

Introduction and Guidance to Rhode Island Social Emotional Learning Standards: Competencies for School and Life Success Indicators

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Introduction

The Rhode Island Social and Emotional Learning Standards: Competencies for School and Life Success were endorsed by the Council of Elementary and Secondary Education in October 2017. These Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards are intended to assist school staff, families and students in identifying Social and Emotional Skills that will help students succeed. Research^{1 2} has shown that purposeful instruction in SEL skills results in higher academic achievement, improved behavior, and better-developed SEL skills such as empathy and teamwork. Instruction in SEL skills also results in better long-term outcomes, such as increased college graduation rates and less involvement with juvenile justice.

The Standards apply to all age levels, from Preschool through Adult. In addition to the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards, an additional tool, Rhode Island SEL Indicators, has been developed to illustrate how these skills evolve at different grade spans.

SEL Skills can be Taught and Learned

Social and Emotional Learning, just like math and reading, is based on certain skills and, also like math and reading, SEL skills can and must be taught. CASEL has identified four ways that SEL can be taught:

- Explicit, direct instruction – usually using specific curricular materials
- Embedded into content area instruction
- Embedded thoughtfully and meaningfully into general teaching practices
- Through school-wide practices and systems.

This means students learn these SEL skills when they are provided instruction, practice and strategies in these areas.

¹ 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.

² Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A. and Weissberg, R. P. (2017), Promoting Positive Youth Development Through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects. *Child Dev*, 88: 1156-1171. doi:[10.1111/cdev.12864](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12864)



SEL Standards

The Rhode Island SEL Standards: Competencies for School and Life Success were developed by the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE) in response to requests from school administrators, teachers and support professionals. These stakeholders stressed the importance of SEL and how standards would validate work in this area. The standards were endorsed by the Council for Elementary and Secondary Education, which means that the Council has approved the standards, but districts are not required to implement them. They are presented as a model for districts to follow in the way that best fits into their district plans.

Social and Emotional Learning and development of SEL standards was included as part of the 2015-20 RIDE Strategic Plan in the area of Globally Competent Graduates. One Key Outcome of that Strategic Plan is that “Rhode Island graduates possess the social and emotional skills necessary to persevere through challenging circumstances, to work in partnership with others, and to develop a growth mindset”.

The Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) has developed a framework with five competency areas for SEL. These areas are Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making³. Rhode Island has adopted these five areas as the basis for the RI SEL Standards: Competencies for School and Life Success.

SEL Indicators

Examples of SEL

The Social and Emotional Learning Indicators are examples of SEL skills that might be developed at various grade spans. This tool is meant to illustrate the continuum of SEL skills across grade levels and life, recognizing that individuals learn and relearn their SEL skills throughout their lives, depending on the unique and collective contexts in which they find themselves. The skills are important at all ages, though proficiency and sophistication in demonstrating the skills will

³ (Core SEL Competencies, 2019)



vary at different ages and competency levels. There are no set requirements of what should happen at certain ages and there is some overlap – among standards and ages.

These indicators have been developed to show how a continuum of skills is likely to develop from birth to adulthood, with foundational skills typically serving as building blocks for later developing skills. However, this does not mean that absence of a skill indicates a disability or warrants specialized intervention. These are designed to provide guidance for when particular skills are generally likely to be present. Students come into schools with a wide range of SEL skills, dependent upon a variety of contextual variables and influences. As with academics, though, these skills can be taught and the indicators may provide a road map for creating or accessing learning opportunities.

Variables and Influences

There will be variation in student’s skills. It should be expected that there will be fluctuation regarding the skills that students have and exhibit at any point, depending upon the context and circumstances. Although a student may show an excellent grasp and display of skills one day, that may not be consistent, and those skills may differ the next day.

Some influences on a students’ SEL skills are physiological. If a student – or adult for that matter – is tired or hungry they may not be able to display the same SEL skills as when these physical needs are met.

