



May 23, 2016

The Honorable John B. King, Jr.
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary King:

On behalf of the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and the Committee for Children (CFC), we are writing to provide recommendations to the Department of Education (ED) on areas of the law in which non-regulatory guidance would be most helpful in the process of implementing the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). To assist States, districts and other grantees we strongly urge you to create guidance that encourages states to focus Title I, II, and IV resources on the identification and implementation of evidence-based practices, particularly for the nonacademic skills essential for learning readiness.

Who we are

CASEL is the nation's leading organization advancing the development of academic, social, and emotional competence for all students. Our mission is to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning an integral part of education from preschool through high school. CFC is a global nonprofit dedicated to fostering the safety and well-being of children through education and advocacy. CFC is the world's largest provider of research-based educational programs that promote social-emotional skills and prevent bullying and sexual abuse. The organization's curricula reach more than 10 million children in 26,000 schools around the world.

ESSA and non-academic strategies

As you well know, ESSA allows states and school districts a great degree of flexibility in the use of educational strategies to provide students with a well-rounded education under Titles I, II, and IV, Part A. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is one of the [nonacademic](#) strategies that has been shown by research to strongly contribute to a student's academic and career success.

SEL involves the processes of developing competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These skills help students succeed in school and also prepare them for future roles as citizens, employees, managers, parents, volunteers and entrepreneurs. These abilities are teachable and many risky behaviors (e.g., drug use, violence, bullying and dropping out) can be prevented or reduced when multiyear, integrated efforts are used to develop students' social and emotional skills.

The importance of SEL

Mounting evidence all serves to demonstrate that state education agencies (SEAs), local education agencies (LEAs) and schools are embracing the importance of SEL at unprecedented levels. This includes:

- A surge in uptake of SEL programs in schools (noted by program providers nationally).
- A survey of educators indicating they believe SEL works with diverse groups of students and provides critical foundations for all students to be college, career, community, and life ready (Bridgeland et al., 2013).

- Compelling data from meta-analyses of K-12 SEL programming documenting that SEL improves positive attitudes and social behaviors, reduces conduct problems and emotional distress, and enhances academic performance – including an 11-percentile point improvement in academic achievement performance in program students relative to students in comparison groups (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).
- Research-based descriptions of SEL in the new 37-chapter *Handbook on Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice* (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015).
- Cost-benefit analyses by Columbia University indicating an \$11 return on each dollar invested in evidence-based SEL programming (Belfield et al., 2015).
- Large districts – such as Anchorage, Atlanta, Austin, Cleveland, Chicago, El Paso, Nashville, Oakland, Sacramento, Oakland, and Washoe County – implementing systemic SEL district-wide.
- Engagement of over half of SEAs in the US in CASEL’s recently announced Collaborating States Initiative for guidelines, policies, and standards to support SEL implementation.
- Movements in various states to focus on SEL standards and teacher preparation.

Thus, locally-driven interest in implementing SEL programming under Titles I, II and IV is likely to be significant.

Local control over decision making has a variety of benefits, but the vast array of activities that are allowable under these Title programs have begun to generate some concern among state and local school leaders. At a recent meeting of school district leaders organized by CASEL, one superintendent voiced particular anxiety that the wide variety of initiatives included in the new block grant programs could lead to confusion about funding priorities at the local level. While ESSA states that these funds must support evidence-based programs, obtaining information on best practices in evidence-based programs will be one of the more challenging aspects of ESSA for many state and local leaders to implement.

Specific Recommendations:

Evidence-based Programs

To implement the new law effectively, guidelines from ED are needed to provide a reference point for SEAs and LEAs to access best practices and evidence-based programs, as well as identify the most cost-effective and results-driven efforts. There exist several well-curated lists of evidence-based programs for SEL and prevention, to which we would suggest ED point to in a guidance document: [NREPP](#), [Blueprints](#), and [CASEL’s Guide to Effective SEL Programs](#). Urging states and districts to focus their expenditure of federal funds on evidence-based practice is highly consistent with ED’s position on best practices generally, and does not conflict with the call for more flexibility and responsiveness to local needs. Rather it is an opportunity to build upon lessons learned and highlight how states and districts have been able to innovate over the past decade to maximize impact through their own locally developed needs assessments.

Accountability and Assessment

With the addition of nonacademic areas comes the questions of assessment and accountability. We believe that evidence-based measures (e.g., teacher ratings, student self-report, observational systems, and performance tasks) of individual student skills and competencies should be used formatively, to offer educators insight into methods that will support a student’s ongoing social-emotional growth and development. CASEL has convened a work group of nationally renowned researchers and educators to identify social-emotional competence measures that are scientifically sound, feasible to use, and actionable. We are in the process of creating guides and trainings so that educators can use these measures effectively in daily practice, and are happy to share our findings with ED, SEAs, and LEAs.

In terms of accountability, there exists a body of highly validated and normed measures which offer appropriate methods for schools, districts and states to assess classroom and school climate, particularly when viewed in the larger context of outcomes such as student achievement and graduation rates. The use of evidence-based school climate assessments currently offers excellent options for states to address ESSA's required non-academic accountability areas.

Summary

To summarize, we suggest ED take the following actions:

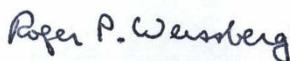
- Create (or point to) a directory of evidence-based practices for SEA's and LEA's to choose from.
- Strongly suggest to SEA's and LEA's that all non-academic programs and practices be evidence-based.
- Use evidence-based school climate assessments as an accountability option for SEA's and LEA's.

Thank you for taking our suggestions for guidance for Titles I, II and IV under consideration as we approach a critical juncture in ESSA implementation.

Sincerely,



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