

Building Social and Emotional Learning into the School Day: Five Guiding Principles

Introduction

From the day we are born, our brains are primed and ready to learn. We enter the world equipped to gather, interpret, synthesize, apply, and modify the enormous amount of information that is available to us through our senses. Together, these processes allow us to learn a remarkable variety of skills and content – everything from complex mathematics to driving a car to reading Shakespeare.

Interestingly, our brains are equally equipped to learn skills and content related to social behaviors and emotions, or what is now termed social and emotional learning (SEL). Moreover, research studies have demonstrated that all forms of learning, whether academic, social, or emotional, are inextricably linked (Zins, 2004). Stated another way: how we feel influences how we think, and conversely, how we think influences how we feel.

Further, researchers have found that instruction in SEL is as critical to development and school success as academic instruction. For example, in a pivotal study of SEL programs across K–12 settings, Taylor and colleagues (2017) found that students who received social and emotional instruction and support programs gained 13 percentile points in academic performance, social skills, behavioral skills, and attitudes over students who did not receive these programs.

About This Paper

Prepared by the Applied Learning Sciences division of McGraw-Hill Education.

The Applied Learning Sciences team within McGraw-Hill Education School reviews existing scholarship and literature from multiple sources across a variety of domains that influence, inform, and strengthen content, pedagogy, and implementation. This white paper is a synthesis of existing research, intended to enlighten and inform the field about applied learning sciences in general. The various ways in which learning sciences research manifests itself within each of our programs specifically is managed by a research lifecycle, efficacy studies, and additional internal and external factors embedded in product development processes for each program (including ongoing iterative research with teachers and in the field).

This study, along with others, provides a compelling argument for the integration of social and emotional learning into K–12 instruction. However, in order for students to reap the full benefits of SEL, it is important to ensure that SEL instruction takes place every day, in every school setting. With all that must be accomplished in a school day, how can teachers, administrators, and school staff also make time for social and emotional skills?

We have created this guide to help answer this question, drawing upon the extensive research that has informed the development of the SEL field. This guide is intended to support all stakeholders in the important work of building SEL into the academic day, at every grade level and in every setting.

Within this guide, readers will find five general principles for SEL integration, along with corresponding strategies for applying each principle. Each section also includes an example of a typical situation in which these strategies may be applied. Because every student and every school is different, we invite readers to incorporate their own strategies into this framework.

Core Competencies

After decades of studying how children behave and interact both within and outside of school, experts have identified several specific sets of social and emotional skills, or SEL competencies, that are key to building positive relationships, managing emotions, and making decisions.

The principles presented in this guide are designed to help teachers, school specialists, and administrators promote students' development of these SEL competencies throughout the school day. Each principle supports one or more of the SEL core competencies listed below, as defined by researchers (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017) and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2017):

5 Core SEL Competencies

1. **Self-awareness:** The capacity to reflect on one's own feelings, values, and behaviors.
2. **Social awareness:** The ability to view situations from another perspective, respect the social and cultural norms of others, and celebrate diversity.
3. **Relationship skills:** The ability to initiate and sustain positive connections with peers, teachers, families, and other groups.
4. **Self-management:** The set of skills that includes self-motivation, goal-setting, personal organization, self-discipline, impulse control, and use of strategies for coping with stress.
5. **Responsible decision-making:** The ability to make choices that consider the well-being of oneself and others.

McGraw-Hill Education SEL Principles

Helping students master the five SEL core competencies during a busy school day is not always easy or straightforward. The following guiding principles can be used to guide SEL planning and instruction at the classroom, school, and district levels.

- **Create:** Consciously create a nurturing, caring, and safe environment for students.
- **Integrate:** Whenever possible, incorporate SEL skill-building into academic instruction.
- **Communicate:** Communicate early and often about SEL with all stakeholders.
- **Instruct:** Provide explicit guidance and instruction in SEL skills.
- **Empower:** Empower students to take charge of their own social and emotional learning.

