Recent shifts in education policy have emphasized expanding definitions of student success beyond high scores on standardized tests (Aspen Institute, 2019). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which guides state and local policymakers’ decisions on spending federal funds, is one such shift. ESSA supports a broad definition of student success that includes competencies and practices often described with the phrase “social and emotional learning” (SEL; Grant et al., 2017). ESSA also allows measures of student success in social and emotional domains to be included in state accountability and school improvement systems. At the state level, 14 states have SEL standards in addition to their academic standards, and 21 states disseminate SEL-related guidance for districts and schools through their websites (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], undated). The recently released final report from the Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development summarizes the extensive research that supports this focus on SEL (Aspen Institute, 2019).

SEL involves a wide range of programs, practices, and student competencies. The Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development report summarizes three broad approaches to promoting SEL: (1) explicit instruction on one or more social or emotional competencies, (2) integration of SEL into academic instruction and other activities, and (3) promotion of

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**KEY FINDINGS**

- Massachusetts teachers reported that social and emotional skills were as important as academic skills, although the teachers believed that their colleagues and supervisors did not share this view.

- Massachusetts teachers reported engaging in some approaches to SEL instruction—integrating SEL into curricula and school activities, implementing SEL programs, and doing mindfulness activities—more frequently than teachers nationally did. The reasons for these differences are unclear.

- Most Massachusetts teachers reported a desire for more support to integrate SEL into instruction.
school climates and cultures that support students’ social and emotional development (Aspen Institute, 2019). Although much of the guidance and direction regarding SEL instruction generally comes from school or district leaders, state education agencies can provide policies, tools, and guidelines that support local SEL initiatives (Dusenbury and Yoder, 2017).

Of course, SEL initiatives are implemented at the school and classroom levels, and teachers are largely responsible for putting SEL programs into practice. Researchers and policymakers must solicit teacher perspectives on SEL implementation through such mechanisms as surveys and include teacher perspectives in decisions related to SEL policy and implementation.

To understand teachers’ perspectives on SEL implementation, surveys need to use a standardized definition of SEL. SEL can be defined in a variety of ways, and the definition used in our survey and report might vary from the definitions used in other research and policy contexts. However, most definitions of SEL emphasize promoting a broad range of student skills and competencies beyond academic achievement, such as collaboration, self-control, and social awareness (e.g., Berg et al., 2017; Blyth, Jones, and Borowski, 2018; Aspen Institute, 2019). In this report, the survey questions that addressed SEL were preceded by the following language:

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

- **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
- **emotional competencies**, which enable one to cope with frustration, recognize and manage emotions, and understand others’ emotions and perspectives
- **social and interpersonal skills**, which 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.²

### Massachusetts SEL Policy Context

Massachusetts is one of a growing number of U.S. states that have articulated SEL competencies, standards, or policies that encourage adoption and implementation of SEL programs and practices in districts and schools (CASEL, 2018). Massachusetts has taken the approach that developing social and emotional competencies, along with promoting student health and safety, supports school improvement more broadly. Massachusetts’ ESSA plan emphasizes promoting SEL, health, and safety from preschool to high school as one of five key statewide strategies to help prepare all students for success (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). As part of this focus, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) emphasizes the importance of integrating academic skills with social and emotional skills in curricula and has incorporated SEL principles into curriculum frameworks to help teachers develop students’ SEL knowledge along with their content knowledge. For example, DESE revised learning standards in math, English-language arts and literacy, history, and social sciences and incorporated information about how SEL can increase academic achievement, improve attitudes and behaviors, and reduce emotional distress into their guiding principles (DESE, 2017).
In Massachusetts, districts and schools have broad discretion to make decisions about which programs, curricula, and initiatives to adopt. The role of DESE is to disseminate information and provide resources and guidance to help districts and schools make such decisions. DESE provides a variety of resources—such as guidance on implementing curricula and on the principles of curriculum frameworks—to help schools adopt SEL programs and practices in a culturally responsive way that is integrated with academic instruction. As of 2018, Massachusetts was one of 21 states that provided tools and resources to support implementation of SEL and one of 14 states that provided state-specific guidance, tools, and links to external resources to support SEL implementation (CASEL, 2018).

By design, the resources and guidance provided by DESE are broad and recognize that each district will select the SEL programs and practices that are most suitable to the local context. DESE guidance does not mandate that schools or districts focus on SEL or use any specific SEL practices, programs, or curricula, and DESE does not evaluate or rank SEL materials. The DESE approach is intended to support educators who believe SEL is important and who might look to the state to provide guidance on promising practices and resources based on current national best practices. DESE also strives to provide information and resources to educators who are unaware of SEL, its potential benefits, and the practices and programs available to support its development.

Educators in Massachusetts can also benefit from organizations in the state that support SEL, including Transforming Education and the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy. These organizations partner with educational organizations representing such stakeholders as superintendents, school committees, school principals, and educational collaboratives to facilitate the exSEL Network. This network supports SEL at the school, district, and classroom levels (Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, undated).

