



Making SEL Happen

Practical Tips for Developing, Implementing, and Measuring Your SEL Program

A Guide by Newsela



Table of Contents

03 Introduction

05 Developing an SEL Program

09 Implementing an SEL Program

12 Measuring the Effectiveness of SEL

16 About

17 Bibliography

Making SEL Happen: Practical Tips for Developing, Implementing, and Measuring Your SEL Program

Why SEL?

In the 21st century, Social-Emotional Learning [SEL] is as much a cornerstone of K-12 education as traditional academic subjects. One 2017 [study](#) found teachers spend 4.3 hours, or 8% of their total working time, teaching SEL skills. U.S. public schools spend \$640 million each year on SEL products and programs.

The evidence suggests SEL is worth the large investment. A Columbia University [study](#) estimated that every dollar schools spend on SEL produces \$11 in benefits to society, including reduced substance abuse, higher wages, and improved mental health for students who master SEL skills. It also produces academic outcomes that you can see in the shorter term: an [analysis](#) by CASEL found that students who participated in SEL programming gained an average of 11 to 17 percentile points in achievement test scores. As we begin to understand SEL's power to benefit students beyond the classroom for decades after they leave the K-12 system, there has never been a better time to develop and implement your own SEL program.



SEL builds competencies including:

- ✓ Social awareness
- ✓ Self management
- ✓ Relationship skills
- ✓ Responsible decision-making
- ✓ Self awareness

Making SEL Happen: Practical Tips for Developing, Implementing, and Measuring Your SEL Program

The SEL Movement

[All 50 states have adopted SEL standards](#) at the preschool level, and each year, more introduce them for K-12 students. Given the recognition that SEL is a powerful pedagogy, it's understandable that schools want to select and implement programs as quickly as possible. However, hasty implementation [can weaken SEL's results](#) if it is done inconsistently or ineffectively. It is worth the time to carefully develop an SEL implementation strategy that's tailored to your school's unique needs.

One powerful way to focus on SEL is implementing a program. But how do you choose?

Here's a practical guide to development, implementation, and measurement strategies that will maximize your SEL program's effectiveness.



Primary actors involved in SEL:

- Principals and school administrators
- Teachers
- Counselors
- Parents

Developing an SEL Program: Finding the Perfect Fit for Your School

Questions to ask when choosing an SEL program

Which competencies does its curriculum emphasize?

For example, [Good Behavior Game](#) focuses almost exclusively on interpersonal skills, whereas [SECURE](#) strikes a relatively equal balance between interpersonal skills, cognitive regulation, and emotional processes.

What is this program's methodology and pedagogy?

[Playworks](#) features game and kinesthetic instructional methods that might be well-suited to schools that already use Montessori frameworks. On the other hand, the Social Decision Making/Problem Solving Program relies heavily on

discussions—easily adaptable for small, seminar-style classrooms.

Is this program customizable for my school's environment?

Some programs are specifically designed to be adaptable for specialized student populations. For instance, [Girls on the Run](#) specifically targets 8- to 13-year-old girls. You might consider supplementing a schoolwide SEL program with narrower initiatives like this one.

How much implementation support does this program offer?

These supports might include multimedia resources, premade implementation plans, and trainings.

How does this program assess SEL success?

[The American Institutes for Research](#) recommend considering five variables when choosing an SEL assessment method: purpose, rigor, practicalities, burden, and ethics.

What are this program's goals and objectives?

Consider not only whether the program's goals align with your school's, but also the extent to which you can tailor its goals to fit your needs.

There are [at least 25 evidence-based SEL programs available](#), with more cropping up each year.

Developing an SEL Program: Finding the Perfect Fit for Your School



Schools can create their own SEL programs, too.

Many schools that introduce SEL programming use a third-party curriculum—but not all choose that route. Perhaps the best choice for your school is to create your own SEL program from scratch or integrate SEL concepts into frameworks you already have. For instance, some teachers have successfully incorporated standalone SEL activities, such as having students take turns sharing a problem they are facing, into their daily routines. Nothing can replace a comprehensive, evidence-based, schoolwide program. However, the speed and cost-effectiveness of layering SEL over preexisting successful frameworks can make this an attractive option for some schools.



Did you know?

