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Teacher and Principal Perspectives on Social and Emotional Learning in America's Schools

Findings from the American Educator Panels



As a result of state and local accountability policies, public schools in the United States have faced pressure to improve students' academic achievement as measured by standardized tests. Educators, policymakers, and members of the public have expressed concern that this emphasis on testing narrows the curriculum and instruction, and research indicates that such narrowing has indeed occurred (Koretz, 2009; Hamilton, Stecher, and Yuan, 2012). Education policy debates during the past few years have been characterized by an emphasis on expanding definitions of student success and thinking more broadly about the missions and goals of public education (Aspen Institute, 2019).

KEY FINDINGS

- Large majorities of principals described social and emotional learning (SEL) as a top priority.
- Most educators rated a wide range of SEL skills as important, although teachers tended to assign greater importance to SEL skills than principals did.
- Educators reported believing that SEL programs can improve student outcomes and school climate.
- Elementary teachers and principals tended to use SEL programs and curricula, while teachers and principals in secondary schools tended to use informal practices.
- Educators reported using a variety of strategies, ranging from classroom activities to community outreach, to improve students' SEL skills.
- Schools reported adopting several initiatives and curricula to address SEL; positive behavior systems were common.
- Majorities of teachers and principals reported that their schools measured SEL.
- Majorities of principals and teachers received training to support SEL; inservice 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.

The Every Student Succeeds Act, which guides state and local decisions on spending federal funds, is a concrete example of this shift. The law includes several provisions that support a broader definition of success, including guidance for expanded accountability systems and references to support a “well-rounded” program of instruction (Grant et al., 2017). Much of this discussion of success has focused on a set of competencies and practices that is commonly described using the phrase “social and emotional learning” (SEL). Researchers and practitioners have conceptualized SEL in a variety of ways,

but all of them emphasize the importance of promoting a broad range of student skills and competencies beyond academic achievement, such as collaboration, self-control, and social awareness. The final report of the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development summarizes the rationale for this expansive view of the competencies that students should develop in school (Aspen Institute, 2019).

In light of widespread encouragement for schools to address SEL, educators and policymakers can benefit from data on how teachers and principals are thinking about and implementing SEL in schools and classrooms, the ways in which their opinions and experiences vary, and the extent to which their responses are related to the characteristics of their schools. This report addresses these needs by presenting results on three topics from surveys of nationally representative samples of public school teachers and principals across the United States: teachers' and principals' opinions about SEL; their approaches to promoting students' social and emotional development; and their perceptions of supports that would help them do this more effectively. For each of these three topics, we address the following questions:

Abbreviations

AEP	American Educator Panels
ASLP	American School Leader Panel
ATP	American Teacher Panel
CASEL	Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
CCD	Common Core of Data
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
SEL	social and emotional learning

1. What are educators' opinions of SEL and what SEL-related programs, practices, and assessments are they implementing?
2. In what ways do teachers' and principals' responses differ?
3. To what extent are responses related to school characteristics?

Our results include descriptive summaries of the teacher and principal survey data. Most of the questions were asked of both teachers and principals, and we were able to examine the consistency of responses across these two groups. This comparison is valuable because teachers and principals may not always view the policies and programs implemented in their schools in the same way. Prior studies have indicated that principals and teachers differ in their perceptions of district policies related to mathematics standards (Desimone, 2006), teacher empowerment (Keiser and Shen, 2000), school-level decisionmaking practices (Noel et al., 2009), and principal leadership skills (Kochamba and Murray, 2003). It is possible that teachers and principals may not perceive SEL policies and practices in the same way. Comparing teachers' and principals' survey responses provides a more complete understanding of the policy environment than either set of responses could provide separately. Differences in the views or experiences of teachers and principals could reflect their different experiences with SEL implementation, or they could indicate a need for improved communication or greater schoolwide alignment of activities and resources.

We also examined how responses varied across different types of schools, including elementary and secondary schools, those in urban and non-urban locations, and those serving higher- versus lower-poverty student populations. These comparisons can illuminate ways in which opportunities to develop social and emotional competencies might be inequitably distributed and can help support providers identify areas of particular need.

This report highlights the most salient findings in the context of national discussions about SEL. (A full set of responses is available in separate technical appendixes to this report.) Together, these data can help inform decisions by local and state education

agency leaders, funders, and others who are interested in supporting educators' efforts to promote SEL in schools. The data also can lay the groundwork for a longer-term look at how educators' opinions and practices change as new resources and supports become available.

Background: SEL in Schools

The popularity of SEL as a school-improvement strategy is evident in recent national surveys of educators. Nearly all the participants in a 2012 teacher survey and a 2017 principal survey commissioned by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) endorsed the idea of promoting SEL in schools (Bridgeland, Bruce, and Hariharan, 2013; DePaoli, Atwell, and Bridgeland, 2017). A separate set of surveys commissioned by McGraw-Hill Education and administered to teachers, administrators, and parents in 2018 found similar levels of support in all three groups (McGraw-Hill Education, 2018). All three of these surveys included diverse samples that were weighted to produce nationally representative results. The survey data we describe in this report extend these prior studies by incorporating much larger samples, conducting more comparisons across school types, and examining consistency between teacher and principal reports.

Widespread enthusiasm for SEL reflects research that indicates that developing SEL skills among children can improve outcomes in adulthood (Deming, 2017; Nagaoka et al., 2015; Schanzenbach et al., 2016). Research also suggests that many programs and practices designed to promote SEL are associated with improved academic and behavioral outcomes both in school (Durlak et al., 2011; Grant et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015) and in the long term (e.g., postsecondary attainment, earnings, reduced criminal activity) (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016; Taylor et al., 2017).

Although much of the rigorous research has examined stand-alone SEL curricula, educators have adopted a variety of approaches to promote SEL (Dusenbury et al., 2015; Kendziora and Yoder, 2016). Generally, these approaches can be classified into three broad categories: (1) explicit SEL lessons

or curricula designed to promote one or more SEL competencies (Grant et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2017); (2) integration of SEL-promoting practices into academic instruction or other school activities (Johnson and Wiener, 2017; Yoder, 2014); and (3) adoption of strategies to promote a positive schoolwide climate, including the development of supportive relationships between adults and students (Allensworth et al., 2018; Aspen Institute, 2019; Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Efforts to support SEL in schools can benefit from the use of high-quality data to guide decisions about which programs and practices to adopt and how to ensure that these approaches address students' needs. Such data might include direct measures of students' social and emotional competencies (although the availability of validated measures is limited and there are risks associated with using such measures in isolation) (Hamilton et al., 2018; McKown, 2015; Taylor et al., 2018). A more comprehensive approach to using SEL data to inform decisionmaking would incorporate multiple measures of student competencies, as well as data on the learning environment. The latter category could include student or educator surveys of school or classroom climate, observations of instruction, measures of SEL program implementation, and assessments of educators' own social and emotional competencies (Taylor et al., 2018; Wrabel et al., 2018).

Another factor that contributes to the quality of SEL implementation is the availability of supports at the system (i.e., district or charter management organization) level. System-level leaders can promote effective implementation by developing a clear vision for SEL; offering professional development, curriculum guidance, and other resources; engaging in continuous improvement with schools; and aligning system resources and staffing with SEL goals (Kendziora and Yoder, 2016).

Because SEL is associated with a large number of definitions and frameworks (Berg et al., 2017; Blyth, Jones, and Borowski, 2018), it is important to clarify our definition in the surveys and in this report. The questions that addressed SEL were preceded by the following language:

Social and emotional skills can be grouped into three interconnected domains:

1. cognitive skills, including executive functions such 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
2. emotional competencies that enable one to cope with frustration, recognize and manage emotions, and understand others' emotions and perspectives
3. social and interpersonal skills that 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.

