

HOW THE Every Student Succeeds Act CAN

# Support Social and Emotional Learning

**S**ocial and emotional competencies are proving critical to students' success in the classroom and in life. Although the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) does not explicitly reference social and emotional learning (SEL), this legislation in fact offers opportunities to support school-based SEL interventions.

How is SEL supported by ESSA? Which SEL interventions meet ESSA's evidence requirements? RAND Corporation researchers address these questions for states, districts, and schools seeking to adopt and support SEL in ways that align with ESSA policy.



Studies over the past decade have shown that social and emotional competencies, such as self-management and relationship skills, play important roles in students' success. Interest in programs and curricula to foster SEL has subsequently grown, as have the number of SEL interventions available for implementation. Schools and districts need a way to be sure that the SEL interventions they are interested in implementing are both evidence-based and can be supported by funding available through ESSA.

ESSA provides flexibility to states and districts with regard to the use of federal funds as long as interventions chosen for implementation are evidence based. However, the phrase *social and emotional learning* does not appear in the ESSA legislation, and education leaders may not be aware of the various ways that the law can support SEL interventions.

In response, RAND researchers examined ESSA legislation and evaluations of SEL interventions to understand (1) how states can use ESSA to support SEL and (2) what SEL interventions meet ESSA evidence requirements. This study is part of a larger effort commissioned by The Wallace Foundation to provide guidance on evidence-based interventions under ESSA across various priority topics in education, including school leadership, arts integration, summer learning, and after-school programs.

## Three ESSA Funding Streams May Support SEL

An extensive review of ESSA legislation shows that there are at least three possible funding streams for states, local agencies, districts, and schools to obtain support for SEL implementation.

Although ESSA does not explicitly reference SEL, its policy language includes calls for improving school conditions for student learning; enhancing peer interactions; providing a well-rounded education; and incorporating programs and activities that promote volunteerism, community involvement, or instructional practices for

developing relationship-building skills. These are all related to SEL.

The three funding streams provide states, districts, and schools opportunities to incorporate SEL initiatives into efforts to support low-income students and enhance school improvement. Each funding stream is described in the following sections, along with information about whether support is distributed through formula funds or through competitive grants, although the future of the policies around ESSA, including funding allocations, is subject to change.


**1. Title I: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged** authorizes education spending between 2017 and 2020 in the form of formula grants to states. This funding stream provides three opportunities to incorporate SEL into school operations: (1) schoolwide assistance programs, (2) targeted assistance programs, and (3) school support and improvement activities.

**2. Title II: Preparing, Training, and Recruiting High-Quality Teachers, Principals, or Other School Leaders** authorizes funding to support the preparation, training, and recruitment of educators at all levels of the school system. States may consider utilizing Part A: Supporting Effective Instruction funds to support their educators by building their capacity to provide instruction that promotes students' social and emotional competencies. States may also apply for Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) and School Leader Recruitment and Support grants to provide SEL-related professional development.

**3. Title IV: 21st-Century Schools** authorizes funding to support a variety of programs aimed at improving the educational opportunities of students. These may be sought in three subareas: (1) Part A: Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants, (2) Part B: 21st -Century Community Learning Centers, and (3) Part F: National Activities. For example, some Title IV, Part B funds cover the delivery of academic and nonacademic supports explicitly offered outside the regular school day.

**Schools and districts need a way to be sure that the SEL interventions they are interested in implementing are both evidence-based and can be supported by funding available through ESSA.**



A young boy with a backpack is smiling broadly, showing his teeth. He has dark hair and is wearing a light-colored t-shirt. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter.

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## Social and Emotional Competencies Promote Immediate and Later Success

Social and emotional competencies can help promote students' achievement in reading, mathematics, and other core academic subjects. Moreover, the same skills are foundational for becoming healthy and competent adults and citizens. This research examines interventions aimed at fostering two kinds of personal competencies that are most often described as part of SEL:

**Intrapersonal competencies** can influence how students apply themselves in school and other settings. Examples include attitudes and behaviors such as conscientiousness, initiative, flexibility, emotional regulation, and grit.

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**Interpersonal competencies** are skills needed to relate to other people. These include communication, collaboration, conflict resolution, and leadership.

See National Research Council, *Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century*, Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2012, p. 9.



## How ESSA Defines **Evidence-Based**

ESSA requires the use of “evidence-based” interventions for a number of funding streams. The legislation defines three levels, or tiers, of evidence from empirical research:

- 1 strong (**Tier I**),
- 2 moderate (**Tier II**), and
- 3 promising (**Tier III**) evidence.

ESSA also includes an additional level, demonstrating a rationale (**Tier IV**), that does not require existing empirical evidence but instead requires that

- the intervention is supported by a strong rationale for believing the intervention is likely to improve the targeted outcomes and
- an evaluation of the intervention is under way.



