



## Social Emotional Curriculum to Support Students A Literature Review

Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

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### Description

Shelby County Schools has purchased *Rethink*, a curriculum designed to support social emotional learning in a school community. This literature review provides a description of social emotional learning and then covers the following topics:

- The importance of social emotional support for students, especially when coming out of crisis
- Teacher professional development and support needed to understand how social emotional support for students impacts learning and classroom behavior
- The academic outcomes associated with best practices of implementation of a social emotional support curriculum
- Best practices, pitfalls, and lessons learned in implementing a social emotional curriculum

### What is Social Emotional Learning?

- Social emotional learning (SEL) focuses on five competencies: 1) self-awareness, 2) self-management, 3) social awareness, 4) relationship skills, and 5) responsible decision-making (CASEL).<sup>5</sup> One model suggests that increases in SE competencies learned through school-based programming first improve students' positive attitudes toward self and others (short-term outcomes) and then increase positive behavior, academic success, and mental health (long-term outcomes).<sup>13</sup> Effective SE skills are an integral part of development. Effectively managing SE skills goes beyond supporting students in PK-12 education to providing skills that will be useful when facing challenges in college or the workplace.<sup>19</sup>
- Effective SEL programs feature six criteria including that they are 1) developmentally appropriate; 2) culturally relevant; 3) systemic; 4) comprehensive; 5) evidence-based; and 6) forward thinking.<sup>19</sup>

### The Importance of Social Emotional Support for Students

- Research<sup>13</sup> on school-based SEL programs has consistently found that they positively impact students' social behaviors and academic progress. Four meta-analyses together analyzed the findings from 459 SEL studies. Two of the meta-analyses examined outcomes immediately after program participation.<sup>8, 28</sup> Both found moderate and significant effect sizes (.57 and .53) for SEL skills for students who participated in SEL programs compared to those who did not. They found small but significant effect sizes (range .19-.33) for attitudes, positive social behaviors, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance with students trained in SEL performing better in all areas compared to non-participating peers.
- The other two meta-analyses<sup>23, 25</sup> analyzed studies that gathered follow-up data at least seven months after the program ended. These analyses found lasting positive effects from SEL training in all outcome areas (SEL skills, attitudes, positive social behaviors, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance) (effect sizes range .07-.33).
- A summary of early studies examining the impact of SEL curricula on student outcomes found that K-6 grade students involved in programs exhibited fewer risk-taking behaviors (i.e., alcohol or marijuana use), expressed emotions more appropriately, followed rules better, and more often stayed on task compared to students in control groups.<sup>27</sup>
- In a school-to-school comparison, the school implementing a universal SEL program to all students and teachers had significantly fewer instances of internalizing behaviors and



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significantly more prosocial behaviors among students than the control school. These trends were evident for all students, however students at-risk for social-emotional problems before the program was implemented showed more positive gains in both areas compared to general education students.<sup>11</sup>

- Randomized controlled studies showed that with SEL interventions there were improvements in academic effort and academic achievement using reading, writing, and math scores as indicators.<sup>19</sup>

### Teacher Professional Development and Support

- Despite the research touting the benefits of incorporating SEL curricula into schools, there are very few teacher training programs that include SEL as part of their program requirements.<sup>6, 17</sup> Yet, being effective as an SE teacher requires understanding the conceptual framework and why it is important,<sup>24</sup> being well-trained in the curriculum,<sup>24</sup> and having a certain level of competence in one's own social emotional skills.<sup>4, 22, 29</sup>
- Teachers' own competence and ability to effectively use SE skills allows them to be better role models for students which is especially important in the younger grades;<sup>29</sup> and allows them to more effectively work through any unexpected reactions and responses from students which is especially important for students who have experienced trauma or have been in crisis.<sup>20</sup>
- Additionally, leaders who have higher levels of emotional intelligence (including competence with SE skills) can navigate organizational change better. School administrators can use these skills to help teachers and staff work through school reform efforts or to make changes in school climate/culture.<sup>16</sup>
- School-based SEL programs in which teachers, administrators, and other school personnel are program participants along with students are most effective at creating positive changes in overall school climate.<sup>19</sup> Successful programs allow for long periods of teacher and staff training in SE skills before implementing a curriculum at the school level for students. Not only do teachers need to learn additional skills and curriculum, other school staff face adjustments to their roles as well. For example, school counselors might need to shift their perspective conceptually. Instead of their role being to respond to a problem that occurs, their work would become consulting with students to prevent problems from arising.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, school counselors could become strong leaders in supporting SEL practices.<sup>3</sup>
- Ongoing teacher PD and teacher support improved implementation fidelity with teachers who initially had low implementation fidelity initially.<sup>7, 15</sup>
- Bullying prevention programs have been more successful when teachers have had more training and coaching. Students exhibited higher emotional intelligence and earned better behavior grades with increased PD.<sup>21</sup>
- Teachers' beliefs about their own teaching and the level of support they have received is linked to the degree of fidelity to which teachers implement SEL curriculum in their classrooms.<sup>22</sup>

