

**Written Testimony of Dr. Aaliyah A. Samuel, President and CEO of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)**

**Before the Committee on Education and Labor  
United States House of Representatives  
Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee Hearing:  
*Back to School: Meeting Students' Academic, Social and Emotional Needs*  
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Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Burgess, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Dr. Aaliyah A. Samuel. I appear before you in three capacities: as the president and CEO of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL); as a former teacher and principal; and—more personally—as the mother of two young Black boys who attend public schools. In all these areas of my life, I have seen the power of social and emotional learning (SEL), and I recognize our urgent need for it now.

Across, the country, parents, educators, and children are continuing to feel the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and face considerable challenges, including:

- Stark declines in academic scores and widening racial and socioeconomic gaps
- A national crisis in mental health, particularly among children and young people
- Teacher shortages and high levels of stress for those in the classroom

Facing such challenges is not easy—for adults, and particularly for children. My own family provides a case-in-point for the importance of SEL. Like many children, my boys returned to school this fall. I have watched my own son struggle, needing support to help him cope with the upheavals we are all confronted with. As an educator, I am gravely concerned about the impact of the pandemic on students' academic achievement. As a parent, I see firsthand that productive academic learning does not occur when we ignore the social and emotional dimensions of learning. Thankfully, my son's school has the SEL opportunities he

needs to feel secure and be successful. We are already seeing the benefits of the SEL programs and practices offered in his school. Our son is happy, feels more included and comfortable in his classroom, and is enjoying school. Because of this, he can focus on learning.

I have heard these concerns from parents across the country when their children's social, emotional, and academic needs were not met. Their concerns demonstrate the importance of our work at CASEL, the nation's leading organization advancing the development of academic, social, and emotional competence for all students. Our mission is to make evidence-based SEL an integral part of education from preschool through high school and into the workforce. I also want to underscore CASEL's commitment to academic recovery, which is the utmost priority. SEL creates the conditions necessary for academic recovery, and decades of research show that it enhances students' academic performance.

### **SEL Supports our Children's Future and our Nation's Future**

CASEL's mission of promoting SEL reflects our commitment to the idea that public education is essential to our democracy. Although there is not yet federal recognition of a right to education in the U.S. Constitution, the federal government plays a vital role in ensuring equal educational opportunity, and states are obligated under their Constitutions to provide a quality education to ALL students. If we agree that education is a public good that benefits all Americans, we must strive to provide the best, most robust education to support engaged, responsible, productive citizens who are equipped for success, both for themselves and as contributors to their communities. Delivering on this promise means ensuring every child has access to rich social, emotional, and academic learning opportunities and supportive environments that fully support their strengths and needs.

This robust education is critically important for students' success, both now and after they leave school and move into adulthood. Our nation's students are graduating into a complex, often digitally based, global economy that requires many skills: reading, writing, problem-solving, relationship-building, and good decision-making. If we fail to prepare our nation's children for this future, we will leave behind an untapped pool of talent that hinders our position as a world leader and compromises our security. By integrating SEL into education, we can provide opportunities not only to develop every students' future readiness, but also to further our progress as a democratic society.

Chairman Sablan and this subcommittee have already done so much to support student success. With your work to pass the American Rescue Plan Act, school districts have access to the funding they need to reopen schools and address students' academic, social, and emotional needs, and 45 percent of school districts surveyed are prioritizing these funds to focus on SEL (AASA, 2022). The committee has also worked to strengthen and diversify the teacher workforce through the passage of the FY22 Omnibus, which included critical investments in the Teacher Quality Partnership Program and a first-time investment in the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers for Excellence, and supported the SEL in the Education, Innovation, and Research grant program and whole child strategies in the Supportive Effective Educator Development (SEED) program. These investments are critical as most teacher preparation programs (TPPs) do not have courses on how to integrate SEL into instruction (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017).

Thanks to these efforts, districts and states alike have invested in making SEL a priority for their students—including in 1,457 school districts identified in research by FutureEd (Jordan & DiMarco, 2022). Here are examples of how some states and districts are moving the work forward:

- **New Hampshire** is using ESSER funds to provide tools for educators to build student resilience, partnering with The Regulated Classroom to support students and educators in developing strategies to reduce stress, self-regulate, and refocus on academics (New Hampshire Department of Education & Houghton, 2022).
- In their approved state plan, **Michigan** identifies SEL as an integral part of supporting students in the wake of the pandemic. The state plans to provide resources and technical assistance to districts based on these types of evidenced-based interventions (Michigan Department of Education, 2021).
- **Syracuse City School District, New York**, includes supporting SEL in their funding priorities for the American Rescue Plan, including funding instructional materials, supplemental materials and textbooks that are supportive of students' social emotional needs and culturally inclusive instruction (Syracuse City School District, n.d.). They are also using funding for additional access to psychologists, social workers, and counselors.

