

Social-Emotional Learning: K–12 Education as New Age Nanny State

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Executive Summary

“I feel like the school’s teaching what I should be teaching—values, attitudes, mindsets—and I’m teaching what the school should be teaching—math.”

– Connecticut mother of five public-school children

Fads are ubiquitous in American public education. Especially since the increased federalization and bureaucratization of the public schools, parents and educators have been bombarded with claims that this or that new method of teaching will “transform” student learning. Often, the new highly touted technique is merely a repackaging of an old—and failed—highly touted technique. But some fads can be so widely embraced, globally as well as nationally, and so turbo-charged by technology that they threaten to linger and inflict harm long after their expected expiration date.

This is true of social-emotional learning (SEL). SEL has been defined as “the process by which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” In a nutshell, SEL posits that education should focus less on academic content knowledge and more on students’ attitudes, mindsets, values, and behaviors.

This paper analyzes the history, current practice, and dangers associated with SEL. With roots in American progressive education and particularly in the movements for Outcome-Based Education and Self-Esteem, SEL is now pushed onto state and local education systems by the federal government and even international governmental entities. Other progressive-education forces, including the purveyors of widely used preschool standards, are equally enthusiastic. And SEL is interwoven into education movements such as the Common Core State Standards and Competency-Based Education.

SEL proponents present their product uncritically as the transformational tool that will propel students into greater academic achievement and personal fulfillment. But as this paper shows, and as admitted by numerous experts in SEL and related fields, the evidence for these claims is thin—and the risks to students’ privacy, health, and even their very futures are significant.

The paper analyzes the scientific research support for SEL claims and finds it much less persuasive than advertised. The paper further addresses the numerous problems in assessing SEL—problems that are acknowledged even by the experts and most dedicated proponents of the movement. It turns out there’s no reliable, objective way to measure a student’s

personality, values, and mindsets. These experts cannot even agree on a uniform definition of SEL.

The paper then explores the use of technology as a means of overcoming these problems. With the backing of the federal government, the education-technology industry is creating

sophisticated software that supposedly can determine the most sensitive personality traits of students via their interaction with digital platforms. But this software—and especially software for video gaming—can go beyond assessing traits and in fact reshape the child to fit the desired mold.

Finally, the paper discusses the fundamental philosophical and ethical objections to having the government, through the public schools, delve into this realm at all. By what right does

the government establish approved mindsets to be inculcated in children? By what right does it deputize minimally trained personnel to measure children's adoption of those mindsets and memorialize their "progress" in an eternal, loosely secured data system? By what right does it employ such amateur

it do any of this without notifying or obtaining consent from the children's parents?

The SEL movement implicates all of these questions. SEL goes well beyond encouraging students do their best and believe in themselves; instead, it constructs a government- and corporate-controlled edifice to measure, assess, and draw predictions from students' most fundamental private and personal characteristics. This paper explains what's really going on and why parents—and all citizens—should be concerned.

We recommend that the taxpayer-funded expansion of social emotional learning research, assessment, standards, and programs be stopped. These efforts will never be helpful to children, families, and society in the long run. Instead, we support:

1. Policies promoting two-parent family formation instead of continued subsidy of family destruction—thousands of years of experience, a myriad of social-science research, and common sense show that this is the best way both to promote social-emotional health and to maintain liberty;
2. Focusing on genuine academic achievement via standards, assessments, and curriculum that are locally derived and controlled instead of the faddish pop psychology and diluted academic content imposed by federal, state, foundation, and corporate interests.

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