Guiding Principle: CREATE

Consciously create a nurturing, caring, and safe environment for students.

The creation of a safe, positive environment is at the foundation of all SEL efforts, both within and outside a classroom's walls. Though every school and every classroom will implement this principle differently, many choose to implement one or more of the same strategies, such as:

CREATE strategies:

1. Greet each student by name, every day.
2. Collaboratively develop classroom rules and expectations with students.
3. Encourage students to hold each other accountable for meeting behavioral and social interactions.
4. Provide multiple ways for students to report, discuss, and work through conflicts.
5. Reward positive behaviors such as demonstrating respect.
6. Establish a school-wide anti-bullying policy, and monitor all school settings, including playgrounds, bathrooms, and cafeterias.

Example: Mr. Wheeler teaches fourth grade. In his school, students switch classes for math and ELA instruction, so he works with over 45 different students in any given day. Despite this volume, Mr. Wheeler makes it a point of saying hello to each student every day, and asking one personalized question (e.g. "Jana, is your baby brother feeling any better yet?").

Even though it took a little while, Mr. Wheeler worked with each section of students at the beginning of the year to come up with a set of shared classroom guidelines. Students agreed to follow these guidelines and worked together to build their own poster, which is proudly displayed in the classroom along with their signatures.

When Mr. Wheeler notices exemplary student behaviors that demonstrate mastery of the shared classroom guidelines, he asks those students to choose “power badges” corresponding to those behaviors. For example, a student who helps another student who was injured on the playground earns a “Hero” badge, which is placed on the desk for the week. Mr. Wheeler also encourages students to award each other badges, which reinforces a sense of community.

Guiding Principle: INTEGRATE

Whenever possible, incorporate SEL skill-building into academic instruction.

It can be challenging to fit everything into the school day. Instead of viewing SEL as one more requirement to fit into an already-busy school day, consider how you might integrate SEL and academic content into your existing instruction.

In fact, learning science supports this type of integration, because so many of the cognitive processes involved in learning academic content are tied to those involved in emotion, behavior, and decision-making. You may notice a natural alignment between SEL skills such as working toward goals, attentional control, or perseverance, and the academic work that your students encounter each day. Approaches to SEL integration vary depending on instructional needs and available resources, but should include content and problem-solving opportunities that are relevant to students’ lives.

INTEGRATE Strategies:

1. Choose a text with an SEL-related topic for use in a literacy lesson.
2. Offer a problem-based project based on students’ topics of interest.
3. Design a full classroom unit based on a real-life theme (e.g. helping a local organization increase environmental sustainability)
4. Point out how academic skills, such as persuasive writing, can also promote positive and constructive social interactions.
5. Build creative writing and/or activities into the day that allow students to express emotions in a safe space.
6. Metacognition (thinking about one’s own thinking) is an important part of SEL. All content area instruction can be enhanced by offering opportunities for self-reflection on students’ own problem-solving, tool selection, organizational strategies, and other thought processes.

Example: Ms. Navarro teaches in a fully-inclusive setting, with six English language learners and several students who require instructional accommodations. Because she must address such a wide variety of learning needs, Ms. Navarro is hesitant at first when the district announces its commitment to SEL programming.

However, with the help of other teachers on her team, the school counselor, and the reading coach, Ms. Navarro discovers that many of the instructional activities in her classroom are already perfect candidates for including SEL components. In November, Ms. Navarro introduces a student-led problem-based unit on games. During the unit, students work collaboratively to research games throughout history, write stories around game narratives, explore the mathematics involved in games such as dominoes, and design games to be played with the younger first- and second-grade students in the school.

Reflecting on student outcomes, Ms. Navarro finds that this SEL-enhanced instructional unit allowed students to develop and practice academic skills and SEL-related skills simultaneously. For example, when testing out their game ideas, Ms. Navarro coached students to view the game from another child's perspective: "this makes sense to a third grader, but how would a kindergarten student play if she doesn't know how to multiply yet?" The collaborative nature of the project also ensured students had plenty of rich opportunities throughout the day to practice conflict resolution, problem-solving, and metacognition.

