

SUPPORTING
SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL
LEARNING THROUGH AN
INTEGRATED APPROACH

smartlab

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ABSTRACT

Social-emotional learning has gained an increasing amount of attention as a critical component of education.⁴

Though academics are the focus of education, especially in a high-stakes era of accountability, social and emotional skills are associated with academic success and college- and career-readiness.²

With the ongoing challenge to meet all instructional minutes in a school day, it can be near impossible to find time to dedicate to explicit instruction of social and emotional skills. An integrated approach may be the solution to achieve both academic and social-emotional success.

In this paper, we will discuss the social and emotional needs of students, the impacts on achievement, and best practices for integrating social-emotional learning into educational practices.

WHAT WE'LL COVER IN THIS WHITE PAPER

- Critical social-emotional skills
- The relationships between social-emotional learning and academic achievement
- Social-emotional learning programming
- SmartLab Learning: An integrated approach to social-emotional learning

CRITICAL SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS

Teachers, school counselors, administrators, and family members can easily identify social-emotional challenges that students commonly encounter.

We see students unwilling to work with a partner, students who lash out at peers, and students who don't believe that they can do "it."

We know the behaviors that can make learning challenging, but what are the skill deficits underlying those behaviors?

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is defined as "the process of acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitude, and skills necessary to recognize and manage emotions; developing caring and concern for others; making responsible decisions; establishing positive relationships; and handling challenging situations capably."⁵

Many of these skills appear in the list of college- and career-readiness skills presented by the Colorado Department of Education, including self-awareness, teamwork, perseverance, problem-solving, and adaptability.¹

The development of these skills will support students throughout their formal education and into their careers.

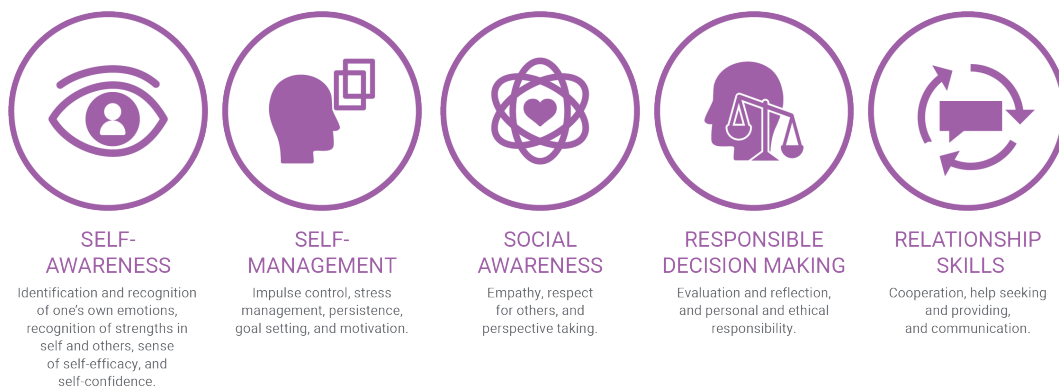


Figure 1. The five key competencies in effective SEL programming outlined by Joseph E. Zins and Maurice J. Elias. Adapted from Ref. 5.

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

As best practices of education have shifted toward personalized, student-directed, and project-based learning, it has become increasingly important to support students in developing their social-emotional skills.

These pedagogical approaches rely on our learners' abilities to work with their peers, persevere through challenges, and take initiative in their learning.

I, along with other classroom teachers, know that our students' social-emotional skills, or lack thereof, have a significant impact on their school experience. We see it when our students struggle to complete a group project because they can't compromise or when they shut down if they don't get the correct answer to a problem immediately.

Beyond anecdotal observations, studies show that effective SEL programs can significantly improve a child's educational experience.

Outcomes include stronger commitment to school and motivation to learn, decreased antisocial behaviors, developing strategies to support resilience and problem-solving, and increased engagement.⁵

In addition, schools with SEL programs found reduced dropout rates and attendance issues⁴ and improved academic achievement measures,⁵ which included grades, standardized test scores, and math and reading skills⁵.

Supporting students in developing their social-emotional intelligence is important to sustain engagement and success in formal education and prepare them for college and future careers.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMMING

Almost any school you walk into will have some combination of SEL programs. However, the problem may lie in the number of programs schools are implementing to support SEL.

