

The Role of Social and Emotional Learning in Future Workforce Readiness



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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 prevention.psu.edu/sel.

Executive Summary

Research has shown social and emotional learning (SEL) to be an integral force for students' education and well-being with positive effects lasting into adulthood. Still, explicit linkages between SEL and career and workforce development remain limited. This brief explores the role of SEL in preparing students for future success in their adult and working lives. In particular, the brief shows SEL's importance in career and workforce development and its relevance to recent trends in the future of work, and offers an examination of equity barriers that hinder youth from underserved populations and how SEL can mitigate them. The brief concludes with a look at the role business and policymakers must play in addressing equity gaps and expanding access to integrative SEL and career and workforce development models.



Introduction

A consensus has emerged on the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom. A meta-analysis of 213 studies showed that students who participated in evidence-based SEL programming had higher academic performance, improved classroom behavior, increased ability to manage stress and depression, and better attitudes about themselves, others, and school.¹ In 2019, the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development released its [culminating report](#)² that declared “children learn best when we treat them as human beings, with social and emotional as well as academic needs.”

The evidence is buoyed by surveys that show students, parents, and educators understand the value of SEL in school, community, and career; believe SEL competencies are teachable; and call for deeper integration of SEL into education in the classroom and in extended learning opportunities.³⁻⁷ Furthermore, a 2021 survey indicated that when parents understand what SEL actually entails, they support its inclusion in the classroom regardless of race, class, or political affiliation.⁸

In short, despite recent pushback, decades of research have shown that SEL has a positive impact on academic performance as well as classroom environments and school-wide culture. When young people, parents, and educators understand what SEL encompasses, they embrace its importance and yearn for greater implementation across schools.

Yet, SEL’s relevance to career and workforce development and future readiness is still underexplored. This is in spite of surveys that show the business community values SEL competencies and sees them as essential.⁹

In recent years, research has shown that SEL is a valuable tool in advancing educational equity.¹⁰ As the United States remains a deeply inequitable society from PreK to career, this is an important extension of the field. While SEL — and education as a whole — cannot close racial, geographic, economic, and other equity gaps alone due to systemic barriers in the workforce and educational system that stem from longstanding disparities, both can serve as mitigating factors.

This brief will explore the myriad functions SEL competencies play in the world of work, particularly SEL’s integral role in creating equitable pathways to success for young people in classroom and career. The brief also reviews literature related to SEL and future readiness, introduces the importance of SEL for creating safe and supportive workplaces, and throughout discusses the ability of SEL to address and help eliminate equity barriers along the educational continuum.

What is SEL?

CASEL [defines SEL](#)¹¹ as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.” This is distilled into five broad interrelated SEL competencies with multiple skills related to each:

- **self-awareness**, including identifying emotions, self-confidence, and self-efficacy, and developing interests and a sense of purpose;
- **self-management**, including exhibiting self-discipline and self-motivation, setting personal and collective goals, managing time well, using planning and organizational skills, and taking initiative;
- **social awareness**, including taking others’ perspectives, demonstrating empathy, showing respect for others, and appreciating a diversity of experiences and perspectives;
- **relationship skills**, including the ability to communicate effectively, developing positive relationships, practicing teamwork and collaborative problem-solving, and resolving conflicts constructively; and
- **responsible decision-making**, including identifying and solving problems, demonstrating curiosity and open-mindedness, and using critical thinking skills both inside and outside of school.

FIGURE 1.

CASEL’s Framework for Systemic SEL



The Connection Between Social and Emotional Learning and Future Readiness

It may appear obvious that having these skills would benefit anyone in their day-to-day lives, including in the workforce. Much of the research around career and workforce development, however, does not make explicit links to SEL, though overlap exists within the literature on employability skills. The following sections will illustrate how implementation of SEL into PreK–12 education can benefit students from childhood into career.

