

## National Association of State Boards of Education

### FIFTH INDICATOR:

## ➔ Social and Emotional Learning

By Sarah-Jane Lorenzo

**Students equipped with social and emotional learning (SEL) skills are more likely to learn, persist in the face of challenges, and succeed in life. Despite a growing awareness of the centrality of SEL skill building to student success, states have not been tempted to gauge the extent to which students master these skills by including SEL as an accountability measure in their state plans for the Every Student Succeeds Act. Yet they would be wise not to ignore SEL altogether.**

Personal management, self-efficacy, social awareness, and growth mind-sets are all SEL skills (see box).<sup>1</sup> Research has found that SEL programs increase student test scores by 11 to 17 percent and that social and emotional development is associated with improvements in student behavior and reduced emotional distress.<sup>2</sup>

But including measures of students' SEL competencies in statewide accountability systems is likely not the best way forward for a few reasons. First, measurement techniques are not yet strong enough to yield reliable data, according to experts.<sup>3</sup> Roger P. Weissberg, chief knowledge officer at the Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), says assessment is a key issue: "When measures are used for state accountability, it should be really clear that doing that is going to be understood and beneficial at the local level," he said.<sup>4</sup> He is concerned that current assessments of social and emotional competence, while useful as local feedback, are not strong enough to meet that standard.

Second, state boards of education and state education agencies must ensure that

their schools have the resources to promote SEL before adding it as an element to an accountability formula. Educators can encourage and support students' development of social and emotional skills, but doing so is not always easy. Understanding evidence-based strategies is a helpful first step. Access to professional learning opportunities and support from school and district leaders can help teachers gain a comprehensive understanding of social and emotional growth and learn to foster that growth in their classrooms.

### ALTERNATIVES FOR PROMOTING SEL

While he does not advocate statewide SEL accountability, CASEL's Weissberg does believe schools and districts should become more aware of students' social and emotional competencies. "I think that what's most important right now is to focus on how to promote kids' social and emotional competence and use measurement for feedback and enhancement purposes," he said. "And I think that's most likely to be done at the local level."

Linda Darling-Hammond, president and CEO of the Learning Policy Institute and Stanford University emeritus professor, also recommends a local approach.<sup>5</sup> Darling-Hammond suggests states recognize four tiers of accountability. The first tier identifies schools eligible for targeted assistance and intervention; the second tier includes informational, state-reported measures used for monitoring; the third tier includes state-supported measurement tools districts may but are not required to use; and the fourth tier includes measures that are locally developed and employed.

Darling-Hammond recommends that states measure SEL by using the second or third tiers of accountability and avoid its inclusion

in the first, largely because so many factors outside schools' control influence students' social and emotional development.

"You don't want to paint schools as deficit ridden because they serve students who may need a greater lift to get them to feeling like they have a growth mind-set," she said. "But you could put those measures into tier two or three where you could report them or support local districts in collecting those data for their own purposes."<sup>6</sup>

### SEL IN CALIFORNIA'S CORE DISTRICTS

Although SEL has yet to be included in state-level accountability systems, a voluntary group of districts in California is monitoring social and emotional engagement. The California CORE collaborative, comprising eight districts, includes a lightly weighted SEL measure that constitutes 8 percent of its School Quality Improvement Index. This formula relies primarily on academic factors when evaluating schools.

However, SEL outcomes captured in the index have not been used to inform stakes-based accountability decisions. "It's not about labeling," said Noah Bookman, the CORE districts' chief strategy officer.<sup>7</sup> "Accountability should be focused on capacity and improvement" as well as giving schools the opportunity to highlight successes, he said.

The CORE collaborative banded together in 2010 to share their work and then to apply for a No Child Left Behind accountability waiver, which they received in 2013. The districts have since continued to share work and strategize. CORE districts measure social and emotional competency most directly through school-based surveys delivered to students, teachers, and parents, which would be problematic were the results tied to consequences. Teachers could easily game such an instrument by predisposing students to respond in a certain way.

