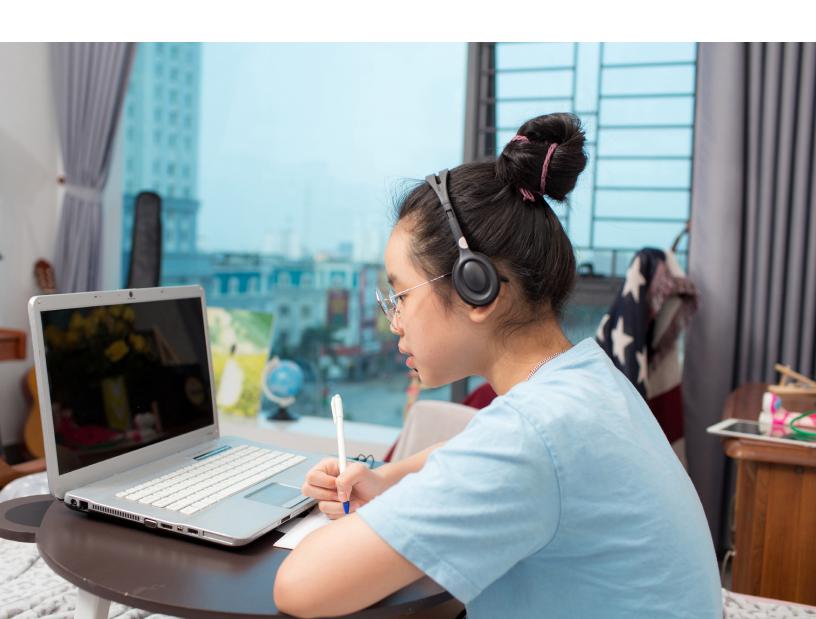# Special Report

Social and Emotional Learning:

A Key Component of Academic Success

November 2020

Educators recognize that social-emotional learning (SEL) is an important component of academic achievement and success. When students feel safe and supported, they're more engaged with their learning and more open to connecting with their teachers and peers. SEL programs strengthen a student's readiness for learning and cultivate their ability to engage with academic content.

Studies have noted that access to SEL curriculum provides students with tools and strategies to focus more attentively on content, problem-solve, and respond with resiliency when they encounter a challenge.[1] These skills allow students to more fully participate in academic learning, leading to higher achievement. A seminal meta-analysis that examined the effects of SEL instruction in 213 programs across the K-12 spectrum found that students who had received SEL instruction made academic gains of 11 points on achievement tests compared to control groups.[2] These academic gains have been shown to be consistent across student populations, regardless of racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds.[3]

The Challenges of Getting Started

Despite the growing attention on SEL, there has been an absence of clarity on best practices for integrating SEL into academic programs in a way that can flexibly support a variety of learning environments. District administrators acknowledge the importance and need for SEL, and recently a growing number of federal and state policy recommendations have included a call for social-emotional learning services and curriculum to be incorporated into K-12 classrooms. Yet schools struggle to clearly define the current baseline, desired future state, and the concrete steps for implementation needed to ensure that they are effectively addressing the healthy development of students.

With the additional challenges of ever-shrinking budgets, lack of prior teacher training in SEL, and the unique needs for each school or district, knowing how to best support students, teachers, and families can feel daunting.

[1]Mark T. Greenberg et al., "Social and Emotional Learning as a Public Health Approach to Education," The Future of Children 27, no. 1 (2017): pp. 13-32, https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2017.0001.

[2]Joseph A. Durlak et al., "The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions," Child Development 82, no. 1 (2011): pp. 405-432, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x.

[3]John Payton et al., "The Positive Impact of Social and Emotional Learning for Kindergarten to Eighth-Grade Students: Findings from Three Scientific Reviews" (Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2008).

The Opportunity

A cohesive approach to SEL implementation and integration is necessary to realize the full potential of SEL curriculum and instruction for all students. And as schools and districts across the country strive to ensure educational equity, a focus on SEL—both at the individual and community level—promotes the development of positive self-identity, encourages the building of relationships based on respect, fosters the ability to empathize with others, and creates a productive context for communities to examine historical and systematic inequities.[4] With the right tools and resources, schools and districts have the opportunity to take a strategic approach to this process in order to maximize the academic, social, emotional, and economic benefits for students, families, and the broader community.

This Special Report will

- Address considerations and best practices for schools and districts as they work to identify and build a cohesive, robust, and accessible SEL implementation plan

- Outline the key components of effective SEL learning strategies and steps that districts can take immediately to empower their students with meaningful and productive social-emotional learning

- Discuss Apex Learning's approach to social-emotional curriculum with Suite360 and how it aligns with these best practices.

