

Social and Emotional Development Matters:

Taking Action Now for Future Generations



This issue brief, created by The Pennsylvania State University with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is one of a series of briefs that addresses the need for research, practice and policy on social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is defined as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

Learn more at www.rwjf.org/socialandemotionallearning.



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Introduction

There is overwhelming agreement from the perspective of educators, parents, and policymakers that children should receive a broad education that prepares them to be active, engaged citizens who make positive contributions to support their families and communities. Although there are various models of educational goals, there is consensus that education should focus on supporting essential capacities to help children navigate the world successfully. These include capacities to: (1) develop healthy personal relationships, (2) treat others with respect and dignity, (3) succeed in post-secondary education and the labor market, and (4) be a contributing citizen in a democracy.^{1,2} Helping children develop these capacities is a formidable set of tasks for educators and families, and to nurture these capacities schools should be healthy, caring spaces that support equitable pathways for children to reach these goals. Because of the complex, diverse, and rapidly changing world in which we live, all four of these broad capacities require the development of children's social and emotional competencies.

There are numerous frameworks that define social and emotional competencies in children and youth.^{3,4,5} These often distinguish between intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies. The most influential framework was developed by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). The CASEL framework identified five inter-related sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies that comprise social and emotional learning (SEL): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (see next page). These and related competencies are critical to academic success and positive adjustment in school and in adult employment.^{6,7}

As a result, social and emotional learning (SEL) has moved from the periphery towards the center of educational curricula and pedagogy, and the goal of enhancing the SEL of children and adults has become key to creating a healthy, safe, and supportive school culture. Over the past two years, Penn State University and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation have released 10 reports on the current research evidence of the impacts of SEL.⁸ This has included a review of evidence-based practices in infancy, the preschool years, and in the elementary, middle and high school contexts, as well as briefs on school climate, teacher stress, parent involvement, the role of peer relations, equity, and the economic benefits of social and emotional learning investments.

In the sections below, we summarize the key pieces of evidence described in more detail in each of the briefs in the series. We've organized the sections to begin with key findings and then focus on implications for policy and practice. We end with critical actions that could be taken by different actors from government to youth to broadly scale SEL.

There is consensus that education should focus on supporting essential capacities to help children navigate the world successfully.

Social Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning has identified five inter-related competencies that comprise social emotional learning:



Self-awareness

The ability to accurately recognize one’s feelings and thoughts and their influence on behaviors. This includes accurately assessing one’s strengths and limitations, and possessing a growth mindset, a well-grounded sense of self-efficacy and optimism.



Self-management

The ability to regulate one’s emotions, cognitions, and behaviors to set and achieve personal and educational goals. This includes delaying gratification, managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating one’s self, and persevering in addressing challenges.



Social awareness

The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.



Relationship skills

The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking help when needed.



Responsible decision-making

The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior, social interactions, and school based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

Key Findings – What Matters

SEL Matters for Success

There is strong scientific evidence that SEL programs improve children’s well-being, behavior, and academic outcomes. Evidence-based SEL programs at all levels from preschool to high school have been shown to promote the development of social, emotional, and academic competencies.^{9,10,11,12} The development of social and emotional skills predicts



improved academic engagement and performance, more positive social behaviors and lower rates of behavior problems and psychological distress. Most educators now believe that developing social and emotional competencies is foundational for student success and should be a major goal of education.^{13,14,15} This is not surprising, as theories of learning remind us that learning is a relational process. Further, when SEL is

implemented with quality and employs culturally competent practices, it can support the development of educational equity for all students.¹⁶

Investment Matters and Pays Off

Investing in SEL is a wise use of public funds. When implemented with quality, SEL programs produce economic benefits. A cost-benefit analysis of six SEL programs found that for every dollar spent on SEL programming, society reaps an average benefit of \$11. That

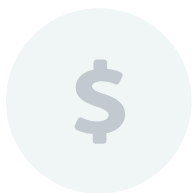


figure arises from fewer negative outcomes such as substance use and delinquency and increased positive outcomes such as academic achievement and social skills.¹⁷ Further, studies have shown that students’ social and emotional abilities as early as kindergarten predict higher rates of graduation from high school and college, as well as lower rates of crime and use of public services. Thus, social and emotional

competencies help to provide a foundation that prepares young people for long-term success in college, work, family, and as productive members of society.¹⁸ [Read the full brief on the economic impacts of SEL.](#)

