

Student Social and Emotional Competence Assessment

The Current State of the Field
and a Vision for Its Future

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Executive Summary

THE STATE OF THE FIELD IN BRIEF

As the field of SEL is working to integrate evidence-based SEL programming more systematically into teaching and learning, progress in SEL assessment is accelerating to support these efforts.

The state of the field shows SEL assessment has advanced in multiple ways:

- Several SEL assessment initiatives are underway.
- There are a growing number of technically sound assessments.
- There is increasing consensus on what constitutes high-quality assessment and data use.
- There are opportunities to better integrate SEL assessment into the policy and practice context so that it supports teaching and learning.

The field also has room to grow by creating assessments to match the varied needs of PreK-12 students, continuing to focus on ways to support equitable and positive academic and behavioral outcomes for diverse learners, and better coordinating policy, assessment, programs, and professional learning.

Background

Purpose. This report describes the state of the field of student social and emotional competence assessment and envisions the conditions in which the field can continue to develop in ways that tangibly benefit teaching and learning. It was created by the Social and Emotional Learning Assessment Work Group (AWG), a group of scholars, test developers, and educators focused on supporting high-quality social and emotional competence assessment. The AWG aims to bring conceptual clarity and provide guidance to the field about what high-quality practical assessments are currently available, and to stimulate further advances in the field of applied SEL assessment. This report will be of interest to educators, policymakers, program developers, assessment developers, researchers, and professionals involved in training teachers.

Definition of SEL. Social and emotional learning (SEL) has been defined in various ways. One of the most commonly cited models, that of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), defines SEL as “the process through which students and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” That process incorporates competencies that include knowledge, skills, and attitudes that affect the quality of students’ interactions with one another and their ability to adapt to and successfully navigate the complexities of daily life.

Focus on universal student competence assessment. The focus of this report is universal student social and emotional competence assessment. This includes methods of measuring and quantifying students' level of social and emotional competence. It also focuses on the use of SEL assessment with all students, not just students with challenges or other specific populations. We recognize the importance of other assessments, such as those measuring climate or adult practices. Student competence assessment poses particular opportunities and challenges that are the focus of this report.

Guiding beliefs. This report is guided by core beliefs from which SEL assessment stands to yield the greatest benefit to teaching and learning practices and student academic and behavioral outcomes:

- SEL can be taught, and all students can benefit from SEL, supporting a focus on universal assessments designed to be used with all students.
- SEL assessment is best understood—and has the greatest potential—when viewed within the policy and practice context in which it is used.
- SEL assessment can best contribute to teaching and learning when there is a high level of systemic coordination between standards, teaching and learning practices, and assessment.

The Impact of SEL. Research examining the relationship between social and emotional competencies and student outcomes has found that the better developed student social and emotional competencies are, the better students do in school and life. This holds for students from different economic backgrounds, races/ethnicities, and genders. Moreover, SEL programs—curricula and practices designed to nurture social and emotional competencies—are likely to yield a financial benefit that exceeds their costs, and under most assumptions, the return on the financial investment is many times the initial cost of programming. However, while social and emotional competencies are universally relevant and needed, they are not always identical for all people in all places. Accordingly, it is important to reach clarity on what social and emotional competencies students should know and be able to demonstrate at different ages and in different contexts.

The theoretical model guiding this report emphasizes that SEL assessment will be in the best position to have a major impact on teaching and learning for diverse learners when: (1) clear standards and guidance on social and emotional competencies are developed and supported through policy, (2) teaching and learning are intentionally focused on nurturing those competencies, (3) appropriate data are collected and used to assess progress and for continuous improvement, and (4) professional learning is provided to support educators' understanding of SEL frameworks, standards, instruction, and assessment.

Why assess SEL. SEL assessment can support effective teaching and learning by serving two broad goals, including assessment designed to guide instruction (formative assessment) and assessment designed to measure the results of instruction (summative assessment). Within those broad goals, SEL assessments can be used to inform many different kinds of decisions. A teacher might administer an SEL assessment before a period of SEL instruction to decide what competencies to teach. This reflects the formative use of assessment. An administrator might use SEL assessment data after a period of SEL instruction to measure progress. That is summative assessment. A researcher might use SEL assessment to measure outcomes in rigorous evaluation of a new intervention. That is program evaluation. A district or state might use SEL assessment as part of a school quality index as part of a continuous improvement push. That is a form of accountability. Other “high stakes” uses of assessment are also possible.

The Current State of the Field

Growth in assessments. This is a period of accelerating development in the field of SEL assessment with a concurrent growth in demand for such assessments. Several high-quality assessments have been developed and are now in wide use. Indeed, a comprehensive catalog of available assessments is now available by consulting the [SEL Assessment Guide](#) and the [RAND Education Assessment Finder](#).

These assessments take many different forms, each with advantages and disadvantages:

- **Self-report:** Students complete questionnaires in which they rate their own competencies. These are easy to construct and are easily administered to large numbers of students on widely available survey platforms. On the downside, they are open to students responding in what they consider desirable ways, depend on self-awareness of one's actual level of competence, and require students to have adequate reading ability.
- **Rating scales:** An adult, typically the classroom teacher, completes a questionnaire about a student. In terms of strengths, they are simple, and many are now on easy-to-use survey platforms. Teachers are also less prone than students to social desirability response biases and have a strong reference group of knowledge from which to rate individual student competencies. Drawbacks include the burden imposed on teachers who must complete many ratings and biases such as "halo" effects where teachers rate students they particularly like more favorably than other students.
- **Direct assessment:** Students demonstrate their social and emotional competencies through solving challenging social and emotional tasks. Strengths include their potential to measure social and emotional competence objectively and to yield highly reliable scores that are valid for a variety of purposes. Weaknesses include the cost of developing and validating technically complex direct assessments. They may also be best suited for assessing the knowledge and mental processes that are involved in social interactions, but not necessarily the behavioral components of these competencies.
- **Other methods:** Other methods of assessment are also available, including standards-based assessment, peer nominations, report cards, and administrative data. Any of these methods of assessment could be used to achieve some SEL assessment goals.

Emerging clarity on what constitutes quality. In addition to progress developing assessment instruments, the field has made progress in clarifying what quality SEL assessment means. Existing and emerging guidance about assessment quality suggests that the best social and emotional assessment process will:

- **Include assessments that measure what matters.** In determining what matters, SEL standards provide guidance on the social and emotional competencies students should know and be able to demonstrate. The content of an SEL program's scope and sequence can also provide guidance on which competencies the corresponding assessment should be designed to measure. Published resources are also available to identify what matters most, such as the [SEL Assessment Guide](#) and [RAND's Education Assessment Finder](#).

- **Be culturally relevant.** Cultural considerations include whether an assessment performs the same way for members of different groups, what social and emotional competencies are most important to different groups, and who gets to decide. Such considerations raise the concern that SEL assessment data could be used to stigmatize some students and reinforce or reproduce social inequities. Although there are exceptions, incorporating considerations of diversity, equity, and inclusion into SEL assessments is an area with opportunities for improvement.
- **Be developmentally appropriate.** Both students' skills and social and emotional competencies themselves change across development. Therefore, assessments should be developed with enough range of difficulty to measure skill advances as students age. They should also measure the competencies in ways that capture their expansion, differentiation, and sophistication across development. Although some assessments are designed to be developmentally appropriate, this is also an area where more careful work is needed.
- **Ensure research evidence supports intended use.** A particular concern in the use of SEL assessment is the suitability of the assessment score for inferences and decisions educators plan to make based on those scores. It is important that developers and users of SEL assessments pay particular mind to what evidence supports the inferences and decisions users will make based on student assessment results. As with all forms of assessment, this is important because consequential decisions about what to teach and how to teach, for example, should be based on information that is appropriate for making such decisions.
- **Employ strong data use practices.** SEL assessment data will be most effective and useful when educators thoughtfully execute practices that support rigorous and appropriate data use and mitigate the risks of unwarranted uses. Engaging in effective data review practices of this sort requires leadership, planning, professional learning, time, effective meeting processes, and adequate resources. To this end, many educators would benefit from professional learning opportunities focused on high-quality data use practices.

Finally, with respect to quality, it is important to note that the process of interpreting assessment data is a human one. Humans bring their own interpretive strengths and weaknesses to this process, including implicit biases that may affect data interpretation and related decisions. Therefore, educators will be in the best position to render equitable judgments of assessment data when they are aware of their own biases, or the potential for bias.

Integration with policy and practice. SEL assessments are used in the context of policies and educational practices. Ideally, SEL assessments are coordinated to improve teaching and learning, and professional learning should be available to support high-quality SEL assessment data use to guide practices designed to support students in meeting standards. Although this does not characterize the field at present, there are several “bright spot” examples when policy, assessment, programs, and professional learning are systematically coordinated. Such examples offer guidance for better integration of assessment-related policies and practices in the future.

A Vision for the Future

The concluding sections of this report offer a vision of assessment integrated with efforts to shape policy, link assessment to practice, continue developing high-quality assessments, and systematize professional learning.

Policy Vision. Policies that provide standards or guidelines indicating what students should know and be able to do can provide guidance for action and investments. CASEL's [Collaborating States Initiative](#) (CSI) has observed a dramatic increase in the number of states adopting standards in recent years. Moreover, states have augmented the development of strategies and policies to support implementation of systemic, evidence-based SEL in districts and schools.

Looking ahead, SEL assessment will be in the best position to support teaching and learning when policy encourages and supports: (1) districts to focus on developing competencies described in standards, (2) the use of high-quality social and emotional assessment data, (3) high-quality program implementation and data literacy so that assessment data is used to inform instruction, (4) professional development and technical assistance for data-based decision-making, (5) incentives for preservice and inservice training in SEL assessment, and (6) consistency and compatibility with other state policies and priorities.

Practice Vision. We envision a world in which high-quality SEL assessment is coordinated with and supports evidence-based SEL programming and practice. Realizing this vision will require the development of assessments designed to measure the competencies that are the focus of instruction in SEL programs and practices. It will also require educators to adopt and use SEL assessments in a way that is coordinated with their adoption and use of SEL programs and practices. Finally, it will require professional development to support the expertise required for educators to use SEL assessments in a coordinated way with SEL programs and practices.

Assessment Development Vision. Assessment development is typically a costly and time-consuming endeavor, and the market for SEL assessment is not clear—in its size or in exactly what the market requires. Rather than a large investment in a few assessments, it is sensible to make many smaller investments to develop varied assessments. Such assessments should be designed to: (1) assess competencies that are incorporated in either standards, programs, or both, (2) assess competencies in developmentally and culturally relevant ways from PreK through high school, (3) clearly articulate the intended uses and interpretations of the assessment, (4) include design input from the intended user so the assessment is both usable and feasible in educational settings, and (5) include the best method of assessment (e.g. self-report, direct assessment, etc.) for the competence to be measured. In such efforts, resources such as professional learning that support the constructive and meaningful integration of SEL assessment with practice will be required.

Professional Learning Vision. For SEL assessments to benefit teaching and learning, educators must have the knowledge and skills to interpret and use data for effective practice. At present, opportunities to participate in professional learning focused on SEL are highly variable. The field will benefit from more intentionally and systematically supporting educators to learn about what SEL is, why it matters, what competencies are described by standards, what evidence-based programs and practices are available, and how to select and use SEL assessment and the data that comes from it to support teaching and learning. Training on these topics should be incorporated in preservice and ongoing professional learning, for teachers and educational leaders.

In conclusion, the field of social and emotional learning has been in ascendancy and is now anchored by a strong evidence base showing that when it is done well, SEL benefits a wide range of students and student outcomes. As the field continues to grow, it should strive to support practitioners' abilities to integrate strong SEL assessment practices, make data-informed decisions about practice, and evaluate student skill acquisition. In doing so, assessments and related practices will need to meet the complex realities of developing students and diverse communities. As the field continues to fulfill its promise to improve teaching and learning, assessment has a key role to play.

Background and Overview

Purpose of this Report

Social and emotional competencies matter. As a result, educators are increasingly being called on to address student social and emotional development. Evidence of widespread interest in social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools can be seen in the widespread adoption of schoolwide SEL—71% of principals in a nationally representative sample across the United States reported they have a plan for teaching SEL skills and have partially or systematically implemented the plan (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019).

One important area that has received comparatively less attention is SEL competence assessment. Educators routinely use academic assessment as an important tool to guide instruction. If they are to teach students social and emotional competencies, it stands to reason they will be in a better position to do so if they can assess those competencies. And yet, until recently, measures of social and emotional competence have been restricted largely to the context of research studies, with few tools available that educators can use in authentic education settings to guide practice and measure progress. But that is quickly changing, with a variety of assessments now available that educators can use to support teaching and learning.

The purpose of this report is to take stock of the state of SEL assessment and describe a vision for its continued evolution that positions it to support teaching and learning practices both in schools and within the community. This report was created by the SEL Assessment Work Group (AWG), a group of scholars, test developers, and educators focused on supporting high-quality social and emotional competence assessment. The AWG aims to bring conceptual clarity to the field, provide guidance to the field about what high-quality practical assessments are currently available, and stimulate further advances in the field of applied SEL assessment.

The perspectives expressed in this report originate from several sources. Most directly, it is the outgrowth of three years of ongoing engagement among the members of the AWG, whose work on several interrelated projects, described below, provided opportunities to deeply consider the nature of SEL itself, the kinds of assessments that can be feasibly used by educators to support teaching and learning, and the opportunities and challenges that arise from the use of SEL assessment in educational settings. The members of the AWG brought diverse perspectives to this work, and the report attempts to reflect those perspectives. To that end, many of the AWG members contributed to drafts of this report.

This report is intended for multiple audiences. A key premise is that SEL assessment will be in the best position to support teaching and learning when assessment content and processes reflect the content of social and emotional instruction, which in turn reflects standards that describe what social and emotional competencies students should have acquired and be able to demonstrate at different ages. Accordingly, we intend for this report to bring together important strands in the field of SEL—policy, instructional practice, and assessment, all supported by teacher professional learning. Audiences that may benefit from the ideas expressed in this report therefore include educators, policymakers, assessment developers, instructional designers, researchers, and professionals involved in training teachers.

