

SEL Assessment to Support Effective Social Emotional Learning Practices at Scale



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Clark McKown, Beth Herman

This issue brief, created by The Pennsylvania State University, is one of a series of briefs that addresses the future needs and challenges for research, practice, and policy on social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is defined 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. This is the second series of briefs that address SEL, made possible through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The first set synthesized current SEL research on early support for parent engagement and its effects on child outcomes; SEL in infancy/toddlerhood, the preschool years, the elementary school period, and middle-high school timeframes; and how SEL influences teacher well-being, health equity, and school climate. Learn more at <http://prevention.psu.edu/publications/type/534>.

Executive Summary

Efforts to support student social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools are at an all-time high. We know that programs and educational practices to foster SEL, when done well, can produce substantial benefits to students. However, as programs and practices “go to scale,” there is considerable risk that they may be implemented poorly or inconsistently and therefore become less effective. In this brief, we explore the role of assessment—of student competencies, adult practices, and climate—in supporting high-quality SEL at scale. We argue that the wise and targeted use of SEL assessment data should inform what educators do, and should help them learn whether their efforts are benefiting students. SEL assessment data can help the field evolve and grow while maintaining effectiveness. We discuss the key role of state education agencies and federal and state policy in encouraging the wise use of SEL assessment data to support teaching, learning, and student outcomes as SEL goes to scale.

Key Points

- As large numbers of school districts adopt social and emotional learning programs, educators must grapple with how to maintain program effectiveness at scale.
- To maintain quality at scale, educators should integrate SEL assessment and data review as part of a continuous improvement process.
- State education agencies, and federal and state policy, can support the use of SEL assessment in schools to ensure that as SEL goes to scale, practices remain rooted in data. In so doing, ongoing improvements can be made to the effectiveness of SEL programs and practices.



A Growing Focus on Student Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning includes the competencies children (and adults) use to interact effectively with others, to form and maintain positive relationships, and to participate in collective life. A wide range of social and emotional competencies are positively associated with academic, behavioral, mental health, and health outcomes.¹ These competencies also can be taught. When universal social and emotional learning programs and practices are implemented with sufficient quality and intensity, for example, they produce benefits that include improved behavior and mental health, and improved academic performance.²

Educators, researchers, policy makers, parents, and the lay public increasingly recognize the importance of social and emotional competence to children's health, well-being, and success in school and life. For example, a growing number of states have integrated into their educational standards specific social and emotional competencies that students should know and be able to demonstrate at different ages.³ The importance of SEL is reflected in what happens in schools. According to two national surveys of educators, approximately 70% of elementary principals have developed or implemented a plan to address student social and emotional competence, and more than 50% of principals have adopted an SEL program or curriculum.^{4,5}

The benefits of teaching social and emotional competencies have been demonstrated in rigorously designed studies of well-implemented SEL programs.² Beyond programs, the benefits of teaching practices, such as those that foster positive teacher-student relationships, are substantial. For example, positive teacher-student relationships are associated with positive social, emotional, behavioral and academic outcomes.⁶ In short, high-quality research supports the value of evidence-based SEL programs and practices.

In this brief, programs and practices refer to: (1) stand-alone programs or curricula, (2) SEL activities and practices integrated into academics and other activities, and (3) practices that influence the broad culture and climate of school.⁷ Universal programs and practices refer to SEL practices designed for all students, not just students who are at risk for problems or who have been identified for special services.

The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) describes five broad social and emotional competencies: self-management, self-awareness, relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making. This model is perhaps the most widely cited; these competencies are incorporated into state SEL standards and are the targets of instruction in evidence-based SEL programs.



Self-awareness



Self-management



Social awareness



Relationship skills



Responsible decision-making

The Challenge of Maintaining Quality at Scale

At a time when schools are rapidly adopting SEL programs and practices, we must ask an important question: Do educators have what they need across community, institutional, and cultural contexts to implement social and emotional learning programs and practices with the quality and intensity needed to consistently produce positive outcomes? This raises other important questions about how to build on the successes of the field and prevent the dilution of impact that too often accompanies efforts to “scale up” programs.

This challenge is not unique to SEL—many fields, including public health, have grappled with how to bring evidence-based programs to scale while maintaining quality. For example, the Society for Prevention Research (SPR) convened a task force to identify methods of bringing what works to scale across five large systems, including the education system.⁸ The task force concluded that the capacity of systems to assess, monitor, and evaluate implementation and outcomes is one of a handful of essential resources needed for evidence-based programs to scale successfully.

