



APRIL 2009

A PRACTITIONERS BULLETIN

The Illinois Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards: Leading the Way for School and Student Success

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In 2003, the state of Illinois adopted the Children's Mental Health Act, legislation that has significant potential for helping schools achieve their goals and has become nationally recognized for paving the way to school improvement and success for all students. The act was designed to ensure that Illinois schools (a) regard social and emotional learning (SEL) as integral to their mission and (b) take concrete steps to address their students' social and emotional development. Key provisions of the act called for the Illinois State

Board of Education (ISBE) to develop student social and emotional learning standards similar to the standards for traditional academic subjects (Section 15a) and required every Illinois school district to develop a policy for incorporating SEL into the district's educational program (Section 15b). The role of school principals is central to the effectiveness of this initiative.

What is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?

SEL is a process for helping children and even adults develop fundamental skills for success in school and life. SEL teaches the personal and interpersonal skills we all need to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work effectively and ethically. They are the skills that allow children to calm themselves when angry, make friends, resolve conflicts respectfully, and make ethical and safe choices. The field of SEL builds from work in child development, classroom management, prevention, and new knowledge about the role of the brain in social and cognitive growth. SEL focuses on five core groups of social and emotional competencies:

- **Self-awareness** – accurately assess-

ing one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence

- **Self-management** – regulating one's emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles; setting and monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals; expressing emotions appropriately
- **Social awareness** – being able to take the perspective of and empathize with others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; recognizing and using family, school, and community resources
- **Relationship skills** – establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; seeking help when needed
- **Responsible decision-making** – making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; contributing to

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the well-being of one's school and community

Why is SEL Important to Student Learning?

SEL is closely linked to school climate and student achievement. In conjunction with planning for school improvement, SEL provides a framework for teaching methods that emphasize active student engagement and involvement in the learning process. Teaching SEL skills helps to create and maintain safe, caring learning environments with a focus on success for all students.

Research has shown that the most beneficial SEL programs provide sequential and developmentally appropriate instruction in SEL skills. They are implemented in a coordinated manner, school-wide, from preschool through high school. Lessons are reinforced in the classroom, during out-of-school activities, and at home. In effective SEL programs educators receive ongoing professional development in SEL, and families and schools work together to promote children's social, emotional, and academic success.

In short, SEL can be seen as a template for effective school reform. Although the primary goal of the original SEL legislation in Illinois was to improve children's mental health, the overall outcome is improved conditions for education and schools generally.

How Do Schools and Students Benefit from SEL?

Many of the programs that teach SEL skills have now been rigorously evaluated and found to have significant positive impacts. Our Chicago-based nonprofit organization, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), has been the leader in research on SEL policy and practice since its founding in 1994. In a systematic analysis of more than 700 studies conducted by independent researchers on a wide range of SEL programs, CASEL found:

- Compared with students who did not receive SEL programming, students in SEL programs demonstrated enhanced skills, attitudes, and positive social behaviors, experienced fewer conduct problems, and had lower levels of emotional distress. They also improved significantly on standardized achievement tests.
- SEL led to gains on standardized achievement tests that ranged from 11-17 percent for different student subgroups.
- Classroom programs conducted by teachers, compared with programs taught by researchers who were not part of the regular teaching staff, were effective in all the outcome areas studied. The clear implication is that SEL programs can become a part of routine school practice.
- To yield the greatest benefits, SEL programming must be "S-A-F-E." That is, it must provide: Sequenced instruction, Active learning strategies, a Focus on developing social-emotional skills, and Explicit targeting of specific social-emotional skills
- SEL programs were effective across the K-12 grade range and for racially and ethnically diverse students from urban, rural, and suburban settings. (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Payton et al., 2008.)

SEL enjoys one of the strongest research bases and delivers among the strongest results of all major educational interventions tested in recent years. Further details and information can be found on CASEL's website (www.CASEL.org).

How Do the Illinois SEL Standards Affect Our Schools?