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Early Development Matters

Programs that support adult caregiving in early childhood can improve young children’s socioemotional development. Effective strategies include early home visitation programs that provide support to parents; parent skills training programs that strengthen parental responsiveness and enhance child security and social and emotional competency; and two-generation programs such as Early Head Start that provide complementary services to support both parental competencies and young children’s social and emotional health. In addition, infant/early childhood mental health consultation can support caregivers in early care and education programs.¹⁹

During the first three years, foundational social and emotional competence achievements can be threatened by exposure to elevated stresses including family poverty, marital conflict, parental emotional problems, and experiences of trauma, neglect, or abuse.²⁰ These and other adversities can cause some infants and toddlers to experience anxious fearfulness, overwhelming sadness, disorganized attachment, or serious problems managing behavior and impulses, at least temporarily derailing their healthy social and emotional development.²¹ [Read the full brief on SEL in the first three years.](#)

Effective school-family partnerships are a key component of an effective SEL system for children.



Parenting Matters

Parents and other caregivers can substantially influence children’s social and emotional competence from infancy onward. To fully understand social and emotional development it also is necessary to take an ecological perspective and recognize the important roles of parents and other family members throughout childhood.

Although many parenting programs focus on ages birth to 3, in order to address children’s school readiness, parent engagement efforts need to intensify during the preschool years.²² The quality of parental care shapes development throughout childhood, and in the preschool years high quality parental care is linked to making friends, getting along with others, and managing emotions and behavior. Because these core school readiness skills grow rapidly during the preschool years, it is a developmental period when parent engagement can have a particularly strong impact on child school readiness and future school success. Parenting throughout childhood and adolescence substantially influences children’s social and emotional development. Thus, effective school-family partnerships are a key component of an effective SEL system for children. [Read the full brief on how parent engagement impacts SEL.](#)



Peers Matter

The development of healthy peer relations makes an important contribution to children's social and emotional competence. Bullying and peer rejection can lead to serious interpersonal and mental health issues. Key developmental milestones during the elementary years include the abilities to make and keep friends, and deal effectively with peer group dynamics.²³ This requires both intrapersonal skills (e.g., understanding and managing one's feelings and impulses) and interpersonal skills (understanding others, negotiating, and social problem-solving). Positive peer relations in childhood significantly predict romantic relationship satisfaction in adulthood, as well as adult work competence, and better health and lower healthcare costs in early adulthood.^{24,25}

Peer relations matter differently at different stages in development. Effective interventions in the elementary years can support individual children's social and emotional skills, alter negative peer dynamics, and foster positive peer attitudes toward all classmates. Children experiencing peer difficulties often need additional, systematic, and intensive social skill coaching. SEL interventions in middle and high school that engage adolescents in team building, collaboration, and community service can impact youth engagement in school and learning and help them develop a positive identity. [Read the full brief on how peer relationships influence SEL.](#)



Development Matters

School-based SEL programs are more likely to be successful if they have a developmental perspective and provide a clear preschool to grade 12 scope and sequence that fosters both interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies. It is critical to utilize developmentally appropriate models that provide a scope and sequence, and that recognize the growing ability of children and youth to actively participate in the process. Children's growth in communicative and cognitive abilities as reflected in the dramatic changes in both their brain organization and social worlds should be recognized in both the process and content of SEL skills, and in efforts to empower children to help to shape the culture and climate of their schools, peer relations, and communities.²⁶ Read the full briefs that cover SEL in [preschool](#), in [elementary school](#), and in [middle and high school](#).



Comprehensiveness Matters

Research demonstrates that comprehensive SEL programs, such as those that focus on all five of the competencies in the CASEL model, produce broader behavioral and academic improvements than those that are more narrowly targeted. This is likely because these components are interdependent outcomes (e.g., accurately identifying emotions, regulating one's emotions and behaviors in order to take other's perspectives, being able to resolve conflict when there are different perspectives, etc.) and are all necessary to achieve student outcomes. Further, comprehensive models present a scope and sequence for learning that incorporates developmental theory and balances interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies.²⁷

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Research indicates that effective programs utilize four practices represented by the acronym SAFE. Such programs are: (a) Sequenced: developmentally coordinated set of activities, (b) Active: active learning helps students master new skills, (c) Focused: programs intentionally develop personal and social skills, and (d) Explicit: specific skills taught are clearly identified, taught, and practiced.²⁸

Further, it is important to recognize that SEL is not value-free and reflects the goals of living in a diverse, democratic society.²⁹ As a result, certain values, attitudes and beliefs (sometimes termed character traits) should be encouraged in SEL programs and daily interactions including caring, compassion, optimism, conscientiousness, courage, citizenship, respect, responsibility, fairness, and honesty. These values provide a reason for why we utilize social and emotional competencies to support the well-being of everyone.³⁰

Effective programs are SAFE.

