



HOW STUDENTS THRIVE | Social and Emotional Learning Advances Educational Equity

To meet the challenges of the moment and of the future, all students need opportunities to develop and apply social and emotional competencies.

- **The education crisis and the challenges in our world coincide with an explosion of evidence about how children learn, develop, and thrive.** Research over the past three decades across multiple fields—from the biological and neurosciences to psychology, sociology, and the developmental and learning sciences—strongly indicates that *all learning is social and emotional*.¹ There is an inextricable link among social, emotional, and academic processes.²
- **Social and emotional competencies are critical to succeed in the 21st century.** The most pressing local and global challenges and the best job opportunities require young people to do what even the most advanced technologies cannot: apply social, emotional, and cognitive skills and human values to solve problems together.^{3, 4, 5} This need is worldwide: Structural inequities mean that young people “need to become adept in handling tensions, dilemmas, and tradeoffs.” Economic success “requires the ability to be self-generative, creative, inner-directed, socially aware, sensitive, and responsible, flexible, and psychologically resilient” (Andreas Schleicher of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development).
- **Schools can play a crucial role in supporting students’ well-being and nurturing their full potential after a disruptive year. Social and emotional learning can be vital to this work.** The consequences of COVID-19 will affect physical, economic, emotional, psychological, and social well-being for years to come, playing out across the lives of individuals and communities.^{6, 7, 8} The pandemic has amplified longstanding educational, economic, racial, and gender inequities and privileges.

Policymakers and education leaders should act to mitigate the effects of the pandemic—and regenerate learning opportunities, experiences, and outcomes—and do so in a manner that promotes thriving and equity. We risk our children’s futures and the nation’s if we turn a blind eye to the realities of the past year.

Over the past three decades, we have learned a great deal about social and emotional learning, the science of learning and development, and implementation science. This knowledge can be leveraged to respond to the impacts of COVID-19, promote equity, and help students thrive.

- **Social and emotional competencies are teachable and learnable.** The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”⁹

Social and emotional learning has the potential to help individuals develop self-awareness and make culturally and situationally appropriate decisions. Young people can develop and apply these skills at home, at school, and in the community. Social and emotional competencies can contribute to effective communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and deeper learning. Transformative social and emotional learning addresses issues of power, privilege, prejudice, and discrimination by nurturing critical examination and collaborative action.¹⁰

Social and emotional learning is most effective when it infuses all school-related activities. State-of-the-art social, emotional, and cognitive processes are linked. Leading social and emotional learning practitioners now put social and emotional learning at the heart of cognitive development and learning—they do not simply treat it as a stand-alone lesson or program.

Systemic social and emotional learning that contributes to equitable learning conditions can benefit from a coordinated set of evidence-based programs and practices that are culturally responsive and deeply integrated into learning experiences across whole schools as well as out-of-school-time programs. This includes, for example, instructional strategies, curriculum, arts integration, sports and extracurricular activities, and restorative justice practices. Such a coordinated and culturally proficient approach requires collaboration and synergy across classrooms, schools, families, and communities.¹¹

- **Individual competencies are not enough. Conditions matter.** To advance equity, schools and learning environments must be safe places for all students—physically, emotionally, personally, and intellectually. They must provide cultural respect and responsiveness, connectedness and a sense of belonging, social and academic support, and engagement and challenge to all students.^{12, 13, 14, 15, 16} To do this effectively, everyone in schools, from teachers, to staff, to bus drivers, should have the opportunity to develop and practice social and emotional learning competencies and do so in a culturally responsive manner.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN PRACTICE

More than a decade ago, the [Cleveland Metropolitan School District](#) experienced a “never again” moment with a tragic school shooting. In response, the district, the city, and the entire school community came together around a strategic, comprehensive approach to heal, to prevent future tragedies, and, ultimately, to thrive.

AIR conducted a districtwide audit of district and community capacity to meet student needs. Based on the recommendations, the district implemented an evidence-based social and emotional learning program districtwide. Thousands of teachers, paraprofessionals, psychologists, therapists, and nurses—anyone who interacted directly with students—received training in social and emotional learning. The district focused on student support and created planning spaces in schools for students to interact with caring adults. The district continues to administer AIR’s Conditions for Learning Survey to monitor how all students in the district experience safety, connectedness, and support; academic challenge; and peer social and emotional competence.