This set of categories is consistent with, but not identical to, a framework that identified three broad categories of competencies: cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (National Research Council, 2012; the intrapersonal category encompasses our "emotional competencies" domain). Together, the three domains overlap with commonly used frameworks, such as those developed by CASEL (undated-b), the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (Farrington et al., 2012), and other prominent SEL scholars (e.g., Jones et al., 2017).

Data and Methods

Sample and Data

This report presents results from the 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). The ATP was administered to a nationally representative sample of 28,954 teachers, 15,719 of whom completed at least 10 percent of the survey, for a response rate of 54 percent. The ASLP was administered to a nationally representative sample of 12,954 principals, 3,530 of whom completed at least 10 percent of the survey, for a response rate of 27 percent.¹ AEP members were recruited using probabilistic sampling methods. The AEP samples are designed to be of sufficient size to facilitate national

analyses as well as analyses of prevalent subgroups at the national level (e.g., elementary school teachers, teachers in urban schools, teachers in high-poverty schools). Although the survey response rates were fairly low, particularly for principals, they are consistent with those of other surveys. For example, Cook, Heath, and Thompson (2000) examined response rates for 68 different surveys and found an average of approximately 40 percent for nationally administered surveys. Another study examined response rates among Michigan principals; researchers found a range of response rates from approximately 15 to approximately 45 percent (Jacob and Jacob, 2012). Low response rates have the potential to threaten representativeness and introduce bias, so we apply weights to address nonresponse, as discussed later (please see the technical appendixes for more details about the sampling weights).

The surveys covered a variety of topics, including supporting students with disabilities, curriculum choices, preservice preparation experiences, approaches to SEL, approaches to the postsecondary transition, use of data, and educator demographics. This report presents results on the series of questions that addressed SEL (see the technical appendixes for the full text of all questions). These questions were adapted from a nationally representative survey of teachers on their attitudes toward SEL (Bridgeland, Bruce, and Hariharan, 2013).² In most cases, identical questions were administered to teachers and principals to facilitate comparisons of responses by educator role.³ Response data were merged with school demographic variables from the 2015–2016 Common Core of Data (CCD).⁴

Table 1 presents selected teacher and principal demographics for the overall sample and among the types of schools included in our analyses. Teachers in the full sample had, on average, 14 years of teaching experience, while principals had, on average, approximately seven years of school leadership experience. A majority of teachers were female, compared with slightly less than half of principals. Large majorities of both types of educators were white. Educator and student characteristics varied by school type. For example, compared with nonurban schools, urban schools were more likely to have minority educators and students and were slightly larger.

Methods

Our main analyses compare teachers' responses with principals' responses. They also compare educator responses across different types of schools. Specifically, we compare responses among teachers or principals in elementary and secondary schools, urban and nonurban schools, and high- and low-poverty schools. We use the NCES CCD definition of *urban school*, as well as the NCES definition of a *high-poverty school* (at least 75 percent of the student body is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) (NCES, 2017). It is important to note that teachers were not sampled within schools, and we cannot directly compare responses between teachers and principals in the same school. Inferences based on differential responses between the two types of educators, in aggregate, are valid because of the nationally representative nature of each sample. We are careful to draw conclusions about broader differences in responses allowed by our sampling frame and do not attribute differences to any specific school.

Our primary estimation strategy consists of weighted averages of the relevant survey responses among the full sample (when comparing teachers with principals) or the subsample of interest (i.e., teachers when comparing teacher responses among urban and nonurban schools). We use linear probability models with the dichotomous response as a dependent variable and an indicator for the subgroup of interest as the independent variable. When comparing responses of teachers with principals, the subgroup of interest is teachers. When comparing principal or teacher responses across school contexts, the subgroup of interest is elementary schools, urban schools, or high-poverty schools. In these models, the constant is the estimate of the average response for the reference group (principals, secondary schools, nonurban schools, or low-poverty schools) and the coefficient on the independent variable is the estimate of the difference in response for the subgroup of interest. Standard errors of the coefficient were used to determine statistical significance of the differential response of the subgroup of interest. The appropriate survey weights were included in all models.

We also carried out supplemental analyses that controlled for school level and urbanicity (if not

TABLE 1

American Teacher Panel and American School Leader Panel Demographics

Demographic Variables	Full Sample	Elementary	Secondary	Urban	Nonurban	High Poverty	Low Poverty
Panel A: ATP (<i>n</i>)	15,719	7,765	7,954	3,229	12,490	3,946	11,773
Teacher characteristics							
Years of teaching	14.04	13.90	14.17	13.25	14.29	13.60	14.22
Percentage Female	74	85	63	76	73	72	75
Percentage White	80	80	81	64	85	71	84
Percentage Black	7	8	7	16	4	12	5
Percentage Hispanic	8	8	7	16	5	2	6
Percentage Asian	3	3	3	3	3	4	2
Percentage has master's or higher	56	3	59	52	57	54	56
School characteristics							
Percentage white	50.48	47.67	53.17	17.62	60.81	30.63	58.39
Percentage black	15.24	15.63	14.88	29.04	10.91	23.29	12.04
Percentage Hispanic	24.28	25.97	22.66	44.83	17.82	34.01	20.40
Percentage Asian	4.85	4.86	4.85	2.88	5.47	6.91	4.03
Enrollment (average)	839.61	560.23	1,106.51	747.28	868.63	911.01	811.15
Panel B: ASLP (<i>n</i>)	3,530	2,115	1,415	885	2,645	767	2,763
Principal characteristics							
Years as principal	6.93	6.87	7.01	6.67	7.02	6.83	6.96
Percentage Female	48	58	33	54	46	54	46
Percentage White	75	74	75	55	81	59	80
Percentage Black	12	13	11	22	08	21	9
Percentage Hispanic	7	7	7	16	4	14	5
Percentage Asian	2	2	1	2	1	4	1
Percentage has master's or higher	92	93	91	91	93	92	92
School characteristics							
Percentage white	53.64	50.15	58.51	20.07	65.11	27.86	62.39
Percentage black	14.35	15.05	13.38	27.54	9.85	25.87	10.44
Percentage Hispanic	22.65	24.60	19.94	43.54	15.52	34.20	18.74
Percentage Asian	3.92	4.22	3.50	2.61	4.37	6.89	2.92
Enrollment (average)	563.67	468.91	695.79	532.65	574.26	663.39	529.82

NOTES: School background characteristics were obtained from the CCD from the 2015–2016 school year. Means were calculated using survey weights, which were calibrated to match the national average for teachers and school leaders. A school is defined as *high poverty* if at least 75 percent of its student body is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This follows the definition set forth by NCES (2017). The definition of *urban schools* comes from the NCES CCD files. Educator characteristics are self-reported. The rate of missingness in characteristics is at most 4 percent for the teacher samples and 7 percent for the principal samples. Missing indicator characteristics were imputed with a zero. Missing continuous characteristics were imputed with the respective sample's mean.

already a subgroup of interest), total enrollment, years of educator in role, gender of educator, race or ethnicity of educator (Hispanic, white, black, American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander, or other), education level (master’s degree or higher), and state fixed effects. The goal of the supplemental analyses was to ensure that differences by the subgroup of interest are not driven by major school characteristics, educator characteristics, or differences in the state context. In this way, we can be more confident that differences in responses are more likely to be associated with the characteristics of interest. We avoided controlling for a more extensive set of covariates, including school-level variables of student race/ethnicity, special education status, English language–learner status, free or reduced-price lunch status, and Title I status, so as not to control for important characteristics that make some contexts of interest unique. This concern is especially pertinent to the urban and nonurban and high- and low-poverty comparisons. Controlling for this larger set of covariates would control for many student characteristics that are highly correlated with these contexts and could contribute to differences in responses. We report the results of our main specification (without additional controls and state fixed effects) in the body of this report but denote a difference as significant only if the result is robust to the supplemental analyses. Please see the technical appendixes for more details on our main and supplemental models.

