



Examples of Social and Emotional Learning in Middle School Social Studies Instruction

Acknowledgments

At the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) generally and in the Collaborating States Initiative specifically, we believe it is important to recognize the contributions and leadership of state teams. In addition to their local responsibilities, they are joined in this collaborative effort to foster conditions for the social and emotional learning for all of our students. This document could not have been produced without the insights and experience of the CASEL Collaborating States Initiative team in Massachusetts, with contributions from staff at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Introduction

Within the Collaborating States Initiative many states are developing competencies to articulate goals for what students should know and be able to do in terms of their social and emotional development (Dusenbury et al., 2015). An immediate question from stakeholders and constituents is: How can teachers effectively promote or teach social and emotional competence to achieve these goals? Put another way: What do teachers and other adults need to do in the classroom and school to help students achieve the goals laid out in social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies?

In the past 15 years CASEL has produced three separate [guides to evidence-based programs](#) designed to promote student social and emotional development (CASEL, 2003; CASEL 2013; CASEL, 2015). We believe our reviews of the actual content of evidence-based programs helps inform the answers to the important question of how adults can effectively promote student SEL in the classroom and school. The purpose of this document is to draw on these previous reviews of evidence-based programs to identify and describe some of the most common strategies used to promote student SEL.

Social Studies is enhanced when it is intentional about developing social and emotional learning (SEL) core competencies.

- **Self-awareness.** *Social studies begins with an awareness of self and how individuals are members of their families, communities, and country.*
- **Self-Management.** *All education is based on the implicit assumption that students will have the self-management skills necessary to calm themselves and focus their attention so they can effectively participate in learning, including history and social studies. A further assumption is that students will have goal-setting skills to complete academic assignments.*
- **Social Awareness.** *Understanding history and social studies depends on an awareness of ourselves in relation to others—how we may be similar and different. Understanding of history and social studies also depends on an awareness of different cultures and historical experiences. It provides an opportunity to understand that people have different perspectives based on their experiences. Perspective-taking is an essential part of social awareness.*
- **Relationship Skills.** *Social studies may be explicitly organized to develop community service skills, which give students opportunities to practice communication, assertiveness, conflict resolution, and problem-solving. Project-based learning and/or cooperative learning techniques also offer opportunities for students to practice important interpersonal skills.*
- **Responsible Decision-making.** *Social studies assumes that students will have the ability to evaluate options and make effective decisions to complete assignments. Further, students have an opportunity to reflect on the values of different historical figures, and how values and beliefs can motivate service to others and their community.*

Social studies and history can be enhanced when instruction and teaching practices are explicitly designed to promote all five core competencies of social and emotional learning (SEL). We know from research that curriculum and instruction that are intentional about giving students the chance to develop the core social and emotional competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills significantly increase academic achievement, improve attitudes and behaviors, decrease negative behaviors, and reduce emotional distress.¹ Effective social studies and history instruction builds upon these competencies to drive student learning and engagement.

For example, through Social Studies and History, educators can support students to:

- Become more aware of themselves and their connection to social groups, and also to see the connections between current tasks and their personal goals and interests (**self-awareness**).
- Develop skills for focusing attention, managing stress and anxiety, and accomplishing goals in order to effectively participate in classroom learning (**self-management**).
- Become more socially aware and develop respect for different cultures (**social awareness**).
- Collaborate in groups where they are encouraged to consider the perspectives and thought processes of their peers (**relationship skills**).
- Reflect on choices and goals they have, and demonstrated by historical figures, as a way of developing strong decision-making skills (**responsible decision-making**).

In short, core social and emotional learning competencies can help students to develop stronger social studies skills and to become college and career ready.