Guiding Principle: COMMUNICATE

Communicate early and often about SEL with all stakeholders.

Effective implementation of SEL instruction is not a lone venture. To provide a rich social and emotional learning environment, all stakeholders must exercise their own SEL competencies, beginning with strong communication and the establishment of a solid SEL vision.

How to begin? It can be helpful to first identify any and all stakeholders who will be involved in SEL efforts. These may include:

- Students
- Families
- Teachers
- School staff
- Administrators
- Community members

These stakeholders are all part of the important work of social and emotional learning, and strong communication will help ensure that students reap the full benefits of SEL programming.

Studies in school, family, and community partnerships have helped establish a number of strategies for effective communication across various groups.

COMMUNICATE Strategies

Communicating with Families

1. Provide families with the same general SEL concepts you are presenting to students. For example, if you are encouraging students to follow a specific process for responding to another's feelings, explain that same process to family members so that it can also be modeled at home.
2. Learn about your students' families, ideally through face-to-face interaction. This will help ensure your SEL instruction is culturally responsive and builds on the strengths and knowledge of families.
3. Demonstrate and model the same empathy skills you are helping your students develop. Offer respect and understanding for the unique circumstances of each family.
4. Send home short notes to families when a student has successfully demonstrated an SEL skill (e.g. "When another student fell on the playground, Jess came right over to make sure she was okay!").

Communicating with School Staff (colleagues)

1. Teacher preparation is key to successful SEL implementation. However, many school staff do not receive instruction in SEL as part of their pre-service training. Ongoing professional development training is a critical way to communicate internally about SEL.
2. Researchers recommend that schools form a core team of school staff and administrators to lead in the communication and integration of SEL into school-wide practice.
3. School staff may wish to hold regular observation and coaching sessions for each other, in order to practice, refine, and discuss SEL strategies.

Communicating with Community Partners:

1. Invite members of the community (e.g. business owners, librarians, fire fighters) to present to your class about how a specific SEL topic, such as teamwork, impacts their work in the community.
2. Together with students, write newsletters describing some of the SEL-related work that takes place in the classroom. Note: be careful to take precautions around student privacy (e.g. names, photographs).
3. Feature any SEL-related activities or events on the school website, and send links to key members of the community.

Example: Hillview Elementary School has recently incorporated SEL into its school mission. At the beginning of the school year, the principal sent home a special bulletin to help students and families understand the definition and core competencies of SEL and why it is so important for students' success.

A new SEL page on the website was created to feature related topics and activities. The page includes a “family corner” with resources for connecting SEL skills learned at school to practice at home. SEL-related events, such as the town’s upcoming multicultural feast, are highlighted in the news section of the website. The page also includes games and role-playing activities for students to try at home and at school.

Students themselves have an important role in Hillview’s SEL communications. This year, the fifth-grade students have taken on the role of “reporters,” looking for and writing about examples of specific student actions and behaviors that demonstrate SEL competencies. Each week the students focus on a new SEL skill. For example, this week, fifth graders are reporting on demonstrations of respect for others. These stories are then published (with pseudonyms substituted for student names) in the school’s print and digital newsletters.

Guiding Principle: INSTRUCT

Provide explicit guidance and instruction in SEL skills.

Just as with academic content, social and emotional learning is achieved through instruction and practice. Although many SEL skills may seem intuitive or easy for adults, these same skills may be new, confusing, and unfamiliar to students. By providing explicit guidance and instruction, educators can ensure that students have a clear understanding of SEL content and expectations.

Often, guidance in social interactions, behavior, and emotions is offered at a “crisis” point, only after a negative incident has taken place. Teachers and school staff can work together to build in teachable SEL moments before such incidents, using the same sorts of strategies they use to teach academic skills and content.