In the next section, we summarize key findings related to three topics: perceived importance and value of SEL, approaches to promoting SEL in classrooms and schools, and supports for SEL.

Results

Importance and Value of SEL

The first set of findings examines the extent to which principals describe SEL as a top priority, as well as teacher and principal perceptions regarding the importance of specific social and emotional competencies. We also summarize educators’ beliefs regarding the potential for SEL programs to improve student outcomes.

Large Majorities of Principals Described SEL as a Top Priority

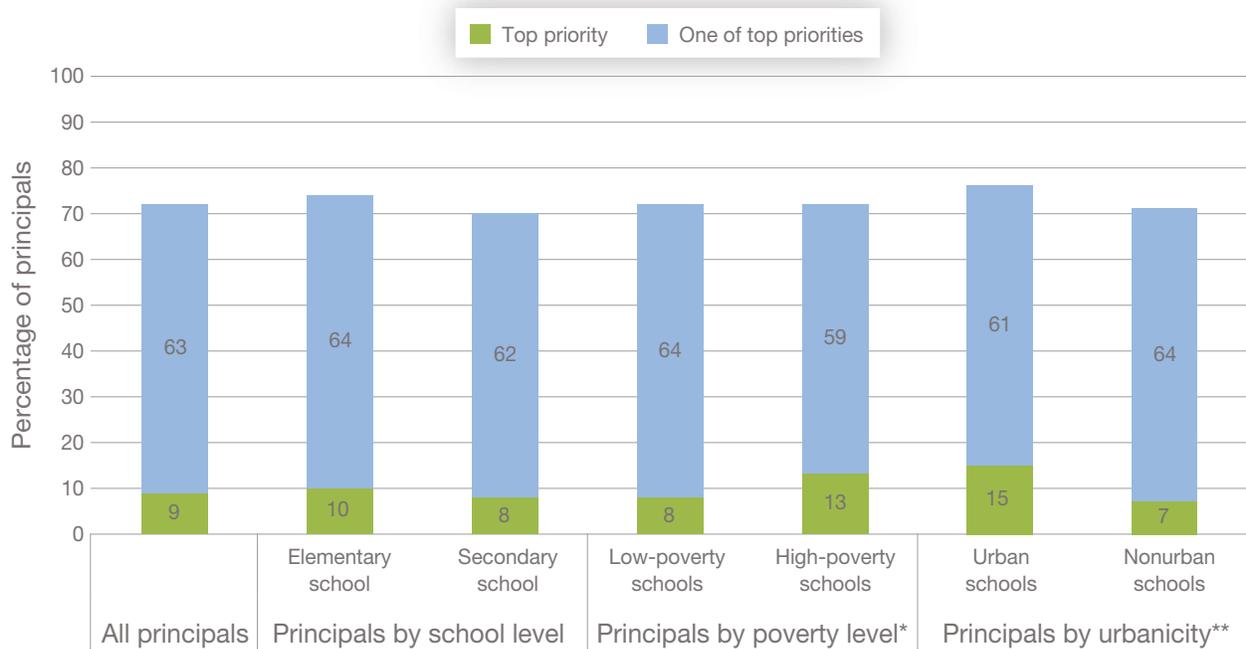
Principals were asked to consider “all of the priorities you had for your school” and to indicate how “the development of students’ social and emotional skills” ranked among these priorities by selecting one of four response categories:

1. It was my school’s top priority, and we dedicated whatever resources we could (e.g., money, time) to it.
2. It was one of my school’s top priorities, and we tried to prioritize resources for it.
3. It was not a top priority for my school, but we tried to dedicate some resources for it when possible.
4. It was not a priority for my school this year, and we did not dedicate any resources to it.⁵

Seventy-two percent of principals indicated that promotion of students’ social and emotional skills was either the school’s top priority or one of the top priorities. Figure 1 summarizes these responses for the full national sample and for subgroups of principals. Despite the considerable pressure most principals are under to address academic outcomes, nearly 10 percent of respondents reported that SEL was their school’s top priority.

Elementary and secondary school principals did not differ significantly in their reported prioritization of SEL. We did observe differences by other school characteristics, with principals in urban schools choosing SEL as their top priority at greater rates than their counterparts in nonurban schools. Similarly, principals in high-poverty schools were more likely to report SEL as their top priority than were principals in low-poverty schools. The reasons for these differences are not evident from our survey data, but could in part reflect the challenges that urban and high-poverty schools face when it comes to student behavior, discipline, and climate (Osher and Fleischman, 2005), combined with a perception that SEL instruction offers an approach to addressing those challenges (a perception that we explore later in this section).

FIGURE 1
Principal Reports of Prioritizing SEL



NOTES: Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among elementary school and secondary school principals, principals in low- and high-poverty schools, and principals in urban and nonurban schools on principal reports that SEL is the top priority. $n = 3,403$. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.
Survey question text: “During the current school year (2017–2018), considering all of the priorities you had for your school, how did the development of students’ social and emotional skills rank?”

Wide Range of SEL Skills Seen as Important; Teachers Tended to Assign Greater Importance to SEL Skills

As we discussed in the introduction, the phrase “social and emotional learning” has been associated with a wide variety of frameworks and skills. When teachers and principals consider the importance of addressing SEL, they might have in mind a specific skill, or they might consider ways to promote the full set of skills that students are likely to need to succeed in school and in their future endeavors. It is infeasible to survey educators about every imaginable skill, so the surveys addressed a subset of SEL skills drawn from both the social and emotional domains. To explore how educators thought about the role of schools in supporting SEL skill development, the surveys asked teachers and principals to rate how important they felt it was for their students “to acquire and apply each of the following social and

emotional skills at school (as opposed to home or elsewhere).”

As Figure 2 illustrates, most principals and teachers indicated that it was “very important” for students to develop and apply each of these skills at school. In no case did fewer than 90 percent of respondents choose an option other than “fairly” or “very” important, and sizable majorities assigned the “very important” rating to each skill. “Developing a sense of identity” was least likely to be rated as very important, but even in that case, both principals and teachers tended to rate its importance highly. It is important to note that the “acquire and apply” language does not allow us to determine whether respondents believe a skill should be developed in school or believe students should acquire these skills outside of school but apply them when they are in school.

A consistent pattern depicted in Figure 2 is teachers’ greater tendency to rate these skills as very

FIGURE 2

Principal and Teacher Perceptions of the Importance of SEL Domains



NOTES: Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among teacher and principal responses in rating a given SEL domain as very important. $n = 18,864$. ** $p < 0.01$. Survey question text: “How important do you feel it is for the students you teach/in your school to acquire and apply each of the following social and emotional skills at school?” Response choices were “very important,” “fairly important,” “slightly important,” and “not important.”

important compared with principals. The magnitudes of the gaps varied, ranging from three percentage points for “establishing and maintaining positive relationships” to 15 percentage points for “developing a sense of identity.” Teachers’ ratings might be higher because they spend more time than principals interacting directly with students, although we do not have the data to test the validity of this explanation.

We also examined differences in the perceived importance of these skills across different school contexts. The results (not shown here) indicate that elementary principals tended to assign ratings of “very important” more often than did secondary principals, with a statistically significant difference for “understanding and managing emotions” and “establishing and maintaining positive relationships.” We observed more differences between elementary and secondary teachers; the former group assigned higher importance ratings for all skills except “setting and

achieving positive goals,” “making responsible decisions,” and “developing a sense of identity.” Teacher and principal responses did not statistically significantly differ between high- and low-poverty schools or between urban and nonurban schools.

Finally, to determine whether respondents’ ratings were correlated across the seven skills (i.e., whether respondents who rated one skill as very important tended to apply the same rating to the other skills), we conducted an exploratory factor analysis. We found that respondents’ ratings of each skill were highly correlated, suggesting that respondents tended not to make clear distinctions among the skills when assessing their importance.

