

Student Support That Meets the Moment: The Need for Clarity and Rigor in SEL

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Months of remote learning and quarantine, a historic racial reckoning and mobilization for social justice, ongoing economic stress, threats to our democracy, and the death of over 1 million Americans due to COVID-19 have taken a serious toll on our nation's public school students.

"Everybody is stressed out to the max," a district leader told us last winter. "What has the impact been on our students and staff? It's been awful."

As stress and disruption have intensified, so has [interest in and spending on social-emotional learning \(SEL\) in public education](#). Also mounting in some places is confusion about what SEL is and a lack of clarity about how, exactly, to implement SEL in sustainable, effective ways. In a time of crisis like no other for our children, how can schools best respond to their complex needs?

To begin answering that question and help schools plan for the future, the Center on Reinventing Public Education spent the 2020–21 school year digging into the issue from several vantage points. We turned to [survey research](#) and [experts](#) to understand how the pandemic was affecting student well-being and mental health. We examined a [national sample of school districts](#) to see how school systems were supporting SEL. And we looked for [data](#) and [practices](#) that schools might leverage to meet the moment. Knowing how difficult the last two years have been for everyone, we're grateful to those who shared their ideas, time, and work.

What we found is that more than anything, schools need clarity about SEL. Teachers can't be left to figure out on their own how to build healthy environments and teach prosocial skills. As districts and schools plan more services and programming with a new wave of federal funding and seek to help students recover from the pandemic—and push back against misguided [efforts to ban SEL](#) altogether—they need to clearly define what SEL means for their institutions, what streams of work fall under that banner, and what problems they are using it to solve. Leaders must prioritize SEL through sufficient staffing and budgets, and schools must develop habits and processes that treat SEL as cross-cutting, school-wide, systemic work.

“I’m burnt out”

Students’ well-being and mental health have taken a serious hit over the last two years. With an increase in social isolation, uncertainty, grief, and other challenges, [three major pediatric groups](#) this fall declared the state of children’s mental health a national emergency.

Across multiple surveys, students reported experiencing negative impacts on their mental or social emotional health during the pandemic. In a [nationally representative survey](#) from April 2020, teenagers reported a significantly diminished ability to concentrate, sleep, and feel happy. The national nonprofit [YouthTruth](#) consistently found that half of the students it surveyed reported feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious in the 2020–21 school year. Other studies have found [significantly higher rates of suicidal ideation](#) and attempts among youth during the pandemic and an [increase](#) in mental-health-related emergency department visits for children.

“I feel like every day is the same, and I can feel myself just running out of mental and physical energy,” one student expressed through YouthTruth’s [spring 2021 survey](#). “I’m burnt out, and sometimes I feel stressed over nothing.”

As is common with societal challenges, those related to pandemic mental health have been inequitably distributed. Students who identify as female or non-binary were [more likely than males](#) to report feelings of depression, stress, and anxiety. Likewise, [Black and Latino communities](#) have been hit especially hard by COVID-19, with higher hospitalization and death rates and less access to behavioral health care. The pandemic also disproportionately affected [indigenous students](#), who already faced systemic inequities in healthcare and education.

Defining the scope of SEL

Even prior to the pandemic, the field [lacked a consensus](#) understanding about SEL and its boundaries, with different groups offering [different frameworks](#). Most of these interpretations nevertheless reflected the same core insight: that student success in school and beyond depends on more than academics. It also depends on developing a healthy identity, self-management skills, self-awareness, empathy, and supportive relationships.

These frameworks generally suggest that schools can influence nonacademic, prosocial capacity and skill by attending to both student capacity and the contexts in which it is developed. They can explicitly teach social-emotional skills, such as collaboration and self-awareness, and incorporate them into academic learning, while also shaping opportunities for prosocial development by offering students safe and affirming environments for learning. In general, educators and experts use the term “SEL” to refer to teaching students non-cognitive skills—such as building self-awareness and maintaining healthy relationships—that help them manage themselves and develop as people.

Especially during the pandemic, though, “SEL” has become a kind of shorthand for a host of related issues and concerns beyond the original intent. It’s now often used as a catchall phrase referring to all aspects of well-being, mental health, trauma, and self-care.

As this happened, experts and practitioners noted that important distinctions between these related concerns—as well as their goals and the interventions that address them—were getting lost. Leaders should be clear about how these issues interconnect and how they differ and whether and how they will address each. Otherwise, SEL-related efforts will be inconsistent and incomplete.