In this model, assessment data can be used to engage in cycles of quality assurance and continuous improvement to monitor program quality and impact. For example, SEL assessment data can help guide educators to build on identified student strengths and address student needs. In addition, they can be used to help determine the extent to which evidence-based practices—including SEL practices—are having the intended impact and can aid in identifying opportunities for improvement.

“Continuous improvement” refers to ongoing efforts to improve practices through a sequence of repeated activities. Typically, a continuous improvement cycle involves four steps. In the first, “plan,” a course of action is set, such as choosing an SEL program. In the second, “do,” the plan is executed. In the third, “study,” data are collected about the activity and its outcomes, and the data are contemplated to see what worked and what did not. In the fourth, “act,” data from the “study” phase are used to make adjustments to the plan, and the cycle begins again. In the context of SEL, SEL assessment can guide instructional planning—for example, what to teach to whom at what point. After this plan has been executed, SEL assessment data can be used to monitor growth and adjust the plan.

The question of how to maintain the effectiveness of SEL programs and practices at scale is not a simple one. However, a key premise of this brief, consistent with the recommendation of the SPR task force, is that a continued commitment to assessment data will increase the likelihood that as states and districts embrace social and emotional learning, their efforts will continue to yield tangible benefits.

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Maintaining Quality through a Commitment to Evidence

Let us consider two starkly different ways forward. In one, educators assume that we have collected enough evidence on the benefits of SEL instruction to move forward, assuming that those benefits will continue to accrue. Their job is to implement, and go big, and they assume that the data have spoken and that SEL programs and practices will continue to yield the same level of benefit as they did in the context of field trials.

In another, educators acknowledge key differences between the controlled and well-resourced conditions of a field trial and the routine conditions of learning. They further assume that without continued efforts to adapt and evaluate practices, the benefits of SEL programs implemented at scale are likely to diminish. With those guiding assumptions, educators commit to continuing to collect assessment data as part of routine instructional practice and to using those assessment data to guide practice and evaluate student growth. They use assessment data to see what works for whom and to identify what does not work, and adjust their practices based on what they learn.

The first way forward is likely to be the default position of the field. School districts vary in their capacity to collect and use evidence to inform practice, even for familiar subject matter such as reading and math. This challenge is exacerbated for less familiar subject areas such as SEL, in which assessments and their proper uses are unfamiliar and less readily available.

We believe that the second way forward will lead to a healthier evolution of the field of SEL—as would be the case with any field of evidence-based practice—and will better support high-quality teaching and learning, and positive student outcomes. Integrating systematic assessment data collection into SEL practice and using assessment data for continuous improvement has the potential to help educators use SEL instruction to address the needs of their students and to determine the impacts of those efforts.

For the purposes of this report, SEL assessment refers to methods of measuring: (1) student social and emotional competencies, (2) adult practices and the conditions of learning, and (3) school climate. A continuous improvement system could focus on one or more of these assessment targets, depending on their goals.

Suppose it is true that high-quality assessment data can support high-quality SEL instruction and student outcomes. It is important, then, to identify the conditions under which educators are most likely to institutionalize the use of SEL assessment data for continuous instructional improvement. Next, we discuss several aspects of the policy and practice context that we believe can support the use of SEL assessment data to guide practice and continuous improvement.

Conditions Supporting Continuous Improvement

It is far from a given that educators are ready to assess SEL and engage in the kinds of high-quality data use practices that are likely to support teaching, learning, and student outcomes. In a recent national survey of principals, 82% reported that they would use SEL assessment to improve instruction if they knew that such assessments were available, and 32% reported that they were using SEL assessment to improve instruction.⁴

This suggests a need for more and better assessment tools. Further, better information about existing tools is needed. In addition, the survey did not measure how educators use SEL assessment data, what kinds of decisions they make based on the data available to them, and whether those interpretations and decisions are warranted with the assessment data available to them. It is highly likely that educators will benefit from support on using assessment data to make sound decisions.

Several challenges routinely prevent educators from using SEL assessment data to inform practice and measure response to instruction. Table 1 summarizes those challenges, and offers a description of opportunities to address them. These challenges, and the opportunities they present to the field, highlight the important role of state and federal governments as resources to remove barriers to assessment practices that support high-quality SEL practices.

