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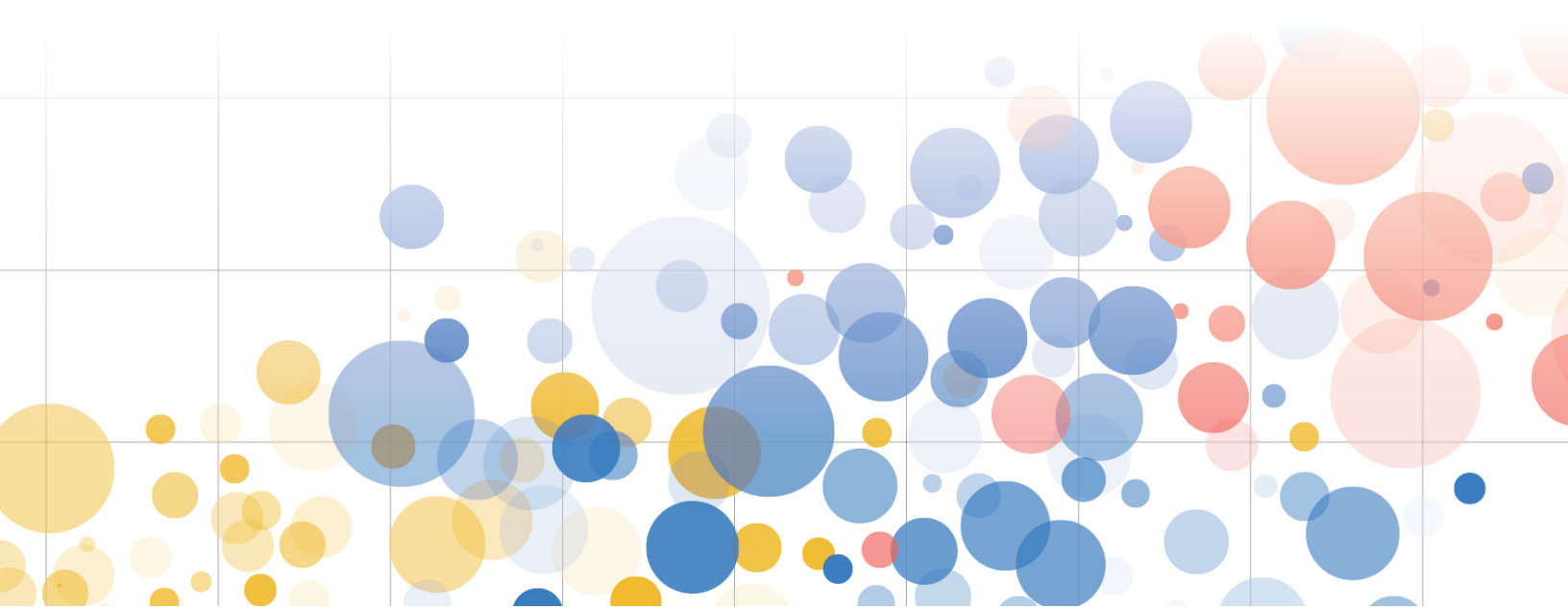
# School-Based Social-Emotional Learning Programs and K-12 Academic Achievement: A Review of the Literature

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- There are hundreds of studies of the effects of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, but only a small fraction of them provide causal evidence on the impacts of school-based “universal” (non-targeted) programs on student achievement.
- The most reliable studies of universal school-based SEL programs—those employing randomized controlled trials and large samples of students—showed positive effects of SEL on student achievement, on average, but there is substantial variation in the estimated impacts across studies.
- On average, SEL programs implemented in elementary schools tended to be more effective than those employed in secondary schools. However, impacts do not appear to vary consistently with the intensity of program delivery or with the economic status of the students a school serves.
- There are a variety of popular SEL programs, but the evidence base on the effects of any particular program on student outcomes is thin. The most frequently studied programs tend to garner mixed results.

