



# READY TO LEAD

A 2019 Update of Principals'  
Perspectives on How Social  
and Emotional Learning  
Can Prepare Children and  
Transform Schools

## Executive Summary

A Report for CASEL

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# Executive Summary

**This report builds on and updates many of the findings from the original nationally representative survey of K to 12 principals in 2017.**

The central messages of this 2019 update are that (1) principals continue to see SEL skills as highly teachable and a priority in their schools; (2) more schools are implementing specific SEL benchmarks by significant percentages; and (3) principals and teachers are assessing SEL skills at much higher rates than just two years ago. At the same time, the survey shows that more work is needed to ensure SEL is systemic across schools and districts and for principals to think existing assessments are useful.

The most significant findings in the report, compared to survey data in 2017, are: (1) the percent of principals that believe social and emotional skills should definitely be included in state education standards has nearly doubled since 2017, and all told 87 percent of principals believe state standards probably should explicitly include SEL; (2) the percent of principals that believe a formal curriculum is necessary for teachers to successfully develop students' social and emotional skills has jumped from 43 percent in 2017 to 70 percent; and (3) while schools have made a great deal of progress implementing social and emotional learning, small town and rural schools continue to lag significantly behind the rest of the country.

*Most of all, this report shows that the movement to embed social and emotional learning into every classroom and school in America has reached a tipping point. Principals stand ready to bring systemic, school-wide SEL to their schools, but they need greater support from leaders at the state and district levels to ensure every student has access to a high-quality education that nourishes their social and emotional skills along with academic learning. Now is the time for policymakers to heed the calls of educators and provide the necessary supports for a student-centric, whole child education that develops the leaders of tomorrow.*



## Survey Findings

Findings from this nationally representative survey of 710 K to 12 principals are presented in four major areas: (1) Attitudes about SEL, (2) SEL implementation, (3) Growing SEL in Schools and Districts, and (4) Assessing SEL. This 2019 update combines these findings with SEL research from the past two decades to offer an understanding of how SEL is perceived by school and district leaders and where we stand in terms of systemic, school-wide implementation and assessment. The results are supported by findings from the 2013 teacher survey, as well as case studies from school districts implementing social and emotional learning district-wide and more recent surveys of teachers and principals (Hamilton, Doss, & Steiner, 2019). Together, these insights and key findings helped produce recommendations to bring forth greater evidence and assessments, and strategically advance systemic SEL in schools nationwide through policy changes, enhanced research, training, and evaluation.

### What is Social and Emotional Learning?

For this report and the survey that informed it, social and emotional learning (SEL) is defined as the process through which people 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. Social and emotional learning focuses on knowledge, attitudes, and skills in five competency areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

## Survey Finding 1: Attitudes about SEL

There is a strong and growing consensus among principals that social and emotional skills are important and should be developed in all students. Nearly all principals continue to see developing students' social and emotional skills as a critical aspect of students' in-school experience, and their commitment to teaching these skills has increased since 2017.

### Principals Continue to Believe SEL Skills are Teachable and should be a Priority in Schools

Principals remain strong proponents of SEL, with 83 percent believing it is very important for their schools to promote SEL skills—the same percent that did so in 2017—and nearly all principals (99 percent) still believe that social and emotional skills are probably or definitely teachable in a school setting. Moreover, 93 percent of principals believe their school should place a great deal or fair amount of emphasis on developing students' SEL skills, with 66 percent suggesting a great deal of emphasis should be placed on student's social

and emotional learning. Encouragingly, principals' level of commitment has increased over the past two years, with 74 percent saying they are very committed in 2019 compared to 69 in 2017.

### Principals Remain Convinced of SEL's Benefits for Students in School and Beyond

As the 2017 survey showed, most principals continue to believe that teaching SEL will foster a more positive school environment. This includes having major benefits to improving relationships between teachers and students, as well as among students themselves, a decline in bullying in school, students' feelings of safety, and their engagement with school.

Principals believe SEL benefits students' academic achievement as well. Over two-thirds of principals say an

72%

of principals at low-performing schools believe a larger focus on SEL would have a very major benefit on students' ability to stay on track to graduate.

increased focus on SEL would have a very major benefit on students' ability to stay on track to graduate from high school, while 62 percent believe SEL would have a very major benefit to students' performance in academic coursework, and over half believe it would have a very major benefit on reducing chronic absenteeism. Principals at low-performing schools are even more likely to believe

a larger focus on SEL would have a very major benefit to student's academic achievement.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, principals believe that SEL will have long-lasting benefits that continue even after graduation, including a very major benefit to students becoming good citizens as adults (79 percent), preparing students for the workforce (68 percent), and preparing students to get to and through college (57 percent).

## Survey Finding 2: Implementing SEL

The findings in this section show that principals who are systemically implementing SEL in their schools are more likely to see the benefits of SEL. They report better development of students' social and emotional skills, knowledge in key content areas, critical thinking abilities, and ability to apply their knowledge and skills in the real world, as well as greater levels of teacher preparation. They also report greater level of support from their district, a key component for systemic, school-wide SEL implementation. These findings make clear the benefits of systemic, school-wide SEL, as well as the need for greater implementation in schools.