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- **Active**
- **Focused, and**
- **Explicit**



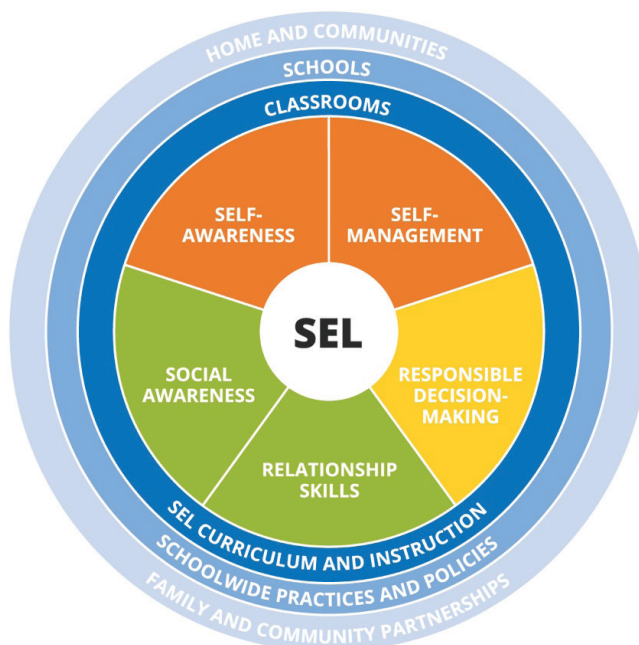
Systems Integration Matters

Schools from PreK to grade 12 should systematically integrate SEL across schoolwide programs, policies, and routines, and intentionally partner with families and their communities, to have the greatest impact. Although the use of evidence-based SEL programs has shown efficacy and is often the first step taken by schools, the broader goal is to adopt a systems-wide approach using a common language that supports a school culture and climate in which the goals of equity, caring, and challenge are well-balanced and in which all adults and students actively participate.^{31,32}

The figure below graphically illustrates a systematic approach that incorporates classroom curriculum, school wide policies and practices, and student, family and community involvement and is carried out most effectively in the context of a carefully planned, multi-layered system.³³ A systematic approach uses continuous improvement practices. The practices include

CASEL’s comprehensive framework for systemic implementation of approaches designed to promote social and emotional development

- Intrapersonal skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Responsible decision-making skills



planning, ongoing goal-setting and assessment of outcomes that actively involve students and faculty, and creating equitable learning opportunities across school, family, and community partnerships. Further, SEL programs provide a universal level of support for all children, but they also need to be integrated into multi-systems levels of support for those children who have additional learning and behavioral challenges. In this way, SEL can be an important component of a comprehensive public health model of education.^{34,35,36} By integrating social, emotional, and academic development, SEL should nurture a school climate and culture that is inclusive of, and responsive to, the diversity of interests, aptitudes, perspectives, races, and cultures represented in the classroom. [Read the full brief on how SEL and school climate can be integrated.](#)

For most US schools this is an aspirational goal. In most schools the absence of a systemic approach to developing and implementing a shared vision of SEL that is supported in everyday interactions across contexts can lead to fragmented experiences that do not optimize the health and well-being of children or the school as a whole. One example of a model for systemic implementation is the CASEL Guide for Schoolwide Social and Emotional Learning³⁷ which provides a systematic process for developing, implementing, and improving schoolwide SEL programming. In order to meet demands at all levels, districts should plan for an administrative structure that has leadership and staffing with SEL curriculum specialists to carry forward SEL initiatives.³⁸

Before and during formal schooling SEL occurs in the home, in child care and preschool, and in out-of-school settings. Social interactions in infancy³⁹ and early childhood⁴⁰ as well as in organized out-of-school activities (e.g., after-school and summer programs and community-based organizations)^{41,42,43} provide opportunities for young people to learn and apply SEL skills with others.



