



Improving School-Wide Culture and Climate through Social and Emotional Learning

The TREP Project works to connect research on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences of developmental trauma with the realities of school and classroom management. We focus on schools serving communities coping with high levels of concentrated poverty and social disorganization, such as housing and food instability, household and neighborhood violence, and drug dependence. We aim to create schools and classrooms that can meet the socioemotional and academic needs of not one or two children who have been exposed to traumatic levels of chronic stress, but the needs of a classroom of traumatized children.

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Recent advances in the neuroscience of emotions are highlighting connections between our cognitions and emotions that has revolutionized our understanding of opportunities for advancing learning in the context of schools. The relationship between learning, emotion, and physiological arousal runs much deeper than many educators realize and is interwoven with the notion of learning itself. Essentially, emotions, which play out in the body and mind, are profoundly intertwined with thought.

For example, there are many emotional reasons behind why a high school student is willing to invest energy in and engage with solving a math problem. The reasons range from the intrinsic reward of having found the solution, to getting a good grade, to avoiding punishment, to helping tutor a friend, to getting into a good college, to pleasing their parents or teacher. All of these reasons have a powerful emotional component and failing to recognize these aspects of learning limits the opportunities that educators have for igniting learning. Moreover, the ability to complete complex cognitive tasks is grounded in strong social and emotional skills such as regulating attention.

Thus, when we discuss social and emotional learning (SEL) we are not merely talking about a student's ability to control their behavior in the learning environment but instead we think about SEL as the many ways we can cultivate strong emotional intelligence to increase students' abilities to engage in lessons and complete other cognitive tasks. This brief encourages educators to think of SEL not as isolated content but as an important aspect of all school-wide systems, classroom practices, and core content.

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STRESS, TRAUMA, AND SEL

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network estimates that as many as one out of three students in America's classrooms has been exposed to a traumatic event capable of impacting their ability to learn. Trauma, and the resulting loss of core self-regulation capacities, impacts students' ability to learn in the following ways:

BODY

- Inability to control physical responses to stress that lead to feeling the need to fight or escape



BRAIN



- Difficulty with thinking, learning, concentration, and memory
- Difficulty switching from one thought or activity to another