SEL and Future Readiness

While SEL's effectiveness in improving academic outcomes has been widely documented, less research exists regarding the benefits SEL specifically has on career and workforce development and future success, though promising evidence has begun to emerge. For example, in 2015 researchers found kindergarteners with stronger SEL competencies were more likely to graduate from college and obtain stable, full-time employment by young adulthood.¹² Similarly, a study by Child Trends found social skills, communication skills, higher-order thinking skills like problem-solving and decision-making, self-control, and positive self-concept to be the five skills most likely to increase success in the workforce — all skills or competencies that can be strengthened through systemic and programmatic SEL.¹³

Increasingly, top business publications and associations have recognized the importance of social and emotional competencies. The Association for Career and Technical Education named top skills that employers need, most of which included SEL competencies: work ethic (self-management), teamwork/collaboration (relationship skills), and creativity/inclusion (social awareness and responsible decision-making).¹⁴ Recently, *Forbes* outlined five sought-after leadership skills, four of which — social intelligence, creativity, working and collaborating remotely, and negotiating — are directly related to SEL.¹⁵ In 2019, LinkedIn's Global Talent Trends, a combination of surveys of over 5,000 global talent professionals, found that 91% of employers believe SEL competencies (referred to as "soft skills") are more important to the future of work than any other trend, with 80% of employers signaling these skills are becoming more important to company success.¹⁶ Additionally, many of the essential skills in the U.S. Department of Education's Employability Skills Framework align to SEL competencies, including personal qualities (self-awareness), resource management (self-management and social awareness), communication skills and interpersonal skills (relationship skills), and critical thinking skills (responsible decision-making).¹⁷ Many of these same skills are mentioned as critical to becoming successful entrepreneurs as well.^{18, 19}

Moreover, a 2020 review of employer surveys over the past decade identified the skills most in-demand, showing that employers are overwhelmingly searching for social and emotional competencies, with communication and interpersonal skills, self-management, the ability to work in teams and collaborate, and problem-solving skill as the most cited skills.⁹

Across employer surveys, business and employability frameworks, and studies of the future of work, it is clear that social and emotional competencies are not a bonus — they are essential to employees and businesses alike. This emphasizes the ability of systemic SEL to prepare youth for the future of work and life.

What Do Young People Need to Be Successful?

Success in the labor market begins well before applications, interviews, and job offers. As such, future readiness is a culmination of experiences across each student's K–12 education and early adulthood. Too often, students lack access to markers on the road to success — this is especially the case for historically underserved students. This section will briefly discuss several of the most important factors for future success beyond social and emotional competences, equity barriers to each, and the role of SEL.

Academic Skills & Credentials

There are several educational pathways to economic well-being that young people can pursue. For years, emphasis had been placed on four-year degrees and predictors of college success (strong GPA and rigorous course-taking).^{20, 21} While four-year degrees result in higher incomes on average and are more resilient to recessions, it is not the only pathway to the middle class or mobility.²² It is estimated that there are 30 million middle skill jobs that pay middle-class wages that require some credential beyond high school but not a four-year degree, including high-quality credentials, certificates, and two-year degrees.²³ Moreover, skills-based hiring is a promising practice where employers waive four-year degree requirements in favor of work and skills experience that has opened doors for students without a high school or postsecondary credential.²⁴



Still, higher levels of education are connected to higher levels of employment and most jobs require some form of postsecondary education or credential.^{25, 26} As such, a high school diploma or equivalency should be viewed as an on-track indicator to economic mobility and life-sustaining wages rather than an end point. To successfully persist on from high school, students need to take challenging high-level courses that prepare them for the rigors of college or are connected to industry-recognized and -backed credentials. Discouragingly, data show students from historically marginalized backgrounds have far less access to high-level math and science courses that are most predictive of success beyond high school and that unlock middle skill career pathways.