INSTRUCT Strategies:

You can enhance children’s SEL learning by following a general process for introducing and developing each new SEL skill:

- STEP 1** - Provide a rationale: To increase student motivation and attention, explain why the SEL skill will be important for everyone to learn. If possible, offer one or two real-world examples.
- STEP 2** - Define the skill: Provide a concise, concrete definition of the skill. Use straightforward, objective language and check to make sure students understand the definition.
- STEP 3** - Model how to use the skill. Offer students examples of how the skill may be used in different contexts. If possible, ask students to help role-play use of that skill in these different contexts.
- STEP 4** – Present opportunities to apply the skill. Class activities, such as games or short hands-on exercises, can be effective tools for allowing students to practice applying a new skill. Be sure to point out when that same skill can be used in other settings as well, such as during a math lesson or during recess. The more opportunities students have to practice, the better! As in any other learning process, feedback from both teachers and peers is an important part of the application stage.

STEP 5 – Revisit the skill throughout the year. Research has shown that short-duration, single-topic SEL programs are less effective than more comprehensive programs that allow students to review and practice skills over time (or even from grade to grade). Every week or two, review earlier skills and point out ways that those skills may connect to what you are currently working on together.

A number of additional strategies may also be used in order to provide explicit guidance and instruction in SEL:

1. For SEL skills that require students to follow a recommended process (e.g. resolving a disagreement with a peer), you may wish to place visual reminders of the process throughout the classroom. Posters and small reminder stickers for desks are often used for this purpose.
2. The differentiated learning practices used in academic instruction should be extended to any SEL content that is taught. Based on the individual and group needs of students, be sure to include multiple methods and modalities for each SEL skill (e.g. include writing activities, dramatic play, media, and discussion).
3. Short, personalized illustrative texts, such as the Social Stories first introduced by Carol Gray in the 1990s (Gray & Garand, 1993), are effective tools for explicitly illustrating a focused SEL concept. These stories are typically written by teachers and are tailored for specific students or groups of students to illustrate SEL content via a customized, safe, and positive format.
4. Explicitly teach protocols and procedures for handling challenging social situations. Recognize that time spent on topics such as conflict resolution counts as “a teachable moment” just as time spent on academic content.
5. Set specific individual and class goals for specific time periods. For example, for students who are learning how to offer constructive feedback to peers, encourage students to provide at least three positive comments and three helpful comments during each work session.
6. Invite family and community members to contribute tips and tricks that they use to effectively manage emotions and social interactions.
7. Whenever an example of a social and emotional skill presents itself, whether in real-time in the classroom or as part of classwork (e.g. watching a video clip), take a moment to describe and discuss that skill with students.

Example: Grady is a student teacher in his second semester of his pre-service training. He has been placed in a bilingual kindergarten under the guidance of a veteran teacher, Mrs. DeFusto. A strong advocate of integrating SEL into instruction, Mrs. DeFusto has worked throughout the year to help Grady develop his understanding of social and emotional development among young children from a wide variety of cultures.

At the beginning of the year, Mrs. DeFusto modeled how to develop classroom rules and expectations together with students. However, both teachers have begun to notice an increase in problematic behaviors, particularly right after lunch and recess. Mrs. DeFusto decides to hold a class meeting to review the classroom rules and expectations, but Grady notices that several students still have trouble transitioning from the playground to the classroom without losing belongings, having trouble lining up, or entering the classroom without disturbing the class next door.

Later that week, Grady invites a few of the classroom volunteer parents to brainstorm a solution together over lunch. The group creates an acronym, CALM, which they introduce to the class the next morning:

C – Check yourself. Check around you to make sure you have your lunchbox, your jacket, and anything else you brought with you. You should also check to make sure you understand any directions.

A – Ask questions. If you aren't sure what to do, ask a friend or an adult.

L – Line up. When it is time to move from one place to another, line up with your class buddy.

M – Move carefully. Please walk quietly and carefully from one place to the next. Please don't touch anyone around you, and keep your voice at whisper level.

