Selecting the right program

What the research says

The role of student identity

Spotlight on social and emotional learning
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Last year, as a parent of a third grader, I occasionally saw worksheets come home on topics such as, “What to do if you feel worried,” or “How to tell someone you’re angry.” When I asked my son what they were about, he would say something vague like, “We already did that at school.” End of story.

But what is the story? Now I understand that these worksheets were part of a social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum that his school is using to help kids learn how to manage their feelings and interact with others positively. Such curricula have been standard practice at the preschool level for several years, but suddenly, SEL seems to be everywhere.

The importance of student perseverance, resilience, self-regulation, and social skills—all components of SEL—was magnified greatly with the recent passage of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, which calls for broader definitions of student success that include nonacademic factors such as student engagement and school climate.

Districts across the country have taken or are taking action to incorporate SEL into their schools and systems. In early August, eight states announced that they will work collaboratively to create and implement SEL plans, which include developing materials, professional development, and, in several cases, creating SEL state standards. In California, a group of districts that received No Child Left Behind waivers in 2013 (called CORE districts) have created a first-of-its-kind local accountability system that relies on a wide range of indicators that go beyond test scores—including measures of student social development and engagement.

In this issue of Changing Schools, we learn about a Colorado district, Littleton Public Schools, that is among those in the process of aligning SEL standards with state standards. We also learn how, despite all of the promise of and enthusiasm for SEL, it’s a complicated issue with many moving parts. Successful SEL programming requires schools to choose from many options the best program for their students, implement and assess it effectively, train teachers to carry the program out with fidelity, get district-wide support, and create school and classroom cultures that nurture it.

It’s not a short order, but one that research has shown and continues to show is worth the effort, including getting all stakeholders—students, teachers, and parents—on board.

Heather Hein is a communications consultant at McREL and managing editor of Changing Schools. You can reach her at hhein@mcrel.org or 303.632.5520.

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Changing Schools is published biannually by McREL International.
Yesterday, it was “growth mindset” and “soft skills.” Today, it’s “grit” and “21st century skills.” For the past few years, it seems like everyone in education has been trying to figure out exactly what “nonacademic” skills, attitudes, and behaviors students need to succeed not only in school but also in life.

The idea that students do best when both their academic and nonacademic needs are met is nothing new (if you’ve ever read John Dewey, you could say it goes back over a century). What is new, however, is an educational climate that has put nonacademic skills front and center—not only in the classroom but also in research and policy.

Why SEL?

The social and emotional learning (SEL) movement grew out of positive youth development programs that have been in place for decades to address various negative behaviors in school. Broadly speaking, both are based on the idea that teaching students social and emotional skills helps reduce problem behaviors and improves their long-term success.

As research on and awareness of SEL has grown, educators have embraced it as an evidence-based way to address many of their toughest challenges, from reducing school violence and bullying to helping low-performing kids meet the rigors of the Common Core, which include many intellectual tasks (e.g., collaborating, persevering to solve problems, understanding others’ perspectives) that require SEL skills many students don’t have (Adams, 2013). At the policy level, when the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed at the end of 2015, it shifted emphasis to a broader definition of student success, requiring states to measure performance on standardized tests and non-academic skills.

A majority of schools already have SEL programs in place, and a growing number of educators believe teaching SEL skills is an effective way to not only reduce discipline problems but also to improve school climate and student achievement (Education Week Research Center, 2015). Still, SEL approaches have many moving parts and questions to be answered.

The big picture

SEL can refer to policies, curricula, or programs put in place to address a huge range of skills, aptitudes, and behaviors—from how to make friends to substance abuse prevention. Most educators use the five-part definition of SEL put forth by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (see text box on p. 5).

While educators generally agree on the importance of the CASEL outcomes, what exactly gets taught and how varies greatly from school to school. For example, some programs teach SEL skills directly; others address specific topics, such as bullying, substance abuse prevention, and conflict resolution. Some approaches have specific curricular and instructional components that are delivered in the classroom, while multicomponent programs supplement classroom
self-regulation, noncognitive skills, character, grit, and growth mindset. Recent research bears this out: for years, proponents have espoused the idea that if you teach students SEL skills, it will improve not only their attitudes and behavior in the classroom but also their academic performance. Research has clearly shown, however, that effective SEL programs—those that result in a decrease in problem behavior, improved student-teacher relationships, and an increase in academic success—include a systematic process for promoting SEL development (Durlak et al., 2011). Specifically, Durlak et al. found programs that have a sequenced, step-by-step training approach with manuals and lessons that target specific SEL skills are more successful than those that don’t (2011).

