

# Social-Emotional Learning in Response to COVID-19 (SEL)

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**T**he Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social-emotional learning (SEL) as “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”<sup>[1]</sup>. CASEL further describes SEL by breaking it down into five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making<sup>[2]</sup>. Nurturing these skills in children and adolescents has been linked to positive outcomes such as improved focus, critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, emotion regulation, and direction-following<sup>[3,4]</sup>. These skills benefit students in school and beyond by improving learning outcomes and developing adults who are better equipped to enter the workforce and engage in meaningful personal and professional relationships<sup>[3]</sup>. Unfortunately, despite evidence of effectiveness SEL has long been viewed as an add-on to school curricula, and not a necessity<sup>[4]</sup>.

## WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Instances of childhood emotional, physical, and sexual trauma are quite common, with research estimating that as many as 68% of children have experienced some form of traumatic event<sup>[5]</sup>. The American Psychological Association conceptualizes individual trauma as resulting “from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being”<sup>[6]</sup>. The landmark adverse childhood events (ACEs) study conducted between 1995 and 1997 assessed for these ACEs, and included 10 different experiences grouped into the three main categories of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction<sup>[5]</sup>. The study found that while growing up, about 64% of people have experienced one ACE, while 22% have experienced three or more<sup>[5]</sup>. ACEs have since been associated with negative health outcomes including social, emotional, and cognitive impairment, as well as engagement in high-risk behaviors<sup>[5]</sup>.

## COVID-19’S IMPACT ON STUDENTS

### PHYSICAL IMPACT

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted learning for an estimated 55 million students through a combination of remote learning, unpredictable school closures, and physical distance from both peers and teachers<sup>[3,7]</sup>. This was especially true for students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners (ELLs), as academic instruction was not adequately tailored towards these groups during this time<sup>[8]</sup>. As such, these students faced a disproportionate number of adverse experiences with the juvenile justice system, foster care, and homelessness<sup>[8]</sup>. Many ELL students lost the ability to practice their language skills with peers, and many students with disabilities were unable to access required services such as speech, physical, and occupational therapy<sup>[8]</sup>. It was also found that students with disabilities, those in foster care or homeless, from low-income backgrounds, Native American youth, and migratory students were more likely to be chronically absent from school during the height of the pandemic<sup>[8]</sup>. As such, the pandemic effectively disrupted the growth of many students who missed developmental and educational milestones, lost loved ones, and suffered from housing, food, and financial insecurities<sup>[3,8-10]</sup>.

### PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT

The pandemic was not only detrimental to students physically, but mentally, emotionally, and socially as well. Many of the experiences that served to regulate and comfort students were removed, including established daily routines, physical access to peers, friends, and family members, as well as extracurricular activities<sup>[4,7,9,10]</sup>. As such, many students lost opportunities to develop important interpersonal and emotional skills that occur naturally through negotiating relationships, building connections, and resolving conflicts with others<sup>[10]</sup>. Children and adolescents also witnessed or experienced an increase in domestic violence and abuse, and many were forced to shift into caretaking roles as their parents struggled to pay bills, grieve loved ones, and find employment with inadequate coping skills<sup>[4,7,10]</sup>. This chronic dysregulation, stress, and daily uncertainty surrounding the course of education and family life during the pandemic led to heightened instances of childhood depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and other mental health issues<sup>[4,7,11]</sup>. This was evidenced by an increase of 24% in mental

health related hospital visits for children aged 5-11, and a 31% increase for youth ages 12-17 during the months from April to October 2020 [4]. The negative, long-term impact of COVID-19 on students' psychological and emotional wellbeing has yet to be seen, but it is clear that schools must not only acknowledge the trauma endured by many but also begin to implement opportunities to recoup their psychosocial losses and begin the process of healing.

## HOW TO IMPLEMENT TRAUMA-INFORMED SEL

### OVERVIEW

With the lingering uncertainty of novel COVID variants, educators must become highly skilled at flexibly adjusting to an unstable, rapidly changing educational landscape, while also meeting the evolving social-emotional needs of students [7]. CASEL's roadmap for re-opening provides a general guide for schools to reference as they integrate tenets of Trauma-Informed SEL instructional practices within the current pandemic [1-2]. Their roadmap includes 4 critical practices to consider as schools develop SEL programs that accounts for the needs of the educators in addition to student (fig. 1).