DESE commissioned the inclusion of SEL-specific questions on the nationally representative RAND American Teacher Panel (ATP) to learn about educators’ views on SEL, where educators believe support is needed, and who might be best positioned to provide that support. The answers to these questions can help the state understand strengths and challenges in SEL integration and help guide future state efforts.3

### Purpose of This Report

This report presents findings from a survey administered in spring 2018 to ATP participants. The panel included a state-representative sample of Massachusetts teachers, providing an opportunity to compare the perspectives of those teachers about SEL with those of teachers across the nation. We present these findings in the first section of results. In addition, DESE fielded customized questions about SEL on the ATP to gauge Massachusetts teachers’ perceptions of and experiences with SEL programs, practices, and related supports. We present these findings in the second section of results. Even though the questions fielded to the nationally representative sample were different from those commissioned by Massachusetts, the two sets of questions covered similar topics. We conclude with a summary of key findings and a discussion of the policy context in which they are situated, which we hope will provide insights for policymakers and point researchers toward directions for future studies.

The purpose of this report is to provide Massachusetts policymakers with a summary of key findings from the SEL questions administered to the full national sample, as well as from the customized questions administered to only Massachusetts teachers. This report presents teacher survey results on three topics: (1) teachers’ opinions about SEL, (2) their approaches to promoting students’ social and emotional development, and (3) their perceptions of supports that would help them do this more effectively. For each of these three topics, we asked the following questions:

1. What are Massachusetts teachers’ opinions of the importance of SEL, approaches to SEL instruction, and supports for SEL?
2. How do Massachusetts teachers’ opinions compare with those in the rest of the nation (where applicable)?
of interest to leaders in other states that are prioritizing SEL instruction and supports.

This report is a companion to a recent report—Teacher and Principal Perspectives on Social and Emotional Learning in America’s Schools: Findings from the American Educator Panels (Hamilton, Doss, and Steiner, 2019)—which summarizes results from the same administration of the ATP and results from a parallel survey administered to a nationally representative sample of principals via RAND’s American School Leader Panel.

Data Sources and Methods

Data Sources

As noted earlier, our main analyses focus on teachers’ responses to questions on the spring 2018 ATP and a supplemental questionnaire that was fielded to teachers within Massachusetts. Teachers were recruited via probabilistic sampling methods.

The ATP sample contained a nationally representative sample of 28,954 teachers. Of that sample, 15,719 teachers completed at least 10 percent of the survey and were included in the analytical sample, resulting in a 54-percent response rate. Sampling weights adjusted for nonresponse to retain the nationally representative nature of the sample. This sampling frame allowed us to analyze a nationally representative sample of teachers, as well as representative samples of teachers in prevalent subgroups, such as elementary school teachers and teachers in urban schools.

The Massachusetts sample contained 463 teachers. These teachers were oversampled and are representative of teachers in the state. The oversampling frame allows us to analyze a nationally representative sample of teachers, as well as representative samples of teachers in prevalent subgroups, such as elementary school teachers and teachers in urban schools.

Our comparisons between teachers in Massachusetts and teachers nationwide are intended to illuminate differences between Massachusetts educators and other educators in implementation and perceptions of SEL and help Massachusetts policymakers identify areas where more support might be needed. We focus on findings that seem most salient in the context of Massachusetts’ efforts to share information about and encourage adoption of SEL programs and practices. As we state in the methods section, the results we present in this report are descriptive and do not support causal interpretations. A full set of responses to the national and the Massachusetts-specific survey questions is available in the separate technical appendixes. These appendixes also include a detailed description of our analytic approach. Together, these data can help inform Massachusetts policymakers and educators as they implement their ESSA plans and continue to think about how to support SEL. The findings might also be
In these models, the constant is an estimate of the average response for the reference group (nonurban or secondary schools), and the coefficient on the independent variable is the estimate of the difference in response for the subgroup of interest. All models include survey weights.

For research question 2, we compared responses of teachers in Massachusetts with those of teachers in the rest of the nation. We used a similar estimation strategy as for research questions 1 and 3, except in these models, the independent variable is an indicator for being a teacher in Massachusetts. The constant is the average response of teachers in the rest of the nation, and the coefficient on the indicator for teaching in Massachusetts is the estimate of the difference in response for Massachusetts teachers. We also performed this comparison separately for teachers in urban, nonurban, elementary, and secondary schools as part of answering research question 3. Survey weights were used in all models.

We also performed supplementary analyses to ensure that differences were not driven by observable characteristics of teachers and schools that are included in our data. When analyzing the set of questions posed to only Massachusetts teachers, we controlled for the following teacher and school characteristics: level of school taught (elementary or secondary school); urbanicity of school (urban or nonurban); total enrollment of school; percentage of enrollment by ethnicity (Asian, Hispanic, black, white, other race); Title I school status; percentage of enrollment in special programs (English-language learner or special education); charter school status; teacher’s years in position; gender of teacher; teacher race/ethnicity (Hispanic, white, black, American Indian, Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, other race); and having a master’s degree or above. For ease of interpretation, we present simple weighted but unadjusted averages in the report and in the appendix, but we denote differences in averages as statistically significant only if the significance remains robust to models that include the controls.

