



Roger Weissberg

The July 2017 publication in [Child Development](#) of a new [meta-analysis](#) exploring the long-term impact of SEL programming has received widespread attention from practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. To help explore how research such as this can impact policy, Roger Weissberg (CASEL chief knowledge officer and Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago) spoke with Gene Wilhoit (executive director of the National Center for Innovation in Education and former executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers). Both are members of the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.



Gene Wilhoit

Weissberg: I thought it would help to first summarize the key findings and implications of the research. Lots of reviews of SEL programming have found positive impacts on skills, attitudes, and social behavior; reductions in conduct problems; and improved academic performance. But we needed more investigation into the long-term impacts. This meta-analysis looked at 82 studies, with follow-ups between six months and 18 years out. We found positive effects on

behavior and academic performance and reduced problem behaviors.

There were no differences based on multiple demographics, which is really important and reflects what teachers and principals have been telling us in national surveys. A creative new part of the research was to look at the long-term impact on socially important outcomes, such as graduation and dropout rates, arrests, diagnosable disorders, and more. Only a few longitudinal studies have been done in these areas, but the results were promising. Finally, we looked at some monetary benefits of some of these interventions.

Weissberg: What's your reaction, Gene? How can research like this help shape policy?

Wilhoit: Getting research into the hands of policymakers is sometimes a difficult task. It's helpful to have a meta-analysis that pulls together multiple studies and implications. That's more influential than individual research studies. It's really critical to have research translated in ways that policymakers can digest and understand.

When you interact with policymakers, they want to know what you learned and how it impacts policy. It helps when researchers can point to some direction and begin to draw implications from the findings, especially on issues that policymakers care about, such as academic performance, low-performing students, and the financial implications. That's when you really get their attention.

"Policymaker" is a broad term, and researchers must understand their unique and different needs, from deep dives into research for some to broad overviews for others. In all circumstances, it's absolutely essential to connect the dots between your research and *their* priorities.

***Weissberg:* What issues are top of mind for policymakers?**

Wilhoit: It depends on which level. For state policymakers, the priorities are academic performance and the impact of interventions on low-performing schools and students. State policymakers are trying to reshape systems. But at the district, school, and classroom levels, they're especially interested in how to do the hard work around implementation.

***Weissberg:* What advice do you have for researchers trying to make a difference at the local or state level?**

Wilhoit: When one asks adults what they believe students should know and be able to do, people get to social and emotional learning right away. They might not call it that. But when you ask for the profile of a learner, inevitably they'll mention content, but other qualities count even more: confidence, lifelong learning, responsibility, collaboration, solving problems. That's what excites and motivates folks.

This is a big opportunity for the field, to convene communities to get clarity on what they want learners to be. If I were still a chief, I'd ask districts to go through some sort of interactive exercises to clarify what they want their graduates to be able to do. The same applies for state policymakers. These community conversations will provide a north star for action and a means to validate the steps taken to advance learning for all students.

***Weissberg:* Do chiefs know about the benefits of social and emotional learning and how they can advance this work?**

Wilhoit: Chiefs are reminded constantly of the need to prepare learners for success in an ever-changing and dynamic world. Many are expanding expectations to include SEL. But they may not be aware of efforts such as your Collaborating States Initiative. You can't assume that information is being shared with chiefs or their deputies. Plus, in state agencies, the work often is disconnected from issues such as accountability and assessment, curriculum, and instruction. You need cross-agency conversations, which is what chiefs can make happen.

Weissberg: How can states and districts work together most effectively to foster students' social, emotional, and academic learning?

Wilhoit: As you know, there's lots of concern about top-down mandates from the federal government to the states, but also from states to locals. You can't build ownership that way. District and school people need to see the implementation. I'd start with "lighthouse" districts where intent and capacity are high, and help them as they move through tough issues such as how to integrate SEL with curriculum and instruction, teacher development, and reshaping school environments.

Weissberg: That's exactly how our [Collaborating Districts Initiative](#) is structured, where we're working very closely with 10 larger districts, helping them implement SEL systemically, and then sharing lessons with the broader field.

Wilhoit: Finally, you need strong communications. You don't want to get ahead of parents. They need to know this is the right thing for their kids, that you're not backing away from a strong commitment to academic standards.

Weissberg: CASEL's [Collaborating States Initiative](#) is working with about 20 states. Some are defining competencies, others are weighing additional policies, and others are focused on professional learning and supports. Key challenges are to get the ears of chiefs, governors, and legislators, and to build state-district partnerships to help with implementation. What do you recommend?

Wilhoit: You're dealing with a complex mix of actors and issues. Every state has a unique history and context. It is critical to understand each. However, all are attempting to improve the outcomes of their systems, and the more one understands how to connect what appear to be distinct and isolated initiatives to the broad policy goals of policymakers—to help policymakers make sense of how things fit together to improve educational opportunity—the greater the chance of success. The really difficult issue is implementation. Building strong partnerships that help states make sense, learn, and adjust policy as they support innovation coming from local collaborative learning laboratories in districts and schools is an exciting opportunity.

Weissberg: What role do third parties play? How do we move this issue from the periphery to a more central priority?

Wilhoit: One should work with groups that share your vision and are deeply committed—groups like the Council of Chief State School Officers, Chiefs for Change, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), teachers, and principals. All are gatekeepers. They have to see SEL as a key component of their goals. That commitment comes with time and understanding leading to trust.

Weissberg: What role can the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development play?

Wilhoit: I think it's really important that we decided to make it a report *from* the nation, not *to* the nation. We're raising the voices of people who understand and have experienced what SEL can do to improve the lives of our next generation.

Because the Aspen Institute has a positive national reputation, its sponsorship is critical, but people want good ideas translated into action, and the Commission is aiming to serve that role.

Resources

For more information about the interrelationship of research, policy, and practice, see the following on CASEL's website:

[Collaborating States Initiative](#)

[Scan of SEL Standards in the 50 States](#)

[Brief](#): How State Planning For the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Can Promote Student Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: An Examination of Five Key Strategies

[Webinar](#): How are States Building SEL into Their ESSA Plans?

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