

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN ACADEMIC SUCCESS

PURPOSE

- To highlight research about the role of social-emotional learning in academic achievement and college and career readiness
- To describe what state policymakers can do to incorporate these skills in their education reform plans

Rationale for Social-Emotional Learning

The ability to learn in school begins with a broad set of social and intellectual skills and behaviors that enable children to learn academic content. These skills allow children to engage effectively in the school’s academic and social environment, as the ability to build positive relationships with peers and teachers impacts children’s ability to focus on academic content. In identifying the behaviors children have when struggling with the transition to kindergarten, teachers often emphasize difficulty following directions, problems with social skills, and trouble with independent work.³⁴ Often students across grades experience mental health, social, and emotional barriers to academic success.³⁵

Thus, social-emotional learning (SEL) is necessary for students across all grades, but is often not the focus of education policy or practice. Interventions that build strong social-emotional skills and approaches to learning can boost academic success both in the early grades and in the secondary and postsecondary years. School and classroom communities built around SEL support healthy

approaches to learning by fostering development of dispositions toward education, such as persistence in

difficult tasks, goal-directed behavior, help-seeking, motivation, effort, and grit.^{34,35} High quality SEL can also make instruction linguistically and culturally sensitive, allowing increased engagement from typically segmented student populations.³⁶

Unpacking Social-Emotional Learning

SEL aims to improve students’ beliefs and attitudes about self, others, and school through the promotion of five interrelated core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.³⁶ Specific skills related to these core competencies are outlined in Table 1.

SEL is linked to a set of skills called executive function (EF), and together they help students develop approaches to learning (e.g., efficacy, self-regulation, curiosity, motivation) that contribute to school, college, and career readiness. EF develops through a combination of brain maturation and experience beginning in early childhood and helps

³⁴ Greg J. Duncan, et al., “School Readiness and Later Achievement” *Developmental Psychology* 43, no. 6 (2007): 1428-1446.

³⁵ Allison Dymnicki, Megan Sambolt, and Yael Kidron, *Improving College and Career Readiness by Incorporating Social and Emotional Learning What Should High School Graduates Know*, (Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research, College and Career Readiness and Success Center, 2013).

³⁶ Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, *What is Social and Emotional Learning* (Chicago, IL: CASEL, 2013); CASEL, *State Standards to Advance Social and Emotional Learning: Findings from CASEL’s State Scan of Social and Emotional Learning Standards, Preschool through High School*, (Chicago, IL: CASEL, 2014).

children appropriately regulate their emotions, behavior, attention, and cognition so that they can be successful socially and academically³⁹. Evidence suggests that with the proper supports and environments, the development of EF occurs rapidly between ages 3-5 and continues from ages 5-8 – and that high levels of EF, particularly control of attention, are predictive of school academic achievement from pre-K through the 12th grade.³⁷

Thus, SEL is in line with education reform goals. Incorporating SEL into P-3 classrooms and policies can support academic achievement by fostering the development of EF skills in all populations of children. High-quality early childhood education (ECE) can provide a strong foundation for EF development, but support needs to be continued throughout the early elementary years, as EF skills continue to mature well after kindergarten entry.

TABLE 1

SEL CORE COMPETENCIES ³⁷	
Self-Awareness	Identify and recognize emotions, accurate self-perception, self-efficacy
Social Awareness	Perspective taking, empathy, respect for others
Responsible Decision Making	Problem solving, evaluation and reflection, moral and ethical responsibility
Self-Management	Impulse control and stress management, self-motivation and discipline, goal setting
Relationship Skills	Communication and relationship building, working cooperatively, conflict management, help seeking and providing

Research on SEL and academic achievement

The research on SEL and academic achievement is threefold. First, in early childhood, programs focusing on SEL promote increased EF, increased academic achievement, and decreased classroom behavior problems particularly for children in at-risk populations.³⁸ Children who have better developed EF skills are most able to adopt optimal learning strategies and perform higher-level cognitive tasks in later grades, as the foundational structures that moderate the control of attention and cognition are strong.³⁹

EF is significantly related to academic outcomes by the end of the 2nd grade, particularly in relation to mathematic and literacy achievement⁷. Superior executive function as supported by SEL is a precursor to adaptive school functioning.

Second, in adolescence, SEL can promote positive school climate resulting in improved academic performance, self-concept, and bonding to school, while also leading to fewer behavior problems,

³⁷ Joseph E. Zins, et al., “The Scientific Base Linking Social and Emotional Learning to School Success” *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* 17, (2007): 191-210.

Improves Cognitive Control” *Science* 318 (2007), 1387-1388.

