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Systemic Social and Emotional Learning: Promoting Educational Success for All Preschool to High School Students

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Social and emotional learning (SEL) has become more central to education because of demand from educators, parents, students, and business leaders alongside rigorous research showing broad, positive impacts for students and adults. However, all approaches to SEL are not equal. Systemic SEL is an approach to create equitable learning conditions that actively involve all Pre-K to Grade 12 students in learning and practicing social, emotional, and academic competencies. These conditions require aligned policies, resources, and actions at state and district levels that encourage local schools and communities to build the personal and professional capacities of adults to: implement and continuously improve evidence-based programs and practices; create an inclusive culture that fosters caring relationships and youth voice, agency, and character; and support coordinated school-family-community partnerships to enhance student development. Promoting social and emotional competencies—including the abilities to understand and manage emotions, achieve positive goals, show caring and concern for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions—are important for success at school and in life. In this article, we summarize key concepts and evidence for systemic SEL. Next, we explain interrelated Theories of Action and resources developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to implement and continuously improve systemic SEL in schools, districts, and states. We discuss research on nested, interacting settings and processes involved in systemic SEL at proximal (classrooms, schools, families, and communities) and distal (districts, states, national, and international) ecological levels. We conclude with recommendations for future SEL research, practice, and policy.

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Public Significance Statement

A systemic approach to social and emotional learning (SEL) creates equitable learning conditions that actively involve all Pre-K to Grade 12 students in developing social, emotional, and academic competencies. Decades of research shows these competencies lead to beneficial outcomes at school and in life. Creating these conditions requires aligned policies, resources, and actions at state and district levels to support a coordinated learning process through school-family-community partner-ships to enhance student development.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) involves a coordinated set of evidence-based programs and practices for enhancing social-emotional-cognitive development, positive behavior and interpersonal relationships, and academic performance (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development, 2018). Proximal goals of SEL are to establish safe and supportive learning environments and to foster social and emotional competencies (SECs) including the abilities to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show caring and concern for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). SEL programming that is well-designed and well-implemented can help all students and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to deal effectively with daily tasks and challenges and achieve success in school, work, and life (Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley, & Weissberg, 2017; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

This article elaborates on a systemic approach to SEL (CASEL, 2020a, 2020b, 2020d; Greenberg et al., 2003; Oberle, Domitrovich, Meyers, & Weissberg, 2016; Weissberg et al., 2015). Systemic SEL is an approach to create equitable learning conditions that actively involve all Pre-K to Grade 12 students in learning and practicing social, emotional, and academic competencies that are important for success at school and in life (cf. Berger, Berman, Garcia, & Deasy, 2019; Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, & Osher, 2019). These conditions require aligned policies, resources, and actions at state and district levels that encourage local schools and communities to enhance the personal and professional capacities of adults to: implement and continuously improve evidence-based programs and practices (EBPs); create an inclusive culture that fosters caring relationships and youth voice, agency, and character; and support coordinated school-family-community partnerships to enhance student development.

Most educators now believe that developing SECs are foundational for student success and should be a major goal of education (Hamilton, Doss, & Steiner, 2019). A representative national survey of K-12 school principals found strong support for SEL (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). These school leaders believe SECs are teachable and lead to a range of positive student outcomes. They also indicate that SEL implementation is higher in schools where systemic SEL is supported by the district and by diverse groups of in- and out-of-school stakeholders. Likewise, parents, students, employers, and scientists agree that SECs are important for success at school and in life (e.g., DePaoli, Atwell, Bridgeland, & Shriver, 2018; Domitrovich et al., 2017; National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development, 2018; Phi Delta Kappan, 2017).

In addition to practical experience, positive support for SEL stems from research demonstrating its impact and related value to public health (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017; National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development, 2017). Numerous meta-analyses have shown that SEL programs taught by classroom teachers can promote the development of SECs (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad, Diekstra, De Ritter, & Ben, 2012; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). Fostering these competencies, in turn, facilitates students' academic performance, positive behaviors and relationships, and reduces behavior problems and distress (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011). A recent meta-analysis found that school-based, universal SEL interventions led to significant improvement in skills, dispositions, prosocial behavior, and academic performance at follow-up periods ranging from 56–195 weeks (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). Thus, SEL programs can build the foundational competencies young people need to help them thrive. However, not all programs and approaches to SEL are effective. Evidence shows that programs containing SAFE features promote SECs and a broad range of beneficial outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). SAFE stands for instructional processes involving (a) *sequenced* step-by-step training, (b) *active* forms of learning, (c) a *focus* on social and emotional skill development, and (d) *explicit* SEL goals. To enhance to social, emotional, and academic learning of large numbers of students, we assert that schools should adopt EBPs that

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operate systemwide and provide for quality design, implementation, and sustainability.

It is important to note that SEL can provide a strong foundation for a public health approach to education that seeks to improve the general population's wellbeing (Greenberg & Abenavoli, 2017; Greenberg et al., 2017). Schools provide a durable context to carry out interventions that promote competencies and reduce risks for all students and, thus, can have a widespread positive affect on public health. To do so requires an approach that integrates universal SEL with other tiered services across whole schools acting in partnership with families and communities and supported by districts and states.

In this article we reaffirm the importance of a systemic approach to SEL in the light of current educational objectives and advances in science and practice. This systemic SEL framework is based largely on 25 years of action research carried out by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) with partnering schools, districts, and states (CASEL, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). CASEL was founded in 1994 with the mission of helping to make evidence-based SEL an essential part of preschool to high school education through advancing rigorous science, beneficial practice, and sound policy (Elias et al., 1997). Next, we discuss what systemic is and why it is important. Then, we describe theories of action needed to implement EBPs effectively, and continuously improve them, at different levels of systemic organization. We discuss the roles of schools, families, and community along with the key indicators needed to support those processes. Lastly, we conclude by highlighting challenges to address and offering recommendations for the future of SEL research, practice, and policy.

