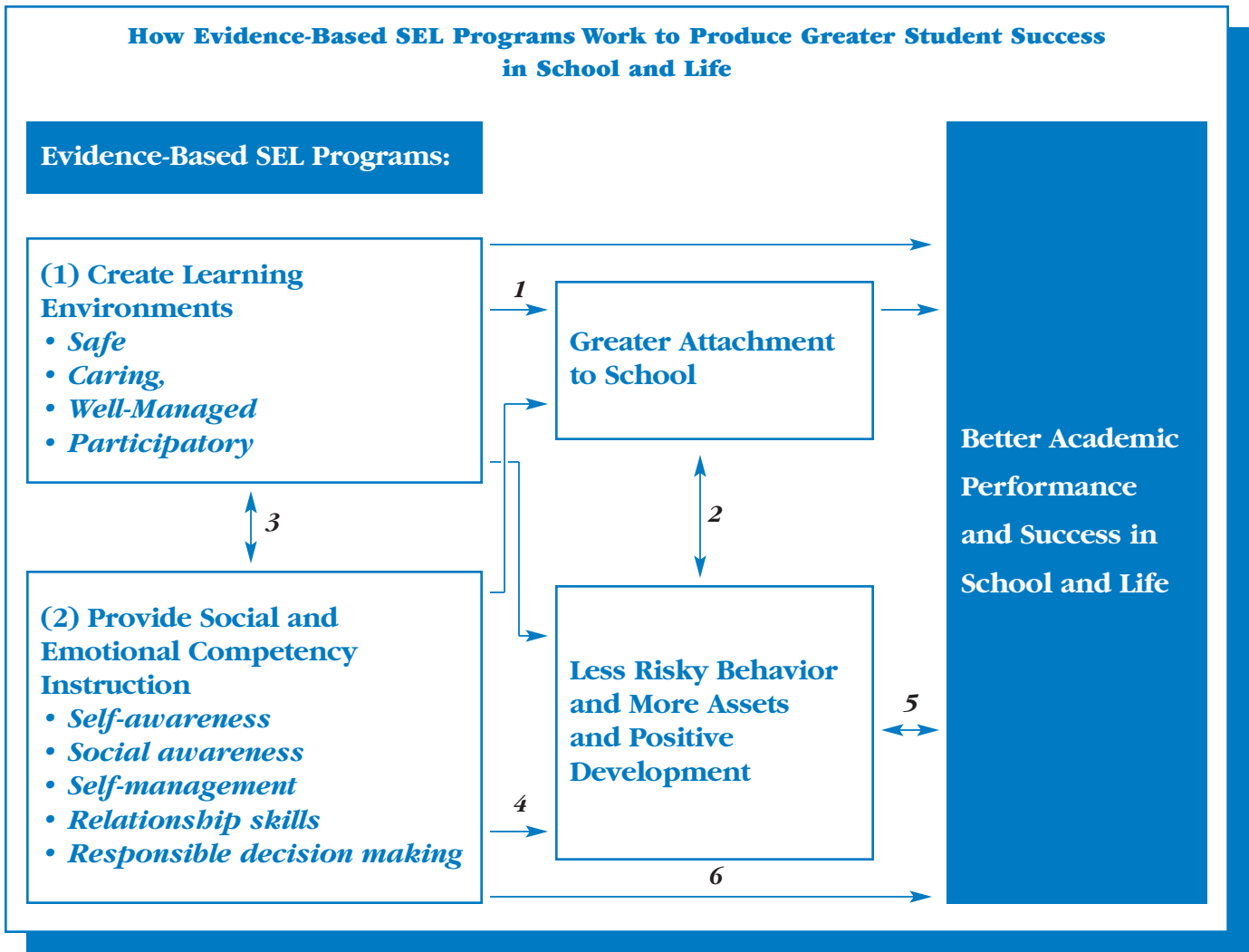


How Evidence-Based SEL Programs Work to Produce Greater Student Success in School and Life



B. SEL and Academic Performance

Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs have direct as well as indirect impacts on student learning and school success. The figure above describes the mechanisms of action that connect SEL programs to student achievement.

The far left column of boxes in the figure is definitional. It posits that evidence-based SEL programs do two things: (1) create safe, caring, well-managed learning environments, i.e., they address the classroom and school climate in systematic ways (top left box); and (2) provide sequenced, developmentally appropriate, class-

room-based instruction in five major areas of social and emotional competence (bottom left box). Few SEL programs accomplish all of these objectives. Instead, schools typically combine programs with strengths in one or the other area to achieve the full benefits of SEL programming.

