

The Current State of SEL in our Schools: The Frenzy, Flaws, and Fads (Part II)

Saturday, November 6, 2021

The Current State of SEL in our Schools: The Frenzy, Flaws, and Fads (Part II)

If the Goal is to Teach Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Skills, Why are We Getting on the Wrong Trains Headed “West”?

Dear Colleagues,

The Current State of SEL in our Schools

In Part I of this two-part Blog Series on the frenzy, flaws, and fads surrounding SEL in today's schools, we noted that many news stories in the popular and professional press have accurately reported on the increased social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students (and staff) due to the Pandemic. However, the authors of many of these stories have jumped on an “SEL train to nowhere” and indiscriminately recommended that schools “do SEL” as the panacea to these needs.

[CLICK HERE to re-read Part I (<http://www.projectachieve.info/news/post/204/addressing-students-sel-pandemic-needs-by-addressing-their-sel-universal-needs-part-i>)]

In doing this, they have largely provided:

- No SEL definitions or criteria of success;
- No objective, causally-related research to support their recommendations or to differentiate which SEL practices help what social, emotional, or behavioral student challenges; and/or

- No counsel on how much time, professional development, money, or other resources will be needed both at start-up and to sustain the initiative over time.

In a figurative sense, in Horace Greeley's words, educators are being told to "Go West, young man (woman), go West and grow up with the country."

And, unfortunately, many educators across the country are "going West". . . but they are ending up in different and unpredictable destinations, encountering different roadblocks and unintended effects, with many ending up with no sustainable results and others worse off than when they started.

I can't imagine a school committing to a reading or math series or curricular approach that way some schools have chosen their SEL approaches. . .for example, based on others' endorsements, marketing, or testimonies; the apparent ease and speed of implementation (regardless of the results); or the fact that "we need to do—so let's try—something."

Indeed, moving back to the first point at the beginning of this piece, our school-aged students are struggling on a social, emotional, and behavioral level. While assessments of individual students in a specific school are needed to validate their struggles and determine if they are related to the Pandemic or not, a recent U.S. Department of Education Report gives us a global picture.

Summarizing data and studies from 2020, the first year of the Pandemic, the Report noted that:

- Emergency department visits for mental health-related issues increased 24% for 5 to 11 year old and 31% for 12 to 17 year old students;
- More than 25% of U.S. parents reported mental health declines in their children, and 14% reported increased behavioral problems; and
- 13 to 19 year old adolescents reported increased feelings of stress, unhappiness or depression, and losing sleep due to worry.

Relative to our second introductory point, a recent Education Week article (Prothero, October 22, 2021) cited information from a report written by consulting firm Tyton Partners and published with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). This report was based on surveys of more than 100 SEL providers and over 2,000 teachers and school/district administrators.

Let's explore the results of this survey as one assessment of where schools are in today's "SEL world."

But let's also close this Introduction to Part II of this SEL Blog series by stating,

Intervention is not a benign act. It is a strategic act.

Every time you do an intervention and it does not work, you potentially make the student, staff, school, or system more resistant to the next intervention(s). Moreover, you also potentially make the original problem worse.

Thus, we do not want to do random intervention. We need to do strategic intervention that is based on and linked to the objectively validated reasons that explain why specific problems are occurring.

As educators, we do not get "credit" for "doing interventions." We get "credit" for doing the "right" interventions at the right time with the right people in the right way such that we solve our problems by sustainably changing student and/or staff behavior.

Results and Implications from the Tyton/CASEL Survey

In contrasting their Pandemic versus pre-Pandemic priorities, the teachers and administrators who responded to the Tyton/CASEL survey identified (a) improving students' mental health, and (b) promoting students' social-emotional competence as their top-two Pandemic-driven priorities.

Given this, and drawing from the October 22nd Education Week article and the October, 2021 Tyton Partners/CASEL report, it was also noted that:

- A majority of survey respondents, especially at the middle and high school levels, connected their increased interest in social and emotional learning in their schools to the Pandemic and to a greater need to focus on racial injustice; and
- They reported that their SEL activities had increased most notably in the areas of Curriculum, Measurement, and Programmatic Implementation in Grades 6 through 12, and Programmatic Implementation in Grades K through 5.
- Significantly, in response to questions evaluating their functional understanding of SEL, **only 40% of the school respondents and 60% of the district respondents were aware of the most popular SEL frameworks**, even as 90% of them said that they were broadly aware of what SEL is.

