

# An Ideal Opportunity: The Role of Afterschool in Social and Emotional Learning

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Ensuring all children and youth thrive as they move through school and into their adult lives requires that they have the opportunity to develop the skills and competencies that will help them land their first job, navigate and overcome the challenges they will face, keep positive relationships, and make good decisions. While families are central to this, others who interact with students can play a supporting role. For instance, a bipartisan report by the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution recommended a holistic approach to education, promoting both academics and skills such as working well with others, self-management, and responsible decision-making.<sup>1</sup>

Social and emotional learning or SEL is the most common terminology to encompass these skills and competencies (See “*What is SEL*” on pg. 3). In recent years, use of the term has grown exponentially—ballooning from 107 media mentions in 2010 to close to 1,500 in 2017—and it is often boiled down to the acronym SEL.<sup>2</sup> Although easier to use, these three simple letters represent a complex host of skills and competencies that form the foundation from which children and youth can learn and grow into the adults they aspire to be. Afterschool and summer learning programs, which have long been places for positive youth development, are helping students cultivate their social and emotional skills and competencies. Programs are providing caring and supportive mentors, creating a safe space where students can explore new interest areas and build confidence in their abilities, showing students how to reach consensus and work collaboratively, and providing meaningful ways for students to engage in the program.

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“When I started, I remember being told that the parents will raise them and we will teach them... We’ve come a long way now in understanding that child rearing begins at home, but that it has to be complemented every step of the way and that all of the institutions along the development[al] pathway have to be involved... I think we are making that progress, but it’s terribly complicated and we have to learn and grow and be flexible along the way.”

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— Dr. James Comer, professor of child psychiatry at the Yale University Child Study Center and member of the Aspen Institute’s National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.



## More Opportunities to Develop Social and Emotional Skills and Competencies are Needed

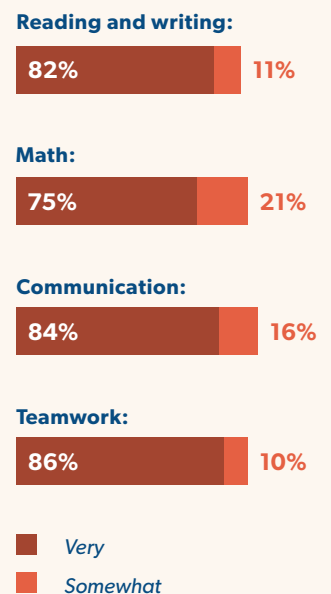
### Academics alone are not enough for students' future success

While employers are looking for employees who possess applied academic skills, such as fundamental reading, writing, and math skills, they also are in search of employees who are able to communicate effectively, work well in teams, make good decisions, and apply other social and emotional skills and competencies. In a survey of Business Roundtable member companies, companies reported that an applicant's communication and teamwork skills were just as relevant to their company as their basic reading, writing, and math skills (See *Chart 1*).<sup>3</sup> A World Bank report reviewing 27 studies measuring employer skills preferences across dozens of countries found that social and emotional skills and competencies were among the skills that were highest in demand, more so than technical skills.<sup>4</sup>

### Schools recognize the importance of social and emotional learning, but barriers to implementation exist

Although teachers and principals are strong proponents of social and emotional learning for their students, schools struggle with the implementation of SEL practices during the school day. In a national survey of more than 600 pre-kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, nearly all reported that they believed social and emotional learning is important for their students' experience in school (93 percent).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, a national survey of close to 900 public school principals found that 99 percent believed that an increased focus on SEL would have a major benefit on promoting a positive school climate, and 83 percent considered it very important for schools to promote social and emotional competencies in students.<sup>6</sup> Both teachers and principals overwhelmingly believe that a greater focus on SEL would have a positive effect on students' success in school, work, and life (See *Chart 2*).<sup>7</sup>

