



An educator's guide to developing social-emotional learning skills in K–12 students

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Introduction	3
Making the case for social-emotional learning (SEL)	4
Putting it into action	8
Unlocking the magic	11
Create a safe space for classroom discussion	12
Encourage collaboration	13
Lean on an SEL-rich online program	14
How Xello helps k-12 students expand their SEL skills	15
Conclusion, the value of SEL	17



INTRODUCTION:

Developing well-rounded students to create successful futures

Let's start from the beginning: What is the purpose of an education?

While a very broad question, the answer boils down to this: The purpose of an education is to acculturate young people and prepare them with the skills they need to be productive members of society. Productivity generally translates into being prepared to assume a job. And we know that—with the foundation we're building in the classroom today—our hope is to see students succeed in the workplace.

Therefore, districts should constantly strive to look at their curriculum through two lenses: One that builds the technical skills they need to perform in their future jobs, and one that develops the soft skills they need to rise to the top. With this in mind, schools need to infuse their curriculum to introduce social-emotional learning.



Making the case for social-emotional learning (SEL)

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SEL became part of the lexicon in the mid 1990s. Schools have been adapting it ever since, though it has gained momentum over the last few years.

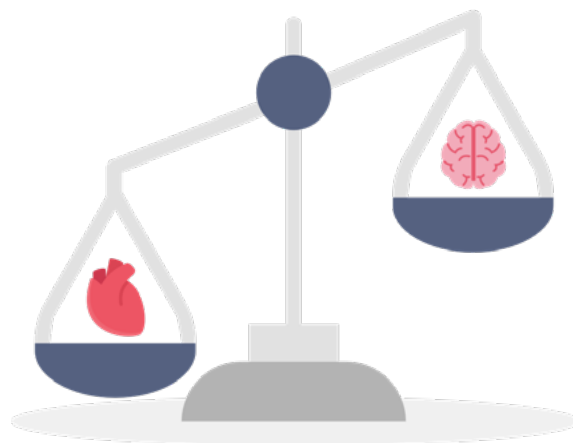
Though SEL is relatively new, [Edutopia](#) says SEL can be traced back to ancient Greece and Plato. In his book *The Republic*, the philosopher “proposed a holistic curriculum that requires a balance of training in physical education, the arts, math, science, character, and moral judgment.” Plato felt, with a “sound system of education and upbringing, you produce citizens of good character.”

Let’s take a step back to clarify what SEL is.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning ([CASEL](#)), the nation’s leading organization advancing the development of academic, social, and emotional competence for all students, offers a definition of SEL: “The process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”

CASEL divides SEL into five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

This might sound all nice and good, positive and pleasant, but does it really need to be taught in schools? After all, it was not taught in the past, and most students seemed to do just fine without it. On top of that, students today need to be groomed so they can contribute and compete in the new digital economy. Shouldn’t precious learning time be spent training students on practical knowledge they’ll need to advance in the workplace?



Making the case for social-emotional learning (SEL)



Much research has been done to determine what, if any, value is gained by inculcating SEL into an educational setting. The results clearly indicate that an education that includes SEL is beneficial for students.

- Consider this [study](#), which found that students who are “SEL participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior ...” The study further explains how a lack of social emotional competency has a negative impact: “... many students lack social-emotional competencies and become less connected to school as they progress from elementary to middle to high school, and this lack of connection negatively affects their academic performance, behavior, and health.”
- The study cited above also notes an academic benefit to SEL. Participating students saw an 11% gain in academic achievement compared with the control group.
- This [study](#) corroborated the findings noted above. It found that students in schools with an SEL program improved academically by 27% versus students in schools without an SEL program. There was a 24% improvement when testing for emotional well-being and social behavior. Furthermore, positive benefits are “evident immediately following the end of intervention and ... persist during various follow-up periods.” The conclusion is that, based on the data, SEL programs are both feasible and effective in a variety of educational contexts in many countries around the world.
- And more proof! This [study](#) found that “on average, for every dollar invested equally across the five SEL interventions, there is a return of eleven dollars.”

Making the case for social-emotional learning (SEL)

Clearly, SEL helps students in school. However, as noted in the introduction, the purpose of education is to prepare students to be productive adults. To make SEL truly valuable in the work setting, it should positively impact students in the long-term.

And it does. This [study](#) published in the American Journal of Public Health “found statistically significant associations between measured social-emotional skills in kindergarten and key young adult outcomes across multiple domains of education, employment, criminal activity, substance use, and mental health.”



Finally, this [study](#), subtitled “A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream,” cites SEL. It says SEL “may be the key to making low-income schools work.” Thus, it can help elevate students who come from poor backgrounds.