Based on the survey, the Tyton/CASEL report concluded that awareness and adoption of SEL quality standards/frameworks remain low today, and that many schools and districts are not using them to guide the adoption, implementation, and evaluation of their SEL initiatives.

But there is a critical dilemma here.

A Harvard Graduate School of Education research group recently identified over 40 different SEL frameworks. As much as CASEL wants to be the dominant framework (see Part I of this Blog series), conceptually and empirically, SEL is in a state of confusion.

Reflecting on this, the Harvard group has stated:

Throughout its history, the field of social and emotional learning (SEL) has been defined or characterized in a variety of ways. In some respects, the term SEL serves as an umbrella for many subfields with which many educators, researchers, and policy-makers are familiar (e.g., bullying prevention, civic and character education and development, conflict resolution, social skills training, life skills, “soft” or “non-cognitive” skills, 21st century skills). However, discussion of this broad non-academic domain lacks clarity about what we mean and is beset by dilemmas about how best to measure and promote skills in this area. Underlying this challenge, and in some ways compounding it, is the fact that the field more generally is structured around a large number of organizational systems or frameworks that often use different or even conflicting terminology to talk about a similar set of skills.

So . . . connecting these dots. . . if the school and district respondents in the Tyton Partners/CASEL survey are representative of their colleagues across the country. . . and if only 40 to 60% of them are aware of the most popular SEL frameworks. . . and if there are at least 40 different frameworks. . . .

How are ALL of our schools and districts reviewing the research and practice across all of these frameworks to ensure that they are selecting the “right” field-tested and objectively validated one for their students, staff, and schools?

This is both very daunting and concerning, especially as the Tyton/CASEL surveys indicated that schools are currently purchasing more SEL curricula, and investing more time in SEL professional development, coaching, implementation, and evaluation now than before the Pandemic.

Indeed, the report states that district spending on SEL programming has grown about 45% between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years, from \$530 million to \$765 million. And with the current availability and flexibility of American Rescue Plan funds, it is likely that 2021-2022 SEL expenditures will increase again.

Recognizing (a) the quality-control concerns inherent in this rush to purchase SEL resources, (b) the dearth of well-evaluated SEL practices, (c) the lack of consensus on how to evaluate SEL outcomes and efficacy, and (d) the lack of well-validated formative and summative evaluation tools, the Tyton/CASEL report stated:

As schools and districts expand their grade 6-12 implementation, and providers follow suit with their offerings, it will be important for the field to evolve best practices to best meet the needs of older students.

Can the SEL marketplace rise to meet the growing demand?

Quality in the SEL marketplace may not keep pace with demand. And while awareness of SEL is high, administrators and teachers are not as familiar with popular SEL standards and frameworks.

In the push to rapidly address these important issues, it is tempting for schools and districts to unintentionally implement half-measures, or low-quality measures, that are masquerading as high quality ones (whether intentionally or unintentionally).

According to the [Education Week](#) article discussing the Tyton/CASEL report:

There are a surprisingly large number of different frameworks considering the SEL marketplace is a mature one. Furthermore, the field does not seem to have coalesced around a common concept of what quality SEL looks like.

Quality control issues are common with fast-growing markets, the report says, in part because growth beckons **low-quality providers to enter** (my emphasis). And when high-quality providers cannot meet fast-growing demand, low-quality providers fill in the gap.

In the report's survey of [SEL suppliers](#) (another way that Tyton evaluated SEL's current national status), **only 37 percent of those surveyed have conducted third-party quantitative studies of the effectiveness of their programs or products with a comparison group** (my emphasis).

Looking ahead, the report flagged additional issues around managing the demand for social-emotional learning programs.

Schools and districts are relying too heavily on federal funds that will run out to pay for their social-emotional offerings. Federal relief dollars were tied for the second most-used funding source to support SEL in districts along with Title I money and projected to be the top funding stream next year.

What are the implications of all of this?

First of all, let's inject a tempering dose of reality relative to CASEL's involvement in co-publishing this survey. Indeed, in Part I of this Series, we discussed some critical flaws in the SEL world according to CASEL, and presented a more scientific cognitive-behavioral alternative to SEL instruction that emphasizes directly teaching students' observable and measurable social, emotional, and behavioral self-management skills.

