

# Starting Strong:

How Social and Emotional Learning  
Can Improve Teacher Education



Teachers and school leaders agree that social-emotional learning (SEL) is essential for academic learning, yet teacher training programs aren't preparing educators to develop, model, and teach social-emotional skills and practices. This gap shortchanges future generations' preparedness to compete in the global economy.

## Demand for SEL Is Strong Because the Need Is Real

### For Students

The consensus among school leaders (98 percent),<sup>1</sup> teachers (93 percent),<sup>2</sup> and parents (81 percent)<sup>3</sup> is that **SEL is just as important as academic learning** and should receive more time and attention in public schools.

Furthermore, **youth perceive that social-emotional skills are important for their learning.** Students and young adults who attend schools with strong SEL practices perceive their school environments as more positive and academically enriching, thus making them feel more prepared for life after school than students who attend schools without a strong SEL presence.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this consensus, research shows that **only 22 percent of educators feel they are "very prepared" to teach SEL** in the classroom, and 51 percent report that the level of SEL professional development offered at their school is not sufficient.<sup>5</sup>

## What Is SEL?

Social-emotional learning is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to understand and manage emotions, set and accomplish positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

### For Teachers

SEL training can reduce teacher stress and improve teacher retention. High levels of daily stress are reported by 46 percent of teachers—and teacher stress is a large contributing factor in teacher turnover, costing \$7.3 billion annually.<sup>6</sup> **Building teachers' social-emotional competencies can help them manage and reduce their stress**, which can in turn reduce teacher burnout and turnover.<sup>7</sup> Teacher preparation programs have begun to incorporate SEL for teachers into their coursework. However, such programs can do more to assist future teachers in applying social-emotional skills in a classroom context.<sup>8</sup>

# Solving SEL Preparation and Training Gaps

Despite recent advances, teacher training programs are not yet sufficiently preparing teachers to understand and model the social-emotional competencies students will need to adapt to twenty-first century life. To better prioritize SEL within traditional and alternative teacher preparation programs, policymakers should:

- Include SEL in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act
- Authorize federal funding for a pilot program that would incentivize state consortiums of higher education and community partners to redesign teacher preparation programs with SEL-embedded core content
- Require existing teacher preparation programs to include focused coursework and training on cognitive and social-emotional development
- Develop statewide standards for educator SEL preparation so educators can manage the stresses of their profession better<sup>9</sup> and more easily cultivate SEL competencies in their students<sup>10</sup>
- Support micro-credentialing that incorporates SEL content, to give educators opportunities to demonstrate their social-emotional competencies

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## Why Is SEL Training Important for Students and Educators?

- SEL **promotes important school outcomes**, including improved academic achievement for students.<sup>11</sup>
- SEL **increases positive life outcomes**, including improved graduation rates and employment prospects for students.<sup>12</sup>
- SEL **reduces toxic teacher stress and improves teacher retention rates**.<sup>13</sup>
- SEL **improves school climate and school safety**.<sup>14</sup>