### Academic Outcomes Associated with Best Practices of Implementation

- A study examining implementation of SEL curriculum and student outcomes compared high-implementation schools to low-implementation schools in four school districts. Three districts displayed statistically significant differences in student outcomes related to level of



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curriculum implementation. One district each showed that high-implementation schools had higher math scores (Gr 3-8), reading scores (Gr 3-8), or English I scores. GPA in one district was higher in high-implementing schools but in another district was lower in high-implementing schools.<sup>18</sup>

- Student academic achievement increased by 11 percentile points on an index based on report card grades and test scores when SEL programs have been implemented with fidelity.<sup>8, 23</sup>
- A meta-analysis of SEL intervention programs for students with social, emotional, and/or behavioral challenges showed that program participation improved academic outcomes (effect size 0.53) when program implementation adhered to key design elements.<sup>9</sup>
- Lasting positive effects were observed for kindergarten students who participated in an integrated social emotional awareness and emergent early literacy curriculum in pre-K that was implemented with moderate to high fidelity. Students in the pre-K treatment classrooms compared to students in pre-K control classrooms showed less disruptive behavior, had higher levels of learning engagement and social competence, and better phonemic decoding skills in kindergarten across all classroom contexts. Additionally, treatment students who ended up in kindergarten classrooms with a strong emphasis on reading showed stronger letter-word identification and sight word efficiency.<sup>2</sup>
- A meta-analysis of 213 studies<sup>8</sup> identified four practices for developing the new SEL skills that students acquired, including 1) using an sequential and integrated skills curriculum, 2) using active learning to promote the skills, 3) focusing sufficient attention on skill development, and 4) establishing explicit learning goals. Schools that used all four practices showed more improvements in student SEL skills and academic progress than those that used only some of the practices.

### Best Practices, Pitfalls, and Lessons Learned in Curriculum Implementation

- When new programs are introduced to school staff and teachers, they run the risk of being received as something that will compete with the teaching time necessary for students to meet state academic standards. To alleviate this, SEL programs work best when they are integrated into the curriculum. Additionally, teachers need to fully understand how SEL supports academic progress. An analysis of the overlap of SEL skills and one state's academic standards showed that SEL skills overlapped with approximately 2/3 of the 204 state standards, including listening skills, communication skills, problem identification, and analyzing options and outcomes.<sup>12</sup>
- SEL curricula that are too scripted might be more difficult for teachers to buy into because they do not meet the current and changing needs of the classroom or students. A strategy-based approach, where teachers learn different SEL strategies that can be applied to many contexts and activities as needed throughout the school day, has been well-received by teachers.<sup>1</sup>
- A study<sup>24</sup> that interviewed and surveyed teachers and students found that while teachers viewed their SEL programs to be empowering to students, students took away very different messages. For example, they viewed that being a leader in their classroom equated to being quiet and compliant. To avoid these kinds of disconnections between teachers and students, the author suggested ensuring that teachers fully understood the program, its



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implementation, and how adjusting it might impact the outcome. Additionally, schools should listen to their students to make sure the program is working as intended.

- The five competencies of SEL skills (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) look different across development. For example, what a 5 or 6 year old is capable of in terms of self-management is much different than a middle-school student or a high-school student; likewise for responsible decision-making. SEL programs with curricula that match development are more effective.<sup>1, 18</sup> Likewise, assessments of student competency with SEL skills should reflect developmental changes in children.<sup>14</sup>
- One expert in promoting SEL skills in schools cautioned that implementation an SEL curriculum takes work on the part of teachers and school administrators and they should be prepared for that expectation.<sup>4</sup>
- Being aware of culture when using SEL curriculum in schools is important to help read social cues accurately.<sup>4</sup>
- Noting parallels between the skills SEL programs can teach and the needs of students who have experienced trauma, one article pointed out the importance of planning implementation. Pawlo and colleagues<sup>20</sup> argued that this is especially important in “urban, high-poverty areas where trauma is highly-prevalent [and] students often struggle to succeed in school (pg. 40).” Careful planning of implementation to allow teachers time for buy in is crucial, especially when teachers and school administrators may be burned out from cycling through different reform initiatives that do not seem to make significant, sustained changes in school success.



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