

# Promoting Academic Achievement through Social and Emotional Learning

by Katharine Ragozzino, Hank Resnik, Mary Utne-O'Brien, and Roger P. Weissberg

In this day of high-stakes testing, educators are eager and even anxious to find new policies, instructional methods, and educational practices to improve academic performance. In their search they have reexamined such policies as teacher certification, school choice, grade retention, summer school, and the latest pedagogies for teaching particular academic subjects. Increasingly, however, educators and policymakers are also discovering the importance of social and emotional variables for academic performance and achievement. Consequently, they are turning their attention to methods and practices that foster students' social and emotional development.

Acknowledging the importance of social and emotional variables is one thing. Really understanding their critical role and developing social and emotional skills among students are different matters. What teacher has not felt the frustration of working with a capable student who has neither the motivation nor the perseverance to perform to capacity? What teacher has not felt that he or she could teach better, and his or her students learn better, in caring, supportive school and classroom environments? Teachers have long recognized, and a body of research now corroborates, that facilitating student achievement means addressing barriers to learning. Many of these barriers are social and emotional.

## Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Defined

Social and emotional competence refers to the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish and maintain positive relationships with others (see sidebar, next page). Social and emotional competence and the learning environments that support their development have been shown to enhance academic performance in various direct and indirect ways (Zins et al. in press). SEL programming in schools, when carried out systematically and comprehensively, supports caring class-

room environments and helps develop positive relationships. SEL programming also provides students with varied skills that positively affect academic achievement. They include:

- managing emotions that interfere with learning and concentration
- developing motivation and the ability to persevere even in the face of academic setbacks and challenges
- working cooperatively and effectively in the classroom and in peer learning groups
- setting and working toward academic goals

For example, learning in a history class improves markedly when students are taught to use problem solving to understand and analyze a historic event. Teaching students social and emotional skills also makes them less likely to behave in ways that interfere with learning.

## What the Research Says

A substantial body of research supports the notion that social and emotional variables are integral rather than incidental to learning (Wang, Haertel, and Walberg 1997). Wilson, Gottfredson, and Najaka's meta-analysis (2001) of 165 studies examined the effectiveness of various school-based prevention activities. Their study revealed that social and emotional learning programs increased attendance and decreased the dropout rate. Zins et al. (in press) found that SEL programs

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improved student attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance.

Rather than diverting schools from their primary academic mission, improving students' social and emotional competence advances the academic mission of schools, while also ensuring that they meet their broader mission to produce caring, responsible, and knowledgeable students. Social and emotional learning provides students with basic skills for success not just in school but ultimately in their personal, professional, and civic lives.

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*What teacher has not felt the frustration of working with a capable student who has neither the motivation nor the perseverance to perform to capacity?*

Such findings should not be surprising. The nature of learning, certainly in school settings, is fundamentally social. In the classroom the most successful children are likely to be actively and prosocially engaged with their peers and teachers (Feshbach and Feshbach 1987; Chen, Rubin, and Li 1997). Such students communicate ideas effectively; listen to, evaluate, and integrate the ideas of others; elicit ideas and input from others; and ask teachers and peers for help when necessary.

Students emotionally connected to peers and teachers who value learning and high academic performance often adopt similar values (Hawkins et al. 2001). Student perceptions of teacher warmth and supportiveness can accurately predict student engagement (Ryan and Patrick 2001). Similarly, students who benefit from positive relationships and interactions tend to achieve above the average academically (Osterman 2000).

In short, educators who want children to care about learning must first ensure they feel supported and offer them frequent opportunities to use SEL skills in meaningful ways (Hawkins 1997).

### **From Research to Reality**

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an organization working to establish SEL as an essential part of P-12 education, has identified specific ways in which SEL programs positively affect academic performance. These approaches are documented

in more detail at <[www.CASEL.org](http://www.CASEL.org)>, CASEL's Web site.

*Encourage students to apply SEL skills to classroom behaviors that enhance learning.* For instance, a teacher can encourage active listening by asking students to identify specific academic goals for themselves. Such goals could be grade-based ("to receive better than C's in all my courses") or related to academic behaviors ("to turn in all my assignments on time"). Students can then anticipate barriers to reaching their goals ("I hate math") and identify ways to overcome those barriers ("I can stay after school and receive tutoring").

*Encourage students to apply SEL skills directly to subject matter.* Students can apply SEL skills not just to situations in their own lives but to circumstances facing characters in novels or to actual events, past or present. For a class discus-

### **CORE SEL COMPETENCIES**

**Self-Awareness:** Knowing what we are feeling in the moment; having a realistic assessment of our own abilities and a well-grounded sense of self-confidence

**Social Awareness:** Sensing what others are feeling; being able to take their perspective; appreciating and interacting positively with diverse groups

**Self-Management:** Handling our emotions so they facilitate rather than interfere with the task at hand; being conscientious and delaying gratification to pursue goals; persevering in the face of setbacks and frustrations

**Relationship Skills:** Handling emotions in relationships effectively; establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resistance to inappropriate social pressure; negotiating solutions to conflict; seeking help when needed

**Responsible Decision-Making:** Accurately assessing risks; making decisions based on a consideration of all relevant factors and the likely consequences of alternative courses of action; respecting others; taking personal responsibility for one's decisions

(From *Safe and Sound: An Educational Leader's Guide to Social and Emotional Learning Programs*, 2003.)

sion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, students can analyze how each party would define the problem. Questions might include:

“What are the perspectives of each party?”

“What are some possible solutions that would reduce the tension between the parties?”

“What are the possible consequences of each proposed solution?”

Such activities both promote deeper understanding of academic material and help students gain familiarity and ease with SEL skills.

*Use instructional practices that promote SEL and academic learning.* Specific SEL-focused classroom-management techniques—cooperative learning groups, academic choice periods, peer tutoring, and service-learning—can improve students’ social-emotional competence and academic performance. Such techniques help establish a respectful classroom environment and minimize disruptions. Instruction in interpersonal skills, followed by opportunities to use the skills in cooperative learning groups, teaches students to collaborate on group goals. Service-learning can enhance students’ social awareness and commitment to others.

*Remember that learning is relationship-centered.* Teachers should make sure they know their students by name, take time to talk with students individually, show concern for their academic progress, and create a caring classroom environment.

Many teachers and administrators contend that effort devoted to SEL may harm academic performance. However, addressing SEL helps schools provide students with a learning context in which students are less likely to behave in ways that harm their health, academic performance, and ability to stay in school. All educators want to create knowledgeable, responsible, and caring students. SEL is an approach to learning that helps students achieve success in school and life.

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*The authors acknowledge and appreciate the support of the Academic Development Institute, the Ford Foundation, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory for Student Success at Temple University, the Surdna Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, and the William T. Grant Foundation.*