



SEL IN CLASSROOMS AMID COVID-19:
Supporting Teachers with Social Emotional Learning and Development

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought more than its fair share of emotional distress to people across the globe. Traditional ways of teaching in schools was interrupted and caused most administrators, teachers, parents, and students to juggle between in-person and online learning. These changes have had an impact on students' emotional well-being and academic performance.

In May 2020, The New York Times reported, "The shuttering of the American education system severed students from more than just classrooms, friends and extracurricular activities. It has also cut off an estimated 55 million children and teenagers from school staff members whose open doors and compassionate advice helped them build self-esteem, navigate the pressures of adolescence and cope with trauma....mental health experts worry about the psychological toll on a younger generation that was already experiencing soaring rates of depression, anxiety and suicide before the pandemic" (Levin, 2020).

During the same time, V. J. Calderon (2020) from Gallup indicated, "Some parents are already concerned for the emotional and mental health of their children in the midst of pandemic response measures. School closures not only upended most students' learning mode, it deeply disrupted students' social networks and interactions with classmates and teachers." Consequently, with cities and states loosening restrictions and school districts opening back up, it is now more important than ever for administrators and teachers to implement Social Emotional Learning (SEL) practices with students and staff whether they are in-person or online.

The Research and Evaluation Institute (REI), a division of the Harris County Department of Education, works to provide evidenced-based practices and information to assist school districts in their efforts to address the social and emotional needs of their students. This paper will introduce the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) roadmap created by the Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL), the pioneers of Social Emotional Learning, to help schools navigate SEL in the current climate. This paper will also discuss some specific SEL strategies teachers can use to support their students during this COVID-19 era.

CASEL defines SEL as a process for helping students develop the skills necessary to create healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2020). Besides providing a foundation for safe and positive learning, SEL prepares students to succeed in school and throughout life. Simultaneously, SEL improves students' attitudes toward school, reduces depression and stress, and lessens disciplinary records and drug use (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki Taylor and Schellingerm, 2011; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, and Weissberg, 2017; Weissberg, 2016).

For SEL to be most effective, teachers should embed it within the curriculum (Edgar, Morrison, & Morrison, 2020). CASEL created guidelines that include five key components to help educators properly embed SEL into their curriculum. The five components are:

- 1. Self-Awareness:** the ability for students to accurately recognize their own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence their behavior. Using Self-Awareness strategies, students can learn to accurately assess their own strengths and limitations.
- 2. Self-Management:** the ability for students to successfully regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations. Self-management teaches students to delay gratification, manage stress, and control impulses.
- 3. Social Awareness:** the ability for students to empathize with people of different backgrounds or cultures. It involves understanding that different social norms for behavior exist. Social awareness also provides students with the ability to recognize resources available to them through family, school, and/or community resources.
- 4. Relationship Skills:** the tools that students need to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals. Relationship skills also help students learn to communicate clearly, listen actively, and cooperate with others.
- 5. Responsible Decision Making:** the ability for students to make constructive decisions about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns and social norms. Students develop the ability to realize the consequences of actions and to take the health and well-being of themselves and others into consideration when making decisions.

To be most effective, as shown in Figure 1, each component should be embedded into curriculums, school policies, and/or provided within family and community partnerships (CASEL, 2020). These five components of SEL can be implemented anywhere learning takes place whether it is in-person or online. Teachers across the state are finding ways to incorporate the five components into their virtual and in-person curriculums. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) recommends CASEL as the best practice guidelines for the middle school and high school levels (Texas Education Agency, n.d.).