Together, the findings presented in this section indicate that large majorities of both principals and teachers believed that students should develop and apply social and emotional skills in school, and that (for the most part) teachers and principals did not

prioritize any specific skills over others. Moreover, these views were fairly consistent across different school contexts, although elementary school teachers tended to see SEL skills as more important than secondary teachers did.

Educators Believed SEL Programs Can Improve Student Outcomes, School Climate

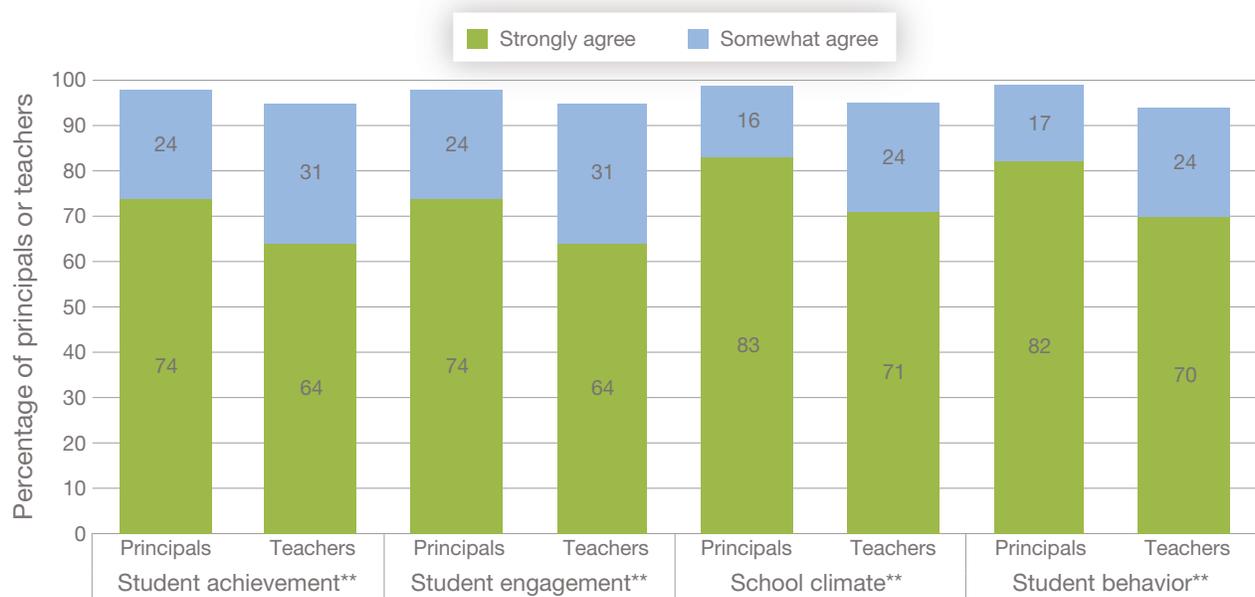
The final question asked teachers and principals to indicate their level of agreement with the statement that “programs or interventions to support students’ social and emotional learning have the potential to improve the following” for each of four outcomes, as shown in Figure 3. These results provide one possible explanation for the earlier findings pertaining to the perceived importance of addressing SEL: Both principals and teachers believed that SEL has the potential to improve students’ achievement, engagement, and behavior, and to enhance schoolwide climate. These findings are consistent with those described in a 2018 McGraw-Hill Education report of teacher,

principal, and parent survey results (McGraw-Hill Education, 2018).

Although teachers tended to assign higher ratings of importance to developing SEL skills than principals, principals were more likely than teachers to strongly agree that SEL programs might improve other student outcomes and school climate. Both principals’ and teachers’ responses were similar in urban and nonurban and in high- and low-poverty schools. Teachers in elementary schools were more likely than those in secondary schools to strongly agree that all student outcomes (but not school climate) could be affected by SEL interventions. Principals’ responses did not differ by grade level.

Teachers and principals were both more likely to strongly agree that SEL programs had the potential to improve student behavior and school climate than they were to improve student achievement and engagement. This pattern is not surprising: As we noted in the introduction, efforts to improve school climate are often considered part of a broad set of

FIGURE 3
Principal and Teacher Perceptions of the Effects of SEL Interventions on Other Domains



NOTES: Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among teacher and principal responses in strongly agreeing that SEL skills affect a given domain. $n = 18,852$. ** $p < 0.01$. Survey question text: “Indicate your agreement that programs or interventions to support students’ social and emotional learning have the potential to improve the following . . .” Response choices were “strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” “somewhat disagree,” and “strongly disagree.”

approaches to supporting SEL. Educators sometimes adopt SEL as a means of addressing student behavior problems, even though this view is inconsistent with how many leaders in the field think about SEL—as a growth-oriented approach to building all students’ competencies, rather than as an intervention to address problem behaviors (Aspen Institute, 2019).

Principals’ and teachers’ high levels of confidence in the potential for SEL to improve outcomes, especially academic achievement, bode well for the sustainability of these reforms in schools. Such confidence suggests that educators view the time and resources they devote to SEL programs and practices as supporting, rather than hindering, their efforts to address goals related to academic instruction.

Together, the findings presented in this section indicate that principals and teachers across the United States and in different types of schools endorse the value of developing students’ social and emotional skills and believe that these efforts will improve other student and school outcomes. In addition, principals reported placing a high priority on SEL activities. These findings suggest that educators are likely to be engaged in extensive efforts to promote SEL in their schools and classrooms. In the next section, we provide evidence regarding the breadth and frequency of these efforts.

Approaches to Promoting SEL

In this section, we discuss the strategies, practices, and curricula that teachers and principals report using to promote students’ social and emotional development and the ways in which they differ across different types of schools. We also describe how teachers and principals report measuring SEL in their schools.

Elementary Efforts Focused on Schoolwide Programs and Curricula; Secondary Efforts Emphasized More-Informal Practices

Teachers and principals have many choices for SEL development in their schools. They can adopt SEL-focused curricula schoolwide or in selected teachers’ classrooms, and they can support SEL through informal classroom practices or through schoolwide

initiatives, such as efforts to improve climate (Aspen Institute, 2019). To gain insight into which approaches educators were using, the survey asked teachers and principals to indicate the approaches used in their schools from a list of three broad strategies. Higher proportions of teachers and principals in elementary schools reported using schoolwide programs and curricula compared with teachers and principals in secondary schools, whereas the reverse pattern was true for use of informal classroom practices, as shown in Table 2. These grade-level differences are not surprising; research suggests that explicit, stand-alone lessons tend to be better suited for and more likely to be adopted in elementary schools (Yeager, 2017) and that more stand-alone programs are available for elementary than for secondary grades (Grant et al., 2017). We did not observe a consistent pattern of statistically significant differences between urban and nonurban schools or between low- and high-poverty schools.

Overall, higher percentages of principals (63 percent) than teachers (47 percent) reported that SEL programs or curricula were used schoolwide; this pattern holds in schools of different grade levels, urbanicity, and poverty level. One possible reason for these differences in teacher and principal reports is that principals typically will be aware of programs or curricula that have been adopted schoolwide. In contrast, if some teachers were not required to implement those programs or curricula in their classrooms, they might not know about them. In addition, the phrase “schoolwide curriculum” could refer to packaged programs (e.g., Second Step), which are often adopted in core classes, but not in non-core classes, such as art or physical education. This category of activities might also include school-developed or commercially available programs that focus on schoolwide climate or relationships outside the classroom. In contrast, the percentages of teachers and principals who reported using informal classroom practices were similar overall and across grade levels. In the next section, we provide details on the specific approaches that survey participants reported adopting.

