



Protect Life Skills, Equity, and Healing in Ohio Schools: Prioritize Social-Emotional Learning to Support Ohio Students

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Ohio’s strategic plan for education, [Each Child, Our Future](#), centers around a singular vision for preK-12 education that “each child is challenged to discover and learn, prepared to pursue a

fulfilling post-high school path and empowered to become a resilient, lifelong learner who contributes to society.”

Achieving this vision for our children hinges on the critical interplay between four equal learning domains: **Foundational Knowledge & Skills**; **Well-Rounded Content**; **Leadership & Reasoning**; and **Social-Emotional Learning**. Each of these domains plays a unique role in a child’s education and bears equal weight in the wellbeing of every student in school and in life beyond K-12.

While each of these domains have come under critical focus during the pandemic with concern about the impacts of remote learning, social-emotional learning (or SEL) is a domain that has been receiving a lot of attention.

One reason is because being equipped with social-emotional learning skill sets is critically important [during times of stress, uncertainty, and crisis](#), especially for young people. The very social-emotional learning competencies that help children learn and grow every day – such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, decision-making, and what we call “life skills” more generally – can also help them navigate the complex realities that have complicated their daily lives before, but especially since, the pandemic started.



Figure 1 Four Equal Learning Domains in Each Child, Our Future

The fact is that all children, to varying degrees, have experienced disruptions to their routines, educations, and relationships due to COVID-19, and these disruptions have caused many children to grapple with powerful emotions like anger, fear, grief, hopelessness, loneliness, and powerlessness, just as the adults in their lives have as well. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that the health of



children and adolescents is profoundly impacted by what is occurring in the world around them and what they absorb from the people and systems they interact with on a day-to-day basis.

Data shows that nearly [two in three young people](#) aged 16-25 expressed they were feeling down, depressed, or hopeless in late 2020. According to [a national parent survey from around the same time period](#), 60% of parents reported that their child had experienced mental or emotional health challenges in the past month, such as social isolation/loneliness, anxiety, difficulty handling emotions and coping with stress in healthy ways, depression, and even suicidal thoughts (which were reported in highest proportion by parents of 9-12 year-olds).

Even prior to the pandemic, [Ohio data](#) painted a worrisome picture for child and adolescent mental health: 1 in 7 children had three or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) ranking us 46th worst out of all 50 states; more than half a million Ohio children aged 17 and under and young adults aged 18-24 respectively had a mental illness or substance use disorder; and our state's rates of teen suicide had spiked 46% over four years.

SEL is one example of Tier 1 supports that schools use as part of a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) that has been identified by many as one key domain that, if integrated universally into a child's school day, can help support prevention, early identification, and intervention in these challenges. Tier 1 supports like SEL can help schools meet all children where they are now as they enter their third school year affected by the pandemic, and it can help school support staff identify any child in crisis who may need referrals to Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports, which are more intensive, individualized interventions.

[CASEL \(Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning\)](#) defines SEL as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions."

The benefits of SEL on short and long-term child wellbeing are wide-ranging and well-documented:

- **Educational Attainment and Learning:** A [landmark 2011 study](#) involving more than 270,000 students found that SEL interventions that were well-designed and well-implemented increased student academic performance by 11 percentile points compared to students who did not participate in a school-based SEL program. The study also found that students who received SEL instruction had reduced likelihood for [disciplinary issues in school](#). Researchers saw these benefits across all student demographics.
- **Workforce Readiness:** SEL competencies align with the skills that employers are seeking in their workforce – the [OhioMeansJobs Readiness Seal](#) outlines key professional skills to be ready for the world of work even that are seamlessly aligned with the competencies of SEL. Research shows that young adults with honed social and emotional "soft skills" have greater employability and retention, especially as the market continues to change with increases in technology and automation. A [2019 Global Talent Trends report](#) found that 89% of employers felt that their "bad hires" typically have poor soft skills. Further, "adaptability" and "coping with uncertainty" were the top two foundational proficiencies linked with higher likelihood of



employment in [a recent study from McKinsey & Co.](#) This report speculates that their value will be even greater in 2030.