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TABLE 1

Challenges and opportunities in integrating policy, practice, and assessment

Challenge	Opportunity
Educators are often unaware of SEL assessment options to support teaching and learning.	Publicize resources on evidence-based assessment, such as the CASEL Assessment Guide and RAND Education Assessment finder .
Many educators believe that screening to identify problems is the same as assessing social and emotional competence.	Policies that incentivize social and emotional competence assessment explicitly state the intended uses of SEL assessment should be for continuous improvement, not screening and identification.
Many educators are unsure of how to use SEL assessment data to support teaching and learning.	Incorporate SEL assessment data literacy in preservice and in-service professional development. Develop how-to guides for educators. Integrate SEL assessment data in existing academic assessment data review practices.
There is wide variability in assessment data use practices, ranging from minimal use to highly skilled use.	Federal and state policies encourage and provide an opportunity to use funding for SEL assessment data review that adheres to defined best practices.
Many educators, parents, and students envision, and largely are repelled by, the prospect of SEL assessment being used for high-stakes accountability.	Federal and state policies encourage SEL assessment data to be used for continuous improvement, not for high-stakes accountability. Provide educators with guidance on how to use SEL assessment data for continuous improvement, and how to avoid high-stakes uses.
Many states have not established standards or guidelines.	CASEL and other intermediaries support states in adopting positions that provide clear expectations about the competencies children should know and be able to demonstrate. Provide guidance to districts in states without standards so they can adopt or borrow from the standards established in other states.

Challenge	Opportunity
For the most part, SEL program providers do not offer high-quality assessments and high-quality assessment providers do not offer programs, making coordination somewhat challenging.	Document and disseminate the relationship between the competencies assessed by specific tools and the targets of instruction in particular programs.
Many districts choose assessments without making sure that the assessment aligns to standards or the targets of instruction in their curriculum. This results in data that does not reflect what is actually being taught.	Provide guidance and training in choosing assessments aligned with policy and practice.
No SEL program or assessment is designed to measure all competencies described in most state standards.	Document and disseminate the relationship between the competencies in state standards and the competencies assessed by specific tools and taught in particular programs.
Behavioral assessment models (frequently used in Multi-Level Systems of Support) and SEL assessment are often conflated, but differ in both their goals (compliance vs. growth, screening and identification vs. measuring strengths) and in the assessment tools used.	Provide guidance and training to schools and districts regarding the differences between the two assessment models and how to implement them in a coordinated way, if schools and districts are doing both.



How might these opportunities be pursued in a cost-effective manner, and by whom? Elaborating on the opportunities and challenges described in Table 1, we examine specific actions policy makers and others can take to support the use of evidence-based SEL assessment for continuous program improvement. Many of these recommendations echo those offered by the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (2019).⁷



Educators need incentives. In their review of efforts to scale up evidence-based interventions across five social systems, one of which was the education system, Fagan and colleagues (2019)⁸ found that the most important factors in supporting going to scale related to statutory support. In the present case, this might include language in state and federal laws that encourages the use of SEL assessment and allows the use of appropriated funds for those practices. In terms of assessment, the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, for example, provided for the flexible selection and use of non-academic benchmarks of school quality. Scaling of SEL assessment could be supported by federal, state, and local policies that incentivize the use of—and permit funding to be used for—evidence-based SEL assessment specifically for continuous program improvement.



Educators need information. Incentives are important but are not in themselves enough. Educators also need to know how to use SEL assessment for continuous improvement. Therefore, a second activity involves dissemination that, at its best, is a smart marketing campaign to get the word out about resources such as the CASEL guides, the Holahan and Batey (2019)⁹ report on measuring climate, and other materials on using assessment as an instructional planning tool. It also involves the distribution of information on the relationship among assessments, standards, and practices, for example. State education agencies and federal regional educational laboratories are in an excellent position to organize this information and provide it to district leaders through the multiple channels of communication available to them and in their role as technical assistants to school districts.



Educators need training. A third key activity involves professional learning supports to educators. A recent report on the state of the field of SEL assessment¹⁰ cited preservice and in-service training on several topics. These include:

- A description of SEL
- An examination of why SEL matters
- A list of evidence-based programs and practices that support SEL
- A description of the ways in which SEL may be implemented in the classroom
- A list and description of available SEL assessment strategies
- Methods of evaluating the technical merits of programs and assessments
- Methods of engaging in high-quality data use to support teaching, learning, and student outcomes

Some of these training opportunities involve the kinds of supports described in the next section.

In the best of all worlds, several kinds of organizations could work on this collaboratively. First, state educational policy makers and departments of public instruction could incorporate pre-service and in-service requirements that educators obtain SEL training, including the use of assessment data to guide practice. States could support training to build local capacity for wise SEL assessment data use. That could include, for example, training regional agencies to ensure they provide consistent and high-quality support to their member districts on evidence-based practices and assessments. States also could build local district capacity to train their own staff.