## INTRODUCTION

The term “social-emotional learning” (SEL) was coined in 1994.<sup>1</sup> While specific definitions vary, it generally refers to the process of developing interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and the self-control that are important to success in school and beyond. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has established five specific core competencies in social-emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.<sup>2</sup> CASEL’s logic model (CASEL, 2008) suggests that SEL can promote positive academic outcomes through both direct and indirect pathways. By promoting the core competencies, they reason that SEL will allow individual students to take greater advantage of classroom learning, students will be less likely to disrupt peers, and there will be a more positive school learning environment. It is also argued that SEL will produce greater attachment to school and reduce engagement in risky behaviors, which indirectly enhance student academic success.<sup>3</sup> While the integration of social-emotional learning within schools’ curricula has been growing for many years, concerns over social isolation and the mental well-being of students during the COVID-19 pandemic have heightened interest in social-emotional learning (Yoder et al., 2020).

SEL programs come in a variety of formats with varying curricula (Jones et al., 2017a). However, they can be placed into two broad categories based on the target audience. “Universal” programs refer to preventive interventions that target a whole population, whereas “targeted” programs are aimed at people who are identified based on their individual risk. In the school context, an SEL curriculum delivered to an entire classroom of students would be classified as a universal program, whereas one directed to students who have been

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<sup>1</sup> See [casel.org/history](https://casel.org/history)

<sup>2</sup> See [casel.org/what-is-sel](https://casel.org/what-is-sel)

<sup>3</sup> Panayiotou (2019) tests these mechanisms by estimating a structural equation model and finds that students with greater social-emotional competence at baseline experienced fewer mental health difficulties, which in turn led to better academic outcomes; however, exposure to an SEL program did not impact these relationships. Consistent with the logic model, greater social-emotional competence was also associated with greater connection to school, but this enhanced school connectedness did not predict later academic achievement.

suspended or are at risk of dropping out would be a targeted program. In this review, we focus on universal SEL programs in schools.

There is a large literature on the effects of SEL, including more than 600 studies that measure a variety of outcomes, including mental health problems, drug use, aggression, and other problem behaviors (Corcoran et al., 2018). While all these outcomes are important for healthy youth development, there is a much smaller literature that measures the direct impact of school-based SEL programs on academic outcomes. For example, in a widely cited meta-analysis of studies published through 2007 (Durlak et al., 2011), only 16 percent of the 213 reviewed studies of school-based programs reported academic achievement outcomes. In Sklad et al. (2012), a meta-analytic review of 75 published studies of universal SEL programs in schools, only 10 studies measured program impact on students' academic achievement. Similarly, in a more recent review (Taylor et al., 2017), which included 82 SEL studies published through 2014, only eight of the studies reported academic outcomes of any kind. In this review, we include the most recent available research and concentrate on the subset of studies that provide evidence on the direct effect of school-based universal SEL programs on student achievement.

## **THE GENERAL EFFECTIVENESS OF UNIVERSAL SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMS IN SCHOOLS**

There are a number of meta-analyses of SEL programs that seek to summarize multiple studies and determine an average or range of estimated program effects. Durlak et al. (2011) reported a small effect of the impact of SEL interventions on academic achievement. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2017) found SEL interventions increased academic performance (measured by grades or test scores) by 0.33 standard deviations (SD). Benefits were similar regardless of students' race, socioeconomic background, or school location. In contrast, Sklad et al. (2012) reported that SEL programs increased academic achievement by approximately 0.46 SD in the short-term (up to six months) and 0.26 SD at follow-ups. These effects are larger than any other outcome they measure, including antisocial behavior, mental disorders, and positive self-image. Across these three meta-analyses, approximately half of the included studies employed randomized designs, commonly considered the "gold standard" in program evaluation. However, many of the studies in these meta-analyses suffer from small sample size or methodological concerns (e.g., subjective outcome measures, lack of baseline controls) and the fact that many were conducted a long time ago.

A more recent review of the literature on universal school-based SEL programs (Corcoran et al., 2018) addressed many of the shortcomings of prior meta-analyses. It focused on studies between 1970 and 2016 that quantitatively measured impacts on student performance, and it only includes studies that meet a set of requirements for study quality, including a clear comparison group, either random assignment to treatment or use of a matching technique to ensure that the treatment and control groups are comparable, baseline equivalency testing, and a sample consisting of two or more teachers with a minimum of 15 students each in the treatment and control groups. Of the 611 SEL evaluations conducted over this period, only 40 met the inclusionary criteria. Among these 40, the authors found overall positive and statistically significant effects for reading (0.25 SD), math (0.26 SD), and science (0.19 SD).

