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Are Educators Setting Goals for Social-Emotional Learning? Evidence from Nationally Representative Surveys

Social-emotional skills are nonacademic skills that include managing emotions, setting and achieving positive goals, being aware of and understanding others, establishing and maintaining relationships, and making decisions.¹ A growing body of evidence shows that social-emotional skills predict long-term life outcomes, even after controlling for differences in academic achievement; and interventions that improve students' social-emotional learning (SEL) also can improve academic achievement.² Despite the evidence that SEL contributes to student success, as well as the central role of schools in developing SEL, few studies have investigated the extent to which educators promote SEL among their students.³ The best nationally representative evidence of educator attitudes toward SEL instruction and efforts to implement it comes from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL found that 44 percent of teachers reported working to improve students' SEL through schoolwide programs, and 35 percent of principals reported implementing schoolwide SEL programs. Urban schools had slightly higher SEL rates, with

In the spring 2017 survey, we asked a nationally representative sample of principals and teachers the following yes/no questions:

- Do you, as a teacher/principal, set goals for growth in student SEL in your classroom/school?
- To the best of your knowledge, does your district set goals for growth in student SEL?¹
- To the best of your knowledge, does your school leadership set goals for growth in student SEL?²

¹ Only asked of principals.

² Only asked of teachers.

¹ Bridgeland, Bruce, and Hariharan, 2014.

² Duckworth, Tsukayama, and May, 2010; Durlak et al., 2011; Kraft, 2017.

³ Buchanan et al., 2009; Bridgeland, Bruce, and Hariharan, 2014; DePaoli, Atwell, and Bridgeland, 2017; Grant et al., 2017.

41 percent of urban principals reporting implementing SEL schoolwide.⁴

Data from the RAND Corporation’s web-based American Educator Panels (AEP) surveys provide additional nationally representative evidence on SEL by documenting the percentage of teachers and principals who report setting goals for SEL growth in their classrooms, schools, and districts.

Most Educators Report Setting Goals for SEL Growth

About 60 percent of teachers and principals reported setting goals for growth in student SEL. We found no robust significant differences by urbanicity when comparing self-reports of SEL goal-setting between urban and nonurban principals and urban and

nonurban teachers.⁵ These results confirm what has been found in other studies: Educators recognize SEL’s importance and are incorporating it into their classrooms. However, Figure 1 shows that responses by principals and teachers varied substantially. Principals were more likely to report that they set SEL goals for their schools compared with teachers’ reports that their school leadership sets those goals. These gaps are present regardless of such school demographics as urbanicity and poverty level.

Urban Leaders Perceived to be Setting SEL Goals at Higher Rates Than Nonurban Leaders

Substantially more urban than nonurban educators reported that their school and district leadership is

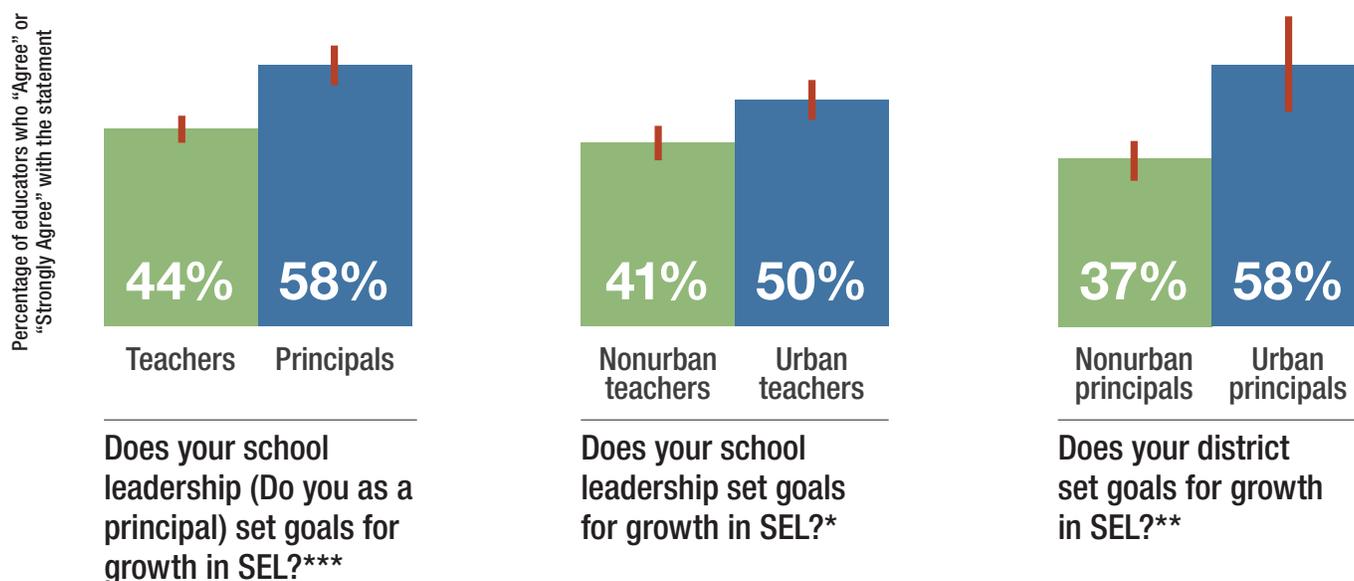
⁴ Bridgeland, Bruce, and Hariharan, 2014; DePaoli, Atwell, and Bridgeland, 2017.

