

BEST PRACTICES FOR MEASURING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING



K-12 EDUCATION



Hanover Research discusses ways that schools can measure students' social-emotional skills.

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INTRODUCTION

State and federal agencies are increasingly holding schools accountable for their role in influencing students' social and emotional (SEL) skills. These skills include a wide range of abilities that help students succeed in college and careers, such as working well with others, understanding and managing emotions, and setting and achieving goals. Many states include SEL in their educational standards, and some states have considered using SEL measures to meet the recent Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requirement that schools use a non-academic indicator of student success. A 2016 survey found that teachers favor SEL over other non-academic measures of student learning, such as student engagement and college and career readiness.

Formal assessment of SEL outcomes enables districts to measure students' SEL skills and implement targeted supports to increase those skills. Formal assessment also sends an important message to students, families, teachers, and staff—it indicates that non-academic outcomes are a priority for a school or district. However, measuring SEL is often challenging. SEL can be defined in many ways, and schools may struggle with prioritizing which skills to measure. Further, SEL is still an emerging field, and educators have yet to reach a consensus regarding the best ways to assess students' SEL skills.

To assist districts in tackling these challenges, this brief provides strategies that school and district leaders can use to 1) prioritize which skills to measure and 2) select assessment methods and instruments.

I. SEL SKILL PRIORITIZATION

When selecting SEL skills to assess, leaders should choose skills that are meaningful, measurable, and malleable.

MEANINGFUL



To be meaningful, skills in SEL programs, policies, and standards should predict important academic, career, and life outcomes.

MEASURABLE



To be measurable, SEL skills should be feasible to assess in the school setting using validated instruments.

MALLEABLE



To be malleable, SEL skills should be able to be taught and learned in the school setting; students' skill levels can change over time.

Source: McKown; Transforming Education.

I. SEL SKILL PRIORITIZATION

Examples of meaningful, measurable, and malleable SEL competencies include:



GROWTH MINDSET

The belief that academic or personal abilities can grow with effort. Students with a growth mindset see effort as necessary for success, embrace challenges, learn from criticism, and persist despite setbacks.



SELF-CONTROL AND SELF-MANAGEMENT

The ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes skills controlling one's impulses, delaying gratification, managing frustration and stress, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward goals.



SELF-EFFICACY

The belief in one's own ability to succeed in achieving goals and controlling one's life outcomes. Students with high self-efficacy are confident that they can influence their external environment as well as their own motivation and behaviors.



SOCIAL AWARENESS

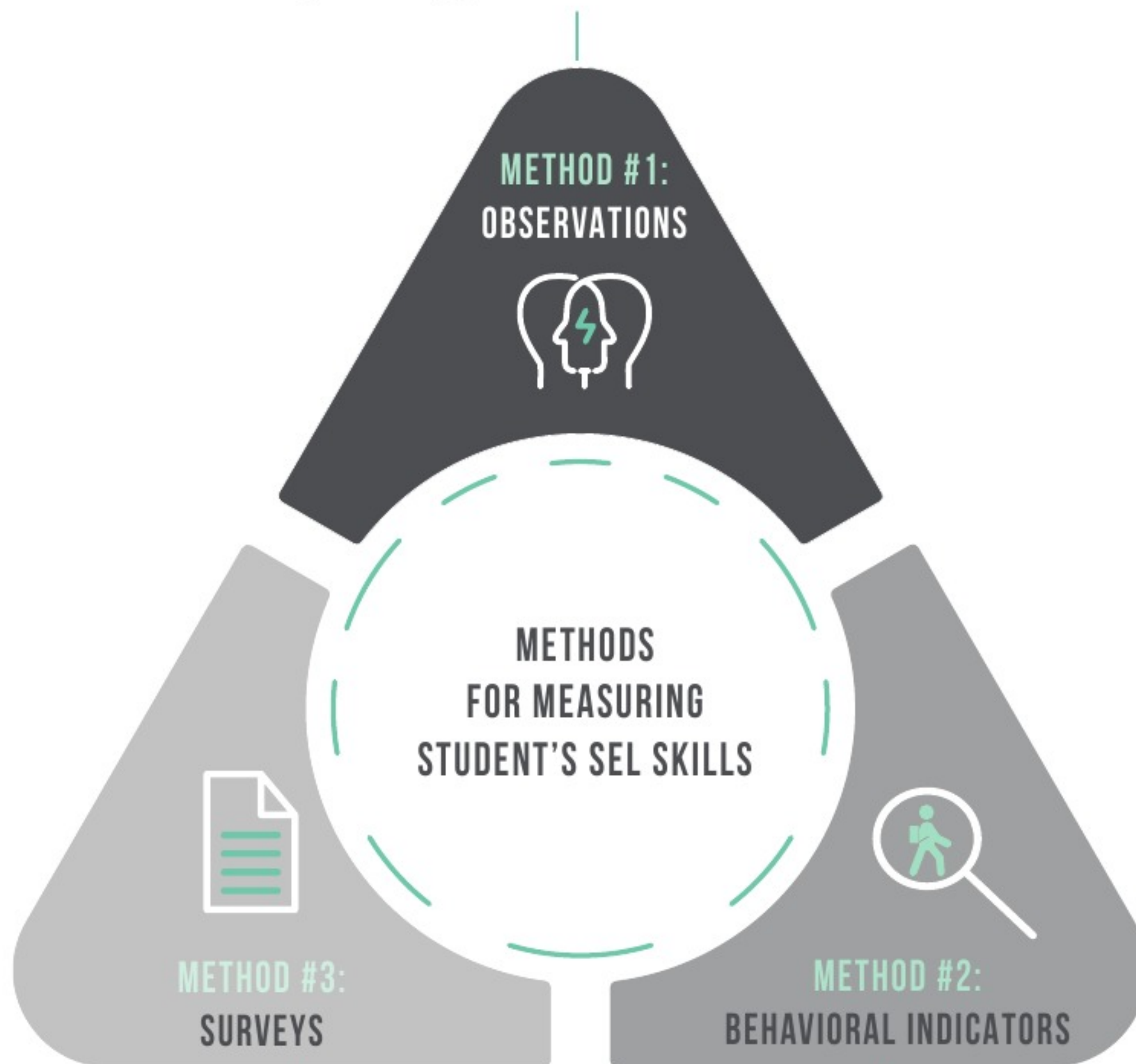
The ability to recognize emotions in others; to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures (perspective-taking); to evaluate the social consequences of individual actions; to understand and resolve interpersonal conflicts (social problem-solving); to understand social and ethical norms for behavior; and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