Clear evidence—and a few caveats

For years, proponents have espoused the idea that if you teach students SEL skills, it will improve not only their attitudes and behavior in the classroom but also their academic performance. Recent research bears this out:

- Durlak et al.’s landmark meta-analysis of 213 studies showed that, across grade levels and for students in rural, urban, and suburban schools, SEL programs reduced aggression and emotional distress, increased helping behaviors in school, improved student attitudes toward self and others, and improved academic performance—including an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement assessed through report card grades and test scores. Moreover, when researchers followed up at least six months after an SEL program had ended, they found that those positive changes were lasting (2011).

- Another meta-analysis by Sklad, Diekstra, De Ritter, Ben, and Gravesteijn (2012) looked at 75 studies of SEL programs and found beneficial effects on seven major outcome areas: social skills, positive self-image, prosocial behavior, antisocial behavior, substance abuse, mental health, and academic achievement.

- The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago found noncognitive behaviors, such as perseverance, academic mindset, learning strategies, and social skills—many of which are addressed by SEL—positively affect student success in school (Farrington et al., 2012).

- A survey of 1,300 8th graders in Boston on their conscientiousness, self-control, grit, and growth mindset found those measures correlated positively with student attendance and behavior, state test scores, and test-score gains from 4th to 8th grade (West et al., 2014).

These studies reveal some notable caveats, however. Durlak et al., for example, found that simply teaching SEL isn’t enough to guarantee success; it depends on how a program is designed and implemented. Specifically, when programs provide opportunities for students to practice SEL skills through role-playing or other activities, they are more successful than those which rely on passive modes of learning, like lectures or books (Durlak et al., 2011).

A working definition of SEL

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), social and emotional learning involves acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to:

- Understand and manage emotions
- Set and achieve positive goals
- Feel and show empathy for others
- Establish and maintain positive relationships
- Make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2013)

The University of Chicago study used five categories that are different from CASEL’s and more closely link cognitive and noncognitive factors. The researchers showed that “virtually all . . . noncognitive factors work through academic behaviors to affect performance” (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 8)—and, further, that some of these factors are malleable (i.e., teachable) and others aren’t. For example, “grit” and “self-control” both fall in the “Academic Perseverance” category; however, grit—which allows you to sustain effort in the long term—is more of a fixed trait while self-control—which allows you to delay gratification and choose to stay focused on a task in the short term—is seen as malleable (Farrington et al., 2012).

West et al. (2014) found that students who, on average, reported higher levels of the four elements measured in their study did not have higher average test-score gains than did kids in other schools. A separate study on KIPP charter schools, which strongly promote character education, showed KIPP middle schoolers had much higher test scores than their peers who had wanted to attend KIPP but weren’t chosen in the lottery—but scored better on only one of a wide range of measures of character/soft skills (collaboration) (Whitehurst, 2016).

Such paradoxical results, West and his colleagues suggest, could be driven by “reference bias,” or the tendency for survey responses to be influenced by social context (2014). For example, when KIPP students are asked to rate themselves on...
the statement, “I am a hard worker,” they must imagine a hard worker to whom they compare themselves; students with higher standards may therefore rate themselves lower.

Full-steam ahead

New research continues to roll in and, as researchers and education leaders continue to sort out issues of assessment, implementation, and how specific SEL skills relate to academic skills, academic achievement, and to each other, schools and districts are proceeding full-steam ahead.

How far SEL will go and whether it will lead to widespread improvement in student achievement remains to be seen. Educators are increasingly confident that improving students’ social and emotional competence will make them better learners, but they are also aware that the biggest challenge for SEL, like many things in education, is not whether it works but how they can find the time to make it a priority (Education Week Research Center, 2015).

References


SEL resources


Using a systematic framework to assess the quality of SEL programs, these guide books identify and rate well-designed, evidence-based SEL programs with potential for broad dissemination to schools across the U.S. They also offer recommendations for systematic implementation.