SEL Assessment in the American Policy and Practice Context

SEL has been defined in various ways. One of the most commonly cited models, that of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), defines SEL as: “...the process through which students and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2019). That process incorporates competencies that include knowledge, skills, and attitudes that affect the quality of students’ interactions with one another and their ability to adapt to and successfully navigate the complexities of daily life. There are many other definitions of social and emotional learning, no two of which align perfectly, but all of which describe similar intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies.

In many ways, social and emotional competence is a universal consideration—all students, youth, and adults benefit when they learn the competencies needed to interact effectively with others and to make, maintain, and deepen relationships. Many of the competencies required to do so are substantially the same across cultures and historical eras. It is also true, however, that how students and adults engage the world is influenced by culture, class, and other forms of group membership. Thus, though social and emotional competencies are universally relevant and needed, they are not always identical for all people in all places. As a result, the field has an opportunity to explore and deepen the ways in which social and emotional competencies are defined, taught, and assessed to honor the diversity of students, to bridge divides, and, potentially, to contribute to greater equity.

However SEL is conceptualized, researchers, parents, educators, and policymakers increasingly recognize that these competencies are critical for success in school and life. This recognition is reflected in educator attitudes and practices (see the callout box below).

- At least 14 states have developed standards or guidelines describing the social and emotional competencies students should know and be able to demonstrate at different grades.
- In a survey conducted by Education Week Market Brief, nearly 90 percent of district leaders in the United States say they have invested or plan to invest in SEL resources.
- Schools and districts spend \$640 million annually on SEL products and programs (Krachman & LaRocca, 2017).
- Teacher time dedicated to SEL instruction reflects an additional implied investment of \$20 to \$46 Billion annually in teacher time and other resources.
- 71% of principals report that they have partly or systematically implemented SEL programs.

SEL Policy

Policymakers and advocates increasingly recognize the benefit of a clear policy framework within which local efforts to support student SEL might be organized effectively. In its recently published policy agenda (Bridgeland and colleagues, 2019), the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development indicated that to support student social, emotional, and academic development, “...policy should... create enabling conditions for communities to implement locally crafted practices...” Furthermore, they argue that such policies should set a clear vision for what social and emotional competencies students should know and be able to demonstrate through standards and guidance.

Substantial progress has been made on developing the organized policy frameworks for SEL, advanced by the National Commission, most visibly through the [CASEL Collaborating States Initiative](#) (CSI). State-level SEL standards and guidelines set expectations for what competencies children should know and be able to demonstrate. These expectations in turn influence district, school, and classroom practices. In CASEL’s most recent state Scorecard Scan, 14 states were identified as having SEL standards ([Dusenbury, Dermody, & Weissberg, 2018](#)). An additional 11 states have standards that span preschool through the early elementary grades, and an additional 21 states have developed web resources related to SEL for their districts. Most of those states (93%) have developed or are developing developmental benchmarks. Although attention to equity has been somewhat more limited (43% of states reviewed, currently), an increasing number of states appear to be moving in this direction (Dusenbury, Yoder, Dermody, & Weissberg, 2019).

SEL Programs and Practices

In developing standards, states have looked to existing programs such as those in the [CASEL Program Guide](#), to identify the competencies to include in policy, creating a natural link between policy and practice. Those programs include evidence-based SEL curricula and practices designed to teach social and emotional competencies. By “evidence-based” we mean that rigorous research has demonstrated the program or practice produces positive outcomes. SEL programs and practices have been widely adopted, with 71% of principals from a representative sample across the United States reporting they have partially or systematically implemented SEL programs and practices in their schools (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019).

SEL Assessment

Just as educators use high-quality student academic assessment data to support teaching and learning, so can high-quality student social and emotional competence assessment data be used, in coordination with standards and practices, to advance teaching and learning. For example, many states are developing SEL benchmarks. Assessment is key to knowing the degree to which students are meeting those benchmarks. Programs and practices are designed to teach discrete competencies, and assessment is key to knowing what to teach to whom and whether students are acquiring the intended competencies.

Educators increasingly recognize the importance of SEL assessment. For example, three quarters of principals report comfort and familiarity with SEL assessment. At the same time, SEL assessment is not as fully integrated in educational settings as SEL programs and practices (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019).

Like SEL policy and practice, which have made meaningful advances, substantial progress has been made in developing feasible, useful, and scalable assessments for educators to assess students' social and emotional competencies, which we describe in detail below. Still, we have a way to go. Many assessments developed by researchers specifically to evaluate program impacts are not necessarily suitable for other applied uses.

Growing interest in the promise of SEL assessment to support teaching and learning is reflected, among other things, in national working groups focused on SEL assessment and increasing public and private investment in assessments. This report is one of the products of the AWG. The goals of this work were to bring conceptual clarity to the field, to provide guidance to the field about what high-quality practical assessments are currently available, and to stimulate further advances in the field of applied SEL assessment.

To achieve those goals, the members of the AWG undertook several initiatives, including: (1) the development of an online assessment guide, (2) efforts to synthesize and organize the myriad SEL frameworks, and (3) an annual SEL assessment design challenge intended to shine a light on innovative and emerging assessments. Highlights of AWG key accomplishments are described on the next page.

In creating these tools and resources, the AWG helped bring coherence, attention, and organization to the emerging field of SEL assessment. The large number of educators who opted into the network, who visited the guide and assessment finder, who downloaded briefs and viewed blogs, who submitted assessment ideas to the Design Challenge, and who otherwise expressed interest in SEL assessment to the members of this group supports the general proposition that the field of SEL assessment is vibrant and growing, a field that continues to need support to realize a broad and consistent vision of assessment that effectively supports teaching and learning practices.

A striking development not represented in this description of the activities and accomplishments of the AWG is that over the course of its three years in existence, the conversation among the group members, and the field as a whole, has moved from the question of whether student social and emotional competencies can be usefully assessed to questions about how best to do so and how to use the data to yield the most benefit to teaching and learning.

Assessment Work Group (AWG) Progress and Products

The AWG and anchor partners' efforts resulted in work products that had tangible impact on the field:

- The design and construction of a set of online tools that include an interactive guide with detailed information about SEL assessments used widely in practice (the [AWG SEL Assessment Guide](#)), a second interactive database that includes a broader range of assessments but fewer details about applications in practice (the [RAND Education Assessment Finder](#)), and a practitioner-focused set of [guidelines for choosing and using assessments](#).
- In less than a year since its launch, the Guide has been accessed more than 42,000 times by more than 20,000 unique users, a number that continues to grow by an average of more than 400 new unique users every month. Over 82% of Guide users that responded to a feedback survey indicated that they would be likely or very likely to recommend it to a colleague.
- Efforts to synthesize the myriad SEL frameworks by Harvard's Ecological Approaches to Social and Emotional Learning (EASEL) Lab resulted in [web-based interactive resources](#) illustrating the relationship between a growing number of the most prominent SEL frameworks and the SEL competencies within them.
- The AWG members produced 20 [Framework Briefs](#) describing, in an accessible and practical way, what frameworks are, how they relate to practice, criteria for reviewing, comparing, selecting, and aligning frameworks as well as thoughtful discussions of key issues around equity and development. Those briefs have been downloaded almost 3,000 times.
- The AWG created the Collaborator Network of educators and others interested in keeping informed about measuring SEL. The network grew between 2017 and 2019 to over 3,200 people from 86 countries and all 50 states. The network received regular communications with over 120 weekly [blog posts](#) and special SEL Field Notes twice a month. The website received an average of 8,000 monthly visitors, and the blogs are opened and read at a rate significantly higher than the sector average.
- The AWG formed a [National Practitioners Advisory Group](#) (NPAG), which includes 28 practicing educators who met in person as well as virtually five times to discuss the use of SEL assessment in practice. The group has developed [Making SEL Assessment Work: Ten Practitioner Beliefs](#) which captures the perspectives and action recommendations of practitioners working on SEL at various levels from local classroom and community programs to nationally.
- The annual [Design Challenge](#) was a peer-reviewed competition that granted awards to innovative existing or emerging direct SEL assessments, including examples of those assessments in practice. The Design Challenge also yielded important lessons about the social and emotional assessment needs of practitioners and priority characteristics of assessments, summarized in a series of annual briefs located on the website. The final brief summarizing design principles is due out this fall.

Focus on Universal Student Competence Assessment

Throughout this report, “social and emotional competence” refers exclusively to student strengths, by which we mean knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are associated with positive youth outcomes and that are teachable. In the context of this report and the field of SEL more broadly, all of the student SEL competencies that we might wish to assess are positive, by which we mean that the better developed they are, the better students fare on a range of functional outcomes. This contrasts with other fields, which may focus instead on pathology, diagnosable conditions, or other undesirable characteristics or behaviors. The positive perspective is supported by the National Practitioner Advisory Group’s (2019) core belief emphasizing that SEL assessment requires a strengths-based lens.

Social and Emotional Competencies

- Self-awareness: Know your strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a “growth mindset.”
- Self-management: Effectively manage stress, control impulses, and motivate yourself to set and achieve goals.
- Social awareness: Understand the perspectives of others and empathize with them, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures.
- Relationship skills: Communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.
- Responsible decision-making: Make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety, and social norms.

Other factors, which are not the focus of this report, are also critically important to the SEL enterprise, including school climate, program implementation quality and fidelity, and adult SEL and teaching practices. This report also focuses on universal assessment conducted to support universal programmatic and instructional decision-making. Other assessments that are not the focus of this report are designed exclusively to support students with special needs and are also critical to supporting all students.

A key reason to focus on universal social and emotional competence assessment is that SEL is relatively new, and universal assessment is important to achieve many policy and practice goals. In this context, it is particularly important to provide the field with an appraisal of the possibilities, limits, and future potential of this approach.

Focus on SEL Assessment in Context

We recognize that SEL assessments will be used in a wide variety of complex cultural, organizational, and policy contexts. Without appropriate and respectful consideration of these contexts, we are unlikely to realize the greatest value and impact of SEL assessments. In fact, as we describe next, we believe that student SEL assessment will make a broad positive impact on practice and student outcomes when SEL standards, SEL instructional practices, SEL assessment, and adult professional development share a common focus on a defined set of SEL competencies and support one another through coordinated and systematic application. Our vision of the optimal relationship between standards, practices, assessment, and professional learning is depicted in Figure 1 below.

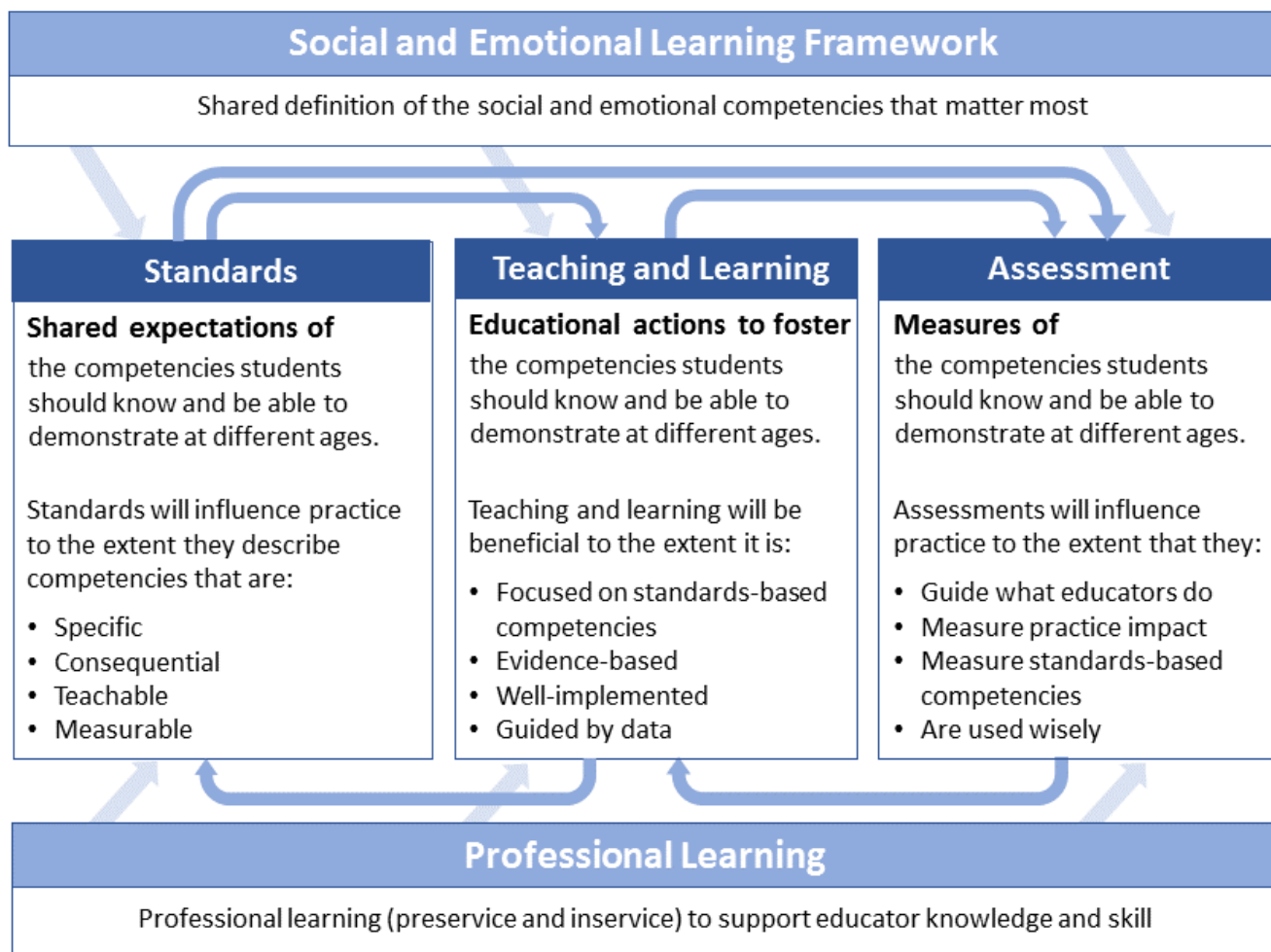


Figure 1. The optimal relationship between SEL frameworks, standards, teaching and learning practices, assessment, and professional learning

Figure 1 depicts our conceptualization of the optimal relationship between standards, teaching and learning practices, and assessment, informed by an SEL framework that drives a shared vision and is supported by professional learning. This model reflects a theory of change that can guide future work on SEL assessment development, and on the most constructive uses of data from existing and emerging SEL assessments.

