive Schools, consult <https://my.vanderbilt.edu/tn-s3-center-vanderbilt/>.
8. For more information about the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, consult [casel.org](http://casel.org).

# GUIDING RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICES INTO THE SEL 2.0 ERA



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## I. ORIGINS OF SEL

Social-emotional learning (SEL) existed as a concept before it was defined and categorized as a practice. Back in graduate school in the mid-1970s, I came to see how important it was for children to have certain basic skills in school, like being able to pay attention, wait their turn, listen carefully, and possess the ability to deal with their own strong, emerging emotions. When I first started working in schools as an educational professional, it became very obvious to me that these were essential basic skills in the classroom.

In graduate school, my research showed that kids who lacked these basic skills were the kids usually labeled as having a "psychopathology," a diagnosis that followed them and negatively affected their entire educational experiences for the rest of their lives.<sup>1</sup> This was really cemented for me in my graduate school practicum with the Hartley-Salmon Child and Family Clinic in Hartford, Connecticut. As a practicum student, I was invisible to the staff. I would sit in the staff room and listen as people would

complain, saying, “If only this would happen! If only that had happened! If only the school had done this or that!” And everything they were saying struck me as things that were entirely possible. The school could have been doing those things, and parents could have been doing these things, and the outcome would have been better if they did. But the structures to facilitate this communication and help those solutions happen systematically were either lacking or simply nonexistent. That was when I began to carve out my path forward in the social-emotional learning framework.

Social-emotional learning as a practice itself came about when Dan Goleman published his book *Emotional Intelligence* in 1995.<sup>2</sup> The book had chapters on applications of emotional intelligence in many different areas of society, and one of the chapters was focused on emotional intelligence in schools. Dan Goleman’s book put the emotions where they belong—front and center—by drawing attention to various neuropsychological research showing how the emotional processes in the brain were, in fact, influencing the very same cognitive processes that we had been focusing on as educators. A passionate group of people, including Tim Shriver, Linda Lantieri, Mark Greenberg, and Roger Weissberg, began to talk about how to take this work in emotional intelligence and systematically apply it to the schools and the general education system.

This led to the formation of the organization named CASEL, which, at the time of its formation, stood for the Collaborative for the Advancement of Social and Emotional Learning.<sup>3</sup> A lot of debate went into that name, especially around whether “emotional” should be included in the organization’s title. There was a vocal group that felt that mentioning emotions in the title would make schools not interested in the work of the organization. In the past, these things were thought of as social competence and social cognitive skills, with much less emphasis on the emotional part. Ultimately, though, the research won the day, and that is why we’re talking about emotional processes here and now.

Social-emotional learning really became an official term in 1997 with the publication of *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for*

*Educators* by ASCD (formerly known as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development).<sup>4-5</sup> That was a big step. Over 100,000 copies of the book were distributed, and people began to explore, define, and expand the field.

Interestingly enough, though, real traction for the theory and philosophy did not take place until CASEL changed its name. In 2001, a meeting of superintendents of schools and other district officials convened at the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan, to discuss SEL and its lack of traction in classrooms and schools. The Fetzer Institute was founded by John Fetzer, a philanthropist and visionary who invented the lights that are used in night baseball and the unidimensional radio wave, which serves as the foundation of our system for radio stations. Later in his life, he turned his attention toward spirituality and health-related issues, including social-emotional life and well-being, so it’s only fitting that the Fetzer Institute was the site of a major moment in the history of SEL.

At the Fetzer Institute retreat, we focused on the same question: “Social-emotional learning is a great thing, so why is it not getting traction?” It turned out the problem wasn’t the inclusion of “emotional” in CASEL’s name, as some suspected. The problem was the lack of the word “academic”—it gave teachers and administrators pause. So CASEL changed its name to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, exchanging the word “academic” for the word “advancement” so that the name could change without changing the acronym. That change launched CASEL and the SEL field into the stratosphere. Mentioning “academic” acknowledged the main purpose of the practice for educators and really made a tremendous difference in the uptake and acceptance by educators across the country.

