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The Impact of Social-Emotional Learning Instruction on Intermediate Grade Levels

by

Leah Frances Davis

A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Education

School of Education

The Impact of Social-Emotional Learning Instruction on Intermediate Grade Levels

by

Leah Frances Davis

This dissertation has been approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Education

at Lindenwood University by the School of Education

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Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

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Abstract

The study, *The Impact of Social-emotional Learning on Intermediate Grade Levels*, examined the perceived impact of social-emotional learning on the five core CASEL competencies. This included: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The study was a mixed methods design using qualitative research methods of surveys and interviews to analyze the teachers' perceptions on the impact of social-emotional learning. Quantitative analysis reviewed attendance and discipline data to determine the impact of social-emotional learning on these factors. Teachers' perceptions, coupled with and compared to the quantitative component of change in discipline infractions and daily attendance, offer great insight into the gaps in beliefs and reality. The study explored attitudes and behavior and their connection to misconceptions, highlighting the thoughts and feelings analyzed in relation to numerical data.

The findings of the study concluded that teachers perceive an impact on the five core CASEL competencies after social-emotional learning instruction was implemented. This was indicated in survey responses and in interviews with teachers. The quantitative analysis did not find a significant difference in attendance or discipline overall. However, there was a significant difference noted in discipline in the month of October, and several discipline trends were noted. Continued research for longer durations should be considered for future research. Additionally, primary grades and secondary grades should be included in future studies in order to have a larger scope and understanding of the impact of social-emotional learning instruction.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

The Impact of Social-emotional Learning on Intermediate Grade Levels was conducted to examine the perceived impact of social-emotional learning on the five core competencies within the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) framework. The CASEL competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Additionally, the perceived impact of social-emotional instruction on student behavior and attendance was studied.

Teachers completed a survey at the beginning of the 2025-2026 school year, where they indicated if all, most, few, or none of their students were proficient in a variety of social-emotional learning competencies. As part of the site's implementation plan and social-emotional learning focus for the year, teachers then taught the adopted PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) SEL curriculum once a week. During this time, teachers participated in ongoing professional development on social-emotional learning. Teachers took the survey again at the beginning of December. The change in their responses was analyzed to understand the impact teachers perceived as a result of the implementation of social-emotional learning instruction. In December, teachers were also interviewed regarding their perceptions, to add an additional layer of qualitative research.

Secondary, quantitative data on student discipline and attendance were also reviewed and analyzed. Student discipline and attendance data from September 2024 through December 2024 were compiled and compared to discipline and attendance data

from September 2025 through December 2025. Structuring the study in the format described allowed the researcher to compare discipline and attendance data from approximately 400 students before social-emotional learning instruction was implemented and after social-emotional learning instruction was implemented.

Rationale of the Study

Information regarding social-emotional learning and its importance has been discussed in the field of education over the past several years. It was noted in the study by Elias and Haynes, that “socially and emotionally competent children tend to be better integrated in the school and classroom context, and can focus on the academic tasks provided to them, compared with children who struggle socially and emotionally” (as cited in Oberle et al., 2016, p. 281). Gathering information and collecting data on the impact of instruction in SEL supports the need for further funding and resources to continue to expand social-emotional learning in public school education.

The literature review in Chapter Two elaborates on connected topics to social-emotional learning instruction. There are growing concerns about students’ mental health. Oftentimes, social-emotional learning is utilized to help support students’ mental health. Social-emotional learning can be interwoven and connected with various academic subjects. Information regarding integration, implementation, and curriculum to support learning and roadblocks are all available.

Social emotional learning concepts first arose in the early 1960s (*Our History*, 2025, para. 6). Dr Comer was one of the first contributors to social emotional learning. However later in the 1980s and 1990s, Dr. Shriver and Dr. Weissberg became involved in the research (*Our History* 2025, para. 7). The actual term of social-emotional learning

was later coined in the mid-1990s from the CASEL foundation (as cited in Dalrymple & Phillips, 2024, Page 338). Social-emotional learning has been a growing topic of discussion in education since that time. While there are some criticisms and controversy around the social-emotional instruction movement, it continues to grow in popularity. There are several curriculum options available to support teachers in leading lessons. The CASEL organization has also been active in providing resources and support.

Social-emotional learning is defined as

the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (What is social and emotional learning?, Para. 1)

The CASEL organization has been a key contributor to topics of social-emotional learning, including the overall framework and competencies. According to the CASEL framework, there are five core competencies of social-emotional learning including: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Many states then have social-emotional learning standards that correspond to the CASEL framework. The site of the research study is located in the state of Illinois and follows the social-emotional learning standards for their state.

There has been ongoing research around social-emotional learning instruction. Zins states, "SEL competencies facilitate effective communication with peers and teachers, help in setting and achieving academic goals, increase motivation to learn, and increase commitment to school, all of which are important aspects of thriving in the

school context” (as cited in Oberle et al., 2016, p. 280). Zin is one of many scholars that have highlighted the benefits of social-emotional learning in their research. More regarding this is shared in the literature review in Chapter Two.

Research further connects that social-emotional learning instruction may offer solutions and strategies to help students manage mental health issues. Dumbuya (2025) states, “SEL equips students with the tools to manage stress, cope with adversity, and develop a positive sense of self. These are essential for preventing mental health challenges and fostering long term wellbeing” (p. 3). There are many mental health issues for students. Anxiety disorders, behavior disorders, mood disorders, and substance abuse are some of the more common mental health disorders affecting youth (Rao et al., 2021). Incorporating social-emotional instruction may be a key factor in assisting many students manage mental health struggles.

The benefits of social-emotional programming are evident through research. Additional information is available regarding implementation of social-emotional programs. Some researchers suggest that social-emotional learning practices be interwoven into the schools’ MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports) framework. This allows the school to streamline programming. There are also multiple curriculums available for educators to utilize to teach social-emotional learning. Although, some research suggests that instruction should be integrated into other academic subject matters in addition to being taught in isolation.

Of course, with any programming, there are always roadblocks and hurdles to implementation. A common obstacle schools must overcome is the lack of financial and

personnel resources to aid in implementation. Integrating social-emotional learning into educational practices can also be a challenge.

While information exists regarding various facets of social-emotional learning, there is still a need for continued research. Teachers' perceptions are a critical component to understand when considering the continued adoption and growth of educational programming. Teachers' perceptions, coupled with and compared to the quantitative component of change in discipline infractions and daily attendance, offer great insight into the gaps between beliefs and reality. The study explored attitudes and behavior and their connection to misconceptions, highlighting the thoughts and feelings analyzed in relation to numerical data.

Problem Statement

It is known through literature and research on social-emotional learning that it is a beneficial practice and instructional topic in education. This is further discussed in the literature review in Chapter Two. Social-emotional learning instruction impacts and benefits classroom culture, creating a positive environment for students to learn and grow. The strategies provided through social-emotional learning instruction help students navigate situations with peers, aide them in being more self-aware and reflective, and promote responsible decision making. Social-emotional learning has also had a positive impact on academic performance. The Positive Behavior Interventions and Support framework has documentation to support its effectiveness and impact on attendance and behaviors. Additional information is provided and discussed in Chapter Two.

However, there is a lack of studies focusing on the teachers' perceptions of the impact of social-emotional learning instruction on students. Limited information is

available on the direct impact of social-emotional learning instruction on behavior and attendance from a numerical standpoint. The study looked to examine teachers' perceptions of the impact of social-emotional learning. Qualitative research methods and quantitative research methods were used to provide an in-depth analysis into teachers' perceptions, which provided insight on teachers' perceptions on the impact of social-emotional learning through qualitative research methods and compared it to the quantitative behavioral and attendance data collected before and after social-emotional learning instruction. The conclusions of this study sought to answer questions revolving around perceptions and beliefs and their connection to results and statistical data.

Purpose of Study

This study examined the impact of social-emotional learning instruction at the intermediate grade levels. Primary data were collected through surveys and interviews of staff members regarding their perception of social-emotional learning on the five-core social-emotional competencies defined by CASEL, as well as their perception of the impact of social-emotional learning on student behavior and attendance. The purpose of the study determined if teachers perceived an impact in these areas. If teachers perceived a positive impact, they were more likely to continue the practices in their classrooms. It also justified continued support and resources in the area of social-emotional development in schools.

Secondary data on discipline and attendance were collected from the time weekly social-emotional learning instruction began. This data were compared to the students' previous year's discipline and attendance data to determine if social-emotional learning instruction had an impact on these areas

As with any organization or entity, decisions are continuously being made about resources and budgets. If it is determined that social-emotional learning instruction had a positive impact, additional support may be given to continue to advance this initiative. Continued support could mean further funding and updated curriculum and resources. It may also mean further and more in-depth professional development for educators in the area of social-emotional instruction. Training not only benefits the educator in supporting and educating students, but also provides them with strategies that can be applied to their own social-emotional well-being. .

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no increase in student self-awareness and self-management after explicit social-emotional learning than before instruction.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no increase in student relationship skills and social awareness after explicit social-emotional learning than before instruction.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no increase in student responsible decision-making after explicit social-emotional learning.

Null Hypothesis 4: The rate of total discipline infractions per student enrollment will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Null Hypothesis 5: The rate of major discipline infractions per student enrollment will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Null Hypothesis 6: The rate of minor discipline infractions per student enrollment will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Null Hypothesis 7: The rate of absences will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Research Question 1: How do teachers perceive the impact of social-emotional learning instruction on the five core social-emotional competencies defined by CASEL?

Research Question 2: How do teachers perceive the impact of explicit social-emotional learning instruction on student outcomes related to discipline?

Research Question 3: How do teachers perceive the impact of explicit social-emotional learning instruction on student outcomes related to attendance?

The study was carefully designed to examine the independent variable of the implementation of social-emotional instruction. Prior to the 2025-2026 school year, social-emotional learning instruction was not a focus of the school. Some educators may have taught a few components of it on their own, but it was not a school-wide initiative or focus. For the 2025-2026 school year, teachers received ongoing professional development to support social-emotional learning. The school's master schedule was reconfigured to allow teachers time to explicitly teach social-emotional learning. Teachers were also provided with a curriculum to use to instruct lessons for social-emotional learning.

Independent variable: The independent variable is what is being changed and manipulated through the research. The independent variable is the implementation of social-emotional instruction.

The dependent variable that was measured throughout the study was the teachers' perceptions. Surveys were conducted at the beginning of the school year to gain insight on teachers' perceptions of students' competencies prior to the beginning of social-emotional instruction. Post surveys were conducted to examine the change in their

perceptions. Interviews were also completed to further investigate and provide insight into the teachers' perceptions.

Dependent variable: The dependent variable is what is measured through the research. The perceptions of the teachers on the impact of social-emotional learning are the dependent variable.

Study Limitations

The study took place in the Midwest region. Fifth and sixth grade educators at the public school were surveyed and interviewed to determine their perceptions on the impact of social-emotional learning instruction on the five core competencies defined in CASEL framework, the impact of student discipline, and the impact on student attendance. Limitations to the study are outlined below.

The survey and interview questions were created by the researcher. They are connected to the Illinois state social-emotional standards and the CASEL framework. Due to the connection and the design of the state's social-emotional standards, the first null hypothesis addressed two of the CASEL competencies: self-awareness and self-management. The second null hypothesis addressed two additional competencies: relationship skills and social awareness. The questions for the survey were reviewed by the dissertation committee. However, the questions were not previously studied or tested prior to their use in this research.

Additional limitations existed as the classroom teachers were the primary staff implementing and teaching the social-emotional curriculum to students. Investigating their perceptions on the impacts of social-emotional learning could be skewed due to their involvement in the implementation and instruction of students on this material.

Inconsistent reporting of classroom discipline infractions also served as a limitation to the study. Each teacher had a different threshold for behaviors in their classroom, and what may seem minor and be unreported from one classroom may be considered a behavior concern in another classroom.

