

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) TOOLKIT FOR SCHOOL BOARDS



Purpose of the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Toolkit

School boards hold an incredible responsibility for shaping the quality of students' education while representing community and parent voice. Through strategic policy and leadership, school board members can inspire, motivate, and make decisions that positively impact student achievement and well-being.

With heightened political attention to local school boards, some communities may see misinformation and confusion around important educational priorities, including social and emotional learning (SEL).

This toolkit offers a quick guide for school board members to help ground SEL conversations in the best interests of students and families. **Use these tools to dispel misinformation with facts and data, then take action to support the social, emotional, and academic learning of every child.**

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Why Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?

SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

In other words, it's how students develop essential skills that help them succeed in school and navigate their lives. SEL has never been more important as schools, families, and communities work to support students' academic recovery, mental well-being, and safety.

If your community is debating educational jargon, refocus your conversations around how schools and families can work together to best support students.

Here are three key points to communicate to your communities:



Social and emotional learning benefits everyone

Learning and practicing social and emotional skills creates a foundation for any goal students hope to achieve—whether it relates to school, career, family, or civic life. That's why SEL is important for all students no matter their academic levels, ability types, behavior records, or home lives.

In fact, SEL isn't limited to students—it also helps adults. Educators with strong social and emotional competence report less burnout and stay in the classroom longer, build and maintain stronger relationships with students, and demonstrate higher levels of patience, empathy, and healthy communication.



Social and Emotional Skills



Self-Awareness



Self-Management



Social Awareness



Relationship Skills



Responsible
Decision-Making



Social and emotional learning is grounded in evidence

Hundreds of independent research studies across multiple disciplines show the impact:

- **Academics:** Students engaged in SEL see consistent gains in academic achievement compared to those who do not have quality SEL opportunities.
- **Mental Health:** Students engaged in SEL experience fewer behavioral problems and decreased emotional distress.
- **Skills Development:** Students engaged in SEL see improvements in critical lifelong skills, such as emotion management and conflict resolution.
- **Climate:** Students engaged in SEL report more positive school climate and a greater sense of safety and belonging.



Social and emotional learning engages schools, homes, and communities

SEL is about students, educators, families, and communities working together to create learning experiences and environments that best promote social, emotional, and academic growth. This coordination ensures students have consistent opportunities to learn and practice SEL across all the places where they live and learn. SEL isn't one-size-fits-all: school-family-community partnerships determine the shared vision, goals, and plans for SEL in their communities.

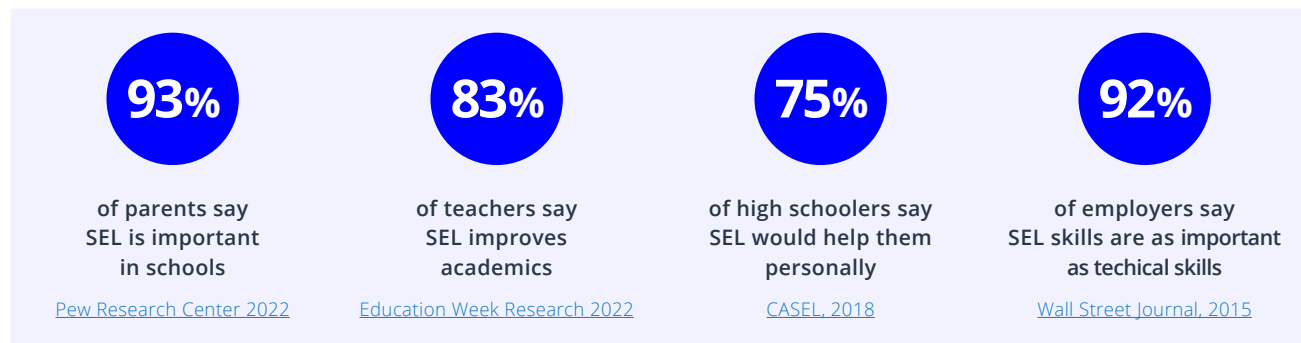
88% of parents want their students to learn social and emotional skills like respect, cooperation, perseverance, and empathy. ([National PTA, 2022](#))

Real
Stories
Real
Families




The COVID-19 pandemic prompted historic declines in student achievement scores, precipitated a national crisis in mental health, and exacerbated the teacher shortage and burnout. As a result, SEL is more important than ever to create the conditions that enhance student learning, well-being, and success.

