

**D2L**

**Supporting Social Emotional Learning  
to Help Enable Student Recovery**

# Introduction

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This past year has taken an immense toll on all of us, impacting our capacity to work, learn, and be mentally and emotionally healthy. Yet children of all grade levels are being asked to be resilient—to push through, focus, and learn despite the myriad of challenging circumstances facing them. It is critical to their ability to learn, and to their happiness and social development, that we acknowledge and address these non-academic student strains and success factors. We can help do so by providing both support for their mental health and by developing their social and emotional skills.

Returning our full focus to learning and optimizing student success requires that we use all resources available to support student healing and growth. We should recognize, as the US Department of Education stated in their most recently released reopening guidance, [COVID-19 Handbook Volume 2](#), that “...returning to the status quo will not address the full impact of COVID-19 on students’ social, emotional, physical, mental health, and academic needs ...”<sup>i</sup> The past year has been exceptional, and the need and opportunity for holistic interventions in K-12 education has never been more urgent.

There is growing consensus among parents, students, educators, and administrators that for students to learn and educators to teach effectively in this new environment, we cannot ignore the need to develop student social and emotional skills.<sup>ii</sup>

In order to meet this challenge, these skills and the mental health needs of students in every aspect of education should be prioritized—including when using the critical online learning tools we have become so familiar with over this year.

This policy brief examines the urgent need for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and mental health support for students and offers recommendations on how to meet those needs. This brief is not meant to be definitive, but rather an introduction to how education systems can help support students, and their social and emotional wellness as a parallel and necessary step for accelerating learning, reimagining the modern classroom, and instilling resilience in our educational systems.

## Defining Social and Emotional Learning and Mental Health

Social emotional learning is broadly understood as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel, and show empathy for others, establish, and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”<sup>iii</sup> Some of the goals of SEL include:

1. Developing self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making skills
2. Using social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships
3. Improving student attitudes and beliefs about self, others, and school<sup>iv</sup>

SEL can be done in a myriad of ways. The most recent school reopening guidance from the US Department of Education gives this general description of how SEL can take place:

1. Through direct instruction in social, emotional, and cognitive skills, including intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, conflict resolution, and decision-making and
2. Integrating social and emotional skills, habits, and mindsets within classroom lessons and activities<sup>v</sup>

In practice, SEL can be infused into every aspect of the educational experience. This includes direct lessons and curriculum centered on building and maintaining relationships and developing social and emotional skills. Also included are the broader aspects of SEL that influence the environment in which learning occurs. For example, using class time to check in on students' emotional health while encouraging students to listen to and support each other. The broad steps educators take to curate a classroom climate that is safe and structured, and which allows students to make mistakes and grow are also considered SEL. Educators who take time to observe and encourage not only the academic progress, but also the social and emotional growth of students, are conducting social and emotional learning.

While SEL is known to have many benefits, it is best employed as one part of a system of holistic supports for learners which includes mental health services. Mental health includes psychological health in addition to social and emotional wellness. It can be impacted by our genetics and other biological factors; our life experiences including trauma; and our family history.<sup>vi</sup> Mental health challenges can include mental disorders, which the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines as, "serious changes in the way children typically learn, behave, or handle their emotions, causing distress getting through the day."<sup>vii</sup>

Being mentally healthy and cultivating and exercising social and emotional skills is foundational to learning. Mental health challenges hinder many students' ability to learn.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health conditions, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and depression, were the most common childhood diseases,<sup>viii</sup> with nearly one in five children between the ages of 13–18 suffering from some kind mental health challenge.<sup>ix</sup> Promoting mental health and wellness requires more than teaching social and emotional skills, and includes services such as counseling, psychiatric medication, and cognitive behavioral therapy.

## The Urgent Need for SEL and Mental Health Supports

This year has been one of unprecedented challenges to the mental health of children and adults alike. Uncertainty, social isolation, and household tension are just a few of the factors dramatically impacting students' mental health.<sup>x</sup> While we are still studying the effects of COVID-19 on our collective mental, social and emotional well-being, some alarming trends have already been identified.

