



Supports for Social and Emotional Learning in Schools

Findings from the
American Teacher Panel

**Setting goals.
Working together.
Making good decisions.**

More than ever, schools across the United States and around the globe are embracing social and emotional learning (SEL) to assist students in adopting these skills and many other interpersonal (e.g., teamwork, leadership) and intrapersonal (e.g., self-regulation, resilience) capabilities. This dedication to SEL is well supported by research. Numerous studies in the last decade have demonstrated how SEL capabilities can improve student well-being, social behavior, and academic achievement.

But what do teachers think about the SEL-related efforts in their districts and schools? How do they see these efforts affecting their students (and themselves)? Do they feel that they are getting enough support to work on SEL in their classrooms?



Defining Social and Emotional Learning

Although SEL is defined in a variety of ways, the research team defined it in accordance with a framework developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). This framework is widely used in schools and includes a broad set of competencies that are reflected in many other common frameworks.

According to CASEL, social and emotional learning “is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”

RAND Corporation researchers conducted a spring 2019 survey through the American Teacher Panel (ATP), a nationally representative sample of K–12 teachers. The team received responses from more than 1,200 teachers across the United States working in schools in different geographic locations and economic conditions and serving different student populations.

The findings from this study, which are summarized in this research brief and documented in the full report, can help education policymakers and practitioners strengthen their supports for SEL in schools.