There’s enough evidence out there that backs SEL as a part part of every curriculum. It helps fulfill the aims of education and enables students to grow into productive competent adults.



Putting it into action: real
SEL skills that students
can learn in school

Putting it into action: real SEL skills that students can learn in school

While the benefits of implementing SEL into K–12 education has been proven, the question shifts to how SEL can be turned into action.

Which skills should be emphasized that will enable students to move forward?

Since one of the goals of all education, including SEL, is the capability to cope in the real world, it's helpful to consider what skills employers want. Note that [LinkedIn](#) found 57% of senior leaders feel “soft skills are more important than hard skills.”

Think about the process of getting, maintaining, and succeeding at a job. Being adept at SEL will benefit one throughout this cycle.

Before landing a job, there's the interview which starts with a handshake. Although some may view a handshake as intuitive, [The Balance](#) offers 10 tips regarding how to give a proper handshake. These include beginning with an introduction to not using a forceful grip (or offering a fish hand) to ending the handshake. A handshake involves self-awareness and social awareness, two core SEL competencies.

Every job has its stressful moments. The ability to calm oneself and focus on the task at hand is a valuable skill and is the heart of self-management. More schools are teaching students meditation and/or yoga as a tool to help students regulate their emotions. Students who master this skill will find it beneficial throughout their personal and professional lives.



Putting it into action: real SEL skills that students can learn in school

These days change is a regular part of the workplace. One who gets stuck in their ways may be left behind. Adaptability comes with a growth mindset and self-awareness. [TeachThought](#) offers some ideas on how to encourage students to be adaptable: “Varying the teaching strategies we use, the setup of the classroom, the ways that learning is demonstrated by students, and even the guidelines for group work or homework can help students learn to adapt.”

Success in the workplace requires being able to work well with others, which means collaboration. Along with collaboration often comes the need for persuasion. The challenges of trying to convince others to adopt your idea or inspiring others to follow your path require social awareness and relationship skills.

To be persuasive, one has to be able to clearly articulate their thoughts (either in speech or writing, or both) and be a good listener. Listening carefully to someone else allows the listener to recognize what is meaningful to the speaker, which can be used to persuade them. There are many ways that listening skills can be taught in school, such as simply having students repeat back something they heard.

When schools incorporate real SEL skills they can prepare students to not just cope, but thrive in successful careers.



Unlocking the magic: how to teach SEL

Unlocking the magic: how to teach SEL

Teaching SEL is not necessarily intuitive and is often hard to put into words. After all, traditional teaching meant one teacher standing in front of a classroom of students giving lessons. It's as if the teachers took from a vessel of knowledge and poured it into each student.

This style of teaching may have worked in the past, but it is no longer the best way to reach students, particularly at the K-12 level. Furthermore, this method is less effective when it comes to teaching SEL.

Once again, consider the five core competencies of SEL:

- 1 Self-awareness
- 2 Self-management
- 3 Social awareness
- 4 Relationship skills
- 5 Responsible decision-making

Much of SEL involves interaction with others and a recognition of self.

Although specific classes can be designed to integrate the core SEL competencies, the concepts can also be naturally integrated into every class.

Create a safe space for classroom discussion

[Learning Forward](#), an association devoted exclusively to advancing professional learning for student success, offers a few suggestions as to how SEL looks in the classroom. When classes begin each fall, rules of conduct and expectations are established. Typically, this occurs with teachers going over a list of dos and don'ts.

Instead of simply stating the expectations, [Learning Forward](#) suggests that teachers conduct discussions with students regarding classroom procedures and incorporate the “student voice



Unlocking the magic: how to teach SEL

with the rules and procedures of the classroom.” At that point, students are provided with “strategies so that they can monitor and regulate their behavior and emotions in the classroom.”

In this model, students are expected to be self-aware and incorporate self-management. There’s also an element of responsible decision making. All this can happen beginning on day one.

Classroom discussions are another great opportunity to incorporate SEL. Teachers can establish expectations that students will listen to their classmates, respond appropriately when the opportunity arises, and share their thoughts in a respectful manner. This type of classroom enables students to practice four of the primary competencies (social awareness, self-awareness, relationship skills, and self-management) of SEL.

Encourage collaboration

Making time for group work also helps incorporate SEL. When students work together successfully, they collaborate in order to gain consensus. Teamwork requires listening to group members, considering what they have to say, and integrating multiple perspectives. Groupwork incorporates each of the five core competencies of SEL.

Educators can also encourage students to take more control of their education. Instead of sitting passively (waiting for information to be poured into them), students can express their curiosity and ask questions of their own. Teachers can also lead discussions that include open-ended questions.

