



American Youth
Policy Forum

Social and Emotional Learning and Traditionally Underserved Populations

Policy Brief

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American Youth Policy Forum

About AYPF

The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF), founded in 1993, is a nonprofit, nonpartisan professional development organization based in Washington, DC that provides learning opportunities for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers working on youth and education issues at the national, state, and local levels. AYPF's goal is to enable policymakers to become more effective in the development, enactment, and implementation of sound policies affecting the nation's young people by providing information, insights, and networking opportunities to better understand the development of healthy and successful young people as productive workers and participating citizens in a democratic society. AYPF's work covers a range of education and youth topics, such as secondary school reform, college access and success, career and technical education, dropout prevention and recovery, alternative education, youth employment, service learning, civic engagement, and afterschool and expanded learning opportunities. This breadth of knowledge allows AYPF to bridge fields and sectors and supports our view of the need for integrated, holistic, and comprehensive academic and support services to help every youth be successful. AYPF has interacted with thousands of policymakers by conducting an average of 40 annual events such as lunchtime forums, out-of-town study tours, and discussion groups. AYPF also publishes a variety of highly respected youth policy reports and materials, available at www.aypf.org.

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Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL) plays a critical role in preparing young people for success in college, careers, and life. In general education settings, high quality SEL programs have been shown to reduce behavioral problems, improve students' sense of belonging, increase school attendance, and promote academic achievement.^{1,2,3} Recent meta-analyses demonstrate that these benefits are long-lasting, improving outcomes up to eighteen years post-intervention.⁴ In order to ensure that SEL benefits all young people, it is important to consider how SEL initiatives affect traditionally underserved student populations and how they can be tailored to better meet the unique needs of different learners.

This brief focuses on the impact of SEL programs for three traditionally underserved groups:

1. Students with disabilities
2. English language learners
3. Youth involved in the juvenile justice system (justice-involved youth)

In considering the unique needs and strengths of these specific populations, it is important to recognize that the developmental trajectories of social and emotional skills differ with the environments young people experience. Both the positive and negative factors influencing social and emotional development must be identified in order to tailor interventions to students' circumstances. Existing research and best practices can elucidate the strategies in SEL instruction that enable traditionally underserved youth to maximize their potential.

As state and federal policies are increasingly inclusive of SEL, it is critical to consider the impact on these traditionally underserved student populations. The adoption of SEL standards by states like Illinois and Kansas⁵ and the passing of the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA),⁷ which allows for the inclusion of school quality/student success measures in state accountability systems, build on existing research in social and emotional development to improve student outcomes. However, the implementation of state-level SEL standards and ESSA will play a crucial role in determining their impact on traditionally underserved student groups, as will future policy that builds off the growing [SEL movement](#). What are the opportunities and challenges in ensuring the SEL movement benefits youth with disabilities, English language learners, and justice-involved youth?

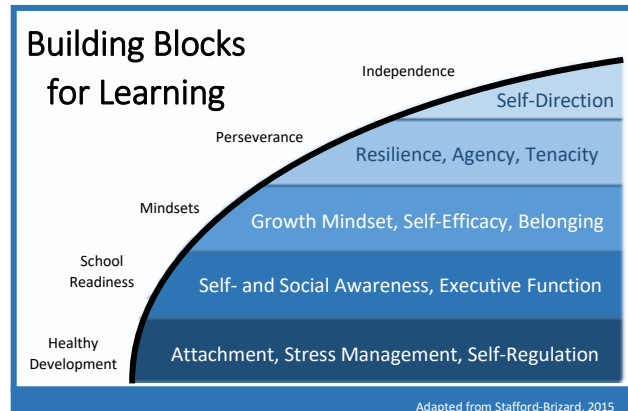
Brief Aims:

This brief includes a review of the current state of research and practice in social and emotional learning (SEL) for three traditionally underserved student groups: students with disabilities, English language learners, and justice-involved youth. The brief identifies patterns of social and emotional development, as well as existing programs that successfully align resources across systems to enhance this development. Lastly, it explores potential policy levers for using SEL to better prepare these populations of students for success in school and life.

Why Focus on Traditionally Underserved Populations?

Just as cognitive and academic skills develop throughout childhood and adolescence, so too do social and emotional skills.⁷ The [Building Blocks for Learning Framework](#) provides a comprehensive model for how early childhood social and emotional skills beget later competencies.⁸ Foundational early childhood skills like stress management, secure attachment, and self-regulation pave the way for hallmarks of school readiness like self-awareness, social awareness, and executive functioning. In turn, these school-ready skills enable students to develop the requisite mindsets for long-term success and school: a growth mindset, self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and the belief that school is relevant to life. Once youth have these mindsets, they are able to develop resiliency, academic tenacity, and a sense of agency. Finally, with these social and emotional building blocks for support, adolescents develop self-direction, curiosity, and civic identity, skills undergirding independence (Figure 1).