EMOTIONS

- Low self-esteem
- Trouble with friendships
- Depression and anxiety



BEHAVIOR



- Lack of impulse control
- Fighting, aggression, running away
- Substance abuse

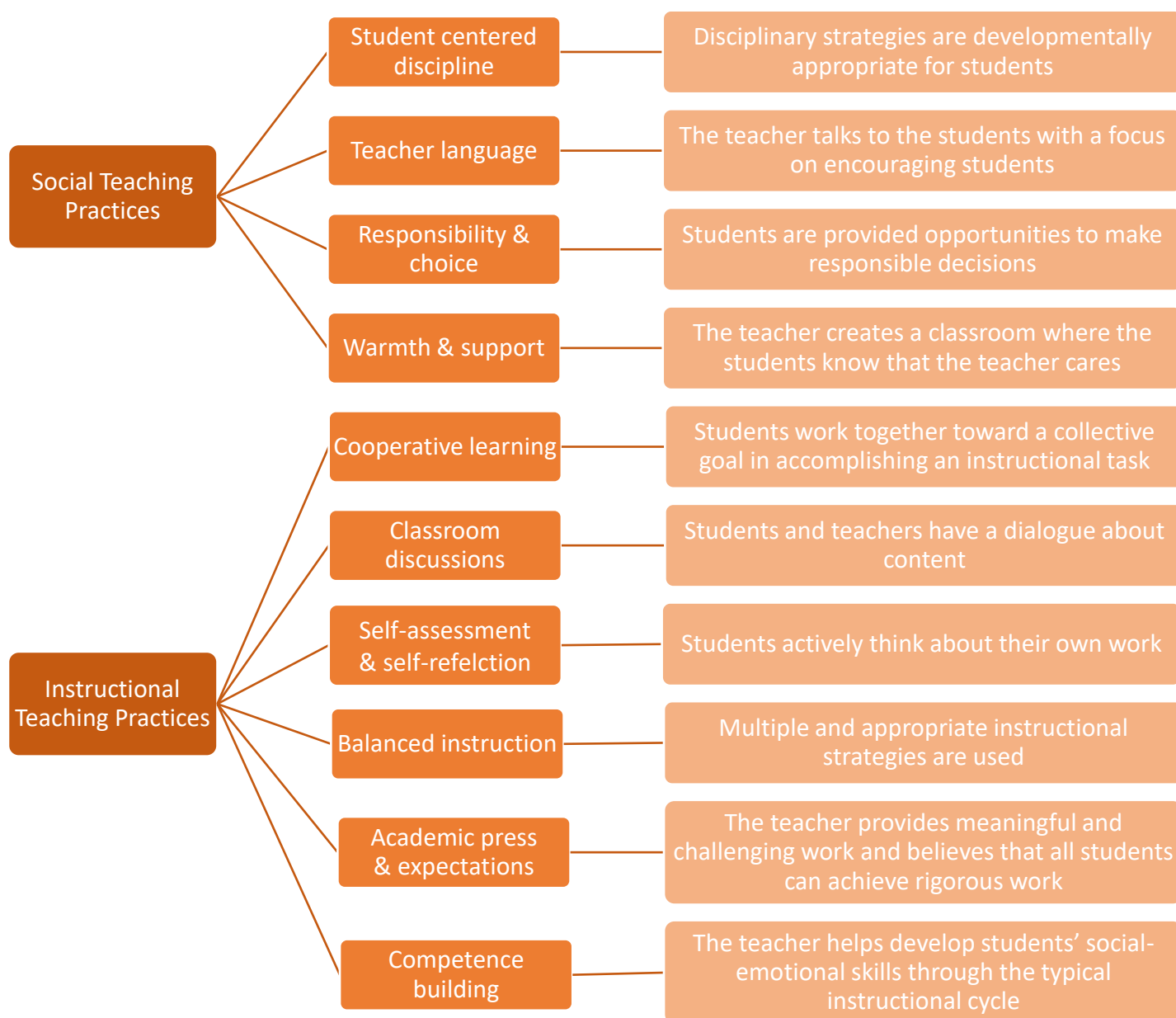
All of these challenges are rooted in all people's foundational need for physically and emotional security before being able to focus on the development of self-regulation skills.

Students coping with trauma are in need of SEL strategies that foster self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-instruction, and goal setting that can be learned and used in their core content courses as well as other areas of their lives.

INTEGRATING SEL INTO ACADEMIC INSTRUCTION

Educators often perceive a tension between utilizing class time for delivering content focused instruction versus social and emotional learning, however, by identifying and utilizing opportunities to integrate SEL into academic instruction learning is optimized. SEL can be integrated in three main ways: (1) the way instruction is being delivered, (2) the themes in the content being presented, and (3) through the way in which students are asked to engage in the content. The chart below outlines important teaching practices that provide a foundation for integrating SEL into academic instruction.

TEACHING PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT SEL



SEL IN THE CORE SUBJECTS: READING

Emotional competencies and the comprehension of oral and written language are deeply connected. The same skills which allow children to regulate their emotions and behavior are also critical in reading comprehension. For example, self-regulation affects a child's ability to remember details in a story and problem solve when a challenging word or concept is encountered. Moreover, understanding emotions and social relationships helps students draw connections to characters in the story, identify plot elements, and make inferences. The mutually reinforcing nature of these skills is also evident in research showing that strong oral language skills were found to increase behavioral self-regulation.

There are many ways to build emotional skills along with language comprehension. While many educators may already be familiar with incorporating SEL in whole-class instruction, such as through an interactive read-aloud, researchers have also found that targeted small group lessons are highly effective in building social and emotional competencies.