As a theory, it incorporates multiple testable components that, in addition to serving as a guide to the field, can and should be empirically tested. Where the data support the components, it should remain as is. Where data suggest the model needs revision, it should be revised. In the best of all worlds, this theory will guide improved practices in all areas, and as these ideas are implemented, it will generate evidence that can be used to improve the theory. As such, we present this theory of change as a model of data use for continuous improvement and as a conceptualization that itself should evolve in the context of a data-informed continuous improvement process.

The theory reflects our belief that SEL assessment is best understood—and has the greatest potential—when viewed within the policy and practice contexts in which it is used. The model also reflects our belief that SEL assessment can best contribute to teaching and learning when there is a high level of systemic coordination, reflected by consistency among standards, teaching and learning practices, and assessment. More specifically, the model incorporates the following specific and testable propositions about the conditions needed to realize systemic coordination:

- **Frameworks** are used to define what matters most. Frameworks should inform standards, teaching and learning practices, and assessment.
- **Standards or guidelines**, generally adopted at the state level or district level, clearly specify the competencies students should know and be able to demonstrate at each grade. Standards most productively set a context for and influence teaching and learning when they describe competencies that are:
 - Specific. The competencies should be specific enough that educators can contemplate how to assess and address them. For example, “Recognizes what others are feeling,” is more specific than “Is socially aware.”
 - Consequential. There should be evidence that the competencies matter. Evidence might take the form of research showing an association between the competence and outcomes we care about.
 - Teachable. There should be evidence that the competencies can be taught. The best evidence will be in the form of field trials demonstrating that students who were taught the competence progressed on measures of the competence more than comparable students who were not taught that competence.
 - Measurable. It should be possible to gather data that reflects a student's level of mastery of the competence.

Standards and guidelines should influence curriculum and instruction. The influence of standards on teaching and learning is depicted by the arrow from standards to teaching and learning. Standards and guidelines should also influence what is assessed, a relationship that is depicted by the arrow from standards to assessment.

- **Teaching and learning** practices that focus intentionally on nurturing the competencies included in standards and guidelines. Teaching and learning can take the form of an SEL program or discrete practices that have been shown to be effective in rigorous research studies. To yield a measurable benefit, approaches to teaching and learning should be implemented with sufficient quality and intensity. Ideally, what and how the competence is taught to whom at what point in the year should be guided by data on student competence.

Teaching and learning practices should result in measurable improvements in student competencies, which is depicted by the arrow from teaching and learning to assessment.

Teaching and learning practices can also influence standards by serving as a model that policymakers and education leaders adopt for the state or district. This influence is depicted by an arrow from teaching and learning to policy.

- **Assessments** are designed to measure those same competencies in ways that educators can use to guide their practice, and in ways that document student progress towards meeting the expectations codified in the standards. Furthermore, educators must be equipped to use SEL assessment data wisely, demonstrated by an understanding of the evidence supporting the use of an assessment to achieve a specific goal and engagement in systematic processes of assessment data interpretation and decision-making. The quality of assessments, as described below, includes considerations of content, culture, development, and reporting.

Assessment of student strengths and needs can be used to make decisions about what to teach to whom at what point. This use of assessment data is depicted by the arrow from assessments to teaching and learning.

- **Repeated continuous improvement loops** should define the relationship between assessment and teaching and learning practices. Formative assessment should guide instruction and should be used to measure progress, and the assessment of progress should be used to guide instruction, in an ongoing process..
- **Professional learning** is key to supporting educators' understanding of frameworks, standards, teaching and learning practices, and assessment, and the ways those elements relate to one another in daily educational practice. Ideally, professional learning will begin in preservice training and continue throughout the educator's career. Professional learning should support educators' understanding of what SEL is, what science says about its consequences, how SEL is related to education, what SEL standards exist and what competencies they describe, what evidence-based practices have been developed and how to use them, the role assessment can play in supporting high-quality teaching and learning, and the role of SEL in advancing equity. This is not an exhaustive list, but it provides a starting point for considering the important topics that should be foundational to educator professional learning.

This theory of change is an aspirational representation that illustrates the conditions in which SEL assessment stands to yield the greatest benefit to teaching and learning practices and student outcomes. As we will discuss, there are examples where many or all of the elements of this model are in practice. Many more examples exist where only some of the elements are in practice.

Much of this report focuses on the state of the SEL assessments as tools used to collect data on student levels of competence. However, an important premise of this report is that to fully take stock of the state of SEL assessment and for SEL assessment to maximally support teaching and learning practices, it is important to evaluate not only existing and emerging assessments, but the extent to which those assessments are part of and coordinated with frameworks, standards, practices, and professional learning.

The Significance of SEL and Its Assessment

Social and Emotional Competencies are Consequential and Teachable

Key Conclusions from the Data

Research shows that students can develop the social and emotional skills and attitudes they need to effectively navigate their multicultural world and contribute actively and meaningfully to their schools, families, careers, and communities. Findings from hundreds of studies of SEL programs involving hundreds of thousands of students around the world confirm that social and emotional competencies are malleable and can be taught effectively to students by school personnel in partnership with families and communities (Mahoney, Durlak & Weissberg, 2019).

As an integrated approach to learning, SEL can promote social and emotional competence and foster cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills, and prevent/reduce problem behaviors. This includes the long-term development of academic achievement, problem-solving skills, ethical decision-making, health-promoting behaviors, prosocial attitudes about self, others, and work, and positive contributions to community and society (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). The benefits are apparent for students of diverse economic and racial/ethnic backgrounds and both genders.

Finally, SEL is a wise, cost-effective investment. According to research on six evidence-based programs at Columbia University, the long-term social and economic benefits return \$11 for every \$1 invested in the programs (Belfield et al., 2015).

Students' social and emotional competencies matter. Many studies from researchers from multiple disciplines have examined the relationship between specific student social and emotional competencies described by [CASEL](#) and important life outcomes. The main finding from this body of work is this: The better developed student social and emotional competencies are, the better students do in school, careers, and life (e.g., Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015).

Social and emotional competencies are teachable. Quasi-experimental and experimental field trials summarized in meta-analyses provide evidence that student social and emotional competence can be taught. For example, summarizing findings from 213 school-based universal SEL programs, Durlak and colleagues (2011) reported that compared to peers who do not receive SEL instruction, students who receive instruction in SEL do better on measures of social and emotional competence. When these programs were well-implemented, social and emotional competencies improved substantially (.69 standard deviations). Well-implemented SEL programs also caused social behaviors to improve meaningfully (.28 standard deviations), emotional distress to reduce (.29 standard deviations), and academic performance to increase (.28 standard deviations). Other meta-analyses mirror these general findings, suggesting immediate and long-term impacts (Mahoney et al., 2019; Sklad, Diekstra, de Ritter, & Ben, 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Wigglesworth et al., 2016).

Teaching SEL programs has a benefit to diverse groups of students. We know, for example, that SEL programs focused on students with early signs of behavioral problems have substantial benefits (Durlak & Wells, 1998). In addition, Durlak and colleagues (2011) looked for but did not find any evidence that the impact of SEL programs was different for students from different ethnic groups. As we discuss later, many considerations of culture and equity are important in discussing SEL and its assessment. However, these findings lend confidence that even SEL programs not heavily tailored to varied cultural communities can have a broad benefit.

Teaching social and emotional learning is also cost-effective. Belfield and colleagues (2015) used these and other estimates of program impacts to evaluate the economic value of social and emotional learning. The authors carefully documented financial costs and benefits of several widely used SEL programs and reported that SEL programs are highly likely to yield a financial benefit that exceeds their costs, and under most assumptions, the return on the financial investment is many times the initial cost of programming, with an estimated \$11 return for every \$1 invested.

In sum, social and emotional competence matters and can be taught in school to benefit diverse groups of learners, and doing so is cost-effective. In addition, as we discuss next, student social and emotional competence can be assessed in ways that improve teaching and learning.

Measuring SEL Can Support Teaching and Learning

As we take stock of the state of the field of SEL assessment, it is important first to address the broad question of why assess student social and emotional competencies at all.

Most educators agree that academic skills such as reading and math are teachable and that assessing those skills is an important part of effective teaching and learning (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). If we expect educators to teach social and emotional competencies, it seems only fitting, then, that assessing those competencies should also support teaching and learning.

What educational goals might SEL assessment help educators accomplish? A recent paper, [*Choosing and Using SEL Competency Assessments: What Schools and Districts Need to Know*](#) connected to both the SEL Assessment Guide and RAND Education Assessment Finder (2018), describes a range of benefits that student SEL assessment brings to educators at multiple levels. Specifically, the authors argue that student SEL assessments can help schools and districts to:

- Communicate SEL as a priority.
- Establish a common language for SEL.
- Deepen understanding of how SEL competencies manifest in students over time.
- Continuously improve SEL instruction and program implementation.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of SEL programming and approaches.
- Support equitable outcomes in education.

Three ways SEL Assessment Can Support Teaching and Learning

Three ways that assessment can be used to support teaching and learning include: informing instruction (formative assessment), evaluating student learning and programs (summative assessment) and improving instruction and programs (continuous improvement).

- Formative assessment is assessment designed to help educators modify instruction to improve student learning.
- Summative assessment is assessment designed to evaluate student learning at the end of an instructional period.
- Continuous improvement is an ongoing effort to improve instruction through cycles of assessment, planning, instruction, and reflection.

These three ways to use assessment can be thought of as an integrated, ongoing process. Each informs and supports the others to achieve and improve SEL programming over time.

How educators use assessment—academic and otherwise—to improve teaching and learning can take many forms. For example, educators can collect systematic samples of student performance in a subject area to obtain information about what students know and are able to do. Educators use this information to guide instruction so they are teaching competencies that build on mastered material and support the mastery of new material. This characterizes assessment for learning.

A second broad goal of assessment is the assessment of learning. The goal of this kind of assessment is to obtain a meaningful measure of the competencies students have acquired in response to instruction, programs, and policies. At their heart, these assessments are designed to provide information to support effective teaching and learning. Assessment results are also used in part to index a school's quality, in ways that may have significant consequences—parents, for example, may use achievement test data to make financially consequential decisions such as where to live to send their students to good schools.

Within those broad goals, SEL assessments can inform many decisions. For example, a teacher might administer an SEL assessment before a period of SEL instruction to decide what lessons to emphasize and what competencies to reinforce. This reflects the formative use of assessment. An administrator might use SEL assessment data after a period of SEL instruction to measure progress. That is summative assessment. A researcher might use SEL assessment to measure outcomes in rigorous evaluation of a new intervention—that is program evaluation. A district or state might use SEL assessment as part of a school quality index as part of a continuous improvement push is a form of accountability. Other uses are also possible. When the stakes are high, special considerations are in order, as described on page 22.

When considering such goals and decision-making efforts, the National Practitioner Advisory Group (2019) emphasizes that data are most powerful when used to improve practice efforts continuously. Educators engaged in SEL assessment should consider what they hope to learn as an outcome of any new assessment and what they want to improve based on the data from the assessment. In this way, assessment data can play a constructive role in effective SEL program planning, design, and implementation that supports the development of social and emotional competencies young people need to succeed in school, at home, at work, and in life.

If educators had data on student social and emotional competencies with the same level of access and variety of methods available for assessing academic competencies, they would have useful information to decide what SEL competencies to teach to whom, what SEL program resources to use to build on student strengths and address student needs, and how to assess students' responses to instructional efforts. Because many educators currently lack SEL assessment data on their students, they lack key information about student competencies on which to base decisions about what to teach to whom and how. Similarly, from the superintendent's office to the statehouse, those responsible for setting broad policies largely lack the information necessary to allocate resources where they could have the most benefit for teaching and learning.

High-quality SEL assessment data alone are not a guarantee that these things will happen, but their availability can inform teaching and learning, measure student progress, and inform policy in ways that have the potential to support high-quality teaching and learning. As we suggested earlier, we believe SEL assessments will have the most power to benefit teaching and learning when they are used in a policy context that sets clear expectations about the social and emotional competencies students should know and be able to demonstrate, when school districts intentionally and intensively adopt practices designed to meet those expectations, and when professional learning supports the effective adoption of SEL programs and uses of SEL assessments to guide decision-making at the individual, class, school, district, or state level.

When the stakes are high...

Educators and policymakers may wonder whether SEL competencies should be involved in higher-stakes assessment. Higher-stakes assessment means that more consequential decisions are made based on assessment results. For example, in a high-stakes assessment, student outcomes on an SEL assessment might be tied to a teacher's performance review and salary.

By mentioning high-stakes assessment, we are not endorsing its use, and we recognize its risks. However, because such uses will be contemplated, it is important to understand the standards for judging the appropriateness of an assessment for those uses and for evaluating their acceptability to the public.

The most important consideration is that the evidence of an assessment's technical properties support its intended interpretations and uses. Figure 2 illustrates this general proposition.

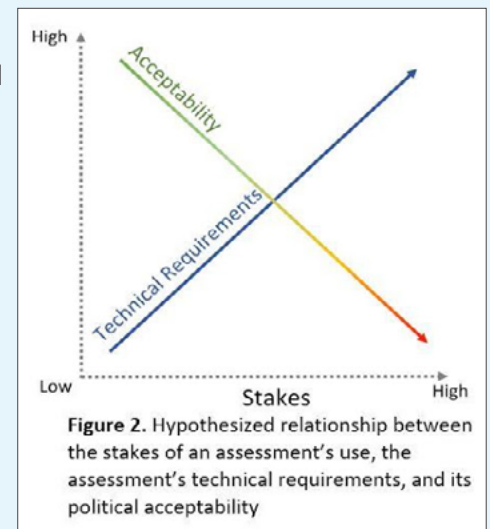
The higher the stakes of an assessment's intended use, the greater burden that assessment carries to demonstrate strong technical qualities such as score reliability, generalizability, and evidence of validity for that use. At the same time, the higher the stakes of an assessment's intended use, the more likely it is to face resistance from at least some stakeholders.