SEL Best Practice: Allow for Flexible Implementation

Each school has a unique set of needs and circumstances. Effective SEL curriculum is flexible in nature, allowing districts, schools, and teachers to utilize resources in ways that best serve their students. Programs that are flexible better allow for utilization across different learning environments and modalities.

SEL programs must also have the capability to be woven into many elements of students' days, supporting both explicit teaching and opportunities for practice.[5] Strong SEL programs allow for easy integration into lessons and can be deployed to meet specific classroom or student needs. The ability to utilize one, comprehensive program that targets this broad spectrum of use cases eases the burden for teachers and better supports students.

[4]Robert J. Jagers, Deborah Rivas-Drake, and Teresa Borowski, "Equity & Social and Emotional Learning: A Cultural Analysis" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), November 2018), https://measuringsel.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Frameworks-Equity.pdf.

[5]Hanover Research, "Best Practices in Social-Emotional Learning," July 2019, http://www.wasa-oly.org/WASA/images/WASA/1.0%20Who%20We%20Are/1.4.1.6%20SIRS/Download_Files/LI%202017/Sept%20-%20Best%20Practices%20in%20Social-Emotional%20Learning.pdf.

The Apex Approach

As schools and districts work to implement a low-burden, high-impact SEL program that meets the diversity of student and classroom needs, Apex Learning provides a comprehensive and robust SEL curriculum via Suite360 that is both easily accessible and flexible for a variety of utilizations. Suite360 gives educators access to a library of grade-aligned SEL and character education lessons to support them in facilitating social-emotional learning. This approach allows teachers and school administrators to easily integrate content into classroom lesson plans, utilize it for parent programs, or address a particular need. With this adaptability, schools and teachers can choose to introduce concepts either as standalone topics, woven within academic courses, or as for-credit courses.

SEL Best Practice: Establish Connections with Students and Families

Students must feel comfortable in their environment in order to engage in both academic and social-emotional learning. To establish this comfort, SEL provides opportunities for students to connect with and consider others' feelings and experiences, and collaborate on shared projects. This kind of learning fosters the development of strong relationships both among students, and between teachers and their students, creating healthy relationships and bolstering climate and morale within the school community.[6]

A focus on this network of connections must be at the core of SEL programs and curricula—and must extend to include connections between teachers and families.[7] When students and families feel connected and have pre-established communication channels, they are more likely to participate in learning and reach out when issues arise or circumstances change. In addition to connecting students to classroom learning, these strong teacher-family relationships allow families to reinforce and extend learning at home.[8] For social-emotional learning, in particular, the home environment provides a natural context for embedded practice. For these reasons, an effective SEL program must easily and clearly reach and support families in order to build a supportive and dynamic learning community.

The Apex Approach

Suite360 curriculum and content helps foster strong connections between teachers, students, families, and peers. For students, the SEL lessons include explicit instruction in relationship-building skills. In order to engage and educate parents and caregivers, Suite360 also provides resources to facilitate productive conversations within families. These tools cover many topics that are often challenging for parents to broach with their children such as mental health and depression; racial tolerance; study skills; and drugs, alcohol, and vaping. And Suite360 ensures that these resources are accessible to all families by providing read-aloud and translation capabilities for 100 languages.

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[6]Juliette Berg et al., "The Intersection of School Climate and Social and Emotional Development," February 2017, https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Intersection-School-Climate-and-Social-and-Emotional-Development-February-2017.pdf.

[7]"Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: SEL Roadmap for Reopening School," CASEL, accessed November 6, 2020, https://casel.org/reopening-with-sel/.

[8] "SEL in Homes & Communities," CASEL, accessed November 6, 2020, https://casel.org/homes-and-communities/.

SEL Best Practice: Empower Staff to Support Students by Offering Effective Professional Development

In order for teachers and staff to effectively support student social-emotional learning growth, educators need access to professional development that equips them with an understanding of SEL teaching and learning best practices.[9] Teaching SEL concepts and curricula is a relatively new addition to teachers' professional responsibilities. Many educators have not had formal training. It is fundamental for strong SEL programs to include high-quality SEL professional development for classroom teachers and support staff, so they are, in turn, able to effectively and productively facilitate social-emotional learning lessons and experiences in engaging and productive ways.[10]

Further, having a standard SEL platform for an entire district or school community is beneficial as it creates a shared understanding and establishes common terms and language to use when teaching or talking with students and families. It is essential to extend this common nomenclature to all adults who work with students and interact with families in order to remove barriers to communication and maximize collaboration. Consistent and streamlined professional development opportunities promote effective SEL instruction and growth.

The Apex Approach

With Suite360, staff can access concise, practical lessons that focus on student wellness, character development, and social-emotional learning. These can be utilized with anyone who is a contact point with students, greatly extending the reach of the program. Included in these professional development resources are timely and impactful trainings that target essential—but often challenging—topics such as sensitivity, equity and tolerance, dealing with disruptive students, strategies to reduce tardiness and absenteeism, and student mental health.