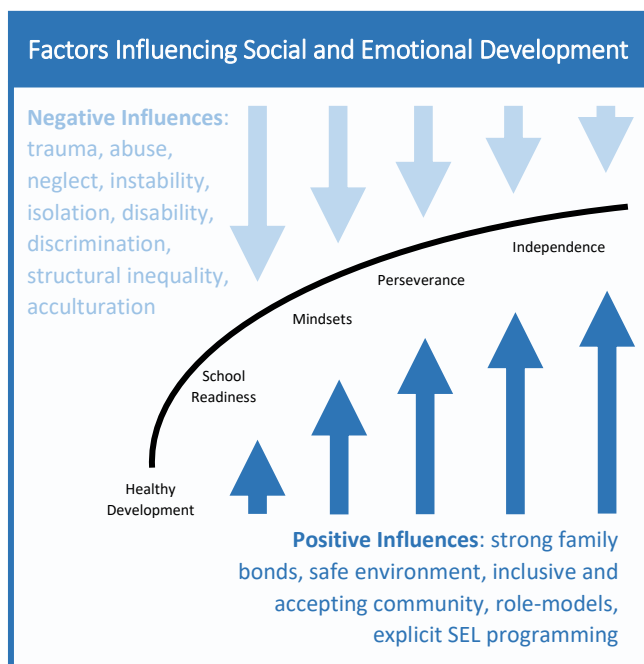
Figure 1



However, like all stage-based models for normative human development, this “standard” trajectory for the development of social and emotional competencies throughout the life course is susceptible to biological and environmental influences, both positive and negative (Figure 2). Traditionally underserved youth, particularly students with disabilities, English language learners, and justice-involved youth, are more likely to grapple with the negative environments and experiences that inhibit social and emotional development, altering the rate at which they gain these skills.

For example, youth in special education often must compensate for biological differences in social,

Figure 2



emotional, and cognitive functioning, while simultaneously coping with community isolation⁹ and discrimination.¹⁰ These realities can impede the opportunities youth with disabilities have to build social and emotional skills and can translate to a slowed rate of skill development. Similarly, English language learners commonly experience community isolation, discrimination, structural inequalities, and acculturation.^{11, 12, 13} The need to not only develop social and emotional competencies despite these obstacles, but also to navigate disparate cultural expectations in expressing these competencies provides a stark barrier to students’ ability to demonstrate their social and emotional skills. For justice-involved youth, experiences of trauma, abuse, and neglect often undermine early stages of social and emotional development,¹⁴ depressing skill attainment trajectories from an early age. Later

life barriers like community isolation and discrimination continue to reduce opportunities for social and emotional learning for justice-involved youth.¹⁵

These examples demonstrate how an opportunity gap in formative social and emotional experiences, such as inclusion, belonging, and safety, may cause differential rates of skill development for traditionally underserved youth populations. The resulting disparities between the social and emotional competencies these youth display relative to their peers puts them at risk for poorer outcomes in school, career, and life. In the pursuit of equity, a two-pronged approach is needed: (1) systemic change to reduce negative influences on social and emotional development and (2) innovative interventions to increase positive influences on social and emotional development. This brief aims to advance both goals by addressing evidence-based practices specific to each youth population and comprehensive policy solutions.

SEL and Youth with Disabilities

Defining *Youth with Disabilities*

The formal definition for youth with disabilities in the United States is codified in the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#), which provides an extensive list of qualifying diagnoses: intellectual disability, hearing impairment, speech or language impairment, visual impairment, emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, and specific learning disabilities.¹⁶

The variation within the disability category is a critical consideration when designing interventions for social and emotional development, as individual students’ strengths and needs vary tremendously. However, many students who qualify for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) share an elevated risk for social isolation and discrimination – a common risk factor for inhibited social and emotional development.¹⁷ Disability-specific challenges only compound this risk, as impaired social functioning, difficulties with emotional regulation, and/or executive functioning deficits can further diminish social and emotional skill building. Combined, these disadvantages make social and emotional development critically important, yet difficult for many youth with disabilities.

Largely because of this overlap, the field of special education has [long-emphasized](#) emotion regulation, self-awareness, and independence in the classroom. Although the term “social and emotional learning” is rarely used, special educators share many goals with the growing SEL movement and are particularly well-poised to both share and adapt practices that promote non-cognitive skill building. This section will consider:

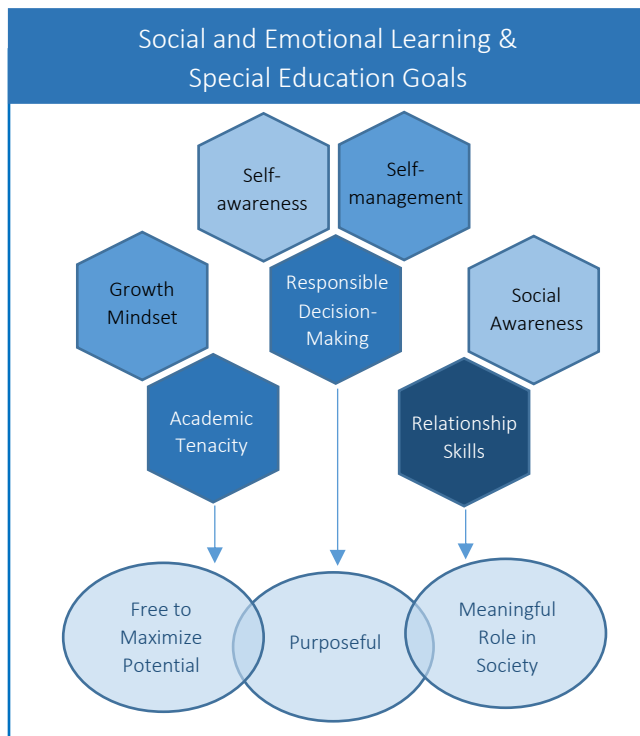
1. The existing overlap between special education and SEL **practices**
2. Opportunities for SEL **research** to provide evidence-based supports for special educators

Overlap between current special education practices and SEL

According to the [Council for Exceptional Children](#), the goal of special education is to empower students to be skillful, free, and purposeful, such that they are able to maximize their potential and contribute meaningfully to society.¹⁸ Compare these traits to the pillars of SEL included in the [Building Blocks for Learning Framework](#) and set forth by the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#), and it is clear that social and emotional skills are a prerequisite for successfully educating students with disabilities (Figure 3).