When teachers allow students the opportunity to comment on open-ended questions (or thoughts), such interaction can lead to a deep dive into a topic and inspire debate. As students have more opportunities to participate in these types of discussions, they gain confidence in expressing themselves and develop their thought process. Such teaching methods not only engage a few of the core competencies, they are more engaging and lead to deeper learning.



Unlocking the magic: how to teach SEL



Lean on an SEL-rich online program

Integrating SEL into the classroom does not have to fall entirely on the shoulders of the classroom teacher. There are a number of online programs which teach SEL. These programs are calibrated to meet each student at their personal level and integrate lessons that work for them.

Online programs are particularly beneficial for students who may be less comfortable expressing their opinions in a group setting. Students who are shy or concerned that what they want to say might not be “right,” are freed to respond to the online program without fear of being judged.

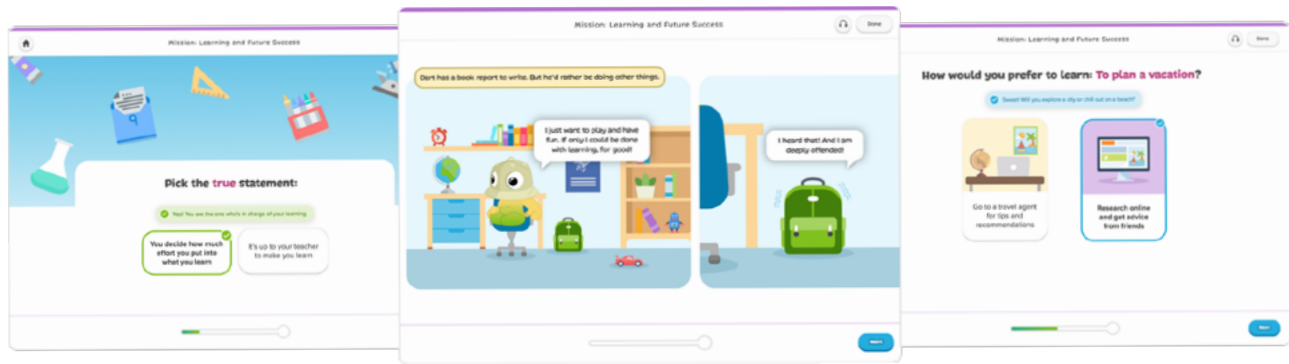
Finally, an online program can provide teachers feedback about student performance. With this information, teachers can design and alter lessons to reinforce areas students need help in.

In order to successfully integrate SEL for all students, schools should offer a combination of offline and online activities so every student can have opportunities to practice the five core competencies.



How Xello helps K-12
students expand their
SEL skills

How Xello helps K-12 students expand their SEL skills



Xello, an online college and career readiness program, can help students develop their SEL competencies. And the time to develop those competencies begins in kindergarten.

Xello for Elementary, a program for students in grades K–5, gives students an early start in future planning. As part of that preparation, there’s a focus on SEL competencies. Some may believe grade school is too early for such a focus – just let kids be kids. However, this program simply opens the door of curiosity through online and in-class activities with an emphasis on building social-emotional intelligence and soft skills.

When students begin with Xello for Elementary, they craft a story of who they are now and what makes them unique. They’re able to upload or customize their account and identify their skills and interests. With this opportunity, students build self-awareness as they journey through the program. Via other activities students learn self-management and relationship skills.

As students move into middle school and high school, they transition into a new Xello experience that includes assessments that build self-knowledge. The engaging assessments encourage reflection about personal topics including personality, unique interests, and strengths. Along the same line, students create personalized portfolios. Both tasks inspire self-awareness.

Lessons are personalized based on a student’s work in Xello. They are given the opportunity to reflect and reassess, and to build communication, problem solving, and teamwork skills, all of which dovetail with each of the core SEL competencies.

Schools that implement Xello directly help their students prepare for workplace success and build up their students’ SEL.



Conclusion:
the value behind SEL

Conclusion: the value behind SEL

SEL skills are valuable. Students who cultivate their SEL skills benefit academically and emotionally. And most importantly, this value does not end after graduation. SEL skills are desired by employers, and people who have developed them fare better professionally.

There are opportunities throughout the school day for teachers to focus on SEL skills—and these opportunities should be seized. Start with traditionally teaching SEL in the classroom. Then go above and beyond by incorporating an EdTech tool which can help students further build their SEL skills. The tool can work in conjunction with what is learned in the classroom and assist each student, no matter their learning style, in fostering each of the five core competencies that make up SEL.

