

Building Support for Social and Emotional Learning: Having an Evidence Base is Critical

By Sean Grant and Laura S. Hamilton

Mathematics and reading are standard subjects in every public-school education. But students need more than proficiency in reading or math – an increasing amount of research tells us that qualities like perseverance, active listening, empathy and good decision making help our youth succeed both academically and in life. This has prompted more schools to become interested in integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) into their curriculum.

State and school district education leaders can find support for SEL programs under the federal law that governs K-12 public education policy, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). While it does not explicitly reference SEL, the law *does* support programming that improves school conditions for learning, peer interactions, volunteerism, community involvement and instructional practices for developing relationship-building skills. These all build social and emotional learning in students.

RAND's [recent review](#) of SEL interventions, funded by The Wallace Foundation, identified many SEL-related activities and programs that are backed by evidence. This is important not only because educators want to use programs that have been shown to benefit students, but also because an evidence base can open up funding opportunities under ESSA.

Our research found that having an evidence base allows leaders to pursue three potential funding streams for SEL interventions. First, Title I (Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged) provides opportunities to incorporate SEL into school operations through school-wide assistance programs, targeted assistance programs and school support and improvement activities. Second, states may

consider Title II (Preparing, Training, and Recruiting High-Quality Teachers, Principals, or Other School Leaders) to seek funds for building educators' capacity to provide SEL instruction or SEL-related professional development of school leaders. Third, Title IV (21st-Century Schools) could be used to support SEL interventions that improve the educational opportunities of students.

The legislation defines three levels of evidence from empirical research: strong (Tier I), moderate (Tier II), and promising (Tier III) evidence. Districts and schools have a variety of options for SEL interventions that meet ESSA evidence requirements, facilitating the possibility of finding an evidence-based SEL intervention that meets local needs. The U.S. Department of Education published [nonregulatory guidance](#) that provides more information about the evidence tiers.

Overall, our review of the research literature found 60 SEL interventions that have recently been evaluated in U.S.-based, K–12 public schools and meet ESSA evidence requirements for Tiers I-III. Most interventions showed positive effects on building students' intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Several interventions also had positive effects on other critical outcomes, such as academic attainment and achievement and civic attitudes and behaviors. Many of the interventions were paired by professional development and implementation support for school staff, and several interventions have a dedicated website for implementation support.

ESSA offers flexibility for educators to implement interventions that are designed to address local needs but may lack empirical research. ESSA's Tier IV – demonstrating a rationale – does not require existing empirical evidence but requires (1) that the intervention is supported by a strong rationale for believing the intervention is likely to improve the targeted outcomes and (2) that an evaluation of the intervention is under way. Tier IV encourages evaluation of local experimentations – such as creating new programs or altering existing programs to fit with local

conditions –which could ultimately enable states and local education agencies to contribute to the evidence base for SEL interventions.

When seeking ESSA funding to support social and emotional learning, schools and districts could consider carrying out needs assessments to identify which SEL interventions would best address their needs. Schools and districts also need to make sure broader conditions – such as professional development, a supportive school culture, and sufficient time and resources for SEL – are in place to support high-quality implementation of chosen interventions. Educators might benefit from professional development or other support to help them better understand how to incorporate the use of evidence in their decisions about school policies and practices interventions.

Although ESSA enables states to include measures of SEL in their accountability or indicator systems, [so far no states have taken this step](#). An increasing variety of high-quality SEL measures is available, but, most have been validated to either further research or to inform instruction and continuous improvement, rather than for external reporting or accountability. Moreover, there are gaps in the availability of measures for some SEL outcomes and grade levels. Access to high-quality SEL assessment measures in the near-future is a pressing need to ensure the programs being contemplated by a school, district, or state will actually improve student learning and their futures.

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