



## Youth and Schools Today: Why SEL Is Needed

**Society and the life experiences of children and youth changed considerably during the last century. The changes include:**

- Increased economic and social pressures on families.
- Weakening of community institutions that nurture children's social, emotional, and moral development.
- Fewer opportunities for children to engage in unstructured, undirected play with parents, friends, and classmates.<sup>1</sup>
- Fewer children living in two-parent households—in 2006, 67 percent of children ages 0–17 lived with two married parents, down from 77 percent in 1980.<sup>2</sup>
- More children living in households with both parents working full-time, with a corresponding increase in the amount of time children spend in the care of someone other than their primary caregivers.
- Easier access by children to media messages that encourage health-damaging behavior.

All of these factors require schools to make a greater effort to nurture and support the healthy social, emotional, and physical development of children.

**Today, schools are expected to do more than they have ever done in the past, often with diminishing resources.**

- In 1900, the average public school enrolled 40 students, and the size of the average school district was 120 students. Today, an average elementary school enrolls more than 400 pupils, and a typical high school enrolls more than 2,000 pupils.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jarrett, O.S. (2003). Recess in Elementary School: What Does the Research Say? *ERIC Digest*.

<sup>2</sup> Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2007). *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*.

<sup>3</sup> Learning First Alliance (2001). *Every Child Learning: Safe and Supportive Schools*.

- In 1900, schools were more economically, racially, and ethnically homogeneous. Today's schools face unprecedented challenges to educate an increasingly multicultural and multilingual student body and to address the widening social and economic disparities in U.S. society.
- A 2006 national poll conducted by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills found that 80 percent of respondents believe the things students need to learn in school today are different from what they were 20 years ago. In addition to the traditional academic skills, the respondents listed the following skills as critically important for schools to teach: critical thinking and problem solving, ethics and social responsibility, teamwork and collaboration, lifelong learning and self-direction, leadership, creativity and innovation, and global awareness.<sup>4</sup>

Here are some other realities schools are dealing with today:

- According to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of children with developmental delay being served in schools under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) increased 633 percent between 1997 and 2001.
- Kindergarten teachers say that about 20 percent of children entering kindergarten do not yet have the necessary social and emotional skills to be "ready" for school. Of very low-income children, as many as 30 percent may not have the necessary skills.<sup>5</sup>
- The 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), the most current year available, revealed that large percentages of American high school students are involved with substance

<sup>4</sup> Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2007). *A presentation of key findings from a national survey of 800 registered voters conducted September 10-12, 2007*.

<sup>5</sup> Child Trends. (2003). *Kindergarteners' social interaction skills*, from [www.childtrendsdatabank.org](http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org).



use, risky sexual behavior, violence, and mental health difficulties. For example, 16.9 percent of high school students seriously considered attempting suicide; over 40 percent used alcohol, and close to 30 percent had ridden in a car with someone who had been drinking within 30 days of the survey; almost half had sexual intercourse, and almost 40 percent of those students did not use a condom during their last sexual intercourse; and almost 20 percent carried a weapon some time during the past month.<sup>6</sup>

- According to the 2006 Indicators of School Crime and Safety report from the National Center for Education Statistics, 27 percent of schools report daily or weekly bullying incidents. In 2005, more than a quarter of students ages 12-18 reported being bullied within the past six months, with 58 percent of these students bullied once or twice during that period, 25 percent bullied once or twice a month, 11 percent bullied once or twice a week, and 8 percent of students bullied almost every day.
- Students who are supported by caring, qualified adults succeed at high levels, yet 24 percent of students who have considered dropping out of high school feel that no adult in the school cares for them. The current average ratio of school counselors to students is 1 to 476.<sup>7</sup>

**Given this context, the demands on schools to implement effective educational approaches that promote academic success, enhance health, and prevent problem behaviors have grown significantly.**

Yet too many child advocates and researchers, despite their good intentions, have proposed fragmented initiatives to address problems without an adequate understanding of the mission, priorities, and culture of schools.<sup>8</sup> Schools have been inundated with well-intentioned prevention and promotion programs that address such diverse issues as HIV/AIDS, alcohol, careers, character, civics, conflict resolution, delinquency, dropout, family life, health, morals, multiculturalism, pregnancy, service-learning, truancy, and violence.

**For a number of reasons, these uncoordinated efforts often are disruptive.**

- First, they typically are introduced as a series of short-term, fragmented initiatives. Such programs and the

needs they address are not sufficiently linked to the central mission of schools or to the issues for which teachers and other school personnel are held accountable, primarily academic performance.

- Second, without strong leadership and support from school administrators, there is rarely adequate staff development and support for program implementation. Programs that are insufficiently coordinated, monitored, evaluated, and improved over time will have reduced impact on student behavior and are unlikely to be sustained.

**Well-planned and effectively implemented Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programming addresses these problems by providing a coordinated and coherent approach to helping children recognize and manage their emotions, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish positive goals, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations effectively. It also enhances students' connection to school through caring, engaging classroom and school practices.**

Broad-based, schoolwide implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programming has been found to be highly effective in addressing the kinds of problems that are facing today's young people, their families, and their schools. SEL programming is supported by a growing body of rigorous social science research. Joseph A. Durlak of Loyola University Chicago and Roger P. Weissberg of the University of Illinois at Chicago recently analyzed 207 studies of SEL programs. Their findings confirm the positive effects of SEL programming on students participating in school-based SEL programs and provide the best overview of the positive effects of SEL available to date.<sup>9</sup>

Ideally, planned, ongoing, systematic, and coordinated SEL instruction should begin in preschool and continue through high school.<sup>10</sup> Learning social and emotional skills is similar to learning other academic skills in that the effect of initial learning is enhanced over time to address the increasingly complex situations children face regarding academics, social relationships, citizenship, and health. And learning social and emotional skills is best accomplished through effective classroom instruction; student engagement in positive activities in and out of the classroom; and broad student, parent, and community involvement in program planning, implementation, and evaluation.

For more information see [www.CASEL.org](http://www.CASEL.org).

<sup>6</sup> *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005.*

<sup>7</sup> *Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), Whole Child Initiative online newsletter, November 12, 2007.*

<sup>8</sup> *Sarason, S. (1996). The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change, NY: Teachers College Press.*

<sup>9</sup> *From a forthcoming report by Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Taylor, R.D., Dymnicki, A.B., & Schellinger, K. (2008).*

<sup>10</sup> *Greenberg, M.T., Weissberg, R.P., O'Brien, M.U., Zins, J.E., Fredericks, L., Resnik, H., and Elias, M.J. (2003). School-based prevention: Promoting positive social development through social and emotional learning. American Psychologist, 58(6/7), 466-474.*