³⁸ Steven W. Barnett, et al., “Educational Effects of the Tools of the Mind Curriculum: A Randomized Trial” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2008), 299-313; Adele Diamond, et al., “Preschool Program

³⁹ Adele Diamond, “Executive Functions” *Annual Review of Psychology*” 64 (2013), 135-168; Cynthia Roebers, et al., “Executive Functioning, Metacognition, and Self-Perceived Competence in Elementary School Children: An Explorative Study on Their Interrelations and Their Role For School Achievement” *Metacognition and Learning* 7, no. 3 (2012), 151-173.

aggression, bullying, delinquency, depression, and social withdrawal; all of which are behaviors that lead to student disengagement in adolescence. Promotion of SEL relates to feelings of belongingness, improved academic performance, and internal motivation toward achievement.⁴⁰ Third, skills related to EF that contribute to adolescent social and academic success also predict adult outcomes, as high levels of self-regulation attained in early childhood has been shown to be associated with better health, less substance abuse, higher socioeconomic status, and fewer criminal behaviors in adulthood.⁴¹

How these skills relate to college and career readiness

It is increasingly acknowledged that to function in today's demanding workforce, individuals need more complex skills than were needed years ago. Current Nevada education policy goals aim to elevate student achievement and bolster college and career readiness, defined as the ability to "demonstrate the foundational knowledge, skills, and qualities to succeed."⁴² Moreover, Nevada has identified a set of skills necessary for college and career readiness including: demonstrates cultural competency, teamwork, and communication; exhibits characteristics of a lifelong learner such as adaptability, flexibility, personal responsibility, perseverance, acknowledgement of diverse perspectives and strong work ethic. These skills reflect current models of college readiness that go beyond traditional measures of GPA and test

scores.⁴³ As such, the purpose of school is to support the development of broader skills necessary to be successful, rather than a sole focus on academic content.⁴⁴ In creating effective educational policy, *what* students need to learn is just as important as *how* to learn.

Importantly, these skills are supported through strong SEL development, which also parallels "21st century skills" outlined by national experts (see table 2) and suggests that SEL is an important component of college and career readiness.⁴⁵ A sharper focus on how education policy and practice can enhance the development of both academic and social-emotional skills and behaviors, then, can support students toward college and career readiness.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Ibid, 1 & 2.

⁴¹ Terrie E. Moffitt, et al., "A Gradient of Childhood Self-control Predicts Health, Wealth, and Public Safety," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108 (2010): 2693.

⁴² Nevada State Department of Education, *College and Career Readiness for Nevada Students: Task Force Report* (2013). Accessed at: <http://www.doe.nv.gov/search.aspx?q=college%20and%20career%20readiness&t=site>.

⁴³ David T. Conley. "College and Career Readiness," *Education Policy Improvement Center*. Accessed at: <https://www.epiconline.org/Issues/college-career-readiness/>; Allison Lombardi, et al., "College and Career Readiness Assessment: Validation of the Key Cognitive Strategies Framework" *Assessment for Effective Intervention*, 38, no. 3 (2012), 163-171.

⁴⁴ Judith A. Doenig. *Assessing 21st Century Skills: Summary of a Workshop*. (Washington, D.C: The National Academies Press, 2014).

⁴⁵ Camille A. Farrington, et al., *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners. The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Literature Review* (Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2012); Camille A. Farrington et al., *Teaching Adolescents To Become Learners The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance : A Critical Literature Review Socio-Cultural Context Academic Mindsets Social Skills Perseverance Learning Strategies Academic Behaviors Academic Performance*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2012).

Cognitive skills	Non-routine problem solving, critical thinking, systems thinking
Interpersonal skills	Complex communication, social skills, teamwork, cultural sensitivity, dealing with diversity
Intrapersonal skills	Self-management, time management, self-development, self-regulation, adaptability, executive function

What This Means for State Policy

Nevada’s state policymakers can take the following steps to align their efforts to improve college and career readiness with research supporting the importance of SEL in P-3 grades:

1. Integrate SEL skills in K-12 standards, as SEL is reflected in the Common Core and the National Health Education Standards. Additional focus on SEL may be needed to articulate the appropriate developmental sequencing of skills from early childhood through 3rd grade. Some states have adopted stand-alone SEL standards for K-12.
2. Support P-3 educators (teachers and leaders) through preparation programs and professional development to implement programs and strategies that are evidence-based with clear demonstration of improving students’ SEL behavior and outcomes. For maximum effectiveness, professional development must be multi-year and ongoing; therefore support for this strategy must be sustained.
3. Incorporate these skills in continuous improvement/accountability policies (e.g., teacher observations, assessments).

- Use of observational instruments that are based on rigorous research can identify effective SEL practices and distinguish them from poor instruction in K-3 classrooms.
- Principals and other administrators conducting observations in K-3 classrooms may need specialized training on best practices and research in SEL to effectively evaluate these teachers, provide appropriate feedback, and offer ongoing support.⁴⁶

Education focusing on the whole child that includes intentional support of not only academic-related skills, but also social-emotional and physical development has the potential to improve student outcomes. Increased attention placed on the role of SEL in academic outcomes is in line with current Nevada education policy that seeks to improve college and career readiness. By viewing school success through a broader lens, a more comprehensive view of college and career readiness emerges that illuminates the importance of SEL in academic achievement throughout the educational lifespan.

P-3 REFERS TO THE CONTINUUM OF LEARNING FROM BEFORE KINDERGARTEN THROUGH THIRD GRADE. THIS INCLUDES ALL EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS AND SERVICES THAT FOCUS ON THE EARLY CHILDHOOD YEARS (BIRTH THROUGH AGE 8)

Suggested citation: LeJeune, J., Burnham, M. M., & Wat, A. (2014). *The role of social-emotional learning in academic success*. (Symposium Policy Brief #4, Governor’s P-3 Symposium: Building a Strong P-3rdGrade Foundation in Nevada). Nevada Department of Education.

⁴⁶ Amanda Szekely, *Leading for Early Success: Building School Principals’ Capacity to Lead High-Quality Early*

Education (Washington, DC: National Governors Association, 2013).