We are grateful for this work and encourage Congress to continue pursuing bipartisan work to create the conditions that support statewide and districtwide implementation of high-quality, evidence-based SEL.

### **SEL in Action**

This committee's critical efforts at supporting SEL builds on CASEL's past work and helps ensure it will continue into the future. For the last 28 years, CASEL has worked with educators, caregivers, out-of-school time providers, researchers, program developers, policy leaders, and philanthropic organizations to establish the field of SEL, demonstrating through

research and our work with districts and states across the country that SEL is essential to creating schools that help children succeed in school and life. We envision all children and adults as self-aware, caring, responsible, engaged, and lifelong learners who work together to achieve their goals and to create a more inclusive, just, and equitable world.

Through this work, CASEL has established a foundation for the field, defining what SEL is—and what it is not. An integral part of education and human development, SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel, and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. SEL also deepens students' ability for future success by helping them develop the skills necessary for success in work and life. In their future careers—whether in business, the service industries, the trades, healthcare, public service, or some other sphere—students will need to communicate and collaborate effectively with supervisors and coworkers. They must have the skills to cultivate relationships with mentors and others who can support them in their career paths and lives. Additionally, there are personal attitudes and aptitudes that contribute to a larger feeling of “success” that SEL supports: a sense of purpose and belonging, an ability to develop and sustain relationships, mental and physical wellness, and civic engagement.

Underpinning this definition is the CASEL framework, which identifies five core SEL competencies that students need to succeed in school, life, and work: *self-awareness*, *social awareness*, *self-management*, *relationship-building*, and *responsible decision-making*. This framework also emphasizes how school-family-community partnerships have always been foundational to students' social and emotional development. The CASEL framework has

informed the development of PreK-12th grade SEL standards and competencies in more than half the states in the country, spanning rural, suburban, urban, and tribal communities representing all political parties and perspectives. These standards and competencies support schools and districts in implementing evidence-based SEL programs and practices.

You can see SEL in action in districts across the country. As the examples below demonstrate, there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to SEL implementation. In fact, SEL programs show the largest effect size when designed with a specific context or culture in mind (Wigelsworth et al., 2016). Each district and school engages closely with families and the community to make local decisions about SEL implementation. For example:

- **Chicago Public Schools (CPS)** has integrated SEL into districtwide curriculum, its ‘Healing-Centered Framework’ to address student trauma, and its multi-tiered system of support, and has experienced significant gains in graduation rates, academic outcomes, and reductions in exclusionary discipline. Suspensions decreased by 67 percent and misconduct by 32 percent. Then CEO of CPS, Janice Jackson, stated that “[T]he turnaround has been striking ... it is the most successful large-scale change the district has ever led” (Mather & Schlund, 2017).
- **Washoe County School District (WCSD)** in Nevada implemented an SEL program with a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) structure to improve school climate and student outcomes, including academic achievement. Since WCSD began implementing SEL in 2012, graduation rates have increased by 20 points (Washoe County School District, 2021).
- **Dallas Independent School District (DISD)** integrated SEL across academic instruction, family engagement, professional development, and school climate. A

survey of 60,000 students in grades 3-12 found that students reported having a more positive view than the average national student in areas such as supportive relationships and social awareness (Little & Valdespino-Gaytan, 2021). DISD has also reported that an increased focus on building positive relationships and addressing disproportionate discipline correlates with a decrease in suspension rates and an increase in attendance rates (Arundel, 2022). For example, the percentage of students repeatedly being disciplined decreased from 28 percent in fall 2019 to 13 percent in fall 2021 (Donaldson, 2022).

- **El Paso Independent School District (EPISD)** assembled a committee including families, teachers, school counselors, community members, and others to identify SEL programs and strategies that are culturally responsive, are available in Spanish, and have family partnership components. Their focus on SEL helped to reduce disciplinary referrals by 25 percent and, according to the superintendent, prepared them to handle the pandemic and other crises (Lozano, 2022).

SEL is also woven throughout out-of-school time (OST) programs where students often spend their afternoons and summers, for example, as part of Boys and Girls Clubs across the nation. Community organizations are critical partners with schools in creating supportive environments for students that integrate SEL into programming. Committed to supporting positive youth development, OST providers recognize how their work closely aligns to the development of social and emotional competencies.

