



GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT SECD

Tips for developing policy, teacher training and instructional practices around social-emotional character development.

“THIS IS OUR TIME,” asserts Tim Shriver, an educator, advocate and [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#) board chairman. “When you look at what’s going to make the country stronger, restore or rebuild the fabric of citizenship and service, reduce anxiety and fear, and promote competition and creativity and the entrepreneurial spirit — it’s not politics or business or entertainment. It’s education.”

Social and emotional learning and character development have been on the education priority list for decades but are getting a new attention thanks to:

1 Increasing business demand for interpersonal skills. Employers want people who can communicate and interact well with others, but many US workers lack these skills, according

to [research from LinkedIn](#). “Communications is the No. 1 skills gap across those major cities in the United States,” says LinkedIn CEO Jeff Weiner in an interview with CNBC’s “SquawkBox.”

2 Mounting scientific evidence that suggests success in school and life is dependent on healthy social and emotional development, including the ability to understand and manage emotions, according a report by [The Aspen Institute](#).

3 Growing realization that this is not a minority or low socioeconomic status issue. “Today, the most elite independent private schools are looking for social and emotional learning programs in the same way most challenged urban high schools are,” Shriver says. SEL is not relegated to class or status; it impacts students from all walks of life.

All of these points support a broader, real-world realization: Strong SEL skills start in K-12 classrooms but they have implications beyond those years.

"SEL competencies and other performance character strengths predict success in college and career," notes Marvin Berkowitz, Sanford N. McDonnell Professor of Character Education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis [Center for Character and Citizenship](#). "SEL is the development of a moral GPS that guides one in the direction of morality and motivates one to apply the SEL competencies to doing good in the world."

A [unified SECD approach](#) addresses five core competencies while also recognizing that schools should provide a moral compass for the development of students' positive character:

1. SELF-AWARENESS
2. SELF-MANAGEMENT
3. RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING
4. RELATIONSHIP SKILLS
5. SOCIAL AWARENESS

It's clear that social-emotional competencies and character development are crucial for success and integrity in life. They help address widespread school concerns such as harassment and bullying, substance abuse and student mental health. Educators have embraced these truths.

But crucial gaps remain in policy and teacher training/credentialing standards. Neither has kept up with the SECD evolution. This must change before real impact can happen in our schools.

PRIORITIZING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN SCHOOLS

Where do we begin? The experts offer these starting points:

FIND OUT WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING.

Developing policy is a tricky, complicated process and it's a good idea to investigate how other countries are doing this, says Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, professor and director of the [Human Early Learning Partnership](#) at The University of British Columbia - Vancouver.

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“It’s a complex issue and there are so many different aspects that need to be addressed — from changing what’s required to be a teacher, to broadening curriculum at colleges of education and enlisting experts who can teach courses on social and emotional learning,” Schonert-Reichl explains.

She suggests US education advocates and policymakers look at the approach used by the British Columbia provincial Ministry of Education, one of the first jurisdictions in the world to embed social and emotional learning into the K-12 curriculum. Since 2016, there has been one K-12 curriculum across the province. Superintendents and principals all support SEL training for teachers, each of whom is charged with promoting social and emotional learning in the classroom. “Every one of our districts has at least one administrative-level person who is focused on promoting social and emotional learning,” she continues. “Policy is embedded in all dimensions of the system — from teacher preparation to parent and community engagement, with a common language of understanding SEL and direct and intentional efforts to promote it within the larger system.”

INVEST IN ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT. Experience has shown that teaching SECD skills isn’t intuitive. Many schools have implemented programs that have not been successful because teachers received limited training and did not know how these skills fit into existing curriculum and standards protocols. “We need to develop ongoing high-quality professional development that is not costly and is readily accessible — but it has to have depth and substance,” Berkowitz notes.

Continuous training reinforces that teaching SECD skills is part of every teacher’s job and that it empowers each educator to be more effective with increased influence on students’ lives in and after school. Schonert-Reichl concurs. “We know that teachers who are well-trained and prepared to teach SEL programs are more likely to implement those programs with fidelity to yield positive outcomes for students,” she says, making it imperative to train administrators and instructional leaders in the benefits of SECD and how to implement it (see sidebar).

