Enthusiasm and support for social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools is growing across the nation. It’s no surprise: Research shows that students’ social and emotional competencies are related to improvements in achievement and in other outcomes. In addition, funding for SEL programs is available through the Every Student Succeeds Act, which offers a broad definition of school and student success. But which SEL skills do principals and teachers see as most important? Which programs and practices are schools adopting, and which kinds of support do educators say they need to implement these programs successfully? Answers to these questions can improve practitioners’ and policymakers’ understandings of SEL and help guide program and curricula design, selection, and instructional practice. They can also help guide research and policy decisions. To find more about how educators are adopting SEL in schools, RAND researchers surveyed and analyzed the answers from nationally representative samples of more than 15,000 K–12 teachers and 3,500 principals in the United States.
Most Principals Prioritized SEL in Their Schools

Seventy-two percent of principals indicated that promoting students’ social and emotional skills was either their school’s top priority or one of their school’s top priorities. Notably, principals in urban schools chose SEL as their top priority at greater rates than their nonurban counterparts. Similarly, principals in high-poverty schools were more likely to report SEL as their top priority than were principals in low-poverty schools.

Most Educators Rated a Wide Range of SEL Skills as Very Important, but Teachers Were More Likely to Do So

The survey asked teachers and principals to rate how important they felt it was for their students to acquire a subset of SEL skills drawn from the three social and emotional domains presented above. Most principals and teachers indicated that it was “very important” for students to develop and apply skills like understanding and managing emotions, setting and achieving positive goals, and feeling and showing empathy. Teachers had a greater tendency than principals to rate SEL skills as very important—possibly because teachers spend more time interacting directly with students.

Belief That SEL Programs Can Improve Student and School Outcomes

Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement that “programs or interventions to support students’ social and emotional learning have the potential to improve” student achievement, student engagement, school climate, and student behavior. The figure shows that, overall, most educators believed that SEL programs improve both student outcomes and school climate. Principals’ and teachers’ high levels of confidence in the potential for SEL to improve outcomes, especially academic achievement, bodes well for the sustainability of SEL programs. It suggests that educators view the time and resources they devote to SEL programs and practices as supporting their academic instruction goals, rather than detracting from them.

The Three Domains of SEL

**COGNITIVE SKILLS** include such executive functions as working memory, attention control and flexibility, inhibition, and planning, as well as beliefs and attitudes that guide one’s sense of self and approaches to learning and growth.

**EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES** enable one to cope with frustration, recognize and manage emotions, and understand others’ emotions and perspectives.

**SOCIAL AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS** enable one to read social cues, navigate social situations, resolve interpersonal conflicts, cooperate with others and work effectively in a team, and demonstrate compassion and empathy toward others.

Source: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Most educators believe that SEL interventions improve both student outcomes and school climate

Key Findings

- Large majorities of principals described SEL as a top priority.
- Most educators rated a wide range of SEL skills as important, although teachers tended to assign greater importance to these skills than principals did.
- Educators believed that SEL programs could improve student outcomes and school climate.
- Elementary teachers and principals tended to use more schoolwide SEL programs and curricula, while teachers and principals in secondary schools tended to use more informal practices.
- Educators reported using a variety of SEL strategies, ranging from classroom activities to community outreach, to improve students’ SEL skills.
- Schools used a variety of SEL initiatives and curricula; positive behavior systems and trauma-informed practices were commonly used.
- Majorities of teachers and principals reported that their schools measured SEL.
- Majorities of principals and teachers received training to support SEL; in-service training was more common than preservice training.
- Many principals and teachers reported that having more time would improve their school’s ability to address SEL.
Elementary Teachers and Principals Tended to Use More Schoolwide Programs and Curricula, While Their Secondary-School Peers Tended to Use More Informal Methods

The survey found that higher proportions of elementary school teachers and principals used schoolwide programs and curricula than teachers and principals in secondary schools, who were more likely to use informal classroom practices. These differences are unsurprising, as research suggests that standalone curricula or lessons tend to be better suited for and are more available to elementary schools.

Educators Used a Variety of Strategies to Promote SEL

Principals and teachers were asked to indicate all of the strategies (from a list of ten choices) they used to improve students’ social and emotional competencies. Some of these choices involved SEL programs or practices, whereas others focused more on behavior. The most common approaches were modeling appropriate behaviors, drawing on school counselors or mental health professionals, and building community and relationships with students/parents.