## II. CURRENT STATE OF SEL

Almost every successful social-emotional program has a morning meeting, a sharing circle, or some other period of time when people get

together and talk. The communication and common language used is very important for the successful implementation of a program.

There's also a societal perspective to examine regarding current issues of civil discourse. We're starting to see a growing recognition that social-emotional factors are critical elements of everyday life both inside and outside of the school. The general public doesn't universally understand this, but it is much more widely appreciated in education than it was three to five years ago. But even though it has become more appreciated and accepted, it doesn't automatically bring with it the organized and effective structure necessary to follow those beliefs.

A district is often going to have violence prevention programs, drug and opiate prevention programs, and special suicide prevention programs set up. All of these programs can be considered as efforts to address social-emotional issues, so when a school has a social-emotional curriculum or approach, they can handle conversations around every one of these issues without breaking stride because they have a language and a framework in place that they can use to talk about it. There is built-in social-emotional learning and character development. Whether we are talking about someone who makes a bad decision with drugs or guns or cheating or bullying, we're talking about a common set of skill deficiencies and character issues that are not separated out. The issue is that, when we start to define and compartmentalize different problem content areas, we draw a lot of attention away from the central issues. We distract kids, and we distract teachers. We drive everyone nuts.

When tragic events happen, we need to have the structures already in place and ready if we're ever going to be proactive and get past a reactive mode. If something terrible happens in the world, we want our kids to know about it, but currently we don't ask them to look at it in a familiar language. Instead, we teach them a new language to process the content. Metaphorically, it's like teaching them French and insisting they read an article about the shooting in Parkland, Florida, in French rather than in English. It's absurd to imagine us doing something like that, yet that's almost exactly what we do when traumatic and catastrophic social events happen.

On a national scene, we see tremendous public sentiment against guns, but it's not being translated in the same way into action. SEL is in the same boat. There are many educators out there who believe that social-emotional competencies are essential, but because the current incentive structures are continuously focused on academic performance measured by standardized tests, people remain reluctant to get on board the SEL bandwagon. They have trouble seeing how SEL and current assessment demands can coexist.

### *SEL Is at the Core of All Educational Issues*

We have to take a step back and look at the bigger picture and understand that social-emotional development is at the core of any interpersonal issues that a school deals with, regardless of the specifics and details. The school has to use the structure and language that they already have in place so that, whenever something happens in the world, they don't have to have a special assembly. Instead, built-in time and mechanisms are available to talk about these things in a trusted context. That is the most powerful thing of all.

In the past decade, social-emotional learning has focused more attention on urban minority populations. These are populations for which SEL curricula had very rarely been developed in previous research because it was extremely challenging to have randomized control trials in those environments. But they represent environments where there's as much need for SEL and character development as in more advantaged settings.

We found out that if we do not help kids see that they have a sense of positive purpose, there's very little good reason for them to want to learn social competencies or academics. Having a positive goal or purpose and achieving academic success is a package deal. We have come to appreciate deeply and dramatically the fact that we must focus on kids' sense of purpose for them to see hope in the future. It's difficult for kids living in the context of poverty, especially those who worry about their own deportation or the deportation of their family members. It's not easy for them to see a sense of purpose. A lot of kids are walking around with a tremendous sense of pessimism for the future,

and it's not necessarily unjustified. Like it or not, this has to be dealt with in the classroom.