Heather Hein is a communications consultant at McREL and managing editor of Changing Schools. You can reach her at hhein@mcrel.org or 303.632.5520.
Creating the right culture for SEL

By Cheryl Abla

Why is it that some students have a happy-go-lucky attitude while others feel that the world is against them? We see this beginning in preschool and continuing all the way through high school, and beyond. These Tiggers and Eeyores go through school, year after year, with nobody seeming to notice—unless a major incident happens, and then we snap to attention and make a plan to ensure it doesn’t happen again. What if, instead, we paid attention to and acted upon students’ social cues from the moment they first walk through the doors of our schools?

How schools respond to and support students’ emotional well-being as well as their interactions with others is a significant part of the overall culture of a school. When Tiggers and Eeyores alike feel listened to and cared about by their peers, teachers, and school leaders, it has a huge impact on their attitude, motivation, and ability to succeed.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs and approaches aim to help students develop the knowledge and skills they need to manage their emotions, behavior, and interactions in a positive way. But SEL programs are only as good as the culture in which they are implemented. In other words, students’ SEL skills won’t improve if they don’t feel listened to and cared about in the classroom.

Taken a step further, some education leaders suggest that teachers should be spending less energy on teaching SEL skills and more on changing the environment of the classroom in order to support their students’ development of positive emotions, behavior, and interactions (Education Week, 2016).

So what can school leaders and teachers do to ensure that the culture of their schools and classrooms promote the social and emotional well-being of all students?
What a school leader can do

School leaders play the most important role in creating a school culture that supports SEL. For SEL programs to succeed, principals must work with their school staff to create a shared vision and goals, provide the necessary resources, and model the behaviors they want teachers to develop among their students (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2008).

To set the right tone and communicate the importance of SEL, here are examples of actions, both big and small, that principals can take:

• **Put your best face forward.** The people that parents and teachers see and interact with when they enter the school should truly care about children and the culture of the building. Welcoming, caring people help communicate the values of the school and, in some cases, can diffuse negative situations. Be thoughtful about choosing staff members who will interact with a new parent enrolling his or her child, a substitute teacher, a tardy student, an upset parent, or a teacher who is running late and needs help. How those people are treated in those first few seconds after entering a school makes a big difference in school culture.

• **Cultivate good relationships with your staff.** Just like students need to feel connected to their teachers and their peers, teachers have to feel connected to each other and to their leaders. This happens by being tuned in to your staff. Know their interests, passions, strengths, and struggles. This requires face time—visit with teachers before and after school and allow time in your professional learning sessions to let teachers talk to one another and to you.

• **Provide feedback on their teaching.** Teachers like to know what they are doing well and what they need to be working on to improve. Notes left on a teacher’s desk or an e-mail after a walkthrough visit helps the teacher feel validated and worth your time. Providing even a quick “glow and grow” opportunity can go a long way.

• **Show that you will “sink or swim” together.** Great administrators know they are only as good as the teachers in their building and have a “we’re all in this together” attitude. When new initiatives are handed down from the district level, great administrators don’t complain to their staff; they focus on how each person can help get the work done. Follow up with teachers to make sure they have what they need and their questions are answered. Ask for and accept help and encourage your staff to do the same. No one should feel like they are on their own.

• **Encourage learning.** Healthy SEL administrators have a learner’s mindset; they are always looking to become better leaders and try new things. Likewise, encourage risk taking among your staff by welcoming all questions and having a “fail forward” attitude. When you fail, admit it and learn from it. When you (and others) succeed, celebrate.

• **Defer to teacher expertise.** Remember, your staff likely has hundreds of years of experience in the classroom, and they know best how to help students. During staff meetings and professional learning days, have them showcase techniques that have had the greatest impact. Teachers tend to feel if their colleagues can teach something effectively, they can, too.

What a teacher can do

Research has shown time and again that positive teacher-student relationships are one of the most important factors in creating a favorable learning environment. In a popular 2013 TED Talk, long-time educator Rita Pierson summed it up this way: “Kids don’t learn from people they don’t like.”

Teachers can nurture the social and emotional well-being of their students by making relationship building a priority in everything they plan and do throughout the school year. Here are some key actions to put into practice:

• **Be positive.** Remember that many students have difficulties at home and in other areas of their lives; being negative or unnecessarily critical only adds to their stress and anxiety.

• **Make time for interaction.** Students enjoy hearing about you, especially about your own years as a student. Share your successes, but don’t forget to share some of your failures—that is what makes you real, safe, and approachable.