Small group instruction can include:

- ✓ Vocabulary comprehension that targets SEL words
- ✓ Teacher and peer led discussions on SEL themes in which students are given the opportunity to use SEL vocabulary
- ✓ Application of SEL concepts in role plays and scenarios
- ✓ Instruction on and practice using social conventions of conversation such as turn taking and making eye contact

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT: BIBLIOTHERAPY

Bibliotherapy is when a child or group of children interact with a story where a character solves a problem similar to the problem they are experiencing. This strategy can be used with an individual child or small group of children who need support coping with trauma and building social and emotional skills. Bibliotherapy works through first allowing children to identify the thoughts and emotions of others, then emotional healing can take place as the character successfully works through challenges. Children can then apply the skill that the character used in their own lives.

MAKING BOOK SELECTIONS

1. Is the reading level appropriate for the student(s)?
2. Is the content age appropriate?
3. Does the content support the SEL goals of the lesson?
4. Is the content culturally responsive?

SEL IN THE CORE SUBJECTS: MATH

The following lesson example uses the teaching practice of “Self-Assessment and Self-Reflection” from the figure on page 3. In this lesson, the teacher helps students to engage with content in a way that not only builds their understanding of math concepts, but also builds problem solving and communication skills. Mastery of the social and emotional skills will enhance their ability to successfully complete complex math problems. Thus, there are multiple benefits to explicitly teaching SEL during math and allowing time for practice.

What does Self-Assessment and Self-Reflection Look Like in the Classroom?

Sample Lesson	
When reviewing fractions in a fourth-grade math class, the teacher asks students to solve a problem, come up with multiple ways to demonstrate their solutions, and share with their peers. The teacher then engages students in a discussion to evaluate how well each approach worked in solving the problem.	
The following set of teacher practices and student behaviors ensure the successful execution of a lesson employing self-assessment and self-reflection teaching practices	
Teacher Practices	Student Behaviors
Shares with students the learning goals for each lesson	Understand the goals they are working toward
Asks students to reflect on their personal academic goals (e.g., make connections to the lesson goals)	Actively think about their work as it relates to the learning goals
Provides students with strategies to analyze their work (e.g., performance rubrics, peer reviews)	Monitor their progress toward achieving the learning goal
Creates opportunities for students to monitor and reflect on progress toward learning goals	Identify what they do and do not know against performance standards
Creates opportunities and resources for students to monitor and reflect on their social and emotional skills	Utilize support resources based on what they do and do not know
Strategizes with and supports students to make sure they meet their learning goals	Identify strategies to improve their work and/or behavior
Provides students opportunities to reflect on their thinking and learning processes (e.g., using graphic organizers or journals)	Provide feedback on the strategies used for their learning

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT: EMBRACING MISTAKES

Math class can be a time of high anxiety for students. That’s why math teacher Christian Jenkins, at Antioch High School in Metro Nashville Public Schools, has embraced the mistakes that students make as an opportunity to integrate SEL. Conversations with students about the mistakes they make provides a source of engagement, a way to build math sense, and as a means to build social and emotional competencies.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SEL

SEL programs are not culture free, and before implementing any SEL curricula schools must consider how well it aligns with the cultural practices of the school community. Because SEL is broad and can take many forms, the SEL approaches that work best for one school or grade level may not necessarily work for another. The diagram below lists a few key steps in the implementation process geared towards ensuring that when an SEL intervention of curricula is adopted by a school or teacher, it will be presented to students and families in the most effective manner.

STEPS TOWARDS CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SEL

ANALYZE THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT, RISKS, NEEDS, AND CURRENT EFFORTS

- Learn about students challenges, needs, and supports in and out of school. Align new curricula with existing efforts by first examining current efforts that are being made to address identified risks and needs. The SEL curriculum might be a first approach to the issues, or it might be in supplement or in the place of the current efforts.

COMMUNICATE WITH SCHOOL STAFF, STUDENT FAMILIES, AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY

- Getting buy-in is crucial for consistent implementation and others may be able to identify additional supports that could help make SEL efforts more consistent throughout the school, and connect their lives inside and outside the classroom.