Equity Matters

It is critical to remove barriers and create greater equity so that all students experience quality SEL. SEL benefits all young people. However, there are barriers that may prevent students of color and other marginalized youth from accessing and benefitting from SEL programs and policies. For all students to benefit, SEL must be grounded in a larger context of equity and justice efforts within public education. Factors such as poverty, exclusionary discipline practices, misinformation about the effects of trauma on students, implicit biases and educator burnout may all impact access to quality SEL programming.⁴⁴ SEL provides the opportunity to recognize and support the values of different cultures in daily life and to use these cultural understandings to support youth's positive cultural identity.

Promising initiatives include those that focus on racial and socioeconomic integration, utilizing restorative justice practices for school discipline, introducing trauma-informed practices to create supportive school environments, improving the cultural competency and equity-literacy of educators, and providing SEL and mindfulness programming to teachers to cope with stress, develop their own SEL skills, and create healthy, caring schools. [Read the full brief on how to approach SEL in a way that promotes equity.](#)

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Measurement Matters

SEL is measurable and assessments should be formative to continuously improve the quality of instruction and the systematic integration of SEL into schools. In order to assess the needs and skills of students, teachers, parents, etc., it is essential to develop a system of assessment to identify what practices, strategies, and policies to implement. These assessments can assess social, emotional, and cognitive skills of students, classroom norms, perceptions of discipline practices, needs of parents, pedagogy of teachers, culture and climate of schools, leadership of principals, etc.⁴⁵

Different types of measures may have different uses. Measures of students' social-emotional competencies should not be used for high-stakes accountability purposes, but instead to inform teaching, learning, and program investments.⁴⁶ States or districts may choose to use aggregate measures of school climate for accountability under ESSA.



Adult SEL Matters

Effective teacher and staff training and administrative support are essential for effective SEL implementation and sustainable systems change. Research has shown that teachers and other adults working with children in school contexts receive little pre-service training in ways to enhance and assess children's social and emotional development.^{47,48} Yet, teachers report that SEL is a key/essential part of their responsibilities in improving children's academic outcomes.⁴⁹ Further, it is common for schools to adopt SEL curricula without providing the essential initial training, ongoing coaching and mentoring, or technical support to ensure effective implementation.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, there is strong evidence that without reasonable quality of implementation, SEL programs will not improve children's well-being or academic success.⁵¹

Today, teaching is rated as one of the most stressful occupations in the U.S. High levels of stress are affecting teacher health and well-being, causing teacher burnout, lack of engagement, job dissatisfaction, poor performance, and some of the highest turnover rates ever.⁵² Teacher stress not only has negative consequences for teachers, it also results in lower achievement for students and higher costs for schools.⁵³ Supporting teachers own social and emotional competence through training that includes emotional awareness, stress management, and mindfulness has shown great promise in reducing teacher stress and improving classroom instruction.⁵⁴ [Read the full brief on how SEL can support teacher well-being.](#)

At the building level, a principal's active support for implementation of SEL programming is essential for success and sustained use.⁵⁵ Effective principals provide support in a variety of ways, including: communicating a shared vision for SEL, allocating resources as needed, modeling the skills and attitudes with students and staff, observing classroom curricula, communicating common goals, supporting collaboration and participation by families and out-of-school providers, supporting teacher's own social and emotional competence,

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and creating a sense of community and caring, positive school climate.⁵⁶ In order to do all of this, principals themselves must be knowledgeable about evidence-based SEL models, and how to effectively provide the skills discussed above. However, similar to teachers, principals generally receive little or no training or mentoring in how to create a caring, supportive school environment in which SEL is infused throughout the school.

Policy and Practice Implications: Using What Matters

SEL programs, delivered through PreK-12 schools to all children, are a low-cost educational intervention that can create substantial returns on investment.^{57,58,59,60}

As such, schools should adopt evidence-based SEL programs and activities in order to improve students' social, emotional, and academic success. At present, formula funds that can support evidence-based programs include Title I, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B, Title II, and Title IV.^{61,62} Federal, state and local policy should provide districts with further financial incentives to adopt, rigorously implement, and assess the effectiveness of SEL programs.

Schools need effective models of support in order to create comprehensive and systematic SEL that is reinforced school-wide. This requires sufficient planning and ongoing technical assistance. School-wide models include explicit instruction, integration with the curriculum, SEL-infused climate and culture that supports equity, and connection to family and community.



Teachers and administrators require ongoing professional development and coaching to ensure high-quality implementation. For SEL to be effective and equitable, adults need support both in pre-service training and in their ongoing work. Professional development should include SEL courses and practicum at both the pre-service and in-service levels based on the most recent advances from the science and practice of systemic SEL. This professional development should include sufficient support and technical assistance for curriculum implementation and school-wide improvement. In addition, schools should plan ongoing professional development for staff to build knowledge and develop their own social-emotional competence.

