Social and Emotional Learning

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Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to an array of skills that underpin learning and development. Although sometimes the term SEL is applied to a process (how social and emotional skills develop) or an outcome (explicitly measured social and emotional skills), it more commonly refers to programming or approaches to develop and improve student SEL skills in school-based settings. In school contexts, SEL programming includes structured curricula, programs, and strategy-based approaches. In this chapter, we outline the key findings from the more than three decades of research on the effectiveness of SEL programs in schools and provide additional background about the content and scope of SEL programs, their heterogeneity in approach and effects, and the politicization of SEL.

SEL theory and practice draw on research about child development and learning to inform instructional and pedagogical approaches that support students' development. The programs ground and organize their scope, sequence, and skill focus within a variety of frameworks. Recent analyses have documented more than 136 such frameworks and more than 700 skills and strategies taught across SEL programs.[1] The framework most used in practice, developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL),[2] is a model comprising five SEL factors:

(1) Self-awareness (understanding of one's emotions, strengths, and preferences),
(2) Self-management (skills that support emotional regulation),
(3) Social awareness (recognition of similarities and differences in others),
(4) Relationship skills (formation and maintenance of healthy relationships with peers, family, and community)
(5) Responsible decision-making (how to make healthy and safe decisions across the lifespan)

Despite the variation in SEL programs' content and skill focus, the evidence on their effectiveness is consistent and clear: Students who participate in SEL programs demonstrate improved academic, social, emotional, mental and physical health, and behavioral outcomes. This robust and growing evidence base on a range of student outcomes has led to significant investments in SEL in schools nationwide over the past three decades.[3] At the time of our writing this chapter, all 50 states have pre-K SEL guidelines, and 27 states have K–12 SEL standards.[4] Initiatives across research, practice, and policy demonstrate how deeply national educational leaders have embedded SEL in their priorities and efforts to promote children's healthy development. At the same time, the recent politicization of SEL in U.S. public discourse has resulted in shifting priorities in some states, an issue we address later in this chapter.

More than three decades' worth of research covering more than 1 million students reports on the effectiveness of SEL in schools.[5] SEL promotes positive outcomes during students' school years and into adulthood.[6] We recently launched a living systematic review of universal, school-based SEL programs in K–12 schools.[7] Our dataset comprises 109 studies published between 2008 and 2023, representing more than 95,000 students. Nearly 60% of these programs were implemented in elementary schools, and 20% were implemented in middle and high schools. Almost all the programs (99%) took place in the classroom, with approximately 75% implemented by classroom teachers. In our most recent analysis, we find statistically significant improvements in SEL skills, attitudes/beliefs, prosocial behaviors, peer relationships, school functioning, academic achievement, school climate and safety, and physical health and decreased externalizing behaviors and emotional distress for students who participate in SEL interventions in comparison to their peers in the control group.[8]

Key findings

Key finding #1. Students who participate in SEL programs have improved social and emotional skills. Social and emotional outcomes are the most frequently included outcome domain in SEL evaluations. Evidence consistently documents that students who participate in SEL programs have improved social and emotional skills.

Key finding #2. Students who participate in SEL programs have improved academic behaviors and performance. Students who participate in SEL programming are more engaged in learning at school, demonstrate increased on-task behaviors in their classrooms, are likelier to complete their homework, and are less likely to be absent from school. The most recent evidence suggests that students who participate in SEL interventions see, on average, an increase of .09 standard deviations in academic achievement.

Key finding #3. Students who participate in SEL have healthier behaviors and feel better at school. Participating students demonstrate increased prosocial behaviors, stronger teacher and peer relationships, and improved well-being. Participation in SEL programs is also associated with reduced aggression, bullying, and other harmful peer behaviors. Students also report improved mental health including reduced anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Key finding #4. Students who participate in SEL programs feel safer at school. Participants feel more connected to school and have better relationships with both their peers and their teachers. They also have more positive perceptions of their school climate and feel safer in learning at school.