## Many SEL Interventions Meet ESSA Tiers I-III Evidence Requirements

The research team 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. This finding suggests that 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.

Most of the interventions identified showed positive effects on building students’ intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, although several interventions have also demonstrated positive effects on other important outcomes, such as academic attainment and achievement, civic attitudes and behaviors, disciplinary actions, and school climate and safety. The most prevalent outcomes included in studies with positive effects were interpersonal outcomes, such as communication.

The number of SEL interventions that meet ESSA evidence requirements is greatest for elementary schools and urban communities. A substantial number of interventions have been validated with samples that mostly consist of students who come from low-income families or from racial/ethnic minority groups.

Furthermore, many of the studied interventions were accompanied by professional development and implementation support for school staff involved in delivering the intervention, and several interventions have a dedicated website for implementation support.

## Tier IV Offers Flexibility, but Evidence Will Need to Be Provided

ESSA’s Tier IV offers flexibility for educators to implement interventions that lack empirical research yet meet local needs. It also encourages local experimentation, which could ultimately enable states and local education agencies to contribute to the evidence base for SEL interventions.



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# Recommendations for Educators and Policymakers


**1 Incorporate measures of social and emotional competencies into needs assessments.** Regardless of whether ESSA requires a needs assessment for drawing on a particular funding stream, schools and local education agencies should consider carrying out assessments. Needs assessments help ensure that limited resources are focused on the most important activities. Incorporating measures of social and emotional competencies can identify which SEL interventions are more likely to address local needs and objectives.

**2 Address local conditions to promote effective SEL implementation.** Adopting an evidence-based intervention does not guarantee results that match those found in the reviewed research. One consideration for educators and policymakers who adopt a new intervention is the need to ensure that the broader conditions are in place to support high-quality implementation of that intervention. These conditions include high-quality, customized professional development, a supportive schoolwide culture, and district and school policies that provide time and resources for SEL.

**3 Take advantage of Tier IV flexibility if needs cannot be met by interventions with stronger evidence.** Although some funding streams require interventions to meet Tiers I through III, others permit the use of funds for Tier IV interventions. This flexibility provides opportunities for educators to draw on a wider range of interventions. It also allows educators to create new interventions or significantly adapt existing approaches to fit their local contexts, provided they can offer a research-based rationale and engage in ongoing evaluation of these efforts.







**4 Provide professional development and other supports to build educators' capacity to gather and use evidence of intervention effectiveness.** Gathering and reading peer-reviewed literature to glean information about evidence is a time-consuming and resource-intensive process that may be impractical for most teachers to undertake. Such resources as this report can reduce or, in some cases, eliminate the need for educators to review literature and assess the quality of evidence, but teachers might also benefit from professional development or other resources to promote their understanding of evidence-based interventions.

**5 Consider a variety of SEL programs and strategies when designing approaches to improve students' social and emotional competencies.** Stand-alone interventions are not the only way schools can promote social and emotional competencies. Other approaches include integration of SEL into academic instruction and schoolwide climate or discipline programs that emphasize social and emotional competencies. Educators should consider how to create an integrated approach to addressing these skills, rather than focusing exclusively on a single program or strategy.

**6 Continue to improve measurement of social and emotional competencies.** The studies reviewed for this project relied on a variety of assessments of students' social and emotional competencies. Most of these measures have some evidence of reliability and validity for their intended uses, but they were not necessarily designed to support day-to-day instructional decisionmaking and continuous improvement efforts. Educators need access to high-quality assessment measures that meet their specific needs, particularly those that impose low burdens and costs. Moreover, funders and policymakers should prioritize efforts to improve measurement, particularly efforts that involve collaborations between assessment developers and potential users who can provide guidance that will help ensure that the resulting tools meet educators' needs.



# Key findings

**ESSA supports SEL through several different funding streams.**



**Numerous SEL interventions meet ESSA evidence requirements.**



**Educators in elementary schools and urban communities have the most options for SEL interventions that meet ESSA evidence requirements.**



**Interpersonal competencies are the most common outcomes positively affected in studies of evidence-based interventions.**



This brief describes work done for RAND Education documented in *Social and Emotional Learning Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review*, by Sean Grant, Laura S. Hamilton, Stephani L. Wrabel, Celia J. Gomez, Anamarie Auger, Jennifer Tamargo, Fatih Unlu, Emilio Chavez-Herrerias, Garrett Baker, Mark Barrett, Mark Harris, and Alyssa Ramos, RR-2133-WF, 2017 ([www.rand.org/t/RR2133](http://www.rand.org/t/RR2133)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RB9988](http://www.rand.org/t/RB9988). The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND** is a registered trademark. © RAND 2017.

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