These average effects do not tell the whole story, however, because there was significant variation across studies in their measured impacts of SEL. First, studies employing randomized designs yielded impact estimates that were about two-thirds the size of those from matched-comparison studies, suggesting that results from non-experimental studies may be upwardly biased. Second, more recent studies, which would likely be more relevant to judging the efficacy of current programs, yielded smaller impact estimates; effect sizes from studies after 2010 were half the size of those from the 1990s and 2000s in reading and about two-thirds of the size of estimates from the earlier period in math. Third, programs at the elementary school level produced results that were about 50 percent greater than those conducted at the secondary school level. Fourth, the intensity of program delivery did not seem to matter; programs offered for fewer than 15 minutes per day or fewer than 75 minutes per week were no less effective than programs with longer daily or weekly duration. Fifth, even among the 19 “higher quality” studies that employed randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and included at least 250 students, effect sizes ranged from  $-0.14$  SD to  $0.73$  SD for reading and from  $-0.22$  SD to  $0.81$  SD for math. Finally, while effect sizes varied considerably across studies, there was no difference in program impacts between studies where more than half of the student population received free or reduced-price lunch (FRL)—a crude measure of poverty—and those where less than half of the students received FRL. This suggests that variation in program effects may be due to differences in program type or implementation, rather than in the student population being served.

## **EFFICACY OF SPECIFIC SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMS**

One possible explanation for the variation in estimated SEL program effects is that some SEL programs may be more effective than others. Knowing if some programs are consistently more effective would provide valuable information to district leaders when they consider which SEL program to adopt.

Social and Character Development Research Consortium (SACD) (2010) reports results from the evaluation of seven school-based universal SEL programs for a cohort of students as they moved from third grade in fall 2004 through fifth grade ending in spring 2007. The studied programs were Academic and Behavioral Competencies Program, Competence Support Program, Love in a Big World, Positive Action, PATHS, 4Rs, and Second Step. Each program was evaluated through a school-level RCT with five to seven schools implementing the SEL program and an equal number continuing with “business as usual.” Along with many social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes, two academic outcomes were measured: a student-reported assessment of engagement with learning and a measure of academic competence and motivation based on reports from teachers. In each year, a total of 20 outcomes were measured. Combining the seven programs, impacts were statistically significant in only two out of the 60 outcome/year combinations over the three study years, less than would be expected by chance. Similarly, for the individual SACD programs, 16 significant impacts were found over the three years (nine beneficial and seven detrimental) out of 420 possible program/outcome/year combinations, also less than would be expected by chance. None of the significant impacts were for academic outcomes.

In two related papers, Jones et al. (2017a, 2017b) review the evidence on 24 popular SEL programs. Of these 24 programs, only six had been studied to determine impacts on academic outcomes: 4Rs, Caring

School Community, Competent Kids – Caring Communities, Positive Action, RULER, and SECURE. For each of these six programs, at least some positive impacts on academic outcomes were reported. However, in the case of the 4Rs program, the positive effects only applied to students with the highest behavioral risk at baseline, while for Positive Action some studies found positive effects and others did not. Further, the quality of the research evidence varies across SEL programs. For two of the programs, Competent Kids – Caring Communities and SECURE, the available evidence comes from a single published quasi-experimental study (Linares et al. [2005] and Jones, Bailey & Jacob [2014], respectively); no RCTs were conducted for these programs.

More recent evidence exists for another popular SEL program: Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies or PATHS. Hennessey and Humphrey (2019) present results from an RCT involving fifth and sixth graders in the United Kingdom. They found no significant positive effect of PATHS on children’s academic attainment. The researchers conclude that PATHS cannot be recommended as an effective intervention for improving the academic attainment of primary school children. In contrast, Sorrenti et al. (2020) employed an RCT to evaluate the long-term academic impact of PATHS for eight-year-old students in Switzerland. The authors found that the PATHS program had robust long-term benefits for students. Participating students had a 23 percent (7 percentage points) higher high school graduation rate compared to the control group. Moreover, university enrollment increased by 21 percent. Interestingly, they also found that treated students obtain higher grades, though they do not score higher on standardized tests.<sup>4</sup>

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Social-emotional learning has become increasingly popular and is being considered by many school systems as a tool for dealing with social and emotional challenges brought about by the closure of schools, move to remote learning, and other challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is considerable evidence that participation in SEL programs has enhanced the social and emotional skills of students, the evidence on the ability of SEL programs to enhance academic outcomes of students is not as clear. There are relatively few high-quality studies of the effects of school-based SEL programs on student academic outcomes, and the studies that do exist often yield conflicting evidence.