Following passage of the 2003 Illinois Children's Mental Health Act and with the input of educators from across the state, standards on student social and emotional development were developed and accepted by ISBE in December 2004. The Illinois SEL standards are shown in the box on this page, and encompass the five core skills areas described above. CASEL subsequently assisted in the develop-

Illinois Social and Emotional Learning Standards

Goal 1: Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.

- Identify and manage one's emotions and behavior
- Recognize personal qualities and external supports
- Demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals

Goal 2: Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.

- Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others
- Recognize individual and group similarities and differences
- Use communication and social skills to interact effectively with others
- Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways

Goal 3: Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.

- Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions
- Apply decision-making skills to deal with academic and social situations
- Contribute to the well-being of one's school and community

ment of SEL performance descriptors and continues to be active in the state's revisions of the original standards. We have also prepared resources for ISBE to support implementation of the standards, as well as reports on SEL practices in Illinois. Extensive information on the standards and related resources, including model SEL school policies, can be found in the "Standards and Policies" section of our website.

How Can Schools Implement the Illinois Standards?

Since the adoption of the Illinois SEL standards, Illinois is on its way to becoming a model for fostering the implementation of widespread, evidence-based, integrated SEL programming. A variety of collaborations have evolved to address the SEL standards. They have brought together state agencies, districts, and schools, all with a focus on expanding evidence-based SEL practice in Illinois and communicating about SEL to educational constituencies such as PTAs, professional associations, and policy makers.

Our organization has been an active participant in this process. We provide support to schools and districts focusing on the SEL standards through direct consultation, professional development activities, and data collection and analysis. We also continue to study and report on effective implementation of school-based SEL programming, and we have published an *SEL Implementation Guide and Toolkit* that is integral to our SEL professional development training and workshops. Illinois is using these materials and this model in its pilot funding of 84 schools across the state to implement the SEL Standards. In all these interrelated efforts, our focus on the role of the principal is paramount. The following sections highlight key aspects of this approach, and more details are available on our website.

Successful Leadership for SEL Programming – Keep In Mind...

- Active, visible leadership support is crucial to successful implementation and long-term sustainability of SEL programming in a school.
- The principal is responsible for creating the "big idea" of SEL and articulating it to the entire school community so that SEL becomes a priority.
- The principal must prepare staff for change and be supportive throughout the process.
- The leader should model the social and emotional competencies he or she expects students to learn and teachers to teach.
- The leader must be an advocate and visible and vocal supporter of SEL, particularly to staff and parents, in order to generate and maintain enthusiasm.

Why is School Leadership So Important to Effective SEL Program Implementation?

Although effective school leadership is essential in any successful school improvement effort, it is particularly important to SEL programming. SEL is as much about adult change as it is about improvements in student performance. In addition to focusing on instruction in social-emotional skills, SEL is a process of creating a school community that is caring, supportive, and responsive to students' needs. In a review of the leadership literature, Leithwood and his colleagues (2004) identify the three major practices through which an effective school leader creates school change that benefits student learning: (a) setting direction (helping staff to see a unifying "big idea" behind their work and the requested changes), (b) developing people, and (c) redesigning the organization.

Beyond these practices, leaders must show "emotional intelligence." Their highly visible leadership role requires an ability to demonstrate the SEL skills sought for all students and staff. Thus,

modeling is a leader's most powerful instructional tool. It gives the principal credibility in promoting SEL as a "big idea" and in leading the planning and implementation of SEL programming, and it demonstrates the relational trust essential to the success of effective SEL implementation in schools (Elias, O'Brien, & Weissberg, 2006).