Key finding #5. Programs delivered by teachers have the strongest impact on student outcomes. SEL programs are most effective at improving student academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes when they are delivered by the classroom teacher rather than other implementers (e.g., research or school staff). Although some SEL programs are facilitated by school mental health providers, members of the school community, or research staff, 75% of SEL programs included in the living systematic review are taught by classroom teachers.

Key finding #6. Programs that are sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (SAFE) have the strongest effects on student outcomes. Programs that provide sequenced, organized, and active instruction focused on specific skills show the largest effects.

These programs might directly instruct students to recognize signs of stress during a test rather than discussing social and emotional concepts broadly.

Key finding #7. SEL benefits students throughout school and beyond. Evidence points to effectiveness of SEL from early childhood through elementary, middle, and high school, with additional evidence suggesting that students who participate in SEL programs have significantly improved life outcomes long after they graduate.

Key finding #8. SEL programs can be cost-effective. The strongest evidence on the cost-effectiveness of SEL programs comes from benefit–cost analyses (BCAs) showing that the long-term benefits of SEL substantially outweigh implementation costs. Cost-effectiveness studies further show that how and when (e.g., in one grade versus another) SEL is implemented can matter for the balance of per-student costs and the maintenance of meaningful outcomes. However, we note that this evidence comes from a relatively small number of studies.

Background

Here, we discuss two contextual features that are important for interpreting the evidence on SEL: (1) politicization of SEL and (2) heterogeneity in program approaches, measured outcomes, and their effects. This section underscores the importance of relying on evidence-based programs, particularly those supported by multiple randomized controlled trials (RCTs).

At the outset, it is worth acknowledging that curriculum choices are inherently shaped by value judgments. The decision to emphasize SEL, math, history, or any other domain reflects underlying beliefs about what students should learn and the roles of schools and teachers in the learning process. As SEL programming has expanded across U.S. schools, it has increasingly become the subject of public and political claims that question its intentions and evidence base.[9]

Skepticism toward SEL research created space for political organizations that oppose SEL and promote disinformation about its use to gain influence (e.g., Moms for Liberty). These organizations frame SEL as a threat to parental rights and local control, a message that has proven effective in mobilizing school board activism and shaping state-level debates about what should be taught in K–12 public education.[10] This political opposition to SEL has increasingly translated into efforts to restrict or eliminate it. In several states, lawmakers have introduced bills to limit or prohibit teachers and schools from engaging in SEL lessons, shift responsibility for social and emotional development to families, and in some cases ban SEL outright.[11] Public statements by bill sponsors and state officials often characterize SEL as deceptive, harmful, or ideologically driven, asserting that it advances political agendas or inappropriate content rather than drawing on empirical research or program evaluations.[12]

This discourse raises important questions about how evidence shapes political and school-level decision-making about SEL investment and implementation. At the time this chapter was written (February 2026), none of the proposed state laws seeking to ban or restrict SEL had been enacted. At the same time, education systems and educators remain largely committed to implementing SEL. In a recent national survey, 83% of principals reported that their schools used an SEL curriculum during the 2023–2024 school year, an increase from the 2021–2022 school year.[13]

While there is no "typical" SEL program, it is helpful to think about what a program might look like in a school setting. Most programs take place in the classroom and involve a set of sequenced lessons implemented by the classroom teacher across a set period (typically half or a whole school year). The lessons tend to focus on different SEL skills and are taught through modeling, direct instruction, and opportunities to practice (e.g., through role-play) and reflect.[14] Many SEL programs encourage a set block to implement lessons (15–30 minutes) and also ask teachers to incorporate ideas or strategies from the lessons into other times of the day (e.g., application of strategies for waiting while students are in line to enter the cafeteria). In middle and high school, these lessons often take place in homeroom or advisory periods and may offer more opportunities for project-based or hands-on learning. Topics in middle and high school may also begin to include topics such as navigating peer pressure, avoiding risky behaviors, and maintaining healthy relationships. Effective programs typically include pre-implementation training for teachers and may also offer coaching or ongoing support.