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Implementing SEL

TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN YOUR DISTRICT OR SCHOOL:

BUILD AN INFRASTRUCTURE.

Create a group responsible for long-term implementation. Members set attainable goals, articulate values and create a schedule and action plan to accomplish each one. They also design activities for learning, assessment and accountability.

! PRO TIP: Consolidate existing groups focused on SEL, character, climate, discipline, morale and anti-bullying into one “school culture” ensemble.
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ALIGN SECD INSTRUCTION WITH STANDARDS.

The key to implementing a sustained SECD initiative is to integrate it into required standards, rubrics and mandates.

! PRO TIP: Charge your school culture group with aligning SECD with Core Academic Curriculum Standards, teacher evaluations and other programs.
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ASSESS SCHOOL CULTURE AND CLIMATE.

Understanding where we’re starting from and how we’re progressing toward the goal requires regular assessments with students, staff and parents through surveys, drop-ins, focus groups and analysis of student work. Reports are used by the SEL team to set priorities and then shared with stakeholders.

! PRO TIP: Collect data by gender and ethnicity, grade level and staff position.
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ARTICULATE AND PRACTICE VALUES AND ESSENTIAL LIFE HABITS.

When SECD programs are presented to children without coherent articulation, the impact is muted and learning is impeded. Successful schools clearly spell out a core set of beliefs and actions beyond catchy slogans and give students ample opportunities to solve real-life problems in real time.

! PRO TIP: Embed values reinforcement and skills practice time in daily lessons across the curriculum and in after-school activities and enrichment programs.
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ASSURE FACULTY READINESS.

Traditional training using manuals and one-day professional development workshops isn’t sufficient. Educators need specific instructions on how to integrate SECD into their teaching, including a deeper understanding of the research base and proven practices from experienced colleagues.

! PRO TIP: Spend more time on conceptual understanding and building a commitment to your vision.
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Get more advice on to [How to Implement Social and Emotional Learning at Your School.](#)

ACADEMY FOR SEL IN SCHOOLS CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS

“Those now educating our children — teachers, school support professionals, educational leaders — need support and preparation for building students’ social-emotional competencies and character,” explains Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, professor and director of the Human Early Learning Partnership at The University of British Columbia – Vancouver. In response, the Academy for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools has created two certification programs, **an SEL/SECD instructional certificate for educators working directly with students and an SEL/SECD leadership certificate for administrator and other school leaders.** In addition to earning these credentials, participants gain membership to the Virtual Professional Learning Community of the academy, which gives ongoing consultation and support.

BUILD A FIELD OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE.

Educators are constantly asked to support new curricula, often without much research on how it drives outcomes. “A lot of teachers aren’t even aware of the recent research findings or feel that it’s just one more thing they’re asked to do,” says Schonert-Reichl. “That’s why it’s important to change their mindsets about how social and emotional competencies develop and to move away from a sole myopic focus on academic achievement.”

To that end, Shriver and others are working to professionalize SECD instruction with an accessible research base, proven practices and teacher and administrator certification (see sidebar). “We’ve never had a discipline around this,” he says. “So we’re creating a field that delivers value by improving head and heart in outcomes of kids.”

Though SECD has been on the agenda for years, now is the time to move ahead with policy, practice and professionalization.

“This is the moment for educators to step up and recognize their unique opportunity to serve children in their classrooms or schools, but to serve the country,” Shriver says. “We can help children grow and develop in ways that are positive, affirmative and helpful even in challenging times. This is the opportunity to claim their rightful place as the architects of the future of the country.” ■

ABOUT ACADEMY FOR SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

The [Academy for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools](#) is a collaboration between Rutgers University and the College of Saint Elizabeth. Our mission is to offer online [Certificate Programs](#) to educators and administrators to foster effective implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL), character development, and school culture and climate initiatives in schools and out-of-school programs, supported by an ongoing virtual professional learning community.

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