All of this works to establish a common understanding of the foundational purpose of social-emotional learning, as well as a shared vocabulary and approach to both explicit and embedded SEL teaching and practice. This cohesive plan for social-emotional instruction and practical strategies benefits student outcomes.

[9]"District Theory of Action: Professional Development," CASEL, accessed November 6, 2020, https://casel.org/in-the-district/pd/.

[10]Nicole A. Elbertson, Marc A. Brackett, and Roger P. Weissberg, "School-Based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Programming: Current Perspectives," Second International Handbook of Educational Change, 2010, pp. 1017-1032, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-2660-6_57.

SEL Best Practice: Provide Opportunities to Assess Student Needs

Strong SEL programs must fit the particular needs of students in a given district, school, or classroom and provide ongoing support as these needs change and evolve. This requires the use of pre-tests, screeners, and surveys to gain initial insights and an understanding of students' needs, strengths, and challenges, as well as the overall school climate. Some assessment instruments are completed by students answering questions about themselves; others involve checklists completed during a classroom or school observation. School climate surveys are completed by a variety of stakeholders in order to understand their perceptions and evaluate different aspects of the educational environment. Beyond baseline data, SEL programs must also embed actionable interim assessments and surveys to continually gauge their effectiveness and allow educators to modify instruction as circumstances and people change over time.[11] This iterative and reflective approach allows adaptations to be made based on both individual and community needs and progress.

The Apex Approach

Suite360 enables districts to both assess and document SEL learning and activities. By providing schools and districts with surveys, pre- and post-tests, and ongoing check-ins, Suite360 enables them to access real-time information about students' attitudes and dispositions, school climate and morale, community trends and concerns, and additional analytics on student engagement and progress over time. This allows administrators, teachers, and staff to stay in tune with what is happening and respond to needs as they arise.

SEL Best Practice: Ensure Culturally Responsive Content and Practices

In order for instruction to be effective, the content and practices must honor and respect students' backgrounds and experiences. Understanding a student's cultural heritage allows schools to better meet their needs and more productively engage them in learning. This is especially true for social-emotional learning and curriculum.[12] Schools must ensure that SEL content is taught in culturally responsive ways that reflect the diversity of their student population.

The Apex Approach

The content and practices in Suite360 have been carefully designed and vetted to ensure they are culturally responsive and affirming. Lessons reflect a variety of cultures, races, genders, and ethnicities through first-person accounts, images, and videos. The Suite360 curriculum provides schools and districts with explicit lessons and guidance for talking about critical issues of tolerance, racism, discrimination, and social impact. Additionally, the SEL lessons that focus on skill development around collaboration, respect, compassion, and communication give students the necessary tools to engage in these challenging and important conversations.

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[11]Susanne Denham, "Tools to Assess Social and Emotional Learning in Schools," Edutopia (George Lucas Educational Foundation, June 17, 2016), https://www.edutopia.org/blog/tools-assess-sel-in-schools-susanne-a-denham.

[12]Robert J. Jagers, Deborah Rivas-Drake, and Brittney Williams, "Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): Toward SEL in Service of Educational Equity and Excellence," Educational Psychologist 54, no. 3 (March 2019): pp. 162-184, https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1623032.

SEL Best Practice: Allow for Anytime, Anywhere Access

Being able to access SEL resources from a variety of locations—including both school and home—increases student, teacher, and family utilization. Further, having a solution that can be accessed at any time, from any device and from any location promotes increased equity and engagement. For teachers, this makes lesson planning easier and expands the opportunities to reach students and families. For students, this anytime, anywhere access allows them to engage with the material at convenient times and return to it as needed. For families, having resources available provides an additional layer of engagement with the school and helps them support their students at home.

The Apex Approach

Suite360 utilizes a dynamic web- and mobile-enabled digital platform to provide access for students, families, and educators. This anytime, anywhere connection to resources allows stakeholders to engage with SEL lessons and resources as needed to support student learning and growth.

A Call to Action: Academics Plus SEL Leads to Overall Achievement

All educators want their students to succeed. They strive to provide instruction that has the right scaffolds and supports to help students master academically rigorous content. They create engaging and interactive learning experiences for students to develop the necessary skills to productively engage and collaborate with others. And they create opportunities for students to find their voices, their talents, and their passions in order for them to grow into happy, healthy individuals who are able to make meaningful contributions to their communities.

All of this important work requires robust academic curriculum, effective instruction, and access to social-emotional learning resources that foster students' readiness, wellness, and ability to learn with and from others. Complementing academic learning with high-quality social-emotional learning works to support broader achievement and success today and for years to come.

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