Kelly Custer, a long-time special educator at the River Terrace Education Campus in Washington, DC, who teaches workforce development skills to adolescents and young adults, emphasizes the importance of social and emotional learning in his classroom. While the term “SEL” is seldom used in his field, Custer defines the goal of special education as empowering students to create their “own measurement of the value of their lives” by teaching them self-advocacy, a growth mindset, and how to develop a sense of belonging in the community, all skills that are aligned with the SEL framework. According to Custer, the challenge is not convincing special educators to value these non-cognitive aspects of development, but

Figure 3



the lack of policy supports for setting SEL goals in Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and the absence of evidence-based SEL curricula adapted for special education classrooms.

Due to the absence of tailored curricula, the special education field instead relies heavily on [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports \(PBIS\)](#).¹⁹ PBIS provides a data-driven, tiered system for identifying student needs and providing targeted interventions. It is most often used to improve student behavior, and may merge well with SEL to achieve greater impact in special education settings.²⁰ Both systems underscore the importance of promoting safe, supportive, and challenging school environments for students and reinforce the positive behaviors that allow students to thrive. [Using the two in tandem](#) to both teach the social and emotional competencies necessary for positive behavior and to reward and measure that behavior when

it occurs, has the potential to improve academic and life outcomes for special education students.

In fact, the [Bradley Schools](#), which serve exclusively students with disabilities who cannot be adequately accommodated in Rhode Island public schools, have effectively adopted a combined SEL + PBIS program. Dr. David Lichtenstein, a classroom team leader at the Bradley School in Cumberland, RI, explains that the school uses a deeply integrated combination of case management, group therapy sessions, individual check-ins, and parent collaboration in order to help its students thrive. A core part of this approach is the use of a PBIS reinforcement system built around SEL goals, especially effort, self-awareness, and coping skills. Lichtenstein believes that, “SEL must work hand-in-hand with PBIS and a clear school-wide culture around behavioral expectations” in order to make an impact for students with the greatest challenges. He also argues that combining SEL and PBIS is the most direct way to implement the highly specialized work of the Bradley Schools in more traditional public school environments. Going forward, more research is needed on how to measure social and emotional skills and on evidence-based approaches to respond to misbehavior to promote social and emotional development.

The state of research on SEL and special education: Need for measures and inclusive interventions

The relatively narrow focus on general education settings in the SEL movement to date has generated few resources for measuring social and emotional skills, as well as few interventions implementing SEL in special education settings. While a seemingly endless array of SEL programs have emerged over the last decade, only a few have specifically tested their effectiveness for students with disabilities. However, the interventions that have been evaluated in special education settings (PATHS, Aussie Optimism, the Resourceful Adolescent Program, and Second Step, to name the most prominent) have shown promising results.^{21, 22, 23, 24} Evidence of reduced behavioral problems, decreased bullying, and improved academic

outcomes indicates that SEL interventions may be just as powerful for students with disabilities as for their peers.

Dr. Dorothy Espelage, a professor of psychology at the University of Florida, and Dr. Chad Rose, an associate professor of special education at the University of Missouri, recently demonstrated that the Second Step SEL program can dramatically improve academic outcomes for middle school students with disabilities, increasing their GPAs by 0.75 points on average.²⁴ In discussing their work, Espelage and Rose emphasize that SEL interventions improve behavioral and academic outcomes for students with disabilities. Yet, they also note there is still limited evidence to parse out the critical components that make these interventions work. In the field of special education, there is a dearth of research on how long the impact of SEL interventions are sustained and how they differentially impact students with different diagnoses. The drivers of impact, sustainability of benefits, and universality of effectiveness remain key research questions moving forward.

The few studies that exist on SEL and special education fall short of the meta-analyses that have pushed the field of SEL in general education forward. To support teachers with evidence-based practices and inform policy, research on SEL for students with disabilities must be expanded in three critical ways: (1) create assessments of social and emotional competencies designed for this population so that outcomes can be more accurately measured; (2) design interventions that successfully improve these competencies in youth with disabilities; and (3) repeatedly test these interventions on a scale that can demonstrate their generalizable efficacy in diverse classrooms and for diverse learners across the county.

SEL and English Language Learners

Defining *English Language Learners*

Although states and school districts are given flexibility in determining which students qualify as English language learners (ELLs), in general the term refers to students “who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds, and who typically require specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses.”²⁵ The federal government also makes a distinction between “newcomer” ELLs and “long-term” ELLs, with newcomers being defined as having resided within the United States for less than 12 months.²⁶

Although English language learners (ELLs) reach American classrooms from diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, as refugees, immigrants, adoptees, and the US-born children of non-English speakers, they often share common experiences of isolation, discrimination, and acculturation, which negatively impact social and emotional development.²⁷

