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The Promise of Social-Emotional Learning Pages 34-35

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SEL: What the Research Says

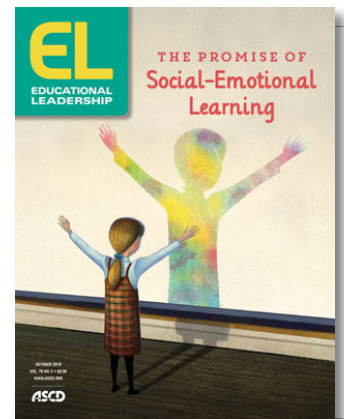
Joseph L. Mahoney and Roger P. Weissberg

Support for social-emotional learning (SEL) is strong and growing among teachers, administrators, parents, employers, and others concerned about preparing the next generation of students for success. This growing demand is complemented by a growing evidence base that strengthening students' SEL skills works.

Two major meta-analyses (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017) examined the influence of universal, school-based SEL programs on student outcomes in six domains: social and emotional skills, attitudes toward self and others, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance. The meta-analyses evaluated studies from a total of 265 reports, and 222 of these reports differed across the two analyses. Therefore, although there is some overlap among the two analyses, each captures a different section of SEL outcome research.

The 2011 meta-analysis examined individual studies from 1955 to 2007 and included 213 school-based, universal SEL programs serving 270,034 K-12 students. All the studies followed a comparison group design and nearly half involved random assignment. Major findings included:

- Students participating in SEL programs showed significantly more positive outcomes in all six areas compared to control students.
- SEL programs enhance academic achievement. The higher academic performance of students who participated in an SEL program translated into an 11 percentile-point gain in achievement.
- SEL programs that were implemented well and adhered to a combination of recommended



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practices—sequenced, active, focused, and explicit learning—were particularly likely to promote positive outcomes.

The 2017 meta-analysis reviewed longitudinal-study research on 82 school-based, universal SEL programs serving 97,406 K–12 students. Again, the studies included comparison groups and over half followed a random assignment design. This review included more recent investigations (up to 2014) and research conducted outside of the United States. Many of the studies investigated follow-up effects, years later, of participation in SEL programming. Major findings include:

- At follow-up, students who had participated in SEL programs continued to show significantly more positive outcomes in all six domains.
- Academic benefits endure. The academic performance of SEL program participants translated into a 13 percentile-point gain in achievement at follow-up.
- A small number of studies that included long-term follow-up through adolescence and young adulthood found that SEL program participants continued to show significantly better adjustment. More had graduated from high school and attended college; fewer had been arrested.

Implications and Future Directions

This outcome research on SEL programs suggests several implications and future directions. First, it will be critical to determine the best ways to scale up evidence-based SEL programming while maintaining its quality—and make a case for it. Pointing to long-term positive results from SEL programming and a strong return on investment for such initiatives—as these two meta-analyses and other research shows (Belfield et al., 2015)—can help district and school leaders make a compelling case for including SEL in strategic plans and budgets. Second, given the positive connections between participation in universal, school-based SEL programs and academic performance, expanding SEL programming in low-performing schools, especially, seems warranted.

Finally, districts themselves should conduct research and follow a model of continuous improvement to drive SEL program implementation. Areas where more research is needed include: how characteristics of the samples, like gender, race, and ethnicity, relate to program impacts; the role of adult SEL (as an outcome and a contributor to student outcomes); and the significance of continuous, integrated SEL from preK through young adulthood.

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