Navigating the Landscape of Social Emotional Learning:

Subtle (and not so Subtle) Threats to Implementation

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INTRODUCTION

In the wake of post-pandemic challenges affecting students, families, and educators, the role of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has become increasingly crucial. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions."[1] SEL is essential for supporting students' sense of wellbeing and became an integral component for addressing students' anxiety due to stressors imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.[2] The benefits of SEL are well documented in research[3], yet despite this SEL continues to face significant implementation challenges. From persistent anti-SEL legislation to resistance within school communities, the opposition is widespread. As we navigate SEL implementation in the post-pandemic era, it is important to continue to survey and adapt to the changing landscape, recognizing the universal benefits SEL offers for students and educators alike.

This brief explores the subtle and not so subtle opposition SEL faces, shedding light on factors that could undermine the practice or adoption of proven SEL approaches. These threats include:

- **Persistence of Anti-SEL Legislation:** Despite a decline in media attention since 2021, anti-SEL legislation persists, and the repercussions of measures introduced during heightened media focus endure.
- **Backlash Across the Political Continuum**: Both the political left and right have voiced concerns around SEL practices, impacting the implementation of SEL in schools in distinct ways.
- **Educator Resistance:** Considerable attention is directed towards external threats facing SEL, however, resistance to SEL practices also originates within school communities themselves from educators not being bought in.
- **Skepticism from Families:** Families express skepticism about SEL due to differing opinions around what topics should be taught at home versus within the school environment.
- **Limiting SEL's Scope:** Despite proven benefits, SEL instruction is often limited to early grades, with waning emphasis in middle and high schools. SEL is also primarily focused on students, often neglecting adults' social-emotional needs in schools.

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[1] CASEL (2023)
[2] Rosanbalm (2021)
[3] Durlak et al (2022)

METHODOLOGY

Education First surveyed forty-six teachers and district leaders from fourteen states to capture teacher and district leaders' perspectives on challenges and needs related to SEL within the public school system. To add depth to our survey findings, we also interviewed six educators deeply engaged in SEL work and conducted an analysis of online reports and resources to explore and understand the current status and issues related to SEL. Additionally, this brief builds upon previous research conducted by Education First around social emotional learning, outlined on our publications page.[4]

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Despite a decline in media attention since 2021, anti-SEL legislation persists, and the repercussions of measures introduced during heightened media focus endure.

In 2020 and 2021, social and emotional learning became a focal point of contentious debates, causing heightened tensions within schools nationwide.[5] In the eight months between January to September 2021, twenty-four states introduced fifty-four bills commonly known as "educational gag orders" aimed at restricting teaching and training practices associated with SEL.[6] These legislative measures restrict discussions around topics seen as controversial, most often focused on discussions related to race, racism, gender and American history.[7] Educators, grappling with the challenge of teaching SEL amid an evolving landscape, found themselves at the forefront of these debates. In 2022, the number of introduced "educational gag orders"peaked at 137,[8] followed by 110 introduced orders in 2023.[9] Even as we see a decline in national coverage and a decline in the introduction of new legislative 'gag orders,' many states and districts still face significant challenges. Policies implemented during the heightened period in 2021 persist, and the implementation of SEL in schools continues to be a source of controversy across the nation.

Education practitioners who are committed to implementation of SEL to support their students' wellbeing are navigating a complex terrain: addressing concerns and misconceptions while advocating for the continued integration of SEL practices in their environment. In an interview one teacher from Maryland shared, "I have avoided using the

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[4] Ed First: Publications (2024)
[5] Cineas (2023)
[6] Friedman and Tager (2021)
[7] Friedman and Tager (2021)
[8] Young and Friedman (2022)
[9] Trimel (2023)

label 'SEL" when communicating with parents. Instead, I am very specific about what activities I have planned and what resources I use. I try to explain what my goal is in spending instructional time on SEL, without labeling it as SEL." A district administrator for California shared similar sentiments in our survey, "We have moved to simple terminology that all educational partners can embrace, such as components of CASEL like building healthy relationships." As discussions around SEL advance, educators and educational leaders are actively working towards finding common ground by seeking new ways to communicate practices, and avoiding engaging in the political theater that often serves as a distraction.

> **Key Takeaway #1**
> As the conversation around SEL progresses, teachers and education leaders are striving to establish common ground by simplifying language and steering clear of the political spectacle often associated with heightened media attention.

Both the political left and right have voiced concerns around SEL practices, impacting the implementation of SEL in schools in distinct ways.