For example, teachers routinely observe student interactions to decide how to teach a skill. Because this is an expected, low-stakes form of formative assessment (Marzano, 2015), it is broadly acceptable and requires little evidence of psychometric merit. At the other extreme, if an SEL assessment is used to infer the effect of teachers on student outcomes and forms the basis for compensation decisions, it would be a high-stakes use, requiring high standards of technical merit and likely facing strong opposition from stakeholders—particularly some teachers.

In addition, the level of data aggregation relates to risk. Specifically, when individual student data from SEL assessments with low reliability are used for decision-making, this can lead to erroneous conclusions about the student. For example, a student may receive a low score on an assessment because she did not sleep well the night before, and that score may therefore be substantially lower than her actual competence level. As a result, an educator may erroneously conclude that the student has under-developed competencies, in turn influencing teacher expectations and decisions about how to best teach that student.

Data aggregated at the classroom level or higher reduces this risk but also reduces the specificity of the data for individual student instruction. Therefore, careful consideration of tradeoffs is warranted. Where possible, individual scores should be bounded by confidence intervals to make concrete the performance range within which a student's true level of competence is likely to lie. The higher the score reliability, the more precisely the score reflects level of competence and the smaller the confidence interval.

As a takeaway, when the stakes are high, the assessment should be up to the task. To that end, as educators consider the goals they wish to accomplish with SEL assessment, it is critical to think about: (1) the magnitude of the stakes of decisions based on assessment data, (2) evidence that the assessment has the technical properties for the intended high-stakes decision, and (3) the level of aggregation of the data reports. Both are strongly tied to the technical requirements of the assessment, the professional learning and support provided to users, and the broad acceptability of that use.



The Current State of the Field

As the field of SEL assessment matures, important questions remain about what methods are best suited to measuring which competencies and for what purposes. In addition, important topics are actively being discussed, including ensuring that SEL assessments measure what matters most, that they are developmentally appropriate, that they are culturally relevant, and that evidence of their technical merits supports their intended uses. This section describes the kinds of assessments that are available and emerging to meet varied SEL assessment goals and describes emerging efforts to define quality in SEL assessment. Finally, we assess the extent to which SEL standards and guidelines are related to and coordinated with SEL programs, SEL assessment, and teacher professional learning.

A Growing Number of Assessments to Accomplish Varied Goals

We are in the midst of a period of increased demand and accelerating development of SEL assessments. Several high-quality assessments have been developed and are widely used. At the same time, the field is new enough that what SEL assessments should measure for what purposes is still not yet totally clear. In parallel with the maturation of the market and attendant clarification about what kinds of assessments are most needed, continued experimentation, characterized by strong collaboration between practitioners and assessment developers, will help advance the field.

Several methods are available for assessing students' social and emotional competence. We focus here on methodologies for which technically sound assessments have been developed and are widely available (though not widely or consistently used) or that are or could be used without substantial investment in assessment development. Self-report, rating scales, and direct assessments have been developed and are widely available. In addition, formative assessments, report cards, and administrative data are used or could be used to achieve some SEL assessment goals (e.g., Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). Each of these methods has advantages and disadvantages (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). We also touch on other methods of assessment that may have promise to advance educational outcomes, including standards-based assessments and report cards. This section describes each of these strategies, examples of their use, and an overall appraisal of the state of the art. Readers interested in researching available assessments may find useful information in the [RAND Education Assessment Finder](#) and the [SEL Assessment Guide](#). Table 1 below provides key points of this review.

Summary of SEL Assessment Approaches

Type of Assessment	Key Strengths	Key Limitations	Best to Measure
Self-report	Simple, feasible	Vulnerable to biases. Difficult to administer to young children	Beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions
Rating Scales	Simple, mostly feasible	Vulnerable to biases. Can be a burden for teachers	Observable behaviors
Direct Assessment	Objective measure of skills	Costly to develop	Thinking skills and knowledge
Standards-Based Assessment	Linked to standards; easily integrated with instruction; mastery focused	Not straightforward to create; no widely available system	Current mastery of competencies
Report Card	Widely familiar; typically already includes behavioral descriptors	Parent concerns about including SEL as part of permanent record	Mastery of competencies
Administrative records	Ease of availability	Proxies for competencies	Impact of competencies

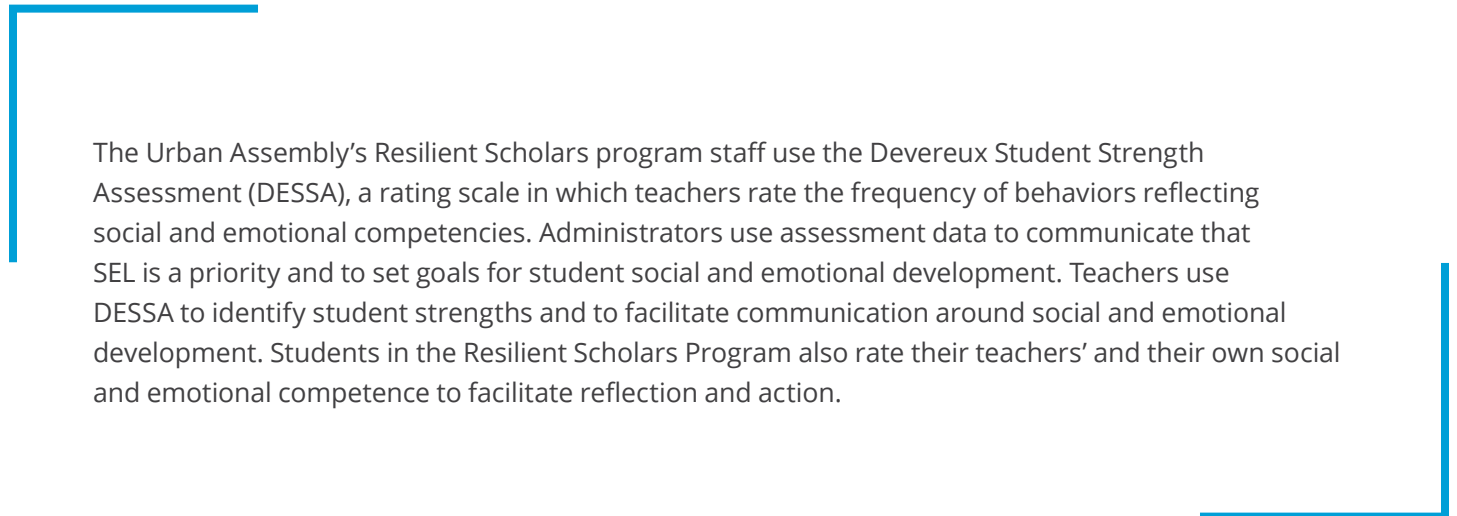
Self-Report

With **self-report**, students complete questionnaires in which they rate their own competencies. Typically, each item on a self-report questionnaire presents statements about a social and emotional competence and the student rates, typically on a four- or five-point scale, how frequently they engage in a behavior or how much they endorse or agree with a value, attitude, or belief. Some self-report questionnaires ask students to rate how true a statement is of them. Questionnaire methodologies have been a central measurement approach in social science research and applied practice for many decades.

Self-report questionnaires have several advantages. First, they are comparatively easy to construct and score and are efficiently administered to large numbers of students on widely available survey platforms. Second, the face validity of self-report questionnaires is strong—that is, it is typically relatively straightforward to infer from the item content what the measure is designed to assess, and summaries of student responses are readily interpretable. Third, self-report questionnaire items may be revised with minimal effort. Fourth, self-report questionnaires, more than other forms of SEL assessment, reflect “student voice,” providing students an opportunity to provide their views of their SEL strengths and needs. This is particularly important for social-emotional competencies that are, at their core, made up of student attitudes and beliefs, such as self-efficacy (the belief that I can accomplish even challenging tasks) or mindsets (the belief that ability is a function of effort).

Self-report questionnaires also have several limitations. First, because it is often clear what a desirable response is, students may consciously or unconsciously tend to rate themselves high, a characteristic of self-report questionnaires that has been called “social desirability response bias” (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Second, because self-report relies on students’ appraisal of their competence, it depends on students to be aware of and accurate in the appraisal of their own abilities, and so its validity depends on self-awareness. Third, because of reading and cognitive demands, it is difficult to administer self-report questionnaires to young students, although creative methods for doing so have been developed (Measelle, Ablow, Cowan, & Cowan, 1998). Finally, students may interpret the meaning of questions differently depending on their cultural background, and on the reference group to which they are comparing themselves. For example, a student from a culture that places a high value on diligence may rate him or herself lower on persistence than his or her peers even if the student works just as hard as peers.

Despite their limitations, and owing no doubt to their strengths, self-report questionnaires are widely used to assess student social and emotional competencies. A noteworthy example is highlighted in the callout box below. This example reflects the large-scale and systematic use of self-report questionnaires strongly integrated in practice. In the first two cases, in addition to self-report data, other kinds of data were collected to inform system change, including data on climate and teacher practices.



The Urban Assembly’s Resilient Scholars program staff use the Devereux Student Strength Assessment (DESSA), a rating scale in which teachers rate the frequency of behaviors reflecting social and emotional competencies. Administrators use assessment data to communicate that SEL is a priority and to set goals for student social and emotional development. Teachers use DESSA to identify student strengths and to facilitate communication around social and emotional development. Students in the Resilient Scholars Program also rate their teachers’ and their own social and emotional competence to facilitate reflection and action.

Teacher Rating Scales

With **teacher rating scales**, an adult, typically the classroom teacher, completes a questionnaire about a student. Typically, respondents read statements describing a variety of behaviors and rate the frequency with which the student engages in those behaviors. Rating scales were initially developed to better characterize behavioral problems, though even some of the early rating scales included competence scales (Achenbach, 1978; Spivack & Levine, 1964). Rating scales have evolved to include assessments that focus on student strengths (Gresham, Elliott, Cook, Vance, & Kettler, 2010). Some focus exclusively on student strengths, and some focus specifically on social-emotional competencies in the CASEL model (Gresham & Elliott, 2017; LeBuffe, Shapiro, & Robitaille, 2018).

Rating scales have several strengths. First, like student self-report questionnaires, they are simple, and many are now delivered on electronic survey platforms that make them easy to develop and administer. Second, compared to student self-assessments, teacher reports are less likely to be susceptible to some forms of biases, but this may be less true if the data are used to evaluate teacher performance or in other circumstances that create a vested interest in the assessment's outcome. Third, given their daily contact with a large number of same-aged peers, teachers have a strong reference group knowledge from which to rate individual student behavior. Fourth, to the extent that rating scales ask teachers to rate observable behaviors, they do not require a high level of inference for teachers to assess students. For these reasons, teacher ratings of students tend to have a stronger association with academic performance than do student self-reports (Poropat, 2014).

Rating scales also have weaknesses. Although they are straightforward, requiring teachers to complete lengthy questionnaires on a large number of students can pose a burden on teachers. Shorter versions of some rating scales are available, reducing respondent burden, but also reducing score reliability and the information gleaned from the results. In addition, teachers are not immune from biases of their own, and different teachers may rate the very same behavior differently. Common biases are “halo” effects by which teachers rate a student she particularly likes more favorably than other students with similar behaviors. Another bias is leniency or severity, in which the teacher rates all students more negatively or more positively than others might rate the same student (Merrell, 2009). Finally, rating scales are best-suited to assessing observable behaviors (Merrell, 2009). Some social and emotional competencies may be less visible—for example, how aware a student is of others' thoughts and feelings—and therefore may be more difficult for third parties to rate.

Teacher ratings have been a part of major educational assessment efforts such as the U.S. Department of Education's National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS, 1988), in which they have proven remarkably effective (Segal, 2013). Investigators have described the ways teacher rating scales could in theory be used as part of the continuous improvement process (LeBuffe, Shapiro, & Robitaille, 2018; Noam & Triggs, 2017). Some organizations have used teacher rating scales as part of school-improvement-focused consultation initiatives. One is described in the call-out below.

The Urban Assembly's Resilient Scholars program staff use the Devereux Student Strength Assessment (DESSA), a rating scale in which teachers rate the frequency of behaviors reflecting social and emotional competencies. Administrators use assessment data to communicate that SEL is a priority and to set goals for student social and emotional development. Teachers use DESSA to identify student strengths and to facilitate communication around social and emotional development. Students in the Resilient Scholars Program also rate their teachers' and their own social and emotional competence to facilitate reflection and action

Direct Assessment

With **direct assessment**, students demonstrate their social and emotional competencies by solving challenging social and emotional tasks. Direct assessments can involve naturalistic tasks that are administered one-on-one by a skilled tester or computer-based assessments. We use the term “direct assessment” as a broad term that encompasses both naturalistic tasks, which are often called “performance assessments,” and other assessments that require students to demonstrate their competencies.

An example of direct assessment that involves naturalistic tasks is the Preschool Self-Regulation Assessment (PSRA). As its name suggests, the PSRA is a direct assessment of self-regulation designed for use in early childhood settings. It consists of a number of tasks that require students to enlist self-regulation, including tasks in which students must follow directions and resist temptations (Smith-Donald, Raver, & Richardson, 2007).

Individually administered direct assessments have mostly been reserved for research and clinical purposes. For example, the Diagnostic Analysis of Nonverbal Accuracy (DANVA; Nowicki & Duke, 1994) is designed to assess dimensions of social awareness, specifically the ability to understand what others are feeling from facial expressions, tone of voice, and posture. Clinical assessments, such as the NEPSY (Brooks, Sherman, & Strauss, 2009) also include subtests assessing students' social awareness, specifically affect recognition and theory of mind.