Below are several expert-recommended, evidence-based strategies to develop students' SEL competencies that should be incorporated into any trauma-informed SEL initiative [1-2,11]:

- Assess students and teacher's social and emotional needs
- Establish community and a sense of belonging
- Establish and maintain relationships between students, teachers, and staff to promote a positive learning environment
- Create space for students to conduct self-reflections and recognize/identify their thoughts and emotions
- Promote self-care and stress management
- Affirm diverse identities and cultures by acknowledging diverse perspectives and backgrounds
- Partner with local mental health organizations and professionals for counseling support as needed
- Build trusting relationships with students where they feel comfortable discussing difficult topics

## INTEGRATE SEL IN EXISTING RTI FRAMEWORKS

Developing a completely new system for implementing trauma-informed SEL would be a daunting task for any district. Thankfully, research is showing that it can be done by leveraging pre-existing response-to-intervention (RTI) or multitiered systems of supports (MTSS) frameworks that many schools already utilize [4-5,7]. What follows is an overview of how each Tier of an existing RTI system can be modified to address SEL and behavioral competencies for students within a trauma-informed framework.

“Schools can create a consistent and predictable environment by greeting students warmly when entering the school or classroom, posting and following classroom schedules, teaching and reinforcing behavioral expectations and routines, and placing emphasis on positive, proactive methods of responding to student behavior over more punitive approaches.” [7]

### TIER 1 INSTRUCTION (UNIVERSAL SUPPORTS)

Tier 1 include high-quality, evidence-based instruction for all students with the goal of creating optimal learning environments that support the bulk (~80%) of learners [7,12]. During the pandemic, students will present with increased social-emotional support needs, which can be addressed largely through Tier 1 instruction [7]. Schools will also need to integrate tenets of trauma-informed-practice, acknowledging the potential losses suffered by students and the collective trauma endured [7]. Keeping this in mind, schools should prioritize the social-emotional needs of students over academic gains in the short-term, creating safe, predictable, and consistent learning environments that minimize unnecessary reminders of trauma [7,12]. This can be done by creating ongoing discussions about individual student experiences.