In order to attempt to control this, teachers were provided a flow chart from the administration and PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) teacher teams at the beginning of the year. The chart explained and outlined interventions and methods for addressing misbehavior. It highlighted using reflective and restorative conversations to address behaviors and utilizing these types of conversations as learning opportunities for students. It also elaborated on what behaviors should be managed in the classroom and what behaviors should be sent to administrators to handle.

An additional limitation for consideration is that not all staff who took the pre-survey at the beginning of the year also took the post-survey. To further this, some staff who answered the post survey did not answer the pre survey. In order to control for this, participants provided their initials when taking the survey. Initials from the pre- and post-surveys were matched to see responses from consistent individuals.

Definition of Terms

CASEL - CASEL is an organization that supports social-emotional learning and provides detailed information and resources regarding social-emotional learning.

At the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, we envision all children and adults as self-aware, caring, responsible, engaged, and lifelong learners who work together to achieve their goals and create a more inclusive, just world. How? Through a commitment to SEL (About Casel 2024, para. 1)

CICO – For the purpose of this study, CICO is defined as an abbreviation for checking out. This is an intervention often used within the MTSS framework and PBIS.

CDC - The abbreviation of CDC may be used in discussion throughout the chapters.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) collaborates to create the expertise, information, and tools that people and communities need to protect their health through health promotion, prevention of disease, injury and disability, and preparedness for new health threats. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): Usa.gov, para. 1)

MB – For the purpose of this study, MB is the abbreviation used in discussion of interventions. MB stands for mindful breathing and is discussed as an intervention within Chapter Two.

MTSS –

Multi-tiered systems of supports, known as MTSS, are a framework meant to support students in achieving their best possible academic and social-emotional outcomes. MTSS models include tiers of instructional and other kinds of support, so that all students can make progress by getting the kind of education that meets their needs. (Pendharkar, 2024, para. 6)

PATHs - “The PATHS® (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies)

Curriculum is a comprehensive social-emotional learning program designed to reduce aggression and behavior problems and to increase emotional and social competencies in preschool and elementary school-aged children. This curriculum is intended to be used by educators and counselors in the classroom to simultaneously target prevention of future

emotional and behavioral problems (all children), as well as intervention (e.g., students with poor classroom behavior and performance). In addition to detailed scripted lessons and materials, generalization and academic integration strategies are incorporated in the program to facilitate the use of skills throughout the day (e.g., in the "teachable moments") and to promote the integration of social, emotional, and academic learning and development. Although primarily designed for use in the school setting (whole classroom or smaller groups), the program can be adapted for other locations. Information and activities are included for use with parents. An after-care version is also available (The PATHS® Curriculum, para. 1).

PBIS - PBIS is an abbreviation that may be used. PBIS stands for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is an evidence-based, tiered framework for supporting students' behavioral, academic, social, emotional, and mental health. When implemented with fidelity, PBIS improves social-emotional competence, academic success, and school climate. It also improves teachers' health and well-being. It is a way to create positive, predictable, equitable, and safe learning environments where everyone thrives. (What is PBIS?, para. 1)

SEL – SEL stands for social-emotional learning. Social-emotional learning is defined as

the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others,

establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (What is social and emotional learning?, para. 1)

Skyward- For the purpose of this study, Skyward is defined as the student information system that the research site uses. It is where attendance is documented.

SWIS – For the purpose of this study, SWIS is defined as a data tracking platform that the research site used to track major and minor behavior infractions.

Summary

The study was conducted to examine and review the impact of social-emotional learning. Social-emotional learning and instruction is a topic of interest in schools and can be used to help address the growing mental health concerns students are facing. By investigating the perceptions and impact of social-emotional learning, educators can better understand if the continued use and implementation of these practices is beneficial. In the next chapter, a full review of the connected literature is shared to provide and build further background knowledge and elaborate on current findings connected to this study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The purpose of the study, *The Impact of Social-emotional Learning*, investigated teacher perceptions on the effect of social-emotional learning. The study began in August of 2025. Teachers completed surveys to gain an understanding of students' perceived social-emotional competencies. Following, teachers implemented weekly social-emotional learning lessons through the PATHs curriculum. Teachers were provided with regular professional development around social-emotional learning and encouraged to integrate the principles into their classroom environments daily. Teachers were surveyed again in December 2025 to provide insight into the change in the students' perceived competencies. Further information was gathered through interviews with teachers in December 2025.

Both primary and secondary data were reviewed in this study. Primary data included the results of the teacher surveys and interviews. Secondary data, of a quantitative nature, was also reviewed. This included student attendance and discipline data from September 2024 through December 2024 and from September 2025 through December 2025. This data were reviewed to evaluate the change in attendance and discipline in alignment with the teachers' change in perceptions.

Chapter Two offers an in-depth look at the literature and topics associated with this study. Items such as mental health and the history and overview of social-emotional learning are reviewed. Further information regarding interconnected approaches and alignment with PBIS, curriculum options, implementation of SEL practices, and roadblocks to implementation are also discussed.

Mental Health Concerns with Adolescence

Mental health concerns have been on the rise for adolescent children. According to the World Health Organization,

Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It has intrinsic and instrumental value and is integral to our well-being (*Mental Health*, 2026, para. 1).

Understanding the full definition of mental health is impactful when reviewing current trends in the area of mental health. Twenty to twenty-five percent of youth in the United States are affected by a mental health disorder (Rao et al., 2021). When considering that classrooms have approximately 25 students assigned to one room, as many as five students in the class may be affected by some type of mental health disorder. Anxiety disorders, behavior disorders, mood disorders, and substance abuse are some of the more common mental health disorders affecting youth (Rao et al., 2021). As noted in the Children's Commissioner (2023), the "report on children's mental health indicates that one in five children are unhappy with their mental health, and for girls this rate is even higher" (as cited in Muller, 2023, para. 1). Evidence of the rate of mental health concerns is a significant reason for concern and consideration on how this impacts classrooms and learning is significant.

The CDC, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, is a national public health agency in the United States. In June of 2025, the CDC released updated data on youth mental health. They report that anxiety, depression, and behavior disorders are the most common mental health disorders for youth. (*Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health*, para. 4). The data shows that

11% of children ages 3-17 had current, diagnosed anxiety (9% of males and 12% of females), 8% of children ages 3-17 had current, diagnosed behavior disorders (10% of males and 5% of females), 4% of children ages 3-17 had current, diagnosed depression (3% of males and 6% of females). (*Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health*, para. 5)

The data and findings on specific age ranges and genders with mental health diagnoses further support the need for concern and further investigation on how students can be supported through these challenges. Additional research and statistics echo the data highlighted by the CDC.

Adolescent Mental and Behavioral Health, 2023 states:

Between 2016 and 2023, the prevalence of diagnosed mental or behavioral health conditions among adolescents increased 35 percent (from 15.0% to 20.3%). The prevalence of diagnosed anxiety increased 61 percent (from 10.0% to 16.1%) and depression increased 45 percent (from 5.8% to 8.4%); the prevalence of diagnosed behavior/conduct problems was stable. (Sappenfield et al., 2024 para. 3).

In the study, *The Youth Mental Health Crisis: Analysis and Solutions*, the authors reviewed approximately 90 youth mental health studies from across the world. These included studies from North America, Europe, Australia, and others. Trends according to type of mental health problem suggest rising rates of anxiety (15/18 studies), depression (26/37 studies), emotional or internalizing problems (20/27 studies) somatic symptoms (8/9) studies, psychological distress (9/14 studies), low mental wellbeing (7/9 studies), suicidal behaviors/thoughts (3/3 studies) Psychosis (1/2 studies), ED (1/1 studies), and Schizophrenia and mood disorders (1/1 studies). (McGorry et al., 2025 Page 4)

In 2023, the National Survey of Children's Health conducted a survey regarding school and social indicators of students' health. Data were collected for approximately 55,000 children aged 0 to 17. They found the following regarding discipline and attendance: "Adolescents with a current diagnosis were 4 times as likely to have parents/caregivers report 2 or more contacts from their school in the past 12 months about problems compared to those with no current diagnosis" (Sappenfield et al., 2024, para. 12) and "adolescents with a current diagnosis were 3 times as likely to be disengaged from school, compared to those with no current diagnosis" (Sappenfield et al., 2024, para. 11). Findings show that mental health concerns are impacting students at school.

As explained in the study by Whitney and Peterson, the rise in incidents of students with mental health disorders is alarming. But, to further this situation, roughly half of the children did not receive treatment or support from a professional (as cited in Rao et al., 2021). “Among adolescents with a current diagnosis who needed treatment or counseling, 61.0% had difficulty getting needed treatment” (Sappenfield et al., 2024, para. 9). The increase in mental health issues is becoming more prevalent and noted in classrooms, leaving teachers worried about students and searching for solutions. As stated in Place2Be, “Ninety-five percent of education professionals reported in a recent poll that they had witnessed increasing levels of anxiety among their students” (as cited in Muller, 2023, para. 1).

In August of 2024, the National Education Association published an article discussing the rise in behaviors in the classroom. The article stated, “an NEA survey found that disruptive and even violent behavior became so rampant during the 2022–2023 school year that many educators cited student behavior as a top concern - second only to low pay” (Long, para. 1). As stated in The New Teacher Project, “A recent survey of high-performing teachers (i.e., teachers who had recently received or been nominated for a formal award) showed that 40% of respondents ranked students with behavioral challenges among the top three barriers to effective teaching (as cited in Marquez et al., 2016, Page 89). This theme is echoed in the halls of many schools today. One must reflect and wonder if the rise in mental health concerns and many students in need of treatment and unable to obtain it is connected to some of the behavioral occurrences that are seen in schools.

The article described students "throw furniture, overturn desks, shout insults, threaten violence, and curse out teachers, support staff, and classmates! Behavior that was once rare or unthinkable is becoming commonplace" (Long, para. 1). Disruptive behaviors are described as follows:

According to a recent report by the Pew Research Center, about 1 in 5 teachers surveyed said major problems include students getting up and walking around when they're not supposed to and being disrespectful. A majority of teachers (68%) also said they've experienced verbal abuse from a student - such as being yelled at or threatened. Many (21%) said this happens at least a few times a month. (Long, para. 4)

These types of behaviors are detrimental to the learning environment. The *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders* stated the following in one of their scholarly publications, " Disruptive and hyperactive behaviors were found here as most common problem behaviors similar to all previous studies of problem behaviors observed in general education classrooms, teacher perceptions of mental health concerns, and most frequent reasons for ODRs" (Harrison et al., 2012, p. 61). Teachers and educators need support, strategies, and resources to manage and mitigate behaviors that are disrupting learning in the classroom.

With the rising trend in behavior, educators are left to explore ways to support students as they work through mental health battles and continue to grow and develop academically, socially, and emotionally. "Educators agree that managing behavior also means using trauma-informed practices and multitiered systems of support across the school setting" (Long, para. 1). The authors of the publication *Embedding Social-emotional Learning from the Bottom Up in Multi-Tiered Services and Supports Frameworks* stated, "with the impacts of trauma and other mental health concerns, it is critical that SEL be infused early and often as foundational curriculum to best support students' learning and development" (Guest et al., 2024, p. 2748). Teachers and educators need support, strategies, and resources to manage and mitigate behaviors that are disrupting learning in the classroom. Research indicates that mental health is a concern for students. Social-emotional learning instruction is one path to address concerns and work toward a solution for supporting students in need.

History of Social-emotional Learning

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Thank

Social-emotional learning has been an evolving concept and framework in schools. The beginnings of Social-emotional Learning date to the early 1960s with Dr. James Comer as he studied the “whole child” (*Our History*, 2025, para. 6). He began a program known as the Comer School Development Program (Fresno Pacific University, 2022, para. 12).

The program focused on two schools with predominantly Black students in New Haven. Both schools ranked among the worst in the city for academic achievement and attendance. A team that included the principal, a mental health worker, parents and teachers began changing the school’s academic and social programs and procedures. By the 1980s, students at both schools outperformed national academic standards, and behavioral problems and truancy declined (Fresno Pacific University, 2022, para. 13).