When comparing Massachusetts teachers with the rest of the nation, we used a propensity score weighting analysis in which we compared teachers in Massachusetts with similar teachers in the remainder of the nation with respect to the aforementioned characteristics.
teacher and school characteristics. This analysis entailed weighting the distribution of characteristics in the remaining states in the nation to match the distribution of characteristics of teachers in Massachusetts and controlling for the matched characteristics in multivariate regression models that also incorporated the weights (see the appendix for more details and covariate balance). Once again, for ease of interpretation, we present weighted averages using survey weights in the body of the report and the appendix. These averages are not adjusted for differences between the teachers in Massachusetts and those in the rest of the nation. Additionally, in the appendix, we present weighted averages from the propensity score approach. We indicate differences in averages as statistically significant only if the significance remains when adjusting for the potential observable differences between the two groups of teachers.

Limitations and Interpretation of Results

The goal of this analysis is to provide descriptive evidence on how Massachusetts teachers view SEL and how their views compare with those of their colleagues across the nation. The policy context in Massachusetts may influence teachers’ perceptions, and at the end of the report, we posit possible ways that the policy context could inform teacher views and suggest directions for future research. The supplementary analyses that use the propensity scores aim to ensure that our results are not confounded by some basic teacher and school characteristics. We conceptualize Massachusetts teachers as being “treated” by the state policy context, and the propensity score approach will reweight educators in the remaining states to look similar to educators in Massachusetts on the observable characteristics in our data. The propensity score approach is a rigorous way of accounting for observable differences in schools and teachers that would otherwise bias simple comparisons of responses between Massachusetts and the rest of the nation.

However, the available covariates are limited and fail to account for many ways in which Massachusetts students, schools, and families might differ from the rest of the nation. For example, because of limitations in the CCD data, we cannot control for any measure of socioeconomic status, such as FRPL. In addition, because of a lack of readily available data nationwide, we are unable to control for average school achievement levels or for measures of the home environment or parental characteristics. These characteristics are likely correlated with the policy context of Massachusetts and with teacher perspectives of different aspects of their job, including the role of SEL. As a result, we caution against making causal interpretations. Rather, we see our results as suggestive relationships that persist after controlling for some basic confounds, and we hope they spur further research on how state policy context can inform educator views on SEL.

It is also important to recognize that the survey data rely on the self-reports of teachers who voluntarily participated. We have no independent means of verifying the accuracy of their responses, and the survey data might not always provide an accurate depiction of practices. Nonetheless, survey responses provide a unique opportunity to share the voices of educators across the country and in Massachusetts and therefore can be helpful for informing decisions about SEL-related policies and supports.

Results

In this section, we present findings related to our research questions for Massachusetts teachers compared with the national sample, followed by the results from the Massachusetts-specific SEL questions. Within each section, we address three topics in each section: the importance of SEL, approaches to SEL instruction, and supports for SEL.

Comparisons Between Teachers in Massachusetts and the Rest of the Nation

Importance of SEL

Recent nationally representative surveys have indicated that the vast majority of teachers and school principals believe that it is important to teach SEL in schools and that SEL has the potential to affect other
domains of student development and achievement (Bridgeland, Bruce, and Hariharan, 2013; DePaoli, Atwell, and Bridgeland, 2017; Hamilton, Doss, and Steiner, 2019). In our first set of analyses, we investigate Massachusetts teachers’ attitudes toward the importance of SEL and the effects of SEL on other domains.

**Large Majorities of Teachers in Massachusetts and the Nation Recognize the Importance of SEL**

We first asked teachers “How important do you feel it is for the students you teach to acquire and apply . . . ” seven specific social and emotional skills, including several competencies often addressed by school-based SEL programs. Figure 1 shows that more than 95 percent of teachers—both in Massachusetts and the rest of the nation—rated all seven skills as either fairly or very important. In addition, with the exception of developing a sense of identity, over 80 percent of teachers rated all skills as very important. The consistency of responses across skills is noteworthy, given the breadth of skills presented and the number of skills teachers are expected to teach. We did not find any statistically significant differences between Massachusetts teachers and their peers in the rest of the nation, nor did we find any robustly significant differences between the two samples in secondary, elementary, nonurban, or urban school subgroups.

**Large Majorities of Teachers in Massachusetts and the Nation Believe That SEL Can Affect Other Domains of Student Development and Achievement**

Social and emotional skills have the potential to affect a broad range of domains and outcomes, including students’ academic performance and behavior. For example, managing emotions, making

**FIGURE 1**

Percentage of Teachers Indicating Various SEL Domains Are Fairly or Very Important
responsible decisions, and learning mindsets can affect how students approach their academic work and how they react in challenging and stressful situations. These skills in turn can affect student achievement, disciplinary infractions, and school climate (Durlak et al., 2011; Grant et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2017; Aspen Institute, 2019).