That's why SEL is a top priority for parents, principals, teachers, students, and business leaders alike. As representatives of your local community, school board members are critical to answering this demand.



Action

1

Learn About SEL in Your Community

Chances are SEL is already taking place in classrooms and schools in your community. According to a [2022 Education Week survey](#), 86 percent of educators say they place “some” or “a lot” of emphasis on SEL—and they cite a positive impact on academics.

SEL is most effective when implemented with evidence-based practices and aligned with local goals. **Learn more about what SEL looks like in your local schools by visiting classrooms and/or setting up time to speak with school leaders, educators, support staff, students, and families.**

Use these visits to learn more about:

- What practices or programs are schools using to teach social and emotional skills like conflict resolution, showing understanding and empathy for others, and being aware of emotions? How do schools know these approaches work?
- How are students taught to cope with frustration, anger, and other challenging feelings? Who teaches these skills and what are the strategies they teach?
- Whose job is it to ensure that all students feel safe and secure and treat each other well?
- How can students tell teachers when they are feeling upset or in need of support without the rest of the class knowing?
- How do teachers and other staff know what they are supposed to do when they see bullying or other hurtful behavior?
- How are they trained in how to stop bullying or other hurtful behavior when it happens?
- How are they trained in how to keep it from happening in the first place?
- How can parents and community partners collaborate and provide feedback to school leaders and staff?

Adapted from Making Caring Common Project. [Read more here.](#)

Action 2

Ground SEL Discussions in Research and Facts

Creating space for dialogue on SEL can help identify shared goals, invite questions, and address concerns. As a school board member, you can help anchor these conversations in research and facts to ensure productive discussions focused on what's effective for student learning and well-being. School board members can also help draw the throughline between SEL and other core priorities such as academic achievement, school engagement, attendance, graduation rates, and student readiness for college, career, and civic engagement.

1. Separate fact from fiction. **In some communities, attacks on SEL have been driven by political narratives and misinformation.** But let's be clear: There is no real controversy among the vast majority of parents and educators who see SEL as essential to education. Let your communities know:

What SEL is and is not

SEL boosts academic performance and deepens engagement with content.



It is not a distraction from academics.

SEL builds relationships and skills that promote healthy well-being.



It is not therapy.

SEL helps students understand different perspectives and share ideas.



It is not a way to teach students a specific political agenda.

SEL is shaped by local priorities set by schools, families, and communities.



It is not one-size-fits-all.

When misinformation spreads, it's important to separate fact from fiction. Download the fact vs. fiction [infographic](#) and share across your social channels.

2. Share the research: **SEL is critical to supporting academic recovery and well-being.** Academic recovery requires comprehensive, evidence-based solutions that take a holistic view of students' social, emotional, and academic learning.

- SEL in schools, preschool to high school, has a consistent and positive impact on student academic achievement, according to research covering more than 1 million students ([Durlak et al., 2022](#)).
- Brain science shows that social, emotional, and cognitive development are intertwined and integral to academic learning and success ([Immordino-Yang, 2011](#)).
- Academic instruction and activities that spark students' emotions or connect cognitive challenges with social interaction result in deeper, long-term learning ([Farrington et al., 2012](#)).
- Years after students participated in SEL, their academic performance was an average of 13 percentile points higher than peers who didn't participate ([Taylor et al., 2017](#)).
- Students participating in SEL had decreased emotional distress, fewer externalizing behaviors, and higher levels of overall "school functioning" including attendance, homework completion, and engagement ([Cipriano et al., 2023](#)).

Download the SEL and academic recovery [infographic](#) and share across your social channels.



Download the customizable "Case for SEL" PowerPoint deck for your next presentation.