SEL skills included in student assessment systems should also reflect school and district priorities, such as the district's vision statement and learning standards for SEL. To ensure that districts prioritize outcomes that meet these standards, leaders can involve teachers and other staff in the prioritization process.

II. SEL SKILLS MEASUREMENT

Schools can measure students' SEL skills using multiple methods, such as **(1)** observing students' behaviors; **(2)** using behavioral indicators as proxies for SEL; and **(3)** surveying students, teachers, or families.

Teachers or administrators observe students' social behaviors, such as conflict resolution strategies or aggressive behaviors.



Schools administer student surveys, in which student self-rate their own SEL competencies, and teacher or parent surveys, in which respondents provide ratings of students' skills.

Schools track behavioral indicators such as absences, suspensions, expulsions, and dropout rates, which are often linked to SEL skills.



METHOD #1: OBSERVATIONS

Observations are the most common method for measuring students' SEL skills. Observable skills include social behaviors, such as conflict resolution or non-aggressive behavior, and self-management behaviors, such as delaying gratification. For example, a teacher can unobtrusively observe a student having a disagreement with another student about a particular topic, and can rate the student on whether he or she is using conflict resolution strategies that were taught or modeled as part of an SEL-focused lesson.



METHOD #2: BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Behavioral indicators—such as attendance rates, suspensions, expulsions, and dropout rates—can serve as proxies for SEL skills. These behavioral measures are indirect outcomes of SEL and are important indicators of school climate. Districts such as California's CORE Districts and Austin Independent School District in Texas have found that higher rates of absences and suspensions are associated with lower self-reported SEL skills and lower levels of SEL integration into the academic curriculum. Because districts already collect data on behavioral outcomes, incorporating these indicators into SEL measurement system would not create additional assessment burdens for teachers and administrators. However, administrators should keep in mind that behavioral outcomes such as suspensions and expulsions can be influenced by a broad range of factors beyond SEL skills (such as school discipline policies and teachers' disciplinary practices).



METHOD #3: SURVEYS

Schools can use SEL surveys to gather information on student ratings of their own SEL skill levels and to identify teacher and parent perceptions of students' SEL skills. School climate surveys are also a useful tool for district leaders to assess supports for SEL development. While assessments of individual students' SEL skills are useful, it is equally important to ensure district leadership has data that school and district staff can directly impact. Specifically, school and district leaders can identify strengths and weaknesses in student support services, academic programming, and professional development needs through an annual school climate survey.

OTHER METHODS

An emerging method for measuring SEL skills is the use of performance tasks. Performance tasks measure student behaviors in contrived or simulated situations that require demonstration of self-control or social awareness. Although few performance task assessments currently exist, one promising assessment is SELweb, an online assessment for Grades K-3 students. Students complete web-based tasks designed to measure social skills and self-control. To assess social awareness, for example, students are presented with photographs of different facial expressions and are asked to describe the emotion on each face.