As an example, the Full-Service Community Schools program leverages community programs to improve the coordination and integration of services for children and family,

including resources for SEL supports. The steady increases in appropriations for the Full-Service Community Schools program since fiscal year 2009 create powerful opportunities for a whole child education focus in school and communities.

These efforts have a positive impact: In a review of 68 studies, OST programs that focus on social and emotional skills development demonstrated significant improvements in self-perceptions, school bonding, and positive social behaviors; significant reductions in conduct problems and drug use; and significant increases in achievement test scores, grades, and school attendance (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007).

### **The Risk of Politicizing SEL**

Despite the proven track record of how SEL benefits students, political agendas are spreading misinformation and seeking to turn a widely supported, non-partisan education priority into a wedge issue. The politicization of SEL puts at risk what is best for children, what research has shown to be effective, and what the vast majority of parents want in schools. While this misinformation campaign would be deleterious at any time, the impact is particularly perilous now, given the challenges borne of the COVID pandemic and recent societal upheavals. Our nation grapples with the magnitude of the loss of learning and student well-being due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated inequity and disproportionately impacted students of color, low-income students, and students with disabilities. Consider these findings:

- Students around the world have **lost on average eight months of learning**, which could result in a \$1.6 trillion annual loss to the global economy (Bryant et al., 2022).
- Scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) show the



**largest average score decline in reading since 1990** and the **first ever score decline in math** (Nation’s Report Card, 2022).

- A 2021 study by McKinsey shows 35 percent of parents are very or extremely **concerned about their children’s mental health and social and emotional well-being**, and 80 percent of parents indicated they had some level of concern for their child’s mental and social and emotional well-being since the beginning of the pandemic (Dorn et al., July 2021).

In light of these data, we cannot let the political posturing around SEL threaten and undermine the quality education and holistic support students need heading into this school year.

Instead, it is imperative that we understand the full range of critical benefits that SEL offers. SEL supports academic learning by creating the conditions in which students learn best; it does not, as some critics contend, displace academic instruction. SEL works to encourage active engagement between schools and families; it does not seek to “replace” parents or caregivers or subvert their ability to raise their children as they see fit. And SEL is a universal good that helps to level the playing field for all children to thrive; it is not a partisan issue or a vehicle for any particular valency along the political spectrum.

In the words of the late Dr. Roger Weissberg, a giant in the field of SEL and co-founder of CASEL, “[w]hile abundant data provide a firm analytical rebuttal to those who question the need for SEL or its effectiveness, perhaps what we should always remember is that this movement is all about the individual children whose lives hang in the balance behind the data points, waiting for us to open the gates to successful learning for each and every one of them” (Weissberg et al., 2018, p. 6).

## **The Need for SEL**

As noted earlier, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the critical need for SEL. According to a recent analysis by McKinsey, the pandemic has left K–12 students, on average, five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading (Dorn et al., December 2021). It also significantly broadened the performance gaps for historically underserved communities and schools and exacerbated pre-pandemic gaps. For example, research shows that in schools where the majority of students are Black, students were a half a year behind in reading and math by the fall of 2021, compared to two months for students who attend schools that are majority white (Bryant et al., 2022).

Additionally, a recent report by the Government Accountability Office found that 1.1 million teachers nationwide reported that they had at least one student who never showed up for class in the 2020-2021 school year (2022). The U.S. Surgeon General has noted the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth (2021). For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 51 percent rise in suicide attempts among teen girls (Yard et al., 2021).

While SEL has always been essential to education, demand from education leaders has soared in recent years as they seek effective strategies for addressing mental health concerns, academic challenges, and all of our needs for connection and relationships. A recent survey of 100 district leaders revealed whole child development/SEL as their top priority for the 2022-2023 school year (Newman et al., 2022). Decades of research has demonstrated how evidence-based, universal SEL can promote academic achievement, social and emotional skills, healthy behaviors, and lifelong outcomes in students. Additionally, recent research demonstrates strong evidence that SEL can support mental wellness, including reducing short-term symptoms of

depression and anxiety (Clarke et al., 2021). Socially and emotionally supportive classrooms also correlate with long-term reductions of violent behavior (Spratt, 2004).

