

Experts Agree Social-Emotional Learning Matters, and Are Plotting Roadmap on How to Do It

By **Evie Blad**

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A national coalition of researchers, policymakers, and educators has forged a consensus on why schools need to be more responsive to students' social, emotional, and developmental needs, and it will now finalize recommendations for how to carry out that vision.

The **Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development** has convened working groups and visited schools around the country that are using strategies around social-emotional learning and student engagement.

The commission **released its preliminary findings Tuesday** and outlined the questions it has yet to answer before making final recommendations to the K-12 field in the fall.

"It's one thing to have some really exciting local pilots in place, but our goal is for this to go to scale," said Gene Wilhoit, the executive director of the national Center for Innovation in Education and the co-chair of the commission's policy subcommittee.

A Three-Pronged Approach

The commission's work comes as supporters of social-emotional learning say that the **federal Every Student Succeeds Act** provides new flexibility and incentives for schools to adopt the approach.

Social-emotional learning strategies center on research that has linked the development of skills like building healthy peer relationships and responsible decisionmaking to success inside and outside the classroom.

The commission supports a three-pronged approach: direct instruction of skills, infusion of those skills into traditional academic subjects like math and reading, and changing broader school practices in areas like discipline to create an environment that fosters students' development in those areas.

The group's leaders hope the commission will give those who are enthusiastic about the issue a common vocabulary and a set of tools for putting social-emotional learning into action.

"We want to think about the way to integrate this work in the very fabric, the practices, the culture,

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the lifeblood of schooling,” said Stephanie Jones, a professor of psychology at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a member of the commission’s panel of scientists.

Among the findings:

- Social, emotional, and behavioral skills **are central** to student success, and **all** students need them. Statement by the commission.
- A variety of strategies can be used intentionally to support social-emotional learning, including traditional instruction and SEL strategies.
- A sensitivity to students’ needs and areas of interest is essential for social-emotional learning to be effective.
- Educators need ongoing professional learning opportunities to support their work.
- SEL strategies should be implemented with fidelity and consistency.

Further Questions

Sheldon Berman, the superintendent of the Andover, Mass., district and a member of the commission’s panel of educators, said his district has taken steps to design its own social-emotional learning work.

District leaders weave an emphasis on social-emotional learning priorities into decisions like hiring, and teachers receive professional development around special curriculum, and classroom strategies like morning meetings help build a sense of community among students. Students also take surveys created by Panorama education to measure school climate, and school leaders review the results regularly.

“Teachers respond incredibly well to this work,” Berman said. “They came to teaching because they love kids, and they want to be successful with kids.”

Commissioners said they want their final recommendations to provide a roadmap for schools without reading like a top-down mandate that stifles local innovation.

A policy group will outline recommendations for areas like teacher preparation and cooperation between schools and other sectors, like social services.

Among the biggest questions remaining for the commission:

- What are the most pressing questions for researchers interested in the field?
- What kind of preparation and support do teachers need to develop students’ social-emotional learning?
- What should schools and policymakers do to monitor the success of their efforts and to make improvements?

A common concern about social-emotional learning is that it will be another short-lived trend in a line of educational movements that schools try and abandon without giving it a chance to take effect in a meaningful way.

But commissioners said they hope growing interest in the research coupled with ESSA will give social-emotional learning better staying power.

The new federal education law requires schools to report new factors, like **chronic absenteeism rates**,

in their public report cards, and it requires states to broaden how they measure school success.

No state decided to include **direct measures of social-emotional learning in its accountability system**. Most cited cautions from researchers who've said **existing measures are not sophisticated enough** to be used for high-stakes purposes. But mindfulness of students' emotions, relationships, and development can help schools show improvement in other areas covered by the law, like attendance and achievement, commissioners said.

Dr. James Comer, a professor of child psychiatry at the Yale University Child Study Center and honorary commission co-chair, has been studying issues related to children's development and education for 50 years.

"When I started, I remember being told that the parents will raise them and we will teach them," Comer said. "We've come a long way now in understanding that child rearing begins at home, but that it has to be complemented every step of the way and that all of the institutions along the development pathway have to be involved... I think we are making that progress, but it's terribly complicated and we have to learn and grow and be flexible along the way."

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