• **Create an Interest Inventory.** Have your students complete this when school starts and then refer to it often throughout the school year. Questions can include:
  - How do you like to be recognized?
  - What motivates you to work hard and do well?
  - What are your hobbies or interests?
  - Is there anything you would like to share with me that wouldn’t normally be discussed in a normal classroom conversation?

• **Greet students every day as they come to your classroom.** This is a quick way to help “fill the buckets” of your students and connect with them as they come through the door. It also helps you gauge your students’ attitudes and moods.

SEL reminds us that human connection is probably, in the end, the most powerful tool we have.
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How to select and implement an SEL program that works

By Adena Miller

Choosing an SEL program is one thing; choosing the right program is another. Even though a majority of schools have SEL programs in place, a recent national survey of teachers and school leaders found only 34% of respondents strongly agreed that their school’s climate fostered social and emotional well-being for students and staff; less than half (47%) said their school’s climate is conducive to teaching and learning; and a mere 22% reported that students are engaged and motivated (Education Week Research Center, 2015).

While educators these days have their pick of a number of evidence-based programs, choosing and implementing the right SEL program remains a challenge because no two school communities are alike. Understanding the customs and cultures of the broader community and what staff and students bring to school in terms of identity and experiences provides the foundation for selecting programming that is likely to succeed.

This protocol has been designed to help school teams get a handle on the needs of their students and their community in order to select SEL programming that is most likely to have a positive impact in their specific setting.

COLLECT AND ANALYZE YOUR DATA

STEP 1

Gather a team that will be responsible for researching and selecting the intervention(s).

Select a team member to prepare student data that will be necessary for decision-making purposes. Data may include:

- Parent, student, and faculty surveys
- Attendance and office discipline referral data
- Cultural norms of the school community (e.g., families, teachers, leaders)
- SEL priorities of school staff and families (e.g., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making)
- Current programming in place, including what is working and what is not
- Level of buy-in of those responsible for teaching SEL
- Implementation priorities (e.g., whether SEL programming will be integrated throughout the school day or taught in isolated lessons)
- Scheduling options

As a team, review and consider your student data.

- What is your school doing well? How do you know?
- What needs have arisen this year?
- What have you struggled to address? Why?
- Are there any factors to be aware of (e.g., conflict between the cultural norms of families and SEL priorities of the staff)?
- Consider creating a chart or graph of your student data.
- Based on your student data, determine your priority area of focus.
DETERMINE THE PROGRAMMING YOU HAVE THAT MEETS YOUR PRIORITY AREA OF FOCUS

As a team, research and document the SEL programming your school currently has in place for the priority area of focus. This will help determine if you have any gaps (see Step 3). Include the following, if known:

• The name of the program
• The skills or concepts it addresses
• Frequency/duration of the program
• Implementation practices of the program (e.g., integrated throughout the day or specific lessons taught in isolation from other content)

• Strengths of the program
• Weaknesses of the program
• Professional development required to implement the program
• Cost of the program

Consider charting this information by program to help identify any knowledge needed about current interventions.

CONDUCT A GAP ANALYSIS BETWEEN YOUR PRIORITY AREA OF FOCUS AND AVAILABLE PROGRAMS

As a team, determine any gaps between available programming and priority area of focus.

• What programming do you have that does not meet any student needs?
• What student needs do you have that you do not have resources for?
• What can you do about this?

Determine the programming needed to address priority area of focus.

RESEARCH PROGRAMMING THAT MAY ADDRESS THE PRIORITY AREA OF FOCUS

Consider using the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) Hexagon Tool for reviewing, evaluating, and reflecting on potential programming.

Assign team members to gather information to present to the decision-making team. The following external resources may be helpful:

• 2015 CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs: Middle and High School Edition

SELECT INTERVENTION AND TRAIN APPROPRIATE STAFF

Based on the decision-making team’s analysis, select SEL programming and communicate to all staff what it is, who it serves, and how to access it for their students.

Determine who needs training and ensure they have adequate resources and support for implementation, including any ongoing coaching/professional learning.

continued on next page
IMPLEMENT THE INTERVENTION

STEP 6
When implementing the programming, ensure that it is:

- Scheduled with sufficient time to have an effect
- Implemented as it was designed

EVALUATE THE EFFICACY OF THE INTERVENTION

STEP 7
> Determine how your team will evaluate whether the programming is having the intended effects. Consider:
- The fidelity of implementation—if it is not being implemented as designed, consider the reasons why and what (if anything) can be done
- The percentage of students responding to the programming (the goal is ~80% of those consistently receiving the programming respond positively)

> Determine when your team will evaluate whether the programming is having the intended effects. Consider:
- When the required data (e.g., progress monitoring, observation, fidelity) will be available
- When it makes sense to make adjustments to the programming (e.g., beginning-of-year, mid-year, end-of-year)
- When decisions need to be made regarding continuing the use of the programming

> Determine if the programming is having the intended effects.