A landmark 2011 meta-analysis of 213 studies involving school-based, universal SEL programs including over 270,000 students in K-12 (Durlak et al., 2011) found that high-quality SEL programming leads to:

- **Improved academic performance**, reflected in an increase of 11 percentile points compared to students who did not participate in SEL. This kind of improvement in academic performance cannot be understated.
- **Decreased anxiety and behavior issues** among students.
- **Improved attitudes about self, others, and school**, which is critical as we continue to work through the ebbs and flows of the pandemic.

These findings have since been replicated in multiple meta-analyses covering hundreds of studies and coming to the same pattern of outcomes. The research is clear: SEL benefits students.

In the face of teacher shortages and widespread burnout, SEL also offers benefits for **educators**. According to a 2017 meta-analysis that included the 82 studies that showed longitudinal effects, teachers who are highly socially competent are better able to protect themselves from burnout by developing nurturing relationships with their students, serving as behavioral role models for children, and regulating their own emotions (Taylor et al., 2017). States recognize this: More than half of states have articulated SEL frameworks for organizing professional learning and classroom support that are used to guide teacher practice and adult SEL.

Additionally, research demonstrates social and emotional skills developed at an early age can have long-term impact on students' lives, including their future employment (Jones et al.,

2015). **Employers** recognize this connection. For decades, and particularly now in the wake of the pandemic, they have valued socially competent employees who have the skills that are promoted through SEL. These include the ability to communicate and solve problems effectively with their colleagues, as well as self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making (LinkedIn Talent Solutions, 2019). In other words, employers agree that essential knowledge and technical skills are important, but equally so, a range of social and emotional skills is critical in the new economy (Lim-Lange & Lim-Lange, 2019; Yoder et al., 2020).

Yet, employers report these social and emotional skills are the most difficult to find in job candidates. Each year, one million students leave high school and do not successfully transition to postsecondary education or training programs due to a lack of social competence (Reyna & Norton, 2020, p. 2). Further, a recent scan of employer surveys and job listings confirmed that the most in-demand skills, such as teamwork and adaptability, are high-level social and emotional skills. It is essential for the success of students that we help them develop these skills so that they can become the adaptable lifelong learners that employers seek (Yoder et al., 2020).

If there is a bottom line to the need for SEL revealed by the research, it is this: SEL is a wise investment in high-quality education and children's long-term success and well-being. In fact, one study demonstrates that for every dollar invested in systemic SEL, there is an \$11 return (Belfield et al., 2015). Given this return on investment, SEL implementation offers an excellent use of ARP and ESSER funding. Based on projections from the 2011 meta-analysis (Durlak et al.), if a school were to implement SEL programming to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on students, there could be numerous positive outcomes, including:

- 27 percent more students would improve their academic performance.
- 57 percent more would gain in their social and emotional skills levels.

- 24 percent more would have improved social behaviors and lower levels of distress.
- 23 percent more would have improved attitudes.
- 22 percent more would show fewer conduct problems.

As these studies indicate, the efficacy and benefits of SEL are well-researched, with evidence demonstrating that an education that promotes SEL yields positive results for students, adults, and school communities. However, this is not to suggest that the research is done—nor likely will it ever be. We know that SEL can reduce bullying and school suspensions and improve academic performance and school climate. Research can continue to increase our understanding and contribute to the field of SEL, particularly how SEL programs serve students with disabilities and students of color (Cipriano et al., 2022). This can in turn strengthen public policy and help states and school districts support the social and emotional well-being of students.

### **Public Opinion From Those Most Impacted**

The research is only part of the story. The demand for SEL has only gotten louder over the years, and especially since the onset of the pandemic. In fact, the three stakeholder groups who are most responsible for a child’s education are three of SEL’s greatest supporters. Additionally, students themselves say that they want greater focus on SEL in schools.

#### *Student Perspectives*

**Students** have shared that SEL helps foster the type of schools that motivate and support their learning. Pre-pandemic, roughly three-quarters of high school students said attending a

strong SEL school appeals to them (76 percent) and would help them personally (74 percent). A majority of both current and recent high school students said that going to a school that focuses on developing SEL skills would: help improve student/teacher and peer relationships, reduce bullying, help them learn academic material and real-world skills, prepare them for college and jobs/careers, and prepare them to give back to their communities (DePaoli et al., 2018).

In more recent surveys, students say they need more opportunities to develop social skills and greater support for their relationships and mental wellness as they cope with the impact of the pandemic. In spring of 2021, only 43 percent of high school students reported feeling a sense of belonging in their school, and nearly half said feelings of depression and anxiety stood in the way of their learning (YouthTruth, 2021). As one 11th-grade student shared:

Give students more chances to communicate with each other ... School should be a place where [students] should feel as if they can talk and communicate a lot with students/friends. This may not seem like such a big problem, but it really is, and it can really affect how one feels throughout their days, throughout school, and about themselves in general (YouthTruth, 2022).

