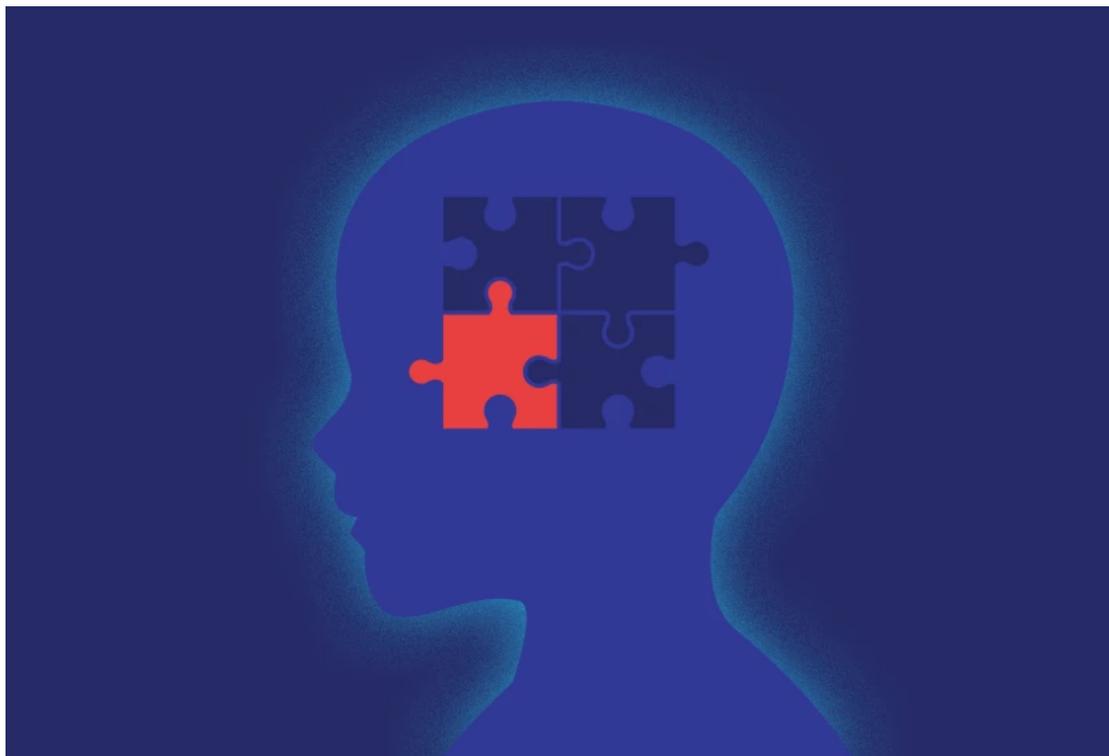


STUDENT WELL-BEING

Parents Like Social-Emotional Learning, But Not the Name



By [Arianna Prothero](#) — August 20, 2021 ⌚ 5 min read



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Parents are strongly in favor of schools teaching the skills promoted in social-emotional learning. Things like setting goals, controlling emotions, and being informed citizens. However, if you ask parents what they think of “social-emotional learning,” they may react negatively.

That’s because while the idea of social-emotional learning is popular with parents, the name isn’t, according to a [nationally representative survey of parents](#) by polling firm YouGov and commissioned by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

This disconnect—and other findings in the survey—have implications for the future of SEL, says the Fordham report based on the polling data.

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Social-emotional learning is having a bit of a moment. Its reach has expanded significantly over the past decade. The number of states that have adopted standards or guidelines for SEL has grown from one in 2011 to 18 today.

Interest in building students' social and emotional skills—especially around things like coping, responsible decisionmaking, and relationship-building—has only intensified with the pandemic. Educators and policymakers alike see SEL as a crucial means to help students recover from the trauma and disrupted schooling caused by the pandemic. Even some federal COVID-19 relief aid requires states to dedicate a certain amount of money toward responding to students' social, emotional, and mental health needs.