It is critical to provide teachers and administrators with ongoing professional development on SEL and equity and to ensure that school programs and policies take into account equity concerns. School districts should engage in long-term planning for professional development grounded in the most recent advances from the science of trauma, adversity, and resilience so that SEL is grounded in a culturally competent context.

There is a pressing need to attune educators to peer dynamics and strategies to enhance the harmony of peer relationships, especially for those students who are struggling to become accepted and liked by peers. Without support, youth struggling for peer acceptance may drift to the margins, become isolated, and miss critical opportunities to develop healthy relationships.

Partnerships with families are important in supporting children's social and emotional competencies from infancy through adolescence. Even in the face of early adversity, enhancing the warmth and responsiveness of caregivers provides children and adolescents with valuable support for building social-emotional competence. It is essential to continue support for Early Head Start and the Maternal and Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting program which was reauthorized in February 2018. A national commitment to the provision of systematic supports for parent engagement from preschool through grade 12 has the potential to promote optimal development for all children.⁶³ Investing in school-family partnerships are critical to create caring and healthy schools.

States and districts should develop standards and implementation guidelines that specify the SEL skills children should know and be able to demonstrate, and that describe how to enhance those competencies. State guidance and resources to support evidence-based SEL will help to ensure that district and school-level learning goals for SEL are well developed and aligned with educational goals and policies. Schools and districts need to develop strategic plans on how SEL assessment fits with other assessments now being used. States need to provide further guidance to districts on the appropriate use of measures that fit their strategic plans.⁶⁴

School districts should engage in long-term planning for professional development grounded in the most recent advances from the science of trauma, adversity, and resilience.

Acting On What Matters: Critical Action Steps to Broadly Scale SEL

The diverse set of briefs presented in this series attest to the breadth and depth of, and advances in, research on SEL. There is now rigorous research demonstrating the potential of SEL programming and practices that was not available one or two decades ago. In addition, there has been considerable interest in the research, practice, and policy findings of the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, which will be released in January of 2019.^{65,66}

Given the substantial interest at all levels of education, it is time to boldly scale SEL efforts in order to improve the educational and personal outcomes of current and future generations of students. Here we briefly recommend strategies that can be taken at all levels of the ecological system from the federal level all the way to specific actions of youth themselves. Both top-down and bottom-up strategies will be necessary to reach the goal of quality SEL in every school, community, and family.

Actions at the Federal Level

There is a need to create a national agenda to further SEL at the federal level. This agenda can provide funding to conduct research to enhance SEL practice and policy, and guidance to support quality implementation of evidence-based SEL at the state, district, and school levels. This guidance should be integrated across departments involved in the lives of children, including the Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, Labor, Homeland Security, and Defense.

The U.S. Department of Education recently funded a new Technical Assistance Center for Social Emotional Learning and School Safety. In a similar manner, the Department should fund a national research center on SEL that bridges research to practice using the tenants of implementation science.

Actions at the State Level

While a considerable number of states are now taking action,⁶⁷ all 50 states should develop clear guidelines on preschool to grade 12 that specify the SEL skills children should be able to demonstrate, describe how to promote those competencies in children, and specify the conditions and settings that cultivate these competencies. The guidelines should be aligned with each state's educational priorities.

Provide funding to support the necessary professional development at both the preservice and in-service levels to ensure teachers and administrators receive sufficient training to integrate SEL programs, policies, and practices into every school and classroom.

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Actions at the School District Level

Develop strategic plans that lead to sustained use of evidence-based SEL programs and evidence-informed practices and policies that involve schools, families, and communities.⁶⁸ As part of these plans, districts can specify how SEL assessments fit with other assessments now being used, especially to support continuous improvement of systemic programming.⁶⁹

Hire SEL curriculum specialists in leadership positions in their central office (based in the Curriculum Department) to support quality implementation and sustainable use of SEL activities for students, teachers, and families. Schools-based SEL teams, supported by district specialists, can ensure high-quality implementation in every classroom.

Actions at the School Building Level

Form permanent SEL committees to ensure the creation and monitoring of school-level plans based on the local needs of both staff and students regarding SEL professional development, programs, policies, and practices. A central focus would include ongoing professional development for staff to build knowledge and develop their own social-emotional competence.