### ***Creating a Sense of Agency and Positive Purpose***

If we want to inspire kids in urban environments, we must create opportunities in the school for them to have social-emotional competencies and agency and help them begin gradually from there to feel they also have the same agency outside the school as well. To this end, we created our SEL program's student ambassadors. These are students who are elected as peer leaders and actually co-lead SEL lessons. They do positive purpose projects in school and, in many other ways, have a voice when school issues come up. For example, in a school in New Jersey, they had four incidents of kids making mock threats about shooting a teacher or bringing a gun to the school. It wasn't substantiated, and when the kids were eventually interviewed, it turned out they were only kidding. The school's solution was to mobilize their student ambassadors to address the problem because it was an issue of peer culture, peer conversation, and the climate of the school. For adults to come down on this in a heavy-handed way and demand discipline or punishment was not the answer. It wouldn't have solved the underlying issues. Kids need to begin to feel and see their worth, value, and purpose in the school before they're going to be able to carry that out into the future. Simply put, if you want the kids to respect and use SEL, you can't just teach this stuff—you have to live it.

### ***State***

How social-emotional learning is advancing is a function of the state you're in. In each state, there is a different threshold and awareness of SEL. In states like Massachusetts and New Jersey, there is a very high public awareness of SEL—many schools have it, and more are examining and implementing it. These states are actually heading toward a tipping point, a critical mass where it's becoming widely accepted and implemented as a standard practice. In other states, SEL isn't present at all. But states like California, Arizona, Connecticut, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Washington, Oregon,

and others are all developing their internal organizational capacity to support schools in SEL implementation. The idea is to have SEL implemented by state education agencies in the state capitals themselves and then let it spread across additional states from there. That's what it takes—an organized, systematic effort to help implementation—if we're ever going to see this move forward in the way that we all would like. It takes an educational network to make it work. I have not seen an individual school implement and sustain social-emotional learning successfully by itself. That's why I am working with colleagues Jim Vetter and Nova Biro in Massachusetts to establish a national network of state-level SEL advocacy and implementation support organizations called SEL4US.<sup>6</sup>

### **III. COST OF MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO**

Here's what we have to recognize: we live in an increasingly complex world that places tremendous demands on individuals as citizens, workers, parents, and community members. We need our teachers to be engaged in more preparation before we feel confident in saying they're ready to implement social-emotional learning with our children. We have folks who are already teaching who need support in building these core SEL competencies. At Rutgers and the College of Saint Elizabeth in Morristown, New Jersey, we have the Academy for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools, which is focused on the expertise of existing teachers and building up their capacity to implement SEL.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, we have the newbies, and there's no way we can prepare them for this unbelievably complex and important job in the extremely limited timeframe that we provide for them during their advanced higher education. This might require a longer post-graduate training period or a longer amount of time in school itself.

It's also equally important that change happens with educational administrators because they determine what occurs in a school. A teacher could already be doing SEL in the classroom, but if the administrator doesn't

know about it or is not interested and supportive, then all the wonderful work does not lead to anything systematic. It's not only a matter of the teachers and students; effective SEL encompasses the entire education system, including custodians, office personnel, and cafeteria staff. Everyone in the building needs to reinforce the practice. The Academy therefore addresses school leaders along with teachers.

If SEL isn't taught in the home, then the school cannot be entirely effective in teaching it. The only way the school can be beneficial is if a unified voice exists among the teachers, the students, the parents, and the school staff. Then it will get its message across in an efficient and all-encompassing way. The secret is that teaching the unified voice must take place over multiple years, just as it does in reading, math, science, and social studies. If you widely vary your curriculum and your pedagogy from year to year, you're not going to get much uptake on the part of kids. The same holds true for SEL.

We have it within our power to avoid becoming fragmented by seeing every individual issue as isolated and separate. We can begin to look at how all these social problems and concerns are examples of SEL and character development that need attention. Students on the fringes think, "Why should I be involved in SEL if I don't have any positive aspirations for the future? Why should I be involved in thinking about long-term consequences if I don't anticipate any good long-term consequences in my life? And why should I trust these teachers who are trying to teach this stuff if I've been hurt by adults in the past?" Helping kids attain a state of forgiveness, compassion, and gratitude is part and parcel of opening them up to learning social-emotional competencies and seeing that they have the potential for a bright future.