Our survey elicited teachers’ views on whether SEL could affect other domains of student development and achievement by asking them to “[i]ndicate your agreement that programs or interventions to support students’ social and emotional learning have the potential to improve . . . ” student achievement, engagement, behavior, and school climate. As shown in Figure 2, over 90 percent of teachers in Massachusetts and the rest of the nation somewhat or strongly agreed that SEL could improve each of these four outcomes. Once again, for each of the measures, the majority of teachers chose the highest endorsement and indicated they strongly agreed that SEL could affect each outcome. We did not see differences between Massachusetts teachers and their peers nationally. There were also no broad differences between Massachusetts teachers and their national peers in elementary, secondary, urban, and nonurban schools. The only robust difference was that, in secondary schools, Massachusetts teachers were more likely to strongly agree (as opposed to somewhat agree) that SEL affects student achievement.

**Approaches to SEL Instruction**

Compared with Teachers Nationally, Massachusetts Teachers Reported Greater Reliance on Specific SEL Programs and Integration with Curricula and Lower Rates of Use of Schoolwide Behavioral Management Systems

As we discussed earlier, schools can adopt various approaches to promote their students’ social and emotional development, ranging from specific, classroom-based SEL instruction to schoolwide initiatives and family engagement activities. Table 1 displays the percentages of teachers in Massachusetts and in the

---

**FIGURE 2**

Percentage of Teachers Somewhat or Strongly Agreeing That SEL Affects Other Domains of Student Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of teachers</th>
<th>Massachusetts</th>
<th>Rest of nation</th>
<th>Massachusetts</th>
<th>Rest of nation</th>
<th>Massachusetts</th>
<th>Rest of nation</th>
<th>Massachusetts</th>
<th>Rest of nation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student achievement</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student engagement</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student behavior</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES: Linear probability models were used to estimate differences between response of teachers in Massachusetts and the rest of the nation. All models include survey weights. \( n = 15,450 \). No statistically significant differences were found.

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: “Strongly disagree,” “Somewhat disagree,” “Somewhat agree,” “Strongly agree.”
rest of the nation who reported that their schools had enacted each of several SEL-related strategies. The responses among both groups of teachers indicate that schools typically address SEL through multiple approaches. Efforts to model appropriate behaviors, draw on counselors and mental health professionals, and build community and relationships with students and parents were particularly widespread among teachers in both groups. Strategies that were more frequently selected by Massachusetts teachers included the integration of SEL into curricula and school activities, the implementation of SEL programs, and the use of mindfulness practices. The only strategy that teachers in other states reported using at a higher rate than Massachusetts teachers was the use of schoolwide behavior management systems. We did not observe clear patterns of differences across subgroups of schools (elementary, secondary, urban, or nonurban).

Supports for SEL

Our final set of findings address teachers’ perceptions of several topics pertaining to SEL-related training and supports. These supports include professional development (PD), factors that could be helpful for supporting SEL in schools, and areas where more resources and supports are needed.

Massachusetts Teachers in Secondary and Nonurban Schools Are More Likely to Report Receipt of In-Service Training on SEL Than Their National Counterparts

The ATP survey asked teachers to report 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 teachers (i.e., in-service PD). As shown in Table 2, Massachusetts teachers and their national peers reported similar amounts of preservice SEL training. However, Massachusetts teachers in secondary schools, and in schools in nonurban settings, were significantly more likely to report receiving in-service training related to SEL than their peers nationally were. Directionally similar differences were seen in elementary schools and urban schools, but these differences were not statistically significant. Further, among Massachusetts teachers, those in secondary schools and in nonurban schools reported receiving in-service PD in similar proportions to their peers in elementary schools and in urban settings. The large proportions of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice, Program, or Strategy</th>
<th>Massachusetts (%)</th>
<th>Rest of Nation (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integrate social and emotional learning into curriculum and school activities</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>52**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build community and relationships with students and parents</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement social and emotional learning programs</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employ schoolwide behavior management programs</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>46**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model appropriate behaviors</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draw on school counselors or mental health professionals</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use point systems or rewards</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use restorative practices (e.g., restorative circles for conflict resolution, restorative justice)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use targeted behavioral interventions (e.g., Good Behavior Game)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use mindfulness practices (e.g., yoga, meditation)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>28**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES: Asterisks indicate the statistical significance of results from a linear probability model used to estimate the differences in the responses between teachers in Massachusetts and those of teachers in the rest of the nation on practices, programs, and strategies used to improve student SEL. All models are weighted with survey weights. n = 14,880.

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01. Statistical significances are robust to propensity score weighting and covariate adjustment.

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 instructed to select all that applied.
Elementary teachers who reported receiving SEL-related training is unsurprising; research suggests that more stand-alone programs are available for elementary than for secondary grades (Grant et al., 2017). These programs are likely accompanied by in-service training.