Overview of the Systemic SEL Framework

Figure 1 and Table 1 depict the processes by which systemic SEL develops at school, district, and state levels. The process at each setting begins with four coordinated sets of practices to establish EBPs for children and adults: (a) Build foundational support and plan by establishing SEL teams, engaging stakeholders broadly, fostering awareness, and developing a shared vision; (b) Strengthen adult SEL competencies and capacity by cultivating a community of adults who engage in their own SEL, build trusting relationships, and collaborate to promote and consistently model SEL throughout the school; (c) Promote SEL for students by developing a coordinated approach across the school, classrooms, homes, and communities; and (d) Practice continuous improvement by establishing an ongoing process to collect and use implementation and outcome data to inform decisions and drive improvements. The center of Figure 1 shows the settings involved in directly promoting schoolwide SEL through partnerships that coordinate efforts among school, family, and community settings. The right-hand column shows the short- and long-term student outcomes expected from systemic evidence-based SEL programs.

Box 1 contains a set of principles that provides guidance for the successful implementation and improvement of systemic SEL programs and practices. These principles have been part of the original vision for SEL (e.g., Elias et al.,

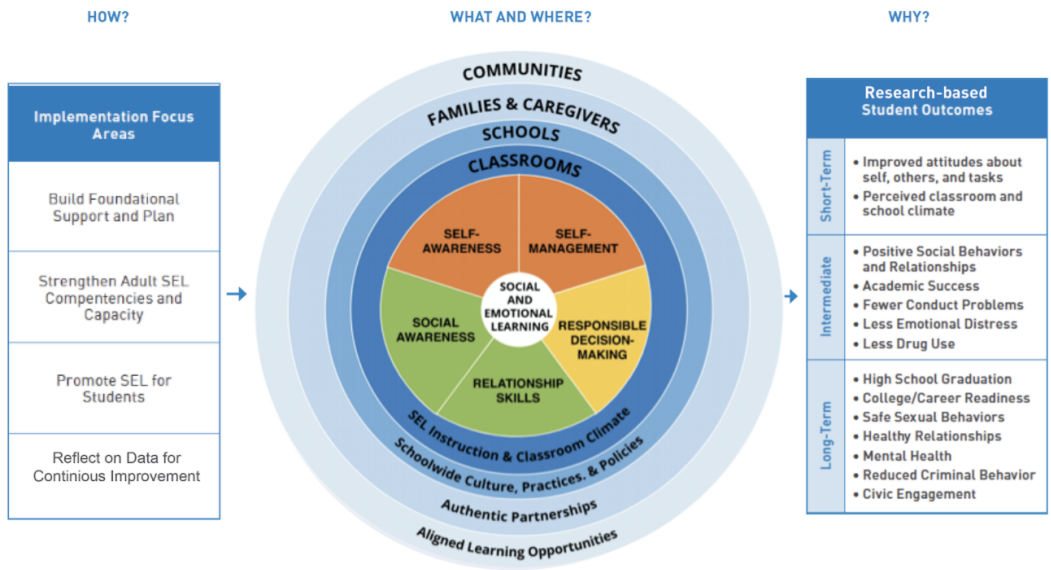

Figure 1. A framework for conceptualizing systemic social and emotional learning (SEL) in educational settings. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

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Table 1
Key Areas in Theories of Action to Promote Systemic SEL at the School, District, and State Levels

Key area	THEORY OF ACTION		
	School	District	State
Build foundational support and plan	Establish an SEL team with broad memberships, foster awareness, and develop a shared vision; assess needs and resources to develop a SEL implementation plan with clear goals, action steps, and assigned ownership.	Develop a districtwide shared plan; engage stakeholders broadly; create a communication plan; ensure alignment of SEL, academics, and equity in goals and strategies; align financial and human resources for implementation.	Develop a statewide shared vision that engages diverse communities; create a policy agenda and communications to create conditions for districts and schools to advance systemic SEL; create organizational structures, including federal and state policy and funding and human resources to support SEL.
Strengthen adult SEL competencies and capacity	Cultivate a community of adults who engage in their own social and emotional learning, collaborate on strategies for promoting SEL, and model SEL throughout the school.	Strengthen central office expertise; provide professional learning opportunities; strengthen adult SEL and cultural competence; promote staff trust, community, and efficacy.	Build adult expertise at the state level; provide professional development; promote adult SEL and cultural competence; and provide guidance to create positive school cultures and climates that are equitable, and culturally affirming.
Promote SEL for students	Develop a coordinated approach for enhancing students' social and emotional learning across the school, classrooms, homes, and communities.	Develop SEL standards; adopt evidence-based SEL programs and practices; foster family and community partnerships; integrate SEL across every interaction and setting.	Provide frameworks competencies/standards; provide guidance to integrate and align SEL with academics and other priorities; support high-quality implementation of evidence-based SEL policies, programs, and practices; and foster family and community partnerships.
Practice continuous improvement	Establish a structured, ongoing process to collect and use outcome and implementation data to inform school-level decisions and drive improvements to implementation.	Plan for improvement; document implementation and outcomes; report data and reflect on results; share conclusions with stakeholders and take data-informed action.	Provide implementation guidance on assessment tools to monitor and enhance implementation and student progress; reflect on state-level outcome and process data with stakeholders to ensure effective implementation.

Note. SEL = social and emotional learning.