Second, schools of education and intermediary organizations that provide ongoing training could develop and offer coursework, workshops, and other training resources to address this need.

Third, state departments of public instruction, in collaboration with universities, could develop online learning modules that offer self-paced professional development and “micro-credentials” focused on using SEL assessment data to inform practice.



Educators need ongoing support. Information is necessary. Training is necessary. Deep learning and institutionalization requires practice and support *in situ*. To that end, a fourth kind of activity involves active coaching support within school districts. For example, district instructional coaches might observe SEL instruction or instructional practice and provide teachers with guidance to improve practice. States, regional educational services agencies, and other intermediary organizations could provide this kind of ongoing support. Even better, state and regional agencies could train district instructional coaches to provide those supports in their own districts. Support efforts could parallel informational and training activities, focusing on helping educators understand how to use SEL assessment data to support teaching, learning, and student outcomes.

Many of these activities could be combined by connecting schools and districts engaged in common cause around SEL assessment data use. In so doing, networked improvement communities could take a “learning lab” approach to the problem of evidence in practice by which all members agree to learn from data and use lessons learned to change practices.



Educators need resources. Consistent with the SPR work group on scaling evidence-based practices, we believe that information, training, and support are not in themselves enough to ensure that educators will implement best practices. If districts and schools support educators’ wise use of SEL assessment data to improve practice, then educators also will need sufficient time, staffing support, and funding. Other new resources for educators include the report, *Catalyzing Future Directions of Social Emotional Learning Assessment*, and a new set of learning training modules on SEL assessment from CASEL and the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. Both the report and the modules are available on [the CASEL site](#).¹¹

Pipe Dream or Possible?

Given the number and kinds of support we propose to utilize in bringing data-informed social and emotional learning to scale, it is reasonable to ask whether this vision is achievable. One way to begin to answer this question is to consider whether substantial versions of this vision have been realized in states, regions, and/or school districts. The answer to that question is an emphatic **yes**.

Wisconsin. In 2018, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) released the Wisconsin Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Competencies for PK-Adult. The Competencies describe social and emotional skills and abilities children should know and be able to demonstrate, by grade level. Following the release of this framework, it became clear that schools, districts, and out-of-school time programs needed support and resources to use these competencies to guide their work with students. While the Competencies provide developmentally appropriate guidelines for what students should know and be able to demonstrate, these benchmarks are not easy to operationalize, much less assess.

One option is to use state education agencies' training networks to support evidence-based SEL assessment practices. For example, the Wisconsin DPI provides information about best practices in SEL through a website, conference presentations, consultation, online training modules, email list serves and social media, all focused on informing practitioners about evidence-based practices as choose-and-use SEL tools. The focus of assessment resources is to support the use of SEL assessment for continuous improvement. As schools, districts, and out-of-school time programs move to implement SEL, state education agencies, such as the Wisconsin DPI, are in a unique position to create messaging on the appropriate role of SEL assessment, difference between behavioral and SEL assessment, and effective use of SEL assessment data to inform instructional practices and programming.

Practitioners need and want ongoing support in all aspects of SEL implementation, including assessment. The state is in a unique position to monitor trends, and identify and address areas of need. In Wisconsin, a particularly pressing need is how to integrate SEL assessment and behavioral assessment as these relate to a Multi-Level System of Support (MLSS). Considerations include identification of students for Tier 2 services, gaining an understanding of the different types of SEL assessment tools available, and choosing the appropriate ones. In addition, DPI will be addressing the role of parents and guardians in this process in 2020. As the assessment training modules come online, educators will obtain access to information about evidence-based SEL assessment tools that align with the Wisconsin SEL Competencies. Educators now have access to free online assessment tools created to align specifically with Competencies. The DPI will be working to create regional support networks and communities of practice (CoP) for all aspects of SEL implementation, including SEL assessment. State agencies can leverage stakeholders, resources, and the collective minds of its educators. They can motivate and support high-quality work in schools, districts, and out-of-school time programs.

Substantial efforts are currently underway to use SEL assessment data to inform educational decision-making in constructive ways.

Other examples. Wisconsin is one of a growing number of states with agencies that support the constructive use of SEL assessment data to guide practice and continuous improvement. In addition to states, other organizations also can provide this kind of support. For example, in California, the CORE districts, led by a not-for-profit intermediary organization, use student social and emotional surveys to guide continuous improvement efforts in schools throughout the state. The Traverse Bay Area Independent School District, a services agency in Northern Michigan that serves 16 school districts in five counties, recently adopted a system-wide common SEL assessment, paired with professional development and coaching to support data-informed SEL instruction. Innovative districts such as Naperville Community Unit School District 203 in Illinois and Washoe County School District in Nevada have undertaken innovative SEL assessment initiatives to measure competencies that are the focus of instruction and standards, and to use assessment data to guide practice.