> Determine what to do about the results.
- If positive, continue implementing the programming.
- If questionable or poor, consider:
  - Making adjustments to ensure the programming is implemented as it is intended
  - Understanding why the outcomes are questionable or poor (e.g., are there cultural conflicts? Are teachers invested? Is there follow-through to the lessons?)

> Develop an action plan to follow up on any next steps. Ensure teachers and students have the supports required to move forward. Include:
- What will be done?
- By whom?
- By when?
- What supports will be required to ensure this happens?
- How will fidelity of the plan be monitored, by whom, and how often?
- When will you check on the efficacy of this programming again?

In addition to the significant investment in time and money, choosing the right program and implementing it effectively also takes a lot of thought and planning. But if the goal is to ensure that SEL programming adequately addresses the needs of the school community and, ultimately, improves students’ social, emotional, and academic outcomes, schools can’t afford not to take these steps.

**References**


Dr. Adena Miller is a consultant at McREL with extensive experience in special education, RtI, and MTSS. She can be reached at amiller@mcrel.org or 303.632.5530.
Q&A

Systemic support of SEL leads to lifelong success for students

By Christine H. Schmidt

Conflicts with peers, a tough home environment, being bullied, getting a poor grade—these emotional experiences can easily, and sometimes perilously, snag students in mid-stream, intensifying the already turbulent emotional experiences of childhood and adolescence. With so much already going on in schools and classrooms, how can educators help students navigate these emotions and not only stay afloat but succeed?

Nate Thompson, the Director of Social, Emotional, and Behavior Services for Littleton Public Schools (LPS) in Littleton, Colorado, talks with us about the importance of SEL and the challenges schools and districts face in implementing and monitoring SEL programs. He works closely with school administrators, counselors, social workers, and psychologists to develop effective mental health services, behavior interventions, and social emotional instruction for LPS students.

Why is SEL important?

**NT:** The research is clear that having strong social and emotional skills is a better predictor of adult success in the workplace than academic test scores. You can be the brightest kid in the world, you can have straight A’s and ace your ACT, but if you don’t have good SEL skills, you might not be very successful in a job or in life. When you start recognizing that, you realize that it really should be something we integrate into all we do in our schools.

You can be the brightest kid in the world, you can have straight A’s and ace your ACT, but if you don’t have good SEL skills, you might not be very successful in a job or in life.

What makes an SEL program successful?

**NT:** A district has to have some agreement from the very top of the organization that this is a priority—having leaders who believe in the value of SEL and are committed to it, who learn about the different curricula and resources available and think on a systemic level. Our district, for example, is currently working to align our SEL model with our state academic standards.

Philosophically, SEL works well when everybody in a school sees it as their role to help kids acquire SEL skills. It’s also important to have the classroom teachers’ buy in. At the elementary level, teachers are very involved in SEL instruction. At the older grades, teachers at least need to know how to support SEL and integrate it into their teaching practices.

How does SEL work with other youth development programs or behavior initiatives?

**NT:** In LPS, we use the SEL model from CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), which includes five specific competencies: self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness. Many other concepts and programs support these competencies. For example, to build good relationship skills, we use the Restorative Practices model in situations where kids have gotten into significant
conflicts, or if they’ve made a poor choice. It helps them learn how to repair relationships, and also to build social awareness and self-management, because now they’re having to realize that when they make a poor decision, they need to have better self-control. Other programs such as character education, growth mindset, mindfulness, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and health and wellness activities are all tools, I believe, to help kids acquire the five SEL competencies.

**How do you foster SEL engagement in the school community?**

**NT:** One example is that, for almost 10 years now, LPS has been involved in the PBIS initiative, which focuses on building a language, culture, and structure that allows your school to do continuous improvement around student behavior and SEL skills. Part of that process is getting a committee together that’s representative of your school, that includes student and parent input, and looks at school expectations. What do we want our kids to learn? What are the behaviors that they struggle with the most? How can we incentivize kids to make good decisions? We’re also getting ready to launch an in-depth school culture and climate survey this fall. We will be getting feedback from students, staff, personnel, and parents from each school, which will give us another set of data to help drive our programming.