The district also institutionalized social and emotional learning and Conditions for Learning practices by incorporating them into its union contract, code of conduct, policies, and practices.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Education Leaders

- **Enact policies that make social and emotional learning an imperative for students and adults in the COVID-19 era and beyond.** Disruptions in schools, communities, and homes are affecting students' ability to learn—socially, cognitively, and academically. Educators, too, need support to meet students' needs now and in the future. Unprecedented numbers of young people are disengaged from school and programs, and reported rates of mental health needs are rising—particularly among adolescents.^{17,18} Policymakers should consider:
 - Adopting social and emotional learning standards that are culturally proficient and developmentally appropriate, and that include skills that support student grounding and agency.
 - Offering grants and support for coordinating services.
 - Providing funding for coaches and trainers.
 - Developing accountability metrics that recognize the inextricable link among social, emotional, and academic learning and the need for supportive conditions for social, emotional, and academic learning.
- **Incorporate social and emotional learning and equity into school reopening and recovery plans.** Infusing social and emotional learning into schoolwide cultures requires a systems approach. Districts and schools should consider:
 - Defining social and emotional learning in a culturally proficient manner and including this definition in a district or school vision statement.
 - Providing high-quality professional development in social and emotional learning and cultural responsiveness for all adults who interact with students, including school leaders, teachers and paraprofessionals, and service providers.
 - Developing accountability metrics that support effective conditions for social, emotional, and academic learning.
 - Providing time for teacher collaboration.
 - Incorporating collective data on school climate and social and emotional learning into data dashboards.
- **Ensure that the implementation of social and emotional learning addresses strengths, identity, and student agency and the lived experiences of trauma, inequity, racism, and injustice, which present real and relevant learning opportunities.** Districts and schools should integrate social and emotional learning into other strategies that focus on these issues, such as trauma-sensitive, culturally responsive, and restorative practices.
- **Attend to the content of frameworks for social and emotional learning and to the quality of implementation.** The content of social and emotional learning frameworks varies. Districts and schools should consider evidence-based approaches and strategies that will promote equity and support students in meeting current and future challenges. Broaden incentives for schools to implement social and emotional learning in a culturally responsive manner.
- **Partner with families and community organizations.** Families and community organizations that offer out-of-school-time learning experiences or youth development programs can support social and emotional development. Policymakers could provide funding to encourage partnerships that strengthen opportunities for students to develop and employ social and emotional competencies in and beyond school.
- **Expand the evidence base for social and emotional learning.** New investments to support social and emotional learning provide an opportunity to gather evidence about what works under a variety of conditions and contexts. This can lead to more effective policies and programs, more culturally responsive programs, and more equitable outcomes for students.

Resources

The following resources aim to help support education leaders and policymakers in their exploration of social and emotional learning as a way to work toward educational equity and addressing the challenges COVID-19 posed to education.

Social and Emotional Learning and Conditions for Learning

- [SEL Online Learning Module: Creating a Well-Rounded Educational Experience](#), AIR, 2020.
- [School Climate Quick Guide](#), guide, National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2016.
- [How Learning Happens](#), video series, Edutopia, 2018.
- [Are You Ready to Assess Social and Emotional Learning and Development?](#) toolkit, AIR, 2019.

Social and Emotional Learning and Equity

- [Long Story Short: Why Is Social and Emotional Learning Important for Equity in Education?](#) video, AIR, 2018.
- [Creating Safe, Equitable, Engaging Schools: A Comprehensive, Evidence-Based Approach to Supporting Students](#), book, Harvard Education Press, 2018.
- [Thriving, Robust Equity, and Transformative Learning and Development](#), paper, AIR and the Forum for Youth Investment, 2020.
- [Bread and Roses Too](#), blog post, AIR, 2020.

Social and Emotional Learning and Reopening Schools

- [COVID-19 and Whole Child Efforts: Reopening Update](#), brief, AIR, 2020.
- [Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Roadmap for Reopening School](#), roadmap, CASEL, 2020.
- [Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package](#), National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2018.

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