

DEC 2018



NEW KNOWLEDGE BRIEF

Cultivating Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

THE BIG PICTURE

Over the last decade, significant advances in our understanding of how children’s brains grow and develop have fostered a growing appreciation of the critical role that social-emotional skills play in learning. As this work evolves, educators and policymakers are increasingly recognizing the importance of students’ identity development, agency, and other competencies for long-term success.¹

In 2012, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) published a literature review that highlighted the link between social-emotional factors such as a positive mindset, social skills, and perseverance, and academic performance.² Since then, additional studies have shown that measures of students’ social-emotional learning (SEL) are related to academic outcomes — including students’ math scores on standardized tests at the middle school level, as well as their high school readiness.³ Research in social neuroscience provides further support for the importance of fostering students’ social-emotional development, suggesting that “the aspects of cognition that we recruit most heavily in schools, namely learning, attention, memory, decision-making, and social functioning, are both profoundly affected by and subsumed within the process of emotion.”⁴

Thus, a broad consensus is emerging around the importance of social-emotional development for children’s learning at all ages and education levels. New research also suggests that providing equitable educational opportunities to all students requires, in part, supporting equitable opportunities for high-quality social-emotional development in schools.⁵

Research finds that, “[focusing only on the content of instruction and students’ tested achievement is insufficient to achieve considerable improvements in educational outcomes and address issues of equity.](#)” Educators and schools are trying to prepare students for jobs that did not exist a decade ago. The demands of the 21st century workforce require new sets of skills and capabilities, which emphasize creative problem solving and teamwork.⁶ As a result, educators are rethinking their work, going beyond teaching content and toward the more complex work of creating opportunities for students to develop the learning mindsets and critical competencies they will need throughout their lives.

According to a [2018 survey](#) from McGraw Hill, 96 percent of school administrators, teachers, and parents believe that SEL is just as important as academic learning and roughly two-thirds of teachers and administrators report that SEL is being integrated into school-wide planning initiatives. Moreover, 75 percent of teachers report they are focusing on SEL in their classrooms, with nearly three-quarters of teachers also reporting that they devote more time to fostering SEL than they did five years ago. Yet, amid this uptake of and enthusiasm for SEL, two-thirds of teachers say they don’t have enough time to devote to their students’ social-emotional development, and only 22 percent say they feel very prepared to develop their students’ social-emotional skills. A recent report published by The Pennsylvania State University identified additional barriers to equitable access to social-emotional development opportunities, including poverty, exclusionary discipline practices and policies in schools, a lack of trauma-informed practices within a school, implicit bias in school staff, and educator stress and burnout.⁷

NEW UEI KNOWLEDGE

The UChicago Consortium’s 2018 research synthesis, *Supporting Social, Emotional, & Academic Development: Research Implications for Educators*, is designed to help teachers and principals support equitable opportunities for social-emotional development and outcomes for all students. The synthesis suggests ways that educators can understand, reflect upon, and utilize insights from research to create responsive, engaging schools and classrooms that advance educational equity: spaces in which all students can fully participate in learning, without disparities in student performance along lines of race or socioeconomic status.

Specifically, the synthesis highlights a canon of literature showing that:

Engaging students in learning is an educator’s most critical task: policymakers and educators often spend a great deal of effort trying to improve student achievement by changing what is taught — changing standards, curriculum, graduation requirements, accountability tests — and less time working to get students more engaged in whatever is taught. Curriculum, standards, and tests do not matter if students are not participating in class and investing themselves in the learning opportunities that teachers prepare.

The most basic requirement for engagement in learning is to be present. Yet, nationally, about 15 percent of K-12 students — almost 20 percent of high school students, and more than 10 percent of elementary school students — are chronically absent, missing at least 10 percent of class time.⁸ Disengagement cuts across racial, socioeconomic, and achievement lines, yet the consequences of disengagement are more significant for students from families with fewer resources; there are more second chances and supports outside of school for students from more affluent families.⁹ Ultimately, there will continue to be large disparities in educational outcomes, with many students struggling in school, as long as one-fifth of high school students and one-tenth of elementary students are chronically missing considerable amounts of school.

Active engagement, where students are emotionally invested and fully participating in learning, is key to students' academic growth. Students learn by actively engaging with material, and it is that process of grappling that allows new skills and content to stick.¹⁰ Studies have consistently found that about half the students in high school are bored and disengaged.¹¹ When students feel disinterested in a subject, it requires extra energy to pay attention — causing mental fatigue and a cognitive inability to focus, which in turn can further undermine students' feelings about and connections to school.¹²

Classroom conditions and teacher practices influence engagement: The ways teachers set up their classes influences students' emotional connection to their school work and their interactions with their teachers and peers. The most equitable classrooms use student-centered instructional practices and create the conditions that



Supporting Social, Emotional, & Academic Development

Teachers, principals, and student support personnel all play an important role in creating a school culture that supports the development and success of all students.