**What is the role of standards and benchmarks in SEL?**

**NT:** Every state has approached this differently, in terms of how to integrate SEL into their standards—or not. It’s one of those things that falls across curriculum, and a lot of times nobody is assigned as the specific point person. The challenge is: How do you start doing this on a more structured basis? I think a lot of districts are trying to figure that out. Here in Colorado, SEL has been integrated into the Comprehensive Health and Physical Education standards. That’s our foundation for looking at more systemic implementation of SEL in our district. We’re using the same model we would for any other academic content and looking at the minimum skills and content knowledge we want kids to acquire.

**What are the biggest challenges in implementing and monitoring SEL?**

**NT:** Time, money, and resources. How do you fit SEL into the school day when you have so many other mandates and so much pressure for schools to perform on standardized tests? You also need to have some flexibility.

**Is SEL here to stay?**

**NT:** Districts are increasingly being tasked with addressing so many aspects of the social and emotional health of a student, like suicide, threat assessment, grief and loss, psychological trauma, substance abuse, and homelessness. Schools are the heartbeat of the community, and students don’t just leave all these things at the door each day when they come in. I think a lot of districts are trying to figure that out. Here in Colorado, SEL has been integrated into the Comprehensive Health and Physical Education standards. That’s our foundation for looking at more systemic implementation of SEL in our district. We’re using the same model we would for any other academic content and looking at the minimum skills and content knowledge we want kids to acquire.

There’s a big wave of recognition happening about the importance of SEL, but there isn’t just one way to do it correctly. Here in LPS, we are trying to approach it on a more thoughtful, systemic level, integrating it with academic standards so it doesn’t feel like just another initiative that’s piled on top of everything else. I think the more we get structured and communicate the value of good SEL, the more it will highlight the need for adequate school funding to support what is proven to help kids be successful in life.

**Christine H. Schmidt** is a communications consultant at McREL. You can reach her at cschmidt@mcrel.org or 303.632.5650.
Is identity the key to unlocking student motivation?

By Katie Stringer

Why does a teenager decide to study rather than go out with friends? Why does one college student work harder when classes are challenging, while another gives up and switches majors? For years, researchers and educators have been asking questions like these to try to get at the heart of what motivates students to learn.

Motivation is a very complex construct, involving an array of beliefs, perceptions, values, interests, and actions that are all closely related (Lai, 2011). As such, approaches to motivation can focus on cognitive behaviors (e.g., self-monitoring and strategy use), non-cognitive aspects (e.g., perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes), or both (Lai, 2011).

One critical piece of the non-cognitive puzzle is academic identity, or how a student sees him- or herself as a learner. In general terms, if a student sees himself as intelligent and capable of doing the work needed now and in the future, that student is more likely to succeed. One’s identity as a successful student both motivates and predicts one’s behavior. Conversely, if a student does not see himself as intelligent and capable, he may tell himself things like, “Studying is for nerds, not for kids like me,” or “Maybe I’m not a math person after all”—and act accordingly.

This could help explain research that shows a disparity between what students want for themselves and their futures and what actually happens. Nearly 85% of American 10th graders, for example, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background, plan to go to college (Domina, Conley, & Farkas, 2011), but of those who graduate from high school or earn a GED, only 68.4% enroll in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

Identity-based motivation theory (IBM) gives us a framework for understanding the relationship between identity and behavior and how students interpret and respond to academic situations. Developed by Daphna Oyserman, a dean’s professor of education and communication at the University of Southern California, IBM theory posits that individuals are more likely to act in ways that are congruent with achieving their goals when they 1) feel a connection between who they are now and
who they could be, 2) are confident in the strategies to become that possible version of the self, and 3) perceive experienced difficulty as a sign of identity importance rather than impossibility.

Studies show benefits of IBM

A number of studies by Oyserman and her colleagues on college students and adolescents have shown that relatively simple actions to improve students’ academic identities can have real and lasting effects.