These examples illustrate the fact that substantial efforts are currently underway, albeit in pockets, to use SEL assessment data to inform educational decision-making in constructive ways. The impact of these efforts on educational practices and student outcomes remains to be seen. In addition, the existence of several examples of SEL assessment integrated with policy and practice does not prove that it is possible to propagate these activities through the many and diverse school districts in the United States with fidelity. The accomplishment of that vision at scale requires a supportive policy framework and the flexibility to utilize resources to use SEL assessment data in ways that support teaching, learning, and student outcomes.

Practical Opportunities for Policy Makers to Support Data-Informed SEL

In many states, the power to make decisions is vested in local education agencies, raising important questions about what state and regional education leaders can do to support data-informed SEL instruction. Government agencies and policy makers can take important actions to support data-informed instruction. Below, we summarize several key opportunities.

State education agencies can:

- Clearly articulate the importance of social and emotional competence.
- Communicate a unifying definition of social and emotional competence.
- Provide guidance—documents, webinars, online learning modules, live training, and coaching—to support the use of SEL assessment data to guide instruction and measure student growth.
- Be a clearinghouse for information and training on evidence-based social and emotional learning, including assessment.
- Provide professional learning opportunities to regional and district educators focused on social and emotional assessment and data use.

- Support the formation of cross-district professional learning communities to support the adoption of data-informed SEL instruction.
- Provide guidance on how SEL is related to the state's other goals for children, such as academic success, and college and career readiness.

Federal and state legislatures can:

- Adopt standards or benchmarks indicating which competencies children should know and be able to demonstrate at different ages.
- In SEL and related education laws and regulations, encourage the use of SEL assessment.
- Delineate the high-stakes purposes for which such assessments should not be used and the continuous improvement uses for which they should.
- Offer flexibility in the use of educational funds to support and incentivize the utilization of SEL assessments as described in policy.
- Provide resources for research and development focused on identifying the most effective methods of integrating SEL assessment data in practice settings.

None of these suggestions requires a significant new public investment. We offer these “bully pulpit” recommendations because at the present time, there is scarce statewide funding of SEL. Nevertheless, state agencies and federal and state legislatures are in a strong position to create a policy framework and specific supports for districts’ use of evidence-based practices and data-informed instruction.

SEL Assessment Data to Support the Evolution of the Field

The field of social and emotional learning has strong evidence to support its potential to benefit many, many children. As SEL “goes big,” we believe that anchoring practice in the regular use of data to guide instruction and for continuous improvement is the very best way for the field to evolve constructively into the future. The alternative—not collecting assessment data—leaves the field vulnerable to practices that do not work, stops working when brought to scale, or works for some students but not others. Many educational movements have come and gone. Remaining committed to collecting ongoing assessment data will help SEL to have staying power, and to fulfill its considerable promise.

Authors and Affiliations

Clark McKown, Ph.D., is an associate professor of behavioral sciences at Rush University Medical Center (RUMC). He is also founder and president of xSEL Labs, whose mission is to improve student outcomes by helping educators understand children's social-emotional strengths and needs. McKown is a nationally recognized leader in the field of SEL assessment. He was a member of the steering committee of the CASEL SEL Assessment Work Group and was lead author of a report from that group on the state of the field of SEL assessment. McKown has been principal investigator on several federal and foundation grants to design, develop, validate, and scale social and emotional assessment systems. Findings from McKown's research have been published in top-tier peer-reviewed scientific journals, including *Psychological Assessment*, *Journal of School Psychology*, and *Child Development*. McKown is also author of *Assessing Student Social and Emotional Learning: From Planning Through Action* (W.W. Norton & Company). McKown received his B.A. in psychology from Yale and his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of California at Berkeley.

Beth Herman is an educational consultant with the Wisconsin Department of Instruction and a member of the Student Services/Prevention and Wellness Team. She is currently supporting state-wide implementation of Youth Mental Health First Aid, the School-based Mental Health Services Grant and Social and Emotional Learning at the department. She served as the state coordinator of the Safe Schools Healthy Students grant from 2013 to 2017. As a school psychologist for over 20 years, she provided training and implementation support for teachers in classroom management, bullying prevention, and social and emotional learning.

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