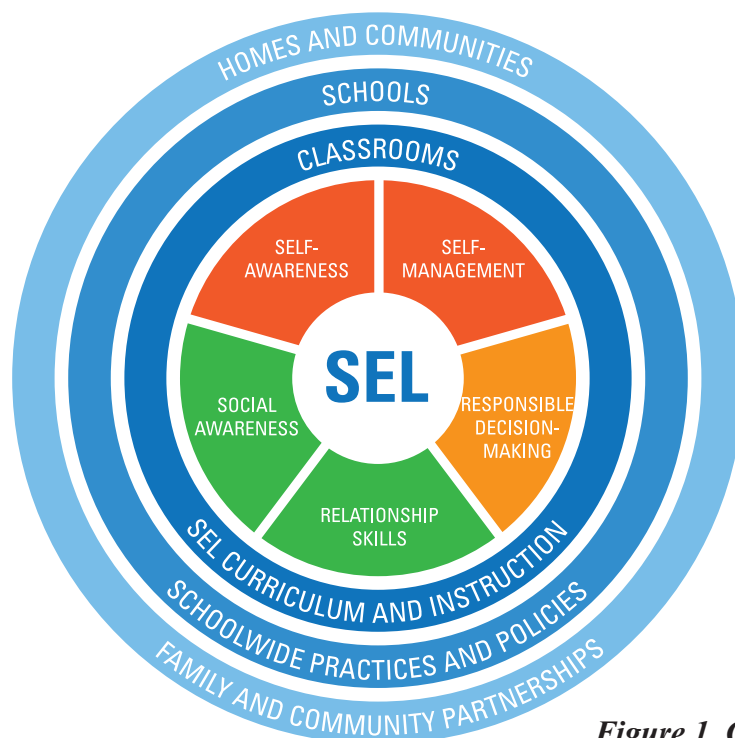


Figure 1. Casel's Framework

Roadmap to Implement SEL During COVID-19 Era

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the nation have been forced to offer alternatives to traditional in-person learning. Some alternatives include: 1) a strictly online learning environment; 2) a hybrid method of learning to include both online and in-person learning or 3) limited in-person learning where students and teachers continue to meet in person, but schoolwork completed through an online platform. With the shift to online learning becoming a new reality, teachers, and professional counselors are concerned about how they will effectively maintain and support their students' SEL.

Figure 2 below depicts the SEL roadmap CASEL developed with more than 40 organizations to support school leaders and leadership teams planning for SEL in the current climate. CASEL hoped that schools—in partnerships with their communities, districts, and states—would use these four SEL Critical Practices, each with three to five activities, to continuously reunite, renew, and thrive their students in SEL during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. This section will discuss the details of these practices.