For example, Landau, Oyserman, Keefer, and Smith (2014) carried out a series of experiments in which they looked at the effects on college students of engaging with “possible identities” while using the metaphor of academic success as a journey. Students saw an image of a sidewalk amidst grass and trees from the perspective of someone walking along the path. Looking ahead, they saw the words “freshman year,” “sophomore year,” and so on. They were asked to imagine their future selves, having successfully completed each stage of college, and write a description including what they are like, what they are doing, and how they feel. The researchers found that students who imagined their upcoming academic years as landmarks on a physical path were more likely to allocate future time for studying and reported higher exam scores than their peers who did not perform this exercise.

In an earlier study, Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry (2006) found that for low-income and minority 8th graders, targeting IBM components with specific strategies made a difference for academic behaviors and achievement. In an intervention called School-to-Jobs (later published as Pathways to Success), these students learned strategies and participated in activities that connected their desired possible identities or selves to their “true selves” and their social identities, and helped them understand that difficulty is a normal and expected part of reaching their goals. Participants improved their academic initiative (e.g., time spent on homework, attendance), test scores, and grades; reduced their levels of depression and absenteeism; and misbehavior in school declined. These effects were sustained two years later.

Interestingly, who one does not want to be can act as a motivator as well. Because identity as a motivator is context-specific, if a student is unsure whether he will succeed in a specific situation, he may be more motivated by avoidance of an undesired possible future self. Oyserman, Destin, and Novin (2015) found that when college students were randomized to conditions where success was likely versus unlikely, and undesired or desired possible future selves were brought to mind, students in “success-unlikely” conditions reported they were more likely to engage in positive academic behaviors when an undesired future self was brought to mind, while students in the “success-likely” context were motivated when the desired possible future self was brought to mind. In other words, when a college student is unsure of whether he or she will succeed in a course, thinking about an undesired possible future self (e.g., a college dropout) is more motivating than thinking about what it would be like to graduate from college.

Putting IBM into practice

McREL, Oyserman, and a coalition of partner agencies are currently working on a five-year project that will take the intervention, Pathways to Success: Schools-to-Jobs, and adapt it into a digital game for middle and high school students. The goal of the game, whose development is funded by a U.S. Department of Education Investing in Innovation (i3) grant, is to improve students’ academic identity by engaging them in activities about who they are and who they want to become.

McREL has also worked with a Colorado middle school that focuses on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) to understand IBM as it relates to students seeing themselves as future STEM majors or professionals. We found that, in just one semester, students who participated in extracurricular STEM programs had and maintained a stronger identity connection to being a STEM major or professional, and students who didn’t participate had a significant decrease in STEM identity connection. Assessing IBM in domains such as STEM allows educators and policy makers to understand what strategies may be effective for increasing IBM.

Another area that could benefit from increased IBM is professional learning. Teachers’ perception of what a successful
teacher does and whether they can do it, too, influences their adoption of new strategies and practices. When teachers see a connection between what is important to them and their professional learning; are confident that they can accomplish the steps to implement a new strategy; and know how to deal with potentially difficult situations, they are more likely to successfully change their practices. While most professional learning tries to instill confidence in teachers for using new strategies, it doesn’t always make it relevant to them—who they are now and what they want to be—or provide ways to persist through difficulties.

Increasing students’ motivation to learn is a challenge for nearly every educator. IBM is a useful theoretical framework for understanding why some students do what they need to in order to succeed in school and others don’t. For teachers who want to help students develop positive academic identities, IBM is a kick starter for thinking about the information you can provide, conversations you can have, and guidance you can give to help all of your students see—and work toward—their potential.

Dr. Katie Stringer is director of research and evaluation at McREL. She is the co-director of the Identity-Based Motivation Journey to Academic Success project, funded by a U.S. Department of Education Investing in Innovation (i3) grant. She can be reached at kstringer@mcrel.org or 303.632.5567.

**References**


In the spring issue of *Changing Schools*, we introduced the “inside-out approach” to school reform, which, as defined in our white paper, *The Road Less Traveled*, “puts student engagement, motivation, and true problem-solving abilities at the heart of everything we do” (p. 5). This shift in focus creates a powerful, new outcome for students that sets them up for lifelong success: *curiosity*.

So as we were putting together this issue of *Changing Schools*, we started thinking about the relationship between SEL and curiosity. At first blush, curiosity may appear to be somewhat tangential to the short- and long-term goals of SEL, which according to the Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), aim to improve students’ *self- and social awareness, self-management, relationships and decision-making skills* as well as their *attitudes and beliefs* about themselves, others, and school. These changes lead to—and research has this borne out—more positive social and academic behaviors and peer relationships, fewer behavior problems, less emotional distress, and improved grades and test scores.