The inconsistent evidence on the ability of school-based SEL programs to promote academic success is likely due in part to the wide variety of SEL programs that have been adopted by schools and differences in the fidelity of their implementation. Schools considering the adoption of an SEL curriculum would be wise to consider their programmatic goals and how particular SEL programs align with those goals. In addition, given the conflicting evidence on SEL programs in general, it would be prudent to focus on evidence regarding the efficacy of specific SEL programs under consideration, rather than base decisions on meta-analyses that combine effects from disparate programs that have been employed in varying contexts.

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<sup>4</sup> These positive long-run effects are consistent with the findings of Bradshaw et al. (2009), who studied a classroom intervention that combined the Good Behavior Game SEL program with an enhanced academic curriculum. The combined intervention was associated with higher scores on standardized achievement tests and greater likelihood of high school graduation and college attendance.

## REFERENCES AND ABSTRACTS

Bradshaw, C. P., Zmuda, J. H., Kellam, S. G., & Jalongo, N. S. (2009). Longitudinal impact of two universal preventive interventions in first grade on educational outcomes in high school. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 101*(4), 926.

**ABSTRACT**—This study examined the longitudinal effects of 2 first-grade universal preventive interventions on academic outcomes (e.g., achievement, special education service use, graduation, postsecondary education) through age 19 in a sample of 678 urban, primarily African American children. The classroom-centered intervention combined the Good Behavior Game (H. H. Barrish, Saunders, & Wolfe, 1969) with an enhanced academic curriculum, whereas a second intervention, the Family–School Partnership, focused on promoting parental involvement in educational activities and bolstering parents’ behavior management strategies. Both programs aimed to address the proximal targets of aggressive behavior and poor academic achievement. Although the effects varied by gender, the classroom-centered intervention was associated with higher scores on standardized achievement tests, greater odds of high school graduation and college attendance, and reduced odds of special education service use. The intervention effects of the Family–School Partnership were in the expected direction; however, only 1 effect reached statistical significance. The findings of this randomized controlled trial illustrate the long-term educational impact of preventive interventions in early elementary school.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL] (2008). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Student Benefits: Implications for the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Core Elements. Retrieved from [eric.ed.gov/?id=ED505369](http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED505369)

Corcoran, R. P., Cheung, A. C., Kim, E., & Xie, C. (2018). 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, 25*, 56-72.

**ABSTRACT**—This review explored the research regarding the effects of pre-K-12 school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions on reading ( $N = 57,755$ ), mathematics ( $N = 61,360$ ), and science ( $N = 16,380$ ) achievement. The review focused on research that met the criteria for high methodological standards. Further, methodological and substantive characteristics of these studies were examined to investigate the association between SEL and study characteristics. There were 40 studies that qualified that were included in the final analysis based on pre-K-12 participants. The results of this review found that SEL had a positive effect on reading ( $ES = +0.25$ ), mathematics ( $ES = +0.26$ ), and (though small) science ( $ES = +0.19$ ) compared to traditional methods, consistent with previous reviews. However, SEL programs from more rigorous randomized studies with large sample sizes that have dominated the classroom over the last few decades might not have as meaningful effects for pre-K-12 students as once thought. More randomized studies are needed to confirm these conclusions.

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students’ social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child development, 82*(1), 405-432.

*ABSTRACT*—This article presents findings from a meta-analysis of 213 school-based, universal social and emotional learning (SEL) programs involving 270,034 kindergarten through high school students. Compared to controls, SEL participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement. School teaching staff successfully conducted SEL programs. The use of 4 recommended practices for developing skills and the presence of implementation problems moderated program outcomes. The findings add to the growing empirical evidence regarding the positive impact of SEL programs. Policy makers, educators, and the public can contribute to healthy development of children by supporting the incorporation of evidence-based SEL programming into standard educational practice.

Hennessey, A., & Humphrey, N. (2019). Can social and emotional learning improve children's academic progress? Findings from a randomised controlled trial of the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 1-24.