[CLICK HERE to re-read Part I (<http://www.projectachieve.info/news/post/204/addressing-students-sel-pandemic-needs-by-addressing-their-sel-universal-needs-part-i>)]

We further noted that CASEL is an independent organization that is not certified by the U.S. Department of Education or any other statutory or accreditation body as an official spokesperson or approving body of SEL or SEL programs and practices. This directly implicates CASEL's Program Guide to Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs which recognizes the SEL programs that CASEL has internally decided meets its own criteria for inclusion.

In a striking example of the disconnect here, we described and documented how CASEL includes the PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) SEL curriculum in its Program Guide, while the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) at the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences stated (March 17, 2021) that, "(b)ased on the research, the WWC found that PATHS® has no discernible effects on academic achievement, social interactions, observed individual behavior, or emotional status."

Given this, the first implication of the Tyton/CASEL report is that districts and schools need to know the existing independent research-to-practice results of those who are recommended different SEL frameworks, curricula, or practices.

The second implication is consistent with the effective selection and implementation practices that we have recommended for many years in our Blogs. Districts and schools looking to select and implement SEL frameworks, curricula, or practices need to:

- Independently review and vet the testimonials, claims, and research that is available (focusing on the latter) to ensure that the approaches being considered have been objectively validated and have demonstrated their causal impact on student behavior; and
- Evaluate the research-to-practice applications of the approaches that make "the first cut" to ensure that they are relevant to and have a probability of success with the actual students, staff, and schools that are being targeted.

From this science-to-practice perspective, we want to reiterate that schools should know the universal social, emotional, and behavioral skill outcomes that they want their SEL initiatives to produce.

In Part I of this Series, we provided a working list of these specific skills, from preschool through high school that were organized into the following clusters:

- Ready to Learn Skills
- Safety Skills
- Responsibility Skills
- Interpersonal/Prosocial Skills
- Social Problem-Solving Skills
- Conflict Prevention and Resolution Skills
- Emotional Control, Communication, Coping Skills

[CLICK HERE (<http://www.projectachieve.info/news/post/204/addressing-students-self-pandemic-needs-by-addressing-their-self-universal-needs>) to read Part I of this Series and the specific skills embedded in each of these clusters]

Finally, from a science-to-practice perspective, we want to re-emphasize that all social, emotional, and behavioral skills are most successfully taught by applying social learning theory and cognitive-behavioral approaches. These involve:

- Teaching the steps, scripts, and behaviors for specific, targeted skills;
- Modeling or demonstrating the steps, scripts, and behaviors for the skills;
- Having students role-play or physically practice (with explicit, critical feedback) the steps, scripts, and behaviors;
- Having students role-play or physically practice the steps, scripts, and behaviors under simulated conditions of emotionality so that they learn how to handle real emotional situations effectively in the future;
- Transferring the practice of the behaviors (with continued supervision and feedback) into progressively more challenging and emotional real-life simulations, settings, and situations;
- Using teachable, real-life moments to infuse the behaviors into real-life settings and situations; and
- Continuing the practice and infusion until the behaviors are automatic, conditioned, and able to be demonstrated in different stressful situations or emotional conditions or circumstances.

Finally, from a science-to-practice perspective, we want to reinforce the fact that students' social, emotional, and behavioral self-management learning and application exist within a five-component ecological context.

These five interdependent components are:

- Positive Relationships and School/Classroom Climates

- Positive Behavioral Expectations and Skill Instruction
- Student Motivation and Accountability
- Consistency and Fidelity
- Special Situations and Multi-Tiered Services and Supports

These components were described in the context of eliminating disproportionate school discipline referrals and suspensions for students of color and with disabilities in our August 14, 2021 Blog.

[CLICK HERE (<http://www.projectachieve.info/news/post/199/the-components-needed-to-eliminate-disproportionate-school-discipline-referrals-and-suspensions-for-students-of-color-do-not-require-anti-bias-training-part-ii>) for a Description of these Five Interdependent Components]

Schools are Also “Buying Stock” in SEL Software Applications: Is There a Crash Coming?

As we move back from virtual and hybrid instruction to full-time, on-site instruction, I am also concerned about another SEL purchasing trend occurring across the country.