Existing SEL programs focus on different skill areas, use a variety of instructional approaches, and include many different components. Using the Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) framework to organize each activity into a skill area (cognitive skills, social skills, emotional skills, identity, values, and perspectives), an analysis of the leading programs in pre-K through elementary school found that, on average, 60% of the activities in each program target social skills, 36% emotional skills, 31% cognitive skills, 14% values, 13% identity, and 4% perspectives. In middle and high school programs, programs still target social (41%), emotional (32%), and cognitive skills (29%), but there is a greater focus on identity (24%), values (16%), and perspectives (6%). Of course, substantial heterogeneity exists within programs. In Good Behavior Game, 91% of the activities target cognitive skills, while in Caring Schools Community, only 2% of the activities do.[15] What is more important than a focus on any one skill area is ensuring alignment with students' developmental stage, the goals and needs of the community, and existing priorities and initiatives.

SEL programs also vary in their instructional approach and the components they include. Across pre-K through twelfth grade, the programs tend to rely heavily on whole-class or peer discussion. Some programs rely more heavily on a particular instructional approach. Girls on the Run and Playworks, for example, include physical activity as a core mechanism for program delivery. A key part of the Playworks model is organized recess activities led by a trained coach to teach conflict resolution and cooperation to produce a positive environment and reduce playground conflict.[16] Other programs may rely heavily on visual displays such as posters (e.g., Open Circle), writing (e.g., Facing History and Ourselves), and role-playing (e.g., Kimochis). While the heterogeneity of SEL programs is relatively well documented, more knowledge is needed about how the various combinations of target skills and instructional approaches produce different patterns of outcomes across skill domains and development.

In general, program evaluations vary in methodological quality and the strength and consistency of their findings. In education research more broadly, positive findings often receive greater emphasis. Not all SEL programs demonstrate similar effects: Findings on their impacts can differ in direction (positive or negative), magnitude or strength of the effects, and generalizability to other schools or settings. When programs have a strong evidence base (ideally support from multiple RCTs), their implementation can accordingly be rigorous and evidence-informed. As a result, it is important to focus on the types of programs for which the evidence base is most robust, which are skills-based SEL programs that focus on explicit social and emotional skill-building (e.g., strategies for regulating test anxiety or making friends).

Speaking to the point about heterogeneity, we acknowledge the emergence of a small subset of justice-focused SEL programs, where students learn about structural or systemic inequities and how to address them through activism or other forms of civic engagement.[17] There is currently no rigorous evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of these programs.[18]

Evidence

Key finding #1. *Students who participate in SEL programs have improved social and emotional skills.* Social and emotional outcomes are the most frequently included outcome domain in SEL evaluations. Evidence consistently documents that students who participate in SEL programs have improved social and emotional skills in comparison to their peers in control conditions. One study analyzed a subset of studies from the Cipriano et al., 2023, meta-analysis, including only those that measured an SEL outcome. Of these studies, 68% were RCTs, and 32% used quasi-experimental designs. The study organized and analyzed the outcomes using widely recognized SEL frameworks (CASEL and EASEL) and found consistently positive effects in areas related to self-regulation. For example, effect sizes (Hedges's g) were 0.18 for self-management (CASEL) and 0.16 for cognitive regulation (EASEL), indicating similar improvements in regulation-related skills across the two frameworks. Positive effects were also observed in domains related to self-awareness and identity. In the EASEL framework, statistically significant effects were found for identity and emotion processes, suggesting improvements in students' beliefs about themselves (e.g., self-efficacy) and ability to understand and manage emotions. In EASEL's social domain, the programs improved interpersonal skills (Hedges's g = 0.17), with smaller but marginally significant effects for relationship skills in CASEL (Hedges's g = 0.07). Additionally, there were significant impacts in the "Other" category (Hedges's g = 0.26), which included measures that did not align cleanly with a single framework domain.[19]

There are several measurement considerations and challenges within the SEL skill domain. Some studies measure specific SEL skills (e.g., executive functioning), while others measure SEL more broadly across multiple domains using self- or parent-report scales. For example, some studies might use measures that focus specifically on emotion vocabulary by asking students to list how the characters in a series of drawings feel.[20] In contrast, other studies might rely on broad measures of social and emotional resilience or knowledge that capture general behaviors, emotions and inter-/intrapersonal strengths.