Research indicates an 11 to 1 return on investment for SEL instruction. U.S. public schools are making the investment, spending \$640 million each year on SEL products and programs.

Developing an SEL Program: Finding the Perfect Fit for Your District

Form an SEL committee.

SEL benefits students, parents, teachers, administrators, and the wider community. Each of these stakeholders should have input into the SEL development process.

Educate stakeholders about SEL

To design an optimal SEL program, all stakeholders should understand SEL's key concepts. Third-party experts are a great resource, but it's also important to develop an understanding of how SEL will work in your district. Reach out to nearby districts and schools to learn from their experiences with SEL.

Identify specific goals for your school or your district

Your priorities for SEL will be as unique as your district. Specific student populations might have specific needs

to which you can tailor your approach. For instance, students facing challenges at home might benefit from an SEL program that focuses on confidence and optimism—key skills for building resilience.

Study programs, narrow down a list of candidates, and select one or more based on input from all stakeholders.

With dozens of evidence-based SEL programs to choose from, you'll want to carefully study your options. Consider not only competencies, but also instructional methods, support resources, assessment, and customization options.

Keep in mind that it may take multiple programs to attain all of your specific goals, and districts can mix and match programs or program components to meet their needs.

Assess costs, training and support, materials, and cultural and linguistic adaptability and responsiveness.

Individual schools and districts weigh these variables differently. Make your job easier by entering the selection process with a clear understanding of your priorities.

Design support systems.

A comprehensive SEL program takes time, labor, and material resources. One of the biggest risks of the implementation process is teachers feeling burdened or unsupported in their efforts to introduce the new curriculum. Professional development supports, substantive resources, and open lines of communication about teachers' needs can prevent this.

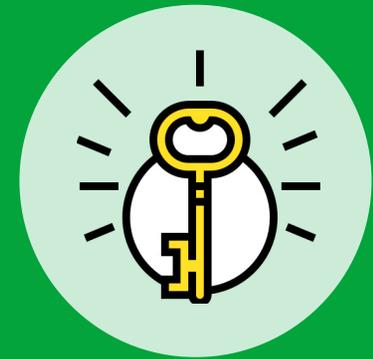
Developing an SEL Program: Finding the Perfect Fit for Your District

Develop a multiyear implementation plan.

This might include a pilot program at one school or grade level with more frequent assessments during the pilot period. Strong institutions can help ensure accountability for adhering to the plan. For instance, [Austin Independent School District](#) [AISD] has created an SEL department, including SEL specialists as well as specialists in parent education and [Methods for Academic and Personal Success](#). AISD's strategy includes evolving resources and support strategies, with the understanding that SEL implementation requires continuous support even in its late stages.

In late stages of the plan, assess challenges and surprises that you've encountered, and adapt the program accordingly.

Don't disband the SEL committee! Your academic programming, teacher skillsets, and assessment tools are living, responsive, and constantly evolving. An SEL framework should be no different.



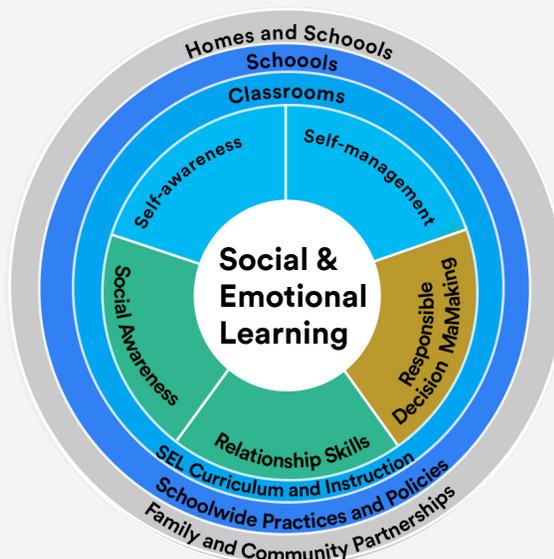
Key Takeaway

SEL should be integrated into every aspect of district planning - including strategy, budget, and human resources.