Computerized direct assessments provide developmentally appropriate tasks that require students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. These can be game-like tasks that don't appear much like an assessment (DeRosier & Thomas, 2018) or interactive modular assessments with illustrated and narrated item content (McKown, Russo-Ponsaran, Johnson, Russo, & Allen, 2015). A direct assessment that was recognized in the second AWG Design challenge is featured in the call-out below.

The Virtual Environment for Social Information Processing, or VESIP, was one of the winners of the AWG Design Challenge 1. Developed at the Rush NeuroBehavioral Center, VESIP reflects an innovative social and emotional competence assessment that measures student competence directly. VESIP is a theory-driven, web-based assessment for third- through seventh-grade students that employs an interactive and immersive simulation format to assess students' social information processing skills. The assessment measures a child's understanding of, and ability to, constructively solve problems in challenging social situations. In VESIP, students assume the role of the primary avatar, named Alex, who can be customized by selecting gender, hair color, and clothing. Alex participates in five different social situations (e.g., ambiguous provocation, bullying, compromising, joining a group of peers, initiating friendship), presented across two school settings (e.g., classroom, cafeteria). During these social situations, Alex is asked about his or her understanding of and response to these situations by another avatar, named Dana. The overarching goal of VESIP is to fill a gap in the available methods to assess social information processing, a key social and emotional competence.

¹ The Design Challenge is an annual competition that seeks to stimulate the development and adoption of direct assessments of social-emotional competence supporting effective instruction and positive student development. Developers submit assessment proposals that address practitioner needs, from which a panel of practitioners and researchers selects the best-designed direct assessments. For more information visit: measuringSEL.caseli.org

Direct assessments have several strengths. Most notably, they provide evidence of competence that is unmediated by the potentially biased perceptions of a rater or the student herself. Their potential to measure social and emotional competence objectively is a great strength. When constructed well, direct assessments can yield highly reliable scores that are valid for a variety of purposes.

Like other forms of assessment, direct assessments have weaknesses. Notably, the costs and complexity of developing technically sound direct assessments are high. Direct assessment suitable for use in schools must be simple to administer and offer automated scoring and reporting. As a result, there are not as many well-validated direct assessments as there are self-report and teacher report measures. In addition, direct assessment may be better suited to assessing some social and emotional competencies than others, particularly the knowledge and mental processes that are involved in social interactions, but do not necessarily result in expressed behavior. For example, a student reading social cues about others' emotions is enlisting a mental process that does not necessarily have an observable behavioral component. Direct assessment may not be as well-suited to assessing the behavioral components of social and emotional competencies. Finally, depictions of hypothetical scenarios in direct assessments may have different meanings and salience to students from different cultural or socioeconomic groups. This limitation is also true of assessments that rely on the interpretation of language, including student self-report and teacher ratings.

Other Methods

Self-report, teacher rating scales, and direct assessments parallel, in important ways, formal achievement tests—they have items with valued responses that yield scores reflecting competence, and their qualities can be judged with traditional psychometric methods evaluating such characteristics as score reliability, various forms of validity, and item and measurement equivalence across groups.

Standards-based assessment. Other forms of assessment may be helpful to achieve varied social and emotional assessment goals. For example, Marzano (2015) argued that standards-based assessment can be used to evaluate student mastery of expected social and emotional competencies. The formative assessment system operationalizes for each competence what lower-level and higher-level proficiency levels look like, so that teachers, in the routine course of instruction, can probe students to understand and periodically rate their proficiency. This strategy is particularly well-suited to formative assessment—teachers can regularly probe learning and use what they learn to support instruction designed to advance student proficiency based on students' current level of mastery.

Report cards. Report cards can also be a vehicle for describing student social and emotional competence. Elias and Ferrito (2015) pointed out that report cards often already include social and emotional proficiency ratings, but that those ratings are not very well-conceived or informative. Including standards-based ratings of student social and emotional proficiency, tied to formative and other forms of assessment, provides opportunities to facilitate home-school communication and focus educational attention and resources on supporting social and emotional competence development. It may, however, make some parents and community members concerned that social and emotional proficiency will become a part of a student's permanent record in ways that are inadvertently harmful to students.

The Standards Based Report Card, developed by San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD), displays the scores teachers give students in academic subjects and SEL. Teachers use an observational SEL rubric to measure social awareness, self-management, growth mindset, and self-efficacy of students in Transitional Kindergarten through fifth grade. Students receive the Standards Based Report Card three times a year. SFUSD also created a teacher guide to help their teachers create safe and supportive classroom environments through the four SEL skills. Approximately 30 schools in SFUSD are grant-funded to teach SEL explicitly in the classroom and assess students' SEL along the four-point scale. SFUSD developed its approach to measuring SEL through its membership in the CORE Districts. Teachers also use the SEL rubric to communicate one-on-one with students and with parents at conferences. Schools use the SEL data alongside other culture and climate data for goal setting and planning.

Peer nominations. Peer nominations involve students nominating classmates whom they prefer, or who display certain behaviors. Peer nomination techniques are well-established and potentially offer useful information. However, they are difficult to administer to large groups of students, require prohibitive levels of expertise to score and interpret, and are not acceptable in many communities.

Administrative records. Administrative records have been used as indicators of or proxies for social and emotional competence (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). For example, Jackson (2016) used absences, suspensions, course grades, and grade repetition to create a score that predicted high school completion and college enrollment. Similarly, Kautz and Zanoni (2018) created a noncognitive composite by combining information about grades, accumulated credits, absences, and disciplinary infractions in the ninth grade. They found that this composite predicted eleventh-grade grades and absences and arrests within four years, high school graduation, college enrollment, and college graduation. They also found that an intervention used in Chicago Public Schools called OneGoal led to increases in college enrollment, and that its success was largely due to its effect on the noncognitive skill composite captured by the administrative records.

Peer nominations, observations, and administrative records are potentially useful assessments, particularly for research. Administrative records may provide a readily available source of information that can be used, for example, to monitor the extent to which high school students are on track to graduate (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Peer nominations and observations can have a close correspondence in their content to the kinds of social and emotional competencies described by the CASEL model but face feasibility barriers. Administrative records, on the other hand, are quite feasible, but are not measures of the competencies themselves.

All of these approaches have advantages and disadvantages. The most promising approaches will have all of these qualities: (1) they measure the competencies themselves, not their proxies, (2) they are usable and feasibly administered to large numbers of students, and (3) they are acceptable in most communities. The reader interested in a more comprehensive catalog of available assessments is encouraged to consult the [SEL Assessment Guide](#) and the [RAND Education Assessment Finder](#).

The State of SEL Assessment Practice - Principals' Perspectives

A recent survey of principals' views of social and emotional learning was conducted by Civic Enterprises and Hart Research for CASEL (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). The sample was representative of principals nationwide, and items were generally consistent with the 2017 CASEL survey of principals allowing changing trends in responses to be examined. The takeaway is that appreciable, positive gains have occurred in SEL assessment awareness and use over the past two years, but also that there is room for continued growth. Some of the key findings include:

Attitudes toward SEL

- SEL continues to be an important focus for principals, and they maintain the belief that SEL will help to promote a positive school climate and support achievement.
- There has been a marked increase in principals' support for incorporating SEL in state educational standards.
- The majority believe that SEL skills are teachable, and there is greater recognition in the need for a formal SEL curriculum to do so.

Implementation of SEL

- The majority report having a plan for implementing SEL, and there are increases in related benchmarks (e.g., inclusion of SEL learning standards, professional development, evaluating the adequacy of resources).
- However, there are lower rates of reaching district-level benchmarks compared to school benchmarks.
- There has been an increase in having an SEL planning team in place and greater attention to providing SEL resources for guidance and support.
- The availability of professional development has increased in tandem with the belief that teachers are better-prepared to teach SEL.
- Room remains to expand partnerships with parents and out-of-school time providers.

Assessing SEL

- Principals' report growth in familiarity with SEL assessments and the belief that they are useful for assessing students' SEL skills.
- There has been an increase in the belief that SEL assessment can and should be used for assessment, with 4 in 10 principals now assessing SEL in all students.
- Assessments are being used more often to improve instruction and for program evaluation.
- Nearly 2 in 3 principals are using school-level data to ensure equity in SEL.

At the same time, principals report that assessment still poses major challenges (e.g, resources, time, funding, training) and that teachers need to know more about how to use SEL assessment data to improve their instruction. In addition, there is room to expand assessment methods as behavioral observations and administrative records are used most often, followed by teacher ratings, self-reports, and performance assessments.

Beyond the Tools: Emerging Clarity on what Constitutes Quality

The field has made progress in clarifying what quality means, and active efforts are currently underway to develop guidance for assessment developers and users alike to evaluate assessment quality. These efforts include defining quality in terms of the technical merits of assessments. But they go beyond that to consider assessment as a process that involves goals, data collection, and data interpretation and use. In that context, considerations of quality include defining what constitutes high-quality data use practices.

Existing and emerging guidance about assessment quality suggests that the best social and emotional assessment process will include assessments that measure what matters, are culturally relevant, and are developmentally appropriate (e.g., National Practitioner Advisory Group, 2019). In addition, high-quality assessment data use will involve ensuring that research evidence supports the assessment's intended use and interpretations and are interpreted in a well-designed and structured data review process. Here we describe these considerations of quality and the extent to which the field has produced assessments that meet these standards of quality.

Measuring What Matters: Coordinating Standards, Programs, and Assessments

Good student SEL assessment should measure what matters. Many frameworks describe SEL, and the policy context has not, until recently, provided guidance on what specific competencies matter most. As a result, defining what matters most has largely been a local matter. This poses challenges to educators and assessment developers. For educators, the task of sorting through definitions and local priorities to get to clarity can be onerous. For assessment developers, it is difficult to know what competencies to design their assessments to measure, because what is important varies from community to community. In addition, it is difficult for assessment developers to justify the considerable investment required to create high-quality assessments that have little chance of being adopted beyond a local context.

There are ways to settle on what matters and find or develop assessments designed to measure those competencies. The growing number of states that have adopted SEL standards provide some guidance on the social and emotional competencies students should know and be able to demonstrate at different ages, although standards are sometimes so broadly worded that they are open to wide interpretation. Educators in such a state can look to those standards. Educators in states that have not adopted SEL standards are left without clear guidance.

State standards can also serve to guide and encourage investment in assessment development efforts. When developers know the competencies educators are expected to teach, and have confidence that teaching and learning will be influenced by those standards, they will see opportunities to develop high-quality assessments that have the possibility of widespread adoption, and are then more likely to make such investments.

A second resource for identifying what matters is the content of SEL programs, such as those described in the [CASEL program guides](#) for preschool to high school students. In the best of all worlds, the SEL programs adopted by a district are designed to teach the competencies described in their states' standards. It may focus on some competencies more intensively than others. The content of an SEL program's scope and sequence can provide guidance on what specific competencies the corresponding assessment ought to be designed to measure.

Several published resources are also available to educators who are working to identify what matters most. When districts are clear about social and emotional competencies they will prioritize, this lays an important foundation for curriculum development and adoption efforts, and for identifying assessment resources that will best serve the district's goals (Taylor, Buckley, Hamilton, Stecher, Read, and Schweig, 2018; McKown, 2019).

Culturally Relevant Assessment

Good SEL assessment should be culturally relevant. Indeed, the National Practitioner Advisory Group (2019) noted that an understanding of educational equity is fundamental to ethically assessing SEL practices and competencies and interpreting SEL data. Like developmental considerations, cultural considerations are multifaceted. Cultural considerations include technical matters, particularly measurement equivalence. They include social values, as reflected by what social and emotional competencies are most important and who gets to decide. And they involve concerns about the SEL endeavor as a means of social control and status reproduction, including questions about the potential cost of focusing on individual student characteristics rather than the opportunities and constraints afforded students from different groups.

Technical considerations, though not straightforward, are bounded and testable matters. At issue is whether an assessment performs the same way for members of different groups. Key questions are: Is the content culturally relevant and reflective of the community being assessed? Does it measure the same competency in all groups of students? Are the intervals between scores equivalent? Do the same scores, both at the item and overall score level, for members of different groups reflect the same level of competence? These properties of an assessment instrument can be tested. To the extent that an assessment demonstrates what is called measurement equivalence, it is capable of obtaining a fair estimate of competence that has similar meaning across different groups. Violations of measurement equivalence can limit its usefulness, and the particular limitation depends on the kind and extent of the measurement non-equivalence.

Beyond technical consideration, some may question the cultural frame of reference for determining what social and emotional competence is, how it is enacted, and how it should be assessed. They may point to a mismatch between the local community's culture and the apparent cultural backgrounds of people depicted in the assessment content, or the description of the behaviors being assessed, or the situations in hypothetical vignettes. To some degree, this concern can be addressed with the evidence of measurement equivalence just described.

However, evidence of measurement equivalence does not fully answer questions about cultural frame of reference. This is because the concern is not only about what is in the assessment; it's also about what is not in the assessment, a problem that is called "construct under-representation." Community members might raise concern that social and emotional competencies that are critical in their community are not measured by the assessment. For example, for many students of color, the skill of code-switching, which involves being able to skillfully cross between cultural contexts with different implicit rules of behavior, is a key skill for navigating the world but is not often the target of assessment.

It is reassuring that the social and emotional competencies we have been discussing appear to matter for students regardless of their cultural background. For example, the meta-analysis by Durlak and colleagues (2011) found that SEL programs, when implemented well, lead to improved student outcomes, the benefit of these programs was not different for students from different ethnic or socioeconomic groups. This suggests that the social and emotional competencies that are the focus of our attention are important for all students and that assessing and addressing those competencies will benefit all students. Nevertheless, other competencies may be important and the field might be better positioned as a "big tent" if community input were more central to determining what is and what is not assessed and addressed.