Fewer than 10% of Black and Latinx students complete the high school mathematics sequence needed to successfully access traditional STEM pipelines.²⁷ This is a consequence of systemic discrimination and inequity, as well as ongoing educational segregation. Data from the U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data collection indicate schools with high Black and Hispanic enrollments are far less likely to offer rigorous math and science courses, while these same subgroups remain underrepresented as AP course- and test-takers.^{28, 29} This contributes to Black and Hispanic young adults — as well as those in the lowest quartile of the income distribution — being more likely to take remedial courses in postsecondary education and leave school with debt but without a degree, and less likely to attend four-year college and persist to their degree.^{30, 31} Data indicate that Black and Hispanic students are about as likely as their White classmates to participate in CTE courses.³² Black and Hispanic students, however, are less likely to enroll in STEM and information technology classes — traditionally higher income fields — but more likely to enroll in hospitality and human services, fields that tend to pay less.³³

As this report laid out in the introduction, opportunities to acquire and practice SEL competencies in the classroom accelerate academic learning.¹ This helps to ensure that students progress through high school, persist into postsecondary education, and earn the necessary credential for their chosen career path. In addition, there's early evidence to suggest SEL competencies also help equip young people for the workforce and future of work.

Healthy Sense of Identity

Beyond academic, social, and emotional development, future readiness is also impacted by identity development, which includes occupational identity. Occupational identity is “a vision of [youth’s] future selves in the workforce — what they like to do, what they believe they are skilled at, and where they feel they belong”.³⁴ Exposure, engagement, and participation are the three main influences on occupational identity development.³⁴

Barriers to occupational identity include stereotype threat, implicit bias, and homophily (the universal tendency to look for and bond with people who are similar to oneself); each of these can contribute to inequitable outcomes in the world of work. Research indicates that these barriers hinder marginalized youth from imagining themselves in high-prestige occupations

and are a contributing factor to historically marginalized populations being underrepresented in STEM fields like biotechnology or computer science, all of which connects to issues of economic equity.^{35–38} Moreover, a 2021 study by McKinsey found that Black, Latinx, and Asian Americans were much more likely to believe their identity unfairly affects their job prospects compared to their White peers, and similarly women were about twice as likely to believe this than men.³⁹ Young people also report experiencing racism in the world of work that can have a negative impact on one's identity.⁴⁰

Research shows that a healthy sense of identity helps to guard against negative or traumatic experiences that may stem from stereotype or discrimination, and contributes to positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes.⁴¹ SEL can promote positive identity development by building young people's self-awareness competency, which is key for students to grow a healthy sense of identity.⁴²

Supportive Adult Relationships and Social Capital

Evidence and surveys indicate the importance of personal and professional relationships for success in school, career, and life.⁴³ The value of these relationships is sometimes referred to as "social capital," defined as students' access and ability to mobilize relationships that help them further their potential and goals, both as those goals emerge and as they shift over time.⁴⁴ Boosting the social capital of young people has many benefits, including growing an occupational identity, increasing access and success in postsecondary education, expanding access to internships and jobs, and improving opportunities for economic mobility.^{44–46}

SEL and positive adult relationships have a mutually reinforcing connection. As SEL programming helps students to grow their relationship skills, they are better able to nourish positive relationships, which in turn are linked to young people demonstrating key social and emotional strengths, including a growth mindset.⁴⁷ In addition, young people who have the support of developmental relationships — a close connection between a young person and an adult or a peer who powerfully shapes a young person's identity⁴⁸ — are more likely to demonstrate resilience, more motivated to learn, tend to set goals, and feel a more positive sense of self-worth and belonging, all key determinants for future success and positive identity development.⁴⁸ By developing students' relationship skills, SEL can also help down the road in building strong relationships with mentors, supervisors, and peers in the workplace, as well as in fostering stronger feelings of belonging in the workplace and expanding social capital.

Students who grow up around employed adults are more likely to gain access to beneficial professional networks that can be a boost to their SEL and occupational identity through exposure and modeling.⁴⁹ Yet, many young people report a lack of access to the professional networks and social capital that can be most helpful to success in the labor market.⁴² This has detrimental effects on young people's ability to build their social and emotional competencies and occupational identities, and limits access to the world of work. Long-standing inequities passed down from centuries of systemic racism and discrimination erect social capital barriers for historically marginalized youth, who are less likely to have access to working adults and relationships that connect them to career opportunities. One study spanning several decades found that White men were much more likely to further their careers through their professional networks than their Black and low-income counterparts.⁵⁰

SEL helps youth along their journey to adulthood by boosting academic success, developing self-awareness competencies that are focal for healthy identity development, and strengthening relationship skills that help young people build and nourish productive adult relationships. In summary, there are crucial connections between SEL supports and future success. Young people will need a high school diploma or equivalency to have a sure path to a postsecondary credential, and will benefit from a strong occupational identity that is expansive and diverse. In addition, supportive relationships can help youth achieve their dreams, expose young people to diverse career paths, and provide connections to the world of work.