Dr. Comer is one of the earliest contributors to concepts and ideas surrounding social-emotional learning. However, additional scholars have further contributed to social-emotional learning, shaping it into what is recognized today.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, “Timothy Shriver and Dr. Roger P. Weissberg, began the New Haven Social Development program that pioneered SEL strategies across K-12 classrooms” (*Our History*, 2025, para. 7). As indicated by CASEL,

While most scholars and institutions acknowledge that the roots of SEL reach further back in time (Elias et al., 2014), the term social-emotional learning was coined in a 1994 meeting of academic researchers, child psychologists, and educators who subsequently launched the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning. (as cited in Dalrymple & Phillips, 2024, p.338)

In addition to the term, a report was released during this time “that defined the goals of SEL, which included programs that foster resilience, help students create a clear and positive identity and support belief in the future. SEL programs since then continue to evolve while promoting social, emotional, cognitive and behavioral competence” (Fresno Pacific University, 2022, para. 15). Social-emotional learning has evolved over the years and will likely continue to evolve based on further research and findings on best practices and methods to support students.

In further reviewing the history of SEL, some researchers stress the need to understand the foundation of SEL principles prior to the organization of CASEL, as they fear its history has implications for today’s society. In the publication, *The Complicated Rise of Social-emotional Learning in the United States*, authors argue “SEL emerged from a succession of political and social battles from the 1960s to the 1990s over the role education could play in correcting perceived flaws within society - particularly within low-income and racially marginalized groups” (Dalrymple & Phillips, 2024, p. 339). They further elaborate that “contemporary SEL is deeply rooted in historical issues related to race and structural inequity” (Dalrymple & Phillips, 2024, p. 340). This is an important piece as Cineas and King explain, “states have had public disputes regarding SEL, from school board meetings to the introduction of legislative bills that aim to restrict or remove SEL programs or standards” (as cited in Dalrymple & Phillips, 2024 p.351). While there are supporters of social-emotional learning and the benefits it provides to students, it has not always been widely accepted. Its history is one of controversy and debate.

In Alfonseca's publication, they explain, "Efforts to dismantle SEL have been most publicized in Florida, where the DeSantis administration, in line with its "War on Woke," rejected numerous school textbooks for including SEL standards and content" (Dalrymple & Phillips, 2024 p.351). However, this is not the only issue facing promoters of social-emotional learning. The Democrats' Appropriation Committee stated, "A more nationally existential threat is an educational funding bill introduced in 2023 by House Republicans that proposes to strip \$87 million in SEL grants as part of a 28 percent cut in federal education spending." (Dalrymple & Phillips, 2024 p.351). Under the previous Biden presidential administration, funding for SEL programming was more accepted. However, the change in administration has brought funding cuts to education, including SEL initiatives.

Despite the criticism and controversy, social-emotional learning continues to grow in popularity. Multiple curriculum options have become available over the years to ensure quality instruction in the area of social-emotional learning. CASEL, as a key organization in social-emotional learning, provides program guides and supports on their website to support districts and school leaders in the process of selecting curriculum to engage students in social-emotional learning practices. Their guide, which was published in 2022, "features nine new additions, bringing the total number of included SEL programs to 86" (Lewis, 2022, para. 3). For districts and schools looking to implement a social-emotional learning curriculum, there are options to ensure it is a great fit for the culture and needs of the student population.

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Overview of Social-emotional Learning

As stated above, CASEL, which stands for the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, was established in 1994. As defined by CASEL, the organization “is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to make SEL integral to educational practices from preschool through high school” (as cited in Dalrymple & Phillips, 2024 p,338). CASEL has developed five areas of social-emotional competences. These have become the foundation of social-emotional learning. Social-emotional learning standards have been created to guide teaching SEL skills. Curriculums have been developed, and several organizations have been founded that support the implementation of social-emotional learning in schools (*What is the Casel Framework? 2023*).

The CASEL foundation, a key organization and leader in social-emotional learning, defines social-emotional learning as:

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 and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (*What is the Casel Framework? 2023, para. 4*)

The CASEL framework for SEL is built on five core competencies: responsible decision making, relationship skills, social awareness, self-awareness, and self-management. The competencies are often depicted in a wheel, indicating the balance and importance of each of them. However, they each have a distinct role and focus within the larger social-emotional learning structure.

Many state boards of education have adopted social-emotional learning standards for educational institutions within the state to follow. The research site is located in the state of Illinois. The Illinois State Board of Education explains, “Drafting of the 10 SEL standards, along with goals, age-appropriate benchmarks, and performance descriptors, was a collaborative effort between ISBE and the Illinois Children’s Mental Health Partnership with technical support from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning” (*School Wellness Social and Emotional Learning*, para. 3). The state standards utilized are accessible on the state’s website. In reviewing the various goals and learning standards, they closely align and support the CASEL framework. As the study sought to understand the teachers’ perceptions on the impact of social-emotional learning, teachers completed a pre- and post-survey that reviewed their students’ progress toward meeting these standards.

The CASEL competency of relationship skills is one that is often intensely focused on at the beginning of the school year, as many educators prioritize getting to know their students and building relationships with them and their families. Relationship skills are defined as:

the abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.

This includes the capacities to communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, work collaboratively to problem solve and negotiate conflict constructively, navigate settings with differing social and cultural demands and opportunities, provide leadership, and seek or offer help when needed. (*What is the Casel Framework? - Relationship Skills*, 2023, para. 1)

Educators have a variety of ways that they approach building relationship skills within the classroom. The Office of the State Superintendent of Education states, “In order to build relationships, educators must take an intentional approach to ensure all students and families feel heard and seen in their classroom” (*Relationship-Building Strategies for the Classroom*, para. 1). The Office of the State Superintendent of Education has a published document that elaborates on various methods of teaching relationship skills. They have published a document that highlights multiple methods relationship skills can be taught. In a quick internet search or a visit with a colleague, educators will often find that they have many practices in place to support this competency. The social awareness competency is closely linked to the relationship skills competency. Social awareness is defined as “the abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts. (*What is the Casel Framework? - Social Awareness*, 2023, para. 1).

This concept can be more abstract for classroom instruction. It is often modeled in classrooms through interactions of the adults or discussed in scenarios that may arise. While it may be more difficult to teach explicitly that social skills it is equally important in ensuring that students build “capacities to feel compassion for others, understand broader historical and social norms for behavior in different settings, and recognize family, school, and community resources and supports” (*What is the Casel Framework? - Social Awareness, 2023, para. 1*).

The two competencies of relationship skills and social awareness present themselves in the state of Illinois social-emotional learning standards in Goal 2. Goal 2 is “use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships” (*Illinois social and emotional learning standards Page 4*). There are 4 learning standards that follow to support the overall goal with indicators for grade levels to support each standard. The table below highlights this for the late elementary and middle school age range.

Table # 1

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CASEL Competencies: Relationship Skills and Social Awareness		
IL SEL Standards Goal 2: “Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships”.		
Learning Standard A: “Recognize the feelings and perspective of others.”	Late Elementary: “Identify verbal, physical, and situational cues that	Middle: “Predict others’ feelings and perspectives in a

	indicate how others feel”	variety of situations”
	“Describe the expressed feelings and perspectives of others”	“Analyze how one’s behavior may affect others”
Learning Standard B: “Recognize individual and group similarities and differences.”	“Identify differences among and contributions of various social and cultural groups”	“Explain how individual, social, and cultural differences may increase vulnerability to bullying and identify ways to address it”
	“Demonstrate how to work effectively with those who are different from oneself”	“Analyze the effects of taking action to oppose bullying based on individual and group differences”

Learning Standard C: “Use communication and social skills to interact effectively with others”	“Describe approaches for making and keeping friends”	“Analyze ways to establish positive relationships”
Learning Standard D: “Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways”	“Analyze ways to work effectively in a group”	“Demonstrate cooperation and teamwork to promote group effectiveness”
	“Describe causes and consequences of conflicts”	“Evaluate strategies for preventing and resolving interpersonal problems”
	“Apply constructive approaches in resolving conflicts”	“Define unhealthy peer pressure and evaluate strategies for resisting it”

(Illinois social and emotional learning standards, pp. 4-7)

Moving clockwise around the CASEL wheel, self-awareness is the next competency. Self-awareness is “the abilities to understand one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts” (*What is the Casel Framework? - Self-awareness 2023*, para. 1). With this competency, mindfulness and yoga have become a strategy often used. Researchers from the National Center for Health Statistics, the National Institute of Health, and the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health studied the rise of yoga, meditation, and chiropractic care. They found,

yoga is the most popular, but meditation is identified as the fastest-growing trend, seeing a more than threefold leap in users. In 2012, 4.1% reported using meditation, and in 2017, that increased to 14.2%” (T, 2024 para. 4).

Self-awareness is important to be able to “recognize one’s strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose. (*What is the Casel Framework? - Self-awareness 2023*, para. 1)

Adjacent to the self-awareness competency is the self-management competency. This is defined as “the abilities to manage one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations” (*What is the Casel Framework? - Self Management 2023*, para. 1). Self-management in the classroom setting is key to success. Having strong self-management allows students to “delay gratification, manage stress, and feel motivation and agency to accomplish personal and collective goals” (*What is the Casel Framework? - Self Management 2023*, para. 1), which can be a key factor in academic success.

The two competencies of self-awareness and self-management present themselves in the state of Illinois' social-emotional learning standards in Goal 1. Goal 1 is “develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success” (*Illinois social and emotional learning standards*, p. 1). There are three learning standards that follow to support the overall goal, with indicators for grade levels to support each standard. The table below highlights this for the late elementary and middle school age range.

Table # 2

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CASEL Competencies: Self-Awareness and Self-Management

IL SEL Standards Goal 1: “ Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success”

Learning Standard A: “Identify and manage one’s emotions and behavior”	Late Elementary: “Describe a range of emotions and the situations that cause them” “Describe and demonstrate ways to express emotions in a socially acceptable manner”	Middle: “Analyze factors that create stress or motivate successful performance” “Apply strategies to manage stress and to motivate successful performance”
Learning Standard B: “Recognize personal qualities and external supports.”	“Describe personal skills and interests	“Analyze how personal qualities

	that one wants to develop”	influence choices and successes”
	“Explain how family members, peers, school personnel, and community members can support school success and responsible behavior”	“Analyze how making use of school and community supports and opportunities can contribute to school and life success”
Learning Standard C: “Demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals”	“Describe the steps in setting and working toward goal achievement”	“Set a short-term goal and make a plan for achieving it”
	“Monitor progress on achieving a short-term goal”	“Analyze why one achieved or did not achieve a goal”

(Illinois social and emotional learning standards, pp. 1-3)

The final piece of the CASEL wheel is responsible decision making. This includes, “The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations (*What is the Casel Framework? - Responsible Decision Making 2023*, para. 1). Key factors to this competency are “demonstrating curiosity and open-mindedness, learning how to make a reasoned judgment after analyzing information, data, and facts, identifying solutions for personal and social problems” (*What is the Casel Framework? - Responsible Decision Making 2023*, para. 1), as well as, “anticipating and evaluating the consequences of one’s actions” (*What is the Casel Framework? - Responsible Decision Making 2023*, para. 1).

The competencies of responsible decision making presents itself in the state of Illinois social-emotional learning standards in goal 3. Goal 3 is “demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts” (*Illinois social and emotional learning standards* Page 8). There are three learning standards that follow to support the overall goal with indicators for grade levels to support each standard. The table below highlights this for the late elementary and middle school age range.