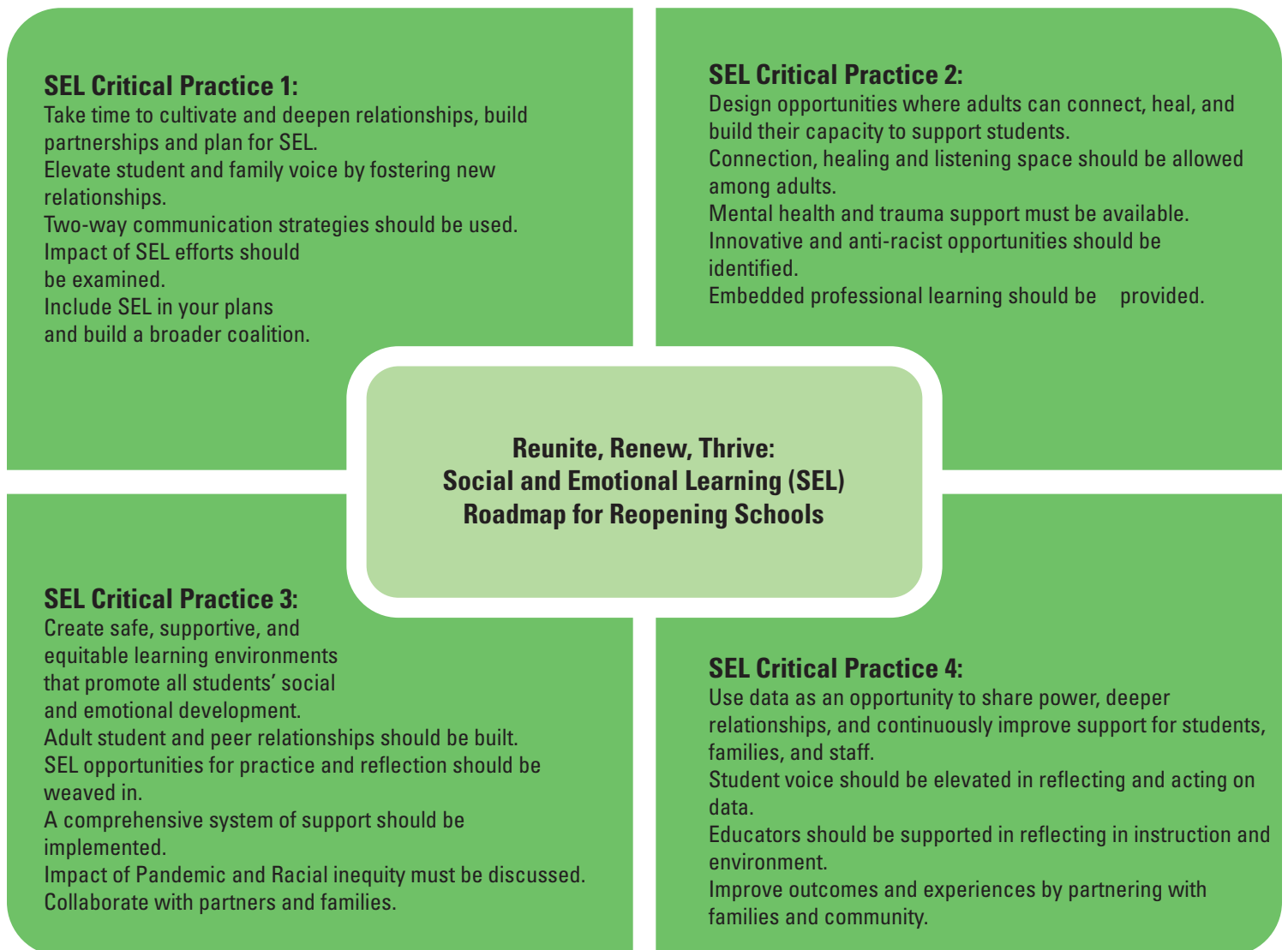


Figure 2. CASEL's Roadmap

SEL Critical Practice 1: Educators are encouraged to take time to develop and deepen relationships within the school community (e.g., students, parents, community partners, educators, etc.), especially those who may have been left out of decision making in the past. By including all members of the school community, school leaders will be able to prioritize resources, identify knowledge gaps, and ensure learning plans are culturally responsive and meets the needs of all learners. Developing these relationships also allows the school community to feel more comfortable getting involved and voicing their experiences and opinions. These strategies can help leaders effectively plan for a more supportive and equitable learning environment that promotes social, emotional, and academic learning for all students.

SEL Critical Practice 2: This practice focuses on creating adequate working conditions for educators. Educators play an important role in helping students understand, process, and heal from major traumatic events such as in the current climate. To effectively support students, educators need to feel well-connected, supported, valued, and capable of taking on challenges. CASEL suggests school leaders design opportunities where educators can connect, heal, and build their capacity to support students. This can be done by promoting collective self-care and wellbeing, providing ongoing professional learning, and creating space for educators to process and learn from their experiences. Mental health and trauma support should also be available.

SEL Critical Practice 3: This practice is about creating safe, supportive, and equitable learning environments that promote the social and emotional development of all students. In this practice, educators should make certain that all students feel a sense of belonging and have consistent opportunities to learn about, reflect on, and practice SEL. Students should feel like they have a sense of belonging at their school and should be able to access support when needed from their school or community partners.