**Chart 1: How relevant are the following to current job openings in your company?**

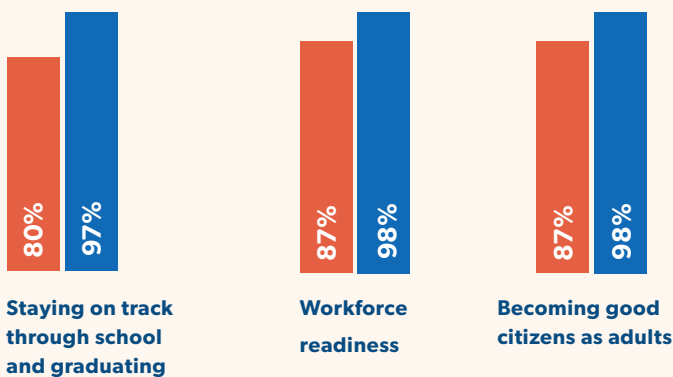




At the same time, a number of challenges exist to implement SEL practices during the school day, including lack of sufficient time focused on building social and emotional skills, training for teachers and administrators, and integration of social and emotional skills into educational practices.<sup>8</sup> Both teachers and principals recognize these challenges. Approximately 8 in 10 teachers (81 percent) report that finding time is a challenge for schools trying to implement SEL practices and 3 in 4 (73 percent) say that a lack of training and knowledge on teaching social and emotional skills is a challenge for implementing SEL in their classroom.<sup>9</sup> Echoing teachers’ sentiments, principals report that challenges regarding implementing SEL practices in their school include teachers not having enough time (71 percent) and teachers needing more training (60 percent).<sup>10</sup> A strong majority of principals (59 percent) also reported that a lack of funding dedicated to social and emotional learning was a challenge.

**Chart 2: Percentage that believe a greater focus on SEL would have a positive effect on:**

■ Teachers  
■ Principals



## What is SEL?

Education leaders are recognizing that student development is strongest when academics and social and emotional learning work together. There are multiple points of view on the skills and competencies that fit underneath social and emotional learning, but significant overlap can be found. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an organization dedicated to advancing the evidence base, practical strategies, and implementation of SEL, defines SEL as:

*“...the process through which children 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.”*

CASEL’s framework classifies SEL competencies into five areas: self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship skills.

The American Institutes for Research assembled other popular frameworks—including “21<sup>st</sup> century skills,” “mindsets,” and “non-cognitive factors”—noting that many of them have overlapping, if not equivalent, competencies. For instance, around the ability to regulate one’s emotions, CASEL’s framework includes *self-management*, while a mind-set framework includes *self-control*. Relating to the ability to communicate and build relationships, CASEL’s framework includes *relationship skills*, the non-cognitive factors’ framework includes *social skills*, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills’ framework includes *learning and innovation skills*—of which communication and collaboration are a part. These examples show that while there are various definitions, overall, there is broad agreement on what social and emotional skills and competencies encompass.

Sources: CASEL, *What is SEL*; American Institutes for Research, *Supporting Social and Emotional Development Through Quality Afterschool Programs*

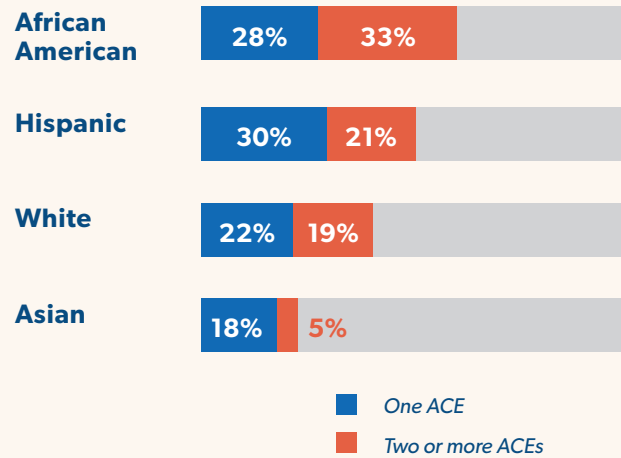
## Too many children and youth today have faced a traumatic experience, placing them at higher risk for negative health and education outcomes

Close to half of children in the U.S. (45 percent) have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE). ACEs are experiences—for instance witnessing or being a victim of violence in the home or community, living with someone who is mentally ill or struggling with drug or alcohol abuse, or having a parent or guardian who died—that could have negative and lasting effects on one’s health and wellbeing.<sup>11</sup> One in 10 children has experienced three or more ACEs, placing them in a higher risk category for negative mental and physical health outcomes. All children can be impacted by ACEs, however, there are ethnic and racial disparities that arise when looking across populations; African American and Hispanic children are the most likely to experience at least one ACE, and the most likely to experience two or more ACEs (See Chart 3). The experience of ACEs can have social and emotional consequences too. Children ages 6-17 with at least one ACE are less likely to be curious and interested in learning new things, be able to stay calm and in control when faced with a challenge, and be able to focus and complete tasks they have started, than are peers with zero ACEs.<sup>12</sup> But social and emotional skills and competencies can also help youth manage stressful, traumatic experiences, acting as protective factors for those who have experienced ACEs.