Table # 3

CASEL Competency: Responsible Decision Making

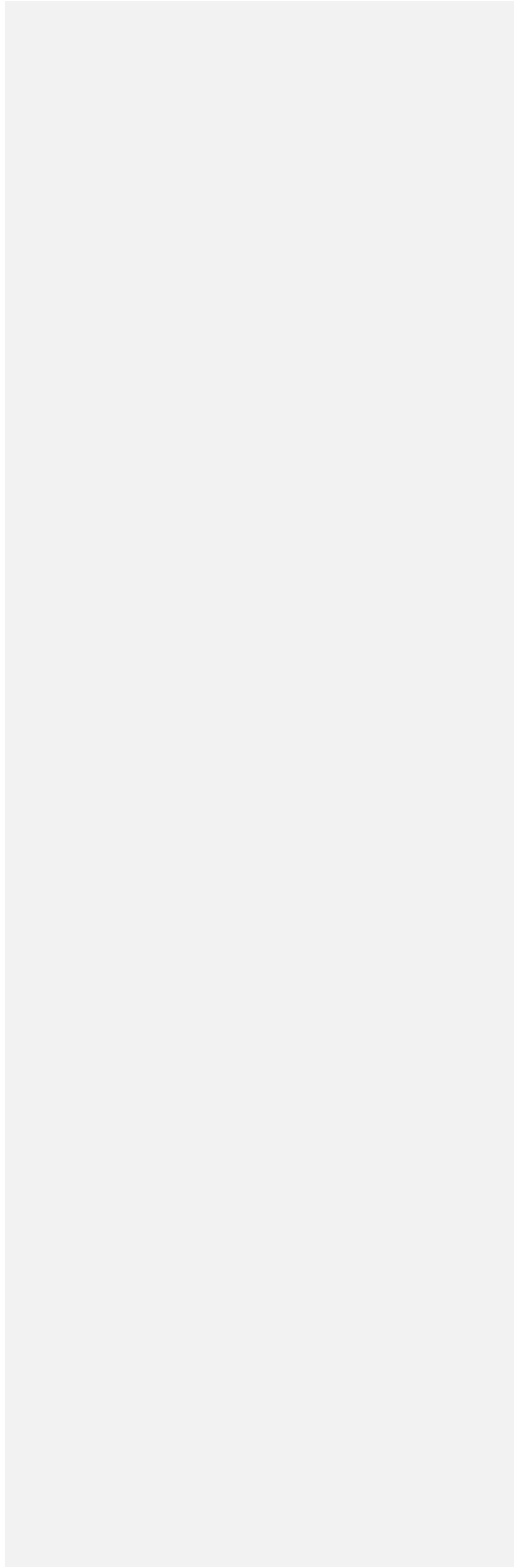
IL SEL Standards Goal 3: “Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts”

Late Elementary: Middle:

Learning Standard A: “Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions”	“Demonstrate the ability to respect the rights of self and others”	“Evaluate how honesty, respect, fairness, and compassion enable one to take the needs of others into account when making decisions”
Learning Standard B: “Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations”	“Identify and apply the steps of systematic decision making”	“Analyze how decision-making skills improve study habits and academic performance”
Learning Standard C: “Contribute to the well-being of one’s school and community”	“Identify and perform roles that contribute to the school community”	“Evaluate one’s participation in efforts to address an identified school need.
	“Identify and perform roles that contribute to one’s local community”	“Evaluate one’s participation in efforts to address an identified need in

one's local
community”

(Illinois social and emotional learning standards Page 8-10)



The CASEL competencies are intertwined and support one another to teach “students of all ages to better comprehend their emotions, to feel those emotions fully, and demonstrate empathy for others” (National University, 2025, para. 1). Depicted in the wheel around the five competencies are the settings in which students learn. These include classrooms, schools, families and caregivers, and communities (*What is the Casel Framework? - Social-emotional Learning 2023*). “Students, families, schools, and communities are all part of broader systems that shape learning, development, and experiences” (*What is the Casel Framework? - Social-emotional Learning 2023*, para. 6). Additional information and best practices for implementation across classrooms and schools is shared in later sections of this chapter.

States across the country have adopted standards to support and further social-emotional learning instruction. The CASEL organization elaborates on the standards and supports provided to schools and organizations.

Competencies and standards across grades or grade bands, with developmental benchmarks or indicators, provide an organizing framework for SEL that includes clear, concise, statements that are strongly grounded in research. Many state and school district leaders define their SEL learning goals by using or adapting CASEL’s SEL framework (“the CASEL wheel”) or choosing another SEL framework. (*Frameworks, competencies, standards, and guidelines 2023*, para. 1)

Multiple states, having adopted standards around social-emotional learning and having learning goals to enhance the initiative, further supports the acceptance of social-emotional practices as a practice to aid students.

As shown in the charts above, the Illinois standards and expectations at each grade level increase in rigor, just as academic standards would increase in rigor as students progress through the grades towards graduation. The goals of the SEL standards remain consistent at all grade levels, but each indicator increases as students progress from early elementary, late elementary, middle, early high school and late high school. Each goal in the standards includes a description of its importance and how it supports students' social-emotional development. There is ongoing research being conducted on the benefits of social-emotional learning. Zins states, "SEL competencies facilitate effective communication with peers and teachers, help in setting and achieving academic goals, increase motivation to learn, and increase commitment to school, all of which are important aspects of thriving in the school context" (as cited in Oberle et al., 2016, p. 280). It has also been noted by Elias and Haynes that "socially and emotionally competent children tend to be better integrated in the school and classroom context, and can focus on the academic tasks provided to them, compared with children who struggle socially and emotionally" (as cited in Oberle et al., 2016, p. 280). Social-emotional instruction in schools is a key component to student success. Durlak states, "research indicating that high-quality SEL programs can improve students' academic, mental health, and behavioral outcomes, as well as classroom climate and teacher practices" (as cited in Bailey et al., 2019, p. 53). Multiple researchers and scholars have indicated through their studies that social-emotional learning benefits students.

In February of 2011, the study titled, *The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions*, was published by five scholars from the University of Illinois Chicago and Loyola University Chicago. The study presented their “findings from a meta-analysis of 213 school-based, universal social and emotional learning (SEL) programs involving 270,034 kindergarten through high school students” (Durlak, Elias, Farrel, & Zalaznick, 2011, p. 405). Through their research, they discovered “compared to controls, students demonstrated enhanced SEL skills, attitudes, and positive social behaviors following intervention, and also demonstrated fewer conduct problems and had lower levels of emotional distress” (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 405). Improvements in academic achievement were also reported. The study stated there was an “11-percentile-point gain in achievement” (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 405). Durlak’s study is one that has been cited and referenced by many other scholars, showing the importance of these findings.

To further support Durlak’s findings, a mixed method study “was conducted in 12 schools serving approximately 3,500 children aged 4-11 in the four communities of Lurgan, Brownlow, Aghagallon, and Bleary” (Sheard et al., 2012, p. 264). The study was a multi-year-long study evaluating the PATHs social-emotional program. The publication by Sheard aligns with the findings from Durlak’s publication, further substantiating the positive impact of social-emotional learning.

This study, published by the *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches*, is significant, due to its alignment with the research site. The research site implemented the PATHS social-emotional learning curriculum after the initial teacher survey. A similar structure was in place where teachers were required to teach one lesson a week. While encouraged to include these concepts in their everyday academic instruction, there was no set requirement.

In 2021, a Turkish research study was released titled, *What Do We Know About Social and Emotional Learning? A Review and Bibliometric Analysis of International and National Studies*. In this analysis, over 300 studies around the world were investigated. It was found that “considerable amounts of experimental research studies have been carried out by the researchers across the world. A growing number of research studies reveal that SEL programs have provided short and long-term improvements in students’ behavior and academic achievement” (Ağırkan & ERGENE, 2021, p. 292).

An additional study was conducted reviewing the Second Step SEL program.

Similar to the study discussed prior, this study reviewed data over multiple years.

The study conducted by Low had a similar conclusion. Although students improved on several measures of social-emotional competence, most gains declined during the summer. If our hypothesis for this pattern of results (above) was correct, it implies that students may require more instruction, review, and reinforcement of skills through the tails of the school year and during the summer, perhaps through enhanced home components. (Low et al., 2018, p. 34).

Even with the decline from the summer months, it was found that “65% to 75% of students improved their social skills” (Low et al., 2018, p. 35). While there can still be setbacks with social-emotional learning, research has proven its effectiveness.

As the research from the above sections indicates, there is a rise in rates of mental health disorders. While social-emotional learning cannot negate that, it can offer solutions and practices to support students’ mental health. “SEL equips students with the tools to manage stress, cope with adversity, and develop a positive sense of self. These are essential for preventing mental health challenges and fostering long term wellbeing” (Dumbuya, 2025, p. 3). Social-emotional learning offers students the support needed to overcome the challenges and obstacles they are facing. “Policy makers, educators, and the public can contribute to healthy development of children by supporting the incorporation of evidence-based SEL programming into standard educational practice” (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 405). All parties must work together to move this initiative forward.

Social-emotional Learning in an MTSS Framework

The research indicates that SEL is a beneficial practice and shows improved conduct, lower levels of emotional distress, and higher academic achievement.

However, determining where the programming fits within the structure of the school and other initiatives can be challenging. [Gottfredson and Gottfredson](#) stated,

“Conventional wisdom can lead school leaders to believe that the effects of implementing multiple evidence-based programs will be additive; however, poorly coordinated and overlapping programs can lead to diminished effects for any one program” (Guest et al., 2024, p. 2747). As stated by Fixsen, Blasé, Naoom, and Wallace, “At the same time, adopting a program-for-every-problem approach (e.g., bully prevention program, substance use prevention program, suicide prevention program, child maltreatment, violence prevention) to universal prevention is untenable because it causes system overload and minimizes sustainability” (as cited in Cook et al., 2015 Page 168). There are several theories on the best way of implementing and structuring social-emotional learning to have the most impact.

With multiple viewpoints, schools are left to decide what is the best and most beneficial way to implement social-emotional learning. The article written by Guest elaborates on some of the common supports and programs.

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Some of the most common support systems and programs used in schools include positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), trauma-informed multi-tiered systems of support (TI-MTSS), and interconnected systems framework (ISF). In addition to the multi-tiered systems of support, social and emotional learning (SEL) training and interventions are a key focus for schools and districts as they search for ways to support their students' needs (Guest et al., 2024, p. 2747).

Integrating social-emotional learning into programming or structures that already exist in the district or school allows for a more streamlined process. This helps staff and students so they are not balancing yet another program and allows for a more connected feel for district and school initiatives.

The research site, as well as many districts and schools, had a strong PBIS framework. Knowing the widely accepted adoption and use of this framework in schools, it is important to further investigate the connection and integration of PBIS and social-emotional learning. “Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is an evidence-based practice that promotes positive academic and behavioral outcomes for all students and is intended to support the needs of all students across three tiers of support” (Zagona et al., 2024, p. 1). PBIS is a common MTSS framework in the field of education.

While PBIS has grown in popularity it is not a new program in education. The framework was founded almost 25 years ago. The Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) was initially funded in 1998. In October of 2023 a new five-year funding cycle was launched. By securing this round of funding, the Center buildt on the momentum of the last five years to support more than 25,000 schools across all 50 states to continue to sustain and scale up their PBIS implementation efforts (Center on PBIS: About, para. 1).

Several authors have noted the PBIS framework, including Goodman-Scott. He states “PBIS is commonly implemented across the United States, in all 50 states . . . and has been recommended by the United States Department of Education (2014) as a best-practice” (Goodman-Scott et al., 2017, p. 98). PBIS has been gaining popularity among schools. “When implemented with fidelity, PBIS improves social-emotional competence, academic success, and school climate” (*What is PBIS?*, para. 1). PBIS has proved to be a successful framework for education. It is an ideal platform to continue to build and integrate social-emotional learning principles into the school setting.