Implementing the Program: Tying SEL into Academic Instruction

Framework for Systemic Social and Emotional Learning

[Source: CASEL](#)



Forging connections to the academic curriculum

It can be challenging for teachers who are already stretched to allocate time for SEL activities, so integrating SEL competencies into existing curriculum is an important step to ensure efficiency. For instance, ELA teachers can choose literary texts that relate to key SEL skills, and math instructors can teach collaborative problem-solving methods.

Tying SEL skills into every academic subject proves to students that these skills are relevant everywhere. Educators know that students who master SEL skills like listening, working well with other students, and making responsible decisions about homework and behavior will learn the academic curriculum more effectively. Teaching students to apply SEL skills in each classroom gives them the tools they need for success.



Did you know?

[Austin Independent School District](#) and [Metro Nashville Public Schools](#) have been leading the charge when it comes to SEL planning, implementation, assessment, and iteration.

Implementing the Program: Tying SEL into Academic Instruction

SEL activities for the ELA classroom

Perspective taking

Assign texts that use multiple perspectives to show convergent and divergent experiences. Peter Dickinson's *A Bone from a Dry Sea*, which features two protagonists' points of view, is a great resource for middle-grade readers. Use games or writing assignments that require students to adopt the perspective of a character from the assigned text. Two-voice poetry and paired text analysis can also be valuable additions to your instruction.

Social awareness

Have students give feedback on each other's writing in small "workshops." Prepare students to give kind, helpful, and constructive feedback on each

other's work with tools like sentence starters and rubrics.

Self awareness

Help students draw text-to-self connections when reading about people and their relationships in texts. What lessons can we learn from this character? Was this an example to follow or not follow?

Relationship skills

Hold free-form or directed "book club"-style conversations in small groups. Set students up for success by having them set their own guidelines for inviting others to the conversation and monitoring airtime. Always end with a reflection on the process and gratitude to their peers.

Key Components of an SEL Culture

- Adults model SEL in the classroom and beyond
- Students have a voice in decision-making and feedback
- Families and community members are brought in to SEL

Implementing the Program: Tying SEL into Academic Instruction

SEL activities for the math classroom

Self awareness

Inculcate in students a growth mindset by holding discussions at the beginning and end of each unit for students to share challenges, discuss any anxiety they have about the upcoming unit, and celebrate their achievements.

Self management

Teach students to manage frustration with hard problems using practical skills like breathing exercises, pep talks, and asking for help.

Responsible decision making

Discuss real-world math applications like personal finance and math-related careers.

SEL activities for the science classroom

Social awareness

Discuss how relationship skills like communication, empathy, and teamwork could have ameliorated scientific controversies like evolution and the ethics of human cloning.

Self awareness and self management

Explore the biology of stress, including emotions, and being aware of what happens to our bodies when we are stressed. Students can apply what they know about the science of stress to come up with their own ideas of how to cope with its symptoms.

Using SEL Measurement to Understand Student Needs

What can SEL assessment do for you and your students?

Asking your students to reflect on their SEL mindsets and skills is essential in order to identify successes and areas for growth. Excellent measurement practices can produce actionable insights to guide your SEL approach.



Panorama Education Case Study

SEL measurement in Racine, Wisconsin

When Racine Unified School District conducted a survey to measure its SEL program's success, its students reported that they had room to improve in the emotion regulation competency—rating themselves 3.4 out of 5 on questions about emotion regulation skills like managing their moods.

RUSD took action by introducing new programs targeting this competency, including “STAR breathing” exercises to strengthen mindfulness, [the Committee for Children's Second Step curriculum](#) to provide teachers with additional tools to teach emotion regulation in the classroom, and lunch groups to work on SEL competencies for students needing extra support.

[Learn more](#) about Racine's SEL strategy.



Did you know?

99%

of principals say social and emotional skills are teachable within a school setting

95%

of principals are committed to developing social and emotional skills in their schools

Source: [CASEL](#)

Using SEL Measurement to Understand Student Needs

Building blocks for SEL measurement success

Student surveys

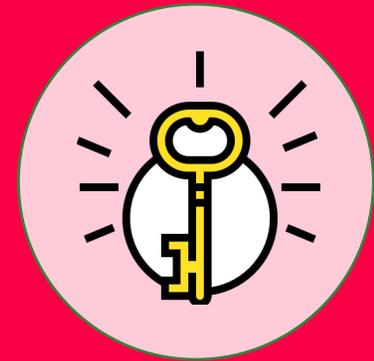
Student self-reporting is an essential component of effective assessment. Why? It gives students a sense of ownership and control over their SEL development, and it encourages self-awareness (itself an SEL competency). Just as importantly, it can kickstart conversations between teachers and students about SEL—a great opportunity for teachers to check in with students and work on cultivating a growth mindset.