Many Massachusetts Teachers Reported That Strategies for Incorporating SEL into Curricula Would Improve Ability to Address SEL

The national survey asked teachers to “select up to three activities, strategies, and resources that would best improve your school’s ability to develop the social and emotional skills of your students.” The list of items ranged from “none, I have all the supports I need” to “time,” “adequate financial resources,” “more engagement from parents and families,” and “support from district or school administration.” (The full list of items, and the percentages of teachers who selected each, appear in the appendix.) Massachusetts teachers endorsed most of the items in similar proportions to teachers nationally. None of the items in the list was endorsed by a majority of teachers, which suggests diversity in the supports that educators believe they might need to address SEL. Massachusetts teachers were statistically significantly more likely than their national peers to select “strategies for incorporating social and emotional skill development into classroom curriculum” (38 percent of Massachusetts teachers; 30 percent of teachers nationally) and “strategies for delivering multitiered supports for different types of students’ social and emotional needs (33 percent of Massachusetts teachers; 24 percent of teachers nationally).

Massachusetts-Specific Questions

Importance of SEL

Massachusetts Teachers Put SEL Success on Par with Academic Success but Think Many of Their Colleagues Disagree

The Massachusetts-specific survey questions asked Massachusetts teachers to contrast their views of SEL with their perceptions of their colleagues’ views. Specifically, the question asked teachers to indicate their agreement with the following statements:

- I think students’ academic success is more important than students’ social and emotional well-being.
- Most teachers in my school think students’ academic success is more important than students’ social and emotional well-being.
- My school administration thinks students’ academic success is more important than students’ social and emotional well-being.
- My district thinks students’ academic success is more important than students’ social and emotional well-being.

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**TABLE 2**

Percentage of Teachers Reporting Receiving SEL Training Across School Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Schools (%)</th>
<th>Secondary Schools (%)</th>
<th>Elementary Schools (%)</th>
<th>Nonurban Schools (%)</th>
<th>Urban Schools (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Rest of Nation</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Rest of Nation</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, I have not received training</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, in in-service professional learning</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>50**</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, in preservice learning</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4*</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES: Asterisks indicate the statistical significance of results from a linear probability model used to estimate the differences in the responses between Massachusetts educators and educators in the rest of the nation in their SEL training experiences. \( n = 14,454 \) for the full sample, 7,810 for the secondary school sample, 7,644 for the elementary school sample, 11,579 for the nonurban school sample, and 3,875 for the urban school sample. All estimates are weighted with survey weights. * \( p < 0.05 \); ** \( p < 0.01 \). Statistical significances are robust to propensity score weighting and covariate adjustment.

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.
As Figure 3 shows, only 16 percent of Massachusetts teachers believed that students’ academic success was more important than their social and emotional well-being. These results are consistent with the previous finding that Massachusetts teachers believed that SEL skills were important and could affect other domains, including academic achievement.

However, many Massachusetts teachers did not think that their colleagues held the same view. Forty-four percent of teachers reported that other teachers and administrators in their buildings believed that academic success was more important than social and emotional well-being. A majority of teachers—59 percent—believed that their district leadership prioritized academic success over social and emotional well-being. There is a disconnect between what many teachers themselves believe and what they perceive their colleagues to believe. This pattern of results is seen in secondary, elementary, nonurban, and urban schools.

**Figure 3**
Percentage of Teachers in Massachusetts Somewhat or Strongly Agreeing with Statements Regarding How They and Their Colleagues Perceive the Importance of SEL Relative to Academic Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I think students’ academic success is more important than students’ social and emotional well-being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Most teachers in my school think students’ academic success is more important than students’ social and emotional well-being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>My school administration thinks students’ academic success is more important than students’ social and emotional well-being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>My district thinks students’ academic success is more important than students’ social and emotional well-being.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** All models include survey weights. n = 446.

Survey question text: “Please indicate your agreement with the following statements related to social-emotional learning.” Response choices: “Strongly disagree,” “Somewhat disagree,” “Somewhat agree,” “Strongly agree.”

**Approaches to SEL Instruction**

**About Three-Quarters of Massachusetts Teachers Reported That Their Schools Emphasized SEL**

In response to a question about the extent to which their schools emphasized several instructional goals, 73 percent of Massachusetts teachers reported that their schools emphasized “developing students’ social and emotional skills” to a moderate or large extent. This percentage is lower than for the other three goals—developing students’ ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world situations (84 percent), developing critical thinking and reasoning abilities of students (90 percent), and developing students’ knowledge and skills in key content and subject areas (93 percent)—but the findings indicate that most schools are addressing multiple goals, including SEL.

Teachers in Massachusetts Indicated a Range of Approaches to Improving Student Behavior

On the Massachusetts-specific portion of the survey, teachers responded to a question about their schools’
Large Majorities of Massachusetts Teachers Reported Experiencing SEL-Related PD

The Massachusetts-specific questions asked teachers to estimate the proportion of their PD activities during the 2017–2018 school year that were spent on the topic of SEL. Statewide, 13 percent of teachers reported that less than 1 percent of their PD was spent on SEL. A large majority of teachers—68 percent—estimated that between 1 percent and 25 percent of their PD activities involved SEL topics. These results indicate that a majority of teachers receive at least some SEL-related PD and that districts appear to be making an effort to include SEL in their PD offerings.

