

Promoting the Social and Emotional Learning of Millions of School Children

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Since 1976, I have focused professionally on answering one key question: How can schools, families, and communities work together to foster positive life opportunities and optimal development for young people? In answering that question, I have been fortunate to work with many collaborators to introduce a significant movement in education: social and emotional learning (SEL; Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015; Elias et al., 1997).

In essence, SEL involves evidence-based programs, practices, and policies through which children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes 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 (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). Through explicit instruction, social and emotional skills can be taught, modeled, and practiced so that children, adolescents, and adults can handle daily tasks, interactions, and challenges effectively. SEL programming also fosters students' social-emotional competencies by establishing positive classroom and school cultures, climates, and conditions for learning that are caring, cooperative, culturally responsive, well-managed, participatory, and safe (Osher & Berg, 2017; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). School-wide, systemic SEL programming takes place at the classroom and school levels and through partnerships with families and community members (Weissberg et al., 2015).

Research has clearly shown that social-emotional competencies can be taught, that schools are appropriate places to teach them, and that SEL can make a positive difference in young people's lives. For example, two major meta-analyses examined the short- and long-term effects of universal, school-based SEL programs across 265 reports on student outcomes in six domains: social and emotional skills, attitudes toward self and others, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger,

2011; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). Major findings from efficacy and effectiveness trials included the following: (a) compared with control students, students who participated in SEL programs showed significantly more positive outcomes in all six areas, including an 11-percentage-point gain in achievement, and (b) SEL programs that were well-implemented and adhered to a combination of recommended practices—specifically sequenced, active, focused, and explicit instruction—were more likely to promote positive outcomes.

I have done most of my school-based intervention research in my role as a university professor of psychology and education. Being a professor is the best job I could have. After all, I have been paid to study what is important and have had the opportunity to spend many hours with friends, collaborators, and students who share my interests. I began my career and research program as a graduate student with the Rochester Social Problem-Solving Group (Weissberg & Gesten, 1982; Weissberg et al., 1981). I continued between 1982 and 1992 as a professor at Yale and collaborated with the New Haven Public Schools to establish the first district-wide, kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) social-development program (Shriver & Weissberg, 1996; Weissberg, Barton, & Shriver, 1997; Weissberg, Jackson, & Shriver, 1993). Between 1986 and 1993, Maurice Elias and I had the good fortune to cochair a multidisciplinary group, the William T. Grant Consortium for School-Based Promotion of Social Competence, which focused on the design and implementation of systemic, developmentally appropriate K–12 programming (Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence, 1994). For the past 25 years, I've been at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional

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Learning (CASEL), the Chicago-based nonprofit I helped to establish and where I'm currently Chief Knowledge Officer. As a result of health challenges, I retired from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2018, where I was a University Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Education and the NoVo Foundation Endowed Chair in Social and Emotional Learning and directed the Social and Emotional Learning Research Group.

My work at CASEL has been the most meaningful of my career. We have worked with the best scholars and practitioners to define what SEL is and have investigated and developed evidence-based, systemic approaches to implement SEL from preschool through high school. Our research and practice has focused on working with classrooms, schools, districts, families, and communities to promote young people's social, emotional, and academic learning. We have worked at all levels, from the statehouse to the schoolhouse, and on research, practice, and policy (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2018; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013; Weissberg et al., 2015). CASEL's overarching mission is to help establish evidence-based preschool to high school SEL programming in 50% of the schools in the United States by 2025.