TABLE 2

Percentages of Principals and Teachers Who Reported Using Various Methods to Promote SEL in Their Schools

	All Principals	All Teachers	Elementary School Teachers	Secondary School Teachers	Elementary School Principals	Secondary School Principals
Schoolwide program or curriculum	63	47**	58	37**	71	52**
Program or curriculum in some teachers' classrooms but not others	41	35**	33	36	37	46**
Informal classroom practices	59	60	57	63**	54	66**
Not applicable to my school	1	4**	2	5**	1	2
I don't know	1	4**	2	6**	1	0

NOTES: Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among overall teacher and principal responses and among teachers in elementary school and secondary school and principals in elementary school and secondary schools. $n = 18,863$ for the overall principal and teacher sample, 15,460 for the teacher sample, and 3,403 for the principal sample. ** $p < 0.01$.

Survey question text: "During the current school year (2017–2018), through which of the following methods are students learning social and emotional skills in your school?" Respondents were instructed to select all that applied.

Educators Used a Variety of Strategies, from Classroom Activities to Community Outreach, to Promote Students' SEL Skills

We asked principals and teachers to indicate the strategies they used to improve students' social and emotional learning. Respondents chose from a list of ten strategies, which we list in Table 3. The most common approaches, as reported by both principals and teachers, were modeling appropriate behaviors (86 percent of principals, 91 percent of teachers); drawing on school counselors or mental health professionals (88 percent of principals, 72 percent of teachers); and building community and relationships with students and parents (80 percent of principals, 77 percent of teachers). Mindfulness practices, restorative practices, and targeted behavior interventions were among the least used in both groups, although they were used by 32 to 48 percent of principals and 25 to 37 percent of teachers. Teachers reported using all strategies less than principals, with one exception—modeling appropriate behavior. Some of these strategies focused on behavior management and would not generally be considered SEL practices, but educators clearly viewed them as strategies that could support students' social and emotional development.

Higher percentages of teachers in elementary schools than secondary schools reported using all these approaches, with the exception of drawing on school counselors or mental health professionals.

Approximately equal numbers of teachers from elementary and secondary schools reported using that approach. Programs and strategies intended to improve student behavior—such as targeted behavioral interventions, point systems or rewards, and schoolwide behavior management programs—were much more commonly used by elementary school teachers than by secondary school teachers. Principals' results (not shown) were similar—higher percentages of elementary school principals reported using these strategies, particularly those related to managing student behavior, than secondary school principals. Differences in approaches to addressing SEL for younger and older students often reflect the maturation of students' abilities, with older students developing sophisticated reasoning abilities that enable them to pursue more-cognitively complex competencies and respond to more-nuanced approaches to behavior management (Williamson, Modecki, and Guerra, 2015).

Reported use of SEL practices, programs, and strategies by teachers in high-poverty schools was similar to that of teachers in low-poverty schools, with some important exceptions. Teachers in high-poverty schools were more likely to report implementing SEL programs, employing schoolwide behavior management systems, using point systems or rewards, and using restorative practices. We found the same pattern among principals, though the

TABLE 3

Principal and Teacher Reports of SEL Practices, Programs, and Strategies

	All Principals (%)	All Teachers (%)	Elementary School Teachers (%)	Secondary School Teachers (%)	Teachers in High-Poverty Schools (%)	Teachers in Low-Poverty Schools (%)
Integrate SEL into curriculum and school activities	59	52**	59	46**	51	52
Build community and relationships with students and parents	80	77	82	73**	77	77
Implement SEL programs	46	27**	34	20**	30	26*
Employ schoolwide behavior management programs	60	46**	53	38**	53	43**
Model appropriate behaviors	86	91**	92	90*	90	92
Draw on school counselors or mental health professionals	88	72**	71	72	67	73
Use point systems or rewards	59	58	76	40**	68	55**
Use restorative practices	47	25**	27	22**	31	23**
Use targeted behavioral interventions	48	37**	46	28**	40	36
Use mindfulness practices	32	28	36	21**	27	29

NOTES: Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among overall teacher and principal responses and among teachers in elementary school and secondary school and teachers in high- and low-poverty schools. $n = 18,242$ for the overall teacher and principal sample and 14,880 for the teacher sample. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Survey question text: "Please select the practices, programs, or strategies you personally used during the current school year (2017–2018) to improve your students' social and emotional learning." Respondents were asked to check all that applied.

differences were generally not statistically significant. These results are consistent with the hypothesis that teachers in high-poverty schools tend to use SEL programs to complement other behavior management systems, such as point systems.

Schools Used Several Initiatives and Curricula to Address SEL; Positive Behavior Systems Were Common

The survey also asked teachers and principals about the specific SEL curricula and other initiatives used in their schools during the 2017–2018 school year (see Table 4). As noted in the previous section, some of these initiatives are more focused on behavior management than SEL. The question listed 17 popular curricula and initiatives and asked principals and teachers to select all that were in use in their schools. Teachers and principals reported that their schools used a variety of curricula and programs, and on average, reported that their schools used more than one program. The most commonly

used approaches are shown in Table 4. Fifty percent of teachers and 59 percent of principals reported that positive behavior systems were in use in their schools, while 18 percent of principals and 8 percent of teachers reported that trauma-informed practices or the Compassionate Schools Model were used in their schools. Among the specific SEL curricula listed on the survey, no single curriculum stood out as used by a majority of teachers or principals, but both Responsive Classroom and Second Step were reportedly used more widely than the other curricula on the list. Our data do not shed any light on why some programs are more popular than others, but one possible reason for the popularity of Responsive Classroom is that it can be embedded into academic instruction.

Consistent with earlier findings, elementary school teachers and principals were significantly more likely to report using many of these programs and curricula than were teachers and principals in secondary schools. For example, 28 percent of elementary school principals and 16 percent of elementary school

TABLE 4

Most Common SEL Initiatives and Curricula Used in Schools, as Reported by Principals and Teachers

Initiative or Curriculum	All Principals	All Teachers
Positive behavior systems	59	50**
Trauma-informed practices/Compassionate Schools Model	18	8**
Second Step	20	9**
Responsive Classroom	16	12
Quiet Time	7	9
Positive Action	5	7
4Rs	2	4**
Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)	1	3**

NOTES: Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among overall teacher and principal responses. $n = 18,236$. ** $p < 0.01$.

Survey question text: "During the current school year (2017–2018), which of the following initiatives did your school use to address students' social and emotional learning and student behavior?" Respondents were instructed to select all that applied. A full list of the programs listed on the survey and the corresponding percentages is provided in the technical appendixes.

teachers reported using Second Step, compared with 9 percent of secondary school principals and 3 percent of secondary school teachers (not shown). These differences are consistent with the fact that many of these curricula are designed for use in elementary and middle schools, not high schools. In addition, while teachers and principals in high-poverty schools were more likely to report using these programs compared with their counterparts in low-poverty schools, few of these differences were statistically significant.

Majorities of Teachers and Principals Reported that Their Schools Measured SEL

Measures of SEL can include assessments of students' social and emotional competencies, as well as measures of how well the school and classroom environment supports SEL. SEL measurement was common, with only 30 percent of teachers and 14 percent of principals reporting that their school did not measure SEL at all (see Table 5). The percentages who reported that their school used various types of measures varied, and in all but one case (performance tasks, which are relatively rare), larger percentages of principals than teachers reported that their schools used the measurement approach. One possible explanation for the differences between principal and teacher responses is that teachers in

some grades and subjects might not be aware of measurement approaches used by other teachers or at the school level. It could also reflect differences in perceptions regarding what constitutes "measuring SEL"—for example, principals and teachers might differ in their opinions regarding whether a specific classroom observation rubric assesses SEL.

Observations were the most commonly used SEL measurement approach. This category of measures could include observer assessments of students' behaviors, and could also include the types of classroom observation rubrics that are often used to provide feedback to teachers or are part of a formal teacher evaluation system. A recent analysis of commonly used observation rubrics indicates that most include indicators of practices that support SEL (Yoder, 2014).