1997; Greenberg et al., 2003), its ongoing evolution (e.g., Devaney, O'Brien, Resnik, Keister, & Weissberg, 2006; Weissberg, 2000), and remain central to current thought, science, and practice in SEL (e.g., CASEL, 2020a, 2020b, 2020d; Durlak et al., 2015; National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development, 2018). These principles contrast with a narrow view of SEL focused only on classroom programs and explicit social and emotional skills instruction.

What Is Systemic SEL and Why Is It Important?

Figure 1 is a framework for conceptualizing a systemic approach to SEL. To elucidate the framework, Box 2 provides a practical example of how states, districts, and schools can work together to coordinate SEL. Although numerous frameworks exist that promote SECs (Berg et al., 2017), they offer different ways to organize, name, prioritize, and communicate SECs (Jones, Bailey, Brush, & Nelson, 2019). They are also based on diverse theoretical perspectives including theories of systems, social–cognitive learning, information processing, child development, or behavior change (Brackett, Elbertson, & Rivers, 2015). These perspectives inform *what* is needed promote outcomes for different students, *which* settings to target, and *how* to implement, assess, continuously improve, and sustain SEL approaches. The framework in Figure 1 reflects years of field testing as part of CASEL's Collaborating District and States Initiatives (CASEL, 2017a, 2017b).

Social and Emotional Competence

SEC is the capacity to coordinate cognition, affect, and behavior that allows individuals to thrive in diverse cultures and contexts and achieve specific tasks and positive developmental outcomes (see center of Figure 1). CASEL identified

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Box 1: Principles for Systemic Social and Emotional Learning

- SEL should prepare all young people for long-term success in college, careers, and life by proactively focusing on the promotion of positive functioning and prevention of problems through the development of five core SEL competencies.
- SEL should prepare youth to be active citizens in multicultural societies through caring and genuine relationships among adults and children that demonstrate concern for others and emphasize how to apply SEL skills in multicultural societies.
- SEL should follow a developmental, sequential approach from preschool through high school with the goal of preparing youth to build SECs throughout their lives.
- SEL programming should consider individual differences and needs and intentionally design equitable, culturally responsive opportunities for learning.
- SEL instruction should include well-designed, universal, evidence-based programming provided to all students by well-supported teachers.
- SEL should occur as a part of an integrated, schoolwide effort to develop safe, supportive, and engaging learning environments.
- Family members should collaborate in the planning and implementation of SEL.
- Community members and organizations should collaborate in the planning and implementation of SEL.
- The SEL system should be regularly assessed at state, district, and school levels and continuously improved through a process of data-driven reflection and action.
- The entire SEL system should be integrated and aligned with states, districts, and schools working together to ensure evidence-based policies and practices are encouraged and supported equitably across the system.

five core SEC clusters: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2013, 2015; Weissberg et al., 2015). The CASEL 5 emphasize intrapersonal skills and attitudes (i.e., self-awareness and self-management), interpersonal skills and attitudes (i.e., social awareness and relationship skills), and making ethical and principled choices in personal and social situations (i.e., responsible decision making). The goal was to establish a broadly applicable framework that could incorporate teachable assets that diverse situations and locations, age ranges, or developmental contexts might prioritize—for example, knowing your feelings and values, growth mindsets, cultural identity, sense of purpose, perseverance, goal setting, and agency might be emphasized as part of self-awareness and self-management; empathy, compassion, collaboration, and leadership could be highlighted as part of social awareness and relationship skills; and problem solving, reflecting on

Box 2: Wisconsin's Approach to Systemic SEL

To build foundational support in Wisconsin, a broad team of stakeholders created a shared vision of SEL (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction [WDPI], 2020). Wisconsin developed a comprehensive, developmental SEL framework aligned with academics and other priorities including college and career readiness, mental health, school climate, and PBIS. Wisconsin has an ongoing partnership with CASEL to understand how systemic SEL influences professional learning, curriculum and instruction, implementation, and continuous improvement.

To strengthen adult SEL, Wisconsin offers professional learning through statewide meetings, trainings, and webinars on the CASEL School Guide to foster systemic SEL at the school level. An Equity Council convened by the state superintendent developed Wisconsin's ESSA plan involving legislators, advocacy groups, parent and family groups, and higher education representatives. The Council communicates SEL and equity through the *Advancing Equity through Social and Emotional Learning* document. Also, the WDPI, RTI Center, and Disproportionality Technical Assistance Network created the *Model to Inform Culturally Responsible Practice* to achieve equity within multilevel systems of support. WDPI is aligning SEL with this document so districts and schools understand and communicate the benefits of SEL for all students, and implement SEL and engage families and communities in culturally relevant ways. Wisconsin's SEL website illustrates how districts leverage state resources to implement systemic SEL locally.

To promote SEL for students, Wisconsin articulated PreK-Adult learning competencies aligned to the CASEL 5 competencies. Wisconsin developed implementation resources and tools for districts and schools including aligning evidence-based SEL programs with the Wisconsin SEL framework. To support continuous improvement, Wisconsin shares guidance and tools for districts and schools to align assessment with the Wisconsin's SEL competencies, including surveys of student and adult skills, teaching practices, and state-specific competency scales by grade band.

For example, bringing Wisconsin SEL competencies to the level of a sixth-grade classroom, teachers will know that, in terms of decision making, students are expected to generate a variety of solutions and outcomes to a problem with consideration of well-being for oneself and others. To accomplish this, teachers would incorporate instructional practices to build decision making skills that are part of an evidence-based SEL program the state shares on its web page. Further, schools and districts are encouraged to align discipline policies with SEL implementation such as student engagement in creating expectations for appropriate behavior and consequences, restorative practices to reduce punitive and exclusionary practices, and developing a plan to reinforce positive emotional regulation strategies at home, at school, and in the community. Teachers can then use data from the Wisconsin Development Tracker, where teachers can rate students' competence in decision making, and also take an assessment that allows them to reflect on practices they can use to develop those skills.