In his classic *Harvard Business Review* article "What Makes a Leader?," CASEL co-founder Dan Goleman (1998) describes research he conducted with executives that showed emotional intelligence to be twice as important as other qualities, including technical knowledge and IQ, in predicting successful leadership and company performance. Experts in the field of school leadership (Lambert, 2003; Patti & Tobin, 2003) have confirmed the importance of emotionally intelligent leadership in schools. According to Goleman, to be an emotionally intelligent leader in any setting requires mastery of five key competencies, closely connected to those identified for children's development in the Illinois SEL standards: (a) self-awareness, (b) self-regulation, (c) motivation, (d) empathy, and (e) social skills. Leaders who possess these competencies:

- Are energized by their work and are driven to achieve for the sake of achievement because they have chosen jobs that fit with their values.
- Are able to manage their emotions, stay calm in stressful situations, and create an environment of trust because they possess self-knowledge.
- Are successful at motivating others and are not easily discouraged.
- Are thoughtful and consider other employees' feelings when making decisions.
- Are good at coaching and mentoring.
- Have a clear understanding of group process.
- Are often successful in interacting with all kinds of people.
- Are skilled at taking on only what they can handle and therefore are generally successful at the tasks they agree to undertake (Cherniss, 1998; Goleman, 1998; Rabinowitz, 2003).

These characteristics, although useful in any setting, are particularly relevant to principal leadership in a changing school environment, where motivation, enthusiasm, and level-headedness are so necessary. Further, emotionally intelligent leaders are more likely to build relational trust between and among themselves and the teaching staff (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

What Should Principals Focus On as They Plan Next Steps to Address the Illinois SEL Standards?

Central to effective SEL implementation is the need for a long-range plan. Although this may seem to imply a huge undertaking that has no relevance to current school activities, for many reasons that is far from the case.

- SEL is completely compatible with the major priorities of today's

schools. These include the need to use evidence-based instruction, be safe and drug-free, and promote high academic performance of all students—all of which are goals that SEL helps schools achieve. Implementing SEL in your school need not detract from your core academic subjects and focus; rather, it can enhance them.

- Research strongly supports the links between social and emotional learning and academic achievement. To say that schools must attend to SEL at the expense of academics is a false choice; the two are interdependent and interactive.
- SEL is part of what all schools are already doing. Whether schools identify activities as contributing to social and emotional learning or not, all schools have an impact on

the social and emotional development of children and youth. Some schools do this intentionally, purposefully, and effectively. Others do it in a manner that is haphazard, unintentional, and unplanned.

- SEL programming is most effective when it is part of a carefully planned school improvement effort. CASEL's approach to SEL implementation is designed to help educators develop and implement a plan for incorporating social and emotional learning as a key element of school improvement.
- Even when the school community broadly supports school improvement incorporating SEL, efforts in this direction must be nurtured and sustained. An emphasis on sustainability, including regular

Ten Steps in the SEL Implementation Cycle

Readiness

1. Commit to schoolwide SEL. Be a champion for SEL.
2. Engage stakeholders and form a steering committee. Invest them with genuine authority and responsibility for the work.
3. Develop and articulate a shared vision. The high hopes and dreams for students bring energy and a positive focus to the work.

Planning

4. Conduct a needs and resources assessment. Identify specific issues to address; build from what's already in place and working well.
5. Develop an action plan. Include the goals and objectives as well as a plan for attaining them.
6. Review and select evidence-based programs and strategies. The resulting shared framework and vocabulary creates consistency and coherence for the students.

Implementation

7. Conduct initial staff development activities. Ensure that staff members understand SEL theory and practices.
8. Launch social-emotional skills instruction in classrooms. Help staff members become familiar with and experienced in SEL.
9. Expand instruction and integrate SEL school-wide. Build a consistent environment and experiences for students.
10. Revisit activities; adjust for continuous improvement. Check on progress to catch problems early.

– Adapted from *Sustainable School-wide Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): Implementation Guide and Toolkit* (CASEL, 2006)

planning, assessment, and professional development, should be part of the school's social and emotional learning plan from its inception.

Any successful implementation process begins with a clear picture of the road ahead. In order to launch programs and practices to help your students attain the Illinois SEL Standards, your school should plan for what you will need to do one, two, and several years from now. CASEL's description of the implementation process, briefly summarized in the "Ten Steps" on this page, draws from and is fully compatible with a number of outstanding resources that provide guidance to community and school-based prevention and student learning support initiatives. In addition, the CASEL model is based on a research review and synthesis and on expert interviews. For more information about the CASEL model, including a description of the entire implementation process, please see the SEL Implementation section of CASEL's website.



www.CASEL.org

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