

Social-Emotional Learning Has Long-Lasting Positive Effects on Students, Study Says

By Evie Blad on July 12, 2017 12:19 AM | [No comments](#)



Programs that teach students how to recognize their emotions, solve problems, and form healthy relationships may **continue to show positive benefits for students** months, or even years, after they complete them, a new meta-analysis finds.

Students who completed social-emotional learning interventions fared better than their peers who didn't participate on a variety of indicators—including academic performance, social skills, and avoiding negative behaviors like drug use, finds the analysis, which examined follow-up data from dozens of published studies on specific interventions.

The meta-analysis builds on previous research that found **social-emotional learning participants outperformed their peers academically**. That research is frequently cited by policymakers and educational leaders who are seeking to promote social-emotional learning programs, through which schools teach students about emotions, relationships, and conflict resolution alongside traditional academic subjects like math.

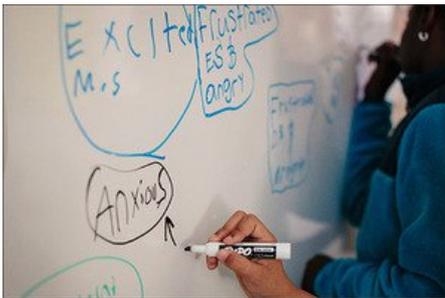
The report, published in the journal *Child Development*, was completed by researchers from the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, Loyola University, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and the University of British Columbia. It was funded in part by the NoVo Foundation, which also supports Education Week's coverage of social-emotional learning.

"This study further solidifies the already powerful case for action—for a significant shift in how we think about education and the urgency of scaling evidence-based programs that unite head and heart," CASEL Chair Tim Shriver said in a statement. Shriver is also co-chair of the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Academic, Social, and Emotional Development, which is working with educators and researchers to set **an agenda for advancing social-emotional learning** and similar approaches in schools.

How did the analysis work?

A meta-analysis is a **review** of existing, published research that looks for larger trends.

In this particular meta-analysis, researchers **reviewed** results of studies on 82 school-based, social and emotional learning interventions that were universal, or administered to all students instead of focusing on those with specific social or behavioral problems. Those studies involved 97,406 students, kindergarten through high school, from a variety of racial and demographic backgrounds. Thirty-eight of the interventions studied took place outside of the United States. To be included in the **review**, studies had to include follow-up data from at least six months after the interventions were completed.



Researchers tracked follow-up results in seven areas: social-emotional skills, positive attitudes, positive social behavior, academic performance, conduct problems, emotional distress, and drug use.

Not every study in the analysis included follow-up results from each category, so researchers worked with the ones that did, creating an index to compare students who participated in social-emotional learning programs with those in control groups who did not participate.

In the eight studies that measured academic results an average of 3.75 years later, participants in social-emotional programs performed about 13 percentile points higher than their peers in the control group, they found. Academic results were based on grades and test scores drawn from academic records.

They found participants similarly outperformed control group peers in all of the other areas, many of which were covered by a much larger number of studies in the analysis.

Social-emotional learning programs were more likely to have long-term positive effects if participants showed immediate gains in social and emotional skills at the end of the initial intervention, researchers found.

And the programs don't seem to work only for wealthy, white students. "Significant positive effects" were found across all demographic subgroups, the analysis says.

So what does this mean?

The analysis suggests that, in addition to their immediate effects on student behavior, SEL programs may have long-term preventative benefits. Perhaps students who've been given targeted instruction in areas like smart decision making, forming healthy relationships, and goal

setting learn to apply those skills in other areas of their lives. That may mean they are less likely to make unhealthy decisions related to drugs and other risky behaviors.

But there are some limitations. As I mentioned previously, not every study included results for every indicator. Many of the studies included in the analysis relied on students to self-report the follow-up data, which may lead to some inaccurate results. And many studies also didn't provide detailed breakdowns of results by race and poverty level.

And researchers were unable to determine what components of the social-emotional learning programs made them more or less effective. For example, were the classroom programs in the analysis coupled with broader changes to school policy, like less punitive approaches to discipline?

So the analysis' authors find hope in their results. And, unsurprisingly, they suggest there's room for more research on the subject.

Should schools use this analysis as justification for adopting SEL program X? Not necessarily. Advocates for social-emotional learning say not every product that is packaged as SEL meets their standards for evidence-based programs.

And those advocates also increasingly support a broader approach. Even schools with evidence-based programs need to work to change bigger, systemic factors, like how their teachers approach their work, how they discipline students, and how they interact with families, they say.

Photo: Students in a 4th-grade class at Oakton Elementary School in Evanston, Ill., listen during a social-emotional learning discussion.