The Role of SEL Competencies in an Uncertain Future of Work

Several recent trends in the world of work and projected future shifts have implications for career and workforce development. This section will briefly introduce these developments and examine how they relate to SEL.

Changing Technical Skills, Consistent Importance of SEL Competencies

The required technical skills for careers are shifting at faster rates than ever before. The rate of change is so great that many of today's children will find themselves in jobs that don't yet exist by the time they enter the world of work. Automation will disrupt work and industries, causing great uncertainty in future job markets and making it difficult to predict many of the technical skills that will be needed. For this reason, SEL competencies will be even more vital for career success. As technical skills shift, SEL competencies are evergreen, providing students with competencies that can adapt to an uncertain future and job market. Employees will always need to self-manage themselves and show up on time, the relationship skills necessary to collaborate and communicate with colleagues effectively, and the responsible decision-making skills to identify and solve problems.

This changing nature of work will also mandate frequent reskilling and upskilling, making it essential that young people develop as lifelong learners. SEL supports this by nourishing students' curiosity (responsible decision-making) and helping them manage change. The business community understands this need. McKinsey described the necessity for workers to foster lifelong learning competencies and mindsets to become "intentional learners" with a growth mindset (an explicit developmental goal of SEL) and curiosity (a focal construct of Transformative SEL). The five core skills — goal-setting (self-management), removing distractions (self-management), seeking feedback (social awareness), practicing deliberately (responsible decision-making), and reflection (self-awareness) — also map onto SEL competencies.

Job Change and the Importance of Meaningful Work

From 1990 to 2010, the number of companies people worked for within five years of college graduation doubled,⁵³ and rates of job-hopping show no signs of slowing. Many young people yearn for careers where they are more than employees — where they are difference makers, contributing to positive change.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, workers are searching for workplaces where they feel psychological safety, meaning they are able to show themselves without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status, or career. According to McKinsey, “when employees feel comfortable asking for help, sharing suggestions informally, or challenging the status quo without fear of negative social consequences, organizations are more likely to innovate quickly, unlock the benefits of diversity, and adapt well to change.”⁵⁵

Psychological safety in the workplace requires managers who have high levels of social and emotional competence, which they demonstrate by norm setting, practicing empathy, respecting the perspectives of their workers, and communicating effectively about both work and personal matters. To meet employee demands, employers will need to foster a strong sense of belonging where workers of all identities are welcomed and supported. Based on SEL’s ability to create supportive classroom environments where students’ are recognized, respected, and affirmed (see CASEL’s [Guide to Schoolwide SEL](#)⁵²), SEL could be a pathway towards promoting psychologically safe working environments by preparing students to be employers and co-workers who effectively foster cultures of belonging.

Team Based Collaborative Problem-Solving

Workplaces are increasingly more team-based and collaborative. Research shows that since 1980, almost all U.S. job growth has been in occupations that require high social skills.⁵⁶ A 2016 study by the *Harvard Business Review* found that the time spent by managers and employees in collaborative activities has increased by 50% or more over the last two decades.⁵⁷ People working in teams tend to achieve better results and report higher job satisfaction.⁵⁸ SEL competencies will bolster collaborative and team-based work, ensuring it operates smoothly, without conflict, and contribute to a positive work culture.