In addition, some have expressed concern that SEL assessment data will be used in ways that stigmatize their students and reinforce or reproduce social inequities. Looming large is the concern that by measuring student SEL competence, educators may be creating yet another way to document new kinds of racial or gender gaps and associated deficits. Information about differences on SEL assessments between members of different groups can cause problems by, for example, subtly shaping what teachers expect from and how they treat their students. Before SEL assessments are used to document group differences, evidence supporting the use of such assessments for this application should be compelling, and the constructive purpose of focusing on group differences should be clearly articulated. Moreover, educators should be aware of, and guard against, implicit bias when choosing and implementing assessments of SEL competencies (National Practitioner Advisory Group, 2019).

Finally, some have voiced concern that in focusing on student competencies, educators might use assessment data to describe inequalities arose as originating from individual students while discounting the broader context in which those inequalities. For example, imagine a district with differential rates of disciplinary referrals for students from different ethnic groups. In this district, community members might be concerned that school leaders will use SEL assessment data to explain the discipline gap as arising from student SEL competence deficits and will discount the possibility that systemic biases and adult practices contribute to the disparity. Combining SEL competency data with assessment on the learning environment, climate, and adult practices, can mitigate this risk.

Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Borowski (2018) conducted a cultural analysis of social and emotional learning, focusing on the CASEL model of SEL. They envision SEL as having the potential to reduce racial inequity and oppression, and they recognize that the field has not yet realized this vision. Examining the CASEL model, they explore opportunities for SEL to support equity by reframing social and emotional competencies to include ways those competencies could reduce oppression. For example, they propose that social awareness might include understanding people with different backgrounds and understanding social norms in diverse communities. This extension of SEL to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion has implications both for what social-emotional competencies are taught and what competencies are assessed. On this score, national data from a survey of school principals shows that the use of data to help ensure equity is common and that SEL assessment for all students is increasing, but there is still considerable room for growth (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019).

The extent to which assessments incorporate considerations of diversity, equity, and inclusion appears to be an area with opportunities for improvement. On the one hand, existing assessments have been used with and validated and normed on diverse samples of students. However, evidence of measurement equivalence is typically not reported by assessment developers, with some exceptions in the area of large-scale assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

In addition, considerations of diversity, equity, and inclusion generally do not appear to be prominent in the design or construction of many SEL assessments. There are noteworthy exceptions to this rule. For example, [the Tripod project](#) has constructed surveys that are designed to assess student perceptions of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their school. Even those surveys, however, are distinct from their surveys of social and emotional competence. The bottom line is that when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion, the field of SEL assessment has room to grow.

Developmentally Appropriate Assessment

Good SEL assessment should be developmentally appropriate. Social and emotional competencies change and grow as children mature (National Practitioner Advisory Group, 2019; Denham, 2018). Because children have different social and emotional capabilities and needs throughout schooling and into adulthood, educators must work to ensure that assessments are developmentally appropriate.

Denham (2018) described two important ways students' development can influence how social and emotional competence are assessed. First, as students age, a competence may stay the same in its meaning and be demonstrated in a similar way. For example, the ability to interpret what others are feeling from nonverbal behaviors such as facial expressions has a similar meaning and expression across the lifespan. At the same time, age-related improvements in emotion recognition skills have been documented, and, as a result, any assessment of this skill needs to include items with a sufficient range of difficulty to measure the skill well at different ages.

Second, the meaning of a social and emotional competence may remain the same across development, but it may have different manifestations, requiring different measurement approaches. Continuing with emotion understanding as an example, young students may be expected to understand and label basic emotions in themselves and others. As they traverse middle childhood, they come to understand more complex emotional experiences—for example, that people can experience different emotions at the same time (Pons, Harris, and DeRosnay, 2004). The same underlying competence—emotion recognition—manifests itself differently as the student ages and the competence becomes more differentiated.

A third developmental consideration is the possibility that different social and emotional competencies become salient at different developmental periods. For example, in preschool and early elementary school, it is important for students to learn self-management as they adapt to the demands, routines, and practices of school. In middle childhood, students learn to coordinate their social behavior with others through social awareness and relationship management skills. With the greater independence of adolescence, responsible decision-making becomes prominent (Nagaoka, Farrington, Ehrlich, & Heath, 2015). Which competencies are most salient at each developmental period is not a settled matter. What is important is that different competencies may emerge in the foreground as social and emotional demands and expectations change with student age.

To address these developmental considerations, some assessments have been designed for different developmental levels. For example, the preschool self-regulation assessment (PSRA; Smith-Donald, Raver, Hayes, Richardson, 2007) includes a series of naturalistic tasks designed to measure self-regulation. These tasks are suitable for and validated with preschool students and are not likely to be useful for older students. Most SEL assessments appear not to have been designed with careful consideration of students' social and emotional development. For example, self-report questionnaires typically ask the same questions to students at different ages, and only to students who are old enough to understand and respond to a self-report questionnaires. Some teacher rating scales have different forms for different ages. Some direct assessments were designed with careful consideration of development, including the Preschool Self-Regulation Assessment (Smith-Donalds, Raver, Hayes, & Richardson, 2007), SELweb (McKown, Russo-Ponsaran, Johnson, Russo, & Allen, 2016), and ZooU (DeRosier & Thomas, 2018).

Intended Interpretation and Use

A particular concern in the use of SEL assessment is the suitability of the assessment score for inferences and decisions educators plan to make based on those scores. In many ways, the psychometric merit of SEL assessment should be judged in the same way any assessment would be (AERA/APA/NCME, 2014). However, as the field moves forward, it is important that developers and users of SEL assessments pay particular mind to what evidence supports the inferences and decisions users will make based on student assessment results. As with all forms of assessment, this is important because consequential decisions about what to teach and how to teach, for example, should be based on information that is appropriate for making such decisions. If the evidence does not support the intended use, faulty decisions can lead to harm.

Why focus on interpretation and use. Interpretation and use are important considerations in weighing the merits of all kinds of assessments, but three facets of the policy and practice context make them particularly important in relation to student SEL skill assessment. First, whereas educators are more likely to be academic subject matter experts who are in a good position to make valid inferences and decisions based on achievement data, they typically do not have the same level of expertise in SEL (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2014; Schonert-Reichl, Hanson-Peterson, & Hymel, 2015). In addition, few teacher preparation programs offer information or skills on SEL, including its assessment, and interpretation and use of assessment data (Schonert-Reichl, Kitil, & Hanson-Peterson, 2017).

Second, the SEL policy context creates uncertainty. Whereas educational policies and well-established local practices often dictate when, how, and why achievement tests are to be used, SEL has only recently appeared in any state policy, and no policy requirements dictate whether, when, how, or why educators must assess SEL. As a result, it is up to district leadership to define these parameters. Without strong guidance and requirements, there is greater room for untoward interpretation and use of SEL assessment data. As such, we recommend that districts wishing to assess student SEL competence consider: (1) clarifying the goals of assessment, (2) examining the relationship between standards, programs, and assessment content, (3) selecting an assessment appropriate for achieving the assessment goal, (4) determining the timing of assessment, and (5) systematically reviewing and using assessment for instructional decision-making. We elaborate on this guidance below.

Third, the field of SEL assessment development for broad educational use is relatively young, and it is important that those who use SEL assessment know how to do so in pursuit of goals for which existing assessments have been established by research as technically sound.

Supporting constructive use. SEL assessment developers and users each have a role to play to ensure that the evidence supports the intended use of a particular SEL assessment. The developer's role is to design assessments with a particular set of uses and interpretations in mind and develop and transparently report evidence of the extent to which the assessment is valid for those uses and interpretations. The user's role is to be clear about the interpretations and decisions they intend to make based on an assessment, and to evaluate the evidence that the assessment is valid for those uses. To do so, effective assessment of social and emotional competencies must be driven by a clear vision and explicit goals for desired outcomes (National Practitioner Advisory Group, 2019). This vision should guide the intentional measurement of practices and competencies that are most important. In addition, users will do well to be clear about those interpretations and uses that are "out of bounds" for the assessment to guard against drift towards unsupported interpretations and uses.

Several actions may increase the chances that SEL assessment will be used to make interpretations and decisions for which they are technically suited. For example, users should be clear about what their assessment goals are (and what they are not). What do they want to understand about their students? Is the goal to assess in ways that inform instruction (formative assessment), evaluate programs (a summative use) or another of the goals described previously in this report? What kinds of decisions do they intend to make from what they learn? Will teachers decide what to teach to whom, or will district decision-makers decide what program resources to invest in, for example? With these goals in mind, they can weigh the evidence that an assessment they are considering will be appropriate for pursuing those goals.

Standards of quality for a given use. All of these considerations raise the question of what standards to use to weigh evidence of an assessment's appropriateness for a given interpretation and use. There is no simple answer to this question. However, for the user who has decided what inferences and decisions they will make with the assessment data, a useful principle might guide them as they judge the merits of an SEL assessment. The table below provides broad guidance about the evaluative questions, forms of evidence, and metrics users may contemplate when judging the merits of an assessment. Note that this is for illustrative purposes. There are many ways student SEL assessments might be used. Users should be clear about the intended use and that the evidence supports their chosen assessment for this use.

Another general principle for reviewing evidence of an assessment's appropriateness for a particular purpose is this: The higher the stakes of the decision to be made based on the assessment data, the higher the standard of excellence the assessment should meet. Observing a student's behavior in the flow of instruction and adjusting teaching style is low-stakes. The time period is limited, and the consequences of the decision are low. Informal assessment with minimal evidence of psychometric merit is, in this context, appropriate. In fact, teachers constantly evaluate students informally to adjust their teaching.

Other decisions have long-lasting and substantial effects on students and teachers. For example, diagnostic decisions about special education placement and teacher performance reviews tied to pay are high-stakes decisions. It seems clear that for these inferences, the quality of the evidence supporting those inferences ought to be very high.

Finally, even for those who are clear about their assessment goals and who carefully weigh the evidence of an SEL assessment's appropriateness for a specific use, the process of interpreting assessment data is a human one. Humans bring all of their own interpretive strengths and weaknesses to the process. This may be particularly consequential when considering the relationship between assessments and equity. All humans are vulnerable to implicit biases, and those biases may affect how the user of data interprets the meaning of those data and the decisions based on the data. There are no perfect safeguards against human shortcomings. Educators will be in the best position to render equitable judgments of assessment data when they are aware of their own biases, or the potential for bias. In addition, the processes by which data are interpreted and used, discussed next, can include procedural safeguards that mitigate the risk of unintended biases.

Sample intended assessment uses and criteria for evaluating assessments for those uses

Intended use	Evaluative Question	Evidence	Metrics
Infer how student performance compares to the general population.	How well does the normative sample reflect the group I care about? How current are norms?	Characteristics of the normative sample and timeframe of normative data collection.	The higher stakes the decision, the better quality the norming sample ought to be.
Understand student strengths and needs to guide instruction	Does the assessment measure competencies taught? Can scores guide instruction? Is assessment score associated with the competencies taught?	Relationship between assessment score skills and curriculum content. Score reliability and correlation with other competencies.	Assessment content. Internal consistency. Temporal stability. Correlation with other variables.
Evaluate student progress over time	Is the assessment sensitive to change in student skill level over time?	Evidence that scores increase with age. Evidence of consistent performance on repeated assessment.	Improvements in performance by age with cross-sectional or longitudinal data. Test-retest reliability.
Engaging in continuous improvement	Does performance on the assessment reflect the skills of the people and the quality of their practices?	Associations between school quality and student competence in longitudinal, quasi-experimental, or experimental designs.	Magnitude of correlation between school quality and assessment score. Evidence that continuous improvement lead to improved scores.
Evaluating program impact	Is the assessment sensitive to the program effects? Is the assessment designed to measure what the program teaches?	See “understand student strengths and needs....” Evidence that the students exposed to high-quality instruction score better than a control group.	See “understand student strengths and needs to guide instruction.” See field trials that included the assessment as an outcome measure.

Table 2 describes some of the most common goals that may be pursued through the use of SEL assessment. In sum, to maximize the benefit of SEL assessment and mitigate the risk of unintended consequences, there is a particular burden on test developers and users to understand the fit between their intended assessment uses and the evidence that their chosen assessment is appropriate for that use. Currently, assessment manuals may provide guidance to the appropriate and inappropriate uses of assessments. However, it seems likely that educators would benefit from support in learning to evaluate the evidence in determining the appropriateness of a given assessment for a particular interpretation and use. In addition, in recognition that the interpretation and use of assessment data is a human process, educators will benefit from intentional training and procedural safeguards to ensure that the data are used to promote equity and not, even inadvertently, to reproduce existing inequities.

Another important consideration for the use of SEL assessment data is the **level of aggregation** of the data. Any SEL assessment designed to measure individual students' competencies will yield scores for each student. That does not mean, however, that it is always or even most often best to interpret individual student scores.

What levels of aggregation might be better for what purposes? For a district administrator interested in program evaluation, average student performance at district and school levels might be most informative. For principals, average student performance at the school and classroom levels might be best. In addition, information about the distribution of groups of students can help district and school administrators better understand what proportion of students are performing at what level—by quartile, for example. For teachers, understanding the average and variability of student SEL assessment performance can provide specific enough information to make instructional decisions.

Note that in none of these examples are individual student scores the unit of reporting and analysis. In fact, for most of these uses, individual student performance data would not be at all useful. Arguably, teachers might use individual student data to tailor instruction. Doing so can confer some risk, however. That is because most student competence assessments, like other forms of educational assessments, have imperfect reliability, an indicator of consistency of measurement. As a result, a student's performance on an assessment on any given day might over- or under-estimate his or her true level of competence. When aggregated at the classroom level or above, the level of imprecision is reduced. In addition, aggregated data reduces the risk that expectations of a particular student will be influenced by imprecise measurement. Reviewing individual-level data runs some risk that the data user might draw an incorrect conclusion about an individual's level of competence and make decisions about that student based on that incorrect conclusion.

Other situations introduce important decisions about the level of aggregation. For example, in a district administering a direct assessment to all students to inform instruction as part of a continuous improvement plan, teachers need to know about their students' strengths and needs to make instructional decisions. An important decision is whether to review data aggregated at the classroom level—for example, reviewing the percentage of students in the class who scored at different performance levels—or at the individual level. Intuitively, many educators may lean towards reviewing individual data. However, to make decisions about whole-class instruction, it may make more sense to look at data about the whole class. In addition, reviewing individual student competence may lead to erroneous conclusions about student competence level because of imperfect score reliability and because some competencies may be more situation-specific (Farrington, Porter, and Klugman, 2019).

