



Improving Student and Staff Well-Being During COVID-19 and Beyond: *Connecting Social Emotional Learning with Anti-Racism and Equity*



The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in additional and ongoing adversity, trauma, and behavioral health concerns for many students and staff, and has disproportionately impacted those who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).^{1,2} The pandemic has also accelerated previously growing interest among school administrators in addressing behavioral health and wellness in order to optimize school climate and academic achievement. These comprehensive and universal approaches to supporting student and staff wellness are often centered in social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula. Concurrently, the racial justice reckoning in the United States has highlighted the intergenerational and present-day racism, discrimination, and trauma experienced by BIPOC students, staff, and their families.

Together, this syndemic (i.e., a set of interrelated epidemics involving health and social/cultural problems) of COVID-19 and racial justice requires ensuring that SEL curricula, as well as broader school approaches to wellness, incorporate principles of equity and anti-racism.

SEL Programs are Effective and Increasingly Available in Connecticut Schools

Connecticut has made significant progress recognizing the importance of SEL programs in schools. In 2019, the state legislatively mandated a social emotional learning and school climate collaborative charged with several goals, including assessing districts' needs, identifying best practices, and directing resources to "improving access to social and emotional learning in schools" (PA 19-166). Multiple entities and organizations are currently supporting and expanding SEL programs, including the [Connecticut State Department of Education](#) (including using federal [COVID-19 relief funds](#)), the [Connecticut Association of Boards of Education](#), and the [Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents](#). SEL programs are a foundational component of comprehensive school mental health systems and services. They often represent universal (or Tier 1) support for all students as part of a school's [multi-tiered system of supports \(MTSS\)](#). Tier 1 supports are instrumental in prevention and health promotion,

whereas Tiers 2 and 3 include more targeted or intensive services for students identified as at-risk or in need of additional behavioral health treatment.

SEL interventions typically focus on five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.³ Decades of research on SEL programs show that they are effective at improving students' social and emotional skills and academic outcomes. A recent review of SEL programs summarized four meta-analyses comprising 356 studies with hundreds of thousands of youth from Kindergarten through 12th grade across several countries.⁴ Students participating in SEL programs showed consistently positive short- and long-term improvements in SEL skills (e.g., self-management), attitudes (e.g., self-esteem), positive social behaviors (e.g., empathy), conduct problems (e.g., disruptive classroom behavior), emotional distress (e.g., anxiety, depression) and academic performance (e.g., reading, math, standardized test scores).^{5,6,7,8}

Principles of Anti-Racism and Equity Belong in SEL Programs

Although SEL interventions have consistently been found to be effective, most do not explicitly address racism, discrimination, and inequities,⁹ the results of which are unfortunately part of BIPOC students' daily lives, including in school. For example, BIPOC students are more likely to experience exclusionary discipline and arrest (particularly Black youth),¹⁰ and to be identified as a discipline problem rather than being appropriately screened and identified as having a mental health condition. Students and staff can and do experience discrimination, racism, and microaggressions in school. Experiences of racism and discrimination can be traumatic and detrimental to students' mental health,¹¹ well-being,¹² and readiness for academic functioning,¹² which are core foci of SEL programs. Public school teachers, both nationwide (79%)¹³ and

in Connecticut (91.1%)¹⁴ are disproportionately White in comparison to their students, making it especially important to incorporate concepts of anti-racism and equity into SEL programs and schools more broadly.

While most SEL programs do not explicitly address racism and discrimination, schools are increasingly incorporating diversity and multicultural awareness into their curricula and professional development and there are emerging efforts to integrate these concepts into SEL programs. The [Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#), which coined the term SEL 26 years ago, recently updated their definition of SEL to explicitly include a focus on advancing educational equity.³ A [recent report from the Education Trust](#) provides recommendations for re-imagining SEL through an equity lens.¹⁵ Others argue for “transformative SEL,” which revises the CASEL competencies to more explicitly focus on educational equity. For example, under the “relationship skills” competency, traditional SEL curricula teach students how to share their own experiences to connect with other students. The transformative approach takes this one step further, supporting students' skills to advance multicultural competence in order to effectively navigate unfamiliar, diverse settings and interactions.¹⁶ Given that SEL is one part of a larger MTSS system, school districts can also incorporate and align anti-racism and equity practices more consistently in staff trainings, student referral and discipline, and other policies. Incorporating anti-racism and equity into SEL and other school programming may help all students and staff, including those identifying as BIPOC, feel more connected to their school community, teachers, and peers.

Recommendations for Advancing Anti-Racism and Equity in SEL Programs

The following recommendations are made for ensuring that schools integrate principles and best practices for anti-racism and equity into SEL programming as well as the broader school climate:

Reccomendations (*continued*)

- **Integrate anti-racism and equity into SEL standards:** State policymakers and SEL collaborative leaders should ensure that standards and best practices for SEL shared with districts reflect emerging research and best practices for integrating concepts of anti-racism and equity. These should be integrated not only with SEL programming but also with other school programs, policies, and the MTSS.
- **Modify SEL models to integrate anti-racism and equity:** Model developers and researchers of SEL programs (and other school-based behavioral health services) should integrate anti-racism and equity principles meaningfully, which will likely require significant modification to program materials and curricula. The Education Trust toolkit¹⁵ is one resource that could be used to support this process.
- **Emphasize anti-racism and equity in selection criteria:** State agencies, grantors, and school districts that fund or support SEL programs should consider the extent to which they incorporate anti-racism and equity when selecting which programs to fund, implement, and sustain.

This Issue Brief was prepared by Jason Lang, Jamie LoCurto, and Jeana Bracey. For more information visit www.chdi.org or contact Jason Lang at jalang@uchc.edu.

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