Student perception surveys on school conditions that foster SEL were another fairly common source of SEL data, with 43 percent of principals and 27 percent of teachers reporting their use. Efforts to measure students' social and emotional skills were less common, with fewer than one-quarter of respondents reporting use of student questionnaires about their own skills and roughly 10 percent indicating use of SEL performance tasks. These relatively low numbers probably do not reflect a lack of interest in

TABLE 5

Principal and Teacher Reports of Approaches to Measuring SEL in Their Schools Expressed In Percentages of Sample

	All Principals	All Teachers
Performance tasks that measure students' SEL	9	10
Self-report questionnaires that survey students' perceptions of their own social and emotional skills	24	17**
Self-report questionnaires that survey teachers about their own SEL and that of their students	18	12**
Student perception surveys on the school conditions that foster SEL	43	27**
Teacher perception surveys on the school conditions that foster SEL	36	24**
Parent perception surveys on the school conditions that foster SEL	32	22**
Teacher, peer educator, or administrator observations of classroom and student behavior	56	45**
Teacher perception surveys or other measures of teachers' own SEL	23	14**
My school doesn't measure SEL	14	30**

NOTES: Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among overall teacher and principal responses. $n = 18,807$.

** $p < 0.01$.

Survey question text: "During the current school year (2017–2018), which, if any, of the following approaches did you or your school use to measure social and emotional learning?"

measuring SEL skills; in a 2017 national survey of principals, 71 percent of principals agreed that SEL skills could be measured accurately, and a majority endorsed the idea of including these skills in annual assessments (DePaoli, Atwell, and Bridgeland, 2017). Our results probably stem from educators' lack of familiarity with SEL assessments (DePaoli, Atwell, and Bridgeland, 2017) and from a dearth of high-quality assessments that meet educators' needs and are supported by evidence of validity and reliability (Hamilton et al., 2018; McKown, 2015; Taylor et al., 2018).

Reported use of SEL measurement approaches varied by school context (not shown). Elementary school teachers reported relying less on student self-report questionnaires and student perceptions of school conditions than did secondary school teachers; instead, they reported relying more on observations. This difference is unsurprising, since most student self-report measures are not designed for young children. Meanwhile, urban teachers and principals reported greater use of student self-report questionnaires, student perception surveys, and teacher perception surveys compared with their

nonurban counterparts. This pattern is consistent with other results showing a greater emphasis on SEL in urban settings. Only one difference was found by poverty status: Teachers in high-poverty schools were more likely to report using teacher perception surveys on school conditions that foster SEL.

Supports for SEL

The final set of results examined SEL-related training that educators received and their perceptions regarding factors that principals and teachers believe could be helpful for supporting SEL in schools. The survey did not include a comprehensive set of questions about supports. However, data on training provide useful information for understanding the extent to which principals and teachers might need additional professional development to address SEL, and educators' ratings of strategies that could improve SEL can inform efforts to develop resources or policies to support SEL in schools.

Majorities of Principals and Teachers Received Training, Inservice More Common than Preservice Training

One way to help educators develop the knowledge and skills needed to support SEL is to offer training that explicitly addresses ways to promote students' social and emotional competencies. (Such training needs to be of high quality and relevant to educators' needs and contexts, but a review of these features of training is beyond the scope of this project.) The AEP surveys asked principals and teachers to indicate whether they had "received training on how to support students in acquiring and applying social and emotional skills" in their preservice preparation programs or while they were working as principals or teachers (i.e., inservice professional development).

As Figure 4 illustrates, 30 percent of principals and 16 percent of teachers reported receiving this type of training in their preservice preparation programs. In contrast, two-thirds of principals and more than half of teachers said they received inservice training. Although educators have always attended to students' social and emotional development, interest in and support for teaching SEL skills are relatively recent phenomena, so it is unsurprising that more educators received inservice training than preservice training.

About one-fifth of principals and approximately one-third of teachers reported that they received no training on how to support students in acquiring and applying SEL skills. In light of the high levels of support for addressing SEL in schools that we discussed earlier, these findings suggest a gap between the percentage of educators who would like to support students' social and emotional development and the percentage of educators who are trained to do so. However, the percentage of teachers who reported no training is smaller than it was for a similar question administered in 2012, which found that 44 percent of teachers had received no training (Bridgeland, Bruce, and Hariharan, 2013).

Teachers in elementary schools were more likely than those in secondary schools to report having received inservice training and were less likely to say they did not have any training (results not shown here but available in the technical appendixes). We

observed a similar pattern for teachers in urban versus nonurban schools and those in high- versus low-poverty schools. The percentages of teachers who reported receiving preservice training did not differ by school characteristic. These findings are consistent with the higher rates of use of some SEL approaches in elementary, urban, and high-poverty schools; the implementation of SEL programs and practices in many schools might be accompanied by professional development. A similar pattern emerged for principals, with those in elementary and urban schools more likely to report inservice training.

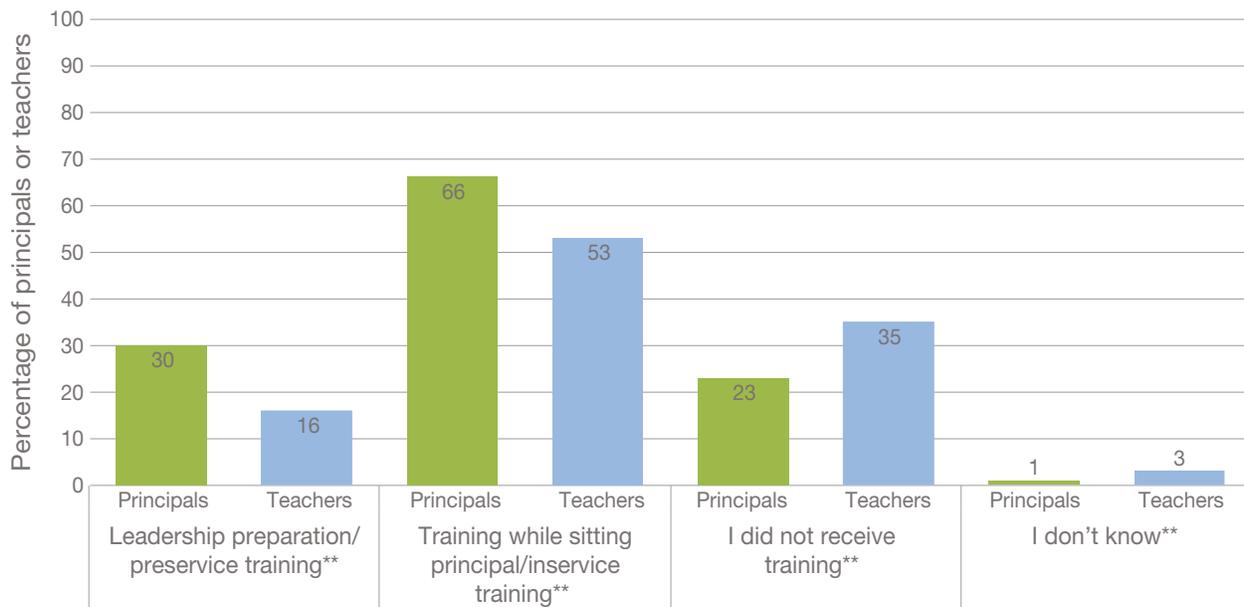
As noted above, a possible explanation for the relatively low percentages of teachers and principals who reported receiving preservice training is the relative recency of explicit attention to SEL in schools. It is plausible that preservice preparation programs have started addressing this topic in recent years. To explore that hypotheses, we compared responses for teachers and principals with five or fewer years of experience (most of whom probably completed their preservice training within the last few years) with those who reported more than five years of experience. Table 6 provides support for this hypothesis: For both teachers and principals, those with fewer years of experience report receiving preservice training on SEL at higher rates than those with more experience. Rates of participation in inservice training show the opposite pattern. The reason for that difference is not clear, but could simply reflect the fact that the greater number of years on the job for the latter group provided more opportunity to participate in training. The higher rates of preservice training for educators who are new to their positions suggests that preservice programs are increasingly addressing SEL, although the percentages who report receiving such training—approximately one-third of new principals and one-fourth of new teachers—are still small.