Moreover, it takes substantial resources and time to get strong parent participation in surveys—a serious obstacle, especially if

## GROWTH MIND-SETS FOR TEACHERS

Once educators learn how to promote students' social and emotional growth, they can employ these strategies in their own work. Growth mind-sets, which help students sustain a positive attitude toward challenging learning, can also help teachers improve their practice. Teachers can both adopt and exemplify growth mind-sets by promoting challenges, embracing mistakes, and providing learning-focused feedback. When a student stumbles academically, for instance, an educator can ask, "What have you tried, and what can you try next?" A growth mind-set also encourages teachers to praise the learning process rather than the person in order to emphasize that all students can develop talents.<sup>a</sup>

a. Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Random House, 2006).

they were imposed upon districts.

There are also more indirect measurement options. For instance, the CORE districts include chronic absenteeism among their measures of socioemotional health and school climate. Darling-Hammond agrees that factors such as chronic absenteeism and suspension rates can provide insight to students' competencies. "Kids who have been taught good conflict resolution skills and good collaborative interpersonal skills have fewer reasons to be suspended, so we think of that as an outcome of social-emotional learning and school climate," she said. Similarly, while chronic absenteeism is influenced by many factors, including access to transportation and home environments, "some of it is creating a good, supportive, emotionally safe environment where kids feel they can come to school," she said.

Although the CORE accountability formula is not tied to stakes-based accountability, Bookman hopes the districts can receive a waiver to serve as an "innovation zone" and test the formula as a mechanism for identifying "priority" schools in need of assistance and "rewards" schools engaging in exemplary work.

## NEXT STEPS FOR STATE BOARDS

Several states are already actively engaged in SEL support through CASEL's Collaborating States Initiative (CSI). Created to support local efforts to measure and promote social and emotional growth, CSI includes 17 states in its network. The states are working to define social and emotional competencies and create policies and implementation guidelines to advance evidence-based SEL programs and practices. Each state is working at its own pace to promote policies and guidance that best suit local needs. CASEL provides resources, tools, and consultation when states request it. Since it was launched last year, the CSI has noted that states and state boards have raised the profile of SEL by adding it to agendas, making it a topic of meetings, and adopting related goals.

States interested in advancing SEL should be prepared for opposition from those who believe state promotion of it represents an overreach. Following stakeholder pushback, Georgia and Tennessee withdrew from CASEL's CSI network, for example.

Linda Dusenbury, CASEL's senior research scientist, said the group's ideal is not for states to tell districts what to do but for states to provide tools, resources, and guidance to help districts maximize their capacity to address local contexts.<sup>8</sup>

Another organization exploring best practices for SEL and academic achievement is the Atlantic Council's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.

State boards of education and state education agencies do not need to include SEL as a fifth indicator in order to promote it. They can instead promote SEL initiatives and help create measurement tools that schools can use to better understand students' skill sets. States can also provide professional learning resources to aid schools and districts in using those measurement tools and understanding the data they generate.

*Sarah-Jane Lorenzo is NASBE's research associate.*

## NOTES

1. Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Random House, 2006).
2. John Payton et al., "The Positive Impact of Social and Emotional Learning for Kindergarten to Eighth-Grade Students" (Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2008), <http://www.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/PDF-4-the-positive-impact-of-social-and-emotional-learning-for-kindergarten-to-eighth-grade-students-executive-summary.pdf>.
3. Samuel H. Rikoon, Meghan W. Brenneman, and Kevin T. Petway, "Assessing Social-Emotional Learning," *State Education Standard* 16, no. 3 (September 2016): 20–23.
4. Interview by author, March 2017.
5. Hanna Melnick, Channa Cook-Harvey, and Linda Darling-Hammond, "Encouraging Social and Emotional Learning in the Context of New Accountability" (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2017), <https://www.learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/encouraging-social-emotional-learning-new-accountability-report>.
6. Interview by author, March 2017.
7. Interview by author, March 2017.
8. Interview by author, April 2017.