



Modifying educator preparation and credentialing to include Social-Emotional and Character Development

HERE'S WHY SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING TRAINING IS SO CRUCIAL FOR NEW EDUCATORS

As educators prepare their students for future careers, they must recognize that social-emotional and character development (SECD) skills are as crucial to academic success as reading skills. For educators to impart these competencies to students, they must possess them (often called “Adult SEL”) and understand the nature and importance of those skills for their potential students. While both are important, here we will discuss the latter.

Our focus is on how educator prep programs in higher education can better equip future teachers, administrators, and other school employees with expertise in fostering young people’s SEL skills.



Making the case for SECD integration into educator training

It has become clear that implicit in SEL is its direction toward prosocial goals. No one wants to violate the advice of Theodore Roosevelt, who famously said, “To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.” For this reason, we think of SECD as SEL 2.0.

[CASEL](#) research shows that educators with SEL skills thrive in and contribute to inclusive, healthy, and just schools responsive to trauma and where academic achievement is optimized. These schools support students in developing the knowledge and skills needed to thrive and become productive, contributing members of society. Educators personally and professionally versed in SECD can appreciate students’ strengths and developmental needs and develop an awareness of learning differences and backgrounds to create classroom environments that are inclusive of all learners.

Sara Rimm-Kaufman, Ph.D., is a commonwealth professor of education at the School of Education & Human Development at the Center for the Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Her work extends beyond the “why” of SEL to the “how” of incorporating it into classrooms, including those that house pre-service educators.

“High-quality relationships between teachers and students are the bedrock of SEL,” Rimm-Kaufman said. “When that idea is placed at the core of educator prep programs, new educators better understand that they need to be responsive to all children and their individual, cultural, and academic needs.”

Educator prep programs offer the perfect opportunity to frame the curricular component of teaching and learning with an SEL and character development lens. It also gives educators a head start on SECD initiatives that are being incorporated in K-12 schools throughout the US.

Patricia C. Heindel is a professor of psychology and the dean of the College of Professional Studies at Saint Elizabeth University. She’s also the director of the Center for Human and Social Development and co-director of the [School Culture and Climate Initiative](#) and the [Academy for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools](#). In her work, she helps discover ways for educators to incorporate SEL into their classrooms and advocates for pre-service educators developing SEL training and techniques of their own.

“Although school leaders offer professional development and training on SEL implementation, too often these trainings are one-offs without ongoing opportunities for continued implementation support,” Heindel said.

Heindel argues that pre-service SECD training helps leaders and teachers see its relevance for content instruction and assessment. Making



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— Sara Rimm-Kaufman , Ph.D.
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When educators are empowered to further develop self-awareness through exploring their thoughts and feelings and discover their areas of strength and improvement, they can do the same for their current and future students.

it seem like an “either/or” rather than a “both/and” puts “novice teachers at an even greater disadvantage,” Heindel notes.

When educators are empowered to further develop self-awareness through exploring their thoughts and feelings and discover their areas of strength and improvement, they can do the same for their current and future students. Additionally, educators with a strong sense of their own social, emotional, and character development appreciate how students and adults alike are better prepared for their tasks when they learn and work in settings with cultures and climates that are supportive, caring, and positive.

“Research shows that teachers with strong social-emotional skills are more likely to stay in the classroom longer,” said Heindel. “On the other hand, research has shown that students in classrooms with teachers who have elevated cortisol levels have elevated cortisol levels too. Emotions are contagious.”

THE COMPONENTS OF A STRONG SECD EDUCATOR PREP PROGRAM

For SECD to make a difference in educator prep, Heindel and Rimm-Kaufman recommend the following components:

- **Self-reflection.** Any educator preparation program should start with pre-service teachers reflecting on their own social-emotional competencies and core values, including identifying their areas of strength and thinking about how they can use those to be more effective in creating classroom environments conducive to learning and creating positive, trusting, and nurturing relationships with students.

This self-reflection should also encourage pre-service educators to engage in introspection and questioning related to their biases, ability

to manage strong emotions, and automatic responses to situations, says Rimm-Kaufman.

She adds: “We must support pre-service educators’ cultural competence so their efforts to cultivate students’ social and emotional skills are done in such a way that they recognize the individual identities and diversity of perspectives of students in the classroom.”

■ **Learning SEL techniques.** Educators-in-training should learn tangible ways to incorporate SECD into their classrooms, other student interactions, and their relationships with their peers. This can include adding morning meetings that involve students in the classroom community immediately, providing regular and frequent opportunities for student reflection, or other techniques such as feelings check-ins. Future educators also should be familiar with evidence-based SEL programs, like Responsive Classroom, [Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving](#), [or Second Step](#), and [character development programs, such as Smart and Good Schools](#). Those planning to lead SEL and character development programs in their school buildings should be acquainted with implementation experts such as [Shelley Berman](#) and [Marvin Berkowitz](#), as well as successful local efforts that they can learn about from [SEL4US.org](#) or [character.org](#).