Key finding #2. *Students who participate in SEL programs have improved academic behaviors and performance.* Students who participate in SEL programming are more engaged in learning at school, demonstrate increased on-task behaviors in their classrooms, are likelier to complete their homework, and are less likely to be absent from school. Participating students demonstrate stronger academic achievement in both literacy and math on both standardized test scores and report card grades. The most recent findings come from a 2025 systematic review and meta-analysis of 40 studies of the effect of explicit SEL instruction on student academic achievement (72.50% RCTs and 27.50% quasi-experimental designs [QEDs]). From a sample of over 33,000 students in 13 countries (with 63% of the studies set in the U.S.), the authors found significant effects of SEL programs on student academic achievement overall and specifically math and literacy scores, as measured by standardized test scores and grade point averages.[21] Compared to programs that lasted up to half a school year, SEL programs that lasted a whole school year had even larger impacts on student achievement. A similar analysis with a mix of RCTs and QEDs on programs in the

United States found that students who participate in SEL interventions see, on average, an increase of .09 standard deviations in academic achievement.[22]

Key finding #3. *Students who participate in SEL have healthier behaviors and feel better at school.* Participants demonstrate increased prosocial behaviors, stronger teacher and peer relationships, and improved well-being. Participation in SEL programs is also associated with reduced aggression, bullying, and other harmful peer behaviors. Students also report improved mental health including reduced anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Students who participate in SEL programs have increased prosocial and positive social behaviors, peer relations, and well-being.[23] A quasi-experimental evaluation of the Open Circle intervention with 154 fourth graders found improved teacher-reported social skills, particularly for students in urban areas.[24] Students who participate in SEL interventions also tend to make more diverse friendship choices, as found in a quasi-experimental study, and to have more positive relationships with teachers and stronger beliefs in participatory citizenship, as reported in a recent RCT.[25]

Students who participate in SEL programs demonstrate reduced aggression and lower rates of bullying. Evaluations of SEL programs demonstrate improvements in social competence, decreased aggression and attitudes/beliefs related to aggression, and a reduced likelihood of reporting perpetration of homophobic name-calling and sexual violence.[26] An RCT of the Positive Action program in 14 urban schools with 1,170 students in grades 3–8 showed fewer declines in self-control, prosocial peer behaviors, and altruism and fewer increases in aggression for students who participated in the program.[27] A recent meta-analysis of bullying prevention programs in 24 countries, with roughly one-third of the outcomes coming from the U.S., showed statistically significant decreases in bullying perpetration and bullying victimization among students who participated in the anti-bullying program in comparison to their peers. Most outcomes in the meta-analysis are from QEDs (56%), with the remainder (44%) from RCTs.[28] RCT evidence demonstrates that SEL programs can reduce bullying through classroom-based programs (e.g., Second Step),[29] programs in other parts of the school (e.g., Playworks at recess),[30] and after-school SEL programs (e.g., WINGS for Kids).[31] Finally, findings from two RCTs conclude that students who participate in SEL report reductions in their experiences of stress and anxiety and tend to report fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, greater positive affect, and higher overall life satisfaction.[32]

Key finding #4. *Students who participate in SEL programs feel safer at school.* Findings from two quasi-experimental studies demonstrate that students who participate in SEL programs have more positive perceptions of their school climate and feel safer in learning at school.[33] A recent meta-analysis examining the effects of SEL programs from a mix of RCTs and QEDs found meaningful improvements in students' perceptions of school climate and safety.[34] These patterns align with a broader body of quasi-experimental research showing that SEL programs, whether or not they explicitly target relational aggression and strengthen prosocial behavior,[35] are important components for safer and more connected schools.

