

Social and emotional learning within a Multi-Tiered System of Support

This commentary discusses how social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies can be effectively implemented within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework to improve learning and behavioral outcomes for all students.

Most would agree that SEL competencies are critical for success in school and in life; however, some educators voice resistance to incorporating such skills in our nation's classrooms. Reasons cited include: lack of time to teach social skills in my classroom; lack of resources, such as curriculum and funding; lack of skills and training; and, perhaps most discouraging, "teaching social skills is not part of my job" (D. Barnett, Personal Communication with multiple practitioners, Orange County CA, 2016–2018).

How do we make the case for teaching SEL competencies in our schools and classrooms? First, SEL is linked through research to valued academic and behavioral student outcomes (CASEL, 2018; Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Payton *et al.*, 2008). Schools that implement evidence-based SEL programs realize improved attitudes about self, others and school; increased pro-social behaviors; and reduced discipline issues (Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Payton *et al.*, 2008). Schools implementing SEL have seen increased attendance and noteworthy gains (+11 percent point gain) on standardized achievement tests (Durlak *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, research demonstrates that SEL is associated with a reduced risk of student failure, decrease in bullying and aggressive behaviors and reduced rates of suspension and expulsion (Payton *et al.*, 2008).

Given the behavioral and academic benefits of SEL, what can be done to address educators' concerns and provide the resources to teach SEL competencies in schools and classrooms? One approach is to integrate SEL into school-wide tiered frameworks, such as MTSS and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) (Barrett *et al.*, 2018; National Technical Assistance Center, 2017). MTSS and PBIS provide a continuum of increasingly intensive supports and interventions matched to student need (Center on Positive Behavior Intervention and Support, n.d.a). Tier 1 provides a foundation of universal prevention and supports for ALL students; Tier 2 offers targeted small group interventions and supports for students at risk of developing behavioral or mental health issues; and Tier 3 focuses on individualized interventions for students who need more intensive supports.

So, what might SEL strategies look like at each tier? At Tier 1, schools establish school-wide positive behavior expectations and social competencies that are clearly defined, taught and positively acknowledged (Barrett *et al.*, 2018). Such behavioral and social emotional strategies are inherent within PBIS frameworks implemented in nearly 2,000 schools in California and over 25,000 schools nationwide (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, n.d. b). At Tier 2, schools may build upon Tier 1 practices by implementing targeted skills instructional groups for some students that data identify as needing a "higher dosage" of teaching, practice, reinforcement, and feedback (Barrett *et al.*, 2018). At Tier 3, schools continue to monitor student progress to identify individual students who may require more



intensive services. Tertiary interventions are layered onto existing T1 and T2 supports and may include individual counseling, mental health interventions and trauma informed practices, provided by a school counselor, psychologist or specialist (Barrett and Eber, 2017).

A unified MTSS system framework allows schools to integrate initiatives within a single, coherent system, as opposed to implementing various initiatives in “silos” (National Technical Assistance Center, 2017). By aligning initiatives with core MTSS system’s features (i.e. data-based decision-making, regular universal screening and progress monitoring, team-based leadership, and evidence-based learning and behavioral practices) schools can successfully integrate related SEL initiatives within their MTSS framework (Barrett *et al.*, 2018; National Technical Assistance Center, 2017). For example, based on a review of data, a school might prioritize and promote various approaches such as Trauma Informed Care, Restorative Practice, or Bullying & Violence Prevention, to support social emotional competence (National Technical Assistance Center, 2017). Several states, such as the CAMTSS initiative in California and Michigan’s Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative model, have moved toward a single integrated system of support that successfully integrates behavior, academic, and social emotional and mental health components within an MTSS framework (Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) (n.d.); MBLSI, 2019).

In summary, we know that SEL works! There is robust evidence that supports the link between SEL and positive student behavioral and academic outcomes (CASEL, 2018). Further, evidence shows that with the proper training and materials, SEL competencies can be taught by regular classroom teachers and staff who also benefit from reduced behavior issues and stronger relationships with students (Payton *et al.*, 2008). For example, a teacher might incorporate a restorative circle to de-escalate a classroom conflict with bullying, or a counselor might teach emotional self-regulation skills to a small group of targeted students. When integrated within a unified MTSS, SEL can support positive learning and behavioral outcomes for ALL students.

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About the author

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