But SEL is also facing some headwinds. Some people in conservative education circles believe that it's imparting a more liberal set of ideals and that its benefits are oversold. More recently, SEL is being brought up in the political sphere and even linked to the fights over critical race theory, the academic concept that racism is embedded in legal systems and policies.

Idaho education leaders were rebuffed by some Republican state lawmakers in the House Education Committee last year over a [social-emotional proposal](#) with one lawmaker comparing it to the dystopian novel *Brave New World*. Others walked out of the hearing.

More recently, the [Virginia Department of Education](#) faced pushback from some Republicans over draft state standards for SEL, with critics calling the proposal indoctrination and critical race theory by another name.

All that aside, though, large majorities of parents, regardless of background or political party, agreed in the YouGov poll: They are strongly in favor of schools teaching students skills such as how to set goals, approach challenges with optimism, believe in themselves and their abilities, and control their emotions.

When asked in the survey to rank in order of importance academic and social-emotional skills, a mix of the two came up in the top. Along with math, career and technical education, reading, science, and computer science, these SEL-related skills were also ranked among the 10 most important by parents: reasoning and problem-solving, responsibility for actions, communication and interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and self-motivation.

Among parents, 89 percent of Democrats and 75 percent of Republicans agreed that in order for students to reach

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But about that name, social-emotional learning.

It was ranked second to last out of 12 different terms related to SEL, coming only above soft skills. The favorite term, by a long shot, was life skills. A distant second was social-emotional and academic learning.

Republican parents in particular disliked the term social-emotional learning.

What's in a name? A lot, at least when it comes to education policy

This disconnect over substance and terminology is not unique to social-emotional learning. Previous polling on the [Common Core State Standards](#), [charter schools](#), and [private school vouchers](#) has shown that people's attitudes toward a word is often different than their feelings toward the thing the word represents.

"If the 'Common Core wars' taught us anything, it's that mishandling communication about education reforms can derail good intentions," Fordham's Amber Northern and Michael Petrilli wrote in the foreward.

While there were differences in attitudes toward social-emotional learning based on race, ethnicity, and religion, the most significant were produced by political affiliation and educational attainment.

Parents with high levels of education tended to rate various SEL skills with more priority than parents with less education.

Democratic parents were more OK with the term social-emotional learning than Republican parents. They were also more supportive of schools setting aside time and resources for SEL.

Republicans were more concerned than Democrats that social-emotional learning in schools might conflict with their values—although that was not flagged as an issue among majorities from either party. A quarter of Republicans indicated that was a concern of theirs, along with 18 percent of Democrats.

Of note: Black parents reported more social-emotional education happening in their children's schools than white or Hispanic parents.

Regardless of party or background, parents see families more so than schools as playing the most important role in teaching children social and emotional skills.

What's next for the term social-emotional learning?

All of the above boils down to four takeaways for educators and policymakers looking to build support for social-emotional learning, according to the Fordham report.

One, educators and policymakers advocating for SEL would do well to use less jargon when talking about social-emotional learning. Parents understand and are supportive of teaching sensitivity to different cultures. They are not as understanding and supportive of SEL.

As the report's author, Adam Tyner wrote: "If advocates can emphasize the practical uses of SEL, regardless of the name attached to it, they may help defuse concerns that it constitutes some sort of indoctrination program—or, as one of the surveyed parents survey put it, 'just a fad of a woke culture.'"

Two, parents respond better to the idea of schools teaching very specific SEL-related skills such as goal-setting, rather than more abstract pursuits.

Three, with large shares of parents expressing concern that SEL takes time and resources away from traditional academic subjects, it's important to focus on indirect ways of teaching and developing students' social and emotional skills through school policy, reading assignments, and good modeling. (Note that SEL advocates and researchers

Four, many parents see the home as where students will learn and develop most of their social and emotional skills. Therefore, family and community members, as well as coaches, peers, and youth leaders, should be leveraged in building children’s social and emotional skills.



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