

# School-based social and emotional learning programs

What we actually know and what policy makers need to know

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*“Social and emotional learning (SEL) skills – the thinking, behavioral, and regulatory skills needed to interact effectively with others – are strongly associated with success in school and life.” ([Brookings / Future of Children](#))*

In current times, the importance of [SEL competencies](#) is well recognised, and the number and type of SEL programs offered in schools is continually growing. Some reviews suggesting evidence for the effectiveness of SEL programs and practices do exist; however, these reviews tend to be dated, lack sufficient focus on the area in question, or have included studies which used non-robust methodologies.

Recently, my colleagues and I conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis regarding the impact of universal school-based SEL programs on student academic achievement (i.e., mathematics, reading, science). With this review, we managed to put all experimental and quasi-experimental studies from the past 50 years into a consistent framework, similar to the methods used by the federal [What Works Clearinghouse](#) (an investment of the Institute of Education Sciences within the U.S. Department of Education). Importantly, this review allowed us to include more recent and methodologically more rigorous studies in the field.

[The study](#) suggests that SEL programs seem to have a positive impact on reading, mathematics, and, though to a smaller extent, also on science in comparison to traditional methods. However, some SEL programs from more rigorous randomized studies – with large sample sizes – which have dominated the classroom over the last few decades may not be producing as meaningful effects for students as were anticipated.

## **What policy makers and funders need to know**

By employing systematic review procedures, our recent study puts the goal of evidence-based reform into practice and thus enables a discussion as to which SEL programs produce significantly positive academic outcomes (and which do not, yet). The paper should help policy makers make informed decisions to improve students' academic outcomes and help inform practitioners and researchers in terms of theory and knowledge.

Policy makers and funders need to continue to invest in innovation and program implementation of new and better SEL interventions that focus on improving student achievement and other outcomes of importance. Moreover, it is critical for researchers to be in the position to work further towards better independent evaluation and better standards for implementing SEL interventions.

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Funders should make resources contingent on rigorous evaluation for those programs that show promise. Policy makers and funders need to understand that more rigorous studies are required for advancements in this research agenda. Studies with large sample sizes with strong sampling methods will guarantee that a study is appropriately powered and generalizable. Randomized designs will provide researchers with greater confidence in being able to make causal claims.

All of these factors require greater investment and decision-makers who are willing to champion a commitment for better research.

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Corcoran, R. P., Cheung, A. C. K., Kim, E., & Chen, X. (in press). Effective universal school-based social and emotional learning programs for improving academic achievement: A systematic review and meta-analysis of 50 years of research. *Educational Research Review*. [Available online](#)

Johns Hopkins University (2015). *Effective programs for social and emotional learning: A systematic review*. (Jacobs Foundation Grant 120813, R. P. Corcoran, Principal Investigator).

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