- **Health and Wellness:** Social-emotional learning is significantly correlated to a child's short and long-term wellness. [Universal SEL interventions](#) enhance young people's social and emotional skills and reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety in the short term. Further, another [prominent study](#) that followed a cohort of children from birth to age 32 found that children who learned key self-control social and emotional proficiencies in childhood had greater likelihood of good physical health and reduced likelihood of substance dependence.
- **Community and Civic Engagement:** SEL proficiencies can help foster empathy, self and social awareness, and interpersonal skills in students that are key to positive community and civic engagement. [Students in schools with universal SEL programs are more likely to report that their "voice" matters and more likely to volunteer in their communities.](#) In fact, 3 out of 4 current and former students with strong SEL programs in their high schools [surveyed in one study](#) said that they would participate in full-time military, national, or public service compared to about 60% from schools with weak SEL programs. SEL competencies fit squarely within a desire to be one's best self while also making the world a better place.

Current and recent K-12 students report that, while they have a fair or positive view of their high schools' preparation for adult life overall, [many \(especially children from marginalized groups\) say that social and emotional challenges that were not addressed are holding them back from opportunities they want.](#)

The moral imperative to invest in universal, school-based SEL programs is evident – it helps children lead happier, healthier lives with greater stability and more opportunities to thrive. The economic imperative is also indisputable - a [2015 study from Columbia University](#) found that an average return on investment was \$11 for every \$1 spent on SEL programs in schools, demonstrating that it is financially irresponsible not to invest upstream in child social and emotional wellbeing.

And yet, its proven benefits are not the only reason why social-emotional learning has been garnering so much attention lately.

For SEL programs to be effective for all students, they must be anchored by and to equity. According to the [Center for Law and Social Policy \(CLASP\)](#), "When divorced from racial equity, Tier 1 supports, particularly SEL, can further harm students of color and LGBTQIA+ students by ... reaffirm[ing] white, patriarchal, heteronormative, and ableist values and ask young people to 'manage' their emotions and 'constrict' their identities."

Our children do not exist in a vacuum. They are young citizens in a society that is increasingly rife with racial conflict and political divisions – [from hate crimes against Asian Americans amid the coronavirus, to the hatred, violence, and death threats targeting their own school board officials, and even an insurrection at the national capitol less than a year ago.](#) As stated previously, we know that children and adolescents are profoundly impacted by the world around them, and to ignore this fact, to refuse to recognize the potential for every child of complex experience, thought, and feeling, is traumatic for them and neglectful of our responsibilities to protect their well-being. If well-designed and implemented with equity in mind, SEL programs in schools can provide children with supportive adults who listen and



safe spaces where they can process the larger socio-political context that touches nearly every aspect of their lives and that of their peers in different ways.

Unfortunately, educational equity, including SEL programs grounded in equity principles, are at risk of becoming collateral damage in a fundamentally political conflict.

As I wrote about previously regarding [House Bills 322 and 327](#), equity in our society's systems and institutions is increasingly under attack. Schools and educational spaces have now become battlegrounds for culture wars that hinge on stoking fear and leveraging anxieties around shifting demographics and power structures in American society. These battles are a direct reactionary response to pushes for racial equity that followed the murder of George Floyd last summer and have nothing to do with education itself nor what is best for a child's well-being.

What do these attacks place at stake for children? They threaten schools' abilities to emphasize values like curiosity and empathy, to encourage students to work through conflict in a way that appreciates difference in life experiences and background, and to embrace the democratic ideals of multiculturalism and opportunity that mark America at her best.

Pragmatically, they could jeopardize the availability of critically needed evidence-based services that help ensure all children are safe, healthy, challenged, engaged, and supported to learn in school, especially as COVID-19 continues to impact them. Backlash against educational equity could make it more difficult for schools districts to engage in [culturally-responsive pedagogy](#), [social-emotional learning programs](#), and [whole child approaches to learning and wellness](#).

In other words, it could make it more difficult for teachers to use lesson plans that expose students to new perspectives and highlight historical events and figures that may have been neglected in curriculum thus far (no matter how the demographics of these figures may even more accurately reflect those of their student body). It could make it more difficult to incorporate lessons on life skills, like emotional regulation and healthy coping mechanisms that foster positive self-esteem. If whole child initiatives had been disrupted during remote learning, it could have meant less meals were sent home to families who needed them during school closures. The collateral damage posed by this assault on equity in schools is almost too far-reaching to accurately define in scope.