SEL programming is typically designed to help all students collectively and often involves curricular resources, whereas mental health programming focuses on individual students struggling with specific issues and relies on mental health interventions, such as therapy (Clark McKown of xSEL Labs explains the distinction well [here](#)). It's also important to recognize that approaches to SEL look different in elementary schools, where typically students are in a single class and schools rely on formal SEL curricula, and high schools, where students move between classes and informal SEL practices are more common.¹

Even so, distinctions about SEL and mental health still blur in everyday conversation. To some extent, this reflects the fact that nearly everyone has, to some degree, experienced a stress response in the last twenty months. As psychologist [Katie Rosanbalm](#) argues, the pandemic has had “universal impacts on our mental health that aren't necessarily clinically significant but can still influence our health, well-being, and capacity for learning.”²

Some experts question the distinction between SEL and mental health. As a staff member at the National Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety said, “It doesn't make sense for our center to say, ‘Well, we are talking about this thing called social and emotional learning’ as if it isn't interdependent with cognitive development, with mental health, and well being, with other things.”³

Conversations about SEL also have merged with complicated conversations about our broader social context and current events. The stress of the pandemic was layered on top of existing biases in ways that have deepened and accelerated inequity in many places. Meanwhile, protests for racial justice in the summer and fall of 2020—and the attendant struggle for students—pushed SEL advocates and practitioners to address equity and racism more directly and be more culturally responsive. In response, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, a leading national organization promoting and providing resources for social-emotional learning, revised its definition of SEL to speak more directly to race, identity, and equity. Meanwhile, the convergence of race, inclusion, and SEL took center stage in debates over SEL curricula and tools (the news site [The 74](#) described such a conflict [in an article](#)

1 On this distinction, see Hamilton, Laura S., Christopher Joseph Doss, and Elizabeth D. Steiner, *Teacher and Principal Perspectives on Social and Emotional Learning in America's Schools: Findings from the American Educator Panels*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. RR-2991-BMGF, 2019. As of July 26, 2021: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2991.html.

2 Rosanbalm, Katie, *Social and emotional learning during COVID-19 and beyond: Why it matters and how to support it*. Durham, NC: The Hunt Institute, Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University, 2021, p. 4.

3 Wrabel, Stephani L., Susan Bush-Mecenas, and Ashley Woo, *Seeking balance in the provision of technical assistance: Insights from the National Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. RR-A1161-1, 2021, p. 10.

provocatively titled, “Social-Emotional Learning or ‘White Supremacy with a Hug?’”⁴). In some districts, SEL was swept up in the [national culture wars](#), with critics on the right framing SEL as a [threat to academic learning](#) and linking it to wedge issues, such as critical race theory.

The components of a comprehensive SEL approach

Given this complex intersection of issues and needs, what should school leaders do? For now, many are responding to problems as best they can, finding time during the school day to support SEL or adopting new curricula, routines, or rubrics. But in the coming months, they need to work with their teams to develop a more precise vision and concrete strategies for SEL.

To respond to the moment, leaders must be precise about the different streams of work that fall under the SEL banner and what they imply for action. They can’t afford to leave it up to individual teachers to define or expect them to respond to clinical concerns they aren’t equipped to handle, nor should they tuck SEL and student well-being into its own box. Rather, it must be integrated into the life of their school or system in systemic, holistic ways that connect it to academics and school culture and ensure it’s always prioritized.⁵

Be clear about what SEL is and isn’t. Leaders need to define what social-emotional learning means at their school: what prosocial skills and capacities they are teaching, how they are teaching them, and what aspects of well-being and mental health are included.

Prioritize SEL through budget and personnel decisions. There are several ways to help stakeholders understand that SEL is a priority and ensure that the work endures. School and district leaders can create positions specifically dedicated to SEL and include leaders with SEL responsibility in their cabinets and executive teams so they have access to resources and decision-making authority and so SEL is part of key strategic discussions, rather than sidelined in an office with many layers between it and top leaders.

Incorporate SEL into the school’s mission and vision. Leaders should make sure their SEL efforts align with their school’s overall values and goals and explicitly incorporate it into their mission and vision—which will signal SEL as an organizational priority and make it easier to integrate new work and ideas into daily routines.

Develop a system to monitor what’s needed and what works. As with any area where a school wants to help students improve, SEL can only be effective if a school community collects a set of commonly understood data to assess student [SEL skills](#), [learning conditions](#), and [well-being](#) and guide improvement accordingly. Data on student perceptions or social-emotional skills, for example, can be integrated into existing meetings where educators review academic progress.

⁴ Interest in and urgency about culturally responsive SEL reverberated through the field as part of a broader push for culturally responsive teaching in education. When YouthTruth, a national nonprofit, analyzed [over 5,000 open-ended responses on student from Black or African-American high school students](#), it found “a poignant theme among Black or African American students’ responses that owing to the absence of their history and meaningful engagement on current topics including racism, they were not inspired to learn.” (p. 19)

⁵ Addressing SEL holistically is not a new concept—just one that’s especially timely now. CASEL has advocated for systemic SEL for years, most recently around the value of [systemic implementation in districts](#) in its [Collaborating Districts Initiative](#).

Make sure SEL is integrated into all aspects of school, especially academics. If schools treat SEL as an isolated initiative, effective implementation and consistent prioritization is unlikely. As [prior research and advice](#) suggest, leaders should think about how they can use shared approaches, data, staffing, and even celebrations to treat SEL as a holistic, whole-school concern. [Our recent report on two charter management organizations](#) illustrates four ways leaders can embed SEL into their schools rather than treat it as a siloed initiative. One way to think of the integration is to incorporate SEL into existing routines and procedures, rather than creating entirely new ones. For example, schools might make SEL a regular part of professional development, providing training on how to use various tools and processes to implement SEL implementation.