In May 2020, a full year ago, 29% of US parents surveyed reported that their children had "already experienced harm" to their mental health as a result of school closures and social distancing.<sup>xi</sup> Another survey assessing the impact of quarantine on children ages 3 to 18 in Italy and Spain showed similarly troubling trends. 85.7% of the 1143 parents studied reported changes in their children's emotions and behavior. Some of the most frequently reported behavioral changes were difficulty concentrating (76.6%), irritability (49%), restlessness (38.8%), nervousness (38%), uneasiness (30.4%), and worries (30.1%).<sup>xii</sup>

Perhaps most troubling, for the majority of 2020, the percentage of young children and adolescents admitted to pediatric emergency rooms for mental health problems, such as panic and anxiety, was up 24 percent and 31 percent, respectively.<sup>xiii</sup> Rates of suicidal thinking and behavior in young men and women ages 11–21 have risen at least 25 percent since 2019.<sup>xiv</sup>

Short of having a mental health disorder, the impact of social isolation and loneliness on students cannot be underestimated. There is concern amongst researchers that the loneliness experienced by youth during social distancing and COVID-19 will impact their mental health in the future.<sup>xv</sup>

There is an urgency, at a system-wide and individual level, to provide students with the social and emotional skills and mental health supports necessary to be resilient and grow.

## Recommendations

For students to have the best chance possible at learning despite the numerous communal and personal traumas they have endured, the creation of resilient systems of holistic support in schools is critical. Instilling in children the social and emotional skills necessary to rally not only from this pandemic but also to persevere through the many challenges life presents, must be our priority. The new learning models and technology that we have become so familiar with throughout this pandemic can and should be utilized as one tool to support student social emotional learning and mental health.

To accomplish this goal will require we prioritize time and financial resources to SEL and mental health curriculum, support and interventions. Schools across North America are facing local funding challenges at a time when student need is incredibly high—federal funding should be used to support these pursuits. The American Rescue Plan infused K-12 schools across the nation with over \$123 billion of flexible funds that can be spent over the next three and a half years. These funds can be used to provide innovative social and emotional learning supports for students, SEL training for educators, and support for student mental health services.

To support students' social and emotional learning and mental health beyond and within the school building, states should:

1. **Implement statewide SEL standards and guidance for ingraining in instruction.**

The events of the last year have created an urgent need for SEL and holistic supports that extend beyond the classroom or counselor's office, reaching students wherever they are. Standards, guidance, and funding should acknowledge the reality of these new models of learning—and include standards for the prioritization and implementation of SEL in the classroom, whether in in-person, or remote environments.

State level administration should elevate SEL in the same way as nutrition, ingraining SEL into regular instruction and school day activities. State level standards for SEL, that include in school actions and remote learning standards, will ensure that SEL is a priority in every classroom, for every student. Administrators and educators should prioritize SEL centered curriculum and supports that equitably address the needs of individual students and diverse populations.

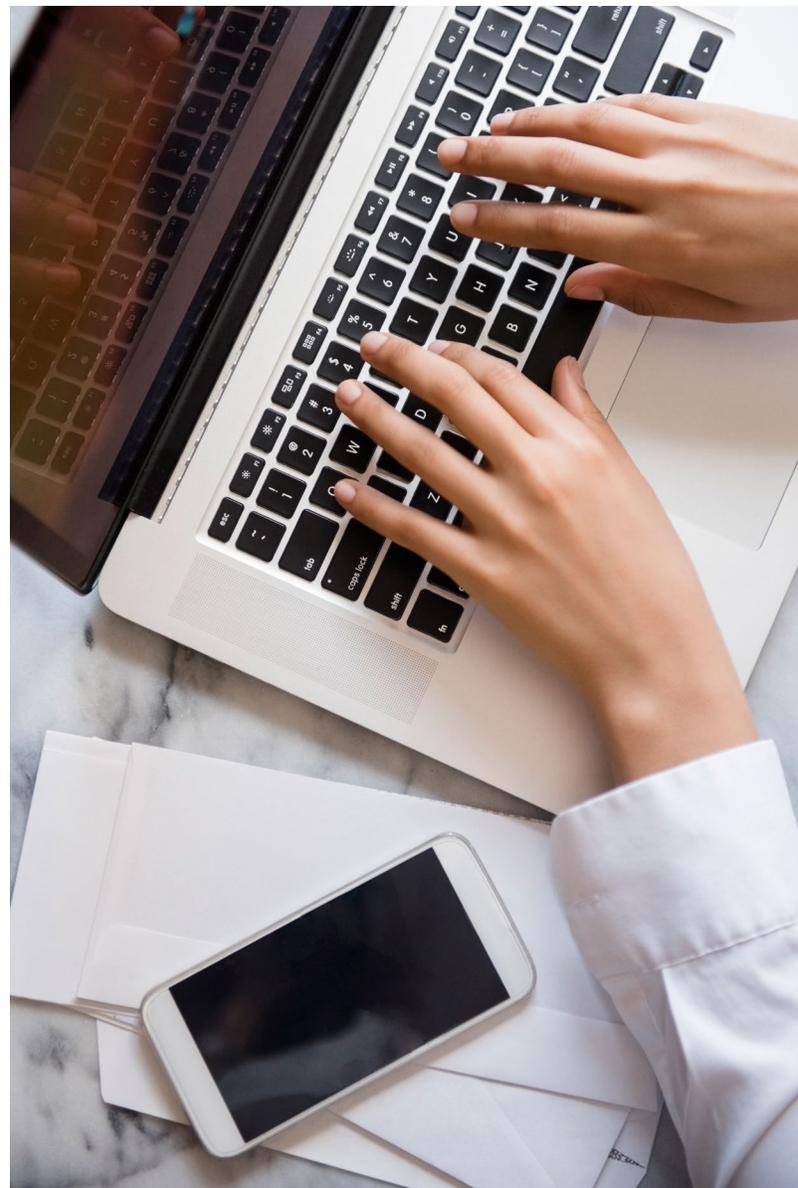
2. **Provide equitable access to the technology-enabled learning tools that support the holistic wellness of students, and connectivity amongst students and all professionals.**