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one's own biases, and character could be part of responsible decision making. As such, the CASEL 5 is a coordinating model that can accommodate specific malleable and measurable competencies in different domains (e.g., academics, civics, health, and workforce) across the life span. In fact, a three-dimensional representation would show a third dimension of development elaborating on more specific competencies that are particularly important for different developmental periods from early childhood to adulthood.

With reference to SECs as teachable developmental assets, many districts and states use frameworks based on the CASEL 5 competencies to create preschool to Grade 12 learning standards (Dusenbury, Yoder, Dermody, & Weissberg, 2020). These standards or learning competencies articulate what students should know and be able to do with respect to SEL across different ages and school settings. In this regard, it is critical that standards be developed from a developmental perspective and using an equity lens.

A *developmental perspective* to SEL considers stability and change in interactions between persons and settings over time (Denham, 2018). Broad SECs can apply to different ages and grade levels (e.g., the CASEL 5). However, the abilities and settings involved in integrating thinking, feeling, and behavior within and across SECs change and allow students to succeed at important age-differentiated developmental tasks. For example, social awareness progresses from following social rules like turn-taking (preschool), to understanding appropriate emotional expression across social settings (elementary school), to comprehending more complex social situations (middle school), to recognizing diverse social-cultural perspectives (high school). Developmental tasks should inform the design of SEL standards, instruction, and assessment. However, SECs develop dynamically in social contexts and local community stakeholders should decide how best to prioritize, teach, and assess them (Assessment Work Group, 2019).

An *equity lens* recognizes that SEL takes place in the context of a socially stratified society. Educational equity implies that every student has the educational resources he or she needs when they need it, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background, or family income (Council of State Chief School Officers, 2017). Understanding how individuals affect, and are affected by, systematic inequality requires a critical examination of how SECs develop according to differences in race, class, gender, setting, culture, country, and social-historical context (Comer, 2009) followed by cooperative approaches to foster SECs in culturally responsive ways. For example, Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Borowski (2018) described *transformative SEL* as, ". . . a process whereby students and teachers build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences; learn to critically examine root causes of inequity; and develop collaborative solutions to personal, community and social problems." (p. 3). Likewise, Gregory and Fergus's (2017) equity-oriented conceptualization of SECs discusses how such competencies can address educational inequities involving culture, power, and privilege. For example, self-awareness includes understanding one's social position in an inequitable society and provides a foundation for more effectively addressing challenges that arise in various contexts. This may help teachers and other educators understand and act productively on how their cultural beliefs and biases impact content, pedagogy, and discipline practices.

Settings That Influence Social and Emotional Learning

The rings in the center of Figure 1 represent key *settings* involved in nurturing and sustaining SECs including classrooms, schools, homes, and the community. Relationship-centered learning environments support SEL and several interpersonal processes and practices have been identified to effectively promote SECs across these settings (e.g., CASEL, 2020b; Durlak et al., 2010): (a) trusting relationships among students, staff, parents, and community members; (b) a caring, culturally responsive community where students are known, respected, and feel safe to learn; (c) adult encouragement, support and effective modeling of equity, fairness, and respect for diversity of race, culture, ethnicity, social class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and other factors; (d) consistency in expectations and practices to promote engaged learning and reduce conduct problems and anxiety; (e) adults fostering student motivation by connecting new learning material to students' lives, background, and what they already know; (f) opportunities for students to engage in challenging, active learning and to practice skills; (g) regular occasions for students to have a voice in developing rules and norms, choices about their classwork, and opportunities for leadership; (h) opportunities for students to express their ideas and feelings in an atmosphere that encourages their active participation and is respectful of their individuality; and (i) restorative, rather than punitive/exclusionary, practices that recognize misconduct reflects developmental needs that present opportunities for learning and for skills to be developed.

Universal, Evidence-Based Programming and Instruction

To promote SECs through systemic SEL, implementing coordinated, universal EBPs is critical. A *universal* approach means that all students and adults in the setting are engaged in a coordinated learning process. This approach allows SEL to be integrated with other academic subjects, reduce the likelihood for stigma because they do not single out students, and are cost-effective from a public health perspective (Greenberg et al., 2017). However, as opposed

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to a "one-size fits all" perspective to SEL, a *targeted universalism* approach (Powell, Menendian, & Ake, 2019) recognizes that different supports are needed for different students to reach the same desired outcomes. The school setting permits teachers to know their students well allowing SEL instruction to be personalized and culturally responsive, and for teachers to prompt and reinforce SECs in appropriate contexts. It is necessary for universal and targeted (i.e., Tier 2 and Tier 3) approaches to be compatible and integrated to support the unique needs of individual students (Bear, Whitcomb, Elias, & Blank, 2015).

Evidence-based. By *evidence-based*, we refer to programs and practices that have been rigorously evaluated so that one has confidence that if they are implemented well (i.e., with fidelity that is adaptable to local contexts), then specific, beneficial results are likely to occur. Unfortunately, EBPs are not always designed as systemic interventions, and this can result in piecemeal, fragmented strategies to enhance students' positive development across a preschool to high school educational system. However, implementation is likely to be more effective and sustained if they: (a) integrate SEL across grade levels; (b) take a whole school approach that infuses SEL into practices and policies; (c) provide ongoing training and consultation; (d) engage families and community partners in program selection, refinement, and improvement and in reinforcing skill development at home (Brackett, Bailey, Hoffmann, & Simmons, 2019).

