

Quick Facts for Criteria on CASEL's Guide to Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs



Developing and disseminating the *CASEL Guide to Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs* (referred to here as the CASEL Program Guide) is one of our highest organizational priorities. We devote substantial resources to researching and updating it. Since we first published the Program Guide in 2003, it has been an essential resource to help educators find evidence-based programs that promote social and emotional competence in their students. It also serves as a resource highlighting new ways of examining evidence-based SEL programs that address the needs of all our nation's students, especially those students and their families who have been historically marginalized.

Since CASEL's last update to the Program Guide in 2015, the field has progressed in terms of research, practice, and policy, not only in the development of ESSA standards, but in many facets of SEL programming. These advances have motivated our latest updates to the evaluation, design, and implementation criteria required for inclusion in the 2021 Program Guide. This document briefly describes the key updates to our criteria for including SEL programs in the Program Guide. CASEL has also published a more detailed rationale paper describing our review of the current Program Guide's criteria for inclusion and the evidence base and rationale for the newly updated version.

Evaluation Review: Quick Facts

ESSA-Guided Evaluation Criteria

1 How are the CASEL Program Guide's new guidelines aligned with ESSA Tier 1 or 2?	All programs in the CASEL Program Guide used either a pre-post randomized control trial (RCT) or pre-post quasi-experimental (QE) design in their evaluation, important qualifications for Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Tier 1 and Tier 2 designations, respectively. While we do not have requirements that are perfectly aligned with the other ESSA qualifications (i.e., minimum sample size, multi-site), we will document if programs listed in the CASEL Program Guide qualify for ESSA Tier 1, Tier 2, or neither to aid users in their decision-making process. It is possible that a program listed at any designation in the CASEL Program Guide (i.e., SElect, Promising, SEL-Supportive) would not qualify for ESSA Tier 1 or 2 because it does not meet ESSA's required minimal sample size of 350 participants and/or has not been evaluated in multiple locations.
2 Is there a minimum number of participants needed in an evaluation of my program? What is it and why did you choose that number?	Yes, starting in the spring of 2021, the CASEL Program Guide will require that each evaluation submitted has a minimum of 100 participants in the final analytic sample size, with the treatment and control groups roughly the same size. While a final analytic size of 100 (across both the treatment and control groups) is below the ESSA-required minimal sample size of 350 participants (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), we believe that amount can still provide statistical power to detect an effect (if present) and is feasible for most experienced educational evaluators. The basis for a minimum final sample size of 100 per evaluation followed from a review of the sample sizes of all programs currently in the Program Guide. The requirement of 100 or more participants recognizes current practice in the field and calls for an advancement to meet a minimum evaluation standard.

Additional Student & Institutional Outcomes

3 Going forward, how will the CASEL Program Guide address issues of equity in evaluations?	An equity lens recognizes that SEL takes place in the context of a socially stratified society. Understanding educational equity is fundamental to ethically assessing SEL practices and competencies, as well as interpreting SEL data (National Practitioner Advisory Group, 2019). Therefore, definitions of SEL and corresponding assessments should recognize how people's experiences are shaped by systemic inequality (Gregory and Ferguson, 2017). We have revised the competence definitions of the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional competencies (Jagers et al., 2019) to more closely take into account individuals' lived experiences. We strongly encourage evaluators to use culturally and developmentally appropriate and relevant SEL assessments best suited to the needs of the targeted population. Which outcomes to assess should be determined by diverse stakeholders who know the local needs, assets, and cultures of the community. CASEL emphasizes the importance of three foci relevant to multiple student and institutional outcomes included in the 2021 Program Guide: educational equity, a developmental perspective, and student perspectives. Updates to the Program Guide will consider how programs are incorporating assessments that tap into stage-appropriate developmental tasks, as well as how they elevate and affirm student voice in their evaluations (see below for further descriptions).
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4	Does the reporter of the outcome matter?	We welcome data gathered from diverse sources (e.g., student, teacher, peer). However, we strongly believe that changes in both cognition and school processes (e.g., layout of school, changing classes) make adolescents insightful reporters of their behavioral outcomes (Crosnoe & Benner, 2015; Steinberg, 2005). Understanding and addressing how youth think and feel about their experiences and how this contributes to social and emotional competence [SEC] is important for interventions aimed at promoting positive adjustment. We believe that inclusion of student-reported outcomes is not only developmentally appropriate (e.g., the self is the most reliable reporter of internal processes) for middle and high school students but that elevating student voice is an important step in promoting equity.
5	How will reporter disagreements be handled?	Where there are instances of reporter disagreement on student outcomes, we will consider the unique perspectives and experiences of all the reporters in our final decision. Exploring why these disagreements may have occurred is a necessary step researchers, evaluators, and program providers must take to fully understanding the impact of youth programming on development.
6	Why did you add “positive youth identity” as a new SElect outcome?	In its updating of the CASEL 5 framework, CASEL has explicitly highlighted identity as an integral aspect in building self-awareness. Identity development is a major developmental task of adolescence (Erikson, 1980), and a large body of empirical evidence supports the links between positive identity development and academic, social, and emotional adjustment (Sellers et al., 1998; 2006). Promoting and affirming young people’s identity and identity development is important for all youth, especially those from historically marginalized communities (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Fostering youths’ understanding and appreciation of their many identities (e.g., racial, ethnic, sexual orientation) and social roles (e.g., as a friend, community member) in context can be linked to agency, sense of belonging, and subsequent engagement in the learning enterprise in adolescence and beyond (Byrd & Chavous, 2006; Seller et al., 2006; Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 1998).
7	CASEL has now elevated school connectedness as a SElect outcome. How is this different from what was previously required?	Previously, both teacher-reported and youth-reported school connectedness (e.g., school belonging, engagement) were Promising outcomes. Starting in the spring of 2021, youth-reported school connectedness will be elevated to a SElect outcome. Teacher-reported school connectedness will remain a Promising outcome. While discrepancies between teacher-reported and student-reported academic engagement, emotional engagement, and school belonging have been documented in past research (Appleton & Lawrenz 2011; Skinner et al., 2008; Nichols, 2006; 2008), we believe that capturing and elevating students’ perception of their school-based relationships (e.g., school belonging, school support) is an important addition to the field and in line with CASEL’s long-standing commitment to issues of equity.
8	Why did you add “positive school climate” as a new SElect outcome?	Positive, inclusive school climates provide the learning conditions in which student and adult SEL take place. Key elements of school climate that connect with SEL include emotional and physical safety, connectedness and support, challenge and engagement, and peer and adult SECs (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2019). Moreover, school climate plays a critical role in educational equity. For instance, students of color are more apt to experience bias, harsh disciplinary practices, low expectations, and micro-aggressions that can diminish their school connectedness (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Aspen Institute, 2018). Understanding and promoting positive school climate for all individuals in the school is an important step toward promoting student and adult interpersonal and intrapersonal competence.
9	Why has the outcome of “positive academic performance” alone been reclassified?	In the past, positive changes in academic performance outcomes alone were considered a SElect outcome. Starting in the spring of 2021, positive changes in academic performance outcomes alone will be considered a Promising outcome. While changes in academic performance are desirable and are often observed in high-quality SEL interventions, changes in academic performance alone do not fully capture change in students’ socio-emotional well-being in general or in the five competencies more specifically. Positive changes in academic performance outcomes observed together with significant positive changes in a behavioral outcome (i.e., declines in problematic behaviors and emotional distress, increases in positive social behaviors, identity development, and school-based relationships), will be considered SElect.

Program Design Review Updates: Quick Facts

Design Criteria Updates

1	How do you explicitly incorporate equity in the program design review?	While our coding process has historically taken aspects of educational equity into account, it is imperative that we assess effective strategies that both reflect—and advance—work in the field. CASEL has begun asking programs to describe and supply examples of their inclusion of any of the following strategies: understanding context, working with bias, translation of materials, student as change agent, student voice within their programming, training offerings, and implementation support.
2	Are you reviewing features of adult SEL in the program review process? If so, why?	CASEL believes equity-related aspects of adult SEL (e.g., working with bias, exploration of one’s own identities, etc.) must be present and purposeful for educators to effectively facilitate strategies that support educational equity in their practice. Updates to the Program Guide will document opportunities for adult SEL more holistically and rigorously through a review of the training and implementation support materials, specifically documenting a program’s approach to understanding context and working with bias. CASEL’s review elevates the importance of training and implementation support as tools to prepare adults to work effectively with adolescents.
3	What do you consider as developmentally appropriate SEL strategies for middle school and high school-based programs?	The Program Guide review team identified key strategies for emphasizing developmentally appropriate strategies for middle and high school programs in the coding process. These include strategies that focus on supporting positive identity formation, positive school-based relationships, student voice and choice, and supporting young people as change agents.
4	What is an organizational strategies approach?	An organizational strategies approach indicates that at the highest levels of school leadership (i.e., principals), a school is working to create policies and organizational structures that support students’ and educators’ social and emotional development. Programs using an organizational approach to SEL are evaluated based on (1) alignment to the four focus areas of CASEL’s Schoolwide Theory of Action and (2) support for implementing systems and structures for continuous improvement.
5	What is the SEL-Supportive designation?	The SEL-Supportive designation (previously SEL-related) highlights strategies that serve students but do not fully align to all five of CASEL’s competencies utilized in our design review standards. Programs with the SEL-Supportive designation met SElect or Promising evaluation criteria for their effect on student outcomes, yet they did not fully meet all necessary program design criteria for inclusion in either of those designations.
6	How many separate grade-level curricula must a lesson-based program offer to qualify for SElect?	PreK and elementary programs must offer at least three unique, sequenced grade-level curricula to qualify for SElect. If a program offers one or two grade-banded curricula (e.g., one curriculum for grades K-2 and one curriculum for grades 3-4), it still qualifies for inclusion to the guide under the Promising designation. Middle school and high school programs with grade-banded curricula can still qualify for SElect, provided there is an additional, required component of the program where SEL is applied and practiced. Additional programmatic components that might meet this criterion include structured one-on-one or small-group mentoring, service-learning projects, or academically integrated project-based learning.

Implementation Criteria Updates

7	How are a program’s training and implementation support reviewed by CASEL?	Due to the critical role of program training for strong implementation, we ask programs to: (1) upload all training materials to our application system and (2) comment on whether their training includes the following aspects of high-quality professional learning: content focus, active learning, collaboration, modeling, hands-on practice, coaching, feedback/reflection, sustained duration, adult SEL, and guidance for effective adaptation. Moreover, we will document strategies that support educational equity: including understanding context, working with bias, understanding students’ lived experiences, as well as translation of materials into non-English language(s). CASEL based these aspects of quality training and implementation support on the identified features of effective teacher professional development (Learning Policy Institute; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2017). A lack of evidence-based professional development may lead to exclusion from the Guide.
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