Teachers are expected to participate in a wide range of PD activities on a variety of topics throughout the school year, so it is unsurprising that a majority of Massachusetts teachers reported spending less than 25 percent of their PD time on SEL (see the appendix for the full set of responses). We did not find any notable patterns by grade-level configuration or urbanicity.

Most Massachusetts Teachers Believed They and Their Schools Need More Support Integrating SEL into Instruction

Massachusetts teachers were asked to respond to a series of questions about the supports and resources they and their schools could benefit from in helping use of several “approaches to improving student behavior.” An important limitation of these findings is that the wording of this question makes it difficult to determine whether teachers’ responses reflect their schools’ overall use of these approaches or only those approaches that were specifically intended to improve student behavior. The options included some SEL-related practices, and the results indicate that some teachers view those practices as one way to address behavior. The only approaches that were selected by a majority of teachers were mindfulness practices (52 percent) and schoolwide behavioral management programs (51 percent; Table 3). Roughly a third of teachers indicated that their schools were using SEL curricula, school security practices, and restorative practices to improve student behavior.

We observed some significant differences between elementary and secondary schools. Higher percentages of teachers in elementary schools reported using mindfulness practices and SEL curricula than did teachers in secondary schools; school security practices and restorative practices were reported to be more prevalent in secondary than elementary schools. Though reporting rates did diverge between nonurban and urban teachers, the differences were not statistically significant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>All Teachers (%)</th>
<th>Secondary School Teachers (%)</th>
<th>Elementary School Teachers (%)</th>
<th>Nonurban School Teachers (%)</th>
<th>Urban School Teachers (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mindfulness practices</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>58*</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schoolwide behavioral-management programs</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeted behavioral interventions</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schoolwide social and emotional learning curricula</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>52**</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School security practices</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>15**</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restorative practices</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>21*</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES: Asterisks indicate the statistical significance of results from a linear probability model used to estimate the differences in the responses between Massachusetts educators in secondary versus elementary school and nonurban versus urban schools. All models weighted with survey weights. n = 449. * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01. Statistical significances are robust to covariate adjustment.

Survey question text: “To the best of your knowledge, which of the following approaches to improving student behavior are being used in your school during this school year (2018–2019).” Respondents were instructed to select all that applied.
that they received supports and resources that were directly related to instruction, such as standards related to SEL, curricula dedicated to SEL, model lesson plans that include SEL, and rubrics designed to assess proficiency in teaching social and emotional competencies. We did not find any notable differences by grade-level configuration or urbanicity.

**Summary and Directions for Future Research**

In this report, we analyze the perceptions and attitudes of Massachusetts teachers regarding SEL and its implementation in schools. When possible, we compare the views of Massachusetts teachers with those of their peers in the remainder of the nation to provide context for the Massachusetts-specific results. In this section, we summarize key findings from these comparisons and discuss areas for future research in the context of Massachusetts state policy.

DESE is promoting SEL as part of a comprehensive approach to supporting schools and students, and it emphasizes SEL in its ESSA plan and in other state-level guidance and materials. DESE seeks to promote SEL in schools by providing schools and districts with curricular materials, PD, and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Massachusetts Teachers Reporting Receiving Sufficient Supports for SEL from their Schools or Districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guidance information on how to support students who display challenges related to social emotional learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A school improvement plan goal related to developing students’ social and emotional competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards related to social and emotional learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricula dedicated to students’ social and emotional learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model lesson plans that include SEL goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model lesson plans that include SEL content integrated into the instructional goals of the lesson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An evaluation rubric designed to assess proficiency in teaching social and emotional competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to discuss the social and emotional well-being of the staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to discuss the social and emotional well-being of the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient professional support staff to help students who display challenges related to social and emotional learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to community resources to support students with intensive challenges related to social and emotional learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTES:** The number of respondents is n = 447. All models weighted with survey weights.

Survey question text: “Do you receive the following resources from your school/district to support students’ social and emotional learning (SEL)?” Response choices: “Do not receive support,” “Limited support received,” “Sufficient support received.”
frameworks for thinking about SEL implementation. Massachusetts is a state in which districts and schools have broad control over policy decisions and program implementation, and schools and districts are not mandated to incorporate SEL into programming or adopt specific SEL initiatives. Rather, DESE seeks to provide support for schools that are seeking to integrate SEL into instruction. DESE also sees the promulgation of SEL materials and supports as a way to share the benefits of SEL with schools and districts that might not be aware of them and thus prompt them to think about how to implement SEL in ways that are appropriate for their contexts.

We found several differences in responses between Massachusetts teachers and their national peers. Although we cannot conclude that Massachusetts state policy is the primary driver of the differences between the two groups, these findings have implications for Massachusetts as DESE continues to adapt and refine how SEL is emphasized in the state. Further, they point to directions for future research that directly probe the link between DESE’s approach and teacher perceptions and attitudes, as we discuss below. Future research can shed more light on how policymakers and organizations can help expand SEL integration at a local level.