## Why Social and Emotional Learning Matters

The foundation for healthy and positive development is the possession of strong social and emotional skills and competencies that help youth do well academically, maintain positive relationships, be physically and mentally healthy, and become civically engaged.<sup>13</sup> Participation in evidence-based programs that take a social and emotional learning approach is linked to positive outcomes, including improved behavior in school and academic performance, lowered emotional distress, and improved self-perception and attitudes toward school, teachers, and others.<sup>14</sup> A 2017 study published in the *Journal of Child Development* reviewing the effect of SEL interventions involving close to 100,000 kindergarten through high school students found both short- and long-term benefits of involvement in SEL programs. Students involved in SEL programs showed gains in their social and emotional competencies, including empathy and teamwork; were less likely than students without SEL interventions to use drugs, report emotional distress, and have conduct problems; and demonstrated improvements in academic performance, including increased high school and graduation rates.<sup>15</sup>

Chart 3: Percentage of children with ACEs



## The Afterschool Connection

Research also points to afterschool and summer learning programs as ideal settings to help students build their social and emotional skills and competencies. Afterschool and summer learning programs are where students can connect to positive adult mentors, feel safe to try new things, and have the opportunity to acquire new skills and develop mastery in an area. In a study conducted by the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, afterschool leaders were more likely than education leaders to say that social and emotional learning was central to their mission.<sup>16</sup> Common principles of quality programs applying a social and emotional learning approach include providing a safe and positive environment, fostering positive relationships between children and adults, offering age-appropriate activities that work on skill development, and ensuring that offerings are relevant and engaging to students.<sup>17</sup> When programs target their students' social and emotional skills, students see positive gains in their attitudes toward peers and school, as well as in their performance at school.<sup>18</sup> Below are a few ways afterschool programs support student social emotional development.

### Taking an intentional, integrated approach to building students' social and emotional skills and competencies

Afterschool and summer learning programs are approaching social and emotional learning in a range of ways. However, when programs are able to align social and emotional learning with their mission and intentionally design activities to grow students' social and emotional skills and competencies, this explicit focus supports the implementation and sustainability of social and emotional learning within the program.<sup>19</sup> **WINGS for Kids' (WINGS)** mission is to, "equip at-risk kids with the social and emotional skills to succeed in school, stay in school, and thrive in life." Currently located in Charleston, South Carolina; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Atlanta, Georgia, WINGS centers its program around social and emotional learning by taking a three-fold approach. It promotes a culture and climate that is encouraging and fun, emphasizes the importance of positive relationships between staff and students, and employs a SEL curriculum that helps staff reinforce social and emotional learning objectives consistently and continuously throughout the program. Preliminary findings of an ongoing randomized control study found that WINGS students improved their relationship with teachers and behavior in class.<sup>20</sup>

### Prioritizing staff training and development

Staff are instrumental in delivering quality programming, since they help foster an open and encouraging environment, establish positive relationships with students, and serve as mentors. **Girls on the Run (GOTR)** has served 1.5 million girls through 200 councils located in all 50 states, plus D.C., providing a supportive environment in which girls run with their friends and coaches while learning, practicing, and applying social and emotional skills and competencies. GOTR prioritizes training its staff and coaches, designing a National Coach Training, which incorporates a blended model of online and in-person elements, facilitated locally by council leaders who have attended a train-the-trainer workshop. GOTR headquarters also provides local councils with coach support and site evaluation tools to aid in their local assessment of program quality. A 2016 evaluation by the University of Minnesota found almost all girls surveyed reported that they learned critical life skills through GOTR (97 percent), which included the ability to manage emotions, resolve conflict, help others, and make intentional decisions.

