

Student Social and Emotional Competence Assessment

The Current State of the Field and a Vision for Its Future

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Executive Summary

THE STATE OF THE FIELD IN BRIEF

As the field of SEL is working to integrate evidence-based SEL programming more systematically into teaching and learning, progress in SEL assessment is accelerating to support these efforts.

The state of the field shows SEL assessment has advanced in multiple ways:

- Several SEL assessment initiatives are underway.
- There are a growing number of technically sound assessments.
- There is increasing consensus on what constitutes high-quality assessment and data use.
- There are opportunities to better integrate SEL assessment into the policy and practice context so that it supports teaching and learning.

The field also has room to grow by creating assessments to match the varied needs of PreK-12 students, continuing to focus on ways to support equitable and positive academic and behavioral outcomes for diverse learners, and better coordinating policy, assessment, programs, and professional learning.

Background

Purpose. This report describes the state of the field of student social and emotional competence assessment and envisions the conditions in which the field can continue to develop in ways that tangibly benefit teaching and learning. It was created by the Social and Emotional Learning Assessment Work Group (AWG), a group of scholars, test developers, and educators focused on supporting high-quality social and emotional competence assessment. The AWG aims to bring conceptual clarity and provide guidance to the field about what high-quality practical assessments are currently available, and to stimulate further advances in the field of applied SEL assessment. This report will be of interest to educators, policymakers, program developers, assessment developers, researchers, and professionals involved in training teachers.

Definition of SEL. Social and emotional learning (SEL) has been defined in various ways. One of the most commonly cited models, that of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), defines SEL as “the process through which students and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” That process incorporates competencies that include knowledge, skills, and attitudes that affect the quality of students’ interactions with one another and their ability to adapt to and successfully navigate the complexities of daily life.

Focus on universal student competence assessment. The focus of this report is universal student social and emotional competence assessment. This includes methods of measuring and quantifying students' level of social and emotional competence. It also focuses on the use of SEL assessment with all students, not just students with challenges or other specific populations. We recognize the importance of other assessments, such as those measuring climate or adult practices. Student competence assessment poses particular opportunities and challenges that are the focus of this report.

Guiding beliefs. This report is guided by core beliefs from which SEL assessment stands to yield the greatest benefit to teaching and learning practices and student academic and behavioral outcomes:

- SEL can be taught, and all students can benefit from SEL, supporting a focus on universal assessments designed to be used with all students.
- SEL assessment is best understood—and has the greatest potential—when viewed within the policy and practice context in which it is used.
- SEL assessment can best contribute to teaching and learning when there is a high level of systemic coordination between standards, teaching and learning practices, and assessment.

The Impact of SEL. Research examining the relationship between social and emotional competencies and student outcomes has found that the better developed student social and emotional competencies are, the better students do in school and life. This holds for students from different economic backgrounds, races/ethnicities, and genders. Moreover, SEL programs—curricula and practices designed to nurture social and emotional competencies—are likely to yield a financial benefit that exceeds their costs, and under most assumptions, the return on the financial investment is many times the initial cost of programming. However, while social and emotional competencies are universally relevant and needed, they are not always identical for all people in all places. Accordingly, it is important to reach clarity on what social and emotional competencies students should know and be able to demonstrate at different ages and in different contexts.

The theoretical model guiding this report emphasizes that SEL assessment will be in the best position to have a major impact on teaching and learning for diverse learners when: (1) clear standards and guidance on social and emotional competencies are developed and supported through policy, (2) teaching and learning are intentionally focused on nurturing those competencies, (3) appropriate data are collected and used to assess progress and for continuous improvement, and (4) professional learning is provided to support educators' understanding of SEL frameworks, standards, instruction, and assessment.