The contributions of SEL to feelings of school safety and connectedness are best illustrated by school-based bullying prevention programs. One large-scale quasi-experimental study of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, implemented in 210 Pennsylvania schools with 70,000 students, documented decreased bullying perpetration and victimization across grade levels, gains in empathy, and stronger student–teacher relationships.[36] Similarly, a multiyear quasi-experimental study of nearly 3,500 elementary students across six Colorado schools found that

implementation of the Bully-Proofing Your School program was associated with reduced bullying and increased student perceptions that aggression was actively discouraged at school.[37] The influence of bullying interventions extend beyond reductions in aggressive behavior at the individual and classroom levels to broader improvements in school climate and students' sense of belonging. A pilot evaluation of the COREMatters program using a quasi-experimental post-test-only design with 404 middle-school students in a Midwestern public school found improvements in student self-esteem, stronger school cohesion and trust, and improved perceptions of safety and belonging among the students who participated in the intervention.[38] The research literature suggests that effective bullying interventions curb harmful behaviors and foster more supportive, connected school environments where students feel safer, more valued, and more engaged.

In addition to reducing aggression and bullying, SEL programs influence students' sense of safety and belonging by shaping how relationships and discipline are addressed across the school. Schoolwide SEL approaches can incorporate restorative practices, which frame discipline as an opportunity to build relationships, address harm, and keep students connected to the school community, in contrast to exclusionary punishment.[39] Key features of restorative practices include establishing shared expectations for behavior, using structured conversations to address conflict, and supporting students in repairing relationships following harm. Although short-term changes in disciplinary outcomes are not always evident, restorative practices are designed to improve school climate by promoting more respectful, consistent, and supportive interactions between students and adults, which, in turn, can strengthen students' feelings of safety and belonging.[40] Programs that target classroom climate and relationships provide clear examples of how everyday classroom interactions shape students' feelings of safety and belonging. The Facing History and Ourselves program uses curriculum and instructional practices that encourage discussion, reflection, and respectful exchange among students, particularly around topics related to identity, social conflict, and moral decision-making. An RCT found that students who participated in the program described their classrooms as more caring and respectful and reported stronger relationships with teachers and peers than students in comparison classrooms.[41] Participants also showed an increase in empathy and prosocial behavior, skills that support positive peer interactions and reduce the likelihood that conflict escalates into harm.

Key finding #5. *Programs delivered by teachers have the strongest impact on student outcomes.* SEL programs are most effective at improving student academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes when they are delivered by the classroom teacher. Although some SEL programs are facilitated by school mental health providers or other members of the school community, most SEL programs are taught by classroom teachers. A meta-analysis of RCTs and QEDs suggests that students benefit more when SEL is facilitated by the classroom teacher than when the programming is delivered by other members of the school community (such as mental health providers) or program staff.[42] However, most classroom teachers in the U.S. do not receive explicit preservice training on SEL instructional practices. Schonert-Reichl and colleagues found that all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia address some area of "Teachers' SEL" in their certification requirements, though implementation is varied and incomplete.[43] While more than half of states include a focus on promoting students' SEL, it receives little attention in required courses in teacher preparation programs. This gap presents an opportunity for policy: Given the robust evidence of the effectiveness of SEL when it is facilitated by the classroom teacher, what would happen if classroom educators were trained in SEL facilitation as part of their certification?

Key finding #6. *Programs that are sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (SAFE) have the strongest effects on student outcomes.* The most robust evidence for SAFE programs comes from two seminal meta-analyses of RCT and quasi-experimental studies worldwide, which demonstrate that programs providing sequenced, organized, and active instruction focused on specific skills show the largest effects.[44] These programs might directly instruct students to recognize signs of stress during a test rather than discussing social and emotional concepts broadly.

Sequenced programs are those that intentionally teach certain skills before others. Sequenced programs that teach intrapersonal skills (e.g., emotional skills) before interpersonal skills (e.g., social skills) achieve better outcomes, on average, than programs that are not sequenced or that teach interpersonal skills first. These decisions align with developmental theory, which supports the teaching of basic emotional and executive function skills first to support the more complex skills required for students to navigate social situations, resolve conflict, and set and achieve goals.[45] These programs typically have detailed program manuals or curricula, whereas programs that are not sequenced may involve only one session (e.g., a bullying prevention assembly).[46]

Active programs use interactive forms of learning that require children to apply the targeted skills. Research shows that interactive programs tend to be more effective;[47] in SEL programs, this interactivity typically takes the form of role-playing or other activities in which students might practice using a particular skill. For example, students might practice resolving disagreements using "I" statements, such as “I feel frustrated because you took the blue marker before I was done,” or responding using active listening statements, such as “You feel frustrated because I took the blue marker before you were done. I’ll ask next time.” Other examples of active learning include playing a game to practice executive function skills (e.g., remembering a growing list of items as students name one by one what they’re bringing on a picnic), taking part in group discussions, or using an SEL tool such as a feelings thermometer to talk through the valence and intensity of a student’s emotion.[48] In programs that are not active, students typically receive information passively—for example, by watching videos or listening to didactic instruction without opportunities to practice.

