

MENTAL HEALTH & ANTIRACIST SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL LEARNING FEDERAL POLICY PAPER 2021



Introduction

Over the past academic year, traditional models of teaching and learning have been completely transformed as a result of the pandemic. More than ever, it's critical to consider the impact that such dramatic changes have had on the mental health and well-being of our students and educators. Across the nation, we must recommit to providing our young people and those leading their learning with a scaffold of support to ensure that the challenges of today are met with long-term investments in their resiliency.



Social and Emotional Learning Through an Antiracist Lens

[Social and Emotional Learning](#) (SEL) is the process through which individuals build awareness and skills in managing emotions, setting goals, establishing relationships, and making responsible decisions that support success in school and in life. When implemented effectively, engaging in SEL through restorative practices can lead to safer schools, greater belonging, higher achievement, higher graduation rates, improved college and career-ready skills, and achievement gains that persist over time ([Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissburg 2017](#)). However, Social and Emotional Learning that is provided in absence of an antiracist lens can do more harm than good to our students of color. Failure to teach SEL within the larger sociopolitical context can make learning opportunities irrelevant to our students, whereas SEL through an antiracist approach can leverage opportunities for students to bridge differences and foster courageous conversations that [confront injustice, hate and inequity](#).

In the classroom, Antiracist SEL humanizes learning and teaching through creating authentic connections and relationships with students, families, community and educators. These relationships support dismantling inequities, transforming systems and centering the healing, belonging, and thriving of adults and youth. This pandemic that has disproportionately impacted the Black community, other communities of color and refugees intensifying the [likelihood of re-traumatization](#) for young people who previously experienced trauma, it's critical that the social and emotional support we offer to our school communities is grounded in antiracism. Systems leaders, superintendents, school boards and educators all play a part in [taking action](#) to ensure that Antiracist SEL is infused into all aspects of school culture.

Connecting and Empowering a Network of Support

To effectively nurture the social and emotional development of our students, we must think beyond only the confines of the classroom. In the [Social and Emotional Learning Roadmap for Reopening School](#), the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) outlines the importance of implementing clear processes and structures for school staff to work with families and partner with school-employed or community-based mental health and trauma professionals. Emphasizing SEL in our school systems underscores a shift toward a [whole-child approach](#) that brings together the resources of our schools and communities to provide the appropriate support for each student. Intentional partnerships with community partners who provide culturally responsive approaches aligned with the ethnic communities they serve can lead to a more connected network of support.

Educators today are often stressed. Providing educators with opportunities to learn strategies to better identify and manage their stress can increase their overall well-being. Social and emotional skills not only improve academic outcomes and classroom behavior for students, but they can have a positive impact on educators' personal and professional success as well. To teach SEL, we need to acknowledge and continue to develop the social and emotional skills of educators and other school staff. Only then can we effectively model and teach those same skills to our students. Educators need to be provided with training, coaching, and consistent support.

Adoption and Evaluation

The adoption of an SEL program represents one step towards prioritizing the social, emotional and mental health of our students. However, it is imperative that we [invest in sustained training](#) and support for our educators to provide them with the necessary skills and resources to meet the unique needs of each student and school community. Allocating funding for continued professional development ensures that the adoption and improvement of SEL practices are an integral part of schoolwide culture. Furthermore, when more educators are equipped to incorporate SEL into their curriculum and embed lessons throughout the school day, the benefits to students are [even more pronounced](#).

As we consider opportunities to evaluate and improve upon SEL and restorative practices, states and districts can guide this work through the development of [guidelines and standards](#) for teaching and learning. SEL standards and benchmarks can inform districts' understanding of how to create conditions that cultivate social and emotional skills for their students. Existing [examples of guidelines for SEL implementation](#) provide resources that can educate districts, administrators and educators on how to implement and integrate SEL into different contexts in a culturally responsive way.



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