Why assess SEL. SEL assessment can support effective teaching and learning by serving two broad goals, including assessment designed to guide instruction (formative assessment) and assessment designed to measure the results of instruction (summative assessment). Within those broad goals, SEL assessments can be used to inform many different kinds of decisions. A teacher might administer an SEL assessment before a period of SEL instruction to decide what competencies to teach. This reflects the formative use of assessment. An administrator might use SEL assessment data after a period of SEL instruction to measure progress. That is summative assessment. A researcher might use SEL assessment to measure outcomes in rigorous evaluation of a new intervention. That is program evaluation. A district or state might use SEL assessment as part of a school quality index as part of a continuous improvement push. That is a form of accountability. Other “high stakes” uses of assessment are also possible.

The Current State of the Field

Growth in assessments. This is a period of accelerating development in the field of SEL assessment with a concurrent growth in demand for such assessments. Several high-quality assessments have been developed and are now in wide use. Indeed, a comprehensive catalog of available assessments is now available by consulting the [SEL Assessment Guide](#) and the [RAND Education Assessment Finder](#).

These assessments take many different forms, each with advantages and disadvantages:

- **Self-report:** Students complete questionnaires in which they rate their own competencies. These are easy to construct and are easily administered to large numbers of students on widely available survey platforms. On the downside, they are open to students responding in what they consider desirable ways, depend on self-awareness of one's actual level of competence, and require students to have adequate reading ability.
- **Rating scales:** An adult, typically the classroom teacher, completes a questionnaire about a student. In terms of strengths, they are simple, and many are now on easy-to-use survey platforms. Teachers are also less prone than students to social desirability response biases and have a strong reference group of knowledge from which to rate individual student competencies. Drawbacks include the burden imposed on teachers who must complete many ratings and biases such as "halo" effects where teachers rate students they particularly like more favorably than other students.
- **Direct assessment:** Students demonstrate their social and emotional competencies through solving challenging social and emotional tasks. Strengths include their potential to measure social and emotional competence objectively and to yield highly reliable scores that are valid for a variety of purposes. Weaknesses include the cost of developing and validating technically complex direct assessments. They may also be best suited for assessing the knowledge and mental processes that are involved in social interactions, but not necessarily the behavioral components of these competencies.
- **Other methods:** Other methods of assessment are also available, including standards-based assessment, peer nominations, report cards, and administrative data. Any of these methods of assessment could be used to achieve some SEL assessment goals.

Emerging clarity on what constitutes quality. In addition to progress developing assessment instruments, the field has made progress in clarifying what quality SEL assessment means. Existing and emerging guidance about assessment quality suggests that the best social and emotional assessment process will:

- **Include assessments that measure what matters.** In determining what matters, SEL standards provide guidance on the social and emotional competencies students should know and be able to demonstrate. The content of an SEL program's scope and sequence can also provide guidance on which competencies the corresponding assessment should be designed to measure. Published resources are also available to identify what matters most, such as the [SEL Assessment Guide](#) and [RAND's Education Assessment Finder](#).

- **Be culturally relevant.** Cultural considerations include whether an assessment performs the same way for members of different groups, what social and emotional competencies are most important to different groups, and who gets to decide. Such considerations raise the concern that SEL assessment data could be used to stigmatize some students and reinforce or reproduce social inequities. Although there are exceptions, incorporating considerations of diversity, equity, and inclusion into SEL assessments is an area with opportunities for improvement.
- **Be developmentally appropriate.** Both students' skills and social and emotional competencies themselves change across development. Therefore, assessments should be developed with enough range of difficulty to measure skill advances as students age. They should also measure the competencies in ways that capture their expansion, differentiation, and sophistication across development. Although some assessments are designed to be developmentally appropriate, this is also an area where more careful work is needed.
- **Ensure research evidence supports intended use.** A particular concern in the use of SEL assessment is the suitability of the assessment score for inferences and decisions educators plan to make based on those scores. It is important that developers and users of SEL assessments pay particular mind to what evidence supports the inferences and decisions users will make based on student assessment results. As with all forms of assessment, this is important because consequential decisions about what to teach and how to teach, for example, should be based on information that is appropriate for making such decisions.
- **Employ strong data use practices.** SEL assessment data will be most effective and useful when educators thoughtfully execute practices that support rigorous and appropriate data use and mitigate the risks of unwarranted uses. Engaging in effective data review practices of this sort requires leadership, planning, professional learning, time, effective meeting processes, and adequate resources. To this end, many educators would benefit from professional learning opportunities focused on high-quality data use practices.