Focused and explicit programs allocate time to fostering a specific set of social and emotional skills and teach or address these skills in clear and deliberate ways. Programs that are not focused or explicit may address broad topics such as character-building without naming or teaching specific skills. Importantly, programs that are sequenced, use active forms of learning, and are focused and explicit produce better outcomes.[49]

Key finding #7. *SEL benefits students throughout school and beyond.* Evidence points to effectiveness of SEL from early childhood through elementary, middle, and high school, with additional evidence suggesting that students who participate in SEL programs have significantly improved life outcomes long after they graduate.

Early childhood SEL programs tend to focus on foundational social and emotional skills (e.g., self-management, social awareness) and have been shown to affect children’s social, emotional, behavioral, and basic academic skills. For example, using a randomized design, the Head Start REDI Program integrated the Preschool PATHS Curriculum into Head Start classrooms with a sample of 356 4-year-old children. One year after its implementation, the participating students had increased vocabulary and emergent literacy skills, learning engagement, emotional understanding, social problem-solving, and social behavior.[50] Multiple follow-up studies of Head Start REDI following the same sample of students who participated in the RCT found sustained

effects of the intervention, including decreased emotional symptoms and behavioral problems in high school.[51] In a meta-analysis of 57 studies that used an RCT or quasi-experimental control group design that controlled for group differences, preschool SEL programs improved overall social and emotional skills and reduced problem behaviors among participating students relative to the students in the control group.[52]

In elementary and middle school, students' social worlds become increasingly important, and the outcomes of interest in SEL programs often relate to social skills, including social competence, prosocial behavior, peer acceptance, social problem-solving, and empathy.[53] In an RCT examining more than 1,000 third- and fourth-grade students participating in the 4Rs program (a literacy-integrated SEL curriculum in which the Rs correspond to reading, writing, respect, and resolution), students who participated in the intervention demonstrated a slower rate of growth in hostile attribution bias and aggressive interpersonal negotiation strategies, decreased depressive and ADHD symptoms, slower growth in aggressive behavior, and increased social competence.[54] Findings across RCTs of individual programs implemented in elementary school demonstrate small but consistent effects on behavioral skills in middle childhood, including decreased aggression, conduct problems, on-task behavior, and absenteeism.[55]

Interventions for older children and adolescents that focus on perspective-taking, moral reasoning, and civic agency have been shown in two RCTs to increase empathy, prosocial behavior, beliefs in participatory citizenship, and civic self-efficacy among participating students in comparison to their peers.[56]

SEL programs also demonstrate long-term effects. A meta-analysis of 82 studies that collected outcomes from 6 months to 18 years post-intervention found positive effects on SEL skills, attitudes, and academic performance and decreased emotional distress and drug use. The findings were strongest for interventions that originally took place in childhood (ages 5–10). Of the included studies, 63% used randomization, and 54% took place in the U.S.[57]

Key finding #8. *SEL programs can be cost-effective.* Though the evidence is limited to a small number of programs, the strongest evidence on the cost-effectiveness of SEL programs comes from BCAs showing that the long-term benefits of SEL substantially outweigh implementation costs. Cost-effectiveness studies further show that how and when (e.g., in one grade versus another) SEL is implemented can matter for the balance of per-student costs and the maintenance of meaningful outcomes.