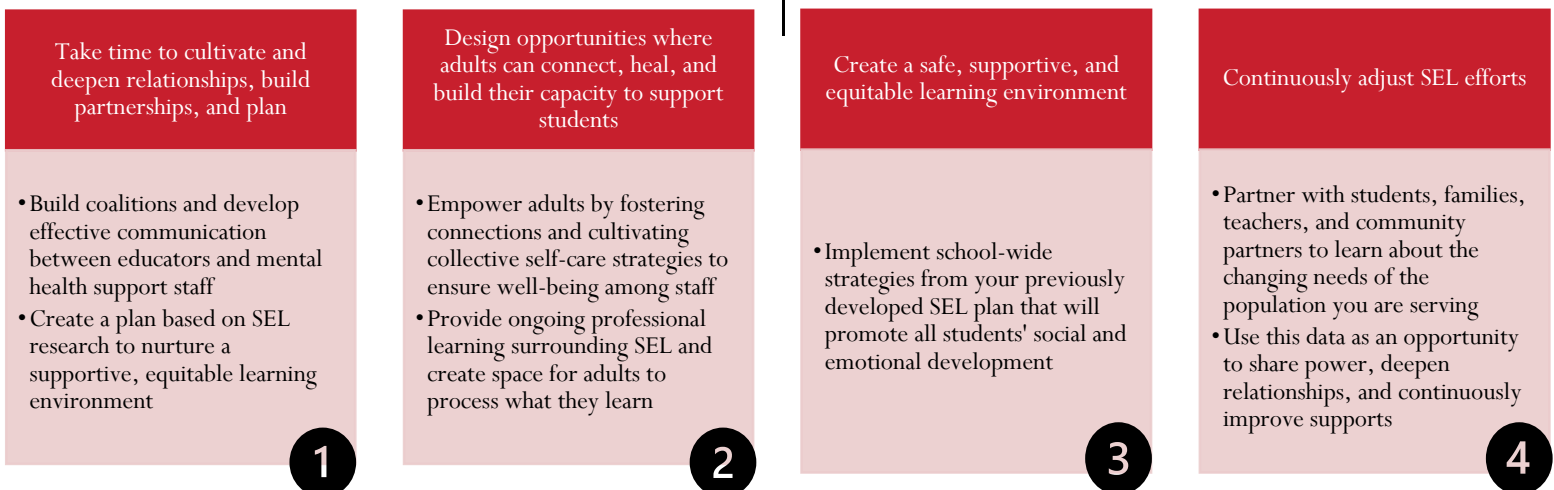


Figure 1: CASEL 4 Critical Practices

### Behavioral Considerations

Students may also present with increased problem behaviors which can be attributed to inconsistent behavioral expectations during school closures [7,12]. Teachers should focus on delivering clear behavioral expectations to students, including demonstrating and modeling what appropriate versus inappropriate classroom conduct looks like [12]. Teachers should also give frequent and timely feedback during this transition period, praising students when they are demonstrating positive behaviors and correcting errors accordingly [12]. Students struggling with behavioral problems may be referred to Tier 2 for more targeted interventions.

### TIER 2 INSTRUCTION (TARGETED PRACTICES)

Tier 2 serves to deliver more targeted interventions to smaller groups of students who may not be finding success in Tier 1 [7,12]. In the context of the pandemic, Tier 2 supports can be utilized to target students that are perhaps having more difficulty adjusting back into the traditional school environment. Supports at this level may include helping students with day-to-day organizational skills, peer interactions, time management, or with developing stress reduction coping strategies [12]. Due to the presence of additional trauma, schools may also decide to create Tier 2 groups for specifically addressing students with trauma-related needs (delivered by more highly trained staff such as school psychologists) [7,12].

### Behavioral Considerations

At this level, behavioral interventions may focus on additional instruction and practice with acceptable behaviors [13]. Instruction may include an emphasis on education surrounding school-wide expectations and developing social skills, all within the non-judgmental, safe learning environment of these smaller Tier 2 groups [13]. At this level, a functional behavior assessment (FBA) may be administered by a trained educator to assess for behaviors that could be better addressed within Tier 3 supports [13].

### TIER 3 INSTRUCTION – INTENSIVE BEHAVIORAL AND ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

Tier 3 instruction is reserved for highly individualized, intensive interventions for students that require even more support than Tier 2 can accommodate [7,14-15]. This is typically administered in groups of 2-3 at a time (smaller than those in Tier 2), which target individual academic deficits as well as problem behaviors [15]. Problem behaviors within the context of the pandemic take on new meaning, and for many students may be the result of the chronic stress and trauma during the height of COVID-19 [7,14]. Tier 3 interventions rely on ongoing assessments to measure student progress and to determine appropriate interventions. Most important are comprehensive behavior assessments, which include record reviews, interviews with the student and family, student observations, and use of the functional behavior assessment tool (FBA) [7,14]. These behavior assessments are used by trained educators to determine environmental variables that can be used to both predict and maintain problem behaviors [14].

## FUNDING YOUR INITIATIVE

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, passed in 2015) promotes the need for schools to develop evidence-based interventions that seeks to improve school conditions for student learning, provide a well-rounded education, promote community involvement, and enhance peer interactions [16]. While the ESSA does not specifically reference SEL, districts can leverage funds authorized under this legislation, including those available under Title I, II, and IV.

ESSA Source	Applicable Funds
Title I Part A	Funds may be used for implementing schoolwide programs, targeted assistance programs, and school supports and improvement activities.
Title II, Parts A and B	Funds can be used for professional development related to SEL including initiatives that support educators in their ability to provide instruction that promotes students' SEL competencies. Funds can also be allocated toward developing the capacity of school leaders.
Title IV, Parts A, B, and F	Funds can be used to support a variety of programs aimed to improve the educational opportunities of students. Monies may also be used to cover the provision of both academic and nonacademic supports outside of the regular school day.

Retrieved from Social and Emotional Learning Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review [16]

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CESP is strongly committed to connecting a broad range of education stakeholders with the best available research evidence to inform sound education policy and practice decisions needed to support the delivery of quality education to all students while closing persistent achievement gaps. To this end, CESP supports active collaborative structures such as professional learning communities and researcher-practitioner partnerships, in addition to translating and disseminating evidence-based guidelines and delivering professional development opportunities. CESP is supported by a robust team of experienced researchers and evaluators with a strong commitment to building the capacity of educators and policymakers to develop and deliver high-quality evidence-based instruction, curriculum, programs, and policy initiatives with significant potential to improve learning for all students while directly addressing existing inequities and systemic bias in education.