Positive Behavior Systems Were Widespread

The survey participants were presented with 17 popular curricula and initiatives and asked to select those that their school used during the 2017–2018 school year. The table shows the most common selections made by both principals and teachers and reveals that half of the teachers and more than half of the principals reported that their schools used positive behavior systems. Additionally, no single SEL curriculum stood out as used by a majority of teachers or principals. However, both Responsive Classroom and Second Step were reportedly used more widely than other curricula.
Half of the teachers and more than half of the principals reported that their schools used positive behavior systems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive behavior systems</th>
<th>All Principals</th>
<th>All Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trauma-informed practices/Compassionate Schools Model</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Step</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsive Classroom</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet Time</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Action</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4Rs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data reveals that half of the teachers and more than half of the principals reported that their schools used positive behavior systems. Figures here represent the most common SEL initiatives and curricula used in schools as reported by principals and teachers. Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among overall teacher and principal responses. n = 18,236. ** p < 0.01
Most Schools Measured SEL; Observations Were the Most Common Method

Regular assessment can guide program improvement, and only 30 percent of teachers and 14 percent of principals reported that their school did not measure SEL at all. The survey results suggest that observations were the most commonly used method to measure SEL. Less common were efforts to directly measure students’ social and emotional skills. Studies suggest that many educators are unfamiliar with SEL assessments, and few high-quality direct assessments are currently available for use in schools.

Most Educators Received SEL-Related Training; In-Service Was More Common Than Preservice Training

When asked about SEL training, 30 percent of principals and 16 percent of teachers reported receiving SEL training in their preservice preparation programs. By contrast, nearly two-thirds of principals and over half of teachers said they received in-service training. Higher percentages of novice teachers (those with fewer than five years of experience) reported receiving preservice training compared with more-experienced teachers.

More Time to Address SEL

When asked to select activities, strategies, and resources that would best improve their school’s ability to develop the social and emotional skills of students, both teachers and principals noted the need for time. Several other items were selected by approximately one-third of both teachers and principals, including “strategies for incorporating SEL into curriculum,” “more engagement from parents and families,” and “strategies for engaging students in their own SEL.”
The study found that support for SEL in the nation’s schools and classrooms is widespread, and most educators believe SEL can promote other important outcomes, including higher student achievement, better behavior, and more-positive school climates. Other answers to survey questions offer insight into where more support and development are needed.

Most teachers and principals did not receive SEL training in their preservice preparation programs.

The explicit focus on promoting SEL in schools is a relatively recent phenomenon; novice teachers were more likely to report having received preservice SEL training than those working longer in the field, but even among novice teachers, relatively few received preservice training. Residencies can provide one way to expose more teachers to SEL instruction before beginning service, given the widespread implementation of SEL programs and practices in schools.

Educators’ approaches to SEL are multifaceted, creating challenges for training and other support provision.

Providers of assistance and support may wish to explore ways to increase educators’ access to information about program quality and effectiveness and to offer guidance about how to implement programs with fidelity and quality.

Most schools measure SEL, but learning environment assessments are more common than measurement of student competencies.

Educators need information about high-quality assessments to help them guide instruction and inform broader decisions about SEL programs and strategies. Guidance about interpreting and using SEL assessment data in the classroom, school, and community contexts could improve the usefulness of these assessments.

Many SEL efforts are focused on behavior management.

A comprehensive approach to SEL should be strengths-based and should aim to build the competencies of all students—not simply address problematic behaviors.

Providers of supports to schools should address integration and engagement.

Helping educators understand how to support SEL through academic instruction could mitigate the risk of reducing time and resources devoted to academics because of efforts to focus on SEL. Because most principals and teachers reported a belief that SEL could improve student achievement, there is a base of support to draw upon when addressing perceived time constraints.
How This Study Was Conducted

RAND researchers administered surveys to principals and teachers in spring 2018 via RAND’s American Educator Panels, which consists of the American Teacher Panel and the American School Leader Panel. Because educators may understand “SEL” in a wide variety of ways, participants were instructed to think of SEL as a group of three interconnected domains: (1) a selected set of cognitive skills, (2) emotional competencies, and (3) social and interpersonal skills.

Participants were asked to indicate how important they believed it was for schools to develop students’ SEL skills, which SEL skills they promoted in their schools during school year 2017–2018, which practices they adopted to address SEL, and which supports they believed would help them address SEL in the classroom and in school. The research team compared teachers’ responses with those of principals, then examined differences in responses among educators in different types of schools. Survey responses were weighted to ensure results were nationally representative of principals and teachers.

About the American Educator Panels

This study presents results from spring 2018 administration of the American Educator Panels (AEP). The AEP consists of the American Teacher Panel (ATP) and the American School Leader Panel (ASLP). These nationally representative samples of educators are invited to provide feedback on important issues of educational policy and practice through surveys that are fielded multiple times per year.

To learn more about AEP, please visit us at www.rand.org/aep.

Principals’ and teachers’ high levels of confidence in the potential for SEL to improve outcomes, especially academic achievement, bodes well for the sustainability of SEL programs.