My greatest joy has come from supporting the implementation of evidence-based SEL programming that benefits young people across the United States and internationally (Weissberg, 2000, 2017; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). At the same time, I'm proud of the publications I wrote collaboratively that helped create and grow the SEL field. Examples include:

- *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators* (Elias et al., 1997), which defined the field
- *Safe and Sound: An Educational Leaders' Guide to Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs* (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005), which reviewed the best research-based SEL programs
- *Building Academic Success on Social and Emotional Learning: What Does the Research Say?* (Zins et al., 2004), a groundbreaking edited volume that linked SEL to better academic performance
- Three meta-analyses (Durlak et al., 2011; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Taylor et al., 2017) of hundreds of experimental-control group studies that demonstrated the positive impact of school-based and out-of-school-time SEL on the behavior and academic performance of young people
- *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice* (Durlak et al., 2015), a 37-chapter volume with 95 contributors that

summarized critical research, practice, and policy advances and challenges for the field

Through all of this work, I have had the great fortune to partner with many leading scholars and practitioners to define the field of SEL and set standards of excellence. Using a collaborative, community-action research model, we have created evidence-based approaches that support children's healthy, successful development across the country and the world (Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998).

Challenges Along the Way

One challenge was the sheer ambitiousness of CASEL's goals: to work from preschool through high school at the classroom, school, district, state, and federal levels with schools, families, and communities (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013).

A second challenge has been to respond to the growing national and international interest in and demand for SEL (Humphrey, 2013). In our early years, we began as a scientific organization, collaborating on community action research to answer such foundational questions as the following: What are the key SEL competencies? What evidence supports their benefits? How do you implement programming well?

In recent years, surveys show that more than 90% of teachers and principals value SEL and believe it should be a key part of children's education (Civic Enterprises, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013; DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland, 2017). Employers, parents, and the public express similar levels of support. Given the demand, we are facing new issues. How do we scale SEL across the country while maintaining high quality? How do we sustain school- and districtwide programming over time? Questions like these are different from those addressed by most scientific researchers and require scientific approaches that go beyond randomized controlled trials (Greenberg et al., 2003; Osher et al., 2016; Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998).

Because the field has evolved so quickly, we have had to be flexible and open to investigating field-building and innovative approaches. These include:

- The Collaborating Districts Initiative, which involves partnering with 20 mostly large urban school districts that are committed to implementing system-wide SEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2017)
- The Collaborating States Initiative, which currently includes 25 states serving more than 60% of U.S. students (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2018)

- The Assessment Work Group, which consists of leading practitioners and scholars working together to establish better ways of measuring SEL (see <https://measuringSEL.casel.org/>)
- Working with the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, a blue-ribbon group developing consensus recommendations on SEL for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers from a broad range of perspectives (see <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/national-commission-on-social-emotional-and-academic-development/>).

What Impact Is the Work Having?

The greatest impact of our collaborative efforts has been to help create and codify an educational field that advances SEL research, practice, and policy. In the process, my colleagues and I have embraced *collaboration* as a core guiding principle. Field building goes far beyond the expertise of any one person or small group of people.

In addition, there is the growing body of research showing that SEL helps raise student academic performance and positive behaviors while reducing negative behaviors such as school suspensions and drug use (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). A study from Columbia University shows that quality SEL programs yield an 11:1 return on dollars invested (Belfield et al., 2015). Also, as the field has developed, we are working to incorporate diverse SEL approaches for supporting children, including the latest research efforts from kindred fields, such as neuroscience, trauma-informed practices, equity efforts, character education, mind-sets approaches, and multicultural competence.

Through the Collaborating Districts Initiative, more and more districts are embedding SEL into all of their work. They engage in explicit instruction of SEL competencies, and they also integrate SEL into math, English/language arts, history, and other academic subjects. SEL is driving their strategic plans, annual budgets, school climate and culture efforts, and equity initiatives (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2017). Through the Collaborating States Initiative, states are developing SEL standards, guidelines, assessment strategies, and other supports that are helping school districts implement SEL with quality (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2018; Melnick, Cook-Harvey, & Darling-Hammond, 2018). Our recent analysis shows that CASEL's resources are being used in all 50 states and at least 186 countries.