Reach out to families and community organizations with clear plans to partner to nurture each child's social and emotional competence. Engage older youth as partners in creating relevant and meaningful experiences that empower their development.

Actions by Teachers

Ensure that their schools and districts provide sufficient professional development and curriculum time to fully implement classroom instruction and school-wide SEL with quality.

Discuss with parents and students their goals for SEL-related competencies, how they are enhanced in the classroom, and how they can be nurtured at home.

Actions by Families, Parents and Caregivers

Request that their local school and school district create and implement full strategic plans for the growth and sustained use of SEL programs, practices, and policies.

Reach out to teachers to express their interest in partnering to foster student social, emotional, and academic competence.

Actions by Students

Develop and apply social and emotional skills to help make their classrooms, schools, and communities more positive places to learn and grow.

Share their perspectives and voices about ways to make schools emotionally and physically safe environments that engage and inspire them to learn and contribute.

Conclusion

During the past two decades rigorous research has accumulated which demonstrates the substantial and important impact of SEL programming and practices. High-quality SEL is directly linked both to increased learning and school success, as well as success in relationships and well-being. While future research is necessary, as in any field of study, our nation clearly has sufficient findings on which to act to improve the lives of children and their outcomes into adulthood.



Authors/Affiliations

Mark Greenberg, Ph.D., is the Bennett Endowed Chair in Prevention Research, founding director of the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center at the Pennsylvania State University. Roger P. Weissberg, Ph.D., is Emeritus Professor of Psychology and Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and Chief Knowledge Officer of CASEL. The authors gratefully acknowledge Dale Blythe, Ph.D., Extension Professor Emeritus, College of Education and Human Development University of Minnesota, and Stephanie M. Jones, Ph.D., Professor of Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this brief.

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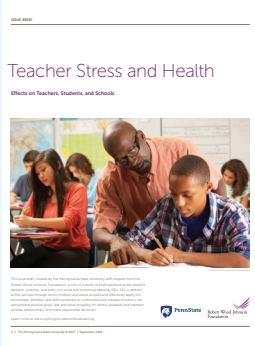
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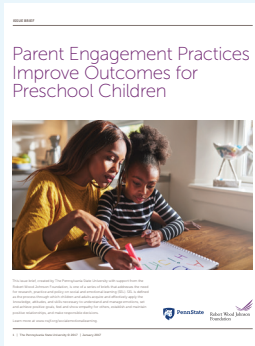
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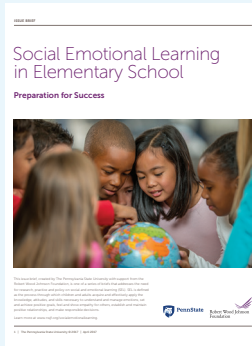
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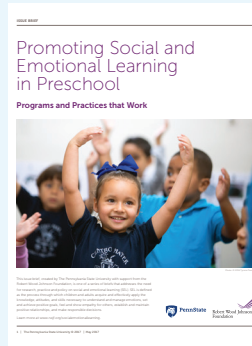
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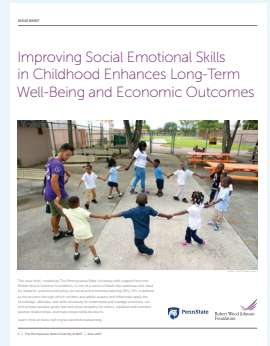
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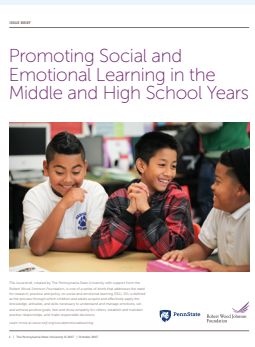
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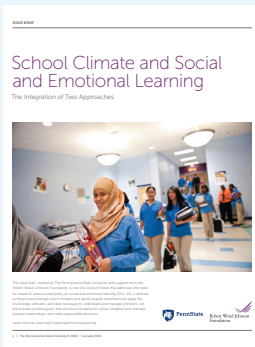
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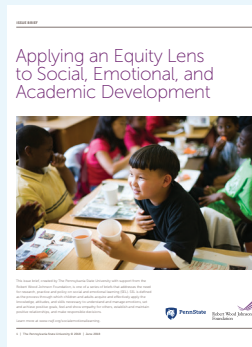
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[Applying an Equity Lens to Social, Emotional, and Academic Development](#)

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[With A Little Help from My Friends: The Importance of Peer Relationships For Social-Emotional Development](#)

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