⁵ Cross-tabulations indicate that urban principals are more likely to set goals for growth, but this difference is not robust to specifications that control for other school, district, and respondent characteristics.

FIGURE 1

Urban Teachers, School Leaders More Likely to Set SEL Goals

Weighted Percentages of Educators That Reported Setting Goals in SEL Growth



NOTE: Red vertical lines represent weighted 95-percent confidence intervals. Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among urban and nonurban responses: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

setting goals for SEL growth. Figure 1 shows that urban principals are more likely to report that district leadership is establishing such goals by about 20 percentage points.⁶ Furthermore, urban teachers were more likely to report that their school leadership sets goals for growth by 9 percentage points.

Discussion

Consistent with other studies, AEP results suggest that a substantial number of teachers and principals are setting goals for SEL growth. However, SEL is by no means a universal practice, with 40 percent of principals and teachers reporting that they do not set goals. Our findings suggest that efforts to integrate goal-setting for SEL growth in classrooms, schools, and districts should continue, as goals make clear the expected outcome and can help educators marshal the needed resources to attain that outcome. The discrepancy in principal self-reported rates of SEL goal-setting and teacher self-reported rates of school leadership goal-setting suggest that as principals begin or continue to set goals for SEL growth, they must be sure to create a coherent schoolwide strategy

⁶ The gap shrinks to 13 percentage points in specifications controlling for other school, district, and respondent characteristics, but remains significant at the 5-percent level.

and communicate that strategy more effectively to teachers. School leaders must take into account the efforts underway in their classrooms throughout this process, given the substantial number of teachers who say they are already engaged in this work. These issues might be particularly pertinent in nonurban schools, where both teachers and school leaders are less likely to indicate that their superiors are setting goals for SEL growth.

One barrier to robust SEL goals might be a lack of schoolwide systems for assessing students' social-emotional skills. According to CASEL's nationally representative survey of principals, only 24 percent reported assessing all of their students' social-emotional skills, and 23 percent reported not assessing any of their students' social-emotional skills.⁷ These relatively low percentages could be partly attributable to a lack of high-quality, instructionally relevant assessments of social-emotional skills.⁸ Setting schoolwide goals requires understanding students' strengths and weaknesses. Ensuring that all students are assessed can be a first step to setting schoolwide, data-driven SEL goals.

⁷ DePaoli, Atwell, and Bridgeland, 2017.

⁸ Stecher and Hamilton, 2014.

How This Analysis Was Conducted

The primary analyses were conducted using weighted linear probability models to compare the responses of teachers and principals. We also conducted supplemental analyses that included additional covariates and a vector of state fixed effects to better understand whether the associations found in the primary analysis were potentially confounded by characteristics of the schools or respondents. These weighted, multivariate linear probability models included a series of demographic control variables from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data.¹

¹ These included school-level variables, such as urbanicity; percentage free and reduced-priced lunch; percentage white, black, and Hispanic; school size; an indicator for elementary school; district-level variables, such as percentage English language-learner students and special education students; and state-level fixed effects.

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About This Report

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers and school leaders across the country.

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