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As stated above, PBIS is a tiered framework. The National Education Association explains Tier 1 as the following: “Universal supports are provided to all students across all settings, including rules and expectations posters in classrooms and hallways, clear instructions for teachers and staff on how to handle behavioral problems, and positive reinforcement for good behavior” (Arway, n.d., *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports*, para. 3). Franzmann et al. (2024) stated, “Tier 2 can be seen as an extension of Tier 1 supports, where students continue to receive support available to all students while also receiving additional supports geared toward their presenting problem” (p. 174). Tier 3 of the PBIS framework focuses on an even smaller group of students. The third tier is described in the following manner:

The third, or tertiary, tier is designed to provide the most intensive support to match each student’s individual needs, when students have received Tier 2 and 3 supports with fidelity, but continue to demonstrate a high level of behavioral problems. (Gage et al., 2020, p. 134)

The tiered MTSS framework allows students to receive the support they each need and to address challenges they face.

In April of 2018, PBIS released an article written by leaders of multiple PBIS networks, staff from the University of Oregon, and the University of South Florida. The article focused on connecting and teaching social-emotional learning within the larger PBIS framework. It stated, “The implementation and instruction systems of PBIS are an ideal service delivery model for embedding social-emotional competencies into the school social curriculum” (*Teaching Social-emotional Competencies within a PBIS Framework*, 2018, p. 6).

Studies have indicated that integrating social-emotional learning and PBIS together has a positive outcome. When this is done, it allows schools to allow for a more cohesive and aligned approach for students. The publication, *PurposeFull People SEL and Character Education Program: A Cluster Randomized Trial in Schools Implementing Tier 1 PBIS with Fidelity*, explored integrating social-emotional learning through the PurposeFull People SEL program with Character education and PBIS. This was done at the tier 1 level. They “corroborated with previous studies (e.g., Cook et al., 2015) to support that SEL and Tier 1 PBIS work synergistically to promote better outcomes for students than either one alone.” (Zhang et al., 2023, p. 1000).

To further this, *Integrated Behavioral Supports: Combining PBIS and SEL at Tier 2* examined the SEL strategy of mindful breathing integrated within Tier 2 of PBIS. Their research indicated, “the current findings suggest that CICO and CICO +MB may be effective classroom strategies for intervening on student internalizing and externalizing problems” (Franzmann et al., 2024, p. 187). The authors further concluded, “Our operationalization of this approach in the present study, CICO + MB, is just one of many possible options toward this end, and our findings provide only preliminary data toward guiding practice on this front” (Franzmann et al., 2024, p. 187).

An additional study, *An integrated approach to universal prevention: Independent and Combined Effects of PBIS and SEL on Youths' Mental Health*, which looked at PBIS in conjunction with the social-emotional program Strong Kids curriculum, The researcher concluded, "Our findings speak to the power of implementing a more comprehensive structure of universal supports by integrating PBIS and SEL interventions together using a blended approach by combining these two interventions both theoretically and practically speaking" (Cook et al., 2015, pp. 178-179).

In September of 2023, PBIS released an article highlighting the framework's positive effect on student behaviors. "Many studies in elementary schools show that PBIS implementation reduced overall rates of discipline referrals" (Santiago-Rosario et al., p. 4) and "overall suspension rates (both in and out of school suspensions) and the number of school days missed due to suspension decrease after PBIS implementation" (Santiago-Rosario et al. p. 4). These findings support that the PBIS framework may be the multitiered systems of support tool that educators are seeking.

Another common concern in education today is student absenteeism. The September 2023 publication showed mixed findings among elementary, middle school and high school in regard to attendance, tardies, and truancy. However, it ultimately came to the conclusion that, "PBIS improved student attendance rates or reduced students' tardiness, unexcused absences, and truancy rates." (Santiago-Rosario et al., p. 7).

The finding of the integration of SEL and PBIS and the impact on behaviors, discipline and attendance is significant to this study as it directly relates to the structure of the research site. The research site worked to connect social-emotional learning curriculum to their existing PBIS framework. Connecting SEL to PBIS was done by utilizing the districts PATHs social-emotional learning curriculum as a Tier 1 intervention. Throughout the study, teachers continued to receive ongoing professional development and were encouraged to implement social-emotional structures into their everyday practices.

Social-emotional Learning Programing Implementation

Information regarding the implementation of social-emotional learning is becoming more readily available. The CASEL organization places importance on implementation of social-emotional learning in classrooms, schools, and the larger community. “A systemic approach ensures that SEL is woven into all students’ educational experiences. More than a single lesson or activity, SEL is integrated across key settings where students live and learn: classrooms, schools, homes, and communities” (*Systemic Implementation*, 2023, para. 1).

There are multiple approaches to implementation in classrooms. When looking at social-emotional instruction in a classroom setting, “Many traditional SEL programs consist of scripted and sequenced curricula that are designed to be used in a weekly 30-minute block, often led by a school counselor or designated SEL facilitator” (Bailey et al., 2019, p. 54). As stated above, the CASEL organization recognizes over seven dozen different curriculum options. Yet, there is also a movement for “an approach to SEL that is developmental, flexible, and responsive to local needs - focused on strategies for teachers to implement as appropriate, rather than a sequenced curriculum for them to follow” (Bailey et al., 2019, p. 54).

Recent research argues that social-emotional learning should be explored and instructed in two facets that support one another and work together.

As research and policy advance, the practice of SEL must also advance.

Traditional approaches to SEL have focused on scripted, lesson-based curricula, and while there is strong evidence of the efficacy of traditional approaches, many schools, OST, and youth development programs do not have the time or resources to implement these programs as designed. To complement existing SEL curricula, we argue that new approaches to SEL are needed. These approaches should be organized around the developmental model of SEL, focus on flexible and evidence-based strategies, and be responsive and adaptable to student needs. Such an approach may increase initial uptake and sustainability over time, thereby maximizing SEL influence on children’s learning and developmental outcomes. (Bailey et al., 2019, pp. 57-58)

Explicit SEL instruction is needed and is a key aspect of social-emotional learning. However, the principles of SEL also need to be integrated into the everyday interactions with and in between students and present in the overall culture of the school building.

A two facet approach to integrating SEL is echoed in other research as well including in *Implementing Social-emotional Learning in the Elementary Classroom*.

Prior research provides recommendations of important pieces to allow students to get the most of the instruction. First, social-emotional learning was implemented throughout the day and taught regularly by classroom teachers (Bailey et al., Barnett). This took on multiple forms, including being integrated into another curriculum (e.g. literacy or math). On the other hand, some programs required separate times of the day devoted to SEL, such as morning and closing circle times (Berman; Stearns). These lessons focused on the direct, explicit instruction of social-emotional skills (Kaspar & Massey, 2022, pp. 643-644).

One aspect of instruction should be through explicit instruction of social-emotional skills through a designated curriculum at a set time of instruction. The other aspect or means of instruction should be through regular integration into classroom academics. One of the key components to social-emotional learning in the classroom is the culture and connection among students and school staff. The publication, *Implementing Social-Emotional Learning in the Elementary Classroom*, discusses the classroom environment regarding social-emotional learning. Durlak et al. (2011), stated, “three themes emerged from the literature that were described as necessary components for SEL to be most successful. These all impacted the learning environment: positive teacher-student relationships, diversity and acceptance, and student voice” (as cited in Kaspar & Massey, 2022, p. 643). In the District Administration publication from September of 2020, listed as the number one recommendation to enhance social-emotional learning was “build connections with students through morning meetings and other interactions” (Zalaznick, 2020, p. 22). Having social-emotional learning as a foundational piece in school and classroom culture is key.

Once the environment is established, SEL practices can be implemented through daily routines and academic instruction. With thoughtful planning and preparation an academic math lesson can easily blend in SEL. For example, having students work in partner in various academic subjects supports SEL. “When students work together on a variety of tasks, there are many social-emotional skills coming into play (McKown et al.,). “Students are required to use their communication skills, teamwork, and conversational skills to work best with their partner” (Kaspar & Massey, 2022, p. 648).

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However, as stated above, there is also a place and a need for explicit SEL instruction. With a quick internet search, there are many options for websites and teacher created lessons that can be done in the classroom. CASEL also has many resources regarding curriculum options. “CASEL has reviewed SEL programs for children in grades pre-K–12 and found that there are many programs that meet their criteria of being well-designed, delivering high quality training, and evidence-based” (LaBelle, 2019, p. 2).

They state,

[T]o ensure all students have high-quality, consistent opportunities to learn and practice social and emotional skills, district and school leaders need to identify evidence-based programs that have been shown effective using rigorous scientific standards. SEL programs are not one-size-fits-all, which is why *CASEL’s Guide to SEL Programs* allows users to search programs in terms of local priorities, compare programs, and determine opportunities for professional learning and implementation support for school and district staff.” (Lewis, 2022, para. 5).

The CASEL program guide is an easy-to-use tool that allows educators to search for programs that meet the needs of their students. The landing page walks users through a three-step process to selecting a program. It begins with determining the goal, The second step is the connection piece between the school's goal and the CASEL metrics. (*CASEL Program guide*, 2025). "To be considered for inclusion in the CASEL Guide to Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs, a program or approach must have an evaluation that meets each of the four evidence criteria. These criteria involve (a) the type of research design used, (b) the setting in which the program was implemented, (c) the statistical findings, and (d) the types of outcomes demonstrated in the evaluation." (*CASEL Program Guide - Connect your criteria*, 2024, para. 1) The final step in their three-step process is to review and compare programs. When looking through programs, there are numerous filter options that allow users to search by grade, different approaches, and school and student characteristics (*CASEL Program Guide - View all Programs*).

While social-emotional learning is important in the classroom, it is also important in the school as a whole. Students spend time during the school day in hallways, cafeterias, and playgrounds. Incorporating SEL into these settings is also important and valuable. The CASEL organizations states, "By coordinating and building upon SEL practices and programs, schools can create an environment that infuses SEL into every part of students' educational experience and promotes positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes for all students" (What is the Casel Framework? – *Schools*, 2023, para. 2).

PBIS was overviewed earlier in this chapter as a school-wide framework. The PBIS organization states, “Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) provides an ideal framework for promoting social-emotional competencies to improve outcomes for the whole child” (Center on PBIS: para. 1). Connecting social-emotional learning to the PBIS framework creates an environment where SEL is integrated into the classroom and school culture. It becomes intertwined in the overall structure of the school and does not act as a standalone program.

Integration of social-emotional learning should continue, and also be present with families and caregivers. The CASEL organization states,

Research suggests that evidence-based SEL programs are more effective when they extend into the home, and families are far more likely to form partnerships with schools when their schools’ norms, values, and cultural representations reflect their own experiences. Schools need inclusive decision-making processes that ensure that families—particularly those from historically marginalized groups are part of planning, implementing, and continuously improving SEL. (*What is the Casel Framework? - Communities 2023*, para. 1)

Haymovitz found “when parents are involved in social-emotional instruction, the impact on student performance is that much greater” (as cited in Kaspar & Massey, 2022, p. 647).

The final setting of social-emotional learning is within the community. “To integrate SEL efforts across the school day and out-of-school time, school staff and community partners should align on common language and coordinate strategies and communication around SEL-related efforts and initiatives” (*What is the Casel Framework? – Communities*, 2023, para. 1) The publication, *Integrating Social-emotional Learning in the Classroom*, explains that success stories should + shared out with stake holders. “These celebrations will help the stakeholders to see the importance of teaching social-emotional skills to students in their community” (Kaspar & Massey, 2022, p. 467).

Roadblocks to Implementation

While information regarding best practices and implementation of programs and social-emotional learning skills is available, schools often have setbacks to overcome. There are multiple common roadblocks. Roadblocks include: implementation challenges, limited local buy in, lack of financial and personnel resources, poor integration into educational practices, and low sustainability (Bailey et al., 2019, p. 54). It is important to understand these and plan for how to overcome them in order to have effective implementation of social-emotional learning structures.