What questions can the adults in a school ask themselves as they work to create a supportive school climate?

Teachers and Students

- Have I set up my classroom in ways that promote positive academic mindsets?
- Do all my students feel...?
 - ... they belong in this learning community.
 - ... they can succeed at this.
 - ... they will see their ability and competence grow with effort.
 - ... that the work has value for them.
- Am I using grade and attendance data to tell me who needs more support?

Principals and Families

- What can I do to develop a positive school culture in which students and families feel engaged and empowered?



Teachers and Families

- Am I establishing positive relationships with families at the beginning of the year?
- Am I communicating and engaging with families regularly so we can be partners in supporting students to succeed in class?

Principals and Teachers Working Together

- Are teachers working collaboratively on our common goals for students?
- Do we have strong monitoring and support systems for students that are opt-out, instead of opt-in? How are we assessing whether our systems and strategies are working and for whom?

All School Staff Working Together

- How can we create a culture where teachers, school staff, and families are working together in true partnership to support student learning and engagement?
- How are we allowing students' to bring facets of their lived experiences in to our school?

Source: Allensworth, E.M., Farrington, C.A., Gordon, M.F., Johnson, D.W., Klein, K., McDaniel, B., & Nagaoka, J. (2018). *Supporting social, emotional, & academic development: Research implications for educators*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

allow each student to be highly engaged. For example, by incorporating routines into academic lessons, teachers can not only promote social-emotional development, but also deepen students' content-area knowledge and skills.¹³ It is important to note that investing time in students' social-emotional development is key to influencing students' engagement, and is not a substitution for teaching academic content — it is a change in how academic content is taught. Learning comes about through cycles of action and reflection — where students encounter, tinker, choose, practice, and contribute to new experiences, and then describe, evaluate, connect, envision, and integrate to make meaning of those experiences.¹⁴

Teachers shape students' mindsets, changing their learning experiences: It is becoming clear that teachers and other school staff are in a unique position to change students' daily experiences and beliefs in ways that have beneficial effects on students' academic performance.¹⁵ Some of the most exciting research from the science of learning and development points to how students' perceptions of the classroom and desire to engage in learning are shaped by how their learning experience is organized. It shows teachers can activate students' intrinsic motivation — the kind of motivation and mindsets that deepen young people's engagement and persistence in academic tasks, improve the quality of the work they produce, and increase their overall enjoyment of learning. Four learning mindsets are particularly important in supporting students' academic behaviors, persistence, and performance on academic tasks. Expressed from the point of view of a student, the four mindsets are, "I belong in this learning community," "I can succeed at this," "My ability and competence grow with my effort," and "this work has value for me."¹⁶ How true these statements feel within a classroom determines how likely students are to focus their attention on learning and persevere with challenging academic tasks. Research has consistently found that students with more positively oriented mindsets engage in better academic behaviors (they have better attendance and are more likely to participate in class, study, and complete homework) and earn better grades than students for whom these belief statements don't feel true.¹⁷ Teachers can support positive academic mindsets in many ways, including connecting learning to students' identities, interests and prior experiences, and providing frequent and specific feedback on students' work in ways that allow them to improve their performance.

Responsive classrooms enable all students to engage: Teachers' efforts to create classroom environments that are responsive to students' individual social and emotional needs can enable all students, and particularly those who have experienced significant stress outside of school, to engage fully and succeed. Each year, millions of students experience significant trauma, such as the death or chronic illness of a loved one, family conflict or separation, extreme damage to home or property, homelessness, food insecurity, neglect or abuse, sexual assault, or exposure to community violence. Educators' critical self-awareness and appreciation of how traumatic stress may affect children's experience of their classrooms are key to responding in supportive ways that enable all children to participate fully and succeed. There are a number of preventative practices, as well as restorative discipline practices, that teachers can learn and employ and these can be supported by school-wide strategies. For example, many schools have adopted Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, which emphasize teaching and rewarding positive behaviors across the school. Other schools provide access to social workers, therapists, and wraparound mental health services to create a school-wide culture that supports educators' ability to understand, recognize, and respond to all children's needs.