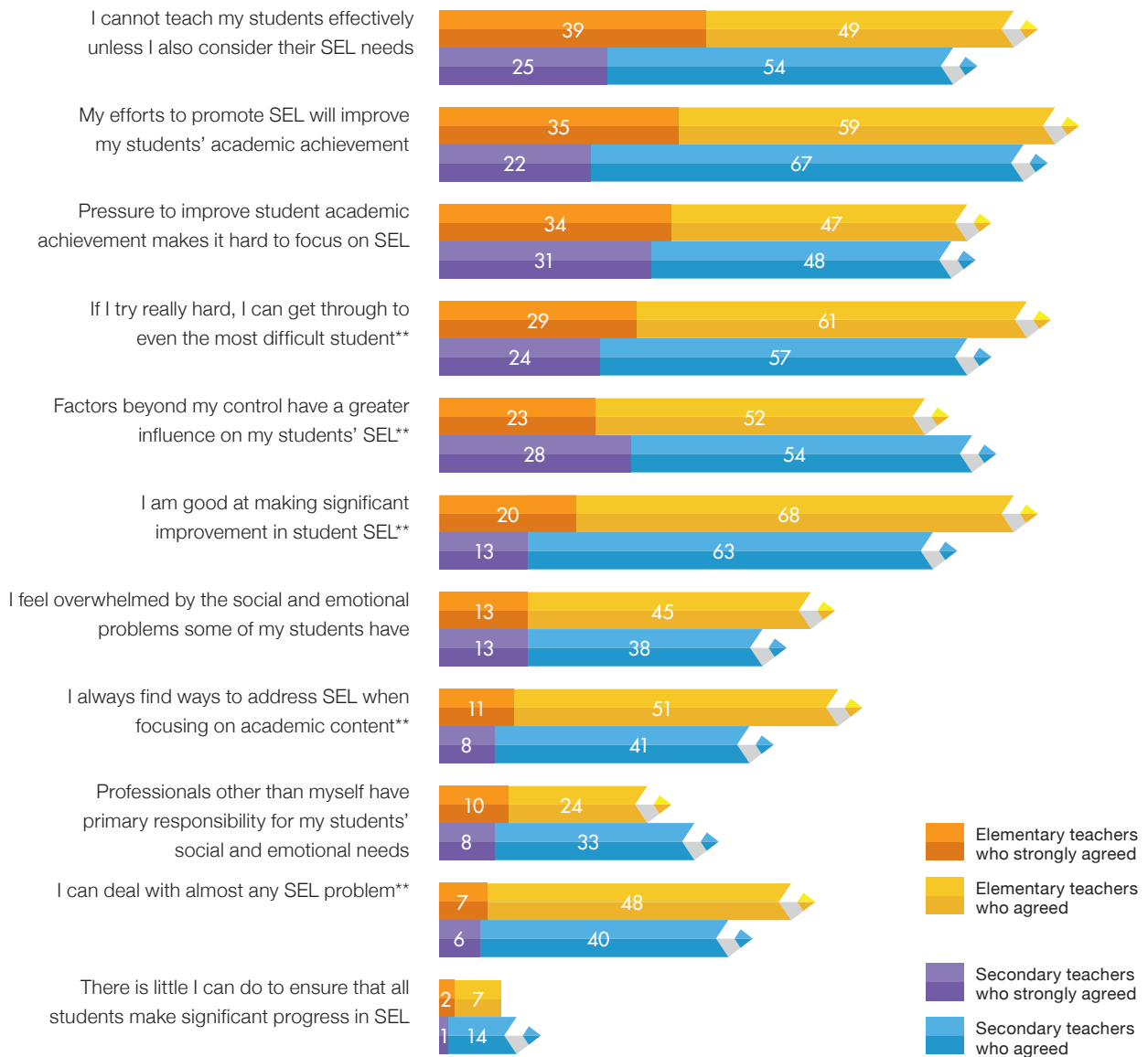
FINDING 1

Most Teachers Expressed Confidence in Their Ability to Improve Students' Social and Emotional Competencies, but They Also Perceived Barriers

Figure 1

About 90 percent of elementary and secondary teachers agreed that promoting SEL would improve students' academic achievement

Percentages of Teachers Who Agreed with Statements About Self-Efficacy and Responsibility for SEL



The survey asked teachers several questions about their beliefs about SEL and their role in promoting it. As Figure 1 shows, teachers' self-efficacy (i.e., their confidence in their ability to improve students' social and emotional competencies) was high; roughly 90 percent of elementary teachers and slightly fewer secondary teachers agreed that they could get through to even the most-difficult students. The responses also suggest that teachers felt confident in their ability to improve student SEL.

However, teachers identified limits to what they could do in their classrooms. Many teachers expressed a belief that factors beyond their control had a greater influence on students' SEL than they did and that pressure to improve students' academic achievement made it difficult to focus on SEL.

NOTES: Linear probability models were used to estimate differences between the proportion of teachers in elementary and secondary schools who at least agreed (agreed or strongly agreed). Linearized standard errors and survey weights are used in all models. N = 1,212–1,214. ** $p < 0.01$. The survey question was "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your work with students this year (2018–2019)?" Response options were "strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree," and "strongly agree."



Survey Results



FINDING 2

Teachers Indicated a Need for Additional SEL-Related Professional Development in Several Key Areas

Professional development (PD) can take a variety of forms and be both formal (e.g., workshops) and informal (e.g., professional learning from peers or mentors). Roughly three-quarters of teachers reported receiving some SEL-related PD during the 2018–2019 school year, with much of this PD in the form of informal dialogue with colleagues and participation in professional learning networks. Although PD covered a variety of topics, the topics that it was least likely to cover were adapting SEL practices to different cultures or linguistic backgrounds and using student SEL data.

When asked about the areas of SEL-related PD they wanted, a large majority of teachers indicated a need for additional development on several topics, including integrating SEL into academic instruction, adapting SEL to different cultures, adapting SEL to students with different learning needs, and reviewing and using SEL data.

Teachers in higher-poverty schools indicated a greater need for more PD related to SEL definitions and overview; about SEL programs, lessons, or activities for use in classrooms; that adapts SEL to different cultures; and that helps teachers build their own SEL skills.



FINDING 3

Teachers' Sense of Well-Being, Which Was Generally High, Was Associated with Their Use of SEL Practices and with the Kinds of Schools in Which They Worked

Teaching can be highly stressful work. Stress on the job can affect teachers' sense of well-being, which, in turn, can detract from teachers' ability to support their students' social and emotional development in addition to their academic performance. Teachers reported generally high levels of satisfaction with their work (e.g., a large majority of teachers reported that they looked forward to work each day) and high levels of well-being, including a sense of connectedness, frequent positive emotions, and feelings of creative engagement in their work. At the same time, however, roughly half of teachers indicated that they felt burned out by their work.

