



Why Social and Emotional Learning and Employability Skills Should Be Prioritized in Education

Introduction

U.S. competitiveness in the global economy depends on a workforce that has acquired both the technical knowledge needed for specific occupations and the “employability skills” required for all jobs. According to a 2012 survey of 704 employers conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and American Public Media’s *Marketplace*, half of those surveyed said they had trouble finding recent graduates to fill vacancies in their companies; even though applicants had the technical prowess, they lacked the communication, adaptability, decision-making, and problem-solving skills needed to do the job.¹ This survey reflects the growing divide between the skills employers are seeking and applicants’ abilities. As Nobel Prize–winning economist James Heckman notes, this divide should lead to a recognition that U.S. economic success and productivity depend on employees with both cognitive and social and emotional skills, which he calls “character skills.”²

EMPLOYABILITY

The U.S. Department of Education defines employability skills as “general skills that are necessary for success in the labor market at all employment levels and in all sectors.”¹⁸

In order for students to achieve success in school, career, and life, they must be taught social and emotional skills—just as they learn reading, math, and science—through instruction and practice. School-based social and emotional learning (SEL) curricula provide a key to workforce development by explicitly teaching the social and emotional skills employers are seeking and the U.S. economy needs. Research shows SEL works to improve behavioral, academic, and career success.

What Is Social and Emotional Learning?

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”³

How Do Social and Emotional Skills Relate to Career, Business, and Economic Success?

SEL curricula teach self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making so students can manage their behaviors, understand and relate to the perspectives of others, and make sound personal and social choices. This suite of [competencies](#)⁴ complements academic learning and meets many of the employability needs identified by business leaders.



Research shows the skills taught in SEL curricula have [wide-ranging benefits](#) that affect children’s success in school, career, and life. For instance, kindergarteners with stronger social and emotional skills are more likely to graduate from high school and college and have stable, full-time employment and are less likely to commit crimes, be on public assistance, and have drug, alcohol, and mental health problems.⁵

According to the authors of the *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning*, [other benefits](#) include:⁶

- More positive attitudes toward oneself, others, and tasks, including enhanced self-efficacy, confidence, persistence, empathy, connection and commitment to school, and a sense of purpose
- More positive social behaviors and relationships with peers and adults
- Reduced conduct problems and risk-taking behavior
- Decreased emotional distress
- Improved test scores, grades, and attendance

In the [largest SEL study](#) ever done, school-based programs improved students’ ability to get along with others, improved student-school bonding, reduced delinquency and aggression, and decreased anxiety and stress. This review of 213 school-based programs, which included more than 270,000 kindergarten through high school students, also showed that SEL programs increased overall academic achievement by 11 percentile points.⁷

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning defines SEL as, “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”³

Even though parents and caregivers impart social and emotional skills early in life, schools (and associated extracurricular activities) are the primary settings where children learn not only traditional core subjects, but how to navigate social relations with peers from diverse backgrounds and build the essential skills that allow them to be productive members of society.⁸ A national survey of teachers found that the

overwhelming majority of teachers believe that social and emotional skills are teachable (95 percent); that SEL will benefit students from all backgrounds, rich or poor (97 percent); and that SEL will be a major benefit for preparing students for the workforce (87 percent).⁹

Why Are Social and Emotional Learning and Employability Skills Important to Business and the Economy?

In a recent Business Roundtable/Change the Equation survey, 98 percent of CEOs reported they have problems “finding candidates with the competencies and training to fill open positions”—at all skill levels.¹⁰

A recent report¹¹ from the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE), National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education (CTE) Consortium, and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21) found this:

- Employers want workers with skills in “the 4 Cs”: critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, communication, and collaboration.
- However, according to Manpower, a worldwide staffing agency, 31 percent of employers globally find it difficult to find qualified workers because of “a talent mismatch between workers’ qualifications and the specific skill sets and combinations of skills employers want” (p. 9).

Nationally representative surveys in the United States show that over half of [manufacturers](#)¹² and business [CEOs](#)¹³ have serious problems finding workers with the skills they need for workplace success. According to manufacturers, the number one skills deficiency is problem solving.¹²

A 2015 *Forbes* report on the [skills](#) employers most desire in college graduates ranked these skills at the top: the ability to work as part of a team, the ability to solve problems and make decisions, and the ability to communicate verbally.¹⁴

The National Network of Business and Industry Associations identified four categories of [skills needed](#) for workers to be employable. Three of these skills map directly onto competencies taught in SEL: personal skills, people skills, and workplace skills.¹⁵

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A new white paper from Microsoft, “Keys to the Future: Align Workforce Readiness Skills to Ensure Student Success,” looks at the most in-demand skills in the workforce today and the skills needed for tomorrow’s best jobs.¹⁶ Based on reviewing 76 million job postings on 25,000 job boards and corporate websites, [the report found](#) that the number of skills students will need to be successful continues to grow. Yet the fundamentals these skills are based on—collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity—are known and can be taught in the educational system.

