

# Foreword: Social-Emotional Learning Is Essential for Our Nation's Schools



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During the past few decades, my colleagues and I have talked with thousands of educators, parents, and students regarding their views about quality education. The conversations focus on two key questions: (1) What do we want children to become, to know, and to be able to do by the time they graduate from high schools; and (2) how can schools, families, and communities work together to ensure that all children graduate to be college, career, and life ready?

The overwhelming majority of respondents call for a balanced education that highlights promoting students' social, emotional, and academic growth. They want students who master academic subjects and are excited about lifelong learning. And they also want students who have social-emotional skills, work habits, and values that provide a foundation for meaningful employment, engaged citizenship, and a happy family life.

The insights and observations within this compendium of thought leaders testify to the enormous potential offered by social-emotional learning (SEL). Imparting SEL skills to children all over the world is the mission of Committee for Children (CFC). And to date, CFC has enabled millions of youngsters across 70 countries to learn how to stay safe, manage their emotions, solve problems, avoid risky behavior, and improve their academics. Most of all, CFC has given them hope for productive, fulfilling lives.

The Committee for Children along with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), of which I am vice chair of the board of directors and chief knowledge officer, are dedicated to making SEL an integral part of education from pre-school to high school. Anchoring this mission are five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies that can be transformative:

- **Self-awareness** enables students to recognize the impact of emotions and thoughts on behavior. It includes assessing strengths and weaknesses accurately, leading to a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.

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- **Self-management** is the ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations.
- **Social awareness** develops perspective about, and empathy for, others; an understanding of social and ethical norms for behavior; and a recognition of resources for support from family, home, and community.
- **Relationship skills** are needed to establish and maintain healthy connections. They include communicating clearly, listening actively, and cooperating, as well as resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help.
- **Responsible decision-making** makes possible constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, and a realistic evaluation of outcomes in a given situation.

It has been demonstrated convincingly that SEL skills can be inculcated in students of all ages, especially through a variety of active, participatory, engaging methods that range from mentoring to problem-solving modelling.

The key to fostering SEL is collaboration among the following key stakeholders:

- School principals have the opportunity to lead in assessing needs, marshaling resources, and working with teachers and others to integrate SEL fully into the life of the school.
- Teachers are obviously crucial; they are on the frontlines and are best situated to enhance students' social-emotional competence, motivation to learn, and academic achievement through their teaching and management of classrooms each day.

- Student support services professionals can reinforce classroom instruction in SEL skills, work with teachers on classroom discipline issues, and provide the link between students and community-based resources.
- Parents clearly are the lynchpin in supporting their child's development over the long run. Learning about children's developing skills and strengths will help parents recognize and support progress. Moreover, researchers have found that embedding SEL programs within the framework of a formal school-family partnership extends opportunities for learning so that young people effectively apply their social-emotional skills in school, at home, and in the community.

There are many evidence-based SEL programs and strategies that can launch each child over the barricades that separate him or her from academic (and life) achievement. Decades of research clearly demonstrate that effectively implemented SEL programming significantly improves children's academic performance on standardized tests.

Additionally, compared to control groups, children who have participated in SEL programs have significantly better school attendance records, less disruptive classroom behavior, like school more, and perform better in school.

The research also indicates that children who have participated in SEL programs are less likely than children in control groups to be suspended or otherwise disciplined. These outcomes have been achieved through SEL's impact on important mental health variables that improve children's social relationships, increase their attachment to school and motivation to learn, and reduce antisocial, violent, and drug-using behaviors.

Every child is different and every situation is different. But there is always at least one constant: the child must be at the center of the exercise. The connection between SEL and better learning is rooted in a safe and caring environment for the child, with a clear and confident relationship to a teacher. If the school team and the family are consistently and mutually supportive, then the child will develop skills that lead to greater confidence. As a result, the child will be better able to actually engage in learning, dealing successfully with all those distractions that previously prevented it.

The magnitude of the challenge is huge. But the growing awareness of SEL's potential to address that challenge should provide inspiration for us all.

As British Professor Neil Humphry noted, "SEL is currently the zeitgeist in education. It has captured the imagination of academics, policy-makers and practitioners alike in recent years. To many, SEL is the 'missing piece' in the quest to provide effective education for all children and young people."

At a time when competition for resources is fierce, there are few initiatives that can boast a record of success like SEL. As debate rages on about what constitutes quality education, and concerns linger about the performance of American children compared to those elsewhere, it's clear that SEL can have an important impact.

While abundant data provide a firm analytical rebuttal to those who question the need for SEL or its effectiveness, perhaps what we should also always remember is that this movement is all about the individual children whose lives hang in the balance behind the data points, waiting for us to open the gates to successful learning for each and every one of them.