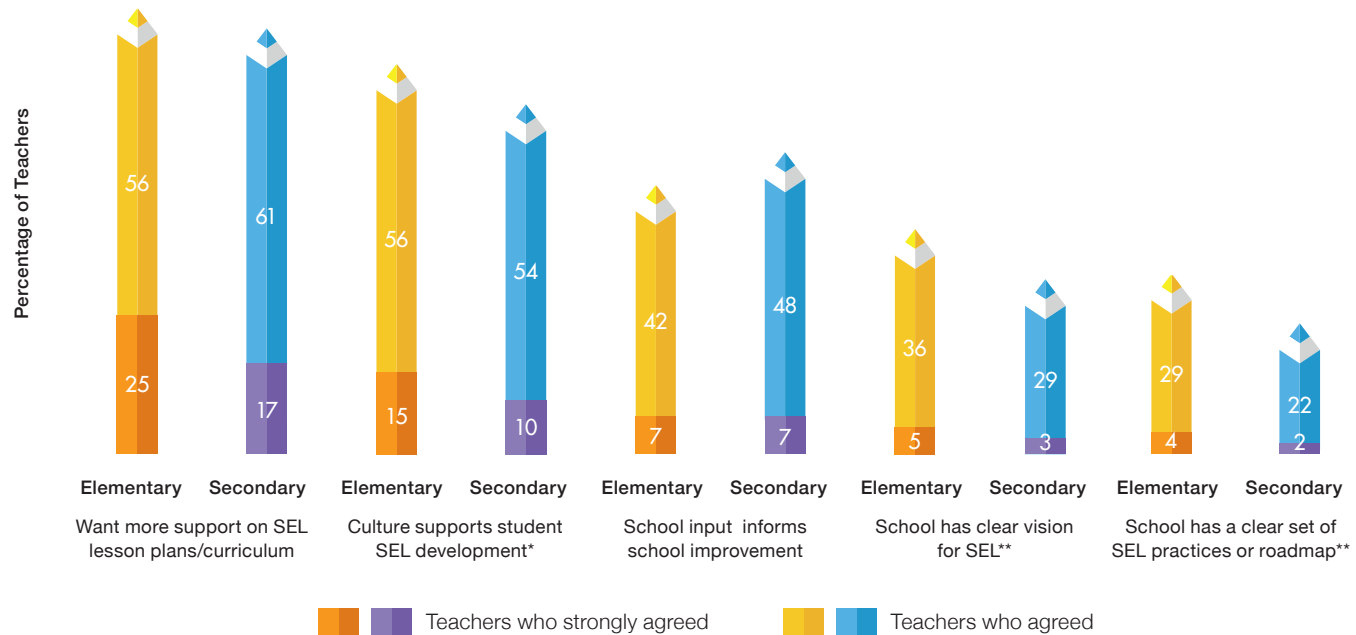
We found that teachers who reported higher levels of well-being reported engaging in SEL practices to a greater extent than those with lower reported well-being. We also observed differences in well-being as a function of school poverty level, with teachers in lower-poverty schools reporting higher levels of well-being—including job satisfaction—than those in higher-poverty schools.

The collected data do not show us why this is so, but the difference might stem from the numerous challenges that educators face in schools that are underresourced or that serve high-need students and families.

Figure 2

Teachers from both elementary and secondary schools agreed that their schools supported SEL, but their schools lacked a clear vision or a roadmap for SEL implementation

Percentages of Teachers Who Agreed with Statements About School-Level Supports for SEL



NOTES: Linear probability models were used to estimate differences between the proportion of teachers in elementary and secondary schools who at least agreed (agreed or strongly agreed). Linearized standard errors and survey weights are used in all models. N = 1,224–1,228. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. The survey question was “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about social and emotional learning in your school during the current school year (2018–2019)?” Response options were “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “agree,” and “strongly agree.”

Survey Results



FINDING 4

Elementary Teachers Reported Higher Levels of School Supports for SEL Than Did Secondary Teachers

Figure 1 shows that most teachers expressed a belief that they could and should promote SEL. However, Figure 2 makes it clear that, although elementary teachers reported a higher overall level of support than secondary teachers, they felt that they lacked access to critical supports to help them do this.

Overall, most teachers (roughly two-thirds) reported that their schools did not have a clear vision for SEL. Even fewer teachers agreed that their schools had a clear set of SEL practices or a roadmap. Most teachers reported that they would welcome more school support; 80 percent wanted more SEL plans and curriculum support.