CONSCIOUSLY ALIGN WITH CULTURAL, RACIAL-ETHNIC, AND PERSONAL STUDENT CIRCUMSTANCES

- This connects with the second step because the staff, family, and community can help with not only analyzing the school climate, but also with providing information about specific student needs and community values.

ESTABLISH PROCESS OF REVIEW AND EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

- This final step can easily be overlooked, but must be put into place in order to ensure SEL curriculum or intervention is functioning as intended and improved based on periodic reviews and evaluations. These evaluations can take many forms, but even simple periodic reflections from various stakeholders can serve as a marker of progress or need for change.

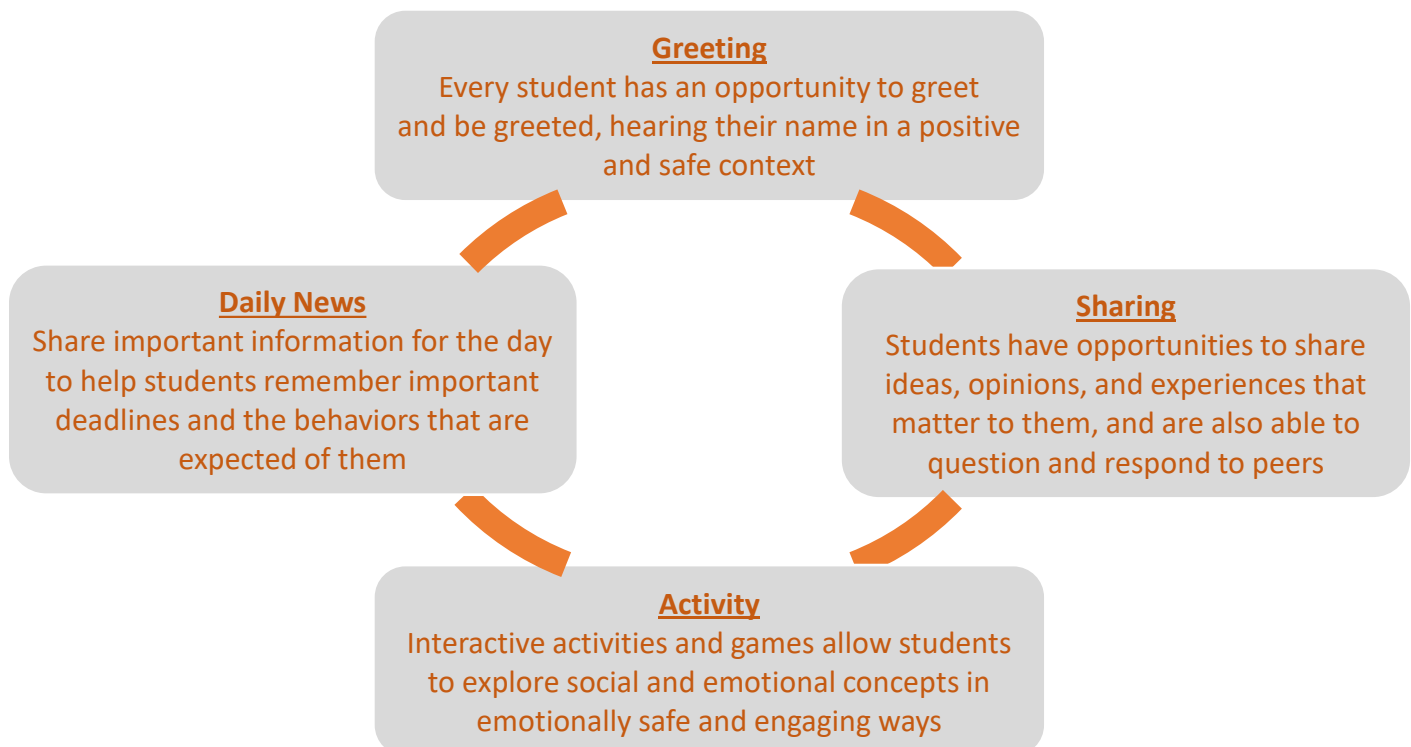
PROTECTED TIME FOR SEL IN THE INSTRUCTIONAL DAY

One way to meet the emotional needs of students coping with trauma is to start the school day with an advisory period. Advisory can also be referred to as a morning meeting or class meeting especially in the younger grades. If done every day this could be as brief as 15 minutes integrated into the start of the first class of the day. If done two to three times a week, a set-aside 30-minute morning advisory can be enough to meet students' needs.