In 2000, the *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation* reviewed common roadblocks from two previous studies. The issues and concerns could be summed up in two categories: Concern Group 1: Those Most Likely to Arise Especially in the Beginning, and Which Most Prevention Programs Have Dealt With Effectively” (Elias et al., 2000, p. 259) and Concern Group 2: Those Questions That Seem Difficult or Most Feared at the Beginning But Rarely Emerge in Reality, Don't Pose the Dreaded Problems, or Have Been Handled With Minimal Difficulty” (Elias et al., 2000, p. 260). The authors suggest addressing the comments and concerns in a thoughtful way. They also stated “make clear that SEL/EQ programs must work in the context of shared values, be visible, and be focused on goals of the children's social and emotional skills, healthy development, and preparation for life as family and community members, active citizens, and productive members of workplaces — including the school. Educators really have no option to ignore these goals.” (Elias et al., 2000, p. 260)

A common roadblock to implementation is a lack of time in the daily schedule to devote to social-emotional learning.

The main concern that teachers have about social-emotional learning is finding the time to fit SEL instruction into their daily schedule (Collie et al., 10). There are many demands on elementary teachers; namely, expectations for students to perform well on standardized tests (Kaspar & Massey, 2022, p. 644). It is important to remember that while time is limited, research shows that social-emotional learning has a positive impact on academics. Additional pieces to consider when implementing a social-emotional learning program, or any new program, is teacher professional development. Teachers must be trained and understand the background, concepts and curriculum in order to effectively convey it to students.

When students experience trauma in their young lives, the development of their brains is affected (Forbes, [19]). Because of this, their ability to maintain relationships in the same way as traditional students is diminished. Behavior typically becomes a problem with these types of children, and it is helpful for educators to be professionally trained in a trauma-informed approach in order to best meet their needs. Social-emotional learning can reduce high-risk behaviors when implemented correctly (Parker & Hodgson, [30]). Consequently, professional development should offer the opportunity for educators to learn and understand the neuroscience behind trauma and ACES (Kaspar & Massey, 2022, p. 646).

Providing teachers with the background and understanding behind the need for social-emotional learning is just the first part of the professional development that teachers should receive.

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To make the most out of the first year of schoolwide SEL implementation, administrators should consider requiring all teachers to complete a coaching cycle in social-emotional learning. This coaching cycle will involve the instructional coach reviewing a lesson with the teacher beforehand, observing the lesson, and reflecting with the teacher afterwards. The coaching cycle will give teachers a chance to ensure they are delivering instruction in the best way possible for students to gain as many social-emotional skills as possible (Kaspar & Massey, 2022, p. 647).

Another roadblock that has been identified is teachers and their own social-emotional learning adeptness.

In the publication, *Implementing Social-emotional Learning in the Elementary Classroom*, authors argue, “If educators are not aware of their own social-emotional competencies, then the art of instructing these skills can become too stressful. In this way, schools should set their priority on supporting adults first before expecting them to teach SEL (Darling-Hammond, [11]).” (Kaspar & Massey, 2022). This concept is reiterated in additional publications as well. “While a host of research and educational philosophies advocate for whole child education, in order to effectively prepare teachers to be successful in their work, we must not forget that teachers are whole people themselves” (Soutter, 2023, p. 25). Teachers must be aware and able to navigate their own social-emotional needs in order to instruct students to do the same.

The research site worked diligently to ensure this was in place, with the focus being on social-emotional learning for the 2025-2026 school year. The school developed an adult SEL team that went to a weeklong professional development summit. While at the week-long training, the adults SEL team reviewed the needs of the staff and developed an action plan to implement for the school year. The action plan ensured staff had resources to assist them in handling and addressing SEL with students, while also prioritizing their own SEL needs as adult staff members in the school building. At the summit, the team looked in-depth at the staff's need and developed an action plan to implement for the school year to ensure staff was provided resources to assist them in handling and addressing SEL from an adult perspective.

Conclusion

The full literature review throughout chapter two provides background and understanding of the concepts and ideas around social-emotional learning. The mental health of youth is discussed, detailing the rise in concern, students being left untreated, and behaviors that have been witnessed in classrooms. This leads into the history and beginnings of social-emotional learning and the beginning of the CASEL organization. There is a detailed overview of social-emotional learning explaining the various components and competencies with connection to state learning standards. Discussion of the benefits of social-emotional learning was discussed in-depth, as it has been noted to improve academic success for students. While social-emotional learning has been proven to be beneficial, it can have an even greater impact when integrated into a larger MTSS framework, such as PBIS. There have been studies conducted to gauge the effectiveness of this at both the tier 1 and tier 2 levels.

The final portion of the chapter highlights the implementation process beginning at the classroom level. There is discussion of integrated lessons and classroom culture, as well as explicit social-emotional learning lessons. The CASEL organization has become a useful resource in providing information and guides for curriculum adoption. However, implementing social-emotional learning goes beyond the classroom. Information is provided on social-emotional learning in the larger school context, with families and caregivers, and in the greater community. Roadblocks to implementation are also discussed. While each organization or school entity implementing these programs will face different challenges, some common challenges have been identified along with solutions to them.

Chapter Three: Research Method and Design

The purpose of this study was to evaluate teacher perceptions of the impact of social-emotional learning. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used, and primary and secondary data were reviewed. This allowed for thorough and in-depth exploration into the research topic.

Research Design

The study was a mixed methods design. Qualitative methods included both survey and interviews. Survey research is defined as "the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions" (Check & Schutt, 2012, p. 160). Interviews are a common method in qualitative research. According to Oakley, "qualitative interview is a type of framework in which the practices and standards be not only recorded, but also achieved, challenged and as well as reinforced" (as cited in Jamshed, 2014, para. 3). Together, these methods produced in-depth primary data, which was analyzed and compared with the secondary data that was collected.

Setting

The study was conducted at a public school in the St. Louis Midwest region. The district covers a wide geographical area and is diverse and of considerable size, "servicing over 6,000 students . . . employs a staff of approximately 520 certified and 360 non-certified staff members" (Collinsville Community Unit School District #10, para. 5). The district is comprised of multiple school buildings with students ranging from prekindergarten through twelfth grade.

The study focused on one school within the school district. It was considered the melting pot of the district, as it is the first time all of the students come together after

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graduating from their K-4 neighborhood schools. It has approximately 900 students, 50 certified staff members, and 30 non-certified staff members. By selecting this particular site to conduct the study, the researcher was able to examine the perspectives of teachers that work with and support a diverse group of students across a large community, while focusing on one specific location.

The Illinois School Report Card is a digital site that reports various school data pieces, such as information on achievement and academic progress, school environment, student population information, and information regarding the staff population.

According to the school report card, student attendance rate was 93% for 2025 (*Dorris Intermediate School (4 - 6) – Students*, p. 1). This is an important piece of information as the study aimed to review attendance data as a secondary piece of information to show the increase or decrease in attendance rates with the implementation of social-emotional learning instruction.

Other critical student information is also available on the Illinois School Report Card. For 2025, 68.8% of students were considered low-income, and 9% of students were reported homeless (*Dorris Intermediate Sch (4 - 6) – Students* (p. 1). Students came to school often carrying the weight of their home lives, with some having limited resources and support outside of the school environment.

The school had a diverse demographic population of students as well. The chart below indicates demographic information for students at the school in the 2025 school year. A diverse student population allows for an enriched school community. However, the school also needed to ensure that the culture was inclusive for all students.

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2025 School Year Student Demographic Data

Black	Hispanic	Two or More Races	White
15.8%	29%	5.7%	48.4%

(Dorris Intermediate Sch (4 - 6) - Student Diversity Page 1)

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no increase in student self-awareness and self-management after explicit social-emotional learning than before instruction.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no increase in student relationship skills and social awareness after explicit social-emotional learning than before instruction.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no increase in student responsible decision-making after explicit social-emotional learning.

Null Hypothesis 4: The rate of total discipline infractions per student enrollment will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Null Hypothesis 5: The rate of major discipline infractions per student enrollment will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Null Hypothesis 6: The rate of minor discipline infractions per student enrollment will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Null Hypothesis 7: The rate of absences will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Research Question 1: How do teachers perceive the impact of social-emotional learning instruction on the five core social-emotional competencies defined by CASEL?

Research Question 2: How do teachers perceive the impact of explicit social-emotional learning instruction on student outcomes related to discipline?

Research Question 3: How do teachers perceive the impact of explicit social-emotional learning instruction on student outcomes related to attendance?

The independent and dependent variables were carefully designed. The independent variable was the implementation of social-emotional learning. This was a new initiative and focus for the 2025-2026 school year. The dependent variable was the teachers' perceptions. Pre and post surveys were conducted to examine the change in their perceptions as social-emotional learning was implemented. Interviews were also conducted to provide further insight.

Independent variable: The independent variable is what is being changed and manipulated through the research. The independent variable is the implementation of social-emotional instruction.

Dependent variable: The dependent variable is what is measured through the research. The perceptions of the teachers on the impact of social-emotional learning are the dependent variable.

Study Design

The study began in late August 2025. Teachers and school staff were provided with an initial survey focusing on their perceptions on the impact of social-emotional learning. The survey was conducted through the *Qualtrics* platform. Questions in the survey were directly tied to the Illinois State Board of Education Social-emotional Learning Standards. They focused on verbiage and skills associated with both the upper elementary grade range and middle school grade range, as the site serviced intermediate

students who were right at the transition point. Questions were also linked to the five emotional competencies defined by CASEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making (*What is the Casel Framework?*, 2023). Due to the wording and format of the state standards that the survey was aligned to, the competencies of self-awareness and self-management were accounted for in the first null hypothesis. The competencies of social awareness and relationship skills are addressed together in the second null hypothesis. In the survey, teachers indicated if all, most, some, few, or none of their students were proficient in a variety of social-emotional learning competencies.

In order to comply with upcoming legislation, the district had a focus of social-emotional learning beginning the 2025-2026 school year. A new social-emotional screening process was adopted. The district level PBIS team had a subgroup of individuals review and analyze various SEL screening tools. The team selected the SABERs SEL assessment as they felt it best met the needs of the district and aligned with platforms they already used. The assessment was piloted during the 2024-2025 school year and then implemented in grade levels kindergarten through eighth grade in the 2025-2026 school year.

Training, support, and guidelines on explicit SEL instruction were implemented to support students with social-emotional learning, while also encouraging interwoven social-emotional learning practices throughout the day in all instructional areas. Ongoing professional development for teachers in regard to social-emotional learning was also scheduled throughout the year. Prior to the 2025-2026 school year, social-emotional learning was more at the teacher's discretion and not a formal district initiative. Per

district guidelines, teachers were to begin teaching explicit social-emotional lessons through the PATHS curriculum once a week, beginning late August. They were also encouraged and provided with support on integrating social-emotional learning throughout the day and into other subjects.

In December 2025, a post survey was conducted, as well as interviews with individual teachers. Responses were reviewed and analyzed to determine staff members' perceptions of the impact of social-emotional instruction on the five core social-emotional competencies defined by CASEL. These responses were then compared to their initial responses in August.

Secondary data of discipline and attendance was also analyzed. Discipline and attendance data were regularly collected in order to identify conduct issues with students and truancy concerns. Discipline data were looked at through the SWIS behavior tracking platform. Staff and faculty at the school were previously trained on this tool and regularly input student behavior infractions into the system.

Attendance data were also reviewed as it is collected in Skyward. Data from students in the 2024-2025 school year from the months of September through December, that was already collected by the school, was compared to the data collected for the 2025-2026 school year, between the months of September through December, while weekly social-emotional learning lessons were being implemented.

An in-depth analysis was conducted, reviewing the qualitative components and primary data regarding the teachers' perspectives on the impact of social-emotional learning, combined with the quantitative and secondary data components of student discipline and attendance data. This allowed for an in-depth and completed analysis.

Participants

There were approximately 50 staff members who met the requirements to participate as teachers within the school instructing fifth and sixth grade students. Teachers have students assigned to their home rooms. They taught two subjects: either English Language Arts / Social Studies or Mathematics / Science. Students switched between two teachers during the school day. Therefore, teachers taught the same subjects twice to two different groups of students. This structure has been in place for over five years. Prior to teaching two subjects, teachers in the school building taught all academic subjects and kept their students throughout the day. Occasionally two teachers would select to pair up and switch their students for Science and Social Studies. However, this was at the teachers' discretion and partnering. The structure of partnering and teaching only two subjects was established to lessen the amount of prep work teachers had to do and allow them to deepen their understanding of the content areas. Most of the teachers were on their teacher teams for many years prior to the study, with the exception of the few who were paired with new staff, due to previous staff separating from the district due to retirement. Multiple classrooms had paraprofessionals that support their classrooms.