Activities and Practices

Self-Awareness	
Lessons/Activities	Have students reflect on and discuss the different groups they belong to – their family, their school community, their neighborhood community, their country – and how membership in these different groups affects how they see the world.
	Have students reflect on and discuss or do reports on the different cultures represented in their community and similarities across groups.
	Use historical events to have students identify with a time they may have had the same feelings as a historical figure and ask them to discuss in small groups (or write in their journals or on an essay question) how they handled those situations.
	Use historical events to discuss a historical figure’s feelings and how those feelings affected others and ultimately the outcome of the story.
	Have students complete a project to describe their cultural background and their larger community.
Teaching Practices	Routinely provide authentic feedback and also ask questions that help students reflect on their own strengths and interests, e.g., “I can tell you’re really enjoying this project. Can you tell me what about this is making you feel so energized/motivated/happy?,” “I can tell you’re really proud of how you did on this report/project. Can you tell me what about this you’re most proud of?”
	Routinely give students the opportunity to reflect on what they like to study or read about in history or government, what kinds of periods in history they like to learn about and why – on essay questions, journal questions, or in student pair shares
	Tell students routinely authentic reasons why you as their teacher feel happy/optimistic for them and their future.
	Create class roles and responsibilities that emphasizes individual strengths, areas to improve, and personal and group goals. For example, students might be assigned the roles of taking attendance, arranging chairs, or displaying student work.
	Establish clear norms and consequences so students can see the impact of their own actions and behaviors on outcomes (e.g., create group academic projects such as a group report and help students develop appropriate strategies for providing feedback to each other if someone is not pulling his/her weight on the team).

Self-Management

Lessons/Activities

Teach self-management techniques such as belly breathing, yoga positions, counting to ten, self-talk, relaxation exercises, or mental rehearsal to help students develop techniques for managing stress or anxiety, including for testing or public speaking situations.

Have students brainstorm ways to motivate themselves.

Lead students in a discussion of how to use their awareness of emotions as a guide to decision-making. Discuss how historical figures harnessed their feelings to work for the common good.

Lead a discussion that encourages students to “press pause” when making a decision if they are feeling angry or hurt. Help students understand that it is always better to make important decisions when we are feeling calm.

Lead discussions about positive ways historical figures expressed their feelings of oppression, anger, or disappointment. Lead a discussion about how students can express their feelings in positive ways (e.g., talk to an adult or friend, put our feelings into words, create media or write an essay or a journal entry about how we feel, show our feelings through dance).

Teach a lesson on the THINK process to help students recognize responsible use of social media before posting an unkind or untrue remark about a person because they are upset. T—is it true, H—is it helpful, I—is it inspiring, N—is it necessary, K—is it kind.

Teach students a lesson how to use certain equipment (such as computers or iPads) and other resources appropriately.

Use a lesson to establish rules for how equipment (e.g., printers or iPads) should be put away.

Over the course of several weeks have students work on individual goal projects using goals they identify for themselves. Have them monitor and document their progress for several weeks.

During a lesson talk about how you motivate yourself when you need to.

Teach students to identify what is known about a lesson topic or objective and to identify what they need to know to understand the lesson objective, then how to set a goal to achieve it.

Lead a discussion that encourages students to reflect on barriers they may encounter when completing an assignment (e.g., finding a computer or color printer they want to use) and that also helps them think about ways they can overcome barriers, including how to approach others for help – e.g., asking a media director for permission to use equipment.

Lead a discussion (ask questions) about who might be able to help, or what other resources might be available, to complete an assignment.

	<p>Create class projects that require effort (e.g., complete a class writing project to develop a cookbook on favorite family recipes in the class, and have a celebration at the end – e.g., invite family to come to a celebration of the cookbook, bringing recipes), and encourage students through to their completion.</p>
	<p>Use historical events to discuss how historical figures persevered through hard times to turn their lives around or reach a goal.</p>
	<p>Teach students a lesson on procedures for class transitions and create class goals for improving the time it takes to complete them.</p>
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Teaching Practices</p>	<p>Routinely practice self-management techniques as a regular part of the school day (e.g., start class with a deep breathing exercise).</p>
	<p>As a teacher, consistently model effective self-management in an age-appropriate way (“I’m feeling a little frustrated, so I’m going to stop and take a breath before I decide what to do next.”).</p>
	<p>Give students authentic feedback for self-management (e.g., “I saw the way you got ready to give your book report just now. I know you were a little nervous, but I saw you take a breath. I’m proud of you, and you should be proud of yourself.”).</p>
	<p>Give students support and/or authentic feedback for expressing emotions appropriately (e.g., “I know you’re angry at her right now [e.g., for interrupting you]. What are some calm ways you could tell her what you’re upset about?” or “I know you were feeling sad about what happened recently. I was proud of you for writing about how you were feeling and what you were doing to feel more peaceful. I’m here if you ever want to talk to me about it.”</p>
	<p>Establish a separate space in the classroom for individual self-management (e.g., a reading corner).</p>
	<p>Routinely encourage students to save a desired activity or experience (e.g., getting a shake or fries, going out with a friend) until they have completed tasks or duties (e.g., until they have finished their homework).</p>
	<p>Routinely develop and complete short-term classroom goals (e.g., getting settled quickly after the bell rings).</p>
	<p>Routinely teach students how to use resources appropriately (e.g., how to use reference resources).</p>
	<p>Routinely model and talk about your own goals,</p>
	<p>Routinely provide authentic feedback to students when you observe them managing themselves well (e.g., regulating their emotions by taking a breath, taking a break to think about a decision).</p>
<p>Students can also be taught to self-assess progress toward their learning goals, a powerful strategy</p>	