SEL faces persistent external challenges from both the political left and right, resulting in widespread pushback against practices. On the right, the conflation of SEL with critical race theory (CRT) has triggered notable resistance, particularly from conservative groups. CRT and SEL are two distinct concepts with different aims. CRT is an academic framework that examines how race and racism are embedded in American law and society.[10] SEL, on the other hand, is a set of educational practices that help students develop skills for managing their emotions, building relationships, and making responsible decisions. Both initiatives touch on sensitive topics like identity and social justice, making them easy targets for conflation in a polarized political landscape. Fox News extensively covered the topic of critical race theory in 2021, referencing it over one thousand times over a span of three and a half months, despite never mentioning it in 2018. The channel also falsely framed SEL's focus on emotional well-being as a covert CRT indoctrination program.[11] The misinformation and political agenda surrounding SEL and CRT often blur the lines between them. An illustration of this is evident in the characterization on the Arizona Department of Education website, which names SEL as a "Trojan Horse to introduce the elements of CRT into the schools."[12]

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[10] Sawchuk (2021)
[11] Lahut (2021)
[12] AZED (2023)

Liberal-leaning communities also raise criticisms of SEL, with some critics asserting that SEL initiatives perpetuate white dominant culture norms under the guise of fostering emotional wellness. One prominent voice in education and for liberatory SEL practices, Dena Simmons, stated, "What's the point of teaching children about conflict resolution skills if we're not talking about the conflicts that exist because of racism or white supremacy? Without that nuance SEL risks turning into white supremacy with a hug."[13] This perspective contends that SEL programs, despite advocating for empathy and understanding, may not adequately address systemic issues related to equity and inclusivity. Consequently, some critics argue that implementing SEL without critically examining power dynamics and structural inequalities may inadvertently reinforce existing social hierarchies.[14]

This ongoing debate within both liberal and conservative circles underscores the need to address broader societal challenges, while also getting clear on what SEL specifically is. In a 2022 interview, Dr. Tia Kim, VP of Education, Research, and Impact at Committee for Children stated that, "Pushback against SEL comes from a fundamental misunderstanding about what SEL is and isn't, and why it matters for kids... 'SEL' is just education jargon for the life skills students need to be successful."[15] It is worth noting that Committee for Children is the publisher of Second Step SEL curriculum, which has the largest SEL market share in the country. While there is room to continue pushing towards more equitable practices, media attention surrounding SEL often adds fuel to the controversy and can undermine support.

> **Key Takeaway #2**
> Resistance to SEL frequently stems from misconceptions about its nature, while political debates divert attention from effective implementation of SEL practices.

Considerable attention is directed towards external threats facing SEL, however, resistance to SEL practices also originates within school communities themselves from educators not being bought in.

Addressing SEL concerns extends beyond managing external legislative and political obstacles; it also involves overcoming resistance within school communities. Survey respondents provided valuable insights into the political challenges educators encounter when implementing SEL practices. Surprisingly, only 19 percent of respondents cited

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[13] Jo Madda (2019)
[14] Communities for Just Schools Fund Report (2020)
[15] Sullivan (2023)

'limiting SEL practices due to legislative challenges' as a concern. In contrast, a substantial 56 percent emphasized 'educators and administrators distancing themselves from SEL terminology or practice because of lack of teacher or administrator buy-in or support for the practices' as a significant challenge.

In an interview one teacher from California noted that, "We are finding resistance from staff, which is an interesting twist. The watering down of SEL terminology or practices comes from staff." Another teacher from Hawaii explained, "From teachers, [questioning the need for SEL] has affected the implementation of our SEL practice. When teachers don't believe in the efficacy of the practice, students do not receive the full benefit and results show that implementation has had limited impact." This sentiment provides a valuable reminder that teacher belief in the benefits of SEL significantly influences student experience and the success of implementation.

> "We are finding resistance from staff, which is an interesting twist. The watering down of SEL terminology or practices comes from staff."
>
> -Teacher in California

Key Takeaway #3
When educators lack confidence in SEL implementation, students are deprived of the full benefit, resulting in limited impact.

Families express skepticism about SEL due to differing opinions around what topics should be taught at home versus within the school environment.

Parents spanning the political spectrum commonly perceive SEL as a familial responsibility.[16] Some parents express reservations regarding schools' efficacy in nurturing their children's social and emotional skills, fearing potential conflicts with their deeply held values. The lack of confidence in schools' ability to effectively support these skills is notable, with some parents believing that educational institutions may inadvertently undermine their own teachings.[17] We know that parents play a crucial role in the functioning and success, or failure, of initiatives. In an interview, a teacher from Pennsylvania noted that she "saw the most success in schools where parents were involved and wanted SEL work to happen." We also heard from another teacher that "educators need to assure parents that we are partners in helping their children grow. There has been trust destroyed between public schools and parents. Educators need to help disrupt that story."

