

## Keeping Social and Emotional Learning Grounded in Evidence

Guest Blog from CASEL Award Recipient: Clark McKown, Ph.D.

I got into the business of developing social and emotional assessments to build a better mousetrap. Self-report surveys and teacher rating scales serve the field well, but if we want to treat SEL with the same seriousness we treat reading and math, we must assess it with the same rigor. And so my colleagues and I set about to create novel methods of assessing SEL. Along the way, we learned that those methods work well, that educators like the data, and that our assessments fill an important gap.

I've learned a lot from conversations with both colleagues in academia and practitioners. Some of my academic colleagues want to focus on assessing adult practices; they are concerned that assessing students can have negative consequences. But without high-quality data on student competence, educators are missing critical information to ensure that instruction will be effective—creating a risk potentially greater than the imagined harms of assessment itself.

Those in the trenches—school leaders and teachers—recognize the potential value of student competence assessment data. In my experience, practicing educators use assessment data in ways that maximize instructional benefit and minimize risk.

These conversations have convinced me that any district implementing SEL would do well to assess student perceptions of the climate and program implementation alongside assessing student competence. Such a system would involve:

- Benchmarking student competence and climate early in the year,
- Reflecting on the data and making decisions about adult practices based on what is learned,
- Periodically monitoring of how much and how well SEL practices are being executed,
- Using implementation data to deploy coaching resources where support is needed, and
- Re-assessing competence and climate after a period of instruction to measure progress.

To some, this may sound outlandishly difficult. To them, I would say two things. First, districts are currently successfully implementing this model. It can be done.

Second, to neglect assessment is risky. SEL programs and practices are being adopted at massive scale, largely without any form of assessment to measure what is happening and whether it is working. Without evidence of SEL's ongoing benefit, it won't take much to undo the good work in this field. Though it may be challenging, assessment is key to the ongoing viability of SEL.

Strong evidence from rigorous published studies have shown that when SEL is practiced well, it benefits students. For SEL to remain strong and evolve, we must maintain our commitment to evidence, and to integrating the collection of that evidence into the very fabric of SEL practices. Assessment is foundational to that ambition.

---

*Clark McKown, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Behavioral Sciences at [Rush University Medical Center](#) (RUMC) and founder and President of [xSEL Labs](#), whose mission is to improve*

*student outcomes by helping educators understand children's social-emotional strengths and needs. He is a recipient of the 2020 Joseph E. Zins Awards.*