<sup>1</sup>Low-performing schools are those where principals "currently rated" their school as low-performing.



### **Similar Proportions of Schools are Systematically Implementing SEL but Higher Percentages are Now Reaching Some Key Benchmarks**

Establishing a school-wide SEL plan lays the groundwork for providing training and support for teachers and staff, SEL program adoption, creating SEL benchmarks and assessments to measure student progress, and creating partnerships that can help support SEL. Encouragingly, the percent of schools that have developed a long-term plan to support SEL has increased from 43 percent to 55 percent, while the percent of schools that have developed a clear vision statement that includes SEL has increased by 10 percentage points. Schools with high levels of low-income students were more likely to have a long-term plan in place to support SEL than more affluent schools.

Despite growth in principals' demand for SEL and implementation of specific SEL benchmarks, there has been little movement in the percent of principals saying their schools are systemically implementing SEL. Over seven in ten principals (71 percent) have at least developed and partially implemented a plan for teaching students SEL skills, consistent with the 73 percent of principals that reported doing the same in 2017.

### **Growing Belief in Need for a Formal Curriculum to Teach SEL Skills**

There is a growing belief in the importance of implementing a formal curriculum for teaching social and emotional skills across all school types and areas. Seventy percent of principals believe it is *not* true that teachers do *not* need a formal

**70%**  
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curriculum for teaching social and emotional skills, up from 43 percent in 2017. This implies a growing recognition that a curriculum is necessary to embed SEL into classrooms and intentionally develop students' social and emotional competencies. Encouragingly, as principals recognize the need for formal curricula, there has been an increase in the percent of schools implementing

a separate and specific curriculum for teaching social and emotional skills, from 51 percent in 2017 to 57 percent. This includes a five-percentage point increase in principals that say this fully applies to their school.

### **District-level Implementation Remains Far Behind School-level Implementation**

Compared to the school level, principals report relatively low rates of district-level benchmarks and one in three principals say their district does not meet any of the benchmarks. While there has been a slight increase in focus, up seven percentage points from 2017, only one third of principals believe their district places a great deal of emphasis on developing student's social and emotional skills. Given the benefits principals see in integrating social, emotional and academic learning, this is remarkably low.

Despite the relatively lower levels of district-level implementation, principals do report district leaders are providing more guidance and support for SEL at higher levels, increasing from 34 percent in 2017 to 53 percent. Moreover, principals in districts that place a high emphasis on SEL report greater levels of success in developing students' social and emotional skills, as well as greater implementation across a host of benchmarks, including SEL integrated into curricula, all teachers being expected to teach SEL, having a SEL planning team in place to support SEL, and having a separate curriculum for teaching students social and emotional skills. These findings point to the important role districts play in school-level SEL implementation, as well as the need for additional district-level resources and collaborations to support SEL implementation.

### **Survey Finding 3: Growing SEL in Schools and Districts**

Despite principals' enthusiasm for developing students' social and emotional skills, they need help expanding implementation. This will require reducing barriers to implementation, including time constraints, working with teachers to show that SEL integration is not an "add-on" activity, and providing teachers with additional professional development opportunities.

### **Principals Believe Teachers are More Prepared to Teach Students Social and Emotional Skills**

More principals believe teachers are prepared to successfully develop the social and emotional skills of students now (53 percent) than in 2017 (45 percent). These gains may be driven by increases in the availability of coordinated professional development programs and the time teachers have to teach SEL. Since 2017, there has been a 14-percentage point gain in the percent of principals who say their school has a professional development program that addresses SEL, bringing the total to half of all principals. Similarly, the percent of principals reporting teachers saying that not having enough time to develop students' SEL skills is a very or fairly big challenge for them declined from 71 percent to 61 percent.

### **Principals Report a Range of Barriers to Implementing SEL**

Despite significant improvement in the landscape of SEL in schools, significant challenges persist. Principals cite lack of reinforcement of SEL skills outside of school, teachers not having enough time, lack of dedicated SEL funding streams, and teachers needing more training to support students' SEL skills development as the largest challenges to implementation.

Schools with more low-income students are more likely to report significant challenges to implementing SEL.

# 70%

or nearly 7 in 10 principals feel students' social and emotional skills should be assessed.

Significantly, schools with more than 80 percent of low-income students are more likely to cite a lack of reinforcement of SEL skills outside of school by 27 percentage points, teachers needing additional SEL training, lack of prioritization at the district level, and teacher turnover to be significant challenges.

These findings emphasize the need to ensure low-income schools are receiving the most intensive supports to implement SEL programming.

### **Survey Finding 4: Assessing SEL**

As high proportions of principals continue to see the value of SEL, more principals are becoming supportive of SEL assessments, as well as calling for state leaders to explicitly incorporate social and emotional development into state learning standards. Yet, despite increased use, some principals question the effectiveness of current assessments, highlighting the need to improve current measures of SEL, as well as advance better training in how to use and collect SEL data.

