

# Guidelines for Social and Emotional Learning

## Quality Programs for School and Life Success

Developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

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### The Challenge: What Should Schools Teach?

In the last decade we have witnessed one of the most significant eras of school reform since our system of public education was established. The need for high-quality education has risen to the top of the national agenda.

Most discussions about education have centered on the poor academic performance of American students compared with those in other industrialized nations and on concerns that they are not prepared to enter the workforce or succeed in higher education.

But in recent years the focus has expanded. If we have been concerned about the quality of many of America's schools, we have also been deeply distressed by widespread alienation, drug use, and violence among youth. It is becoming clear to growing numbers of parents and community leaders that in addition to pursuing their primary goal of improved academic learning, schools can and should play a critical role in preparing new generations of healthy, productive workers and citizens.

As indicated by numerous polls of parents and community leaders, there is a growing consensus about what we want our children to

know and be able to do, and thus what we want schools to teach. We want young people to:

- Be fully literate, able to benefit from and make use of the power of written and spoken language through a variety of media and technologies;
- Understand mathematics and science at levels that will prepare them for the world of the future and strengthen their ability to think;
- Be effective problem solvers and recognize the consequences of their actions;
- Take responsibility for their personal health and well-being;
- Develop effective social relationships such as learning how to work in a group and how to understand and relate to others from different cultures and backgrounds;
- Be caring individuals with concern and respect for others;
- Develop good character, make sound moral decisions, and behave in an ethical and responsible manner.

Educational goals like these can be found in the mission statements of school districts throughout the country. All schools and com-

munities want the very best for their children. Yet achieving the kind of balance that encourages all children to develop to their fullest potential has been a continuing challenge as our society has grown more complex and our communities more fragmented.

### **The Central Role of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)**

Growing evidence strongly suggests that a key element in meeting all our educational goals for children and youth (academic as well as social), and helping all children to reach their highest potential, is social and emotional learning (SEL).

Social and emotional learning is the process through which children and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to understand and manage life tasks such as cognitive learning, forming relationships, and adapting to the demands of growing up in today's complex society.

The theory underlying social and emotional learning is based on research indicating that individuals learn in many different ways and that learning is influenced by a variety of social and emotional factors. A child who comes to school anxious, afraid, or alienated is a child whose ability to learn will be significantly diminished. A school in which teasing and bullying are everyday facts of life is not a place where children feel encouraged to learn and grow.

What all schools (and their parents and communities) want is students who are actively engaged in learning, who are motivated to learn, and who feel connected to their schools. Social and emotional variables are critically important to such engagement, motivation, and attachment.

Social and emotional learning programming provides systematic classroom instruction that enhances children's capacities to recognize and manage their emotions, understand and appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and attain goals, identify and solve problems, and use a variety of interpersonal skills. Effective SEL programs also recognize the importance of the home and the critical role of parents and guardians in a child's success. They emphasize the role of school climate and positive, collaborative, professional relationships among school staff. They are based on the premise that the preparation of knowledgeable, responsible, car-

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was founded in 1994 with the mission to establish research-based social and emotional learning (SEL) as an essential part of education from preschool through high school.

CASEL's six major goals are to:

- Advance the science of SEL;
- Translate scientific knowledge into effective school practices;
- Establish SEL as a foundation for academic learning;
- Disseminate information about scientifically based SEL strategies
- Enhance the professional preparation of educators so they have the tools to implement high-quality SEL instruction;
- Network and collaborate with educators, scientists, policy makers, and interested citizens to increase the coordination of SEL efforts.

ing youth is a multifaceted undertaking shared by all the people and institutions that affect children's lives.

### **Experience with SEL Programs: What the Research Shows**

Aspects of social and emotional learning can be found in most of our schools. For example, programs designed to "fix" a wide range of problems that interfere with children's ability to learn, such as drug education and violence or bullying prevention curricula, often include elements of SEL. The problem with many of these efforts, typically implemented as a response to a highly publicized issue or emergency, is that often they are not based on effective educational strategies.