Under the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015*, the U.S. Department of Education (2016) provided guidance to select and implement educational interventions. ESSA's guidance for program selection is embedded in a model of continuous improvement that includes a tiered system of criteria for choosing EBPs at four evidence levels. SEL programs and practices with strong or moderate evidence (Levels 1 and 2) should be used because they have been proven effective and are more likely to improve student outcomes. These criteria have informed the consumer-report ratings for CASEL's Program Guides for preschool to high school students (CASEL, 2013, 2015). These Guides are freely available (https://casel.org/guide/).

Programming and instruction. By *programming* we refer to a developmentally based, comprehensive curriculum focused on creating relationally healthy places for children and adults. Such a curriculum entails a clear developmental sequencing of knowledge, attitudes, and skills organized into units and learning experiences that identify clear roles, responsibilities, training, and technical assistance for adults involved in instruction. EBPs can be taught using at least one of the following SEL-enhancement practices: (a) free-standing lessons designed to enhance students' social and emotional competence explicitly; (b) instructional strategies such as cooperative learning and project-based learning that promote SEL; (c) integration of SEL into academic areas such as language arts, math, social studies, or health; and (d) a supportive learning environment that is culturally responsive and focused on community building.

What is important for any of the above approaches is that the SEL instruction is explicit and intentional (e.g., Bandura & Walters, 1977). *Explicit* requires a clear understanding of the competencies, and the instructional methods needed to improve those skills directly tied to the competencies. However, it is important to recognize that all children bring their own levels of SECs to the classroom and are not passive products of the instruction. Instead, they actively contribute to the dynamic learning processes. In addition, the best EBPs establish contexts that allow students to develop SEL skills as a learning team, build existing relationships with peers and adults, and practice lessons together in personally meaningful ways (CASEL, 2013, 2015).

Although the lessons from EBPs can be free standing, they can also be integrated into instruction embedded in traditional academic subjects. This may be especially important in middle and high schools where curricular time is less flexible than in elementary school. There is likely to be more generalization and maintenance of SEL skills when they are also taught along with, or embedded into, other academic subjects. Therefore, SEL should be intentionally built into the curriculum, daily work, and everyday interactions of the school.

Kernels of evidence-based practice. Most SEL curricula began as SEL "kernels" of practice that were enlarged into curricular units as a result of practical experience and teacher feedback Although research on the effectiveness of these kernels is needed, one possibility is to utilize evidence-based elements as kernels of practice (Jones, Bailey, Brush, & Kahn, 2017). Kernels can be taught to all staff to supplement, but not to supplant, universal, schoolwide SEL programs. SEL kernels can be done "on the fly" in hallways, playgrounds, cafeterias, and so forth to reinforce skills students are learning in the classroom (cf., Jones et al., 2017; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Kernels should model and communicate ways of being that reflect core SECs such as deep listening, respect, acceptance, use of problem-solving skills, and caring that can be applied consistently across schools, families, and community settings.

Theories of Action for Systemic SEL

Figure 1 and Table 1 show four key areas that schools, districts, and states can engage in to support systemic SEL. Collectively, these four areas represent a systemic "theory of action" to guide SEL implementation and sustainability. These four areas are similar across levels and share common names: (a) Build foundational support and plan, (b) Strengthen adult SEL competencies and capacity, (c) Promote SEL for students, and (d) Practice continuous im-

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provement. However, the specific activities to promote SEL will be different in a school, district office, and state board of education (see Table 1). To learn how to carry out each of the activities in Table 1, we direct the reader to the *CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL*, District Resource Center, and Collaborative States Initiative Resources (CASEL, 2020a, 2020b, 2020d).

From a systemic perspective, it is important to understand that actions taken at one level affect other levels (e.g., Goleman & Senge, 2014). For example, building foundational support for SEL at the district level can be facilitated and sustained by the state-level provision of guidance and resources that highlights the importance of SEL to student success. At the same time, district-level support can provide the structure and resources needed for schoolwide SEL to be implemented well, continuously improved, and sustained over time. Thus, SEL programming is most likely to be successful when school, district, and state-level priorities are aligned.

Proximal and Distal Settings

A systemic approach to SEL involves multiple learning environments (Berger et al., 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). The environments can be organized into two main levels: proximal and distal settings. *Proximal settings* are those that children interact with directly through face-to-face interchanges. Children can directly influence, and be directly influenced by, what happens in proximal settings. Moreover, these proximal settings can influence one another, for example, when a classroom teacher provides parents with SEL activities that can be done at home to reinforce learning at school. Likewise, parents should be part of the school SEL team that helps to select and implement EBPs.

In contrast, *distal settings* extend beyond a child's direct involvement (e.g., the school district, state-level policies, and national policies), but may substantially influence children's outcomes by impacting the proximal settings (e.g., a school board may adopt SEL standards that affect classroom instruction and climate). In addition, because of the dynamic nature of these settings, a long-term view of SEL is required to provide support that is developmentally appropriate and sensitive to emerging needs and incorporates cultural and community standards.

Proximal Settings Involved in Systemic SEL

A major aim of SEL is to nurture equitable and welcoming learning environments where children feel safe to actively participate in developmentally appropriate education that is engaging and challenges them to work collaboratively to solve complex problems. When we think of proximal learning environments, an image of students in a school classroom often comes to mind. However, the school classroom is only one of many proximal settings where children learn. During the school day, SEL occurs across a system of interconnected settings (e.g., the classroom, school bus, hallways, lunchroom, and playground). Beyond formal schooling, learning also begins and is always taking place in the home through relationships with caregivers and other family members. Moreover, multiple community settings including organized out-of-school activities (e.g., afterschool and summer programs and community-based organizations) are replete with opportunities for youth to learn and practice SECs. Therefore, SEL can and does take place across multiple contexts, each day, and all year around.