Comparisons Between Teachers in Massachusetts and Those in the Rest of the Nation

Massachusetts Teachers Reported Engaging in Some Approaches to SEL Instruction More Frequently Than Teachers Nationally

Massachusetts teachers reported engaging in some SEL instructional practices at higher rates than their peers nationally. More Massachusetts teachers reported integrating SEL into curricula and school activities and implementing SEL programs. Further, almost three-quarters of Massachusetts teachers reported that their schools emphasized SEL instructional goals. Although this percentage is less than the percentage of teachers reporting that their schools emphasize more-traditional instructional goals, such as critical thinking and reasoning abilities, knowledge and skills in key content areas, and applying knowledge to real-world situations, it suggests that a large majority of Massachusetts schools are investing in SEL instruction.

These results are consistent with DESE’s approach of encouraging local districts to invest in SEL integration. They suggest that some districts may be responding to DESE’s efforts. Future research can explore how districts leverage the curricular guidance disseminated by DESE and how they integrate that guidance into their existing curricula and school or district initiatives. Given that DESE does not mandate adoption of specific SEL programs or curricula, exploring differences in the use of curricular guidance among schools and districts that have a strong SEL focus and those that choose to focus on other initiatives could be informative. Further, studying the effects of adopting these curricular recommendations on measures of student SEL and behavior could provide preliminary information about the effectiveness of such efforts.

Massachusetts Teachers Reported Emphasizing Behavior Management Approaches Less Than Teachers Nationally

As we noted earlier in this report, schools can adopt various approaches to promote students’ social and emotional development, which can range from classroom-based instruction to family engagement activities. Our findings suggest that schools in Massachusetts and across the nation address SEL through multiple approaches. Efforts to manage student behavior, along with such other approaches as building community and relationships with students and parents, were reportedly widespread among teachers in Massachusetts and nationally. Massachusetts teachers were more likely to report integrating SEL into curricula and school activities and less likely to report using schoolwide behavior management systems than teachers in other states were. This difference between Massachusetts teachers and teachers in other states could reflect the emphasis DESE guidance places on integrating SEL with academics, as we have previously discussed.

Our conversations with state policymakers suggest that DESE’s guidance is intended to encourage SEL as a strategy for promoting growth and
development in students rather than a means of managing student behavior. Further research can probe how teachers and principals view the role and effects of SEL in their schools. For example, research suggests that interventions that improve student SEL can decrease instances of disciplinary infractions, even though SEL is not a disciplinary tool (Durlak et al., 2011). Moreover, the adoption of such approaches as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports can support students’ social and emotional development, particularly when they are combined with other strategies to promote SEL (Barrett et al., 2018). By implementing SEL strategies, Massachusetts teachers might be improving student behavior and therefore reducing reliance on behavior management approaches. Research in this area would aid DESE in understanding how SEL is put into practice and the impact of these efforts.

**Massachusetts Teachers in Some Schools Were More Likely to Report Receipt of In-Service Training on SEL Than Their Counterparts in the Nation**

Although Massachusetts teachers reported similar amounts of preservice SEL training in all types of schools analyzed, Massachusetts teachers in secondary and nonurban schools were more likely to report in-service SEL training than their national counterparts were. This finding is notable because, nationally, elementary school teachers were more likely to report in-service SEL training compared with secondary school teachers (Hamilton, Doss, and Steiner, 2019), and there is some evidence that urban schools are implementing SEL initiatives more systematically than nonurban schools are (DePaoli, Atwell, and Bridgeland, 2017; Doss, Johnston, and Akinniranye, 2019). Massachusetts teachers therefore report receiving more in-school SEL training in areas where, nationwide, teachers typically receive less SEL training or are less likely to systematically implement SEL initiatives.

Future research can explore whether DESE’s approach to offering PD that supports SEL implementation is contributing to these patterns in responses by understanding how districts and schools select and implement DESE’s PD offerings. Nonurban schools might seek PD support from state sources and benefit from the PD resources that DESE provides, or DESE’s approach to interweaving SEL into curriculum PD and training in other topics might be especially appealing for secondary schools. Indeed, stand-alone SEL programs, which often come with stand-alone training, are less commonly available for secondary schools, making the integrative approach potentially more appealing. These findings can help Massachusetts and other states target their PD offerings more efficiently and understand the types of PD structure that schools prefer.

**Results from Massachusetts-Specific Survey Questions**

**Massachusetts Teachers Believed Social and Emotional Skills Were as Important as Academic Skills**

Large majorities of Massachusetts teachers believed, like their peers nationally, that developing students’ social and emotional skills should be a priority and that social and emotional skills have the potential to improve a range of other outcomes, such as student achievement, engagement, behavior, and school climate. These views seem to suggest that teachers do not believe that SEL programs conflict with other important goals, such as promoting students’ academic learning.