Many Educators Reported That Having More Time Would Improve Ability to Address SEL

The final set of findings draws on a question that asks principals and teachers to "select up to three activities, strategies, and resources that would best improve your school's ability to develop the social

FIGURE 4

Principal and Teacher Reports of Training to Support SEL



NOTES: Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among teacher and principal responses for each type of training experience. $n = 18,853$. ** $p < 0.01$.
 Survey question text: "Have you received training on how to support students in acquiring and applying social and emotional skills?" Respondents were instructed to select all that apply.

TABLE 6

Teacher and Principal Reports of Training to Support SEL, by Years of Experience

	Teachers (%)		Principals (%)	
	Five Years or Fewer	More than Five Years	Five Years or Fewer	More than Five Years
Yes, in preservice training (or leadership preparation)	23	15**	33	27*
Yes, in inservice professional learning (or while a sitting principal)	43	56**	60	72**
No, I did not receive training in this area	38	34	27	19**
I don't know	6	3**	1	1

NOTES: Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences in responses between new and experienced educators for each type of training experience. $n = 15,454$ for the teacher sample and 3,399 for the principal sample. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.
 Survey question text: "Have you received training on how to support students in acquiring and applying social and emotional skills?" Respondents were instructed to select all that applied.

and emotional skills of your students.” The list of items, including the percentages of teachers and principals who selected each, appears in Table 7. None of the items in the list was selected by a majority of either principals or teachers, which suggests diversity in the supports that educators believe they might need to address SEL. The most commonly endorsed item was “Time (e.g., for planning, training),” with 42 percent of principals and 43 percent of teachers including this in their top three desired supports. Several other items were selected by approximately one-third of both teachers and principals, including “strategies for incorporating SEL into classroom curriculum,” “more engagement from parents and families,” and “strategies for engaging students in their own SEL.”

A comparison of teacher and principal responses revealed several similarities in perceptions regarding what is needed to improve SEL in their schools, but there were a few significant differences. For example, higher percentages of principals than teachers selected “strategies for delivering multitiered supports

for SEL needs” and “adequate financial resources or allocations to implement SEL.” By contrast, teachers selected “more engagement from parents and families” and “materials” at higher rates than principals. Teachers were also more likely to endorse “explicit prioritization and support from school administration” than principals were to endorse a parallel item about support from district administration. These differences are consistent with the kinds of roles that principals and teachers play in SEL program and practice decisionmaking and implementation.

Responses did not differ greatly across different types of schools, although we did observe a few differences among educators in high- and low-poverty schools. Principals in high-poverty schools were more likely than those in low-poverty schools to select the items that addressed parent engagement and student engagement. Teachers in high-poverty schools also selected the parent engagement item at higher rates than other teachers did, but we did not see a difference among teachers on the student

TABLE 7
Principal and Teacher Reports of Top Three Activities, Strategies, and Resources That Would Best Improve School's Ability to Develop Social and Emotional Skills of Students

	All Principals (%)	All Teachers (%)
Strategies for fostering an environment to develop SEL	23	23
Strategies for incorporating SEL into classroom curriculum	33	30
Strategies for delivering multitiered supports for SEL needs	37	25**
Strategies for educator self-care	13	10**
More engagement from parents and families	30	40**
More knowledge of connections to existing resources	13	15
Strategies for engaging students in their own SEL	35	37
Adequate financial resources or allocations to implement SEL	31	19**
Explicit prioritization and support from (school or) district administration	8	20**
Time	42	43
Materials	15	19**
Technical assistance	2	2
None of the above; I have the support I need	1	2

NOTES: Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among overall teacher and principal responses. $n = 18,818$. ** $p < 0.01$.

Survey question text: “Please select the top three activities, strategies and/or resources that would best improve your (your school’s) ability to develop the social and emotional skills of your students.”

engagement item. Teachers in low-poverty schools were more likely than their counterparts in high-poverty schools to select time, which is consistent with findings we presented earlier that suggest that high-poverty schools are already implementing some SEL approaches to a greater extent than low-poverty schools are. Although we observed some differences in responses from educators at elementary versus secondary schools and urban versus non-urban schools, for the most part, the responses of these groups were fairly consistent.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This report provides an overview of how principals and teachers across the United States think about the value of SEL, how they work to promote students' social and emotional development in their schools, and which supports they believe could improve their SEL efforts. Although these survey data do not tell us whether the SEL programs and practices educators have adopted are improving student outcomes, they do provide information that could be of interest to policymakers and practitioners who are working to address students' social and emotional development. The findings can inform the decisions of state and local education agency leaders and other policymakers who are considering ways to support school-based staff through professional learning opportunities, funding, curriculum choices, or other resources. These findings can also help funders identify areas that might be worthy of new investments and can help researchers identify programs and practices that are in widespread use and that might benefit from evidence of efficacy. In this final section, we briefly discuss some implications of the findings for policymakers and educators who are working to improve students' SEL experiences and opportunities.

Support for SEL is Widespread, and Most Educators Believe SEL Can Promote Other Positive Outcomes

Large majorities of principals reported that SEL was one of their top priorities, and most principals and

teachers agreed that students should develop and apply a wide range of social and emotional competencies in school. Most respondents also agreed that SEL can improve student academic achievement, engagement, and behavior, as well as schoolwide climate. This strong base of support for and confidence in SEL as a way to generate multiple benefits for students is consistent with recent research and expert guidance on the value of SEL (Aspen Institute, 2019). Education leaders and policymakers who work with teachers and principals can draw on this support when providing guidance about how to incorporate SEL-focused programs and practices in their schools. To sustain this apparent enthusiasm for SEL, it is important to demonstrate to educators that SEL can lead to the anticipated benefits and that it can support, rather than detract from, work to improve student academic achievement. It will also be useful to monitor both support for and implementation of SEL in schools over time as educators gain experience with these practices and develop a nuanced understanding of the challenges and facilitators. The high level of support evident in our survey results might not be sustained if clear benefits do not arise.

Despite Near-Universal Support for SEL, Most Did Not Receive SEL Training in Preservice Preparation Programs

Although majorities of teachers and principals reported receiving some training related to SEL, most of this occurred during their time in their professional roles rather than through their preservice preparation programs. A comparison of newer and more-experienced educators suggests that those who completed preservice preparation more recently were more likely to receive SEL-related training, but those who reported such training constituted a minority of all new teachers and principals. Aligning the content of preservice preparation programs with the needs and practices of the schools where candidates will eventually work is challenging, but the use of residencies or other practical experiences provides one way to address this need. Through residencies, candidates have opportunities to receive high-quality

training on content and practices that are common in schools (Guha, Hyler, and Darling-Hammond, 2017; Steele, Steiner, and Hamilton, 2018). The widespread implementation of SEL programs and practices that our survey results revealed suggests that training through residencies could expose most participants to SEL and give them opportunities to hone their SEL practices in a supervised setting.