In every aspect of wellness and education, technology is being integrated to reach individuals where they are in astoundingly personalized ways. To enable the highest quality, most holistic SEL and mental health supports possible, for students both in and outside of the school building, we should optimize our use of available technology. Schools should invest in educational technologies which:

- Enhance connections amongst teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and students in an integrated manner.
- Create deep, authentic, learning experiences and can support SEL integrated curriculum.
- Provide flexibility in modality, time, and place of learning, to reach all students wherever, whenever.
- Allow teachers and administrators to track progress on homework, projects and assessments to detect behavioral changes indicating distress.
- Enable communities of support for educators and students alike.
- Support continuous professional development opportunities for educators.
- Procurement at the state or regional level will allow for more equitable purchasing by districts. Purchasing decisions should be made in tandem with investments into best practice guidance and the professional development necessary for educators to gain fluency in available technology.

3. **Provide SEL professional development and mental health support training to teachers across the state.**

Educators should be fully supported in expanding their SEL competency to address the unique needs of students, in this moment and beyond, using the robust technology available. There is a need for teacher enablement, both in self-care and in the identification and mitigation of SEL-related deterioration. States' level administration and districts should provide professional development opportunities centered on the intersection of SEL and technology—giving educators the skills and confidence to reach students wherever they might be.



## ENDNOTES

- i US Department of Education in the most recent ED COVID-19 Handbook Vol. 2
- ii <https://edsources.org/2021/why-mental-health-is-the-key-to-dealing-with-learning-loss/653087>,  
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- iii <https://casel.org/overview-sel/>
- iv <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Social-Emotional-Learning-Standards.aspx>; <https://casel.org/overview-sel/>
- v <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/coronavirus/reopening-2.pdf>
- vi <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/what-is-mental-health>
- vii <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html#ref>, citing Perou R, Bitsko RH, Blumberg SJ, Pastor P, Ghandour RM, Gfroerer JC, Hedden SL, Crosby AE, Visser SN, Schieve LA, Parks SE, Hall JE, Brody D, Simile CM, Thompson WW, Baio J, Avenevoli S, Kogan MD, Huang LN. Mental health surveillance among children—United States, 2005–2011. *MMWR* 2013;62(Suppl; May 16, 2013):1-35
- viii <https://childmind.org/2015-childrens-mental-health-report/>
- ix <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html#ref>
- x <https://www.psychiatrytimes.com/view/new-findings-children-mental-health-covid-19>
- xi <https://news.gallup.com/poll/312605/parents-say-covid-harming-child-mental-health.aspx>
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- xiii <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/23/health/coronavirus-mental-health-teens.html> citing [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6945a3.htm?s\\_cid=mm6945a3\\_w](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6945a3.htm?s_cid=mm6945a3_w)
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- xv <https://www.psychiatrytimes.com/view/new-findings-children-mental-health-covid-19>



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## ABOUT D2L

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