#### IV. FORECAST FOR THE FUTURE

When we've seen successful implementation and sustainability, it happened because those schools were connected to other schools doing SEL. The widespread implementation support system turns out to be a necessary

ingredient for SEL to be carried out systematically. An individual school may be able to do it for a little bit by itself, but people leave, leadership changes, the board changes, an issue of the day enters in and takes over, and SEL becomes difficult to sustain. I have not seen a school implement and sustain SEL by itself, but when SEL implementation is part of a larger movement or practice, it's a different story.

An important element necessary for a school to implement SEL successfully is an improved culture and climate. The school should be a building where both adults and children feel welcomed and enjoy. It should be a place that brings a sense of purpose, pride, and contribution. Those are common characteristics in schools that support the social-emotional, character, and academic growth of children, and that's a metric you can apply when visiting or assessing schools. If a school says they're implementing SEL but fails to have a positive climate, they're not doing it the right way. The climate and culture have got to be essential elements of the SEL implementation.

The other thing you'll see in a successful implementation is a common language. You'll see that the language of SEL is not isolated to the SEL class. For instance, if SEL is taught for a 45-minute period once a week or three times a week for 20 minutes, the language has a way of stretching outside the confines of the class. You will see artifacts on classroom walls. You will see posters and sayings in the halls and cafeteria. You will hear people using the prompts and cues of SEL to bring the skills out in the kids. You will hear it happening in classes where it's not being taught. You will go into a social studies class or a language arts class, and you'll hear people talking about feelings and relationships using the SEL lexicon. These are the indicators of a building that has taken on social-emotional learning.

When you implement an SEL curriculum, you've got to bring it in with intentionality. You've got to bring it in with the understanding that you're building a set of important life skills. But what does it mean to develop a skill? You don't build a skill in a very general way; you have to build a skill in a specific, structured way. Almost every SEL curriculum that is worth anything has a self-regulatory component. It teaches some type of emotional regulation

skill. For example, the Social Decision Making/Problem Solving program uses the phrase “Keep Calm.”<sup>8</sup> It isn’t a generic statement; it is a practice. In the curriculum, “Keep Calm” is taught as a series of steps that kids deliberately undertake. If I want a student to invoke a self-calming procedure, I can’t tell the student, “Calm yourself down.” I can’t tell the student, “Be calm.” I can’t tell the student, “Take a deep breath.” I have to tell the student, “Use ‘Keep Calm,’” and they will then move through the procedures of the “Keep Calm” skill set they’ve been taught. I have to make an effort to correctly identify and prompt the skill set that I want the kids to use.

That is a discipline that only comes when people have a shared understanding of the mission and a common language. That’s the main reason why we don’t see the “stickiness” in some of the SEL curricula being implemented. They haven’t taken steps to make sure the principles of that curriculum are followed outside of the SEL instructional environment. Failing to make SEL and its language a standard part of the school day is the single biggest issue and obstacle to long-term successful and effective implementation.

Obviously, we want to extend SEL outside of the school and into the homes too. When the families and the school are aligned in building SEL competencies, it’s a great thing. We wrote *Emotionally Intelligent Parenting* based on that premise.<sup>9</sup> Let’s give the families the tools and skills at home to reinforce the SEL instruction in the school. But what if they don’t? Then they don’t. It mirrors the old days of parenting, when the ability of parents to help kids with academics was very limited. Many parents couldn’t read English while their kids were learning to read in school.

An average school year is 180 days, so a school has that many opportunities every year to influence children. If they implement SEL successfully, the kids are going to learn the SEL skills with or without family involvement. The kids are also going to learn to code-switch with SEL just like they do with everything else. They might not be using their SEL skills at home as much as they’re using them in the school, but if they use them in school and

learn to use them in college and the workplace, they’re going to be in pretty good shape. That’s our goal.

## V. PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

I think we have reached SEL 2.0, a version of SEL which necessarily includes character development. We now recognize the need to be explicit about what previously has been implicit in SEL by acknowledging that SEL is not value-neutral. Nobody wants to have socially and emotionally skilled, smart children with poor character. I refer to current social-emotional and character development as SEL 2.0 because it necessarily brings in the character piece of the puzzle.