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[16] Northern and Petrilli (2021)
[17] Field (2022)

Rebuilding trust between public schools and parents is imperative, requiring educators to play a pivotal role in disrupting negative narratives and fostering a renewed sense of partnership between schools and parents. One teacher from Connecticut shared in an interview that, "Including parents and community stakeholders on our SEL Teams at the school level has helped us significantly because now parents and community members can respond to many of the concerns that arise." Establishing effective communication channels and fostering positive rapport with parents and families is imperative for gathering their support and buy-in.

> **Key Takeaway #4**
> Opening channels of communications and mutual understanding with parents and families is essential in working towards the successful implementation and continuation of SEL.

Despite proven benefits, SEL is often limited to early grades, with waning emphasis in middle and high schools. SEL is also primarily focused on students, often neglecting adults' social-emotional needs in schools.

Research strongly supports the universal benefits of SEL for all individuals, but schools and districts tend to prioritize SEL implementation only in early grades. All fifty states have standards related to SEL in preschool, but little more than half of the states have SEL standards related to the full K-12 range.[18] This focus on elementary SEL results in less attention and resources allocated to comprehensive SEL support for middle and high school students, and SEL for adults within those school buildings. One district administrator from New York noted in an interview that, "There is a mindset that in younger grades SEL comes a bit more naturally. We have a clear program at elementary that started organically from staff that wanted to do SEL and that slowly expanded. Now all of our elementary schools use that program and there's district support for it." This district did not have the same experience at the middle and high school levels.

"Big thing is supporting adult SEL right now. People often say it's not about the adults, it's about the children. But if you support the adults, that trickles down to 25 other people."

-Teacher in New York

One way to scale SEL across K12 systems is by supporting those who help enact it: adults. Prioritizing adult SEL can also have a transformative effect on a school environment.

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[18] Anderson (2022)

Insights from a 2019 pilot program in D.C. where adults in a public charter school were offered free mental health services at their school underscored the positive impact of prioritizing adult SEL. Feedback from participants showed a 100 percent improvement in personal wellbeing, along with positive outcomes for students' wellbeing, mental health, and academic performance.[19] We heard similar sentiments about the profound effect adult SEL can have from our interviewees. As one educator interviewee reflected, "The most important thing is to support adult SEL. I know people say it's not about the adults, it's about the children. But if you support the adults, that trickles down to 25 other people." Fostering adult SEL can translate to a heightened level of commitment and enthusiasm for SEL initiatives schoolwide.

> **Key Takeaway #5**
> Prioritizing the well-being of adults can extend the positive impact of SEL practices schoolwide and create a more positive and welcoming school environment.

CONCLUSION

SEL is foundational in fostering the holistic development of students and adults alike - and providing equitable and welcoming learning conditions that support improved student outcomes and teacher satisfaction. Despite clear evidence of the benefits of SEL programming, subtle yet powerful opposition to SEL practices poses a threat to implementation. Concerns ranging from the national political stage to skepticism from families about what should be taught in schools can make it seem difficult to move forward. Addressing these challenges is imperative to ensure widespread adoption and implementation of effective SEL approaches.

In navigating SEL implementation in a school, a district, or a community, consider these questions in response to the key takeaways:

Key Takeaways and Reflection Questions

1. *As the conversation progresses, teachers and education leaders are striving to establish common ground by simplifying language and steering clear of the political spectacle often associated with heightened media attention.*
   + **How do you communicate about your SEL practices to colleagues, parents, district leaders and others?**

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[19] McCormick (2021)

2. *Resistance to SEL frequently stems from misconceptions about its nature, while political debates divert attention from effective implementation of SEL practices.*
   + **How do your current SEL practices align with the intended goals and purpose of SEL, especially considering the prevalent misconceptions around SEL practices?**

3. *When educators lack confidence in SEL implementation, students are deprived of the full benefit, resulting in limited impact.*
   + **How are you fostering genuine commitment from teachers, moving beyond mere compliance to authentic buy-in?**

4. *Opening channels of communications and mutual understanding with parents and families is essential in working towards the successful implementation and continuation of SEL.*
   + **How do you ensure your message is getting across clearly and effectively across all stakeholder groups?**

5. *Prioritizing the wellbeing of adults can extend the positive impact of SEL practices schoolwide and create a more positive and welcoming school environment.*
   + **What systems and structures do you have in place to prioritize the wellbeing of adults in your school?**

By addressing these considerations, education leaders can start to move towards cultivating an environment conducive to the successful implementation of SEL. These efforts can pave the way for a transformative educational environment where SEL not only thrives but becomes a catalyst for the flourishing of students, educators, and school communities.