Box 3 describes 10 key indicators of systemic schoolwide SEL. These are evidence-based strategies developed through CASEL's Collaborating District Initiative (CDI; CASEL, 2020a). The CDI is a partnership with 20 mostly large, urban school districts that are systemically implementing evidence-based SEL through school, family, and community partnerships. We direct the reader to Durlak et al. (2015) for empirical bases supporting the indicators. Below we discuss these indicators in the context of promoting SEL across different proximal settings.

The school. To be fully effective, SEL programming should receive schoolwide support. Because the school setting comprises many interrelated contexts—classrooms, hallways, cafeteria, playground, the school bus—fostering a healthy school climate, and culture requires active engagement from all staff and students (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Indeed, there is likely to be more generalization and maintenance of SEL skills when school staff provide well-coordinated programming. Although classroom teachers and the principal are obvious sources of support, teachers' aides, specialists, counselors, psychologists, social workers, cafeteria staff, custodians, security guards, secretaries, and other staff can be important models and supporters of SEL development.

To achieve schoolwide buy-in, a comprehensive approach to professional development is needed to establish consistent practices, messages, and a common language shared by all members of the school community (Meyers, Domitrovich, Dissi, Trejo, & Greenberg, 2019). This requires the integration of SEL across various schoolwide programs, policies, and routines within and across grade levels (Elias et al., 2015). To continuously improve schoolwide SEL programming, staff need regular opportunities to reflect on student data (e.g., SECs, behavioral, academic, engagement, and climate) and implementation data for continuous improvement (see Table 1; e.g., Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015). The *CASEL Guide to Schoolwide Social and Emotional Learning* (CASEL, 2020b) provides detailed instruction for the process of

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Box 3: Ten Key Indicators of Schoolwide Systemic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020b)

- **Explicit SEL instruction.** Students have consistent opportunities to cultivate, practice, and reflect on SECs that are developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive.
- **SEL integrated with academic instruction.** SEL objectives are integrated into the instructional content and teaching strategies for academics and other school activities.
- **Youth voice and engagement.** Staff elevate a broad range of student perspectives and experiences by engaging students as leaders, problem solvers, and decision-makers.
- **Supportive school and classroom climates.** Schoolwide and classroom environments are supportive, culturally responsive, and focus on building relationships and community.
- **Focus on adult SEL.** Staff have regular opportunities to cultivate their own SECs, build trusting relationships, and maintain a strong community.
- **Supportive discipline.** Discipline policies and practices are instructive, restorative, developmentally appropriate, and equitably enforced.
- **A continuum of integrated supports.** SEL is seamlessly integrated into a continuum of academic and behavioral supports, which ensure that all student needs are met.
- **Authentic family partnerships.** Families and school staff have regular and meaningful opportunities to build relationships and collaborate to support students' social, emotional, and academic development.
- **Aligned community partnerships.** School staff and community partners align common language, strategies, and communication around all SEL-related efforts and initiatives.
- **Systems for continuous improvement.** Implementation and outcome data are collected and used to continuously improve all SEL-related systems, practices, and policies with a focus on equity.

developing, implementing, and improving schoolwide SEL programming.

School leadership is vital. The special importance of school leadership (i.e., administrators) to the success of schoolwide SEL deserves comment (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Mahfouz, Greenberg, & Rodriguez, 2019). Research on successful implementation of SEL programming concludes that school leadership may be the single most important factor for success (CASEL, 2020b; Devaney et al., 2006). Leadership influences the quality of SEL implementation, the durability or sustainability of programming, and the magnitude of improvement seen in students' SECs and related short- and long-term outcomes.

Effective leaders communicate a shared vision of, and responsibility for, SEL across the school community coupled with high expectations and allocation of resources. They model the use of SEL language and endorse the use of SEL practices throughout the building, creating a positive school climate (Patti, Senge, Madrazo, & Stern, 2015). Finally, they understand the benefits of parent involvement (e.g., Epstein, 2018; Sheridan, Smith, Moorman Kim, Beretvas, & Park, 2019), and serve as liaisons with families to help foster supportive relationships, common goals, and a sense of collaboration. They should also build in expectations and training for staff to authentically engage parents as partners (see CASEL [2020b] for guidance on developing schoolwide SEL leadership).

The classroom. The classroom is a critical setting and SEL is carried out most effectively in a nurturing and safe environment characterized by positive, caring relationships between students and teachers and among classmates. The ability to create a such a caring environment depends on adults having strong SEL skills and cultural competence (e.g., Delpit, 2006; Jennings, Minnici, & Yoder, 2019). To do so, teachers must be fully committed to SEL to communicate and model the behaviors such as managing stress and frustration, showing empathy, cooperating, and handling conflicts. Indeed, students are more likely to respond empathetically and resolve conflicts peacefully with peers when they see teachers modeling these behaviors. Moreover, teachers with strong SEL skills are better able to manage their own job demands, and foster a healthy learning environment (e.g., Greenberg et al., 2016). Therefore, as part of the foundation of a SEL system, fostering SECs in classroom teachers is essential (CASEL, 2017b; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). To do so, regular opportunities for staff to develop these skills must be provided through professional development (Greenberg & Weissberg, 2018) to support teacher social and emotional development (Jennings et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the field of learning sciences has shown that deeper student learning depends on teachers having a deep knowledge of their students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Teachers must know their students well to provide personalized instruction that matches individual experiences, interests, and needs. Given the diversity of learners in today's classrooms, culturally responsive instruction is essential for adults to understand and appreciate the unique strengths and needs of each student. Such instruction affirms students' cultural knowledge and personal experiences as integral assets to the learning process. In this way, effective SEL emphasizes the creation of a caring, culturally responsive learning community where students are known, respected, appreciated, and feel safe to learn. To the degree these conditions prevail systemically, the foundation for equitable learning opportunities is strengthened (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019).