Data-driven action

SEL reports—from the individual student level to the district level—can help drive comprehensive improvement plans as well as empower educators to emphasize specific competencies in the classroom. Educators can even use self-reported student data to identify struggling students and offer personalized support, including pairing them with classmates.

Iteration

Iteration frameworks like [Challenge Based Learning](#) inculcate a variety of SEL competencies, including self-management (coping with frustration in challenging tasks), growth mindset, and self-awareness. Repeating similar challenges gives students an opportunity to identify their areas for improvement. Assessment data can help you design iteration tasks that target students' weaknesses, and iteration activities themselves can be a form of performance assessment for both SEL and academic competencies.



Key Takeaway

Collect and analyze SEL data from students over time to drive continued improvement.

Putting Great Measurement Practices Into Action



Panorama Education Case Study

A data-driven approach to growth mindset improves academic performance at Long Beach Unified

In the 2014-2015 school year, Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) in California conducted an SEL assessment through student surveys. At one school, MacArthur Elementary, school administrators noticed a surprising finding: only half of students reported confidence in their ability to grow their intelligence and talents.

In response, the school introduced a targeted program to improve students' growth mindset, a core SEL skill. The program included lessons about the brain's malleability and practical strategies to develop a growth mindset in their lives. For adults, the school offered professional development for teachers and hosted "parent university" nights to educate guardians about the importance of growth mindset.

By the 2016-2017 school year, MacArthur students scored in the 99th percentile on growth mindset metrics compared to similar schools, and students' favorable views of their growth mindset skills had increased by 33 percentage points. ELA and math achievement also increased by 19 percentage points and 17 percentage points, respectively, during this time frame.

[Learn more](#) about growth mindset and academic achievement in Long Beach.



Analyze SEL data alongside other key indicators:

- Academic data
- Attendance data
- Behavior and disciplinary data
- School climate data
- Graduation rates

Putting Great Measurement Practices Into Action

3 strategies you can implement today to start the journey toward SEL success

Approach measurement and data-driven strategy as an ongoing process.

Set progress benchmarks throughout the year and adhere to a schedule for introducing new skills. We recommend assessments at the beginning and end of the school year to measure progress. To hold your school or district accountable for its SEL goals, it can be helpful to put a person or committee in charge of measuring SEL success and translating it into ongoing improvement.

Research measurement frameworks and identify the one that's best suited for your school or district.

As with development and implementation, it is essential to get [stakeholder buy-in](#) for your SEL measurement practices. Collaborate with district leaders, school

administrators, and teachers to research the many evidence-based measurement frameworks and identify one that best meets your goals.

Identify specific questions you hope to answer in your assessment.

Assessments measure the general effectiveness of your SEL efforts, but they're also a great opportunity to answer narrower questions about how your students are growing. How are students in different grade levels progressing with particular SEL skills? Do specific student groups (for instance, ELLs or students receiving free or reduced lunch) need additional SEL support?

Sample SEL Survey Questions: Sense of Belonging

1. How connected do you feel to the adults at your school?
2. How well do people at your school understand you as a person?
3. How much do you feel like you belong at your school?

Source: [Panorama Education](#)

About Newsela

Newsela is an Instructional Content Platform that combines engaging, leveled content with integrated formative assessments and insights to supercharge engagement and learning in every subject. Students and teachers use Newsela to find digital content from hundreds of the best sources—from National Geographic to NASA, Biography.com to Encyclopedia Britannica, the Washington Post to the Wichita Eagle. Content is instructionalized to meet students where they are, with interactive tools and analytics to take them where they want to go. Newsela has become an essential solution for schools and districts, with a presence in over 90% of U.S. K-12 schools. Newsela is the content platform for the connected classroom.

Find out more about Newsela's SEL Collection here: <https://www.newsela.com/collections/#sel>

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