

**PROPOSAL**  
**Social Emotional Learning as Part of a Basic Education in Washington State**  
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A critical component of a child's school success is social emotional learning (SEL), yet most discussions about public education focus solely on their academic performance. Students with good social emotional skills make better use of instructional time, and are less likely to be held back or participate in special education. Social emotional skills *can* be taught. These skills are essential for academic achievement as well as workplace and lifelong learning. **A child who comes to school anxious, afraid, or alienated is a child whose ability to learn is significantly diminished.**

The definition of a "basic education" for students in Washington should include not only core academic skills, but also core social emotional learning skills such as behavioral and emotional management, positive relationships, conflict resolution, interpersonal communication, cooperation, decision-making, and planning. Our Basic Education Learning Goals should reflect these and resources should be incorporated into state funding formulas.

**Why Are SEL Skills an Essential Component of a Basic Education for All Students?**

Students with strong social and emotional learning do better in school. They have significantly better attendance records; their classroom behavior is more constructive and less often disruptive; they like school more; and they have better grade point averages. They are also less likely to be suspended or disciplined. The overall effect is a more effective and successful classroom experience for all students.

Several states, including New Jersey, Wisconsin, Illinois, New York, and Tennessee, have adopted statewide standards and benchmarks for these skills. These states recognize that, just as with academic skills, SEL skills should be taught with appropriate curriculum, and teachers should be trained to provide rich and engaging instructional opportunities for students to learn them.

Some may argue that instruction in SEL is not a primary responsibility of our public schools that the focus of classroom instruction should be on reading, writing, and mathematics. In fact, students who do not possess SEL skills may not succeed academically or later in college, the workplace, or as a citizen in the community. The reverse is also true: students who can successfully exercise SEL skills will improve their academic achievement.

**What is Social Emotional Learning?**

Creating positive relationships with others, age-appropriate management of behavior and emotions, resolving conflicts, knowing how to cooperate and work with others to accomplish an objective, weighing options and making decisions, planning and setting goals. Some call these "soft skills." But more often they are being referred to as "Social Emotional Learning" or SEL.

Regardless of the terminology, an increasing number of educators are recognizing the importance of providing students, at each stage of their educational and developmental experience, with a defined set of skills that allows them to be successful in school and in life. Just as with academic standards, there are age-appropriate standards for SEL skills.

**How is SEL Currently Addressed in Washington?**

As with many states, there are scattered references in the learning standards for Health and Fitness to such concepts as "Understands positive and negative effects of stress and stress management techniques" [*Health GLE 2.4.3*] or "Solves conflicts while maintaining safe and respectful relationships" [*Health GLE 3.3.3*]. Some schools have been able to access temporary grant programs to support SEL, which often address special issues such as mental health and drug and alcohol prevention or target specific at-risk populations of students such as foster children or students in dropout retrieval programs.

## What does research tell us about SEL?

### Higher student achievement.

- ⇒ A rigorous meta-analysis of 207 studies of school-based SEL skills programs found that students demonstrated enhanced personal and interpersonal skills, attitudes, and behaviors. Among the studies that examined academic outcomes, participating students scored 11 percent higher than non-participating peers on standardized achievement tests. (CASEL: 2007 www.casel.org)
- ⇒ Other academically-related benefits of SEL instruction include decreased suspensions and increased school attendance, grades, and attachment to school. (Hawkins et al., Journal of Studies on Alcohol: 1997)

### Reduction of high risk behaviors

- ⇒ Early SEL instruction by trained teachers promotes emotional competence, behavior regulation, and school readiness in pre-K through first grade, especially for at-risk children. (Webster-Stratton [University of WA – The Incredible Years]. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry: 2008)
- ⇒ In Washington, more than 20 percent of high school students drop out of school or otherwise fail to graduate within 5 years. (OSPI: Dropout Statistics 2004-05) Factors known to be associated with dropout risk are poor attendance, lack of engagement in school, poor academic achievement, lack of adequate counseling, and behavior problems. (OSPI: Dropout Prevention Report, December 2005)
- ⇒ SEL instruction reduces the type of high risk behaviors that interfere with learning and are highly correlated with students' lack of success and/or dropping out of school, particularly disruptive and violent behavior and drug and alcohol use. (Zins et al. Building Academic Success on Social and Emotional Learning: What Does the Research Say? 2004)

## How Should SEL Be Incorporated into Basic Education?

Rather than only serving a limited set of high needs students using a clinical treatment approach and temporary grants, schools need ongoing and permanent capacity for all students using a public health prevention model. This can best be accomplished having schools do what they do best: provide instruction to students and support for teachers.

1. **Standards.** The Basic Education Goals (RCW 28A.150.210) should be expanded to include SEL skills. EALRs and GLEs, as well as appropriate Classroom-Based Assessments, should be developed. There are already examples of standards and benchmarks from other states.
2. **Curriculum.** OSPI should provide technical assistance and guidance to refer school districts to available high quality curriculum and programs for SEL. here are research-proven programs for all age ranges.
3. **Professional Development.** Teachers will need support to provide effective instruction in SEL. This includes professional development and training directly associated with the district's chosen curriculum.
4. **Support.** Support for teachers also includes the availability, in each school building, of counselors and family/community liaisons who can provide specialized intervention with students when needed and can supplement school resources with resources and expertise (such as public and mental health professionals) from the community.
5. **Resources.** Financial resources for the necessary curriculum, professional development, and staff support to make SEL a part of Basic Education should be provided to school districts through the basic education funding formulas.

As the Basic Education Finance Joint Task Force makes recommendations for a new definition of Basic Education and accompanying funding formulas, now is the time to ensure that all students have an opportunity to learn the core Social Emotional Learning skills that will enable them to be successful academically and socially throughout their lives.

"No educational tool is more essential than good health. We believe that healthy kids make better students and.... Policies and practices that address the health and developmental needs of young people must be included in any comprehensive strategy for improving academic performance."

*Council of Chief State School Officers, Policy Statements on School Health, 2004*