Agile Leadership, Autonomy, and Employee Empowerment

As changes in the world of work unfold more rapidly, many employers are shifting to agile models. Agile organizations operate more nimbly, with flatter leadership structures that empower employees and adapt quickly to changing environments. Agile leadership requires shifting mindsets to be more creative, fostering collaboration and partnership, and empowering employees. At the same time, many businesses are applying autonomous leadership to their teams that emphasizes employee independence, adaptability, and trust by empowering teams to make decisions, self-manage, and problem-solve. Research has indicated that agile organizations and autonomous leadership practices have had concrete benefits, especially in responding to unprecedented challenges, like the COVID-19 pandemic, that impact business performance and employee vitality.⁵⁹⁻⁶⁰

For businesses to make this shift, managers and employees will need to be able to develop and practice social and emotional competencies. Managers will have to display responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills to build trust with their employees, foster collaborative and creative cultures, and understand the way their teams work best. Meanwhile, employees will need self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship, and responsible decision-making skills to manage their time well, solve problems on their own and in a team context, decipher when they can take on more work and when they need support, and respond well to colleagues' feedback.

Policy & Practice Implications

For Employers

As automation shifts the labor market and in-demand fields, workers need opportunities to adapt, reskill, and upskill, as well as professional and personal support from managers. Employers have a responsibility to enable workers to be lifelong learners. As such, businesses should both provide and encourage reskilling and upskilling opportunities for their employees.

As work is changing, businesses are placing increased emphasis on teamwork and collaboration.⁵⁷ This requires workers with high degrees of social and emotional competence, and work environments with ample social and emotional supports. Workers will perform better if they can be their authentic selves, know their ideas and opinions are respected, and believe that they are in a safe place. This requires social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making on the part of their colleagues. All this suggests it is good business to invest in K–12 SEL and explore policies and practices to build their employees' SEL competencies, an area that bears further exploration and research.

Moreover, businesses can play a role in developing SEL competencies by collaborating with local schools and universities. By creating rich skill-building opportunities for students in high school and postsecondary education, like work-based learning, apprenticeships, and internships that are integrated with SEL, they can help engage diverse students in the world of work, expanding career and workforce development. Beginning in middle school, they can offer job shadowing opportunities or partner with schools for career fairs to expose students to different career pathways at a young age. In addition, by encouraging employees to mentor underserved youth in their communities, they can help provide the supportive adult relationships young people need to be successful.

It is crucial for employers to get this right and for social-emotional skill-building and supports in the workplace to focus on supportive relationships and building a psychologically safe workplace where workers are free to be themselves. Otherwise, workplace SEL is at risk of becoming just another method to police worker behavior and force adherence to a specific vision of professionalism.⁶¹

For Educational Leaders and Policymakers

While demand for SEL remains strong, systemic implementation continues to lag. Research shows school leaders see SEL as a top priority, but need support from policymakers to make it a reality.^{5, 6} As such, policymakers should heed these calls and create enabling conditions for further implementation.

Moreover, this brief lays out evidence that SEL competencies are essential workplace and employability skills. This places SEL as a key jobs strategy, making investment in SEL an imperative for labor and economic policymakers in addition to those in education. The evidence in this brief makes the case that developing young peoples' social and emotional competencies is imperative to cultivate a labor force that is prepared for the future of work and to build a thriving economy. Positioning SEL as a key workforce development solution may also have potential in cutting through recent rhetoric that challenges SEL's role in education.



Integration of SEL within Career and Workforce Development Programs

This brief also shows the importance of a holistic approach to future readiness, especially as it relates to equitable pathways to work. Young people from historically marginalized communities need greater exposure to supportive adult relationships and diverse career fields to build their occupational identity and professional networks. Creating more opportunities in K–12 education for experiential working opportunities like work-based learning and apprenticeships can expand access for all students. In addition, expanding access to STEM programming, SEL, and rigorous courses in math and science for Black, Latinx, low-income, and female students can help strengthen and build more diverse career pathways, while providing young people opportunities to apply and grow their social and emotional competencies. Policymakers can advance an integrated SEL and career and workforce development strategy by expanding and connecting these opportunities in school.