The Illinois School Report Card highlights the retention rate of the school staff at 92.9%, which is higher than the state average (*Dorris Intermediate Sch (4 - 6) – Teachers*, p. 1). This level of retention has been consistent for many years. Staff are notably familiar with the building, structure, and processes that were in place. Forty-four percent of the teachers at the school held a master's degree or higher (*Dorris Intermediate Sch (4 - 6) – Teachers*, p. 1). This was a slight decrease from previous years. However, it aligns with the increase in novice teachers in the building. For the 2025 year,

10.7% of the teachers were considered novice, which is roughly a 10% increase from 2024 (*Dorris Intermediate Sch (4 - 6) – Teachers*, p. 1). At the end of the 2024 –2025 school year, there were several retirements, which allowed new staff to be hired.

Of the population, 32 survey responses were recorded in August. These were the pre responses before social-emotional learning instruction took place. The post survey had 16 responses. There were 13 staff members who took both the pre- and post-study. Four interviews were conducted, and discipline and attendance data were reviewed for the months of September 2024- December 2024, and September 2025 – December 2025.

Data Collection and Analysis

As stated above, both primary and secondary data were collected throughout the research study. Primary data were in the qualitative form and through the means of surveys and interviews. Pre and post-survey responses were reviewed for a change in perception on the students' proficiency in social-emotional skills.

Surveys were distributed to staff at the research site in August 2025. Staff were given the option to complete the survey at that time. Social-emotional learning instruction began after the survey was taken by staff. The staff implemented social-emotional learning instruction once a week, during their scheduled social-emotional learning time. In December 2025, staff were given the option to complete the post survey. The survey contained open-ended questions, as well as the option to participate in an interview.

Results on the survey were reviewed. Four individuals selected that they would participate in an interview. Interviews were conducted in the middle of December 2025.

Secondary data were collected through discipline infractions and attendance rates. Student discipline and attendance data from September 2024 through December 2024

was compared to their discipline and attendance data from September 2025 through December 2025. Students did not have social-emotional learning instruction in September through December 2024. Instruction of these skills and competencies began in August 2025. Reviewing pre- and post- data allowed the researcher to conduct a quantitative analysis of the impact of social-emotional learning on the areas of discipline and attendance.

Table # 4

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Research Alignment Table

Research Question	Data Source	Analysis Method
RQ1: How do teachers perceive the impact of SEL instruction on the five CASEL competencies?	Primary Date: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre- and post-surveys; Teacher interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Qualitative coding of survey responses Thematic analysis of interview transcripts
RQ2: How do teachers perceive the impact of explicit SEL instruction on student engagement and classroom climate?	Primary Date: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre- and post-surveys; Teacher interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Qualitative coding; Pattern comparison with pre-survey responses Thematic analysis of interview transcripts
RQ3: How do discipline and attendance outcomes	Secondary data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantitative comparison of pre-

change following SEL	• SWIS discipline	implementation
implementation?	records	(2024–2025) and
	• Skyward	post-
	attendance records	implementation
		(2025–2026) data

Summary

This mixed methods study was designed to investigate the impact of social-emotional learning. The qualitative portion collected primary data through surveys and interviews and explored the teachers' perceptions. Surveys were provided to teachers prior to the beginning of social-emotional instruction. Teachers took post surveys in December, 2025, after several weeks of student instruction. The survey contained open-ended questions to provide the researcher with additional insight. Teachers also indicated in the survey whether or not they would like to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted in December 2025. The quantitative portion of the study reviewed the change in attendance and discipline data after explicit social-emotional learning lessons had been implemented by classroom teachers. Attendance and discipline data were collected by the district. The use of these data sets allowed the research additional insight into the impact of social-emotional learning. Together, these pieces allowed for an in-depth review of the impact of social-emotional learning and exploration of the gaps in beliefs and reality. Chapter Four continues to elaborate on the research that was conducted by detailing the data analysis that was completed.

Chapter Four: Analysis

The study, *The Impact of Social-emotional Learning on Intermediate Grade Levels*, was conducted to examine the perceived impact of social-emotional learning on the five core competencies within the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) framework. The CASEL competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Additionally, the perceived impact of social-emotional instruction on student behavior and attendance was studied.

At the research site, training, support, and guidelines on explicit SEL instruction were implemented to support students with social-emotional learning, while also encouraging interwoven social-emotional learning practices throughout the day in all instructional areas. Ongoing professional development for teachers regarding social-emotional learning was scheduled throughout the year. Training began with selected members of the staff attending a week long SEL summit. The staff analyzed the needs of the school and determined that more education needed to be provided to the staff about social-emotional learning in general and specific practices for adults.

A training schedule was developed that allowed professional development to take place during district professional learning communities. In August 2025, at the district institute day training, staff learned about the new social-emotional screener that was being implemented. Those that could not attend this professional development attended a make-up session the following week. Several members of the staff also attended deescalation training at the end of August 2025.

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If you would care to A paragraph about this could be inserted in your chapter three.

The school site not only had a social-emotional team that attended the week-long summit, they additionally had two PBIS teams. The PBIS teams joined forces with the SEL team to deliver professional development around social-emotional learning practices in regards to students. Together, the PBIS teams and SEL team lead staff in learning about student and adult SEL at five different professional learning committee sessions.

Optional training and events were also provided to deepen understanding and provide additional learning opportunities. In November 2025, several staff attended a virtual professional development workshop held by Matt Weld from one of the local regional offices of education. Matt Weld is known in the area for his expertise in social-emotional learning. Later that month, several staff members participated in an optional book study on social-emotional learning and self-care. Professional development also continued in the area of social-emotional learning after the conclusion of the study.

Prior to the 2025-2026 school year, social-emotional learning was at the teacher's discretion and not a formal district initiative. Per district guidelines, teachers were to begin teaching explicit social-emotional lessons through the PATHS curriculum, once a week beginning in late August. They were also encouraged and provided with support to integrate social-emotional learning throughout the day and into other subjects.

The study was a mixed methods design. Primary data were collected through qualitative research methods, including surveys and interviews. Secondary data regarding discipline and attendance were analyzed through quantitative measures.

Surveys were conducted through the *Qualtrics* platform. The initial pre surveys were distributed in August 2025, prior to the beginning of social-emotional learning instruction. There were 32 respondents for the pre survey. The post surveys were

distributed in December 2025. There were 16 respondents for the post survey. Thirteen staff members took both the pre survey and the post survey.

The respondents were all educators at the research site working with either fifth or sixth grade students. The site has a range of teacher experience levels: from first-year teachers to teachers who have been teaching for well over a decade. Teachers' educational attainment levels also varied. Some teachers had a four-year degree, while others have further education at the master's level or higher.

The average score for each question in the pre survey was calculated. This was also calculated for the post survey. The difference between the pre survey average score and the post survey average score was calculated to examine the overall change in responses for each question.

The final question of the survey asked if participants were willing to be interviewed. Four respondents indicated that they could be interviewed. All four were interviewed in December 2025. There was an equal representation of fifth and sixth grade teachers. Three of the educators participating in the interview taught primarily English Language Arts and Social Studies. These teachers held a general education title but also supported special education students at various times of the day. One of the teachers was a special education teacher who taught all academic subjects. One of the teachers also serviced students who were learning English as a second language.

Discipline and attendance data were regularly collected by the school to identify conduct issues with students and truancy concerns. Discipline data were collected through the SWIS behavior tracking platform. Staff and faculty at the school were previously trained on this tool and regularly input student behavior infractions into the

system. Student discipline data from September 2024 through December 2024 and from September 2025 through December 2025 was reviewed to evaluate the change in discipline. This structure allowed comparison of discipline data from approximately 400 students before social-emotional learning instruction was implemented and after social-emotional learning instruction was implemented. The discipline data included the total number of referrals for each month. It also included a more in-depth report of the number of referrals that were major office handled referrals and minor classroom handled referrals. The discipline data included the total number of referrals for each month and a breakdown of the number of those referrals that were considered major referrals and minor referrals.

The study had multiple hypotheses and research questions.

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no increase in student self-awareness and self-management after explicit social-emotional learning than before instruction.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no increase in student relationship skills and social awareness after explicit social-emotional learning than before instruction.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no increase in student responsible decision-making after explicit social-emotional learning.

Null Hypothesis 4: The rate of total discipline infractions per student enrollment will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Null Hypothesis 5: The rate of major discipline infractions per student enrollment will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Null Hypothesis 6: The rate of minor discipline infractions per student enrollment will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Null Hypothesis 7: The rate of absences will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Research Question 1: How do teachers perceive the impact of social-emotional learning instruction on the five core social-emotional competencies defined by CASEL?

Research Question 2: How do teachers perceive the impact of explicit social-emotional learning instruction on student outcomes related to discipline?

Research Question 3: How do teachers perceive the impact of explicit social-emotional learning instruction on student outcomes related to attendance?

Independent variable: The independent variable is what is being changed and manipulated through the research. The independent variable is the implementation of social-emotional instruction.

Dependent variable: The dependent variable is what is measured through the research. The perceptions of the teachers on the impact of social-emotional learning are the dependent variable.

Quantitative Research

Summary of Findings – Null Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis was regarding student self-awareness and student self-management. The first 12 questions in the pre and post survey were designed to examine the teachers' perceptions of the students' progress with these skills. When analyzing the difference in the average score for each question addressing self-awareness and self-management, teachers indicated improvements. The average difference between the pre- and the post-test for the first 12 questions in the survey showed an increase in all

questions. This indicated that there is an increase in student self-awareness and self-management after explicit social-emotional learning than before instruction.

The results for the first null hypothesis were determined by analyzing the results of the *t*-test. The post data set was used as sample one and the pre data set was used as the second data set. The *t*-test produced a *t*-value of 5.95 and a right $p < .001$. With this information, the researcher rejected the null hypothesis. Therefore, there is sufficient evidence to believe that there is an increase in students' self-awareness and self-management after explicit social-emotional learning instruction.

Summary of Findings – Null Hypotheses 2

The second hypothesis addressed relationship skills and social awareness. These two concepts were addressed in questions 13 through 29 in the survey. Similarly to the first two hypotheses, the average score was calculated for each of these questions and the difference between the pre survey and post survey responses was analyzed. Growth was noted in all questions.

The results for the second null hypothesis were determined by analyzing the results of the *t*-test. The post data set was used as sample one and the pre data set was used as the second data set. The *t*-test produced a *t*-value of 4.45 and a right $p < .001$. With this information, the researcher rejected the null hypothesis. Therefore, there is sufficient evidence to believe that there is an increase in students' relationship skills and social awareness after explicit social-emotional learning instruction.

Summary of Findings – Null Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis focused on responsible decision making. The last 12 questions of the survey addressed this skill. The average score for each question was

determined and the difference between the average pre survey score and post survey score was calculated. Again, growth was shown in all questions.

The results for the third null hypothesis were determined by analyzing the results of the *t*-test. The post data set was used as sample one and the pre data set was used as the second data set. The *t* test produced a *t*-value of 2.96 and a right $p < .004$. With this information, the researcher rejected the null hypothesis. Therefore, there is sufficient evidence to believe that there is an increase in students' responsible decision making after explicit social-emotional learning instruction.

Summary of Findings – Null Hypotheses 4, 5, & 6

The fourth, fifth, and sixth hypotheses centered around student discipline infractions. The total number of infractions, major infractions, and minor infractions was all analyzed via quantitative statistical analysis. Discipline infractions were reviewed by comparing total, major, and minor infractions from September 2024 to those in September 2025. This process continued for the months of October 2024 and October 2025, November 2024 and November 2025, and December 2024 and December 2025. For the 12 different analyses that were reviewed, only the major referrals for October 2024 to October 2025 showed a significant difference.

