

Research Showing SEL is necessary for Academic Success

From role-playing games for students to parent seminars, teaching social and emotional learning requires a lot of moving parts, but when all the pieces come together such instruction can rival the effectiveness of purely academic interventions to boost student achievement, according to the largest analysis of such programs to date.

In the [report](#), published Feb. 4 in the peer-reviewed journal *Child Development*, researchers led by Joseph A. Durlak, a professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Chicago, found that students who took part in social and emotional learning, or SEL, programs improved in grades and standardized-test scores by 11 percentile points compared with nonparticipating students. That difference, the authors say, was significant—equivalent to moving a student in the middle of the class academically to the top 40 percent of students during the course of the intervention

Compared with their peers, participating students also significantly improved on five key nonacademic measures: They demonstrated greater social skills, less emotional distress and better attitudes, fewer conduct problems such as bullying and suspensions, and more-frequent positive behaviors, such as cooperation and help for other students. Also, the effects continued at least six months after the programs ended.

Social and emotional education seeks to provide a foundation for academic instruction by teaching students skills in self-awareness and self-management, getting along with others, and decision-making. Programs vary from afterschool courses taught by outside providers to school wide efforts incorporating curriculum, teacher professional development, school activities, and parent training.

For this study, researchers distinguished SEL programs intended to teach social skills broadly from programs focused on fixing specific behaviors, such as bullying.

The researchers found the SEL programs most likely to be effective followed what Mr. Durlak called the SAFE model: “sequenced,” step-by-step instruction; “active” learning, such as role-playing; with sufficient time “focused” on each lesson; and “explicit” learning goals. The most effective programs used all four practices together.