The most robust evidence for the cost-effectiveness of SEL programs comes from a BCA of four SEL programs. BCAs—which compare a program's expected benefits to its expected costs—can be challenging to implement in evaluations of the typical outcomes of interest in SEL because the method requires both the costs and benefits to be stated in monetary terms. For example, Belfield et al. (2015) could estimate monetary benefits for only three of fourteen outcomes of interest (attention challenges, social competence, and aggressive behavior) in their evaluation of 4Rs using shadow pricing (i.e., assignment of a dollar value to something without a clear market price) based on education- and health care–related costs for servicing student needs.[58] The BCA of the four programs examined demonstrates meaningful and consistent benefits that greatly outweigh the programs' cost of implementation.

Cost-effectiveness analysis (CEA) examines how much additional improvement is gained from every dollar spent on one program in comparison with the gain from a dollar spent on another program, in another implementation context for a program, or

in a business-as-usual (BAU) scenario. Hunter et al. (2018) conducted a CEA of the Social Skills Improvement System – Classwide Intervention Program (SSIS-CIP) to compare the cost-effectiveness of implementing the program in first-grade versus second-grade classrooms.[59] In CEA, only one outcome is examined at a time, and in this study, the selected outcome was student social skills, identified as the most proximal outcome. After evaluating the program costs and calculating the effect sizes, the authors calculated the incremental cost-effectiveness ratio (ICER), or the per-student cost required to gain a standardized unit of effectiveness. Implementing the SSIS-CIP in second grade cost approximately half as much per student as implementing it in first grade. A similar study conducted in England compared the PATHS program to the BAU setting and demonstrated the program was cost-effective.[60]

Cost analysis methods represent a promising way to demonstrate the value and potential of SEL programs, but they require several considerations. First, it is unclear how to apply monetary values to improvements in social and emotional outcomes. BCAs focus on behaviors that can easily be expressed in monetary terms, which makes improvements in outcomes such as self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and sense of belonging—often crucial parts of a program's theory of change—hard to quantify and include. Another challenge is when to measure the outcomes for a BCA. Measures of benefits taken immediately after an intervention may miss important long-term gains, while other interventions may have effects that grow over time. A final consideration is how to handle potential spillover effects, such as improvements to the overall school or classroom climate, whereby program benefits may extend to students not directly involved.[61]

Conclusion

A robust body of evidence documents the effectiveness of universal SEL programs in schools across social, emotional, mental health, behavioral, and academic outcomes. At the same time, much of this chapter has emphasized the variability (i.e., heterogeneity) in SEL programs and their effects. It is true that most research focuses on average impacts on an average student, addressing the question of whether SEL programs are effective on average. Such work sets the stage for nuanced questions about what effects various types of SEL programs have, what features of those programs are most effective, and which students tend to benefit most from these programs. While some evidence documents the effectiveness of some types of programs for different groups of learners (e.g., effects of antibullying programming on students with diverse racial and ethnic identities),[62] the variation in focus and strategies across SEL programs complicates efforts to aggregate overall evidence of their effectiveness.

There is also growing evidence linking participation in SEL programs to improvements in academic achievement, suggesting that SEL program implementation could be a mechanism for strengthening academic outcomes. Most SEL programs are freestanding and exist adjacent to or outside of traditional academic content (math, literacy, science). However, educators and leaders nationwide are increasingly seeking guidance on how best to embed explicit SEL instruction into academic instructional blocks. Developers of SEL programming are moving to meet this need by providing explicit guidance and adapting the programs; however, evaluations of these approaches are still relatively rare.[63]

SEL is embedded in the landscape of U.S. education, attracting substantial investment and benefitting from a large and growing research base. Across more than three

decades of study, universal, school-based SEL programs have been associated with improvements in students' social and emotional skills, academic outcomes, behavioral functioning, mental health, and perceptions of school climate and safety. These effects have been documented across developmental stages, from early childhood through adolescence, and in a range of contexts. At the same time, the field is characterized by meaningful variation in frameworks, program components, instructional approaches, and study quality. The evidence is strongest for structured, skills-based programs delivered by classroom teachers and designed according to the SAFE principles. This detailed and evolving evidence base can inform decisions about the selection, implementation, and evaluation of SEL programs in schools. The Improving Student Outcomes website is a resource on the latest SEL evaluation evidence. Home of the regularly updated living systematic review of SEL programs in the United States, the website includes reports, data visualizations, and interactive content.

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