

Impact of social-emotional learning on academic achievement

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Those promoting a "whole-child" approach to education contend that we need a holistic perspective that aims to nurture the full range of skills and capacities that will help children of today become healthy and competent future adults. But increasing scrutiny of academic achievement gaps among children in the United States, as well as between children in our country and other developed countries, has created an urgency to promotion of academic achievement that has left little time for the development of non-academic skills.

However, research recently reported in *School Psychology Quarterly* suggests there's no real conflict: a randomized, controlled trial of an evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum (PATHS: Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies) in grades 3-6 showed that students in schools randomized to receive an enhanced SEL program were more likely than those in the control group to achieve basic proficiency in reading, writing and math on independently administered state mastery tests in later grades (Schonfeld et al., 2015).

The project involved all students enrolled in regular or bilingual education in an inner-city school system where 2 out of 3 students qualify for a free or reduced price lunch and 9 out of 10 students are African American or Hispanic/Latino American. The project focused on the impact of advancing academic proficiency at the lowest level (i.e., below basic proficiency) given that the curriculum has demonstrated positive impact on behavior and emotion for students most at-risk, as well as the belief that these students might be most vulnerable to the

negative impacts of suboptimal social and emotional skills, classroom and school climate, and school engagement. Furthermore, this group of students contributes most to the achievement gap that has challenged our country's educational system.

Those children randomized to schools where the enhanced SEL curriculum was taught were more likely to achieve basic proficiency in the three academic areas evaluated by the mastery test. Furthermore, within the schools where the enhanced SEL curriculum was implemented, researchers saw a "dosage effect;" students whose teachers reported teaching more of the lessons were more likely to achieve basic proficiency. Positive intervention effects of the curriculum were found in at least some grade levels for all three academic content areas. Specifically, the intervention group showed greater basic proficiency in 4th grade reading and math, as well as 5th and 6th grade writing, compared to the [control group](#), with the analyses for the dosage effects providing additional support for the intervention effects for reading and math. Although the effect sizes were relatively small, considering that the curriculum aims to teach social-emotional skills and was implemented to reduce the onset of high-risk behaviors (a prior paper by the team showed that the program helped reduce early sexual behavior), the fact that there was also impact on academic test scores is noteworthy. This is one of the first studies to examine the impact of a multiyear SEL program on [academic achievement](#) among young students.

Many schools are actively restricting classroom time devoted to any subjects or activities that do not appear to directly prepare children for high-stakes testing in reading, writing, and math. Teachers and school administrators are increasingly finding their job performance linked to the degree to which their students demonstrate achievement in these subject areas. As a result, many important components of children's education, including SEL, are being seriously compromised or eliminated entirely. This research provides support that SEL may be a

promising approach to promote basic academic proficiency, especially for those [students](#) most at risk.

More information: David J. Schonfeld et al. Cluster-randomized trial demonstrating impact on academic achievement of elementary social-emotional learning., *School Psychology Quarterly* (2015). [DOI: 10.1037/spq0000099](#)

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