Partnering with families supports student engagement: There is significant evidence that strong parent engagement practices are related to student achievement.¹⁸ Students who have involved parents are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level classes; be promoted to the next grade level, pass their classes, and earn more credits; and attend school regularly.¹⁹ Also, in schools where there are strong relationships between school staff and families, students feel safer and more supported.²⁰ Much of what accounts for the large differences in safety among schools are the ways in which parents, teachers, and students work together and trust each other. Research in Chicago found that, among schools that served students from similar neighborhoods, those that had strong relationships between teachers and families had much safer and more orderly school environments.²¹ Principals and teachers can create intentional practices and systems that promote family involvement, including for families who face challenges to involvement, such as work schedules, language barriers, and differences in culture.

School leaders and staff co-create the climate for student success: It takes educators working together on creating supportive, trusting, and safe learning climates in schools to improve student learning. When teachers

are left on their own to figure out how to create equitable learning environments in their classrooms, the task can seem daunting, and their success will vary considerably. Without intentional, whole-school efforts to build collaborative relationships across the school community, individual teachers and school staff members lack support in addressing the challenges they encounter — leading schools to recreate the inequalities that mirror the larger society. Research has shown everyone benefits when schools have a collaborative learning culture among all of the adults working in the school, including administrators, teachers, counselors, front-office staff, and security guards, and a culture in which all educators take responsibility for the whole school and are committed to creating a strong and inclusive climate. In fact, the way teachers and other staff work together in the school is more important than individual teacher qualifications.²² Relational trust is key to successful collaboration so that all staff are able to work together on the factors that matter for success.²³ By taking a systems-level approach focused on school climate, principals can foster an environment that empowers both educators and students to thrive.

Ultimately, the UChicago Consortium's report points to the importance of creating the student-centered learning environments that research shows foster students' holistic development and contribute to equitable learning opportunities and outcomes. Importantly, it also offers ways that educators can understand, reflect upon, and utilize insights from research for SEL.

DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

As research on and interest in students' social-emotional development grows, a growing number of districts are integrating and expanding SEL in their classrooms. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has [partnered with 20 urban school districts across the country](#) — including major cities such as Chicago, Atlanta, Austin, Baltimore, Cleveland, Minneapolis, Oakland, and Dallas — to help strategically embed SEL into all aspects of their education systems. CASEL's program, the Collaborative Districts Initiative (CDI), provides a resource center with research on and classroom-tested practices for fostering social, emotional, and academic development, among other supports. Similarly, the [Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model](#) created by ASCD and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides tools and guidance for schools to enhance the social emotional development of their students.

Researchers have also made strides over the past year with respect to the development of reliable measures for identifying students who may be at-risk both academically and socially. A recent study published in the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* found scores for the teacher-completed Social Emotional Learning Screening Assessment (SELA) aligned with the five major components of SEL recognized by CASEL and provides practitioners with a reliable and timely way of identifying at-risk students.²⁴ Additionally, UChicago Impact, a nonprofit organization within the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute, has partnered with the UChicago Consortium to test a research-based survey designed to increase educators' capacity for reflecting upon and understanding how the learning environments they create, from the way their classrooms are organized to seemingly mundane daily practices, influences aspects of their students' social and emotional development. The forthcoming survey, *Cultivate*, is based on UChicago Consortium research showing that the conditions teachers create in their classrooms influence students' mindsets and strategies for learning, which are reflected in students' academic performance.

Cultivate is unique from other systems that measure mindsets and strategies in that it turns educators' attention away from trying to "fix" students and toward creating the kinds of environments and experiences that enable students to develop the type of academic mindsets and learning strategies that lead to higher levels of academic achievement. The survey provides educators with data on the seven dimensions of a classroom that matter most for cultivating students' academic mindsets and learning strategies: Teacher Support, Learning Connections, Developmental Relationships, Classroom Community, Learning Goals, Organization, and Class Work.

UChicago Impact is also developing a reporting site designed to illustrate the connection between the specific conditions teachers create in their classrooms and the academic performance of students who experience those conditions. Moreover, the site will include recommendations on strategies educators can implement in their particular schools to cultivate the classroom conditions that contribute to students' social, emotional, and academic development.

Finally, the philanthropic community continues to invest more in the potential of SEL. In October 2018, the Allstate Foundation committed [\\$45 million over 5 years](#) to provide direct programming for youth who can most benefit from SEL. Other major philanthropies including the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#) and the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#), are also focusing some of their efforts on improving and supporting SEL work across the country.

To download the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute's full New Knowledge Report, visit: <https://www.ueiknowledge.org/2018-new-knowledge-report>

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