The remainder of the figure describes a series of relationships that hold true in studies of classrooms and the interventions designed to improve them. Several of the studies highlighted below are experimental or quasi-experimen-

tal in design, rather than merely correlational. That is, SEL programming has been shown to result in better student outcomes, including improved academic performance. These relationships, and some of the research supporting them, are described in the remainder of this brief.

1. There is solid evidence demonstrating that student attachment to school is strongly influenced by the learning environment. Classroom and school interventions that make the learning environment safer, more caring, better managed, and more participatory have been shown to increase student attachment to school. In turn, students who are more engaged and attached to school have better attendance and higher graduation rates, as well as higher grades and standardized tests scores. Interventions that increase student bonding often positively affect student educational outcomes and academic achievement.

Supporting Evidence

- A detailed review of the literature finds that creation of supportive learning environments increases student engagement and attachment to school, and that these variables significantly influence student academic performance (Osterman, 2000).
- Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health suggest that students feel greater attachment to school when their schools are smaller and when they are part of well-managed classrooms in which students get along with each other and with teachers, pay attention, and complete assignments (Blum, R.W., McNeely, C.A., & Rinehart, P.M., 2002).
- The evaluation of a program designed to foster (1) a more supportive, cooperative, and participatory learning environment, and (2) the development of prosocial skills in students, documented increases in students' sense of school community and commitment to school (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997). Perceived sense of community mediated the positive program effects, including improved academic achievement (Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps & Lewis, 2000).
- When teachers implemented an interven-

tion that included proactive classroom management, interactive teaching methods, cooperative learning techniques, and interpersonal skills instruction, students' positive attitudes and commitment to school significantly increased, as did the grades and standardized achievement scores of males (Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson, & Abbott, 2001; O'Donnell, Hawkins, Catalano, Abbott, & Day, 1995).

- A school and classroom intervention that increased student bonding to school by creating smaller learning environments, increasing classmate stability during school transitions, and restructuring teacher roles to be more supportive also resulted in higher attendance rates, lower drop out rates, and better grades among middle and high school students (Felner, et al., 1993).
- Teacher-child conflict decreases student attachment to school, while closeness positively relates to school bonding and academic achievement (as assessed on the Metropolitan Readiness Test). Teacher-child conflict increases student school avoidance, and decreases student liking of school, self-directed behavior, and levels of cooperation in the classroom (Birch & Ladd, 1997).

2. Research indicates that attachment to school decreases the prevalence of high-risk behaviors, and interventions that improve classroom climate and functioning, and enhance student attachment to school, decrease rates of high-risk behaviors. When students are attached to school and to prosocial teachers and peers, they are more likely to behave in prosocial ways themselves, and to avoid engaging in high-risk behaviors (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). Providing students with opportunities for participation may also increase students' intrinsic motivation to behave in prosocial ways, thereby decreasing school crime and other forms of deviant behavior in the school setting (Csikszentmihalyi, & Larson, 1980).

Supporting Evidence

- A meta-analysis of 165 studies of school-based prevention activities showed environmentally focused interventions (e.g., establishing norms for behavior, classroom and in-

structional management, school or discipline management interventions, reorganization of grades/classes) significantly decreased the prevalence of the four outcomes examined: delinquency, alcohol and drug use, drop out/non-attendance, and conduct problems (Wilson, Gottfredson, & Najaka, (2001).

- Students in schools using a program designed to create more supportive and cooperative-learning environments had significantly lower rates of drug use and delinquency than comparison students (Battistich, Schaps, Watson, Solomon, & Lewis, 2000).
- Adolescents' sense of connectedness to school is associated with significantly lower rates of emotional distress, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, violence, substance abuse, and sexual activity. (Resnick, et al.,1997).

3. Creating more caring and psychologically safe classroom environments also improves a variety of students' social and emotional skills, thereby reinforcing the second component of effective evidence-based SEL programming—SEL instruction. In supportive atmospheres, for example, students feel more comfortable approaching and interacting with teachers and peers, thereby strengthening their relationship skills. In essence, teachers and schools can improve students' social-emotional competence by creating a social learning context where such skills are frequently called for and positively reinforced.