## Social and emotional learning and a trauma-informed approach

There is strong alignment between creating an environment that is conducive to social and emotional learning and a trauma-informed approach, as evidenced by program examples in this issue brief. For example, The Possibility Project's programming begins with providing students with a safe space to address the trauma and conflict in their lives and reinforces that the program is a community where each person's voice is valued and support of one another is critical. Students tackle issues affecting their lives, working together to lead community action projects, reflecting the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) six principles of a trauma-informed approach:

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and transparency
3. Peer support
4. Collaboration and mutuality
5. Empowerment, voice and choice
6. Cultural, historical, and gender issues

See SAMHSA's principles of a trauma-informed approach at: <https://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/trauma-interventions>



## Providing relevant and engaging project-based opportunities

Creating authentic, experiential learning opportunities helps promote student engagement and buy-in, while also giving students the chance to address an issue they care about, form relationships with their peers, reflect on and think critically about a topic of concern, listen and communicate well, and identify solutions. For example, the **Boys & Girls Club of Souhegan Valley** in Milford, New Hampshire, established the YES (youth empowerment service) team. Comprised of middle schoolers, the YES team reached consensus that they wanted youth to be more involved in reducing opioid overdoses in the state after a weekend retreat discussing issues affecting them. Students designed an action plan to focus on drug and alcohol prevention and mental health awareness, which included hosting a Youth Summit in mid-April 2018. Students worked together to plan the event, creating the summit's agenda, sending out invitations to the event, and co-facilitating sessions at the summit. At the **McKinley Afterschool Program**, a part of the Southeast Bronx Neighborhood Center in New York, students were asked to create a campaign centered around an issue in their community. The program's STEP team chose educating their community about gun violence and has since held community performances to raise awareness of gun violence, created an anti-gun violence campaign documentary, and led a virtual town hall with students from across the U.S. to discuss the prevalence of gun violence and solutions to stop it.

## Promoting youth agency and voice

Afterschool and summer learning programs have the flexibility and adaptability that provide students the opportunity to find their voice and gain the confidence in themselves to take ownership of the experience and lead. Through the arts, **The Possibility Project (TPP)** in New York, New York, concentrates on leadership, community action and responsibility, and positive future outcomes. Students create, produce, and perform original theatrical musical based on their lived experiences while collaborating, learning to resolve conflict, setting goals, managing time, and prioritizing responsibilities. In addition to performing in an off-Broadway show for their friends, family, and community, students take on a community action project, tackling issues of their choice to see their ability to affect change. For instance, students produced a short documentary featuring interviews with undocumented young people discussing how it feels to live as an undocumented individual in the U.S. An external evaluation found that students in the program performed better in conflict resolution and providing emotional support than their peers not in the program. Of students interviewed, more than 9 in 10 said the program taught them to develop openness to diversity and empathy for other perspectives (94 percent) and self-acceptance and confidence (91 percent).





## Conclusion

There is broad agreement that social and emotional skills and competencies are important for children and youth, and that, in addition to families, there is a responsibility among education and community stakeholders to support social emotional development. In a 2017 poll, more than 8 in 10 Americans said that it was “extremely” or “very” important for schools to help students, “learn skills like being cooperative, respectful of others, and persistent at solving problems,”<sup>21</sup> and parents have said that helping develop students’ critical thinking and reasoning abilities is one of their top three priorities for schools.<sup>22</sup> Devoting time and resources to implement social and emotional learning is also a smart investment—Columbia University found that every \$1 invested in SEL programming produced an \$11 return.<sup>23</sup> Together with families and schools, afterschool and summer learning programs can work to ensure that all children and youth are given the supports they need to build their social and emotional skills and competencies, paving a clear pathway to a healthy and fulfilling future.

## Additional Reading

- ▶ [Navigating SEL from the Inside Out](#) (Jones, S., et.al., 2017)
- ▶ [Social and Emotional Learning in Out-of-School Time Settings](#) (Jones, S., Bailey, R., Brush, K., & Kahn, J., 2017)
- ▶ [Kernels of Practice for SEL: Low-Cost, Low-Burden Strategies](#) (Jones, S., Bailey, R., Brush, K., & Kahn, J., 2018)
- ▶ [The Future of Children: Social and Emotional Learning](#) (Princeton University & The Brookings Institution, 2017)
- ▶ [Social and Emotional Learning Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review](#) (RAND Corporation, 2017)

For more information, visit The Wallace Foundation’s [Social and Emotional Learning Webpage](#) or the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s [Social and Emotional Learning Collection](#).



## Endnotes

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