Similarly, trauma and emotional stress will also have an impact on how well a student, or adult, shows SEL proficiency. When a person is under stress or anxiety or is pre-occupied with an issue they perceive as a priority, they may not be able to show the same level of social awareness or relationship skills they can at other times.

Specific situations and environments may result in students and adults acting in different ways. The intensity of certain situations may impact a person’s ability to show appropriate skills. For example, a student may have and exhibit appropriate self-management skills when they are in class but may still be learning how to manage their emotions on the playground or in physical education class during a competitive game.



Students with Disabilities

Disabilities may impact the way a student learns or demonstrates social and emotional skills. Similar to academic areas, students with disabilities may need more explicit or specialized instruction in SEL skills. They may need increased practice opportunities in both a learning setting and when generalizing to new contexts, additional adult or peer support, and frequent recognition for demonstrating skills. Some students may need to have skills broken down into smaller steps or may need to be given concrete examples. Additionally, many disabilities (e.g. ADHD, specific learning disabilities, or autism spectrum disorder) have hidden aspects that affect social and emotional learning. As an example, some disabilities can impact how an individual communicates, processes information, makes sense of the world, picks up nonverbal cues, perceives the intention of others and/or flexibly adjusts thoughts and behavior.

Social and emotional learning goals may be included as part of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan for some students. The student's abilities in this area would be described in the Present Levels of Functional Performance and then be part of the functional goals for that student.

Family and Cultural Expectations

From birth, a student learns SEL skills from parents, caregivers, and extended family. SEL skills are connected to verbal communication, but also to the multiple facets of nonverbal communication. The richness of nonverbal communication derives from cultural and ethnical backgrounds and varies within each. Every family embeds in their own unique culture numerous aspects of Social and Emotional Learning communicative patterns. Differences and variations among cultures result in disparities in how behaviors may be displayed and interpreted. For example, some cultures have a relaxed attitude toward time, so tardiness or last minute changes may be common, while punctuality is very important in other cultures, such as the mainstream U.S. culture. Avoiding eye contact is a sign of respect in many cultures, while in the mainstream U.S. culture making eye contact is expected and considered a sign of active listening. The amount of expected personal physical space varies also. In the mainstream U.S. culture, personal space is emphasized while in others, such space is reduced, sometimes to a level that would be considered too personal by other cultures. Another significant part of communication takes place in dialogues and oral exchange of information and opinions. During such exchanges, some cultures stress the need to complete the full message before someone else is able to take a turn and respond to the message. Conversely, in other cultural settings, the delineation in turn taking is more fluid and overlapping where



interruptions of the full message might occur in a respectful way, or simultaneous messages are uttered, yet the conversation remains effective for all participants. Students and adults will encounter new and different communication styles in school settings, where these will be taught and learned, sometimes through explicit instruction. Additionally, working with multicultural students, educators will have to acknowledge the variations in communication patterns in order to set up a safe environment for all students to express themselves and grow their mastery in SEL.

It is important for teachers to be aware and understand the nuances of cultures and how these may impact a student's learning. Curriculum needs to provide both a window and mirror, in order to reveal a multicultural world and for students to see their own cultural reality reflected.⁴ For example, when building students' self-awareness skills, culturally proficient SEL instruction respects and honors student's individual and family/community identities and backgrounds and also supports students to consider how their identities and backgrounds are perceived by others and how they perceive others' identities and backgrounds. In a culturally proficient SEL lesson, self-awareness and social awareness are often tightly linked.⁵

Trauma

A number of students attending school have experienced some type of trauma. Trauma is defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) as:

“experiences that cause intense physical and psychological stress reactions. It can refer to a single event, multiple events, or a set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically and emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

Trauma can affect a person's functional ability - including interacting with others, performing at work, and sleeping - and contribute to responses - including isolation, anxiety, substance misuse, and overeating or under eating - that can increase health risks. Behavioral health service providers can benefit greatly from understanding the nature and impact of trauma and the benefits of a trauma-informed approach.”⁶