Finally, it is critical that students have a voice and be viewed as partners in the educational process, including the development and improvement of SEL programming.

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Student perspectives are important on aspects ranging from assessing school culture and climate, to the selection of EBPs, and the collection and use of SEL data (DePaoli et al., 2018). Thus, youth should be viewed as collaborators in the SEL process as opposed to just the beneficiaries of it.

The family. The family is critical to the success of SEL because parents are their children's first teachers and SEL begins at home. Accordingly, parents and families are vitally important in helping their children develop SECs (Miller, 2020). Parents and family members can both model social and emotional skills and intentionally teach them through parenting practices (Elias, Tobias, & Friedlander, 1999).

As school and family are two dominant contexts in the lives of children, strong school-family partnerships are critical (Epstein, 2018; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005). In such partnerships, teacher-parent communication is meaningful and inclusive, and characterized by genuine collaboration (Garbacz, Swanger-Gagné, & Sheridan, 2015). SEL involves a coordinated, aligned approach where parents and school staff share a vision, goals, and responsibility for the work. This enables children to experience coherence in the messages received across settings and to practice SEL skills that are consistently reinforced in multiple contexts (Albright & Weissberg, 2010). Indeed, school-family partnerships that regularly engage parents in their children's schooling are linked to positive outcomes such as improved academic performance, mental health, increased student engagement, and reduced school dropout (e.g., Christenson & Reschly, 2010; Garbacz et al., 2015; Sheridan et al., 2019). To engage parents, it is essential that the school environment is welcoming to families during and after school. Parents need meaningful opportunities to have a voice in the planning, decision-making, and implementation of SEL. This can be fostered by having regular opportunities for families to learn about SEL and clearly defined roles for parents to be active collaborators and participants in SEL activities. To foster this commitment may require schools to reach out to parents in community settings and remove barriers that make it difficult for some parents to interface with school staff (e.g., language, cultural divides, child care, etc.). On the other hand, SEL programming taught in the school can be intentional about having students practice skills at home with family members.

The local community. The local community refers to both individuals and organizations surrounding the school that have established relationships with young people and support the SECs of young people. It is imperative that young people practice and apply SEL skills in everyday situations and be acknowledged for using them across a variety of settings. Thus, what happens in the school and family should be synergistically connected with learning opportunities in the local community. A considerable literature shows that organized out-of-school and community-based settings can promote SEL (Devaney & Moroney, 2018; Durlak et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2016) and benefit young people (Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009).

SEL programming should be coordinated and aligned between the school day and in out-of-school time (e.g., common language of SEL, equitable discipline practices, etc.). As an example, the Wallace Foundation's Partnership for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI) involves six communities engaged in systemic SEL to build capacity and align programs, practices, policies, and continuous improvement approaches in school and out of school (Wallace Foundation, 2019).

Service-learning, youth participatory action research, and project-based learning provide additional examples of community-linked programming whereby learning opportunities allow young people to work directly with community members (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Elias et al., 2015; Jagers et al., 2019). These opportunities allow students to use and generalize their SEL skills in "real world" settings that are both personally relevant and can open opportunities for their future. Examples include serving the homeless, assisting in senior citizen programs, working with children who have special needs, mentoring, tutoring, and organizing community clean ups. These settings allow students to practice SEL skills with peers, other than their classmates, who may be more diverse in terms of experience and background.

Distal Settings Involved in Systemic SEL

The school district. The school district includes the broader system of schools and relationships, the district school board, central office staff, and district level policies and procedures (Mart, Weissberg, & Kendziora, 2015). A key insight from CASEL's (2017b) Collaborating District Initiative is that SEL ideally should be integrated into every aspect of the district's work, from the strategic plan and budgets to human resources, professional development, and operations. To be successful, district administrators should fully support the institutionalization of SEL programming initiatives (CASEL, 2017b). The four broad areas of district support for SEL are identified on the left side Figure 1 and described in Table 1.

The importance of district level support is demonstrated through findings from the CDI that show that SEL can be implemented successfully at the district level (American Institutes for Research, 2015). Moreover, outcomes at the district level (e.g., positive systemwide climate, commitment to SEL, and clarity of roles and responsibilities for SEL) and at the student level (e.g., increased attendance, academic performance, and fewer disciplinary referrals)

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have been observed across CDI districts. To provide a comprehensive framework for systemic, districtwide SEL implementation, CASEL developed the District Resource Center that includes learnings, resources, tools, and artifacts from the collaborating districts (CASEL, 2020a).

The state. The involvement of state-level departments, boards, governors, legislators, and other organizations is important. State-level policies, guidelines, and practices provide the conditions in which districts and schools can implement systemic SEL and help identify SEL as a statewide priority. CASEL initiated the Collaborating States Initiative (CSI) in 2016 (https://casel.org/collaborative-state-initiative/) to "help state educational agencies create statewide conditions that will encourage and equip educators at the district level to promote integrated, equity-focused, academic, social, and emotional learning" (Collaborating States Initiative, 2018).

CSI participation has grown steadily to well over 30 states in 2020 (Dusenbury et al., 2020; Yoder, Dusenbury, Martinez-Black, & Weissberg, 2020). These states share their visions for state-level SEL, create funding structures and communication strategies, develop standards and guidance, identify strategies for implementation in the districts and schools, and align programming with state and federal requirements. Currently, 18 states have established SEL standards or competencies, 29 states offer SEL websites, and 25 states have state-specific guidance designed to support SEL implementation (Yoder et al., 2020).