Across the country, schools are using an average of 14 different SEL programs to support their students.⁴ Additionally, many of these programs are implemented in isolation with little application to or integration with academics.⁴

With this complication, schools face a number of challenges when implementing SEL interventions:

- Where do you find extra instructional minutes to dedicate to SEL instruction?
- What are the needs of the student population?
- How do you ensure consistency and fidelity across the school?
- How do you encourage the transfer of skills to other content areas and contexts?

Joseph Zins outlines a variety of implementation approaches that vary from isolated instruction to integrated academic, social, and emotional instruction, from focus on the learning environment to the instructional practices.⁴

However you choose to address SEL, highly-effective SEL programs have common characteristics:

- Are research-based
- Encourage application of skills to a variety of situations and contexts
- Are integrated into academics across all grade levels
- Build community relationships
- Use a variety of effective teaching practices to engage all students⁴

In addition, it's important that SEL programs provide the staff with quality professional development and support, opportunities to assess effectiveness, and align with the school's needs and goals.⁴

There are a number of factors that contribute to the success of SEL initiatives.

Building a school culture to support SEL is critical. SEL programs should not only support individual students in developing essential intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, but should also promote a school atmosphere that is “caring, safe, supportive, and conducive to success.”⁴

This culture can be developed with the use of class and whole-school community building activities, leadership opportunities for students, and involving families in school activities.³

You can also increase the effectiveness of any SEL program by utilizing instructional practices that engage students, including cooperative, student-directed, and project-based learning, and reinforcing SEL skills in the classroom, in specials and elective courses, and even in extra-curricular activities.⁵

Explicit instruction about SEL can be easily integrated into morning meetings, mini lessons prior to and throughout group projects, and in whole-school assemblies.

It can be helpful to coordinate the focus on specific SEL skills across the school to reinforce the development of these skills.

SMARTLAB LEARNING: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO SEL NEEDS

SmartLab Learning is a personalized, student-directed, project-based approach to learning.

Whether whole classroom SmartLab HQ environments or our SmartLab Rover that brings in-depth learning into individual classrooms, our solutions keep your learners engaged in hands-on, minds-on activities that reinforce science, technology, engineering, and math concepts.

With every SmartLab Learning solution, students work in pairs to complete relevant, open-ended challenges, which makes it the perfect approach to support SEL.

With SmartLab Learning, the role of the teacher, who we call the facilitator, is to guide and support the learning process.

The project objectives and processes are determined by the students, which allow the facilitator to focus on providing holistic versus content-specific learning support. SEL skills are developed from kindergarten through twelfth grade with varying levels of teacher guidance, spiraled curriculum, and open-ended challenges.

The professional development provided to SmartLab Facilitators prepares them to support their students in effectively collaborating with peers, solving problems, persevering through challenges, setting goals and reflecting on progress, and ultimately finding answers to their questions.

In a SmartLab Learning solution, SEL is integrated into what students do every day. Many facilitators begin and end their classes with SEL-focused mini lessons and support students throughout the class period with small-group coaching.

The nature of SmartLab Learning provides schools with the flexibility to incorporate any SEL program that the school has chosen.

Integrating a social-emotional intervention with SmartLab Learning maximizes the transfer of skills to academics and real-world situations.

CONCLUSION

Addressing the social-emotional needs of students is no longer optional for schools. It is essential for schools to support SEL to reinforce academic achievement and prepare their students for college and future careers.

The key to effective SEL is implementing it with a holistic, long-term, integrated approach. SmartLab Learning provides a space, learning approach, and professional development to support schools in addressing the social-emotional needs of their students.

ABOUT CREATIVE LEARNING SYSTEMS

We've been converting traditional learning environments into project-based learning experiences and constructivist spaces since 1987.

Today, we partner with the most innovative school leaders nationwide to provide personalized, project-based learning experiences and environments that engage and empower students through experiential, personalized, and collaborative learning.

With SmartLab Learning's suite of in-person and remote solutions, we provide students with hands-on, project-based learning experiences that encourage them to explore, question, and lead their own learning while engaging in our standards-aligned supplemental math and science curriculum.

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