Although large majorities of Massachusetts teachers reported that students’ social and emotional well-being was as important as students’ academic success, most teachers believed that their school and district colleagues did not share this view. This pattern of results is seen in secondary, elementary, nonurban, and urban schools in Massachusetts. More research needs to be done to understand these discordant views. One possible explanation could be that teachers do not communicate with colleagues on topics related to SEL, and their interactions with other teachers and leaders focus more on academic achievement. An individual teacher might value SEL, but that teacher might not perceive others as valuing it to the same degree. SEL as a stand-alone concept is still relatively new in education, and a common understanding of its role might not yet be established.
in many schools and districts. This discrepancy between teachers’ reports of their own beliefs and their perceptions of their colleagues’ beliefs could suggest an opportunity for Massachusetts to consider additional messaging and supports for its vision of SEL implementation. DESE could also consider encouraging district and school leaders to communicate the importance of SEL, as well as their visions for SEL implementation in their district or school, to encourage consistent understanding.

**Massachusetts Teachers Expressed Interest in More Specific SEL Supports**

Although a majority of Massachusetts teachers reported receiving SEL-related PD, large majorities of teachers—more than 90 percent—expressed a desire for additional resources and supports, a pattern that held regardless of school type. Teachers expressed a desire for support integrating SEL into their lessons and their daily practice and supporting students with different SEL needs in particular, and few teachers—fewer than 30 percent—reported receiving sufficient support and resources in areas directly related to instruction, such as standards related to SEL, curricula dedicated to SEL, model lesson plans that include SEL, and rubrics designed to assess proficiency in teaching social and emotional competencies.

More research can explore the reasons for this perceived need for support. One possible explanation could be that teachers’ interest in supports is linked to higher reported levels of implementation of SEL or, alternately, their greater awareness of the potential value of SEL. For example, with about three-quarters of teachers reporting that their schools emphasize SEL to a moderate or large extent, teachers’ desire for support may reflect their developing understanding of the complexity of providing SEL instruction.

Future research could study this interplay between teacher knowledge of SEL, efforts to integrate SEL instruction, and perceived need for support—across different types of schools and states—and inform policymakers’ efforts to support teachers in different stages of SEL implementation.

These responses also could reflect teachers’ desire for more specific guidance when it comes to integrating SEL into academic curricula. By design, DESE’s guidance related to integrating SEL into curricula and school activities has been general, allowing communities to choose the approaches that work best in each context. The state has not encouraged use of specific SEL materials, curricula, or programs or provided SEL-specific PD.

**Conclusion**

This report summarized the perceptions and experiences of Massachusetts teachers regarding SEL and its implementation in schools. Because teachers are largely responsible for implementing SEL programs and policies, the data on teacher perspectives that we presented can help education leaders, including those in state and local education agencies, make informed decisions about how to support teachers and promote high-quality SEL instruction. Massachusetts provides a useful case study of a state that has emphasized SEL in some of its statewide policies while deferring to local control. Although we cannot determine whether or how teachers’ perceptions and practices were influenced by the state policy context, our findings provide guidance for Massachusetts leaders as SEL becomes more widespread and reveals unanswered questions that could benefit from broader data collection and further research.
Notes

1 The recent RAND report that focused on national survey data (Hamilton, Doss, and Steiner, 2019) drew on the same survey questions as those used for the national comparisons in this report and used the same definition of SEL.

2 For more information about this definition of SEL and the American Educator Panels, see the companion report, Teacher and Principal Perspectives on Social and Emotional Learning in America’s Schools: Findings from the American Educator Panels (Hamilton, Doss, and Steiner, 2019).

3 We obtained this information through a review of documents on the DESE website (DESE, 2019) and through a conversation with Rachelle Engler Bennett, Associate Commissioner, Student and Family Support, DESE, on April 22, 2019.

4 Two other common school subgroups that could warrant analysis are high-poverty schools and those that serve a large proportion of minority students. We cannot analyze high-poverty schools because in the 2015–2016 Common Core of Data (CCD) data, the free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) enrollment variable is marked as either missing or not applicable for all schools in Massachusetts. We did perform exploratory analysis on schools that served a majority minority student body. The results largely mirrored those of urban schools. For the sake of brevity, we do not include those results.

5 We define urban schools as those whose locale is designated as a small, midsize, or large city in the NCES CCD database. NCES creates categories based on a school’s proximity to an urban area. Those given any designation of “city” are found within a principal city. See the School and District Glossary on the NCES website for full details (NCES, undated).

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Barrett, Susan, Lucille Eber, Kent McIntosh, Kelly Perales, and Natalie Romer, Teaching Social-Emotional Competencies Within a PBIS Framework, OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, April 2018.


CASEL—See Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.


DESE—See Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.


NCES—See National Center for Education Statistics.


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About This Report

This report presents American Teacher Panel survey results on Massachusetts teachers’ perspectives about social and emotional learning, their approaches to promoting students’ social and emotional development, and their perceptions of supports that would help them do this more effectively. It analyzes results from a survey of teachers in Massachusetts and how they compare with those of their peers in the rest of the nation.

RAND Education and Labor

This research was conducted within RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through post-secondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking.

For more information about the RAND American Educator Panels, of which the American Teacher Panel survey is a part, please email aep@rand.org or see www.rand.org/aep. More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this report should be directed to cdoss@rand.org, and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to educationandlabor@rand.org.

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