Already, momentum for this type of strategy is building. In 2019, CASEL launched a community of practice through its Collaborating States Initiative focused on integrating SEL with career and workforce development. As part of this, CASEL, Civic, and the Coalition for Career Development Center advanced a PreK–12 developmental framework for states that integrates systemic SEL and career and workforce development (CWD) to advance a holistic vision of future readiness.⁶² Building off this framework and the work of states in the community of practice, the three organizations released a policy roadmap detailing how states can integrate SEL and CWD.

Research on promising programs that build SEL competencies through CWD is beginning to emerge. A few examples include the following:

- [Linked Learning](#) engages students through career-themed pathways tied to local industry sectors through a program that integrates rigorous academics, career technical education, work-based learning, and comprehensive student supports. Through the program, students gain skills and mindsets that are key to success in their careers. An evaluation of the program found that Linked Learning students are more likely to report improved “21st century skills” such as public-speaking, communication skills, getting along with people from diverse backgrounds, and conducting, analyzing, and applying research to make good decisions.⁶³
- [NAF Academies](#) are open enrollment learning communities that work to ensure all high school students are future-ready by providing rigorous, career-focused curricula that incorporate project- and work-based learning with an explicit goal of building students’ “workplace skills and 21st century competencies.” A four-year study of the program showed students who participated in NAF were more likely to graduate from high school than their peers who did not.⁶⁴
- The [Urban Alliance’s](#) High School Internship Program connects seniors in Washington DC, Baltimore, Chicago, and Detroit to paid internships, professional skills development workshops, and two supportive adults: an UA program coordinator and a mentor in their workplace. These adults are dedicated to the seniors’ academic and professional growth. A study on the program’s effectiveness found that along with increased college-going rates, students were more likely to have developed important SEL competencies, including communication skills and self-management skills like meeting deadlines.⁶⁵

Personalized Career and Academic Planning (PCAP) is another promising practice for integrating SEL with CWD in middle and high school. When the PCAP process is used effectively, students develop an individualized learning plan with a trusted adult that outlines their learning goals and develops a plan to explore their own interests and build the skills needed to achieve that goal. [CASEL's recent Developmental Framework for the Integration of SEL and CWD](#)⁶² explains how the PCAP process may be utilized to integrate SEL into students' high school CWD:

This process requires that students understand a set of career and workforce opportunities (social awareness), determine their own talents and interests (self-awareness), plan for and set goals (self-management), pursue steps to experience career and workforce opportunities (responsible decision-making), and seek help from others and establish relationships with mentors to advance goals (relationship management).

Kentucky provides an advanced example of this potential integration. The state explicitly links career exploration and social and emotional learning through its Individual Learning Plan Playbook [beginning in the middle grades](#), and [extending through high school](#) to build students' essential skills.

Other states have also begun to integrate SEL and CWD. In May 2022, the Coalition for Career Development Center released [three state case studies](#) on [Delaware](#), [Kansas](#), and [Wisconsin](#). These case studies describe the work of all three states in developing policies to integrate SEL with CWD efforts.

As part of explicitly linking career and workforce development with SEL, data disaggregation is vital to advancing equity. State and federal data on career and workforce development approaches should be disaggregated to better identify and address disparities across race, ethnicity, income, and locale.

SEL is Essential for Students' Future Success

The education field has reached near-consensus that SEL is beneficial to academic success, with benefits lasting into adulthood. Reviewing business trade outlets, employer surveys, and emerging trends in the world of work makes clear that social and emotional competencies are crucial for success in the labor market as well. Yet, equity gaps remain that sustain unequal outcomes for youth from marginalized communities. To build stronger and just future pathways, employers, educators, and policymakers all bear responsibility in coming together to strengthen the school-to-future pipeline.

This brief is narrowly focused on the role SEL should play in career and workforce development. This is just one piece of a youth development process that must encompass a broad definition and goal of well-being for youth in their futures. SEL also has a clear role to play in developing young people with the competencies and dispositions to find meaningful relationships, become strong members of their community, and reach thriving adulthood. Moreover, while this brief focuses on how SEL can help young people respond to shifts in the future of work, it is reasonable to expect that the competencies instilled in youth through SEL will lead young people to drive additional shifts in the labor market to match their career and life aspirations.

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