The nation. Federal and state policy provides opportunities for SEL at the national level (National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development, 2018; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). As ESSA requires state accountability systems to include indicators for "school quality and student success" to accompany academic outcomes, states can now broaden their definition of success to include SECs (Melnick, Cook-Harvey, & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Moreover, ESSA provides ways to leverage federal funding for evidence-based SEL programming, including Title IV (Grant et al., 2017). In addition, ESSA can support equity by allowing states flexibility to advance their equity mission (The Aspen Education & Society Program and the Council of Chief State School Officers, 2016). Finally, the executive and legislative branches are supporting SEL. Congress approved and the president signed a bill with $123 million in landmark federal funding for SEL, and the U.S. Department of Education launched the Center to Improve SEL and School Safety (Yoder et al., 2020).

The world. A global perspective to SEL recognizes that through international collaboration we can develop educational systems and strategies that will improve the lives and life opportunities of children and adolescents around the world (e.g., Cefai, Bartolo, Cavioni, & Downes, 2018; OECD, 2018; Torrente, Alimchandani, & Aber, 2015). In this effort, the development and assessment of SECs for children and adults in low- and middle-income countries is of special importance (e.g., Smart et al., 2019; The World Bank, 2020). Compared with the dawn of SEL nearly three decades ago, technological advances now make it possible for SEL knowledge and resources to be exchanged rapidly on a broad scale. Thus, regional, national, and international connections among schools and districts, universities, and social services are now common supports for SEL. For example, people from over 180 countries visited CASEL's web page at www.casel.org during the last year to attain and share knowledge on SEL.

Future Policy, Practice, and Research Directions for Systemic SEL

In this article we have described a systemic approach to SEL that involves collaboration and synergy across classrooms, schools, families, and communities. This approach is supported by research and practice carried out for over two decades. Considerable progress has been made in providing all students with regular opportunities to engage in well-designed SEL enriched learning environments. At the same time, much work remains to be done. Many children do not yet have access to high-quality, supportive learning environments rich with consistent SEL opportunities and, thus, may not reach their fullest potential as healthy and productive adults. What does the field of SEL need to achieve over the next decade to change this circumstance?

Future Directions for Policy and Practice

A key issue involves how to implement systemic SEL with quality as programming expands broadly across schools, districts, states, and nations. A fully systemic approach calls for national and international agendas to further SEL at all levels of research, practice, and policy (National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development, 2018; OECD, 2018). This will require new national policies that place SEL alongside academic performance at the core of education so that it is coordinated and integrated with existing educational priorities and allotted appropriate resources for nationwide development and sustainability. Furthermore, ongoing efforts are needed to support and integrate statewide and districtwide SEL. This includes adopting statewide, developmentally appropriate, preschool through high school (or adult) SEL competencies in all 50 states along with well-developed assessment tools to evaluate and enhance progress. Ideally, these assessments will be tied to SEL implementation plus student and adult competencies, behavior, and academic performance for purposes of informing instructional practice and not for high stakes accountability (Assessment Work Group, 2019).

Training and capacity building for adult SEL at all levels of education is required. This should include SEL courses

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and practicum for all future educators at colleges of education, and ongoing, high-quality professional development for existing educators that is grounded in the most recent advances from the science and practice of systemic SEL (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Finally, it is important to recognize that designing, implementing, evaluating, and continuously improving systemic SEL policies and practices requires a multiyear commitment and ongoing evaluation. Many schools, districts, and states have begun their SEL journeys to provide quality education for all students. Ongoing evaluation with feedback to multiple stakeholders about the accomplishments, challenges, and limitations of implementation efforts are critical to sustain and improve systemic SEL efforts over time.

Future Directions for Research

The past 25 years have seen an explosion of research in the development, implementation, and evaluation of SEL programs and policies. Research has shown that effectively implemented, evidence-based SEL programs lead to measurable and potentially long-lasting improvements in various domains of a child's life. We advocate for placing SEL within a larger public health framework of systems transformation for education. This will require multimethod research that uses randomized trials, quasi-experimental designs, the use of both newly created and archival data, and rich data collection from qualitative approaches. Studies are needed in several domains. More important, research is needed at the level of schools and school districts to examine the effect of comprehensive, transformational approaches that combine evidence-based programs, policies, and practices, that partner with families, and are coordinated with community programs. To adequately address critical concerns about educational equity, such efforts need to be adequately resourced and asset-focused, require clear logic models that specify what locally meaningful academic, social, and emotional outcomes will be impacted with a focus on discerning programs, approaches, and practices that create equitable learning environments supporting the specific populations of children and youth in accessing positive social and academic opportunities and reaching their fullest potential. Second, studies should examine how to most effectively fully integrate universal SEL models with services at other tiers (indicated and treatment levels for children who require more services) so that schools have a common framework to promote wellbeing and school success and to prevent mental health disorders. Third, studies are needed that focus at the preservice and in-service levels on the effects of SEL programs and organization change interventions for educators (for teachers, student support personnel, and principals/administrators) that support the culture and climate needed for healthy, caring schools. Finally, it is critical to examine ways that federal and state policies can enhance or reduce the quality of SEL implementation at local levels along with the impact that programming has on student social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth. To advance the science and practice of SEL systems transformation, researchers, educators, and policymakers will need to work together to design and test comprehensive SEL programs that can substantially improve our communities' public health. We hope that the systemic framework and related resources described in this article provides guidance and support as schools, families, and communities work together to enhance the life skills and opportunities for all children and youth.

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