	that promotes academic growth and should be an instructional routine in classroom from grade 4-12.
	Routinely notice and discuss with students when they are being perseverant.
	Routinely ask questions that encourage students to reflect on barriers they may encounter and that help them think about ways they can overcome the barriers in any difficult situation they are facing.
	Routinely ask students who might be able to help them in various situations or what other resources might be available.
	Help students think through and suggest alternatives when they encounter challenges.
	Offer to help when needed.
	Give authentic feedback when students persevere (e.g., “I know how hard that was, but you never gave up. You kept on going. I’m very proud of you, and you should be proud of yourself.”).
	Routinely encourage students to write in journals or share with partner in pair shares to reflect on why their efforts in certain situations succeeded or failed, and what they might do differently in the future.
	Routinely work with the class to establish and complete class projects (e.g., a group project that explores a particular period in history – set goals, break the goal down into weekly subgoals, lay out steps for achieving weekly goals, monitor progress toward achieving goals, celebrate achievements).

Social Awareness	
Lessons/Activities	Conduct a service-learning project to help students become more aware of needs in their community.
	Teach a lesson on how to communicate effectively during public speaking, including a discussion of why it is important to identify how others feel and what to look for (e.g., facial cues, body language).
	Discuss the expectations and demands of different settings for public speaking—how we dress and behave for school, places of worship, formal ceremonies, or hanging out with friends.
	Discuss more subtle cues in the environment, such as the presence of people of different ages, when people are quiet, etc., in determining what kinds of behaviors are appropriate during public speaking.

	Examine historical events. Discuss the different perspective of different historical figures, identifying their feelings and thoughts.
	Organize and encourage student projects as a part of learning about history that explores different cultures and celebrates diversity.
	Celebrate historical figures who resisted stereotypes or worked to promote justice and equality for all individuals.
	Ask students to reflect (including in journals) on questions about the negative effects of stereotyping. Give them opportunities to discuss in pair shares.
	Lead a class project connected to history to promote awareness of the rights of others.
	Discuss and analyze the origins and negative effects of stereotyping and prejudice as reflected in history.
	Study historical figures who showed respect for others or served others and discuss their example.
	Ask students to write in their journals or discuss in pair shares how they try to be helpful in their families or with their peers.
	Work with students to organize a community service project.
Teaching Practices	Routinely discuss figures in history in terms of how they felt and why they took certain actions or behaved the way they did.
	Use small groups to allow students to talk about the kinds of history they like to learn about and why, so that students can begin to see the ways in which other students have similar or different preferences, and learn from each other about why studying history can be interesting and fun.
	Routinely examine history and biographies in terms of the perspective of the individuals being studied, identifying their feelings and thoughts
	Routinely talk about how others feel in different situations.
	Provide students with opportunities to share in small groups how they feel in different situations.
	Allow students to dress up as figures from history and act out how those individuals were feeling and thinking and how it affected their behavior.
	When there is a difference of opinion among students, allow them to reflect on how they are feeling (writing an essay or in a journal) and then share with a partner or in a small group, to be heard but also to listen to how others feel differently, and why, in the same situation.

	Build respect for diversity in the classroom by having students share their different cultural perspectives on situations.
	Model respect and enthusiasm for learning about diversity. Show enthusiasm for learning about different cultures and for learning about their history.
	At holiday time create classroom celebrations that allow students to share and explain traditions from their own family holidays.
	Give everyone an opportunity to participate. Involve family members, asking them to share their traditions with students.
	Model acceptance of others who have different attitudes and values.
	Use cooperative learning and project-based learning strategically (reflecting thoughtfully and intentionally on the composition of groups) to build diverse working groups.
	Organize class meetings to involve students in sharing and recognizing others who have different experiences. This develops empathy and appreciation for differences and similarities
	Routinely ask questions in different situations that make the point that we are all both similar and different.
	Model respectful behavior.
	Model concern for the well-being of others.
	Model service to others.
	Identify and celebrate figures in history who made a positive contribution to their communities. List their contributions and ways that they contributed to the common good.
	Give feedback to students in authentic ways when they are respectful toward others. Encourage students to identify how they feel when they were respectful or supportive of another person.
	Ask routine questions throughout the day to draw attention to how students' behavior is affecting those around them.
	Routinely give specific and timely feedback to students for accepting direction well from authority figures.
	Develop and revise classroom rules and norms with students to work together to promote understanding and respect.
	Routinely discuss why we have classroom or school rules in the context of current experiences in