When I first began this work 40 years ago, the dominant frame was a deficit model that focused on at-risk

students and helping to prevent mental illness (Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003). Both with our early research on social problem-solving-skills training and social-competence promotion and in our work with SEL, we instead focused on an asset-based model. Our goal has been to nurture the development of young people's competencies and strengths, agency, and sense of purpose so that they can best succeed in their schools, in their careers, and in life. We are doing this not just for some students, but for all students—those who are poor or rich, and those who live in urban, suburban, or rural areas.

Helping to launch CASEL in 1994 gave me a chance to extend the work I had been doing between 1974 and 1994, and it has helped spread evidence-based SEL broadly. Tim Shriver and Mark Greenberg, two of my closest colleagues, convinced me that becoming the leader of CASEL was the right move if I wanted to make a positive and meaningful difference in the world beyond science. I agreed to do this, but only under the condition that they would stick with me on this journey. Thankfully, they have for the last 25 years. Four years ago I became CASEL's Chief Knowledge Officer. Having Karen Niemi as CASEL's CEO has been a great gift to the field, the organization, and me.

Finding the Work Meaningful in My Career and Life

Somebody once said “nobody on [their] deathbed has ever said ‘I wish I had spent more time at the office.’” I happily say that I am an exception. The long-term collaborations and work relationships with friends such as Larry Aber, Dale Blyth, Marc Brackett, Cynthia Coleman, Linda Darling-Hammond, Joe Durlak, Linda Dusenbury, Maurice Elias, Ellis Gesten, Eric Gislason, Mark Greenberg, David Hawkins, Alice Jackson, Robert Jagers, Karen Niemi, David Osher, Kim Schonert-Reichl, Mary Utne O'Brien, Melissa Schlinger, Tim Shriver, Joe Zins, and so many others over the years have been incredibly interesting and meaningful.

I have always been a strong advocate for young people. We need to constantly let them know that we believe what they think and feel is important; that they can develop the skills and attitudes to effectively navigate their world; and that they can contribute meaningfully to their schools, their families, and their communities. I get so much out of visiting schools and seeing students benefitting from the work; seeing classrooms in action; and hearing teachers, principals, students, and parents discuss the impact of SEL on their lives. This always energizes me to work harder. As I reflect on the positive impact my collaborators and I have had on children's lives, I believe something Katharine Graham once wrote

summarizes how I feel about my career: “To love what you do and feel that it matters—how could anything be more fun?” (Howard, 1974, p. 124).

I was trained as a clinical-community psychologist and specialized in working with students, families, schools, and communities. The collaborative, community-based model of science that has been my life’s work emphasizes there is value in recognizing and appreciating the work of one’s collaborators. I have been fortunate to partner with many smart, committed colleagues who have accomplished so much to enhance the lives of young people. I have learned a tremendous amount from them, and I celebrate their successes.

What Might I Do Differently if I Were to Do It All Again?

As a trained scientist, I started my career using a *researcher-practitioner* model in which my university colleagues and I took the lead in conceptualizing, designing, implementing, evaluating, and disseminating programs to promote the social, emotional, and academic competence of young people (Weissberg, Caplan, & Sivo, 1989). Increasingly, I think a *practitioner-researcher* model can have greater impact, with more emphasis on how to implement ideas in the real world of classrooms, schools, districts, and state systems. How does a school-wide, systemic SEL model actually work? How should you reorganize the central office to foster the social, emotional, and academic learning of all students? What influence can state departments of education have to support and scale quality implementation of SEL programming across districts and schools? My greatest creativity and insights came from being out in the schools and partnering with practitioners to continuously improve educational policies and practices that benefit young people. If I were to do things differently, I would spend even more time in schools, district central offices, and state departments of education. Collaborative community action research produces the most impact when you work with diverse groups of people who are willing to challenge you and cocreate best practices and policies. Collaboration takes time, social and emotional skills, openness to new ideas, and courage. Together, we can look at what works and why, what does not work and why not, and what the implications are for the next steps in improving the lives of millions of school children.

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