SEL Critical Practice 4: This practice uses data as an opportunity to share power, deepen relationships, and continuously improve support for students, families, and educators. It aims to help school communities continuously improve their process by identifying and addressing challenges, building upon successes, and collectively solving problems that may pop up after evaluation. CASEL encourages school leaders and educators to partner with students and their families, as well as with community partners, to learn how to improve SEL experiences and outcomes. Educators should also be supported when trying new practices and have the space to examine their own data.

CASEL has provided the use of this roadmap to school leaders at any stage of implementation and has made sure to include tools that help implement this roadmap in any type of learning environment. While this roadmap provides a framework for schools, the authors of this paper believe it is beneficial to also provide specific SEL techniques teachers can use to support their students during this COVID-19 era.

SEL Strategies for Teachers During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to quickly adjust their SEL curriculums and activities in response to the changing conditions, including restrictions on in-person activities and increase student trauma. The new challenge became how to revise SEL strategies that would apply to both in-person and online settings. Although there are not many blueprints that explain how to implement SEL remotely or during a pandemic, many educators are trying out different strategies that teach or infuse SEL into their new learning environments. This section provides three specific strategies teachers can use in this new normal: 1) Teaching Social Skills in an In-person and Online Learning Environment; 2) Creating a Safe Space for Emotions and 3) Applying Psychological Distancing.

Teaching Social Skills in an In-person and Online Learning Environment

Social skills are a main component of SEL. Numerous studies have proven that implementation of effective social skills (e.g., effective communication, conflict resolution, relationship management) has been linked to positive peer and teacher perceptions. Generally, when students have good social skills, they have higher student achievement and better feelings about school (Konold, Jamison, Stanton-Chapman, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2010; Morgan, Higgins, Miller, Pierce, Boone, & Tandy, 2016). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools relied on the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) matrix to teach social skills to students. The standard PBIS matrix is a widely used framework that lists positive behaviors teachers can use to monitor students' daily behavior. While this matrix is acceptable for use during in-person learning, it does not completely satisfy the needs for online social skills.

Since a large majority of schools have shifted online, teachers should make sure to incorporate online social skills into their curriculum. Research shows that failure to implement appropriate social skills within the online environment has led to high reports of cyberbullying and exploitation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Mitchell, Sabina, Finkelhor, and Wells, 2009; Morgan, et. al, 2016). Therefore, it is imperative that teachers teach students online social skills. The traditional PBIS matrix teaches students social skills in a physical environment but leaves gaps when incorporated into the online learning environment. Hannigan and Hannigan (2020) developed the S.O.A.R matrix to help define, teach, and reinforce what is expected in the Virtual Learning environment and to close the gap. The matrix consists of four components: 1) Self-control (S.), 2) On-task (O.), 3) Achievement (A.), and 4) Respect (R.) - (S.O.A.R.). Figure 3 presents the S.O.A.R matrix in more detail.

S.O.A.R. VIRTUAL LEARNING MATRIX

SELF-CONTROL

- Follow instructions
- Wait for your turn to speak or contribute
- Use the raise your hand feature
- Minimize distractions
- Utilize chat features appropriately

ON-TASK

- Log in on time
- Be present/actively engaged/actively engaged
- Organize your materials
- Set daily goals
- Make yourself visible
- Have a backup plan if you get disconnected

ACHIEVEMENT

- Complete tasks on time/stay on top of assignments
- Be prepared
- Complete preparation work
- Reach out to the teacher for help
- Share and collaborate
- Write in complete sentences
- Create a schedule /space to complete assignments (something about time and space management)

RESPECT

- Mute microphone when others are speaking
- Respect others' perspective
- Use kind words
- Use proper etiquette (i.e., All CAPS, Bold, Italics, Sarcasm/jokes, etc.) can be misinterpreted in a digital space.
- Help each other during group assignments and in designated meeting rooms
- Resolve conflict peacefully

Figure 3. S.O.A.R. Virtual Learning Matrix

Creating A Safe Space for Emotions

Handling emotions is an important component of SEL. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students are dealing with a lot in their personal lives and homes from not attending school and interacting with their peers, spending time in unstable homes, to caring for a sick relative or overcoming a sickness themselves. With all the different disruptions and issues students are facing, teachers can help them by creating a safe space for them to release their emotions.