Advisory time can encompass:

- ✓ Teaching and discussing social and emotional concepts
- ✓ Introduction to and reinforcement of the school and classroom culture
- ✓ Behavioral and academic remediation
- ✓ Formation of relationships between students and teachers
- ✓ Formation of relationships among students
- ✓ Opportunities for skill building such as public speaking and leadership

EXAMPLE ADVISORY STRUCTURE



Adapted from Crawford's L. *The Advisory Book*.

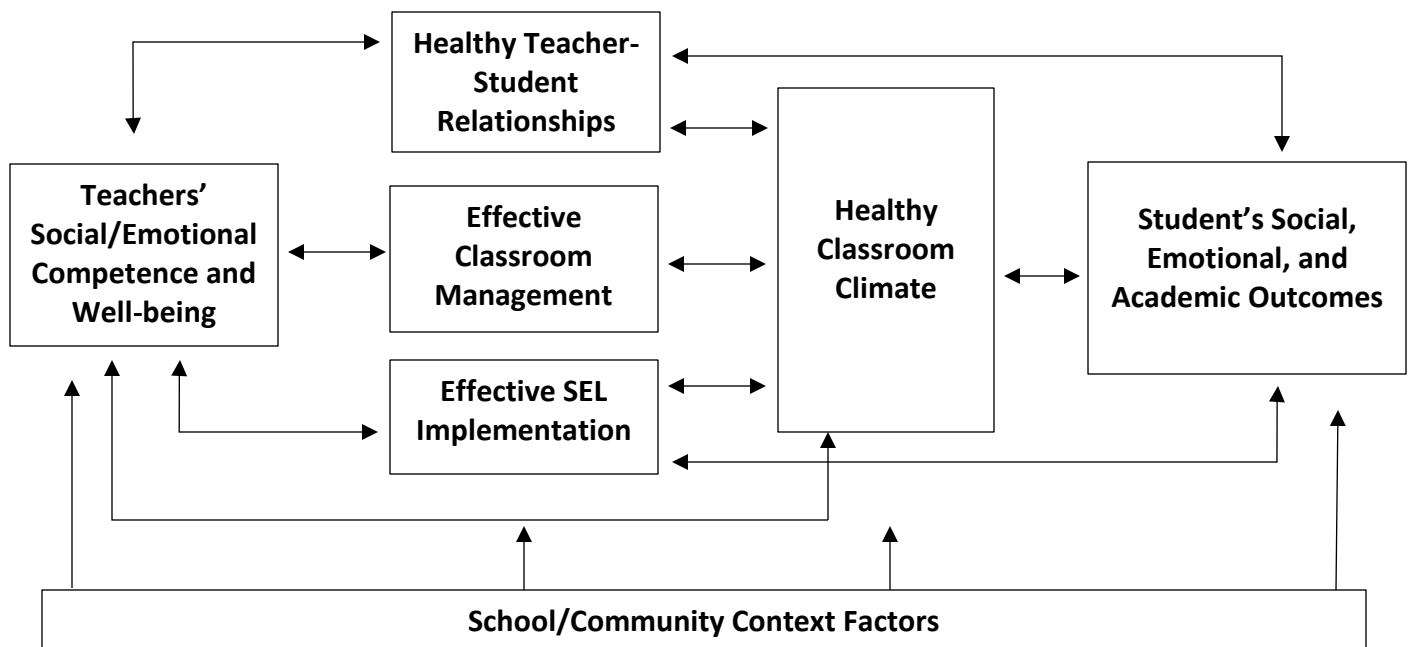
Successful Advisories:

- ✓ Allow constructive, non-evaluative time for relationship building
- ✓ Provide opportunities for student leadership roles
- ✓ Start with low social risk activities and work towards building trust
- ✓ Are well planned with predictable times and structures

EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF ADULTS

SEL begins with fostering positive teacher-student relationships, with a focus on positive emotional processing and behavioral control. This means that teachers' emotional development and well-being must also be prioritized. Teacher burnout—teachers' experience of "emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment"—contributes to a classroom climate that decreases learning efficacy, especially for children who are already at risk of disorderly socioemotional development. Teachers who have strong social and emotional competencies have high self and social awareness, are able to regulate their emotions when aroused by challenging situations, demonstrate strong prosocial values in interactions with students and colleagues and practice self-care. The chart below outlines the mechanisms through which socially and emotionally competent teachers are able to positively affect their students' academic outcomes.

The prosocial classroom: A model of teacher social and emotional competence and classroom and student outcomes



Adapted from Jennings and Greenberg's The Prosocial Classroom: Teacher Social and Emotional Competence in Relation to Student and Classroom Outcomes.

Socially and emotionally competent teachers set the tone of the classroom by developing supportive and encouraging relationships with their students, designing lessons that build on student strengths and abilities, establishing and implementing behavioral guidelines in ways that promote intrinsic motivation, coaching students through conflict situations, encouraging cooperation among students, and acting as a role model for respectful and appropriate communication and exhibitions of prosocial behavior. ~Jennings & Greenberg

SCHOOL-WIDE INTEGRATION OF SEL

The *Caring School Community* initiative is a great example of implementing SEL in schools. The key components in this program are the following: class meetings to provide a forum for teacher and students to get to know each other, cross-age buddies to support positive relationships between older and younger students, home-side activities to link parents to the classroom, and school-wide community building activities. All of these areas contribute to the overall success of the student as a whole person. As outlined in the chart on page 8, the school and community context affects every aspect of teachers' and students' interactions in school. The chart below demonstrates the deep connections between federal, state, district and school-wide policies which lead to student-level outcomes.