	the school or classroom.
	Routinely discuss implicit rules and how they are affecting students' current behavior.
	Model and routinely promote a school norm of treating others the way you would want to be treated.
	Routinely remind students anytime they need help to think about the resources (formal and informal) that are available to them.
	Work with other teachers and administrators to create a sense of responsibility among adults in the school to be available to help students

Relationship Skills	
Lessons/Activities	Lead a community service project so students can practice communication, assertiveness, social problem-solving, and helping others at the same time they are learning about the needs of their community.
	In preparation for presentations, teach lessons to develop speaking and listening skills (e.g., how to identify and prepare one's message, how to introduce oneself and be sure others are listening, how to speak loudly and clearly so that others can hear, etc.).
	Teach lessons on effective listening and give students a chance to practice, taking turns in pair shares.
	Teach lessons to develop listening, including nonverbal behavioral to show you are listening.
	Teach students how to give feedback in specific situations that will help them improve their communication skills.
	Teach lessons on how to receive constructive feedback.
	Teach lessons on how to give constructive feedback.
	Teach lessons on how to offer help in a sensitive, appropriate way.
	Teach lessons on how to say thank you and receive help well.
	Use history and the experiences of historical figures as an opportunity to teach students a lesson or lessons on how to resolve conflicts peacefully.
	Use service-learning to develop and routinely practice communication, social, and assertiveness

Teaching Practices

skills.

Use team-based, collaborative teaching practices such as cooperative learning and project-based learning to provide students with opportunities to develop and routinely practice communication, social, and assertiveness skills. Be very intentional when creating groups to balance students so there are natural leaders who can inspire the others they are working with. Avoid placing overly dominant or more intimidating students with shy, more passive students.

Give students opportunities to practice social skills in small groups and project-based learning activities.

Give students authentic feedback anytime they work well with others.

Thank students whenever they listen well and tell them specifically what they did well.

Use interactive teaching strategies such as cooperative learning and project-based learning to provide students with opportunities to develop and practice positive communication skills.

Establish class meetings to give students the opportunity to take turns interacting with each other and practicing speaking and listening skills.

Model and reinforce effective communication and relationship skills.

Establish a conflict-resolution process that is used any time there is a conflict.

Model good conflict-resolution skills.

Give students support as needed when they are working out a conflict.

Give students authentic feedback for resolving conflicts peacefully.

Use collaborative work groups (e.g., cooperative learning projects or project-based learning) to reinforce the importance of working together to solve problems and achieve goals.

Responsible Decision-Making

Lessons/Activities	Teach lessons that explore the way successful historical figures made decisions.
	Teach students a formula for making good decisions (e.g., stop, calm down, identify the problem, consider the alternatives, make a choice, try it out, re-evaluate).
	Apply group decision-making to choosing a community service project.
	Ask students to apply their decision-making formula to problems historical figures faced.
	Define “responsibility” and related terms (ethical, safe, values, honesty). Ask students to write essays about these words.
	Discuss higher order values demonstrated by historical figures, e.g., being a good citizen, helping the community or country.
	Walk through the steps of problem-solving in response to situations in history.
	Discuss situations in literature in terms of whether decisions made by historical figures were ethical. Evaluate against clearly defined ethical criteria.
Teaching Practices	Routinely model good decision-making.
	Use dialoguing techniques that encourage students to think through a systematic process for decision-making (e.g., What’s the problem you’re facing? What are your options? What would be the consequences of exercising each of those options? What are you going to try, and why? How will you assess whether your option was a good one? What will you do if it doesn’t work?).
	Support students through the steps of making a decision anytime they face a choice or decision.
	Give students authentic feedback for making good decisions.
	Routinely examine problem or moral situations from history and examine alternatives and impacts.
	Develop and enforce class rules and shared norms, discussing them routinely.
	Create, agree to, and help students understand logical consequences, discussing them frequently and whenever appropriate.

¹ Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D. & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students’ social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1): 405–432.