In addition, most teachers felt that their schools had a culture that was supportive of student SEL development and used student input to inform school improvement. However, teachers in higher-poverty schools (55 percent) were less likely than those in lower-poverty schools (71 percent) to report having a supportive school culture and to report that student input informed school improvement (46 percent and 54 percent, respectively).





FINDING 5

Half of the Surveyed Teachers Reported Not Knowing Whether Their States or Districts Had SEL Standards or Measures

There is growing awareness of how state and local SEL standards and assessment data can influence and support individual educators' practices. We found that half of teachers did not know whether their districts or states had general SEL standards or whether their state or district's academic standards addressed social and emotional competencies. Additionally, most teachers did not know whether their state or district had a reporting system that included SEL-related measures for students.



FINDING 6

Teachers Who Perceived That Their State or District Had SEL Standards Indicated Greater Use of SEL Practices Than Those Who Did Not

Regardless of whether states actually had standards, teachers who believed that there were SEL standards said that they or their schools had enacted SEL practices at higher rates than teachers who said that they did not have SEL standards or that they did not know. Responses regarding academic standards that addressed SEL and accountability systems that included SEL measures followed the same pattern.



FINDING 7

Teachers Working in Different Grades and in Schools with Different Poverty Levels Reported Using Different SEL Practices

Teachers were asked to indicate the extent to which they or their schools used various approaches to promote SEL. Figure 3 shows that teachers reported providing SEL instruction in a variety of ways, which differed by grade level.

The figure shows that the use of SEL curricula or programs was more common among elementary teachers, whereas secondary teachers reported greater reliance on community engagement, teacher/student check-ins, and student involvement in school decisions. Currently, SEL curricula and instructional resources are more available for younger students, and there is a need for SEL approaches that emphasize voice and relationships for adolescents.

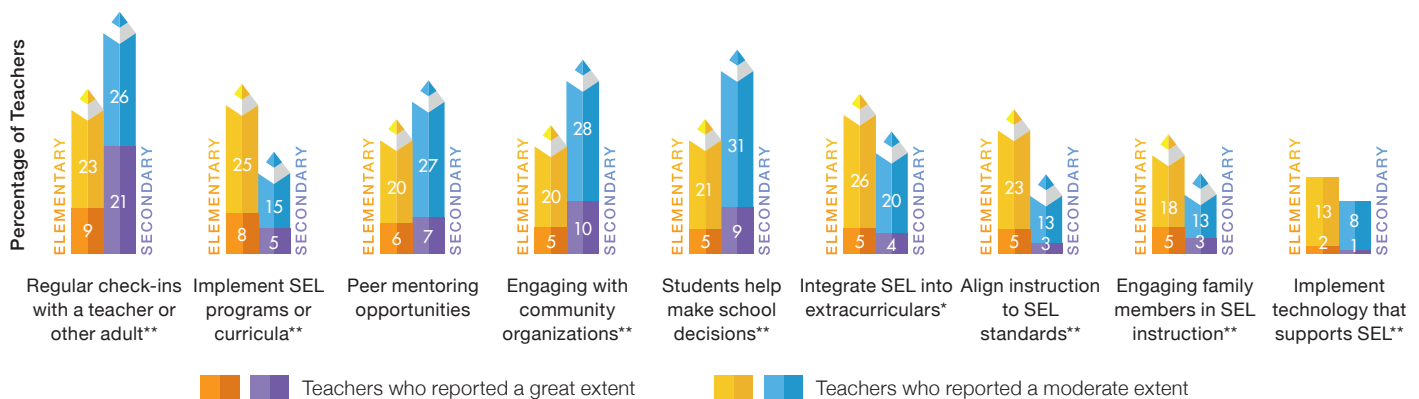
The practice that the lowest percentage of teachers in both elementary and secondary schools reported adopting to at least a moderate extent was using technology that supports SEL.

Teachers in lower-poverty schools reported using some practices more than their peers in higher-poverty schools, specifically peer mentoring, project-based learning, and guided inquiry.

Figure 3

Approaches to promoting SEL varied by grade level taught and by school poverty level

Percentages of Teachers Reporting That They or Their School Used Approaches to Promote SEL to a Moderate or Great Extent



NOTES: Linear probability models were used to estimate differences between the proportion of teachers in elementary and secondary schools who responded at least a moderate extent (a moderate extent or a great extent). Linearized standard errors and survey weights are used in all models. N = 1,216–1,220. ** p < 0.01. The survey question was "To what extent have you or your school used the following approaches to promote SEL during the current school year (2018–2019)?" Response options were "not at all," "to a small extent," "to a moderate extent," and "to a great extent."