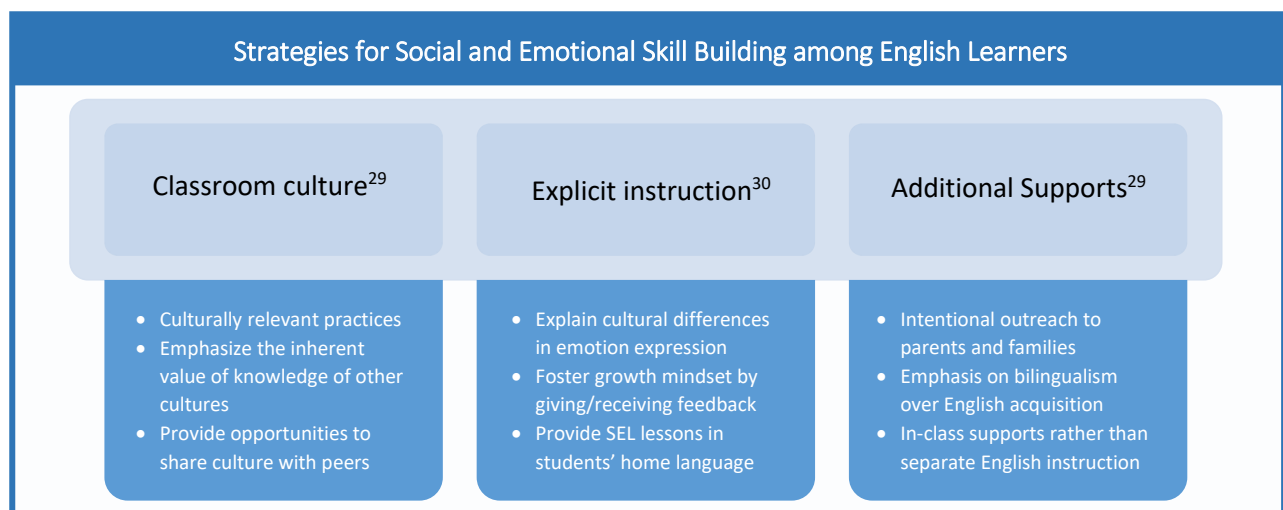
Unlike special education, ELL-serving programs rarely focus on students’ self-efficacy, social inclusion, and independence. Instead, the emphasis is on English acquisition, with instruction often carried out in segregated classrooms.²⁸ The field is ripe for innovation and the creation of additional classroom-level supports. This section will explore:

1. Best **practices** in supporting social and emotional development for ELLs
2. Emerging evidence/**research** on the importance of SEL for ELLs

Cultural identity and social and emotional well-being: Best practices to promote SEL for ELLs

Although English as a second language (ESL) instruction traditionally places little emphasis on SEL, several schools and districts across the country are pioneering new initiatives to focus on ELLs’ social and emotional needs. However, despite growing consensus that SEL matters for these students, interventions vary substantially. Currently, evidence points to three disparate lines of thought on how social and

Figure 4



emotional skill building can be fostered in ESL instruction: (1) intentional changes to classroom culture; (2) explicit SEL instruction; and (3) implementation of ELL best practices in school and curricular structuring.^{29,30} Figure 4 provides more details on each of these strategies.

The [Internationals Network for Public Schools](#), a consortium of schools across the United States that implements a proven approach for ELLs, is a leading example of how an inclusive and culturally relevant classroom culture can be intentionally cultivated. Joe Luft, the Executive Director of the Internationals Network, describes SEL as “an essential part of the work” that these schools do. A culture that promotes SEL is embedded in every part of a school’s structure, from the backgrounds of the professionals hired to the additional supports provided, like counseling services and community partnerships. When explaining what practices make the Internationals Network schools successful, Luft highlights that SEL strategies are embedded into all classrooms, regardless of subject area, in the same way that language development strategies are incorporated across subjects. By emphasizing group work, fostering collaboration, and explicitly sharing the purpose behind classroom activities with students, the schools embed social and emotional skill building into the holistic process of education. For the Internationals Network, school climate, student mindsets, and teacher expectations are paramount.

In contrast, the [Austin Independent School District \(AISD\)](#) has pursued the same goal of fostering social and emotional development among ELLs, but using a different approach: investing in evidence-based instruction tools to explicitly teach SEL. As part of the [CASEL Collaborating Districts Initiative](#), AISD created an SEL Department in 2011 to oversee the implementation of social and emotional learning in local schools. [Second Step](#) was provided to all pre-K through middle school teachers and [School-Connect](#) was provided to all high school teachers, both serving as SEL instructional resources. AISD has worked hard to make SEL accessible to the many ELLs that attend school in Austin. According to Caroline Chase, the SEL Assistant Director, the district is currently in the process of rolling out “SEL 2.0,” a reinvigorated SEL vision that aims to incorporate student voice and empower teachers to use the district-provided instructional resources as a foundation for additional lessons, tailored to meet the unique needs of their classrooms. While AISD firmly believes that explicit and evidence-based SEL instruction is necessary to best serve its students, the district now plans to explore how these programs can be adapted to meet the needs of all students in all classrooms, including ELLs.

Joe Anderson, a consultant with [Education First](#) and former AISD teacher, worked in the district when the SEL pilot programs were first rolled out. As an educator, he recalls realizing that the goals of Second Step were “the stuff we were already trying to do for all students, especially the English learners.” To Anderson, the value of SEL was immediately clear: “if students are not supported socially and emotionally as we push them to learn a new language, they’re not going to be able to achieve.” However, a lack of evidence-based programs specifically for ELLs made the task of meeting the new teaching expectations inordinately difficult. Both Chase and Anderson commented on the need for additional research on program design and evaluation, particularly for making SEL accessible to ELLs. Questions linger about the relative (and additive) benefits of inclusive school climate, explicit SEL instruction, and the utilization of additional supports tailored for ELL students.