As it turns out, though, research shows that we develop many of these same dispositions when we become and are able to remain curious about the world around us—including the perspectives of others—and see ourselves as lifelong learners. Researchers call this kind of curiosity *trait* curiosity, in contrast to a more fleeting kind of curiosity called *state* curiosity. People with trait curiosity view themselves as—and even take pride—being curious.

In school, research has shown that this kind of curiosity, combined with conscientiousness, has as big of an effect on academic performance as intelligence (von Stumm, Hell, & Chamorro-Premuzi, 2011). And the benefits continue beyond school—those who *stay* curious have greater success in the workplace and in leadership roles (von Stumm, Hell, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2011; Reio & Wiswell, 2000; Strella & Martin, 2014), not to mention stronger relationships, more happiness, and even a longer life (Kashdan & Steger, 2007; Swan & Carmelli, 1996).

Studies have also shown that we’re born curious with a natural drive to explore our natural environments. Yet schooling itself...
appears to remove that drive for many students. Indeed, researchers have found that the longer students stay in school, the less curiosity they demonstrate.

The good news, though, is that we can create environments that develop and nurture students’ curiosity by creating a curiosity-based culture in the classroom and by using the right instructional practices. For example, we can spark student interest by using suspense or controversy, then use higher order questions that lead to deeper inquiry, and finally, give students the autonomy to explore their interests and ask themselves questions.

Perhaps most important, though, is how students feel about learning new things. For students to be curious, they must feel comfortable acknowledging they don’t know something, feel like knowing that something is valuable, feel confident that they can understand it, and want to know something enough that they can persist if it’s hard to understand. All of those conditions align closely with SEL.

**SEL and curiosity: It takes two**

We might think of SEL and curiosity as a one-two punch. According to our colleague John Munro of the University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education, curiosity in the classroom is a fusion of three elements:

- **Positive emotion**—which stimulates students to respond to unfamiliar or challenging information
- **Intrinsic motivation**—which drives students to be self-directing, autonomous learners who shape and self-regulate their learning
- **Pursuit of knowledge**—which gives learning or thinking a focus or direction (Munro, 2016)

It seems, then, that the positive emotion and self-regulation skills that students get from SEL could go a long way toward preparing them to become and remain more curious learners. It makes even more sense when you consider, too, factors that tend to thwart curiosity.

For younger kids, the home environment plays a large role—for example, according to child mental health expert Bruce Perry, three ways that adults constrain or even quash children’s curiosity are: 1) **fear** (when the child’s world is chaotic or if he is afraid, he will be more likely to stick with the familiar and not explore unfamiliar things), 2) **disapproval** (e.g., if children are constantly told, “Don’t touch that,” “Don’t get dirty,” etc., their sense of discovery will be diminished) and 3) **absence** (without a caring, invested adult in their lives, children don’t feel safe discovering new things or sharing discoveries with others) (Perry, n.d.). As kids get older, we know that curiosity fades for many of them—but for many reasons. Yes, school may get more “boring,” but there’s also increased peer pressure to look smart or, more precisely, to not look like you don’t know something.

Perhaps most important, though, is how students feel about learning new things. For students to be curious, they must feel comfortable acknowledging they don’t know something, feel like knowing that something is valuable, feel confident that they can understand it, and want to know something enough that they can persist if it’s hard to understand. All of those conditions align closely with SEL.

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In the end, if you think of the most successful people you know, the relationship between SEL and curiosity is clear: You need both. Curiosity is a powerful driver for learning, exploring, questioning, critical thinking, and creative problem-solving—but only if students have the social and emotional competence to start exploring in the first place.

**References**


**Bryan Goodwin** is president and CEO of McREL International and author or co-author of several books, including *The 12 Touchstones of Good Teaching: A Checklist for Staying Focused Every Day and Balanced Leadership for Powerful Learning: Tools for Achieving Success in Your School*. You can contact him at bgoodwin@mcrel.org.
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Every problem educators face is an opportunity to learn. If you’re looking for guidance on how to better support social and emotional learning—or any other improvement initiative—McREL can help you develop and implement a plan that will get to the root of your challenges and lead to better outcomes for your students.

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800.858.6830 | info@mcrel.org