Action 3

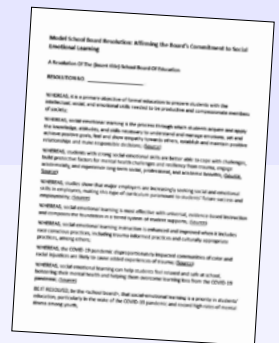
Endorse an SEL Resolution

School board members are critical in supporting district superintendents and leadership in identifying priorities, and their involvement can send a strong message to teachers, families, and students.

- Endorse a resolution: A resolution in favor of SEL is an official expression of the opinion, will, or intent of a school community and can communicate a strong commitment to SEL. As a school board member, a resolution can drive a necessary conversation with fellow board members and your community.
 - Considering highlighting the following themes and key messages in your resolution to help codify why SEL is important in classrooms and schools:
 - o Every child deserves to learn in a supportive and inclusive environment. Teaching bans and attacks on SEL curricula do not allow educators to properly do their jobs.
 - o Students deserve supportive, inclusive educational environments in which every child can thrive and learn the important life skills they need to build towards a brighter future for all of us.
 - Diversity is our strength. And we want our students to feel seen and included in the classroom.
- Know what to do and what not to do at your school board meeting. Here are some quick tips to keep in mind, especially when presenting a resolution:
 - **Do:**
 - Speak from your personal experience and about local examples and local concerns.
 - Appeal to shared values (e.g., quality education that prepares every student with lifelong skills etc.) and look for common ground in education.
 - Use messaging that speaks to the broadest community (i.e., the benefits for ALL students).
 - **Don't:**
 - Use national examples or rhetoric that are not actually based on the local reality and context you're in.
 - Use jargon (i.e., avoid formal language and focus on making your point clearly) or zero-sum language (i.e., position SEL as a separate initiative rather than foundational to core priorities.)
 - Apologize for elevating, listening to, and advocating for children, particularly students of color.
 - "Wing it." Being prepared never hurt anyone!

Review a Model School Board Resolution:

[Affirming the Board's Commitment to Social Emotional Learning](#)



Action
4

Initiate SEL as a Long-Term Priority

Successful SEL implementation engages all stakeholders as partners in the process. Here are six long-term considerations for creating robust partnerships across the community:

- **Establish consensus-driven understanding about the importance of SEL.** Work closely with district leadership to introduce the concept of SEL and analyze its potential benefits to the district. Identify existing programs and practices that are aligned with SEL implementation and outcomes. Anticipate questions and concerns from constituents, and work to build consensus about SEL and the development of an effective SEL implementation plan.
- **Build and maintain positive relationships with district, school, and community leaders.** Successful school board members enlist community members' support for SEL and respond to concerns. This process includes having open lines of communication and an understanding of the school or district's definition of SEL and SEL practices.
- **Ensure SEL is embedded within district priorities.** Work with district leaders and constituents to identify how districtwide vision, goals, and strategic plan align with SEL. Identify how SEL can be built into existing accountability structures, such as schoolwide improvement plans.
- **Ask for regular updates about SEL implementation progress.** Updates can include aggregate data and systemic updates as well as showcasing exemplary sites and practices that can be replicated and can involve a range of SEL leaders in the district or school, including teachers and administrators.
- **Collaborate as a board to analyze and address SEL gap areas.** Look for and analyze patterns of underachievement that are revealed through disaggregated student achievement data, disciplinary referral data, and school climate survey data. Work with district leaders to create a forum for providing suggestions and input.
- **Support sustainability and scalability of SEL initiatives.** School boards are critical in supporting the superintendent in identifying and addressing budget priorities. Ensure district transparency about the cost of SEL implementation (as well as the return on investment). Remember to examine both start-up costs and projections for expanding and sustaining SEL over multiple years.

Adapted from [CASEL's District Resource Center](#) (free login required to access)

Who We Are

The Leading with SEL Coalition is composed of organizations representing parents, caregivers, educators, and others who support quality education, SEL, and whole child development. Our organizations are committed to sharing clear, accurate information about students' social, emotional, and academic learning.

For more information about the coalition and resources for parents, caregivers, and advocates, download the [companion parent toolkit](#).

If you're interested in sharing your SEL story (e.g. writing an op-ed or blog, speaking to media, being featured in videos, etc.), please email comms@casel.org.