Preliminary research findings and the need for expanded intervention studies

Much of the ambiguity on how to best meet the social and emotional needs of ELLs stems from the lack of research on the intersection of SEL and ELLs. To date, no comprehensive study exists evaluating the impact of SEL interventions on academic achievement for ELLs. Instead, research supports two related

claims: (1) social and emotional skills are linked to academic outcomes,³¹ and (2) specific ESL practices can build social and emotional skills.^{32,33} It makes logical sense that these ESL practices, which include recruiting greater parental involvement in schools, emphasizing bilingualism over English acquisition, and explicit SEL interventions conducted in students' native language, may be associated with achievement. However, no study has yet had the statistical power to make a causal connection.

Dr. Sara Castro-Olivo, an associate professor at Texas A&M University, has dedicated her career to answering this question by investigating the intersection of social and emotional learning and the needs and achievement outcomes of ELLs. In 2014, Dr. Castro-Olivo demonstrated that Jóvenes Fuertes, a culturally adapted version of the Strong Teens SEL program tailored specifically for the needs of Spanish-speaking ELLs, improved SEL knowledge and resiliency after just 3 months.³³ Inspired by her own experiences as an ELL student, Dr. Castro-Olivo also investigated the social validity of the program, which proved to be popular among students and their parents. By balancing research into explicit SEL instruction and ESL best practices, Dr. Castro-Olivo is making headway in a field that has limited examples of effective strategies.

Looking forward, it is critical to expand the scale and duration of SEL interventions with ELL populations, in order to investigate the duration of impact, social inclusion benefits, and link with academic outcomes over time. In addition, a protocol is needed for modifying existing SEL programs to meet the needs of ELLs, so that school districts like AISD and others have the tools available to best serve their students.

SEL and Justice-Involved Youth

Defining *Justice-Involved Youth*

Justice-involved youth are youth in contact with the juvenile justice system, whether detained, adjudicated, placed in a facility, on probation, or other kind of system involvement.³⁴

The risk factors, experiences, and consequences associated with justice system involvement frequently create barriers to social and emotional development. Before system entry, young people often experience abuse, neglect, and trauma.¹⁴ Navigating the juvenile justice system creates instability, making it less likely for children involved to attend the same schools, develop consistent positive relationships, or maintain exposure to a single set of rules and expectations.^{35,36} Even after exiting, social and emotional development can be hampered by the stigma and isolation resultant from delinquent pasts.¹⁵ The current organization of the juvenile justice system does little to foster SEL for these youth, in many cases compounding rather than alleviating the challenges faced.³⁷

In attempting to enumerate SEL best practices for justice-involved youth, it becomes difficult to highlight programs and research initiatives that touch on the many varied environments in which justice-involved youth find themselves. Thus, for the purpose of simplicity, this section will focus solely on the opportunities that exist within correctional facilities. Specifically, this section will discuss:

1. The difficulty of supporting social and emotional development in correctional facilities and the innovative **practices** that aim to address this gap
2. Emerging **research** on fostering social and emotional development during justice system involvement

The challenge of promoting social and emotional well-being within correctional facilities

Correctional facilities were not designed with social and emotional learning in mind. In contrast, the environment itself can be traumatic, making it nearly impossible, but especially critical, to promote SEL. Melissa Svigelj-Smith, a veteran teacher at the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Detention Center in Cleveland, Ohio, describes the environment in which her students must live and learn as “prison for kids” with blank walls, sterile lighting, small shatter-proof windows, and security screenings for teachers before entering the classroom, to ensure dangerous materials are not permitted inside. By necessity and design, the structure of schools inside correctional facilities is anathema to the promotion of social and emotional skills like self-regulation, creativity, and independence. Negative peer influences and unstable schedules only complicate matters further, as incarcerated youth are often denied access to community supports and are placed in correctional schools for stints ranging from a few hours to a few years.

However, many teachers and community groups are working to improve these learning environments so that justice-involved youth can gain access to the social and emotional skills they need. While it would be ideal for change to occur on a system level rather than through local programming, the impact made by these nascent initiatives and organizations can potentially be leveraged to demonstrate the need for attention to SEL on a larger scale. For example, using a grant from the [NoVo Foundation](#) and [Education](#)

[First's](#) SEL Innovation Fund, Svigelj-Smith has created an arts program that brings local, national, and international artists specializing in all media into her classroom in the Juvenile Detention Center. By pairing these experiences with community service projects and daily lessons on growth mindset, realistic goal setting, and reflection, Svigelj-Smith aims to build hope, empowering students to reengage in learning and envision a better future for themselves.

[Maine Inside Out \(MIO\)](#), a theater and social justice organization in Portland, Maine, also leverages art as an effective tool to engage justice-involved youth. For the past ten years, MIO has led ongoing theater workshops inside Maine's juvenile correctional facility, supporting incarcerated young men and women to create and share original theater in the facility and in communities around the state. MIO's approach, rooted in the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Friere and Theater of the Oppressed founder Augusto Boal, builds trust, connection, and essential skills in every core SEL competency area. Youth learn and practice awareness of self and others, empathy, reflection, nonviolent communication, collaborative problem solving, and restorative approaches to instances of harm. Performing their work in the facility and other venues enables MIO's youth artists to build confidence and a stronger sense of identity as members of the greater community.

MIO also offers support after incarceration with innovative transitional employment opportunities for young people who join MIO's community groups directly upon release and continue creating and performing original theater together. Youth learn and practice key social and emotional skills, supporting better individual outcomes in housing, employment, and social engagement. The social and emotional skills young people gain through both the arts and additional programming MIO offers plays a powerful role in helping them avoid recidivism and achieve success as they move forward in life.