Individual student data, therefore, may be best considered a source of hypotheses about students' strengths and needs that require additional information to confirm or disprove. For example, if a student scores particularly low on a social and emotional competence assessment, is there evidence from his or her behavior, peer relationships, ability to participate in classroom activity, or other sources to support the hypothesis that this competence is a challenge? It is important to consider the possibility that an individual student's score, particularly a low score, may not reflect his or her true level of competence. To avoid inadvertently stigmatizing students, it is important to corroborate conclusions based on individual student scores. In addition, it is important to consider whether individual student scores are the best way to meet an assessment goal. If higher levels of aggregation will serve to meet that goal equally well, preference for aggregation helps avoid the risk of over-interpreting individual student scores.

Data Use Practices

Assessment data use—the process through which educators interpret assessment data and make decisions based on those interpretations—happens in the context of human interactions that are part of identifiable routines and practices. The most constructive uses of SEL assessment data will take place in a thoughtfully executed set of data use practices. Designed well, data use practices can support the rigorous and appropriate use of SEL assessment data and mitigate risk of unwarranted uses.

Helpful resources for data use practices include the interactive SEL Assessment Guide, Taylor, et al (2018) and McKown (2019). Districts interested in using assessment data effectively will need to:

- 1. Identify who the users are.** If the intended use is to inform instruction, instructional staff and those supporting instruction are key users, for example. If the intended use is to evaluate a program, district decision-makers might be the main users.
- 2. Ensure that users understand what the assessment measures.** Assessment scores are useful only if users have a good grasp of the competencies the scores reflect. It is important, therefore, that users understand accurately and clearly, the competence each score reflects and can articulate how that competence expresses itself in daily life.
- 3. Ensure that users understand what the assessment scores mean.** Assessment scores are useful only if users know how the numbers are scaled. For example, with a norm-referenced assessment, users should know what the average score for a child's age or grade level is and what the standard deviation is so they can interpret the meaning of the numbers in relation to the performance of the normative sample.
- 4. Decide the form and level of aggregation of assessment data reports.** As discussed previously, the assessment goal should help determine the level of aggregation of the data that are reviewed.
- 5. Provide time for users to review data together.** Assessment data will only inform educators' understanding of their students, and their decisions about teaching and learning, if they have time to review and discuss the data. Many schools already have regular meetings to review student assessment data. In those schools, assimilating SEL assessment data may be more straightforward, as they can be included in existing meeting agendas. In schools that do not have systematic assessment data review practices, more work is required to establish a culture of data-based decision-making and the practices that support it.
- 6. Facilitate a structured data review process.** Assessment data and its meaning is not always intuitive, particularly when discussing content areas, such as SEL, that are less familiar. To support effective data interpretation, we recommend a structured data review process whereby a member of the group who understands data and its meaning helps the group with interpretation and advises them when their interpretations are beyond what the data can support.
- 7. Support action based on data review.** Data-based decision-making is most powerful when decision-makers are empowered to take action based on the decisions they make from the data. For example, if a teacher, based on student SEL data, wants to alter her instructional approach to build on student strengths and address student needs, she will be in the best position to do so if the principal supports that modification and offers resources, such as professional development and coaching, to support the teacher's success.

Building adult capacity to effectively use SEL data to inform practice calls for a lifelong learning approach (National Practitioner Advisory Group, 2019). Such capacity-building requires that organizations commit to fostering the adults' knowledge, skills, and competencies to understand SEL frameworks, programs, and practices and in using data and information to improve SEL practices. This includes attention to adult SEL at the recruitment and hiring process both to reinforce the importance of SEL, and to understand educators' background and capacity to use data to inform practice. Moreover, because adults' awareness of their own social and emotional competencies is a precursor to supporting social, emotional, and academic development in others, effective data use practices will also involve adults assessing, reflecting on, and developing their own social and emotional competencies.

Engaging in effective data review practices, in short, requires planning, professional learning, time, effective meeting processes, and resources for follow-up. All of these resources require leadership and commitment. Weakness in any of these areas reduces the chances that assessment data will be used well, or even used at all.

Being intentional about data use is, we believe, a critical component to using SEL assessment to support equity. It is during the very human process of data interpretation and decision-making that hidden biases may affect how data are used. In defining the structure of the data review process, leaders can build the process around the assessment goals, defined at the outset of the SEL assessment process. In so doing, they can facilitate the discussion to stay consistent with those goals and when the discussion strays from the main purpose, bring it back to those goals.

In addition, a structured discussion of assessment should support interpretations that are “close” to the data. That is, the data reflect certain facts about students. When discussion begins to include unwarranted interpretations that stray from those facts, the meeting facilitator can redirect the discussion to the facts—for example, by urging participants to support their inferences with specific facts they observe in the data.

The process of data use is where the proverbial rubber meets the road. It is here that assessment data will either be used in service to a specific goal or in a diffuse and unfocused way; where interpretations and decisions will be warranted by evidence of the assessment's merit, or will stray beyond; and where the sense adults make of the data will either be used to support equity, or not.

Summary: The State of the Tools

The best SEL assessments will measure what matters most in culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate ways. Evidence will support the assessment’s intended uses and interpretations. And those charged with using the assessment data will engage in a systematic and well-designed process of data use that constructively informs practice.

With those quality criteria in mind, we can consider the state of the assessments. A growing number of SEL assessments have been, and will continue to be, introduced to practice. These assessments show promise to support teaching and learning. One way of taking stock of where we have come in the development of assessments is to consider a matrix of assessment needs and consider how many of the “cells” in that matrix can be occupied by an assessment that has been developed.

Pre-K	Competence					
Assessment Goal	Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Social Awareness	Relationship Skills	Responsible Decision-Making	
Formative	12 th Grade	Competence				
Summative	Assessment Goal	Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Social Awareness	Relationship Skills	Responsible Decision-Making
Continuous Improvement	Formative					
	Summative					
	Continuous Improvement					

Hypothetical grade level by assessment goal by competence matrix

Imagine that this matrix consists of five main competencies (self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) by 14 grade levels (PreK to 12) by three assessment goals (formative, summative, and continuous improvement). Such a matrix would include 5 X 14 X 3 = 210 cells, as depicted in Figure X. Readers may debate whether this matrix reflects the right competencies and assessment goals. Regardless of how such a matrix is constructed, however, it seems clear that a large number of cells are currently unfilled. That is to say, we have an important and exciting array of tasks to develop assessments that can measure key social and emotional competencies across all grade levels to achieve the most pressing assessment goals.

Several general conclusions can be drawn about existing and emerging SEL assessments. First, reflecting ongoing diversity of views about what constitutes SEL, the existing assessments originate from different models of SEL and measure overlapping but not consistent sets of competencies. Second, few assessment systems are designed to measure competencies in a developmentally appropriate way from PreK through high school. Third, few widely used SEL assessments have deeply integrated considerations of cultural relevance from design through validation. Finally, for all of the most pressing goals, competencies, and grade levels for which SEL assessment may be needed, more work is needed to make the full array of instruments available to educators.

In addition, guidance about the appropriate uses of SEL assessment is emerging that will increase the odds that evidence of an assessment’s merits will influence the range of purposes to which that assessment will be put. Less clear is the extent to which school districts are prepared to engage in high-quality, structured data uses processes (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). It seems fair to conclude that many educators would benefit from professional learning opportunities focused on high-quality data use practices to enhance students’ social and emotional growth. The callout box on page 42 highlights some of the areas of professional learning that will benefit the field.

Professional Learning for Administrators and Teachers

Educators are likely to be expert in academic subject matter, but not necessarily in SEL or how to assess it. Indeed, there are no policy requirements on what, whether, when, how, or why educators must assess SEL. Therefore, the existing professional training educators receive is not often designed to prepare them for SEL assessment. This circumstance leaves room for untoward interpretation and use of assessment data.

However, policymakers and school leaders can play a key role in creating standards and supporting professional learning opportunities to help guide educators toward the selection of assessments that best match their intended use. Professional learning about SEL assessment should be prioritized at the preservice level and continue as an ongoing part of professional learning communities for inservice educators. Components of such professional learning may include the following aspects.

Understanding SEL. It is essential that all staff share a basic knowledge of SEL. In addition to core elements such as understanding common definitions, concepts, and frameworks, this knowledge should include clear and explicit goals about what educators want their students to know and how settings, contexts, and cultures will facilitate desired outcomes to guide assessment goals and to practice continuous improvement.

Data literacy. To be in the best position to use SEL assessment data well, educators will benefit from training on data literacy, including sufficient knowledge of test construction and psychometrics to be critical consumers of test data, and an understanding of how to interpret the meaning of scores presented at the individual and group levels.

Ways to assess SEL. Several types of assessments are now available to meet various assessment goals (e.g., self-report, rating scales, direct assessment, etc.). Gaining knowledge of the different assessments and their properties will help educators select assessments that measure the practices and competencies most important to their goals and to select assessments that are well-validated.

Strengths and limitations of SEL assessments. No SEL assessment is ideal for all purposes or goals. Understanding that each assessment has advantages and disadvantages can inform educators' decision-making about which method(s) best fits their needs and goals. Issues such as feasibility, ease of administration, ease of interpretability, vulnerability to bias, cost, availability, and public acceptability are important considerations in choosing which assessment(s) to use.

Selecting assessments aligned to goals. Assessments should be chosen based on what matters. Those assessing must be clear about why, what, and to what end they are assessing. Because there is no agreed upon list of which competencies matter most, professional learning can help educators gain clarity about SEL-related goals for their students and then to select assessments that are aligned to those goals. This requires support for educators to discuss goals and evaluate assessments that match one another and fit with local priorities.

Scheduling assessment to meet goals. Social and emotional competencies develop as students mature. Assessments can inform whether different learning goals are met as intended according to expected timeframes for change. Professional development opportunities can help educators to develop a clear theory of change that provides the foundation for how and when students are anticipated to reach learning goals. Developmentally appropriate assessments can then be chosen and administered so that they are sensitive to capturing the anticipated change processes and learning goals.

Understanding the meaning of assessment. The process of interpreting assessments is a human one. Educational equity is fundamental to appropriate assessment, yet everyone is vulnerable to implicit bias. To guard against implicit bias when interpreting assessments, professional learning should help educators understand they are best able to render equitable judgments when they are self-aware of their own bias or its potential. In addition, engaging key stakeholders including teachers, administrators, students, families, and community members can aid in the equitable interpretation and appropriate use of assessment data.

Data use practices for high-quality data-informed decision-making. Ongoing professional learning can help educators learn how to properly interpret assessment data and make good decisions based on those interpretations. This includes following thoughtful data use practices that support the appropriate use of SEL assessment data and reduce the risk of improper interpretation and use.

Beyond Tools: The State of Integration with Policy and Practice

In discussing the state of the field of SEL assessment, we have largely focused on the state of the tools—what assessments are available, what assessments are needed, and what is the emerging consensus about quality assessment. As we suggested at the beginning of this report, the field of SEL assessment is not limited to measurement tools. Those assessments are used (or not) in the context of policies and educational practices that vary in their adherence to coherent frameworks and are influenced by the level of competence of professionals in schools, district offices, and state education agencies.

Any evaluation of the state of the field of SEL assessment, therefore, must necessarily describe the extent to which policy, practice, and SEL assessments are coordinated in service to improving teaching and learning, and the extent to which professional learning is adequate to the task of supporting high-quality SEL assessment data use. It is our observation that there are no turnkey and widely scaled efforts that demonstrate the kind of coordination we view as essential for the field of SEL assessment and for SEL as a whole. Our general observations about the state of integration between SEL assessment, policy, and programs are as follows:

- Policy and programs have a history of coordination. Many state policies were modeled after the content of evidence-based SEL programs included in the CASEL guides. As a result, policies and programs often demonstrate a clear and beneficial correspondence.
- Policy and assessment are less coordinated. With exceptions, there are no high-quality assessments designed to assess the range of competencies described in standards across the entire grade range for which those standards were developed.
- The content of programs and policies and assessments overlaps variably. One puzzling feature of the field is that assessment developers generally do not offer programs or practices to teach the competencies their assessments are designed to measure, and program developers generally do not offer high-quality assessments to measure the skills their programs are designed to teach.
- Nevertheless, SEL assessments are increasingly available that are designed to measure the competencies that SEL programs are designed to teach.
- Professional learning is generally unavailable to support the coordination between policy, assessment and programs.

We see a substantial number of exceptions to these rules, however, and highlight some “bright spots” here to illustrate what is possible when policy, assessment, programs, and professional learning are systematically coordinated:

Naperville Community School District 203 is in the western suburbs of Chicago and serves nearly 17,000 EC-12 students. In 2013-2014, a comprehensive social-emotional learning plan became a key part of the district's five-year strategic plan. In partnership with CASEL, an implementation framework was developed and a comprehensive SEL curriculum was created that aligned with the Illinois SEL learning state standards. However, the district's SEL Committee did not find available assessments that were a good match for the district's curriculum or the state standards. So, the committee took the initiative to identify priority standards for each grade level and create its own performance-based rubrics to measure proficiency. After communicating with community members, teachers, and staff, it was decided that proficiency should be shared in the form of a report card communicating students' progress toward specific standards. These data are used to measure programmatic success, individual student growth, and to revise and improve the curriculum and performance rubrics.

Washoe County Schools are part of CASEL's [Collaborating District Initiative](#). Washoe embeds their SEL assessment into an online climate survey completed annually by students in grades 5-9 and 11. After searching for an effective measure of SEL domains, Washoe decided to develop their own assessment based on district SEL standards and developmental pacing guides. The development process involved focus groups with students at multiple grade levels. Washoe wanted an assessment that was easy to interpret and use and one that did not reveal scores on individual student profiles. Accordingly, SEL scores are reported in aggregate form using the percent of students rating each competency as easy or difficult and overall school results are compiled and shared publicly. The data are reviewed and used in multiple ways including an annual student data summit that emphasizes student voice, SEL professional development sessions, and a data book and open lab provided for all staff.