To speed the development of performance task-based SEL measures, CASEL issued a “design challenge” in 2017 to solicit proposals for new ways to measure SEL. Winners of the challenge proposed performance tasks such as a “social detective” game that asks students to identify others’ values and perspectives, and an assessment that measures frequency of “rapid guessing” on achievement tests, which is associated with low self-regulation.

DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT: WASHOE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT— FROM ASSESSMENT TO ACTION



Washoe County School District in Reno, Nevada implemented district-wide SEL learning standards and an SEL curriculum in 2012 as part of its strategy to increase its graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020. The district uses multiple methods, including surveys, behavioral indicators, and performance tasks, to evaluate students’ SEL skills. The district:

- Incorporates SEL-related measures in its annual climate survey.
- Uses an Early Warning Indicator to identify at-risk students based on student grades, attendance, and suspensions.
- Administers the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment to Grades K-8 students.
- Administers SELweb to Grades K-3 students.

Although SEL instruction and measurement is a key focus for the district, leaders noticed that some students and teachers were resistant to completing SEL surveys. Focus groups with students revealed that they were frustrated because they had taken surveys for multiple years and had not seen changes in their schools. They wanted to know what was being done with the results, and why the surveys were worth their time.

To address this issue, the district provided training to its “SEL Lead teams” on how to debrief survey data with teachers, staff, and students. The district’s Accountability Department now works more closely with district administrators, school SEL teams, students, and families to use SEL data in the district’s planning process, and the district holds regular student data summits to discuss survey results. In a recent data summit, leaders shared the finding that students scored themselves poorly on managing and expressing emotions. Students explained that they felt that teachers did not actually teach them how to express their emotions. As a result, schools began developing plans for increasing this type of instruction in its existing SEL curriculum and improving SEL professional development provided to teachers.

Source: Aperture Education, CASEL, Education Week, Learning Policy Institute.

III. DIAGNOSTIC: CHECKLIST FOR DEVELOPING SEL ASSESSMENTS

Districts can use a variety of existing tools and survey instruments to assess students' SEL skills. **The Checklist for Developing SEL Assessments** can help district leaders make decisions regarding which instruments to use or what qualities an internally-developed SEL assessment should have. *(Circle the answer)*

ALIGNMENT WITH SEL FRAMEWORK AND GOALS

YES	NO	Do the items measured by the tool align with the district's SEL goals and the district's definition of success in SEL?
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EASE OF USE

YES	NO	Can teachers and students easily use or understand the assessment?
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YES	NO	Does the school/district have the technological infrastructure needed to use the tool?
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YES	NO	How easily can teachers and administrators interpret data from the assessment and apply insights from this data to school and classroom practices?
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PROVIDE TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR SEL PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES

YES	NO	Are we providing professional development on what is SEL, why it matters and how it connects to academic achievement?
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YES	NO	Do we incorporate SEL practices into feedback mechanisms such as classroom observations, walkthroughs, and peer observations?
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YES	NO	Do we support professional learning communities that address SEL?
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COST AND TIME

YES	NO	Is the tool free or must it be purchased from a third-party provider?
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YES	NO	Does the tool require teachers to assess students individually or as a group?
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YES	NO	How much time and resources are required to train teachers and staff on new tools and distribute tools to each school?
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YES	NO	How much time is required to administer the assessment and analyze the data?
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YES	NO	Do data need to be collected via paper-based or online tools or both?
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YES	NO	How does the assessment fit in with existing district assessments?
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FAIRNESS AND ETHICS

YES	NO	Does the assessment measure the same skills for all participants, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or gender?
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YES	NO	Are assessments accessible or adaptable for students with disabilities?
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YES	NO	Are there any risks to student or teachers if they participate in new assessments?
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Source: American Institutes for Research, Asia Society, CASEL, McKown, Transforming Education, and University of Minnesota.

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ABOUT HANOVER RESEARCH

Hanover Research provides high-quality, custom research and analytics through a cost effective model that helps clients make informed decisions, identify and seize opportunities, and heighten their effectiveness.

THE HANOVER APPROACH TO MEASURING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Hanover Research offers an integrated and customized approach to evaluating social-emotional learning. The issue of social-emotional learning and cultural responsiveness is unique to each K-12 organization, and Hanover’s team of experts will recommend a tailored approach best suited for the individual organization. Hanover’s unique year-long partnership model allows for each social-emotional learning project to build off of the previous one, producing more actionable results and more detailed insights.

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SECONDARY RESEARCH

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