The class makes laminated pocket cards with the CALM acronym, which they bring with them for the first few weeks as they learn how to follow each step. A few students still have some difficulty with the process. Grady spends time with engaging in role play to demonstrate the process in different contexts. With time and practice, the CALM strategy becomes a natural part of all their classroom transitions.

Guiding Principle: EMPOWER

Empower students to take charge of their own social and emotional learning.

To reap the full benefits of social and emotional instruction, it is essential that students of all ages are offered continuous opportunities to apply what they have learned, both in and out of the classroom.

Teachers, administrators, and other school staff can foster this by creating a culture of student empowerment. This does not mean that adults should give up full control of what happens in school. Rather, adults can spend some of the school day as facilitators, while helping students build positive, safe environments and providing guidance and support as needed.

EMPOWER Strategies

1. Examine your own beliefs as an educator. If you believe that students are talented, engaged, and intelligent individuals who are capable of incredible growth, it becomes more likely your students will believe this themselves – setting the stage for positive social and emotional development.

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2. Provide data and feedback that students can use to modify and extend their own application of SEL strategies learned in the classroom.
 3. Include student-led activities throughout the school day, in which adults serve as facilitators but students direct the interactions.
 4. Involve students in discussing and solving real-world problems. This not only helps connect skills to content, but provides rich and complex situations for practicing discrete skills independently.
 5. Hold regular class meetings to allow students extra practice with skills such as self-management in a group, turn-taking, and communicating with others.
 6. Offer choices throughout the school day in order to encourage a sense of autonomy and promote decision-making skills. Demonstrate aloud the thought process behind making a careful and thoughtful choice.
 7. Provide opportunities to safely fail, and learn from that failure.
 8. Offer students scheduled time to interact with students from other classes or grades. Encourage students to alternate playing the role of teacher, coach, and student.
 9. Ask students about what they need. Establish multiple venues for expressing thoughts, feelings, and needs (e.g. a class mailbox, lunch with a teacher, and voice recorders for students who may prefer talking over writing).

Example: It is no secret that students in Christine Cook’s third grade class love coming to school, and when asked, Ms. Cook often says it begins with a handshake. Every morning as students enter the classroom, they are greeted with a handshake by Ms. Cook, who then distributes a morning “thought question.” As students settle in before the school announcements, students are encouraged to use their computers or devices to type their anonymous response to the question in a document that is then shared after the announcements. Whenever possible, the thought question is tied to one of the day’s lessons. For example, one recent thought question was, “would you rather use your knowledge of coordinate grids to help plan out a community garden to feed people in the neighborhood, or to help design a playground for kids on your block so they have a new place to play?”

Students then lead the daily class meeting, starting by reading of a few of the responses to the thought question. Taking turns, students are encouraged to spend a few minutes offering constructive feedback or asking follow-up questions. During the meeting, students also are in charge of communicating the daily schedule and collecting any questions they may have for Ms. Cook.

At times, Ms. Cook uses the thought question to introduce academic content. In the coordinate grid example, Ms. Cook asked students to work in small groups later that day, in order to solve a series of math problems culminating in the design of a hypothetical playground. When students made mathematical errors, Ms. Cook encouraged groups to share and examine these errors as a group, as a concrete demonstration of how failure can lead to learning and later success.

Joining Hearts and Minds through SEL

Education is a remarkable, intricate, and constantly changing paradigm. No two students, or teachers, or classrooms are the same. However, at the core of every educational endeavor is one unchangeable fact: we are, all of us, human. As such, we must all recognize that our astonishing capacity to learn extends not only to the rich academic content encountered in schools, but also to our emotions and relationships with others.

The principles and strategies offered here are designed to offer a framework for addressing this fundamental human element, and help all educational partners support both the hearts and the minds of all students. By pairing positive social and emotional learning with high quality academic instruction, students will not only capitalize on their powerful, innate learning abilities, but will build skills that will have a positive impact on lives throughout their school years and beyond.

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