### *Family Support*

**Parents** support and want SEL in schools. A recent study by Benenson Strategy Group found parents overwhelmingly agree that schools have a role to play in social and emotional competence and reject the notion that SEL is taking the place of some other key academic learning (Committee for Children, 2022). For example, more than 75 percent of parents say that the reason they support SEL is because they see how teaching SEL creates a positive classroom environment where children learn the skills they need to succeed—in school and their future.

Parents prioritize SEL skills as critical outcomes they want for their students, with self-esteem, communication, and decision-making skills topping the list. Multiple surveys show that parents, educators, and students all highly value social and emotional skills and support further implementation in schools (Atwell et al., 2022, p. 7).

Even before the pandemic, about 80 percent of parents and caregivers believed families and schools should work together to promote SEL and that social and emotional skills are essential for their children's futures (Learning Heroes, 2018). This data contradicts the claims of some that SEL infringes on families' rights to raise their children according to their own values—and that parents and caregivers do not want SEL.

Since then, the demand from families has only increased. Eighty-two percent of parents and caregivers now say that SEL has become even more important (McGraw Hill, 2021). Even more recently, independent surveys conducted by a wide range of organizations from the Fordham Institute to the National PTA consistently find that large majorities of parents (80 to 90 percent) agree schools should teach social and emotional skills like setting and achieving goals, navigating social situations, and empathizing with others (Tyner, 2021; National PTA & Wilson, 2022). These opinions garner widespread bipartisan support, too, with 75 percent of parents/caregivers saying schools have a role to play in teaching kids SEL skills, including 65 percent of Republicans (Committee for Children & Benenson Strategy Group, 2022). SEL competencies are supported by parents and, when properly implemented, can complement, and reinforce the learning a child is doing at home.

### *Educator Support*

Teachers, counselors, administrators, and other school staff desire a strong focus on

implementation of high-quality SEL. Surveys indicate that 84 percent of teachers said integrating SEL into the core curriculum has become even more important since the pandemic (“2021 SEL Report,” 2021). We also know that the vast majority of TPPs include the learning of SEL competencies as a focus (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017, p. 32), and 98 percent of school counselors say that they are very or somewhat interested in incorporating SEL into their school counseling programs (Bobek et al., 2021, p. 8).

It is always important to consider the voice of educators when making decisions about education policy, but this is particularly true when so many states are experiencing teacher shortages. By strengthening and supporting SEL, the federal government can demonstrate that it responds to the needs and desires of educators, potentially serving to improve the experience of teachers on the ground and help them avoid burnout—which can help increase retention rates—and aid in recruitment of new teachers.

### **A Call to Action for SEL**

Despite the evidence provided here—the benefits of SEL to both children and adults; the strong field of research on SEL practices; the widespread support from families and educators; and the historically bipartisan support for SEL at the local, state, and federal level—there has been growing opposition to SEL based on misinformation, misconceptions, and misunderstanding about SEL. This opposition has included:

- Attempts to introduce state legislation to limit or ban SEL: This year, seven state legislatures have proposed anti-SEL legislation. All of these efforts have failed thus far, because parents and educators recognize the detrimental impact of these bills.
- The organization of anti-SEL groups that have lobbied legislators and spread



misinformation about SEL.

These efforts have had a chilling effect on teachers and students as they are restricted in their ability to integrate SEL into classroom instruction, culture, and relationships as part of the effort to support learning and development. Teachers are unclear on what they can and cannot teach and whether anti-SEL legislation is being passed or not. The fact that SEL has become a controversial topic represents an enormous challenge above and beyond the stresses already loaded upon our nation's educators in the past few years. These attempts to stifle SEL impair the quality of education teachers provide in the classroom and ultimately threaten schools' and districts' efforts to support students' mental, social, and emotional well-being—needs that are only intensified in the current circumstances. All of this comes at a particularly challenging time in education, when schools and districts are struggling to recruit and retain teachers.

The need is urgent, and it is clear: Congress must rise above the misleading, divisive rhetoric and come together to continue to support students' academic, social, emotional and mental health. We must commit to doing what is right for this generation of students, who are struggling amid the COVID-19 pandemic and a youth mental health crisis. Now is the time to build up our support for students, not tear it down. Supporting SEL is the best path to a stronger, healthier future for our students.

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