One of the most common practices that many teachers use are daily check-ins with their students (Prothero, 2020). Though these daily check-ins, according to Venet (2020), are simple, it is important to identify students' immediate needs and provide them with the most efficient support possible. Families may be experiencing job loss, food insecurity, illness, anxiety, fear, or other trauma. It is not necessary for teachers to try and fix or dismiss their students' worries. Instead, teachers should acknowledge their students' feelings and provide a listening ear. "I hear you," "that sounds really hard," or "I can hear how worried you are," are some key phrases teachers can use when listening to their students. Teachers can hold open discussions during class time or make themselves available during non-classroom hours where they can speak with students privately (Gross, 2020). If teachers are ever concerned about what a student is sharing, they can immediately reach out to the student's parents, school counselors, or follow any mandated reporting policies.

Some teachers believe communicating with students about the COVID-19 pandemic and other events can help reduce students' stress level (Summers, 2020). Although communication is important, it is also important not to overwhelm students with too much information (Prothero, 2020). Creating a safe space for students to express their emotions is a strategy that can be applied in-person and online and should be continued even after the pandemic.

Applying Psychological Distancing

After teachers create a safe space for students to express their emotions, they can then begin to help students work through their negative experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic. This can be done with psychological distancing. Psychologists have recognized the benefits of psychological distance for decades. A number of studies indicate that adopting a distanced perspective can enhance emotion regulation and the long-term effectiveness of cognitive therapy (Beck, 1970; Gross, 1998; Mischel & Ayduk, 2004).

Psychological distancing focuses on viewing personal experiences from an outside perspective. Kross and Ayduk (2017) stated that people often fail to adapt on their negative feelings because they focus on their experience from a "psychological immersed" perspective. This makes it difficult for people to reason objectively. This practice can help students think about different strategies they would use to support and encourage others, while helping the students re-examine their own situation and recognize potential solutions for themselves. (Prothero, 2020). Teachers can apply this strategy by encouraging students to think about what others might be experiencing during this pandemic and what students would do to support family and friends during this time. Sample questions for students to ask could be, "What can I do to support my best friend who is telling me they are experiencing difficult time? What would I say to them?" (Prothero, 2020). Encouraging students to reflect on their negative experiences from a psychologically distanced perspective allows students to reflect on their feelings more constructively and helps students work-through their negative experiences more effectively. Applying this strategy can also help students manage their stress more efficiently and can be used in-person and online.

The strategies discussed above focus on teaching successful SEL skills that can be taught in-person and online. Teachers can alter these strategies to make them suitable for various teaching environments. The authors of the paper also encourage teachers to use their creativity to develop other possible SEL strategies that can be applied in-person and online.

CONCLUSION

A year into the pandemic, schools, teachers, and students are still adapting to this new norm of non-traditional in-person learning and online learning. On top of that, many educators, students, and families are suffering from a good amount of stress, depression, and other traumas. The authors of this paper believe SEL during this time is especially important when so many changes are occurring in students' home and school life. Also, with the change in learning environments, it is equally important that SEL be flexible for in-person and online learning.

This paper offers different strategies to help schools and teachers implement successful online and in-person SEL programs. CASEL's SEL roadmap was introduced to help educators embed SEL programs into curriculums. Some examples of in-person and online SEL strategies for teachers were also introduced to help with implementation into classrooms. The authors hope that the strategies discussed in this paper will help educators continue to support students' emotional needs and help them maintain a sense of optimism during and after this pandemic.

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