California's CORE Districts, situated in Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Santa Ana, were founded in 2010 to implement new academic standards and improve training for teachers. The CORE Districts developed a comprehensive school improvement and accountability system that includes students' social-emotional skills. To select social and emotional competencies, the CORE Districts convened district experts and SEL content experts and made selections based on the extent to which each competency was meaningful, measurable, and malleable. CORE then worked with Transforming Education to identify the most promising measures for each competency and this list was curated by other experts in the field and vetted by district staff members. Working with its collaborators, CORE engaged in pilot and field testing of the measures before including them as part of their overall School Quality Improvement Index (SQII). CORE's work is further supported by a research partnership with Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) to provide real-time, research-based feedback to improve student learning, inform policy, and provide findings about school improvement.

A Vision for the Future

In an ideal world, standards, teaching and learning, and assessment would be coordinated. Standards would indicate what competencies students should know and be able to demonstrate. Instructional practices would focus on teaching those competencies. Assessments would measure the acquisition of those competencies. And professional learning, from preservice through inservice training, would support these endeavors. Considerable work is being done on each of these fronts. As a result, there are many opportunities to build this kind of integration of assessment in conjunction with existing initiatives. In this section, we describe a way towards a vision of assessment integrated wisely through efforts to shape policy, to continue developing high-quality assessment, to link assessment to practice, and to systematize professional learning.

Policy Vision

We look to policy to guide our attention, action, and investments. Policies that provide standards or guidelines indicating what students should know and be able to demonstrate therefore provide an important context for rallying effort towards common cause.

In their report of emerging insights from the CASEL Collaborating States Initiative (CSI), [Dusenbury and Weissberg](#) (2018) have observed that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of states adopting SEL standards in recent years, in part because of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, which enabled states to define student success more broadly. While not all states are expected to develop standards for SEL, the number of states developing standards for SEL is likely to continue to grow over the coming years. Perhaps even more importantly, the CSI is seeing an intensive focus by states on developing strategies and policies that will support implementation of systemic, evidence-based SEL in practice in districts and schools.

As recommended by the CASEL [Collaborating States Initiative](#), state policies will best serve the field of SEL, and SEL assessment, if they: (1) clearly reflect a coherent framework or model of SEL, (2) state in measurable terms the competencies students should know and be able to demonstrate, (3) link those competencies clearly to the framework, (4) differentiate levels of competence by developmental or grade level, (5) provide sample performance descriptors at each level, (6) articulate with existing state education policy and priorities, (7) are deliberate in their treatment of equity and SEL, (8) encourage the adoption of evidence-based SEL approaches, (9) encourage the adoption of SEL assessment for continuous improvement, and (10) encourage the integration of preservice and inservice SEL training to teachers, focused on what SEL is, how to teach it, and how to use assessment data to support teaching and learning.

Existing standards engender many of these characteristics, but none includes all of them. Currently, all state standards reflect a clear framework and describe competencies in, for the most part, measurable terms, including some consideration of equity, usually in the form of respect for diverse cultural groups. Some states differentiate level of social and emotional competence by grade level and provide performance descriptors that explain what each competence looks like when students demonstrate it.

Because policy sets an important context for practice, there are several opportunities for state and federal policy to strengthen high-quality SEL assessment and data use in service to teaching and learning. Specifically, SEL assessment will be in the best position to support teaching and learning to the extent that policy:

- Encourages or requires districts to use effective SEL practices and or programs whose instructional goals focus on developing competencies enshrined in standards and communicate and support best practices.
- Encourage small-scale experimentation in the use of SEL assessments in support of standards-based practices.
- Encourages or requires the use of high-quality social and emotional assessment data, but emphasizes the use of assessment to guide instruction, not to evaluate teacher or school performance.
- Provides districts with technical assistance to support implementation of SEL program and SEL assessment so that districts develop the capacity to implement programs and assessment with high quality, and to use data to inform instruction.
- Provides district educators with sufficient support around data literacy to increase the odds that SEL assessment data will be used in ways that are supported by the evidence of an assessment's technical merit.
- Provides resources and supports to districts for data-based decision-making. Specifically, states might consider supporting professional development, technical assistance, or innovation grants to help districts implement instructional programs and practices that arise from their review of SEL assessment data.
- Incentivizes or requires the inclusion of SEL in educator preparation and inservice training. This should include the specific content areas described previously.
- Is consonant with and complements other state policies and priorities. For example, in a state that prioritizes data-based continuous improvement in public education, SEL policy could and should support the extension of that existing priority to include social and emotional learning.

It is important to note that state policy and district practices influence one another bidirectionally. It is easy to see how state policy and the requirements that arise from it would influence districts. However, districts, particularly large districts, can and regularly do influence state policy. For example, in Nevada, Washoe County, one of CASEL's Collaborating Districts, experimented with SEL assessment and practice, and developed district standards. Noting their success at creating standards linked to assessment and practice, the state of Nevada adopted policies intended to support the dissemination of these practices statewide.

Practice Vision

Evidence-based programs and practices have been widely adopted. Indeed, 71% of principals report having a plan for teaching students SEL skills (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). We envision a future in which SEL assessment and SEL programs and practices are used in coordinated ways to support excellent instruction and student outcomes.

This will require assessments that measure the same competencies that are the target of instruction in programs and practices. It will also require programs and practices designed to teach skills for which there are assessments. As noted above, SEL programs typically do not include well-developed assessments to guide practice or evaluate the acquisition of competencies. It will benefit the field if programs and appropriate assessments are available to practitioners. This might happen if program developers invested in creating high-quality assessments to include with their programs. Because curriculum development and assessment development require different technical skills, however, it may make sense for program developers and assessment developers to collaborate so that assessments are designed to measure the competencies that programs are designed to teach.

Educators then should select and use SEL assessments to support their adoption and use of SEL programs and practices. District administrators can provide the professional learning supports needed to ensure high-quality implementation of programs and the high-quality use of assessment data to support programs. In their decisions about what programs and assessments to adopt, practitioners can influence program and assessment developers to create systems that complement one another.

The wise and coordinated use of assessment and programs will benefit from professional development support to teach educators how to use SEL assessment data to inform SEL practices and measure their impact. Although growing, such professional development is a recognized need in the field (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). To this end, program providers and assessment developers might consider developing joint professional development experiences aimed at supporting wise adoption and implementation of programs and assessments. Such professional development support might focus on readiness and capacity.

Assessment Development Vision

Assessment development is typically a costly and time-consuming endeavor. For assessment developers to justify the cost involved in developing SEL assessment, they need to be reasonably confident that the assessment will be widely adopted. In the context of a growing number of state SEL standards, this becomes a more tenable decision. However, state standards do not yet have, and may never have, an assessment requirement. As a result, the extent to which districts will move to adopt SEL assessments is still unclear.

Neither is the market for SEL assessment clear—its size or its requirements. This will limit to some degree the willingness of assessment companies to invest in developing assessments. As a result, for the time being, it will be important for non-private-sector funders to support innovation in social-emotional assessment development. Federal research agencies and private foundations have made such investments. More investment will help advance the quality and variety of assessments available to practitioners.

But what should those investments support?

Because the market is not clear, it does not currently make sense to invest a large amount of funding into a singular “moonshot” assessment like the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), which was developed to assess skills taught in the Common Core. Instead it will make sense to make multiple smaller investments to develop assessments designed to meet a variety of assessment goals.

Assessment development investments that best support the vision of assessment integrated in a policy and practice context supported by professional learning and defined by a specific framework include the following characteristics:

- They will be designed to assess competencies that are incorporated in either standards, programs, or ideally both.
- They will be designed to assess these competencies in developmentally and culturally relevant ways from PreK through high school.
- Given the heavy weighting of SEL in the elementary grades, and some in the middle school years, assessment development efforts focused on K to 8 should be prioritized.
- Before assessment development begins, the intended uses and interpretations of the assessment should be articulated in an intended use case that describes those uses, and the psychometric evidence that is required to demonstrate the appropriateness of the assessment for the intended uses.
- From design through deployment, the intended end user should provide input.
- Assessments should have high promise of usability and feasibility in educational settings.
- Assessments should produce reports that are as straightforward as possible and that meet the information needs of users.
- Assessment reports should consistent with the intended use argument.
- The method of assessment (e.g., self-report, direct assessment, etc.) should be the best one for the competence to be measured and for the intended use.

Beyond developing the assessments themselves, the field will benefit from resources that support the constructive and meaningful integration of SEL assessment with practice. Resources include professional development courses, online microcredentials, workshops, books, and preservice curricula. Those resources will advance the use of assessment to the extent that they support improved data literacy among educators and build educators’ capacity to use SEL assessment data to inform practice.

In addition, integrating assessment and practice may be facilitated by scalable technologies. For example, it may be possible with a relatively straightforward application of artificial intelligence for results from SEL assessment of, for example, a classroom of students, to produce recommended lessons or strategies that teachers can use to address the specific needs of her class of students. These assessments could include on-demand online professional development resources to help teachers implement the plans. Such assessments stand to automate or partially automate the process of using educational resources to address needs identified through assessment.

Professional Learning Vision

For any educational initiative to benefit teaching and learning, educators must have the knowledge and skills required to convert the ideals and ideas of that initiative into practice every day in every classroom. That is no small task. As described in this report, currently opportunities for educators to participate in professional learning focused on SEL are highly variable. The field will benefit from more intentionally and systematically providing opportunities for educators to learn about social and emotional learning, including preservice training, and ongoing professional learning, for teachers and educational leaders.

We have argued throughout this report that SEL assessment will benefit teaching and learning most if it is coordinated with policy, practice, and professional learning. As a result, we recommend the development of professional learning opportunities that reflect that theory. Specifically, we recommend that professional learning opportunities focus on the following topics:

- What SEL is, including a review of frameworks and their usefulness.
- Why SEL matters for academic and other student outcomes.
- What standards say students should know and be able to demonstrate.
- Programs and practices that support the social and emotional competencies described in standards.
- What SEL assessment strategies are available to measure standards-based competencies.
- Evaluating the technical merits of SEL assessments and their fitness to achieve varied assessment goals.
- The process of planning for assessment, selecting an appropriate assessment (that measures what matters and is appropriate for the assessment goal), and high-quality data use.
- The use of SEL assessment for instruction and continuous improvement.

Policy can support this goal by providing preservice and inservice requirements that guide educators towards early and ongoing professional learning in support of standards-based social and emotional assessment and instructional practice.

Laboratories for Innovation and Integration

The field of SEL assessment, like all fields, is evolving and is still early in its arc. Our assessment of the state of the field, and particularly the vision we have described for its future, is based on a theory of change represented in Figure 1. Like any theory, this one is subject to empirical test and revision based on data. We also recognize that the ideas and recommendations described in this report, when put into practice, may run into social and political resistance that is a predictable consequence of systems change efforts.

As such, we recommend a researcher-practitioner-policymaker partnership approach to integrating and using SEL assessment that reflects a learning laboratory model. In such an approach, states or districts will use SEL assessment as part of their overall SEL plan, and will study the consequences, both the benefits and unintended effects, of SEL assessment use. Based on lessons learned, the field can iteratively modify SEL assessment policies and practices in ways that maximize the benefits and mitigate the risks.

The field of SEL has a strong history of using laboratories for innovation. This started as field trials of SEL strategies that spanned schools and districts. It has grown into larger efforts to support systems change, such as CASEL’s Collaborating Districts’ Initiative (CDI) and Collaborating States Initiative (CSI). The CDI includes 21 school districts and the CSI includes 30 states around the country and serves as an opportunity to learn what it takes to support strong SEL practices, and to learn by doing. A subset of states and district partners is engaged in learning labs, which use a research practice partnership approach to test and refine strategies to address identified problems of practice. This presents opportunities to empirically test the theory of change described here, and develop a deeper understanding of the ways that SEL assessment can support high-quality teaching and learning.

Another example of a “scaling up” learning laboratory is the Wallace Foundation’s Partnership for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative, or PSELI. This project is a large-scale effort, including six school districts around the country, to support SEL practices in school and in coordination with out-of-school time service providers.

It is in the context of these and other existing and emerging SEL initiatives that we hope to see SEL assessment integrated at the vanguard of data-informed SEL practice and policies. In so doing, the model described here, and the propositions it is built upon, can be tested in the most important laboratory of all—the authentic practice setting.

In addition to serving to stimulate innovation and integration, learning laboratories can provide opportunities to mentor the next generation of researchers to engage in rigorous research practice partnerships to support student social and emotional development.

The Key Role of Intermediaries in Advancing the Field

The CDI, CSI, and PSELI efforts owe their existence to the substantial efforts of intermediary organizations—CASEL, the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust, NoVo Foundation, Pure Edge, Inc., the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Wallace Foundation. These organizations are not school districts, and they do not represent the interests of any particular SEL assessment or program provider. Rather, their work in SEL is specifically focused on building the field of SEL and learning what works, and what doesn’t, in the process. For the field of SEL and the constructive integration of SEL assessment data in the field, it will be important for intermediary organizations whose mission is to support the development of the field to continue to play a very active role in supporting the field’s constructive growth and development.

Assessment to Support Positive Evolution of the Field

The field of social and emotional learning has been in ascendancy. With growth comes risk. For example, when educational programs that are effective in controlled field trials go to scale, their impact often diminishes, and they fall out of favor. The field of social and emotional learning has a strong evidence base showing that when SEL is done well, SEL programs and practices benefit a wide range of students and student outcomes. As the field grows, if practitioners are able to integrate strong SEL assessment with policies and practices, make data-informed decisions about SEL practice at the district and school level, and evaluate student skill acquisition, it will be possible for the field to grow and evolve to accommodate the complex realities of communities rich in diversity of people, practices, and preferences. If the field has grown on the promise of its evidence base, it will be sustained by the continuing growth of evidence that it is fulfilling its considerable promise to improve teaching and learning and the success of young people. In that, assessment has a key role to play.

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