It's important that school leaders don't pit SEL in competition with academic learning. Rather than crowding each other out, these two aspects of human development are complementary, and numerous approaches support them. There are instructional approaches, such as [mastery-based education and personalization](#), that are especially well-suited to reinforcing and practicing SEL skills. Academic tasks can be designed so that students must justify answers, respond to feedback, and communicate with others—all ways to practice prosocial skills such as listening, managing feelings, and understanding other people's perspectives. Teachers can plan academic activities that build prosocial skills and self-efficacy by requiring collaboration, including checkpoints for reflection and self-awareness, and encouraging [productive struggle](#). [San Francisco Unified School District's math curriculum](#), for example, promotes self-efficacy by teaching students to persist and learn from their mistakes. Leaders can take the link between SEL and academics one step further by providing [culturally responsive](#) assignments and setting communication norms so students know what to expect from their teachers and peers.

Plan both whole-school activities and individual interventions. Rosanbalm suggests schools think about SEL through the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework, which involves assessing student needs and responding with interventions of increasing intensity as needed. In MTSS, Tier 1 provides universal support for all students. When it comes to SEL, these supports may be an explicit curriculum that teaches prosocial skills or the systematic integration of specific SEL skills, such as collaborative problem-solving, into academic tasks. Tier 1 might also include consistent routines the school uses in all classrooms, such as morning meetings, to build a supportive environment. The key is to get clear on what's universal for all students in all settings and to provide language, support, and materials for teachers and students to use school-wide.

Tier 2, for small groups, and Tier 3, for individual students, are meant to meet more specific student needs. These extra supports could focus on prosocial skills or address mental health issues, like anxiety or depression, with specific interventions or therapies.

In any tiered framework, schools need to be clear on how they will identify students for additional support. As school psychologist [John Desrochers points out](#), precision and definitions matter here too: Teacher referrals may work for some behavioral issues, for example, but are an unreliable way to identify students who need extra emotional support. A combination of an explicitly structured SEL program and a robust MTSS approach—with effective screening and referral processes—puts a school in the best situation to address a variety of student needs.

Staff sufficiently to meet SEL needs. Schools need to ensure they have the right staff—in skills and capacity—to execute on a system of referrals and interventions. This means deploying

designated staff to provide Tier 2 and 3 support and investing in mental health professionals (which increased federal funding should make possible), rather than asking teachers to identify or respond to mental health problems.

Connect SEL to DEI work. SEL efforts should align with other work a school may be doing around diversity, equity, and inclusion. Attempting this integration could prompt conversations about the need for culturally responsive SEL curricula or deeper conversations about the motivation for working on social-emotional skills. “SEL teaches you the tools of self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness,” one district leader told us. “If you don’t have those things and you hop into a circle and talk about the DEI, it can be a disaster. The way we positioned DEI is, it’s the higher-order work that comes out of mature social and emotional development.”

Invest in adult SEL and well-being. The last two years haven’t just taken a toll on students—they’ve also deeply affected the well-being of teachers and staff. Educators have struggled with [burnout and low morale](#), too, as they taught remotely (or in person, with attendant health risks), managed increased workloads, dealt with unclear and ever-changing reopening plans, and faced heightened student needs. In a [nationally representative survey](#) conducted in July 2021, 60 percent of teachers reported job-related stress frequently, with 41 percent reporting that this stress makes them less effective at their job. Yet only [one in three districts](#) mentioned offering social emotional support for their staff in fall 2020.

Providing support for the emotional development and health of teachers can put them in a better position to support SEL for students. “You have to have adult acquisition of SEL first before they can support students,” Lisa Schmidt, senior director of SEL at Uplift Education told us last year. Uplift also invests in adults through both physical and mental well-being programs that include yoga, mindfulness, and nutrition. In addition to training and supporting teachers, innovative leaders should consider [new work arrangements](#) that might make teaching more sustainable, including co-teaching, more flexibility, and reduced teaching loads.

Conclusion

As leaders look to rebuild out of the pandemic, they will face a host of challenges related to SEL. To meet them, they need to ground their work in a vision for SEL and well-being that is organization-wide, value-based, and integrated into organizational routines rather than a stand-alone effort. As they do this, they also need to be clear on what they are doing and why—whether that is developing students’ SEL skills, building safe and supportive environments, or providing extra support for students struggling with more acute mental health needs.

If they haven’t already, leaders can designate a design team (including administrators, teachers, students, and families) to plan ahead. Their work could include developing a clear vision and definition for SEL, building a school-wide understanding of why it matters, and identifying and advocating for the resources needed to support it. Involving a design team that includes stakeholders from multiple groups will also help schools ensure buy-in when they’re ready to launch a new vision for SEL.

Many schools are already doing work in all of these areas. A surge in federal funding will no doubt allow them to do even more. In the rush to meet students’ urgent needs, this careful planning will set the stage for meaningful relief, change, and growth for students.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center affiliated with Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive.