

Social and Emotional Learning



Background

Social and emotional learning (SEL) involves learning the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to support one's emotional and behavioral health, overall well-being, and productivity in school and society. With SEL, one learns how to develop a **healthy self-identity, control emotions, set and reach goals, understand and show empathy** for others, build and maintain **strong relationships**, and make **responsible and caring choices**. One commonly used SEL framework is CASEL,³³ which has been used in some of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (MA DESE) frameworks. Research has shown that SEL can boost young people's social and emotional skills, reduce emotional distress, and lead to several other positive outcomes such as reducing violence and aggression, and improving behavior issues and functioning at school.³⁴



Image source: Interactive CASEL Wheel

Many Efforts are Underway to Support SEL in Schools

Many schools in Massachusetts have recognized the importance of teaching students these skills to support well-being, mental health, academic success, and overall school functioning and have now adopted SEL curricula. In 2023, MA DESE revised its Comprehensive Health and Physical Education Curriculum Framework to include some emotional and mental health standards that are drawn from social and emotional learning frameworks, highlighting the recognition that these skills are important for student well-being and success. The state’s framework draws from the CASEL social and emotional competencies.³⁵

Support Structures are Needed for Successful Implementation

While most schools in Western Massachusetts and across the state have adopted an SEL curriculum, our interviews with those who work with schools on SEL indicated that the challenge is in effectively implementing a curriculum. An SEL expert who provides consultation to school districts indicated that SEL implementation is successful when accompanied by appropriate support structures. These include district-wide coordination, staff specifically responsible for district and school-wide implementation, SEL embedded throughout the day, and structures to support ongoing professional development for teachers and other staff. Aspects of these structures are happening in pockets in some schools in Western Massachusetts, but more support is needed for schools to systematically implement SEL.

Interviewees also described challenges to implementing SEL, including the need for funding to support implementation and for ongoing professional development, as well as the challenges in creating structures to support system- and district-wide SEL implementation. State funding and support can be very helpful to school districts in supporting their efforts. However, the different types of programming being promoted to support mental health in schools—SEL, PBIS, and mental health education—as well as the different laws and proposed legislation (for example, Section 37Q Mental Health Support Law, Act Relative to Mental Health Education) can be confusing.

Research has found that programs that were delivered by classroom teachers, included a focus on school climate, used multipronged approaches, taught intrapersonal skills first (versus interpersonal), and integrated SEL throughout academic curricula were more likely to be

“I’d like to see mandates for social and emotional learning in school—funded mandates...there are some mandates, but they’re not funded or supported for restorative practices in schools. I think that really will help with connection and stigma and social emotional learning.”

-coordinator, Franklin County Youth Prevention Coalition

effective.³⁶ In addition, those SEL programs that used a SAFE approach—**s**equenced, **a**ctive learning, at least one component **f**ocusing on developing personal or social skills, and **e**xplicitly targeting specific SEL skills—were more likely to lead to positive outcomes.

Resources to Support Implementation

There are resources available to support the implementation of SEL programs; however, many schools are not aware of their existence or have competing needs that make it challenging to access them. For example, interviewees noted that the University of Massachusetts BIRCh (Behavioral Health Integrated Resources for Children) project, which provides SEL professional development and technical assistance to schools, is underutilized. However, in our interviews, a few people who focus on SEL work were not aware of its existence. In addition, only some schools in Western Massachusetts have applied for the MA DESE funding, which is available for school districts to support SEL and other types of behavioral health promotion and prevention efforts. Given the many challenges our schools face as they recover from the pandemic—including youth behavioral and mental health needs, teacher and staff burnout, parent/caregiver exhaustion and mental health challenges—more support and coordinated efforts are needed to enable them to take advantage of these important resources.

Meeting Needs of Diverse Communities

Throughout our interviews with School Committee members and behavioral health providers, we heard the importance of ensuring that the SEL curricula and programs meet the needs of diverse cultures, backgrounds, and identities. Transformative SEL aims to address equity in education by meeting the diverse needs of students by including consideration of key equity principles in the implementation of SEL such as power, bias, and voice.³⁷

Community-Based SEL

Interviewees from community organizations and those who vetted our findings repeatedly noted the need for SEL in the various community locations where youth are engaged. In addition to schools, some community-based organizations are implementing SEL curricula and/or embedding principles into their programs. The YMCA of Massachusetts is an example of a community-based program working to embed SEL in its programming. This approach was highlighted as important by our Advisory Group and the Springfield Youth Mental Health Coalition because youth and parents may be more open to coaches or other nontraditional providers educating about SEL given stigma related to discussing mental health among Black, Latine, and other communities. Similarly, recommendations were made to have coaches and other non-classroom teachers provide SEL given stigma.

Recommendations

- Schools:
 - Build in structures to support the implementation of SEL, including district-wide coordination, staff specifically responsible for implementation, SEL embedded throughout the day, and structures to support ongoing professional development for teachers and other staff.³⁸
 - Use available resources to support SEL and mental health, such as the [University of Massachusetts BIRCh](#) (Behavioral Health Integrated Resources for Children) project, which provides SEL professional development and technical assistance to schools, and the MA DESE funding.
 - In addition to providing SEL in classrooms, also embed SEL in non-classroom settings, such as team sports, other extracurricular activities, and after-school programs.
 - Incorporate Transformative SEL principles into implementation,³⁹ which includes consideration of key equity principles such as power, bias, and voice.
- Community:
 - Embed SEL in community programs that engage youth, such as youth development programs, summer job programs, faith-based groups, and so on.
- Parent/Caregivers:
 - Provide information to parents and caregivers about social and emotional resources and skills so they can model and teach SEL to the youth they care for.
- Policy:
 - Provide more funding to support SEL implementation structures and parent/caregiver education.
 - Align school-based policies and overlapping regulations.
- Keep equity in mind!
 - Acknowledge cultural differences and approach SEL with cultural humility using principles of Transformative SEL.