System-wide SEL in Educational Settings

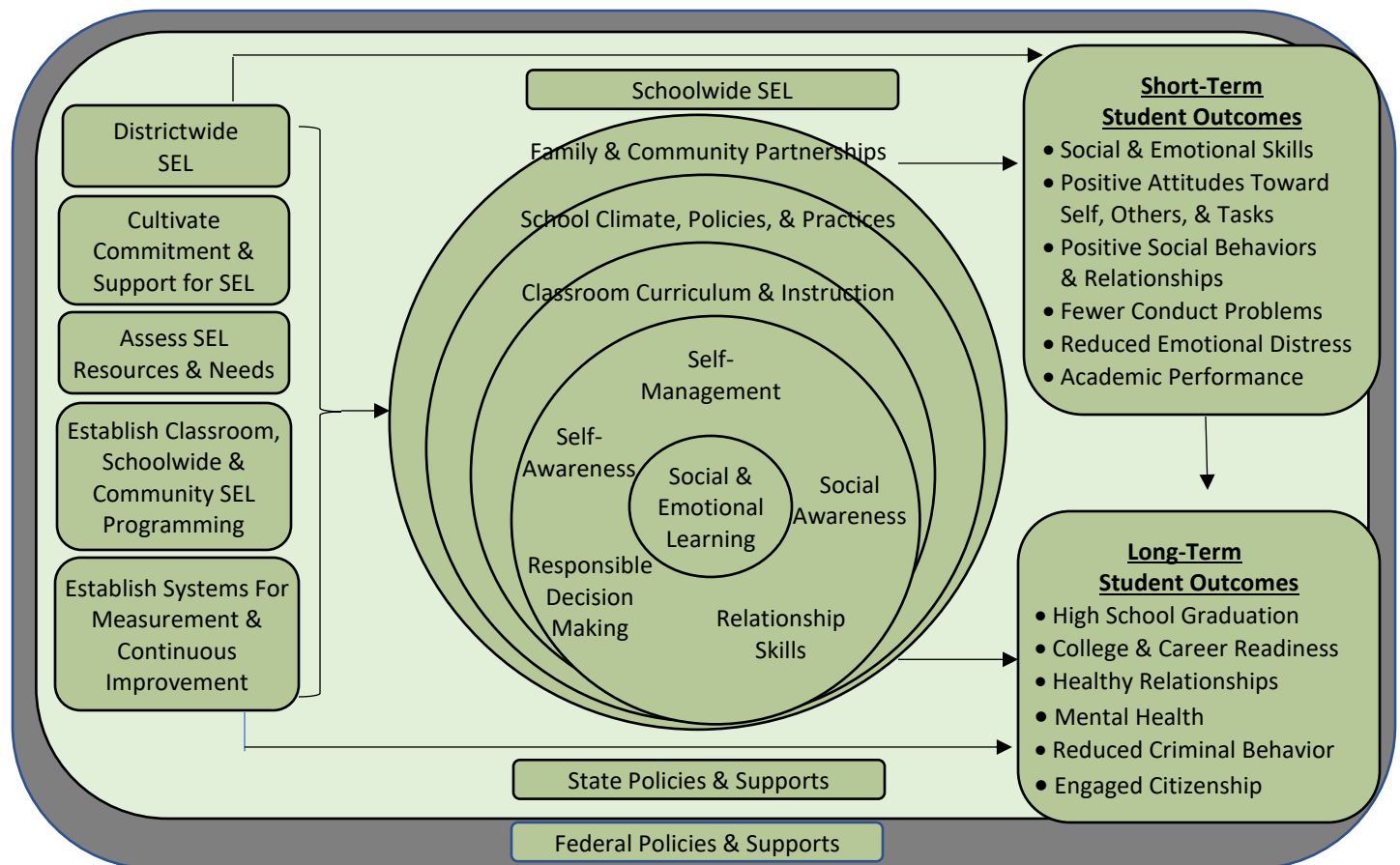


Chart originally published in Durlak et. al's *Handbook for Social and Emotional Learning*

One of the difficulties of implementing an SEL program occurs when implementation is not comprehensive across the school. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (CASEL) guidelines for successful SEL implementation stresses that program leaders, teachers, parents, and even community partners need to have aligned goals and practices that encourage the efficacy of the program. CASEL provides [a comprehensive rubric and implementation guide](#) for school-wide integration of SEL.

STUDENT VOICE

Supporting students with trauma is a complex process that involves considering adult emotional well-being, modifying teaching practices, and improving school policies. Given the overwhelming, all-consuming nature of the work, it is easy to lose sight of our students' voices. As educators, one of the most important things we can do is pay attention to the messages our students are sending us, whether through the direct thoughts and feelings they share, or through their behaviors, which can sometimes indicate we need to be the ones to start the conversation.

Here is one student's reflection on the pivotal role that teachers can play during times of personal grief. Teachers can provide students with emotional support and perspective during times of crisis, while building students coping skills:

"It is important for teachers to be there for students in times of grief because it allows students to feel as if they have an added layer of support. Often times, students may feel alone in school when a loved one passes, but if a teacher can be there for them that feeling can be combatted. In addition, a student's family members may be so caught up in their own grief that they are unable to meet the emotional needs of others. A teacher, as an outsider, will be able to care for the student, which could help the student understand that the pain is only temporary. Bonding over grief also allows a teacher and student to become closer because the student is letting the teacher into their personal life and the teacher is leaving behind their teacher-mode and trying to understand the student as a person."

~ Sophomore at Mansueto High School in Chicago, IL

Educators may not always remember the right strategy or decide on the most effective policy, those things will come with hard work and practice. However, all educators can commit to being a caring adult who is willing to listen to students. All learning, especially social and emotional learning, is built on strong relationships between teachers and students. Nurturing relationships and the sense of security they provide allow students room to grow and offer the support students need to meet high behavioral and academic expectations.

Motivation to learn, which is internally determined by our interests and goals and externally supported by our social relationships, arouses our interest and sustains our persistence in mastering new content.

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