

A Case for Social and Emotional Learning

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Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a process through which children acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to develop healthy identities, empathy, maturity, self-regulation, supportive relationships, and decision-making skills. Although it's become a staple in schools across the nation, I didn't know much about SEL until a couple of years ago, when I joined the board of the Morningside Center, an organization based in New York dedicated to working with educators to build students' social and emotional skills.

"SEL creates a space, or as we say, a container, that allows students to voice their feelings and generates a sense of connection with peers and adults," says Cassie Schwerner, Morningside's executive director. "We know from neuroscience that having a sense of belonging and safety are critical for the learning process. As any teacher will tell you, a student in 'fight or flight' mode is not prepared to learn." What could be better for students?

Yet legal objections to SEL have emerged. For example, in the last two years alone, a legislator in Oklahoma — decrying SEL as “psychologically manipulative,” “sinister,” and “anti-family” — introduced a bill that would prohibit any public school in the state from using government or private funds to “promote, purchase, or utilize the concepts of social-emotional learning for training, instruction, or education of students.” Indiana’s attorney general issued a “Parents’ Bill of Rights,” warning that SEL represents a “fundamental shift in the role of teachers from educators to therapists” and “expand[s] the reach of government into domains of the family” by “assum[ing] powers over students’ mental health . . . beyond their [legal] authority” (Rokita, 2023). And earlier this year, parents sued a school district in Pennsylvania, arguing that the SEL-related curriculum at their children’s school violated their religious beliefs (Johnson, 2023). (The three main goals for students in the challenged curriculum: “Be Kind, Be Strong, and Be Well.”)

Opponents of SEL — including groups like Moms for Liberty — make two primary arguments. The first is that SEL veers too far from core academic subjects and compromises parents’ autonomy to manage the interior (and private) lives of their children — this argument echoes decades-old objections to sex education. The second is that, in furtherance of the goal to foster positive identity, empathy, and tolerance, SEL invites exploration of race, gender, and LGBTQ+ issues in ways that could cause “discomfort” — this is much like recent objections to “critical race theory” (CRT) or curricula or training related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

It’s not hard, therefore, to imagine SEL receding from view, like other topics caught in the political crossfires. But there is considerable contrary evidence, and law, to suggest that SEL is — and ought to be — here to stay.

Legislation focused on SEL and student mental health

Notwithstanding recent opposition, SEL has become firmly established in schools across the nation. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 50 states have adopted SEL frameworks for preK students, and 44 states offer guidance on SEL implementation. District spending on SEL programming — fueled by pandemic-era concerns about students’ mental health — increased by 45% from 2019-20 to 2020-21 (Prothero, 2021).

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In the last three years alone, states all over the political spectrum have enacted laws that increase SEL in schools. For example, Illinois recently amended its laws to require training on SEL during in-service professional development sessions, and Texas enacted legislation designed to increase students' ability to manage emotions, maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

Policy makers' support for SEL mirrors recent legislation designed to address students' mental health needs. For example, Delaware recently passed legislation to increase the number of school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and licensed mental health therapists in elementary and middle schools. Utah took similar steps by funding mental health screenings and counseling for K-12 students. (A caution, however, against equating SEL with the work of trained counselors or psychologists: "Educators can use SEL to help students manage their feelings," Schwerner says. "But it doesn't replace the work of trained school counselors or psychologists. It's not therapy." SEL and counseling are complementary yet independent tools.)

SEL as a tool for equity

SEL isn't just good for students and their development. It's also a tool to help schools foster equitable and nondiscriminatory school environments and, in the process, comply with civil rights laws. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR), which enforces federal antidiscrimination laws in schools, has recognized the existence or absence of SEL as significant in civil rights investigations.

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For example, on issues of racial discrimination and harassment, studies have shown that social-emotional learning, when implemented well, can reduce student misbehavior and incidents in which students of color experience racial discrimination in the form of unjustified and disproportionate discipline (Girvan, 2020). Helping students *and* teachers develop interpersonal stability through social and emotional learning has been identified as a step toward dismantling the so-called "school to prison pipeline" (Nance, 2016).

These benefits have been recognized during civil rights enforcement proceedings. Following OCR's investigation of whether it had "subjected African American students to discrimination on the basis of race by disciplining them more frequently and more harshly than similarly situated White students," in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Oakland Unified School District in California agreed to take steps to assess the

school climate, including reviewing “student and staff surveys on *social and emotional learning*” (Office for Civil Rights, 2012). And in an investigation into whether Peoria Unified School District in Illinois failed to adequately respond to student and employee racial harassment, OCR noted that SEL was one of the measures the district should have considered taking (Office for Civil Rights, 2022b). The district agreed to take further steps to offer supports or remedies to students impacted by harassment.

The same goes for civil rights issues related to sex and disability. SEL can teach children to ask for help when they are subjected to unsafe and sexually abusive behaviors — and prevent people from engaging in harmful sexual behavior in the first place (Committee for Children, 2020). It’s also been argued that instruction in social-emotional skills is consistent with the goal of disability laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), to foster equal opportunity, self-sufficiency, and independence (Golembiewski, 2016). Recently, OCR investigated whether the San Marcos Unified School District in California had failed to provide a disabled student with a legally required education under federal disability laws. The complainant alleged that the district had “not adequately responded to . . . requests for assistance to address [the student’s] academic, attendance, and social-emotional needs” (Office for Civil Rights, 2022a). To settle the case, the district agreed to determine whether the student was owed money or remedial services as a result of its failure to provide the appropriate educational or related services.

Particularly in light of the large numbers of civil rights complaints and investigations facing public schools — last year, OCR received nearly 19,000 complaints, the most in its history — the benefits of adopting SEL or similar approaches to foster student well-being, equity, safety, and positive school climates would appear to provide a solid counterweight to the current, culture-wars-driven arguments against them.

SEL: Not just for children

After reviewing the evidence and broad consensus on SEL in schools, it’s hard to fathom how and why it’s become such a political target. But I linger on a passing observation by Schwerner — and wonder if it offers something of a clue.

There’s broad recognition that SEL is beneficial not only for kids, but adults too, Schwerner told me. “As an educator, if I don’t have social and emotional competency — if I’m not able to manage my own anger or anxiety — I’m not going to react well or make good decisions on behalf of my students.”

SEL's applicability to adults conjures a bitter realization, which is that SEL's most ardent detractors may lack the very skills they need to recognize its value. Empathy, awareness, and emotional self-regulation aren't just pivotal to learning and child development; they're also necessary to get behind laws and policies that foster these attributes among children.

Do we all need SEL?

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