Instead of the short-term, categorical programs that typify many approaches to SEL, a growing body of research supports programs that are planned, ongoing, and systematic, programs that are monitored, improved, and refined over time. Such an approach is consistent with the research on improving academic performance that stresses the need for "whole school" reform. When reforms are carried out in an isolated, fragmented way, their impact, even

when they make a real difference, is often short-lived.

Uncoordinated programs assume that the fix can and should be simple or quick. Such programs ignore the fact that problems like youth drug use, violence, bullying, sexual promiscuity, and alienation are closely interrelated, complex, and develop over time within the broader context of the school, family, and community. When an unexpected outbreak of negative behavior among students occurs, often the first question the public asks is, “Who is to blame?” Typically the next step is to adopt programs to “target” the problem. Rarely, however, do the school, the parents, and the community come together to ask, “How can we provide a positive and supportive environment for our young people, from grades K-12, that will be a lasting part of education in our community and make events like these much less likely to occur in the future?”

### **Guidelines for Effective SEL Programming**

Considerable research has been done to address that question, and the answers are becoming increasingly clear. They can be viewed as a set of basic guidelines for effective Social and Emotional Learning programs and their implementation. This section presents guidelines that can apply to any well-planned and well-implemented SEL effort. They are consistent with current research and thinking about school reform generally.

Effective SEL programming has the following characteristics:

#### ***(1) Grounded in theory and research***

It is based on sound theories of child development, incorporating approaches that demonstrate beneficial effects on children’s attitudes and behavior through scientific research.

#### ***(2) Teaches children to apply SEL skills and ethical values in daily life***

Through systematic instruction and application of learning to everyday situations, it enhances children’s social, emotional, and ethical behavior. Children learn to recognize and manage their emotions, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish positive goals, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situa-

tions effectively. They also develop responsible and respectful attitudes and values about self, others, work, health, and citizenship.

#### ***(3) Builds connection to school through caring, engaging classroom and school practices***

It uses diverse teaching methods to engage students in creating a classroom atmosphere where caring, responsibility, and a commitment to learning thrive. It nurtures students’ sense of emotional security and safety, and it strengthens relationships among students, teachers, other school personnel, and families.

#### ***(4) Provides developmentally and culturally appropriate instruction***

It offers developmentally appropriate classroom instruction, including clearly specified learning objectives, for each grade level from preschool through high school. It is also emphasizes cultural sensitivity and respect for diversity.

#### ***(5) Helps schools coordinate and unify programs that are often fragmented***

It offers schools a coherent, unifying framework to promote the positive social, emotional, and academic growth of all students. It coordinates school programs that address positive youth development, problem prevention, health, character, service-learning, and citizenship.

#### ***(6) Enhances school performance by addressing the affective and social dimensions of academic learning***

It teaches students social and emotional competencies that encourage classroom participation, positive interactions with teachers, and good study habits. It introduces engaging teaching and learning methods, such as problem-solving approaches and cooperative learning, that motivate students to learn and to succeed academically.

#### ***(7) Involves families and communities as partners***

It involves school staff, peers, parents, and community members in applying and modeling SEL-related skills and attitudes at school, at home, and in the community.

***(8) Establishes organizational supports and policies that foster success***

It ensures high-quality program implementation by addressing factors that determine the longterm success or failure of school-based programs. These include leadership, active participation in program planning by everyone involved, adequate time and resources, and alignment with school, district, and state policies.

***(9) Provides high-quality staff development and support***

It offers well-planned professional development for all school personnel. This includes basic theoretical knowledge, modeling and practice of effective teaching methods, regular coaching, and constructive feedback from colleagues.

***(10) Incorporates continuing evaluation and improvement***

It begins with an assessment of needs to establish a good fit between the school's concerns and SEL programs. It continues gathering data to assess progress, ensure accountability, and shape program improvement.