How can educators assess social and emotional learning?

Early in 2019, a National Commission Report, "From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope," highlighted the urgency for the use of data to drive social, emotional, and academic learning. Rigorously evaluating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programming with assessments that are both ecologically and psychometrically valid is a pivotal pathway to these ends.

When done well, assessments can empower teacher autonomous and authentic instruction, student voice, and the continuous improvement of school culture. Simultaneously, advancing assessment methodologies also promotes the sustainability of effective SEL practices throughout the school community. Assessments that accurately capture the impact of SEL for students, their teachers, parents, and the school community can drive systemic and sustainable change and have an enduring impact on both policy and practice.

Many new SEL assessments have emerged, and numerous examples of promising research remains underway. Resources are increasingly becoming available to guide educators in choosing and using assessments and understanding the intersectionality of different SEL frameworks and standards (see To Learn More, next page). These resources provide valuable and highly sought information to practitioners.

Why assess SEL?

The goals of SEL assessment can be two-fold: formative assessments— those designed to inform SEL instruction—

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and summative assessments—those designed to measure effect of SEL instruction on student learning targets. A teacher may use formative SEL assessment to inform their decision on which SEL competency to focus on during instruction, whereas an administrator may review end-of-term SEL assessment data to inform their decision on whether or not to invest additional dollars in SEL programing supports or professional development for teachers. In addition, assessing SEL communicates SEL as a priority, supports the establishment of a common school language for SEL, and further informs our understanding of how SEL can promote education equity.

Despite nationally representative survey data showing near unanimous commitment to SEL (95%) among school principals, and even stronger agreement that SEL competencies are teachable (99%), less than a quarter (17%) of principals reported they were aware of what assessments of students' SEL competencies were available to use. Just as few (16%) believed that their teachers knew how to use data from these measures. There is a clear need from practitioners for

more guidance and support related to SEL Assessment, and researchers and practitioners across the nation are responding to the urgency and working to generate a knowledge base for SEL assessment.

How can teachers choose SEL assessments?

In the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) guide "Choosing and Using SEL Competency Assessments: What Schools and Districts Need to Know," researchers encourage teachers and leaders to examine the validity and reliability of each assessment before making selections. They strongly recommend selecting strength-based approaches to assessment, which focus on the assets of the learner to promote positive behaviors. Importantly, SEL assessment should center on the development of all students' knowledge, skills,and attitudes, which requires careful attention to equity and student cultural context. Lastly, educators are cautioned to not confuse SEL assessment with assessments used in high-stakes decision making.

How can teachers use SEL assessments?

Dr. Clark McKown and colleagues at xSEL Labs provide a four-step process to guide educators in the practice of data-informed SEL instruction:

Step 1. Assess: To begin, educators should start by measuring SEL strengths and needs. Steps to assess include making a plan for assessment administration, confirming the necessary technology and infrastructure are able to be executed on, and conducting the assessment. It is important to consider factors such as where and how the assessment will be administered to be least intrusive to the student learning environment and most accessible to the widest diversity of learner. These steps are not easy and, in fact, require intentional revisiting by all stakeholders after each administration.

Step 2. Reflect: Next, review and analyze the SEL assessment data. It is important that educators understand the assessment score and reflect on how to interpret the data based on how it is aggregated—at the student level (individual-level data) and/or at the class or grade level (group-level data). Most SEL assessments will include a data report, and educators will need to explore how the data is aggregated to begin the process of digesting the scores for meaningful interpretation and action. It is suggested that educators and school leaders familiarize themselves with SEL assessment score reports prior to administering the assessments to students. Doing so will position educators to select an assessment that provides them with data that is meaningful for their practice.

Step 3. Plan: After reflection on the data, plan and outline how you will meet SEL goals. Planning includes reinforcing and replicating existing SEL practices (including teaching, drawing on supplemental or extension lesson activity) and implementation. Plan how you will bring in additional SEL best practices, consider new and alternative program adoption, and commit to an action plan as a learning community. Wherever possible, include school leaders and stakeholders in your planning to support the execution of your plan and the alignment of your plan with school- and district-wide goals for teaching and learning .

Step 4. Teach: Implement data-informed SEL instruction that follows through on your action plan. We know that the best made plans require continuous reflection and revisiting, and as such it is helpful to plan times across the instructional period to reflect on implementation over time, and allow for adjustment mid-cycle if needed.

Additional considerations to support teachers' use of SEL assessments.

Don't Google it: The field of SEL assessment boasts a rich and ever-growing array of free and publicly available resources and assessments designed specifically for use by educators and schools in support of SEL competency assessment and efficacious SEL implementation (see Learn More). Check out these resources first. The benefit of choosing assessments from these curated venues is that they have been vetted and cataloged for their psychometrics, sensitivity, and accessibility. Although useful data can be located via search engines more broadly used, looking within the specific resources listed below will ensure that the assessments accessed are of high-quality for your use.

Invest in Data Literacy. Although educators show commitment to SEL, they need more guidance and support related to SEL assessment. Practitioners request and need clear, approachable guidance on how to leverage data they have, including:

- identifying priorities ("What do you hope to change with SEL?"),
- clarifying expectations ("What are reasonable expectations around those things changing?"),
- operationalizing constructs ("What data do you already have access to that gets at these issues?"), and
- best practices of data collection and interpretation.

Most of these questions require attention to data literacy geared at making use of data and extend beyond improving how assessment measures are developed and data is gathered. The field continues to work to provide data users with stepwise guidance and parameters for decision-making to support in the identification of priorities, expectations, operationalization of constructs, and best practices in data collection and interpretation.

TO LEARN MORE

CASEL SEL Assessment Work Group resources
https://measuringsel.casel.org/resources/

RAND Assessment Finder
http://xsel-labs.com/resources/guides/

Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory
http://easel.gse.harvard.edu/

Choosing and Using SEL Competency Assessments: What Schools and Districts Need to Know
CASEL/Rand Corporation, 2018
http://bit.ly/33Zsq5E

Guide: Data-Informed Social Emotional Learning Instruction
xSEL Labs (2019)
https://xsel-labs.com/resources/guide-to-data-informed-sel-instruction/

Learning Point: What is Social Emotional Learning?
http://bit.ly/LP-SEL

Learning Point: Where does SEL Assessment Fit in the Building and District Assessment System?
http://bit.ly/LP-SEL3