Of the 16 skills identified in a World Economic Forum report as important for the 21st century—including foundational literacies, competency in approaching challenges, and character qualities—12 are social and emotional skills.¹⁷ Children need to learn social and emotional skills if they are to thrive in the workplace of the future.

How Does Social and Emotional Learning Benefit Business and the Economy?

SEL and employability skills benefit business by helping provide qualified job candidates who thrive in their positions. Self-motivation, time management, communication, problem solving, and relationship building—some common aspects of SEL—are the types of skills employers often look for. Employers want to

hire and retain employees who have the ability to think critically and work effectively with others.

The U.S. Department of Education defines employability skills as “general skills that are necessary for success in the labor market at all employment levels and in all sectors.”¹⁸ Its [Employability Skills Framework](#), which details these skills, includes critical thinking, communication, and interpersonal skills and qualities such as self-discipline, integrity, and responsibility—matching many core skills taught in SEL.

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Social competence, a key component of SEL, can be more important for job success than IQ or academic achievement. A 2015 [comprehensive survey](#) of employers listed “ability to work in a team” as the most desirable attribute of new college graduates, ahead of analytical/quantitative skills.¹⁹ Research shows that since 1980, almost all the job growth in the United States has been in occupations that require [high social skills](#), while there was an especially strong decline in jobs requiring high math but low social skills.²⁰

A comprehensive research report identified the [five critical skills](#) most likely to increase success in the workforce: social skills, communication skills, higher-order thinking skills (including problem solving, critical thinking, and decision making), self-control, and positive self-concept.²¹ Many of these are skills taught in SEL curricula. Social and emotional skills, such as problem solving, communication, and collaboration, will become more and more critical as the digital economy transforms the workplace and traditional jobs and roles become automated or mechanized.

SEL benefits the economy and even pays for itself many times over. Investments in SEL programs have more than a tenfold return in [cost savings to taxpayers](#). A recent analysis of the projected economic return from six effective SEL programs found that all of them showed a return on investment. On average, there was an \$11 return on investment for every dollar spent on the intervention, and for some of the interventions, the return on investment was much greater than the initial cost of the program.²² Given the evidence linking children’s proficiency in social and emotional skills to their long-term outcomes in education, employment, and crime—and given the expenses involved in handling crime, unemployment, and other social problems—there is [potential for quality SEL programs to provide economic benefits](#).²³

How Can We Support SEL and Employability Skills?

A [World Economic Forum report](#) found that in educational policy development, SEL is not being prioritized sufficiently for a variety of reasons, ranging from limited awareness of SEL and its benefits to low levels of funding and resources for SEL.²⁴

However, awareness is growing in the business sector and among policy makers. The National Network of Business and Industry Associations, which represents employers from major economic sectors, has created a roadmap for employers, potential employees, and educators that identifies fundamental skills for employability. These common employability skills provide the foundation for linking the fundamentals to be taught in educational settings to students’ success in career and business productivity.¹⁵

Now is the time to stand behind educational efforts that incorporate, support, and/or allow for teaching social and emotional competencies to all U.S. students.

Recommendations:

- Educate policy makers about the importance of and connection between SEL and employability skills.
- Engage the business community in events where business leaders can speak in support of teaching SEL.
- Encourage business leaders and policy makers to continue working together to identify the skills and competencies needed in a changing job market and ensure that these foundational skills are being taught in schools.
- Include SEL and employability skills language in legislation such as the reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act and in support for educator professional development.
- Prioritize funding for teaching research-based SEL curricula in preschool, elementary and secondary schools, career and technical education programs, colleges, and universities.
- Identify reliable SEL measurements related to career and technical education and workforce success.

Conclusion

Developing the employability skills that businesses and the economy need should be embedded in schools' missions. It is the role of schools to educate students to reach their full potential of success in school, career, and life. Proven, effective, affordable SEL programs can help accomplish that goal. What is needed now is for policy makers and the education system to give SEL the priority required to support the success of the U.S. workforce. Employability skills matter, and school-based SEL programs are a way to begin building them. Teaching SEL will benefit individuals, businesses, the economy, and society.

WHO WE ARE

Committee for Children (CFC) is a global nonprofit dedicated to fostering the safety and well-being of children through social and emotional learning and development. CFC is the world's largest provider of research-based educational programs that promote social and emotional skills and prevent bullying and sexual abuse.

CASEL is the nation's leading organization advancing the development of academic, social, and emotional competence for all students. Their mission is to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning an integral part of education from preschool through high school.

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