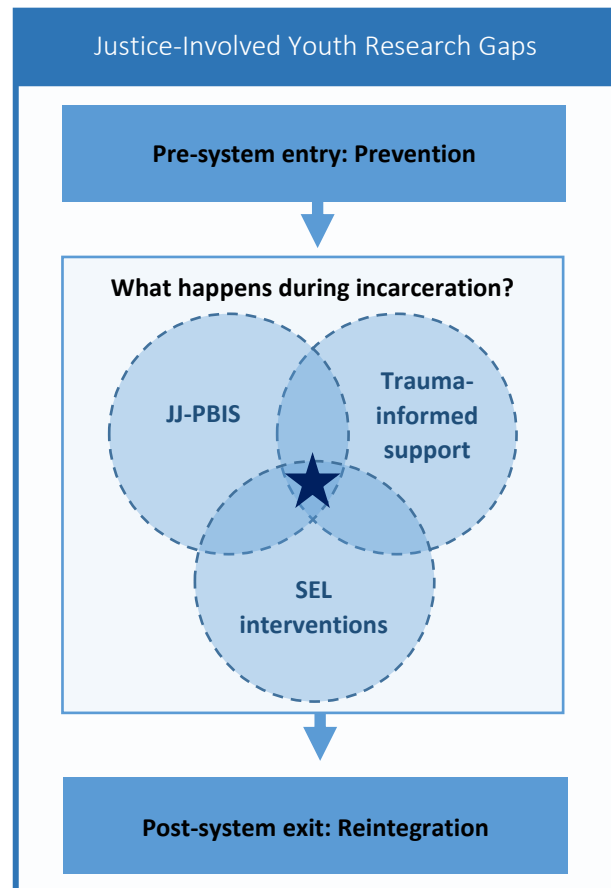
Emerging research: Fostering social and emotional development during system involvement

Despite the emergence of programs across the country aimed at developing social and emotional skills for justice-involved youth, little to no research exists on best practices or evidence-based design. Instead, the majority of research focuses on the periods before and after system involvement, preventing youth delinquency,^{38,39} and subsequently preventing recidivism and enabling employment. SEL during detention or incarceration remains a major gap (Figure 5). While it is known that social and emotional skills predict better college and career readiness for at-risk youth,⁴⁰⁻⁴² little is known about how to build these skills while children are directly involved in the juvenile justice system. However, two growing trends, PBIS and trauma-informed supports, may help to bridge this gap as the field moves forward.

The first of these, a modification of positive behavioral interventions and supports for use in juvenile justice settings (JJ-PBIS) applies the tiered intervention approach commonly used in special education to serve incarcerated youth. Under this model, a universal set of expected behaviors is established and

Figure 5

modeled across correctional facility environments. In addition, targeted group interventions are in place to address academic and/or social deficits, and intensive individual interventions are carried out for struggling youth using interagency collaboration. Preliminary studies suggest that the model is impactful in correctional environments, but that buy-in from facility teachers and staff is difficult.³⁷ JJ-PBIS represents a major culture shift from the current correctional model, and would likely require all staff to interact with youth differently, offering them more autonomy and relinquishing classroom hours to create more opportunities for counseling. In addition, the current lack of evidence-based SEL interventions specific to justice-involved youth creates a substantial barrier to providing the needed supports, even if the youth who will most benefit can be identified using JJ-PBIS. There is potential for an integrated SEL/JJ-PBIS approach to effectively promote social and emotional development for youth in correctional facilities in the future, but significantly more research in tailored intervention is needed.



Similarly, trauma-informed support provides a framework for how to structure correctional facilities and provide SEL to justice-involved youth who have experienced trauma, but falls short of a complete SEL intervention program. Instead, trauma-informed supports provide particularly useful guidelines to practitioners – teachers, clinical psychologists, and all staff working in juvenile justice settings – on how to best support incarcerated youth. Dr. Monique Marrow, child psychologist at the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children, describes how trauma can impact child development and argues that resiliency requires self-esteem, self-efficacy, connectedness, and sustained positive relationships.⁴³ According to Marrow, best practices for youth who have endured trauma include the opportunity for agency, allowing young people to explain what has happened to them, why they react to certain stimuli the way they do, and to come up with their own plan to calm down when experiencing trauma-linked symptoms. Tailoring environments to individuals’ needs makes an important impact. In addition to directly promoting social and emotional skills like self-awareness and responsible decision-making, integrated trauma-informed supports create an environment in which broader SEL is supported rather than impeded. Unfortunately, however, the rigid structure of correctional environments often makes this challenging or impossible.

A culture shift that allows for JJ-PBIS and trauma-informed practices, combined with new research on tailored SEL interventions, is needed to transform correctional facilities into environments that promote, rather than impede social and emotional development for justice-involved youth.

Policy Considerations

As the field of SEL moves forward, it is critical that emerging policies take into account the needs of all learners, including special education students, ELLs, and justice-involved youth. Three policy considerations that education leaders should consider in thinking about ways to better meet the social and emotional needs of traditionally underserved student populations include:

1. Making SEL a priority for *all* students
2. Building capacity for SEL instruction across all youth-serving systems
3. Fostering continuous improvement

Making SEL a priority for all students

The benefits of SEL are widespread and well-documented. For traditionally underserved youth, especially, access to social and emotional skill building serves as an important tool for overcoming adversity, improving academic outcomes, peer relationships, resiliency, and community belongingness. For these reasons, SEL should be made a priority for all students, especially those from traditionally underserved populations.