We have to be ready and willing to stand by the fact that there are certain values and virtues that schools intentionally need to promote. When you talk to teachers, by and large, they’ve gone into education because they want to help kids become better people. Being “better people” includes being responsible, having integrity, being cooperative and caring, and being supportive of others. When these basic values are implicit in SEL curricula, then, by its very nature, SEL suppresses bullying. When we talk about SEL 2.0, we’re not talking about something that’s value-neutral; we’re talking about a philosophy and curricula that have an implicit value structure linked to caring, kindness, consideration, cooperation, and mutual support. It creates a school culture and climate that exemplifies those attributes.

That’s why I talk about SEL 2.0. That’s why we can’t disconnect social-emotional competencies from character virtues and a positive purpose. In a religious school context—and there are religious schools of various faiths that focus on SEL to some degree—there is a positive purpose philosophy naturally built in. There are wonderful examples of schools that show the social-emotional competencies being used and not used by various religious characters within their scripture. In the public education environment, a sense of positive purpose is something that we must work toward actively

inspiring in our kids. Many of our kids have gone down a dark path, driven to a sense of negative purpose by their home and outside environment. It's understandable, but we have to combat it in the classroom and in the school.

One of the other things sometimes glossed over is that, according to a meta-analysis done by Joseph Durlak in collaboration with CASEL, the strongest successes have been associated with at least two years of implementation.<sup>10</sup> Often, when we talk about SEL, we do it without specifying dosage and saturation, or even defining what those things are. Many of us would agree that, for something to be called social-emotional learning, it has to be implemented for a minimum of thirty to forty-five minutes a week for an entire school year. Experience has shown that this is the absolute minimum required to affect the culture. If it doesn't have that minimum dosage, it's very difficult to say that a school even has an SEL structure in place.

And even that minimum dosage becomes insufficient if it doesn't include the prompts and informal reinforcers used by cafeteria workers, custodians, and office staff. These people are necessary to embed social-emotional learning into the everyday school routine. If we only have SEL in SEL class, then we can't say we truly have social-emotional competence schoolwide. It has to become a pervasive part of what happens in a school, and it should be obvious to an observer. We should be able to look for it and find it in the hallways. Sometimes implementation is successful, and sometimes it's not, but either way it shouldn't be considered an indictment of the SEL program itself—it is a statement about the implementation. No program is implementation proof, but we have enough evidence supporting SEL programs to prove their effectiveness if they are implemented consistently throughout the school.

An analogy about reading is a perfect example. If we only read during reading class, we wouldn't say that we have true literacy. We've always known that literacy is essential, but we are heading to a point as a society where we recognize its gravity. Reading is so critically important as a necessary skill that, in fact, if you cannot read, you're going to be extremely hampered in what you can accomplish in life. In the same way, if you can't read people, if you can't interpret situations, if you can't read feelings and emotional cues,

you are going to be hindered in what you can accomplish in your life even if you have an incredibly high IQ. These are abilities that can be—and should be—taught, and it's going to be recognized more and more on a broader scale that these social-emotional competencies are as basic to human functionality in society as foundational mathematical and linguistic skills.

When SEL is done in a systematic way, there is a very high likelihood of seeing good results at the end. We don't always get results in one year, and we may not even get them in two. Typically, though, we see real results and a major culture change by year three. The secret is to make sure that we have the proper support and benchmarks for good implementation.

#### *Editor's Reflection Questions*

- In your experience, can SEL be effective if it's not present in both the school and the home? What about other organizations within the community? If not, how do we ensure it is a part of each setting?
- Has your school set aside dedicated time to focus solely on SEL? If not, what benefits do you think you're missing? If yes, how have you taken advantage of this time?
- Where have you seen gaps in SEL buy-in and implementation at the district, state, or national level? What must we do as an education community to push SEL buy-in past the tipping point?



## NOTES

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