Educators' Approaches to SEL Are Multifaceted, Creating Challenges for Training and Other Support Provision

Consistent with a conceptualization of SEL as involving a variety of approaches (Aspen Institute, 2019), the teachers and principals who responded to the AEP surveys indicated that their schools were implementing a range of formal and informal programs and strategies to improve students' social and emotional skills. This breadth of approaches is valuable for helping to ensure that students receive support for SEL throughout the school day, but it can make it difficult for state and local education leaders and technical assistance providers to design training or other supports that are relevant across schools. There is no single "program" to which these supports can be tailored, so some degree of customization is likely to be necessary. In addition, the large number of programs that claim to address SEL but lack an evidence base (Grant et al., 2017) could lead decisionmakers to feel overwhelmed by choices and could result in the adoption of low-quality materials and programs. Providers of assistance and support should explore ways to increase educators' access to information about program quality and effectiveness (e.g., CASEL, 2013, 2015; Grant et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2017) and to guidance about how to implement these programs with fidelity and quality (Jones et al., 2018; Walsh, Rolls Reutz, and Williams, 2015; Wrabel et al., 2018).⁶

Understanding how SEL approaches typically differ across schools serving different grade levels is especially important. Our results and those of others (e.g., Yeager, 2017) indicate that stand-alone SEL curricula tend to be used primarily in elementary schools, while middle and high schools often

address SEL in other ways—such as through efforts to improve schoolwide climate or to adopt SEL-focused instructional practices in academic courses. It is not clear to what extent the lower reported use of SEL curricula in secondary schools is a result of a lack of availability of programs, scheduling challenges, or other constraints. Regardless of the reason, if older students' social and emotional development is typically addressed through approaches other than stand-alone curricula, their teachers and principals could benefit from guidance on how to do this.

The notion that supports might need to be customized to individual schools' contexts is reinforced by the diversity in teachers' and principals' top three strategies, activities, and resources they believe would improve their schools' ability to support students' social and emotional skill development. Support providers can work with school-based educators to determine what programs, practices, and strategies are in place or are being considered and use this information to develop supports that are applicable to that context, while drawing on more-general principles regarding evidence-based approaches to addressing SEL.

Many SEL Efforts Are Focused on Behavior Management

Although some SEL programs have been shown to have positive effects on student behavior (Grant et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015), a comprehensive approach to SEL should be strengths-based and should aim to build the competencies of all students rather than simply addressing problematic behaviors (Aspen Institute, 2019). It is also crucial that those who implement any behavior management strategy are cognizant of the need to enact these programs in a way that promotes equity and is responsive to the needs and experiences of students from traditionally marginalized groups (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Borowski, 2018). Students of color are disproportionately subjected to harsh and exclusionary disciplinary actions compared with white students, even when the behaviors that precipitated those actions are the same (Anderson and Ritter, 2017; Losen, Martinez, and Gillespie, 2012; U.S. Department

of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018).

The popularity of some behavior-focused approaches (e.g., using points systems or rewards, modeling appropriate behaviors) among teachers and principals suggests that many educators are focusing on using SEL to improve student behavior. Moreover, the tendency for educators in high-poverty schools to report greater use of these approaches than those in low-poverty schools raises potential concerns about equity in students' access to supportive, strengths-based SEL activities. At the same time, the greater reported use of restorative practices in high-poverty schools is encouraging; those approaches have been shown to reduce suspension rates in one urban district, although evidence regarding the broader effects of this approach on students who commit behavioral infractions and on their classmates is mixed and effective implementation is crucial (Augustine et al., 2018). The survey results by themselves do not indicate a widespread problem, but they do point to the need to ensure that educators are providing all students with SEL supports that seek to build students' social and emotional strengths and not simply improve behavior.

Most Schools Measure SEL, But Assessments of Learning Environment More Common Than of Student Competencies

Most teachers and principals indicated that their schools measured SEL, and a wide range of measures were reportedly used. Measures of the learning environment, such as observation rubrics or school condition surveys, were widespread, whereas assessments of students' social and emotional competencies were less common. A comprehensive approach to assessing SEL in schools can benefit from both types of measures (Taylor et al., 2018; Aspen Institute, 2019). Earlier work has suggested that most principals and teachers are unfamiliar with how to assess SEL even though they believe it is a good idea (Bridgeland, Bruce, and Hariharan, 2013; DePaoli, Atwell, and Bridgeland, 2017). Together, these findings suggest that educators could benefit from information about

Survey results point to the need to ensure that educators are providing all students with SEL supports that seek to build students' social and emotional strengths and not simply improve behavior.

available high-quality assessments to guide instruction and inform broader decisions about SEL programs and strategies.⁷ Developers and researchers have been experimenting with new approaches to assessing SEL (McKown, Read, and Bookman, 2017), and their efforts are likely to help fill the gap in the availability of high-quality assessments over the next few years. But even with good assessments, educators need guidance to make sense of SEL assessment data in the context of other information about the classroom, school, and community environments.

Providers of Supports to Schools Should Address Integration and Engagement

The relative popularity of time as a desired resource is not surprising, given the numerous demands that principals and teachers face. The AEP data do not allow us to determine whether respondents are interested in more time for curriculum implementation, common planning with colleagues, professional development, or other activities, but the finding suggests that those who support educators in implementing SEL programs and curricula might consider ways in which to help teachers and school leaders integrate

SEL into other activities, such as academic instruction. Helping educators understand how to support SEL through their academic instruction could mitigate the risk that they would reduce time or resources devoted to academics in their efforts to focus on SEL. The potential benefits of providing this type of support are reinforced by the finding that approximately one-third of teachers and principals selected strategies for incorporating SEL into curriculum as one of their top three resources to improve SEL. As we discussed earlier, most principals and teachers reported a belief that SEL could improve student achievement, so there is a base of support to draw upon when addressing perceived time constraints.

However, very few educators reported that they had all the support they needed, and about one-third of teachers and principals responded that they would like more engagement from parents and families, as well as strategies for engaging students in their own SEL. Although we found that most principals prioritize SEL, these survey responses indicate that additional supports, including professional development, materials, and guidance for engaging

family and community members, as well as students themselves, are needed to ensure a comprehensive approach to promoting SEL and integrating it into academic instruction. This need for more resources is not surprising. The explicit teaching of SEL is a fairly recent phenomenon; relatively few principals and teachers received preservice training in SEL, leaving them reliant on inservice training. Furthermore, the plethora of programs and measures available to teachers and schools, many of which are of varying quality, can be overwhelming.⁸

Currently, there is a wave of educator support for emphasizing SEL in schools. By properly supporting educators in the areas of training, selection of high-quality programs and assessments, and integration of instruction into academic curricula, education leaders and policymakers can help maximize the chances that school-based SEL programs, practices, and strategies achieve the goal of helping all students develop the broad set of skills they will need to succeed as students, workers, community members, and citizens.

Notes

¹ For the ATP, 15,258 teachers completed the entire survey (a completion rate of 53 percent). For the ASLP, 3,299 principals completed the entire survey (a completion rate of 25 percent).

² We thank CASEL, Civic Enterprises, and Hart Research Associates for their permission to use the questions in the AEP. These questions were also used by the Rodel Foundation of Delaware in their survey of educators in the state (Rodel Foundation of Delaware, 2017).

³ In some cases, questions were modified slightly to reflect the different roles of the educators. For example, teachers were asked about SEL instruction in their classrooms, while principals were asked about SEL instruction in their schools.

⁴ The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) recently released the CCD for the 2016–2017 school year. These most recent data were not available when calculating the survey weights. Thus, the weights ensure a nationally representative sample of educators based, in part, on characteristics from the 2015–2016 CCD. We use the variables from the 2015–2016 CCD in our models to be consistent with the data used to calculate the weights.

⁵ Unlike the other survey questions we examine in this report, this question was asked of principals but not of teachers.

⁶ Examples of these kinds of resources can be found on CASEL’s website, including their program reviews (CASEL, 2013, 2015) and district resource center (CASEL, undated-a).

⁷ Several sources of guidance about social and emotional competency assessments are available to educators, including the RAND Education Assessment Finder (Hamilton et al., 2018), the Measuring SEL Assessment Guide (CASEL, undated-c), and American Institutes for Research’s Ready to Assess toolkit (American Institutes for Research, 2015).

⁸ CASEL offers resources to help educators implement a school-wide approach to SEL (CASEL, 2014).

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American Educator Panels



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