In order to advance this goal, educational and political leaders must work to signal the importance of SEL. One way states have already begun to do this is through the creation of [SEL standards](#), which signal the priority of SEL to all stakeholders. Well-written SEL standards provide a consolidated source for developmental benchmarks in social and emotional development, along with guidance for teachers and administrators on how to help students develop these skills. Special education advocates, in particular, are excited about the prospect of SEL standards eventually being used to inform IEP goals.

Another tool is the expansion of funding for population-specific research in SEL. Reliable metrics of social and emotional skills are sorely needed for diverse groups of learners, as are adaptable programs that successfully balance classroom-level flexibility and an evidence-based structure. While the field of special education needs a large-scale longitudinal study to confirm the previously detected academic and social benefits of SEL, the SEL programs for ELLs and justice-involved youth lag behind. Both fields require the development of interventions specifically tailored to the youth populations being served.

To effectively prioritize SEL for all students, these broad strategies must be combined with local leadership and youth voice, two essential elements for impact on the classroom-level. Grassroots organizing around SEL has been, and will continue to be, a powerful supportive force as the movement expands to include traditionally underserved student populations.

Building capacity for SEL instruction across all youth-serving systems

Beyond establishing SEL as a priority in public education, there should also be a commitment to adequately train educators and other youth-serving leaders to model and teach social and emotional skills. To that end, it is critical that leaders in the field share best practices, leverage resources across youth-serving systems, and collaborate to ensure adequate and relevant professional development opportunities that specifically address the needs of traditionally underserved youth populations.

Many key players in youth development, including afterschool programs, workforce development initiatives, K-12 schools, institutions of higher education, etc., have valuable experiences to contribute to the broader conversation about SEL. Unfortunately, much of this knowledge is kept in silos. It is important

to recognize the overlap between the objectives of different stakeholders, such as the shared social and emotional goals between special education and SEL and the similarity between [CASEL's SEL competencies](#) and the [Employability Skills Framework](#) put forth by the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor. The SEL movement could benefit from additional intersystem collaboration, as well as the back-and-forth transmission of knowledge and resources that accompanies it.

Classroom teachers who work with traditionally underserved student groups, in particular, need access to these resources and social and emotional skills. Professional development should highlight up-to-date research and best practices tailored to the populations they serve. In order to create resources that are widely available, incentivized, and relevant, it is particularly important to create a variety of training options and to allow teacher choice. Leveraging intersystem SEL resources and intentionally establishing professional development opportunities for educators and youth workers is critical for building the capacity for high-quality SEL instruction.

Fostering continuous improvement: Learning from what works to build better systems

Lastly, it is critical to facilitate the continuous improvement of SEL programs in diverse classroom settings. Schools and districts implementing SEL should pay careful attention to the impact interventions have on students with disabilities, ELLs, and justice-involved youth, using student and parent feedback to continue to make an SEL curriculum more accessible.

Additionally, on a federal policy level, the newly created indicator of School Quality and Student Success under ESSA creates the possibility of incorporating measures of social and emotional skills into statewide accountability systems. If school districts are held accountable for SEL outcomes, the incentives behind continuous improvement will inherently be greater. However, many education experts [hesitate](#) to recommend that SEL be included in high-stakes accountability, as these skills are highly subjective and assessing them can be difficult. The best policy lever to foster continuous improvement in SEL remains a point of debate.

In submitting their 2017 ESSA State Plans, most states have opted for metrics of school quality using rates of attendance, suspensions, and expulsions, rather than direct measures of social and emotional skills. Given the possibility of modifying state plans, however, it is possible that proxy measures of social and emotional development will eventually find their way into school accountability. In California, the [CORE Districts](#) are utilizing school climate surveys, which measure students' general satisfaction and feelings of belonging at school, rather than their social and emotional skills, in determining school ratings. This is just one example of the ways in which states and districts may assess social and emotional inputs, such as the provision of services and the presence of a positive learning environment, rather than outputs like skills and competencies. The new law creates many opportunities to consider the role of non-academic or [co-academic](#) learning, and SEL will likely remain an important part of the accountability conversation for years to come.

Regardless of what measures of SEL emerge as the most promising candidates for inclusion in accountability, the end goal of fostering continuous improvement within the field must always be at the forefront of policy decision-making. To that end, the emphasis should be on SEL growth, rather than proficiency, and on providing the resources to educators to make that growth possible.

Conclusion

Social and emotional skills play a critical role in preparing all youth for success in college, careers, and life. Traditionally underserved students, like students with disabilities, ELLs, and justice-involved youth, are especially likely to grapple with the negative environments and experiences that inhibit social and emotional development, altering the rate at which they gain these critical social and emotional skills. In reviewing current research and practices across these fields, it is apparent that the goals of special education are closely aligned with the SEL movement, whereas the culture of correctional facilities for justice-involved youth is not always conducive to social and emotional development. For ELLs, access to SEL resources is highly variable across districts and schools. Additional research is needed in all three fields to develop tailored SEL interventions and test them at scale. On a policy level, SEL standards and professional development opportunities across systems and specific to the needs of special populations offer a promising start to making SEL accessible for diverse learners. Simultaneously, states are beginning to consider the best levers to foster continuous improvement of emerging SEL initiatives.