Supporting Evidence

- A review of the research on cooperative learning indicates that teachers can improve the interpersonal relationships among students by creating cooperative learning groups characterized by positive interdependence (Johnson, Johnson, & Maruyama, 1983).
- Students in classrooms using a program designed to create more supportive and cooperative learning environments showed significant improvement in two types of interpersonal skills: spontaneous prosocial behavior and supportive and friendly behavior (Solomon, Watson, Delucchi, Schaps, & Battistich, 1988).
- Students in such classrooms also scored significantly higher on measures of cognitive problem-solving skills (e.g., interpersonal sensitivity, consideration of others' needs, means-end thinking), and used more prosocial conflict resolution strategies than comparison children (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, Solomon, & Schaps, 1989).
- Adolescents' judgments that their teachers are respectful, fair, or supportive have been negatively related to cheating (Calabrese & Cochran, 1990; Murdock, Hale, & Weber, 2001).
- Among adolescents, teacher support was a significant predictor of student reports of pursuit of compliance with classroom norms, while peer support was a positive predictor of their reports of prosocial behavior (Wentzel, 1998).
- Adolescents who characterize their learning environments as including a caring, respectful teacher and peers who help each other were more likely to participate in class and complete their homework (Murdock, 1999).

4. SEL instruction provides students with basic skills, such as good decision making and refusal skills, which enable them to successfully avoid engaging in high-risk behaviors, and to participate in behaviors that support their positive development.

Supporting Evidence

- A meta-analysis of 165 studies of school-based prevention activities found interventions with social competency instruction significantly decreased delinquency, alcohol and drug use, and conduct problems (Wilson, Gottfredson, & Najaka, 2001).
- A review of prevention studies from 1980-1990 found that among 12 categories of programs, comprehensive programs (i.e., those using several different prevention strategies, but all providing decision making and resistance skills training) and social influence programs (i.e., programs teaching about and providing skills to resist social pressures) were the most effective in preventing the onset of substance use (Hansen, 1992).
- Reviews of the research on school-based substance abuse and violence prevention programs indicate that instruction and practice in social and emotional competencies is

a critical element of effective programs (Dusenbury, & Falco, 1995; Dusenbury, Falco, Lake, Brannigan, & Bosworth, 1997).

5. High-risk behaviors in students are associated with poor academic performance. Likewise, poor academic performance is a risk factor for a variety of high-risk behaviors, while academic achievement is a protective factor.

Supporting Evidence

- A review of health risk behavior studies and reports found student health risks such as intentional injuries, substance use, sexual behavior, and poor physical health were directly and negatively linked to educational outcomes, education behaviors, and student attitudes about education (Symons, Cinelli, James, & Groff, 1997).
- A meta-analysis of naturalistic studies on academic performance and delinquency found that high academic achievers are less than half as likely to engage in delinquent behaviors as those with low academic performance. Academic performance negatively predicted delinquency independent of socioeconomic status (Maguin & Loeber, 1996). Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that being at risk for academic failure was associated with every health risk behavior studied. The authors state that school failure should be recognized as a health and education crisis (Blum, Beuhring, & Rinehard, 2000).

6. SEL instruction provides students with the social skills needed to successfully navigate the social learning environment of the classroom. Social and emotional skills can also significantly enhance learning when they are integrated into different academic content areas. Other specific strategies and

mechanisms for enhancing academic performance through SEL can be found in Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg (2003).

- A meta-analysis of 165 studies of school-based prevention activities found interventions with social competency instruction significantly decreased rates of student drop out/non-attendance (Wilson, et al., 2001).
- Well-designed evaluations of several SEL programs have demonstrated that SEL instruction can produce significant improvements in school attitudes, school behavior, and school performance (Zins, et al., 2003).
- Longitudinal studies of a preschool program designed to foster social-emotional competence documented numerous positive outcomes for program participants, including less time in special education programs, higher literacy and high school graduation rates, higher incomes and rates of home ownership, fewer arrests, and (for females) fewer children outside of marriage (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997).
- In a longitudinal evaluation of a social problem-solving program, students who participated in the program had higher overall academic achievement six years later than a non-participant comparison group. Students whose teachers most fully implemented the program performed better in language arts and mathematics, and had fewer absences than students in the comparison group (Elias, Gara, Schuyer, Branden-Muller, & Sayette, 1991).
- Students' social competence in second grade significantly influenced their third grade academic competence (as assessed by language and math grades and work skills), suggesting that improving social competence results in improved student academic performance (Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O'Neil, 2001).

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