### **More Principals Believe SEL Can—and Should—Be Assessed**

Three-quarters of principals believe students' development and acquisition of social and emotional skills can be accurately measured and assessed, a slight increase from 2017 (71 percent). More strikingly, nearly 7 in 10 principals feel students' social and emotional skills should be assessed, up 11 percentage points from 58 percent. Still, only about a quarter of principals (28 percent) say social and emotional skills should definitely be part of student assessments and that SEL skills can be accurately assessed (22 percent).



### **Familiarity with Current SEL Assessments has Increased, but More Progress Needed**

Over one-third of principals (37 percent) report being familiar with current assessments that are available for measuring students' social and emotional skills, a significant increase from 17 percent in 2017. Principals similarly believe more teachers (33 percent) know at least a fair amount about how to use assessment data to improve instruction than they did previously (16 percent). While it is encouraging to see teachers' familiarity with assessments more than double, these numbers indicate the large majority of principals and teachers are still generally unfamiliar with current SEL assessments.

### **More Principals are Using Assessments but More Useful Assessments Still Needed**

Eighty-three percent of principals are currently using some type of assessment for students' social and emotional skills, up from 77 percent in 2017. This increase was seen in a variety of assessment types as well, including use of performance measures, student self-reports, and in administrative records. Importantly, more principals (40 percent) are using assessments of social and emotional skills with *all* students than in 2017 (24 percent), but most principals continue to only assess a subset of their students.

Encouragingly, more principals see current assessments for students' social and emotional skills as fairly or very useful, increasing 17 percentage points from 2017 up to 45 percent. Still, less than half believe these assessments to be useful despite SEL assessments becoming more widespread, emphasizing the need for more useful assessments. Yet, districts that place greater emphasis on social and emotional learning and high-implementation schools find assessments far more useful. Seventy percent of principals who say their district places a great deal of emphasis on SEL believe assessments are useful, compared to 44 percent of districts placing a fair amount of emphasis on SEL, and 12 percent placing some or less emphasis. Similarly, 64 percent of principals that have implemented a SEL program find current assessments useful.

### **Principals Increasingly Believe that Developing Social and Emotional Skills should be Included in State Education Standards**

Principals overwhelmingly believe that social and emotional skill development should probably or definitely be explicitly stated in state education standards (87 percent). This marks a sizable increase from 73 percent in 2017, including strong support nearly doubling from 25 percent to 49 percent.

## Policy Recommendations

Principals, teachers, and students have all articulated the demand for greater integration and implementation of SEL into their schools and classrooms, as well as a belief in its ability to be taught, assessed, and improve everything we already measure, including student achievement and engagement. Now it is time for leaders at the district, state, and federal levels to work together to create the enabling conditions needed for systemic, school-wide SEL in schools throughout the country.

### **Create and articulate a clear vision for students' comprehensive development, including SEL**

To create effective policy and practice, states, districts, and schools require a clear vision of what student success, and SEL look like, as well as how it will be measured. Many states and districts already have mission statements or visions. Now is the time to revisit these statements with greater knowledge of how learning happens. This vision should be informed by what students should be able to do at each age level and be aligned with the best evidence on social and emotional skill development. At the state level, the vision for SEL must be adaptable to allow school and district leaders the flexibility to address the local contexts of their communities, while still providing a strong framework for advancing and implementing systemic SEL and assessment.

### **Promote the development of adult capacity and strengthen SEL training among teachers and administrators**

State leaders should ensure educator preparation programs and licensure requirements reflect the knowledge and competencies necessary to successfully support students' social and emotional development. SEL training should also be embedded in continuing education requirements for faculty and educators. Districts should also hire and retain educators with proven background or training in SEL.

### **Foster and support continuous improvement of learning environments**

State leaders should enable districts and schools to create and continually improve supportive learning environments that promote strong relationships, provide personalized supports for students, and create engaging and relevant learning opportunities. To do this, state and district leaders must support the creation and adoption of data systems to continually improve learning environments for all students. It is also essential that policies and resources are aligned to provide equitable access to high-quality learning environments for each and every student. This will require closing SEL implementation gaps for low-income and rural schools.

### **Support state SEL learning standards and competency benchmarks backed by funding and resources for full implementation**

State SEL standards should be used as a high-impact lever to implement many of the policy recommendations included here. Specifically, they can include the vision for students' SEL development, and inform best practices and continuous learning on integrating SEL into academic curricula. They can also provide guidance for higher education institutions by laying the groundwork for integrating SEL into pre-service teacher training programs and guide professional development of teachers and administrators. Unlike academic standards, however, it is important SEL standards and benchmarks are only used to improve teaching and learning and are excluded from high-stakes accountability systems at this time. Standards should also be backed by the funding and state level infrastructure necessary to successfully support schools and districts as they implement systemic SEL.