As the SEL movement continues, analysis of its inclusivity of students with disabilities, English language learners, and justice-involved youth will become increasingly critical. AYPF will continue to elevate the voices of leaders and educators in order to highlight best practices and inform policy regarding SEL for traditionally underserved populations.

Glossary of Terms

Academic Tenacity: beliefs and skills that allow students to look beyond short-term concerns to longer-term or higher-order goals and withstand challenges and setbacks to persevere toward these goals⁸

Accountability: the process of evaluating school performance on the basis of student performance⁴⁴

Acculturation: the adaptation process an individual experiences when entering a new culture³¹

Agency: a student's individual decision-making and autonomous actions⁸

Attachment: an enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space⁸

Civic Identity: a multifaceted, dynamic notion of the self as belonging to and responsible for a community⁸

Correctional Facilities: secure facilities where justice-involved youth are incarcerated; time spent in correctional facilities varies based on crime committed³²

Curiosity: the desire to engage and understand the world; interest in a variety of things, with a preference for a complete understanding of a complex topic or problem⁸

English Language Learners (ELLs): students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds, and who typically require specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses²⁵

Executive Functions: the cognitive control functions needed when one has to concentrate and think, when acting on one's initial impulse would be ill-advised⁸

Growth Mindset: the belief that ability and competence grow with effort⁸

Justice-Involved Youth: youth in contact with the juvenile justice system, whether detained, adjudicated, or placed in a facility, on probation, or other kind of system involvement

Juvenile Justice PBIS (JJ-PBIS): modification of positive behavioral interventions and supports for use in juvenile justice settings; applies a tiered intervention to serve incarcerated youth

Mindsets for Self and School: student beliefs that enable success in social and academic settings; include growth mindset, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and relevance of school⁸

Newcomer ELLs: English-language learners that have resided within the United States for fewer than 12 months²⁶

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS): three-tiered systems approach to enhance the capacity of schools, families, and communities to design effective environments that improve the fit or link between research validated practices and the environments in which teaching and learning occur¹⁹

Professional Development: learning supports and opportunities that professional learning that improve teachers' practices and student learning⁴⁵

Relationship Skills: the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups; includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively and seeking/offering help when needed⁸

Relevance of School: a student's sense that the subject matter he or she is studying is interesting and holds value⁸

Resilience: positive adaptation during or following exposure to adversities that have the potential to harm development: examples include developing well in the context of high cumulative risk for developmental problems; functioning well under currently-adverse circumstances; and recovery to normal functioning after catastrophic adversity or severe deprivation⁸

Responsible Decision-Making: the ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms; the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and a consideration of the well-being of oneself and others⁴⁶

Self-Awareness: the ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior; includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism⁸

Self-Direction: process by which learners take the initiative in planning, implementing and evaluating their own learning needs and outcomes, with or without the help of others⁸

Self-Efficacy: the perception that one can do something successfully⁸

Self-Management: the ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations, such as effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself; the ability to set and work toward personal and academic goals⁴⁶

Self-Regulation: regulation of attention, emotion, and executive functions for the purposes of goal-directed actions⁸

Sense of Belonging: belief that one has a rightful place in a given academic setting and can claim full membership in a classroom community⁸

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 supports⁸

Social and Emotional Development: the gradual accumulation of specific skills and competencies that students need in order to set goals, manage behavior, build relationships, and process and remember information; fundamentally tied to characteristics of settings that can be intentionally structured to nurture these skills and competencies⁹

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): 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/maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions; the processes underlying social and emotional development⁴⁷

Social and Emotional Skills: skills that are developed over time through social and emotional learning

SEL Movement: the growing push for SEL in educational practice and policy since the 1980s, currently being led by Aspen Institute’s National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

SEL Standards: official documents published by school districts and/or states that provide simple, clear, and concise statements and developmental benchmarks for what students should know and be able to do in terms of various social and emotional skills⁴⁸

Special Education: education programs dedicated to improving academic and life outcomes for children and youth with disabilities¹⁶

Stress Management: constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person⁸

Trauma-Informed Supports: tools, resources, and trainings for juvenile justice professionals that provide strategies rooted in the understanding that many justice-involved youth have experienced trauma and that their behaviors and emotions often stem from memories and reminders of traumatic experiences⁴¹

Youth with Disabilities: children with intellectual disability, hearing impairment, speech or language impairment, visual impairment, emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, and/or specific learning disabilities¹⁶

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Acknowledgements

This brief would not have been possible without the generous support and contributions of many thought leaders from across the country. I would like to particularly acknowledge the following individuals:

Dr. Dorothy L. Espelage, Professor of Psychology, University of Florida
Dr. Chad Rose, Associate Professor of Special Education, University of Missouri
Dr. David Lichtenstein, Psychologist and Classroom Team Leader, Bradley Schools
Kelly Custer, Special Education Teacher, River Terrace Special Education Center

Dr. Sara Castro-Olivo, Associate Professor in Psychology, Texas A&M University
Joe Luft, Executive Director, Internationals Network
Joe Anderson, Consultant, Education First
Caroline Chase, SEL Assistant Director, Austin Independent School District

Tessy Seward, Co-Director, Maine Inside Out
Melissa Svigelj-Smith, Teacher, Cuyahoga County Juvenile Detention Center

In addition, I am deeply grateful for the thought leadership and support of Betsy Brand, the Executive Director of AYPF, as well as the guidance provided on the development of this report by Jennifer Lerner, AYPF Deputy Director, Carinne Deeds, AYPF Senior Policy Associate, and Jenna Tomasello, AYPF Policy Associate.

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