Implications for Policy and Practice

These findings, which reflect the views and experiences of K–12 teachers across the United States, point to ways that state-, district-, and school-level education leaders might contribute to better, more-intensive SEL in classrooms and schools. The data also suggest ways in which policymakers and others could contribute to improved SEL practices. For example, stakeholders should:

- **develop the right SEL-related PD opportunities.** Teachers reported that their PD lacked emphasis on some important topics, including adapting SEL to different cultures and using student SEL data to inform instruction. PD providers should consider ways to ensure that teachers have access to learning opportunities in areas where they need more help.
- **ensure that information about SEL standards is widely accessible to educators.** SEL standards are intended to promote awareness of—and attention to—SEL. Some states have adopted SEL standards, but they are not nearly as prominent or visible as state academic standards. Teachers who believed that their state or district had SEL standards engaged in higher levels of several SEL practices than those who did not believe that there were standards.
- **address teacher well-being and burnout.** Although the survey showed that teacher job satisfaction and well-being were generally high, there were substantial disparities, with teachers in higher-poverty schools expressing lower well-being and higher burnout than those in lower-poverty schools. Additionally, all teachers likely have experienced heightened levels of stress and concern as a result of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. State policymakers and district leaders should monitor (or continue to monitor) teachers' stress and well-being and develop resources and strategies to support all teachers.
- **equip principals and other school leaders with the knowledge and resources needed to engage in instructional leadership around SEL.** Many teachers reported a lack of a clear vision and roadmap for SEL in their schools and indicated an interest in more guidance related to SEL lessons. Principals can have a tremendous impact on the teaching and learning environment in their schools, including setting a schoolwide SEL vision. District staff and others who work with principals should provide the necessary guidance or other resources to help ensure SEL-focused school leadership.
- **provide secondary schools with guidance on how to incorporate SEL into classes and activities.** The lower rates at which secondary teachers enacted some practices, such as integrating SEL into extracurricular activities, conducting student-led discussions, and making connections to SEL during academic instruction, suggest that there are opportunities for middle and high school teachers to bring an SEL lens to their instruction and activities, provided they receive the tools and guidance to do so.
- **be ready to provide guidance on new and emerging SEL online instruction programs and tools.** Digital approaches to SEL were not widely used as of spring 2019, when this survey was conducted. However, as a result of the spring 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, some organizations, such as CASEL and Transforming Education, began issuing guidance to help educators support students socially and emotionally using remote-learning strategies and tools. It is also likely that the adoption of digital SEL materials will grow. Teachers' lack of prior experience with such materials highlights a need for training and other resources to help them use these tools effectively.



How This Study Was Conducted

This survey was administered in spring 2019 to a nationally representative sample of K–12 teachers via the ATP, which is part of RAND’s American Educator Panels. We initially fielded the survey to 1,998 teachers and then weighted the 1,238 responses to ensure that the sample was nationally representative in terms of teacher characteristics (e.g., years of teaching, race/ethnicity) and school characteristics (e.g., elementary or secondary school, geographic location, enrollment numbers, student racial/ethnic composition). We analyzed the data to provide a detailed portrait of current supports for SEL that reflects a whole-school, systemic approach. The results contribute to our understanding of how schools across the United States attempt to promote SEL, what conditions are in place to support SEL, and how practices and conditions related to SEL differ among schools.

Teachers’ voices will be critical in the coming years as schools, policymakers, SEL program developers, and other groups continue to explore how to promote a broad variety of SEL competencies among young people. In addition, high-quality SEL for children ultimately depends on teachers who have access to training, instructional resources, and supports for their own well-being. The lessons from this study can inform the work of education leaders and organizations that work with teachers to offer SEL opportunities that benefit all children.

This brief describes work conducted by RAND Education and Labor and documented in *Supports for Social and Emotional Learning in American Schools and Classrooms: Findings from the American Teacher Panel* by Laura S. Hamilton and Christopher Joseph Doss, RR-A397-1, 2020 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A397-1). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA397-1. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND is a registered trademark.

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