



SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMS AND CURRICULA

Excerpted and adapted from *Skills and Dispositions that Support Youth Success in School, Part 2: Strategies for Building Motivation, Engagement and 21st Century Skills*

Research shows that social and emotional skills are pivotal to student success in school, work, and life. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs and curricula are developed to explicitly teach these skills. There is strong and compelling evidence that fully integrated SEL programs improve students' connection to school and reduce behavior problems.¹ Furthermore, there is a growing understanding that they can improve academic performance. A recent, comprehensive meta-analysis of SEL programs identified critical components of effective SEL programs that can be captured with the acronym SAFE: sequenced, active, focused, and explicit. SAFE programs use a **S**equenced set of activities to achieve skill objectives; use **A**ctive forms of learning; Include at least one program component **F**ocused on developing personal or social skills; and **E**xplicitly target particular personal or social skills for development. When programs were implemented with fidelity by trained classroom teachers, and addressed all components of the SAFE model, they were associated with statistically significant improvements in both test scores and grades.²

HOW SEL PROGRAMS WORK

SEL programs can take a variety of forms, ranging from direct instruction by way of packaged curriculum to integrated school- and system-wide approaches focused on relationships and culture. They are typically preventative in nature and target known risk and preventative factors in student development. Many school based programs focus on the 5 competency areas identified by the Collective for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. CASEL had conducted a review of SEL programs and have identified CASEL Select programs which meet the following criteria:

1. They are **well designed, teacher taught, and classroom-based**.
2. They provide **training and other implementation support**.
3. There is **evidence of effectiveness**. Many SEL programs, including the two specifically mentioned in this paper, have been rigorously evaluated using pre- and post- outcome measurement and a comparison group in randomized control trials.³

CHARACTERISTICS OF SEL PROGRAMS

SEL programs are best distinguished by their explicit and intentional focus on the development of social and emotional competencies. For the purposes of this piece, two SEL programs will be briefly discussed: Second Step and the RULER approach. These two have been chosen based on their strong evidence base, system-level supports,

¹ Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger (2011); Greenburg, Weissberg, O'Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnick & Elias (2003); Payton, Wardlaw, Graczyk, Bloodworth, Tompsett & Weissberg (2000)

² Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger (2011)

³ Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2012)



promising successes in King County, and/or widespread adoption. All schools considering an SEL program should choose the program that is the right fit for their school context, needs, and resources.

MODEL PROGRAMS

- The **Second Step** program is a comprehensive, manual-based SEL curriculum developed by the Committee for Children, based in Seattle, Washington. Second Step is generally taught by classroom teachers, who receive training in facilitating structured, discussion-based lessons that focus on empathy, social problem solving, and emotion management. Evaluations of Second Step have found the program to have positive effects on student behavior and achievement, but implementation matters. Teachers can reinforce the curriculum by modeling pro-social behaviors and using instructional practices that reinforce skills taught.
 - **RULER** is a multi-year program that provides curriculum for students with substantial training for educators. RULER is an acronym representing five key emotional literacy skills: recognizing emotions in the self and others, understanding the causes and consequences of emotions, labeling emotional experiences with an accurate and diverse vocabulary, and expressing and regulating emotions.⁴ Skill-building lessons are accompanied by the integration of supportive behaviors among the adults who work with young people. RULER is a program that can be scaled to entire schools or districts, and is currently being implemented in a number of local schools and districts. Evaluations of the RULER approach have demonstrated positive effects on school and classroom cultures, teachers' perceptions of student behavior, student/teacher relationship quality, and grades.⁵
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CONSIDERATIONS

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs are perhaps the best positioned to *teach* the skills and dispositions that support youth success in school. These programs are most effective when they are reinforced throughout the day.⁶ Disciplinary practices and relational dynamics at school can either enhance or detract from the effectiveness of SEL programs.⁷ SEL instruction is most powerful when situated within a positive school climate and combined with positive, trauma-informed, and culturally appropriate forms of discipline.

HOW SEL PROGRAMS CAN HELP CLOSE THE OPPORTUNITY GAP

While social and emotional factors can put students at risk for poor achievement, they can also be thought of as protective. Improving relationships through SEL programs is a promising approach to improving student motivation and student achievement. The effects may be most powerful for low-income students and students of color, who are often most in need of social and emotional supports.⁸ One recent study of predominantly low-income students found that positive relationships with teachers were protective against achievement problems for those with low levels of effortful control. Conversely, effortful control was protective against achievement problems for students

⁴ Brackett & Rivers (n.d.), p. 9

⁵ Rivers, Brackett, Reyes, Elbertson & Salovey (2013); Brackett, Rivers, Reyes & Salovey (2012)

⁶ Elias, Zins, Graczyk & Weissberg (2003)

⁷ Frey, Hirschstein & Guzzo (2000); Cooke, Ford, Levine, Bourke, Newell & Lapidus (2007)

⁸ Becker & Luthar (2002)



with poor teacher relationships.⁹ This makes SEL programs, which teach effortful control *and* improve student-teacher relationships, seem especially promising.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- **Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)** - <http://www.casel.org/>
CASEL's mission is to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning an integral part of education from preschool through high school. They provide research and guidance on policy and practice for educators, parents, and partners.
- **Second Step** - <http://www.cfchildren.org/second-step.aspx>
Second Step is a comprehensive social and emotional skill development program focused on early education through grade eight. Developed by the Committee for Children, the program provides comprehensive curriculum for all grades, and has partnered with the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment to adapt their DESSA SEL-skill assessment tool for use with Second Step programs.
- **RULER Approach** - <http://ei.yale.edu/ruler/>
Developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, RULER is a multi-phase school improvement process that attempts to integrate emotional learning into every aspect of the school curriculum and community. Ruler has been shown to improve achievement as well as school climate and culture.

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⁹ Liew, Chen & Hughes (2010)



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