*ABSTRACT*—Despite the significant evidence base demonstrating the positive impact of the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum on children's social-emotional and mental health outcomes, there has been very little research on its efficacy in improving academic attainment. More generally, the relationship between implementation variability and PATHS intervention outcomes has been underexplored. A cluster-randomised controlled trial with two arms: intervention (PATHS – 23 schools) and control (usual practice – 22 schools) was implemented to assess the impact of PATHS on English and Mathematics for children in years 5 (aged 9–10 years, n = 1705 pupils) and 6 (aged 10–11 years, n = 1631 pupils) in English primary schools. Two-level hierarchical linear models (school, child) were used to assess both primary 'intention-to-treat' effects and secondary 'subgroup' effects (for children eligible for free school meals). Additionally, the moderating role of implementation variability was assessed in 31 year 5 (n = 712 pupils) and 32 year 6 (n = 732 pupils) classes across the 23 intervention schools, with fidelity, dosage, quality/responsiveness and reach data generated via classroom-level structured lesson observations. Intention-to-treat and subgroup analyses revealed no significant positive effect of PATHS on children's academic attainment. Cluster analyses of observational data revealed four distinct implementation profiles, differentiated primarily by dosage levels. However, these profiles were not significantly associated with differential academic outcomes. In light of our findings and their likely generalisability, it is not possible to recommend PATHS as an effective intervention for improving the academic attainment of children in English primary schools.

Jones, S., Brush, K., Bailey, R., Brion-Meisels, G., McIntyre, J., Kahn, J., Nelson, B. & Stickle, L. (2017a). Navigating SEL from the Inside Out. Looking Inside and Across 25 Leading SEL Programs: A Practical Resource for Schools and OST Providers. Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Jones, S., Bailey, R. & Jacob, R. (2014) Social-emotional learning is essential to classroom management. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 96(2), 19-24.

Jones, S., Barnes, S., Bailey, R., & Doolittle, E. J. (2017b). Promoting social and emotional competencies in elementary school. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 49-72.



Linares, L. O., Rosbruch, N., Stern, M. B., Edwards, M. E., Walker, G., Abikoff, H. B., & Alvir, J. M. J. (2005). Developing cognitive-social-emotional competencies to enhance academic learning. *Psychology in the Schools, 42*(4), 405-417.

*ABSTRACT*—This preliminary study examined intervention effects of a universal prevention program offered by classroom teachers to public elementary school students. The Unique Minds School Program (M.B. Stern, 1999) is a teacher-led program designed to promote cognitive-social-emotional (CSE) skills, including student self-efficacy, problem solving, social-emotional competence, and a positive classroom climate, with the dual goal of preventing youth behavioral problems and promoting academic learning. During 2 consecutive school years, 119 students and their teachers were assessed in the fall and spring of Grade 4 and again in the spring of Grade 5. As compared to students in the comparison school, students in the intervention showed gains in student self-efficacy, problem solving, social-emotional competencies, and math grades. Incremental gains within CSE domains were found after 1 and 2 years of intervention.

Panayiotou, M., Humphrey, N., & Wigelsworth, M. (2019). An empirical basis for linking social and emotional learning to academic performance. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 56*, 193-204.

*ABSTRACT*—There is general agreement about the benefits of school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions in relation to children and young people's social-emotional competence, mental health, and academic achievement. However, we know little about the theorized mechanisms through which SEL leads to improved academic outcomes. The current study is the first to present an integrative model (derived from the SEL logic model) using a 3-wave (annual assessment, T1, T2, T3) longitudinal sample of 1626 (51% boys,  $n = 832$ ) 9–12-year-old students ( $M = 9.17$ ,  $SD = .31$  at baseline) attending 45 elementary schools in England, drawn from a major randomized trial of a universal SEL intervention (the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies curriculum; PATHS). Using structural equation modeling that accounted for within-time covariance, data clustering, gender and prior academic attainment, we examined the temporal relations between social-emotional competence (T1), school connectedness (T2), mental health difficulties (T2), and academic attainment (T3). It was hypothesized that social-emotional competence would directly and indirectly influence academic attainment through school connectedness and mental health difficulties. Our analyses also examined whether these hypothesized relations varied as a function of intervention exposure (PATHS versus usual provision). The theorized model was partially supported. Social-emotional competence at T1 exerted a significant influence on school connectedness and mental health difficulties at T2. However, the latter was the only significant predictor and mediator of academic attainment at T3 after controlling for gender and prior academic performance. Students with greater social-emotional competence at T1 were reported to experience fewer mental health difficulties at T2, and this in turn predicted higher academic attainment at T3. Intervention exposure did not markedly influence the magnitude or statistical significance of these identified pathways. Collectively, these findings indicate some possible revisions to our current understanding regarding the role of social-emotional competence in promoting academic attainment, as its contribution appears to lay primarily in buffering the adverse effects of mental health difficulties.