This trend involves teachers putting students—who are sitting right in front of them—on on-line, software-driven SEL programs. . . to “teach” them how interpersonal, social problem-solving, conflict prevention and resolutions, and emotional control, communication, and coping skills.

Talk about a contradiction!

This is comparable to teachers “teaching” academic skills using on-line, asynchronous programs or courses with no live instruction. . . even though, once again, their students are right in front of them.

Critically, research and practice tells us that computer-based instruction results in academically less knowledgeable, skilled, prepared, and proficient students. We know this from evaluations of computer-dependent credit recovery programs, from the emerging research with on-line textbooks, and from differences in the State Proficiency Test performance of students who take these tests on-line versus using paper and pencil.

But even if computer-assisted academic instruction worked (and it doesn't), why would we relegate the instruction of critical social, emotional, and behavioral real-life preparation and skills for all students to a “sit alone” process of instruction mediated by a static computer and two-dimensional screen?

And I say this with all due respect to the SEL softwares that use AI (artificial intelligence)-generated characters, complex algorithms, and even virtual reality to present socially complex and "realistic" scenarios to train students' social-emotional thinking and response sets.

Indeed, one of the reasons why some of our students have so many interpersonal conflicts and social skill gaps is because of the significant time they have spent "interacting" on computers.

And let's not get into how much cyber-teasing and bullying occurs on-line, and the mental health issues (e.g., low self-esteem, thoughts of suicide) correlated to excessive social media use.

When schools—and this occurs at both elementary and secondary school levels—relegate their primary SEL instruction for students to computers, they abdicate their educational responsibility of effectively teaching them the skill-based outcomes needed in this essential area.

This should not be about "checking off an SEL instructional box" so that educators on their drive home from school can say, "At least, we're doing something."

This is about preparing our students to handle personal, interpersonal, social, and conflict-triggering situations so that they are (a) contributing to safe and positive school and classroom settings, (b) sustaining their academic engagement—individually and when working in groups; and (c) maximizing their social, emotional, behavioral—and and academic—learning, progress, and proficiency for this school year, the next school year, and for all their post-graduation years.

Summary

There is no question that students have many different social, emotional, and behavioral needs from preschool through high school. They had them before the Pandemic began, and some students certainly have different or greater needs due to or that have occurred during the Pandemic.

As such, students need social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health multi-tiered services, supports, strategies, and interventions.

But these needs need to be assessed using a systematic, data-based, functional assessment, problem-solving approach that identifies their root causes, and the resulting services, supports, strategies, and interventions need to be explicitly linked to the root causes and the goal of enhancing students' self-management strengths and competencies.

There are well-established research-to-practice blueprints to accomplish this process. These include (a) direct student instruction and practice focusing on teaching and applying observable and measurable social, emotional, and behavioral skills; and (b) embedding that instruction in the ecological contexts (through the five interdependent components outlined above) that make it meaningful to the students and relevant to their home, school, peer, and community lives.

If this is what a school embraces as the foundation to their SEL initiative, they will have a high probability of success.

However, if schools fall into the traps that (a) were identified in the Tyton/CASEL report, (b) are inherent in the Harvard group's recognition of over 40 SEL frameworks, (c) are represented in the contradiction of having CASEL tout a specific SEL (PATHS) program while the What Works Clearinghouse basically pans it, and (d) were cited in the empirically-based concerns with the CASEL framework. . . then SEL will predictably fail. . . meaning that we will be failing our students.

This is the challenge of today. . . a time of seemingly never-ending challenges. But this is a challenge that can be won.

The Question is: Will education take on this challenge using wisdom and courage, research and data, common sense and pragmatism?

Some will need to get off the "bandwagon headed West," and get on the "train to the specific destination" where we and our students should be.

I appreciate everything that you do to support our students and colleagues in the field. My Blog analyses and comments are not designed to emphasize what is not working in our field. Instead, they are designed to critique why some things are not working, while emphasizing field-tested, science-to-practice alternatives.

I always look forward to your comments. . . whether on-line or via e-mail.

If I can help you in any of the multi-tiered areas discussed in this message, I am always happy to provide a free one-hour consultation conference call to help you clarify your needs and directions on behalf of your students.

I hope to hear from you soon.

Best,

HOWIE