⁴ (Style, 1988)

⁵ (Center for Instructional Support - Social and Emotional Learning for All - Access, Cultural Proficiency, and Cultural Responsiveness)

⁶ (SAMHSA News - Key Terms: Definitions, 2014)



The Guiding Principles of Trauma-Informed Care include ensuring that students that have experienced trauma feel safe physically and psychologically, have experiences that build and maintain trust, collaboration, empowerment, voice and choice and are free from cultural, historic and gender stereotypes and biases.⁷

The definition and guiding principles clearly align with social and emotional learning. Experiencing trauma may have an impact on a student's SEL skills and way of learning new skills. At the same time, it is vital that students experience a safe, trusting, environment through the implementation of classroom and school-wide SEL practices.

Poverty

Poverty may also impact a child's SEL skills and the way they learn them. Low-Income families may struggle to provide nutritious food, which can result in health issues, and may have trouble finding a stable housing situation. This can cause stress in a family, which can be passed on to children. This chronic stress from poverty can be a form of trauma. Poverty and trauma impact student brain development, health, and behavior.

Children raised in poverty rarely choose to behave differently, but they are faced daily with overwhelming challenges that affluent children never have to confront, and their brains have adapted to suboptimal conditions in ways that undermine good school performance. Some teachers may interpret students' emotional and social deficits as a lack of respect or manners, but it is more accurate and helpful to understand that the students come to school with a narrower range of appropriate emotional responses than we expect. Cooperation, patience, embarrassment, empathy, gratitude, and forgiveness are crucial to a smoothly running complex social environment (like a classroom).⁸

Teaching social and emotional skills is even more important for students coming from low-income families. Some actionable strategies to address the challenges of teaching students from poverty include building positive relationships and creating a safe atmosphere for learning, giving students a sense of control, using a calm voice, teaching emotional skills, along with empathy and hope.⁹

⁷ (SAMHSA News - Guiding Principles of Trauma-Informed Care, 2014)

⁸ (Jensen, 2009)

⁹ (Teaching Children from Poverty and Trauma, 2016)



Effects of Variables

All of these variables will have an effect on how a student, or adult, displays their SEL skills. A student may vary in how they demonstrate and apply their SEL skills, in which they may demonstrate mastery one day or may need additional support the next, making it important for adults to understand when students exemplify their SEL skills and when they need additional assistance based on the context and circumstance. Skill development may ebb and flow. Some students may need additional instruction in certain skills for particular settings, at specific times of the day, around certain people, or under certain conditions and situations or environments.

Use of SEL Indicators

As described earlier, these indicators are intended to be used as *examples*. They should not be used as any type of assessment instrument or be used to identify students for special services. Some students may excel in certain areas and exhibit skills that are listed in higher levels; and some students may show skills that are listed for younger levels.

These examples are not meant to be all-encompassing. They do not highlight all skills for a particular SEL standard. There are other indicators of SEL that are not included in this document.

Early Learners – Birth to Five

It should be noted that the Indicators for ages Birth to Five come directly from the Rhode Island Early Learning and Developmental Standards (RIELDS). While many of these indicators describe a student mastering a specific skill, early learners typically need adult prompting, guidance or assistance to meet the indicator. They are at the beginning stages of learning these skills, and so there may be greater fluctuation in their ability to demonstrate mastery. For example, a very young learner may only be able to demonstrate certain skills in situations that are manageable and becoming part of a routine, or only with familiar and trusted adults in a safe environment.

Adult Assistance

It should be noted that within the text of the indicators, several indicators include the phrase “with adult assistance”. The phrase is used with the intention to indicate that the student



might need direct adult assistance, but it is important to consider that as cultures shape behaviors, some of this assistance might be needed or will be needed within a continuum of mastery in students' SEL skills and presence of adults. It is not intended to preclude adult assistance in any specific grade.



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