The most outspoken opponents to educational programs tethered to equity say that social-emotional learning programs are "vehicles for anti-whiteness" and "indoctrination". Some call them "Marxist". But with so much historical evidence demonstrating [the real pattern of "backlash dynamics" in U.S. history](#), this warrants analysis into what information (or misinformation) is being used to form an opinion of SEL.

According to a recent [study from the Fordham Foundation](#), 89 percent of Democrats and 75 percent of Republicans agreed that for students to reach their full academic potential, their social and emotional needs must be met. When considering the practical uses of SEL, there's largely widespread agreements that, yes, it is important for our children to goal set, to approach challenges with optimism, to believe in themselves, and to respond ethically in challenging situations. The disconnect comes down to the name – social-emotional learning is ranked 11th out of 12 terms the report used to survey parent preferences on words that all mean largely the same exact thing. "Life skills", parents reported, was their number one preferred term.



The Fordham study is rich with data that demonstrates differences in parents' ideas about familial versus school responsibilities, among other topics to consider when thinking about how to communicate the benefits of SEL for children. The report, aptly named "How to Sell SEL: Parents and the Politics of Social-Emotional Learning," concludes ultimately that while support for SEL is strong across the board, we should start talking about it in different terms ("life skills") to avoid a disconnect, so that we are all on the same page.

However, in a search of the entire report, the word "equity" appears nowhere. Not a single sentence in the 46 pages mentions "equity" or even asks parents their views on how it relates to "life skills".

As we are working together to protect and demonstrate the importance of SEL, it's important that we do not allow "equity" principles to be discounted and forgotten. Because what then, if we do not teach our students to recognize and act on injustice, are the ultimate life skills we want to teach them?

"We can no longer avoid discussing topics that make us uncomfortable," says [Dena Simmons](#), prominent educator and research of social-emotional learning who was formerly the assistant director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. "Our students, incessantly inundated with divisive rhetoric and reports of premeditated acts of violence (or even themselves targets of violence), don't have that luxury. SEL has tremendous potential to create the conditions for youth agency and civic engagement and, ultimately, social change. We owe our students an education that centers on their lives and explicitly addresses the sociopolitical context. This will not only prepare our students to engage civically and peacefully across difference, but also to become the changemakers and leaders we need."

A white-washed version of SEL cannot carry us on to our larger vision for what prek-12 education ought to look like and provide for the students in our state.

After all, "What's the point of teaching children about conflict resolution skills," says Simmons, "if we're not talking about the conflicts that exist because of racism or white supremacy? Without that nuance, SEL risks turning into ['white supremacy with a hug.'](#)"

We must get this right for our children, especially now. So, what can be done to support SEL in schools and protect education equity in Ohio?

- **Prioritize child mental and behavioral health with universal Tier 1 supports, like social-emotional learning, and the expansion of school-based health care in Ohio schools with federal relief dollars.** Children's health and mental wellness is foundational to their ability to thrive and flourish. Federal funds included in ESSER I, ESSER II, and the American Rescue Plan can help our state move more in the direction of our vision and goals for prek-12 education. Ohio needs to prioritize Tier 1 supports that emphasize equity in SEL and are mental and behavioral health-focused, trauma-informed, culturally-responsive, and [healing-centered](#). We should also invest \$25 million per year, over two years, [to support and expand access to integrated school-based, community-connected health care](#).
- **Oppose efforts to rescind the Ohio State Board of Education Resolution to Condemn Racism and Advance Equity.** One year after the resolution's approval, a State Board of Education



member [proposed rescinding the Board's Resolution to Condemn Racism and Advance Equity](#) in a July meeting. [See specific ways you can make your voice heard here.](#)

- **Support school staff wellness.** A [survey published at the beginning of 2021](#) found that nearly a quarter of teachers said they were leaving the profession at the end of the school year. The wellness of school staff and teachers is vital to their ability to model wellness to their students. Further, professional development that encourages educators to improve their own SEL skills [has been shown to positively impact the children they teach in their classrooms.](#)
- **Vote in your local School Board elections on Nov. 2nd.** Get informed about the candidates for school board running in your district. School board leaders make key decisions about the direction of education and school policy in your local community. When you vote, consider what you want the future of education to look like for all children.