Finally, with respect to quality, it is important to note that the process of interpreting assessment data is a human one. Humans bring their own interpretive strengths and weaknesses to this process, including implicit biases that may affect data interpretation and related decisions. Therefore, educators will be in the best position to render equitable judgments of assessment data when they are aware of their own biases, or the potential for bias.

Integration with policy and practice. SEL assessments are used in the context of policies and educational practices. Ideally, SEL assessments are coordinated to improve teaching and learning, and professional learning should be available to support high-quality SEL assessment data use to guide practices designed to support students in meeting standards. Although this does not characterize the field at present, there are several “bright spot” examples when policy, assessment, programs, and professional learning are systematically coordinated. Such examples offer guidance for better integration of assessment-related policies and practices in the future.

A Vision for the Future

The concluding sections of this report offer a vision of assessment integrated with efforts to shape policy, link assessment to practice, continue developing high-quality assessments, and systematize professional learning.

Policy Vision. Policies that provide standards or guidelines indicating what students should know and be able to do can provide guidance for action and investments. CASEL's [Collaborating States Initiative](#) (CSI) has observed a dramatic increase in the number of states adopting standards in recent years. Moreover, states have augmented the development of strategies and policies to support implementation of systemic, evidence-based SEL in districts and schools.

Looking ahead, SEL assessment will be in the best position to support teaching and learning when policy encourages and supports: (1) districts to focus on developing competencies described in standards, (2) the use of high-quality social and emotional assessment data, (3) high-quality program implementation and data literacy so that assessment data is used to inform instruction, (4) professional development and technical assistance for data-based decision-making, (5) incentives for preservice and inservice training in SEL assessment, and (6) consistency and compatibility with other state policies and priorities.

Practice Vision. We envision a world in which high-quality SEL assessment is coordinated with and supports evidence-based SEL programming and practice. Realizing this vision will require the development of assessments designed to measure the competencies that are the focus of instruction in SEL programs and practices. It will also require educators to adopt and use SEL assessments in a way that is coordinated with their adoption and use of SEL programs and practices. Finally, it will require professional development to support the expertise required for educators to use SEL assessments in a coordinated way with SEL programs and practices.

Assessment Development Vision. Assessment development is typically a costly and time-consuming endeavor, and the market for SEL assessment is not clear—in its size or in exactly what the market requires. Rather than a large investment in a few assessments, it is sensible to make many smaller investments to develop varied assessments. Such assessments should be designed to: (1) assess competencies that are incorporated in either standards, programs, or both, (2) assess competencies in developmentally and culturally relevant ways from PreK through high school, (3) clearly articulate the intended uses and interpretations of the assessment, (4) include design input from the intended user so the assessment is both usable and feasible in educational settings, and (5) include the best method of assessment (e.g. self-report, direct assessment, etc.) for the competence to be measured. In such efforts, resources such as professional learning that support the constructive and meaningful integration of SEL assessment with practice will be required.

Professional Learning Vision. For SEL assessments to benefit teaching and learning, educators must have the knowledge and skills to interpret and use data for effective practice. At present, opportunities to participate in professional learning focused on SEL are highly variable. The field will benefit from more intentionally and systematically supporting educators to learn about what SEL is, why it matters, what competencies are described by standards, what evidence-based programs and practices are available, and how to select and use SEL assessment and the data that comes from it to support teaching and learning. Training on these topics should be incorporated in preservice and ongoing professional learning, for teachers and educational leaders.

In conclusion, the field of social and emotional learning has been in ascendancy and is now anchored by a strong evidence base showing that when it is done well, SEL benefits a wide range of students and student outcomes. As the field continues to grow, it should strive to support practitioners' abilities to integrate strong SEL assessment practices, make data-informed decisions about practice, and evaluate student skill acquisition. In doing so, assessments and related practices will need to meet the complex realities of developing students and diverse communities. As the field continues to fulfill its promise to improve teaching and learning, assessment has a key role to play.