Berkowitz emphasizes that good teaching and sound school administration are built upon a foundation of the supportive, caring school and classroom climates and adult modeling of SECD. Heindel adds, “Educator prep programs should absolutely provide tangible SEL and character development tools for their students to help set them up for success.”

■ **Infusing SEL into already-established curricula.** Viewing SECD as an integral part of learning – and not a separate subject – can help pre-service educators develop more prosperous, nuanced lessons across content areas.

SEL in action for pre-service educators

At Saint Elizabeth University, Dr. Joanne MacLennon has developed SEL lessons to infuse into the school's educator prep program. In addition, the university [offers a course that addresses SEL implementation in classrooms and school-wide](#). Some states, such as [Oregon](#), have included SEL in their K-12 standards. Education departments in other states, such as New Jersey, promote but do not mandate [SEL in educator prep programs](#). ■



“Pre-service educators should understand that SEL skills are not just about WHAT you teach but HOW you teach,” Rimm-Kaufman says. “Adults in educator preparation programs must realize their impact as models for students.”

Heindel suggests that pre-service teachers learning best practices for writing lesson plans also learn to include SECD objectives. An example Heindel gives is to increase students’ social awareness and understanding of responsible decision-making during a lesson that analyzes a character in a novel. Students can reflect on how a character reached a certain decision or how they could have made a different decision in the novel. There are many [resources](#) to guide educators in making these [academic-SEL connections](#).

Rimm-Kaufman co-authored a paper about [integrating SEL into science lessons](#) published in the journal “Science and Children.” In it, the authors outline a science lesson on energy that starts with integrated SEL concepts and then moves into the more curricular material related to energy. For instance, many science standards involve practices that require students to rely on SEL skills, such as communicating effectively, respectfully arguing about ideas using evidence, collaborating with peers, and learning to process and manage frustration if work does not go as planned.

“It is wise for teachers to make sure that students have opportunities to learn these social and emotional skills, and then teachers can help students apply these skills to their science lessons,” Rimm-Kaufman says.

CONCLUSION

It’s time for universities and colleges to systematically integrate social-emotional and character development into teacher training

and educational programs. State education departments should correspondingly modify their certification requirements to incorporate the addition of SECD competencies embodied in at least the three components covered here. All young people need to have a sense of belonging and purpose and to learn and practice the skills that support them as they strive to reach goals and positively contribute to their communities. This is why SECD is crucial – it can cultivate environments for growth and educational opportunities that promote practicing social, emotional, and academic skills, which are key to healthy human development and civic learning for democratic engagement.

[Reach out](#) to join the SEL and Higher Education Task Force of SEL4US.



The success of SECD hinges on educator prep

A photograph of a male teacher with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue button-down shirt, sitting on a desk in a classroom. He is smiling and looking towards a group of students. The students are partially visible in the foreground and background, some wearing blue shirts. The background shows a chalkboard and a whiteboard.

Inspired by the evidence of benefits to students, more school districts have added SEL to their curriculum. However, research shows that for students to achieve positive results, schools must first invest in training their educator teams.

“Teachers need clarity around the domains of social-emotional learning and the ability to organize learning experiences that result in students being able to solve the inter- and intrapersonal challenges that contribute to the flourishing of individuals and communities,” said Dave Adams, chief executive officer of the Urban Assembly schools. [Adams’ schools walk this talk.](#)

Adams emphasizes that educators’ ability to support social and emotional development is not an innate skill. Teachers can only teach SEL effectively if they receive high-quality training, starting with their earliest moments

of professional preparation and continuing throughout their careers.

“Educators who learn how to take whole child approaches to learning and use SEL practices in their school are preparing students to become healthy, effective members of their school community and productive, ethical members of society as adults,” adds Sara Rimm-Kaufman, Ph.D. and commonwealth professor of education, School of Education & Human Development at the Center for the Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

If educators are not properly oriented to and trained in SECD, any social-emotional learning or character curriculum is nothing more than words on paper. From the outset of their professional journey, educators need guidance and support as they integrate techniques into their classrooms to empower their students to succeed academically and flourish in life. ■



ABOUT Academy for SEL in Schools

The Academy for Social and Emotional Learning in Schools is a professional development certificate program for current school educators, staff, and administrators to develop the skills to foster social-emotional learning, character development, and positive school culture. To meet the unique needs of both educators and administrators in this task, the Academy is divided into two tracks: a school leader track aimed at SEL on a school or district-based level and an educator/school mental health professional track aimed at the classroom/direct instruction level. In both tracks, the Academy course sequence includes two courses led by an

SEL expert, followed by a third course, which is a virtually supervised, job-embedded practicum. For most participants, the course sequence takes 1-2 years to complete.

The Academy uses an online, cohort-based format that mixes live chats with online, sequenced coursework. Based on online learning literature, educational PDs can be as effective when administered online as they are in person, especially when they contain the live component that the Academy uses. For registration and further information, please go to SELinSchools.org. ■

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