Sklad, M., Diekstra, R., Ritter, M. D., Ben, J., & Gravesteyn, C. (2012). Effectiveness of school-based universal social, emotional, and behavioral programs: Do they enhance students' development in the area of skill, behavior, and adjustment?. *Psychology in the Schools, 49*(9), 892-909.

*ABSTRACT*—To answer the question of whether teaching social and emotional skills to foster social-emotional development can help schools extend their role beyond the transfer of knowledge, the authors conducted a meta-analytical review of 75 recently published studies that reported the effects of universal, school-based social, emotional, and/or behavioral (SEB) programs. The analyzed interventions had a variety of intended outcomes, but the increase in social skills and decrease in antisocial behavior were most often reported. Although considerable differences in efficacy exist, the analysis demonstrated that overall beneficial effects on all seven major categories of outcomes occurred: social skills, antisocial behavior, substance abuse, positive self-image, academic achievement, mental health, and prosocial behavior. Generally, immediate effects were stronger than delayed effects, with the exception of substance abuse, which showed a sleeper effect. Limitations of the analysis and moderators of the effectiveness of SEB programs in schools are discussed in the final section of the article.

Social and Character Development Research Consortium (2010). *Efficacy of Schoolwide Programs to Promote Social and Character Development and Reduce Problem Behavior in Elementary School Children* (NCER 2011-2001). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Research, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

Sorrenti, G., Ribeaud, D., & Eisner, M. (2020). The causal impact of socio-emotional skills training on educational success.

*ABSTRACT*—We study the long-term effects of a randomized intervention targeting children's socio-emotional skills. The classroom-based intervention for primary school children has positive impacts that persist for over a decade. Treated children become more likely to complete academic high school and enroll in university. Two mechanisms drive these results. Treated children show fewer ADHD symptoms: they are less impulsive and less disruptive. They also attain higher grades, but they do not score higher on standardized tests. The long-term effects on educational attainment thus appear to be driven by changes in socio-emotional skills rather than cognitive skills.

Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child development, 88*(4), 1156-1171.

*ABSTRACT*—This meta-analysis reviewed 82 school-based, universal social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions involving 97,406 kindergarten to high school students (Mage = 11.09 years; mean percent low socioeconomic status = 41.1; mean percent students of color = 45.9). Thirty-eight interventions took place outside the United States. Follow-up outcomes (collected 6 months to 18 years postintervention) demonstrate SEL's enhancement of positive youth development. Participants fared significantly better than controls in social-emotional skills, attitudes, and indicators of well-being. Benefits were similar regardless of students' race, socioeconomic background, or school location. Postintervention social-emotional skill development was the strongest predictor of well-being at follow-up. Infrequently assessed

but notable outcomes (e.g., graduation and safe sexual behaviors) illustrate SEL's improvement of critical aspects of students' developmental trajectories.

Yoder, N., J. Posamentier, D. Godek, K. Seibel, and L. Dusenburyick (2020). From Response to Reopening: State Efforts to Elevate Social and Emotional Learning During the Pandemic, Committee for Children. Retrieved from [casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/State-Covid19-Response-CASEL-CFC.pdf](https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/State-Covid19-Response-CASEL-CFC.pdf)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## ABOUT GEORGIA POLICY LABS

The Georgia Policy Labs (GPL) is a collaboration between Georgia State University and a variety of government agencies to promote evidence-based policy development and implementation. Housed in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, GPL works to create an environment where policymakers have the information and tools available to improve the effectiveness of existing government policies and programs, try out new ideas for addressing pressing issues, and decide what new initiatives to scale. The goal is to help government entities more effectively use scarce resources and make a positive difference in people's lives. GPL has three components: The Metro Atlanta Policy Lab for Education works to improve K-12 educational outcomes; the Career & Technical Education Policy Exchange focuses on high-school-based career and technical education in multiple U.S. states; and the Child & Family Policy Lab examines how Georgia's state agencies support the whole child and the whole family. In addition to conducting evidence-based policy research, GPL serves as a teaching and learning resource for state officials and policymakers, students, and other constituents. See more at [gpl.gsu.edu](http://gpl.gsu.edu).