

Youth Need Better Civic Learning Opportunities, and SEL Can Pave the Way

Guest Blog from CASEL Award Recipient: Laura Hamilton, Ph.D.

Our country has experienced numerous challenges this year. As a result, the nations' schools face their own daunting challenge as they aim to provide instruction safely while equipping children to navigate current societal storms. Increasingly, evidence about [how people learn and thrive](#) shows that to do this, schools must attend to students' social and emotional learning (SEL) in addition to their academic progress.

Educators have embraced this research. In a [recent RAND American Teacher Panel survey](#), we found high enthusiasm for SEL among teachers, but also disparities in access to supports for SEL. And in the wake of COVID, principals have [pointed out the need for supports that ensure that SEL continues to be a focus of instruction. While other recent surveys](#) show that [SEL has a foothold in education](#), we still have a way to go to ensure high-quality, equitable supports.

Educators [understand](#) that students can't learn academically if their social and emotional needs aren't met. Similarly, many educators have called for a reconsideration of how schools are addressing the [civic mission](#) central to American public education. Many have recognized an increasing need to [expand](#) the metrics for assessing whether schools meet the needs of students and the larger society—particularly regarding readiness for civic life. Civic readiness is more than knowledge of history and government; it encompasses cultural competence, collaboration, critical thinking, information literacy, and other skills crucial for a thriving, democratic society.

The connection between SEL and civic learning is clear. Commonly used SEL definitions and frameworks, including the [recently updated CASEL framework](#), include competencies aligned to civic learning. Policymakers may not appreciate this civic emphasis, instead focusing on meeting students' immediate and future career needs. Preparation for careers and for civic life do not, however, need to be in tension. Instead, they [reinforce](#) one another. Students with high levels of cultural competence, information literacy, and other skills will have a head start at navigating and contributing to a changing economy.

Scholars and practitioners specializing in SEL are well-positioned to shepherd a movement to promote the civic mission of schools. Some of my [work](#) at RAND built on its [Truth Decay](#) initiative, examining how schools support civic learning and what they need to do this effectively (final report to come in December). In my new role at ETS, I'm excited to collaborate with colleagues who are exploring [innovations](#) in learning and [assessment](#) to equip educators to prepare youth for civic life. Preparing student readiness for future challenges will require collaboration among scholars, practitioners, and policymakers from a variety of organizations, and the SEL community can lead the way.

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