Discipline Data – Null Hypothesis 4, 5, & 6

Class of 2032	Sept. 2024	Sept. 2025	Oct. 2024	Oct. 2025	Nov. 2024	Nov. 2025	Dec. 2024	Dec. 2025
Students Enrolled	427	424	426	425	427	426	421	427
Total Referrals	66	72	66	55	51	82	30	67

Major (Office Managed) Referrals	9	7	32	7	28	19	14	11
Minor (Teacher Managed) Referrals	57	65	34	48	23	63	16	56

Discipline data, including total, major, and minor referrals, was analyzed using the z-test for difference of two proportions. For sample one, the total referrals for the month of September 2024 was used as the X1 sample, with the sample size being the enrollment for that month. For sample two, the total referrals for the month of September 2025 was used as the X2 sample, with the sample size being the enrollment for that month. This then produced the z-value and the *p*-values. Based on the hypothesis, the right *p*-value was used in calculations. Alpha was .05 in all calculations. This process was completed again for major referrals in September 2024 and 2025, minor referrals for September 2024 and 2025, and total, major, and minor referrals for October 2024 and October 2025, November 2024 and November 2025, and December 2024 and December 2025. For eleven of the twelve tests that were run, the researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis, and, therefore, there is insufficient evidence to believe that total, major, or minor referrals will decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Quantitative Figures – Null Hypothesis 4, 5, & 6

	Z Value	Right P Value
Total Referrals Sept 2024 & 2025	-.59	.724

Minor Referrals Sept 2024 & 2025	-.83	.797
Major Referrals Sept 2024 & 2025	.43	.334
Total Referrals Oct 2024 & 2025	1.09	.139
Minor Referrals Oct 2024 & 2025	-1.63	.949
Major Referrals Oct 2024 & 2025	4.12	<.001
Total Referrals Nov 2024 & 2025	-2.94	.998
Minor Referrals Nov 2024 & 2025	-4.56	1
Major Referrals Nov 2024 & 2025	1.34	.089
Total Referrals Dec 2024 & 2025	-3.93	1
Minor Referrals Dec 2024 & 2025	-4.86	1
Major Referrals Dec 2024 & 2025	.6	.273

Total referrals for the months reviewed in 2024 trended downward over time, while total referrals for the months reviewed in 2025 fluctuated between increasing and decreasing. In the 2024 months, major referrals peaked in October and November. In 2025, the peak for major referrals was in November. Minor referrals through 2024 trended downward; while minor referrals in 2025 also trended downward, they showed some fluctuation.

Comparing 2024 and 2025, total referrals for each month were higher in 2025 than in 2024, with the exception of October. Each month, there were more minor referrals in 2025 than in 2024. However, there were fewer major referrals in each month of 2025 than in 2024. However, the overall conclusion is that there is insufficient evidence to believe the rate of total, major, and minor discipline infractions per student enrollment will decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Summary of Findings – Null Hypothesis 7

The final hypothesis of the study examined attendance. Attendance data were recorded by the school in their school information software platform, Skyward. These data were kept to monitor absences and identify truancy issues. For the study, monthly attendance reports were run showing the absence occurrence for each student. Absence occurrences for each student were then added together and combined with the other students' absence occurrences for the month to determine a cumulative absence number per month. The number of attendance days was recorded for each month. Together, these determined the average cumulative absence per school day for each month.

Attendance Data

	Sept. 2024	Sept. 2025	Oct. 2024	Oct. 2025	Nov. 2024	Nov. 2025	Dec. 2024	Dec. 2025
Students Enrolled	427	424	426	425	427	426	421	427
Cumulative Absences	503.5	524.5	594.5	548	610.5	459.5	533	425
Total Number of Attendance Days in Month	20	21	21	20	16	16	15	15
Average Cumulative Absence Per School Day	25.16	24.98	28.30	27.4	38.16	28.72	35.53	28.33

Similarly to the discipline data, the z-test of proportions was used to analyze attendance data. For sample one, the average cumulative absence per school day for the month of September 2024 was used as the X1 sample, with the sample size being the enrollment for that month. For sample two, the average cumulative absence per school day for September 2025 was used as the X2 sample, with the sample size being the enrollment for that month. This then produced the z-value and the *p*-values. Based on the hypothesis, the right *p*-value was used in calculations. Alpha was .05 in all calculations. This process was completed again for attendance in October 2024 and 2025, November 2024 and November 2025, and December 2024 and December 2025. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis, and, therefore, there is insufficient evidence to believe

that the rate of absences will decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Quantitative Figures – Null Hypothesis 7

	Absences September 2024 & 2025	Absences October 2024 & 2025	Absences November 2024 & 2025	Absences December 2024 & 2025
Z value	0.00	0.12	1.20	0.99
Right P Value	0.500	0.453	0.116	0.160

Qualitative Research

Research Questions

The research questions were designed to align with the null hypothesis, allowing the researcher to complete a mixed method analysis. Null hypotheses one, two, and three correspond with the first research questions, regarding the impact of social-emotional learning on the CASEL competencies. Null hypotheses four, five, and six correspond with the second research question, regarding the impact on student discipline infractions. The seventh, and final null hypothesis, corresponds with the third research question regarding attendance.

Summary of Findings - Research Question One

The first research question focused on how teachers perceived the impact of social-emotional learning instruction on the five core social-emotional competencies defined by CASEL? The CASEL competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. This research

question is significant because the competencies defined by CASEL act as the framework for social-emotional learning. They are interwoven through social-emotional learning standards and are the building blocks of various social-emotional learning curricula. Understanding the impact instruction has on these competencies is a critical research component to evaluate the success of social-emotional learning. In order to evaluate the impact on the CASEL competencies, descriptive data from surveys, open-ended survey responses, and interview responses were all analyzed and evaluated.

A significant theme that was evident in the responses from qualitative research was the students' growth in SEL strategies to support them in the CASEL competencies. Growth was indicated throughout survey responses and noted in open-ended responses. It was also evident in the interviews.

Teachers responded to a pre- and post-survey where they indicated their students' proficiency in a variety of skills related to self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. The average difference between the pre- and post-responses on all 40 questions was calculated. There was not a single question that indicated no growth or regression of students' skills. In fact, all 40 questions showed an increase in student proficiency.

The most growth, as indicated by survey responses was related to the CASEL competency of relationship skills. The question "Students in my homeroom class can "evaluate strategies for preventing and resolving interpersonal problems" showed a change in response from 2.35 to 3.25. This is a 90% increase.

Exceptional growth was also noted in student self-management. An 82% increase was noted for the question "Students in my homeroom class can "describe the steps in

setting and working toward goal achievement".” Outstanding growth was also indicated in an additional question regarding student self-management. A 77% increase was noted for the question “Students in my homeroom class can “set a short term goal and make a plan for achieving it.””.

There were three open-ended questions on the survey. The first was, “Have you observed any changes in students’ self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and/or responsible decision-making following implementation of social-emotional learning instruction? If so, please elaborate on the changes you have noted.” Teacher responses on this question further supports the growth indicated through the pre- and post-survey.

One staff member wrote,

I think there has been a change in their social awareness about how to act and treat others as the year has progressed. I think sometimes these skills take a back seat over the summer and now that the expectations of the classroom are back in place I have noticed they are more aware of their behavior.

An additional staff member shared, “My students are able to better identify their emotions, what is impacting their emotions, and better self-awareness.” Many of the teacher responses echoed this theme. A third staff member elaborated, “I have noticed students independently participating in mindfulness, self-correcting behavior, stopping and thinking before acting, and treating their peers with more respect.”

In the interviews, teachers noted and shared specific examples of students exhibiting self-awareness and self-management strategies. These included using the breathing strategies along with others that were taught through the SEL lessons to calm

oneself and reset. It was even noted that teachers have seen students remind others to use the strategies. Through the responses that students had made growth in the areas of self-awareness and self-management.

In regard to relationship skills and social awareness, one of the teachers noted students being able to phrase statements as “I feel” or “I believe”. She also shared that students have been less reactive to others and able to think through situations. An additional teacher reported students being friendly and respectful, and those skills successfully transferred into the academic setting. Similar to the competencies of self-awareness and self-management, teachers reported growth among their students in regard to their social awareness and relationship skills.

All of the participants noted specific examples of students using strategies for responsible decision making. Multiple teachers noted students taking deep breaths or using strategies to regulate themselves prior to making decisions. It was reported that students are also more aware of their feelings. Responses to the interview questions further support that students have made growth in the competency of responsible decision making.

In reviewing and analyzing the responses from the surveys, open-ended responses, and interview questions regarding students and the impact of social-emotional learning on the CASEL competencies, it was evident that students showed growth in all competencies. Teachers shared insight as to what they notice and observe in the classroom regarding the five competencies. Several noted and shared specific examples of students utilizing skills and strategies in each area.

Summary of Findings - Research Question Two

The second research question focused on how teachers perceived the impact of explicit social-emotional learning instruction on student outcomes related to discipline. As students learn skills to manage emotions and navigate social situations, the hope is to see these skills translate and be applied to everyday situations. In order to evaluate the impact of social-emotional learning instruction on student discipline responses to open-ended survey questions and interview responses were analyzed and reviewed.

This research question concluded with the theme of social-emotional learning instruction having a positive impact on students' behaviors. The majority of teachers indicated a change in students' behavior. This was evident in their responses on the opened ended survey questions and through the interviews.

The opened ended survey question asked, "Have you observed any changes in student behavior and discipline incidents since implementation of social-emotional learning instruction? If so, please elaborate." Responses varied in detail. However, many noted specific changes in student behavior.

One respondent shared, "Yes, I think that students have improved on how their behavior can impact someone else and how to better handle when conflicts arise." To further support, an additional teacher shared, "Yes, they are more aware of their actions and how to help others who maybe having a rough day." Not only were conflict resolution skills, self-awareness, and relationship skills highlighted, an additional staff member shared specific strategies that students used.

Students appear more comfortable expressing their feelings and identifying appropriate steps to take when they become frustrated or overwhelmed. Practicing

breathing techniques and discussing real-life social situations has supported students in making progress with peer interactions. Overall, implementing social-emotional learning has helped create a supportive environment where students can learn and apply effective coping strategies.

Interviews further highlighted the improvements in behavior, due to social-emotional learning instruction. One respondent noted that students are less explosive, while another noted that students are no longer crying as much in the classroom. Teacher responses indicate that social-emotional learning has had a positive impact on students' behaviors.

Summary of Findings - Research Question Three

The third research question focused on how teachers perceived the impact of explicit social-emotional learning instruction on student outcomes related to attendance. Attendance has become a significant focus for schools. The site of the study was located in Illinois. Chronic absenteeism is reported on the Illinois State Report card for schools and plays a factor in their overall school designation. Schools, including the site of the study, look for ways to improve student attendance to further support student achievement and success. In order to evaluate the research question, open-ended survey responses and interview responses were reviewed and analyzed.

Through analysis the researcher determined a theme of social-emotional learning have no impact on student attendance. Teachers stated this in open-ended responses. It was also highlighted in the responses on in-person interviews. The open-ended survey asked, "Have you observed any changes in student attendance patterns since implementation of social-emotional learning. If so, please describe. One teacher shared,

“I do see an increase of attendance.” An additional respondent highlighted, “No not really. Student attendance is not better overall.” Several teachers simply responded “no”.

Interview responses aligned with the responses from the open-ended survey questions. When asked, “Have you noticed any changes in student attendance since implementation? If so, please elaborate”, three of the four respondents answered “no”. The fourth respondent explained that her class had good attendance regardless of social-emotional learning lessons.

Conclusion

The study was comprised of mixed methods to provide insight on the impact of social-emotional learning instruction. Quantitative analysis of survey responses, discipline data, and attendance data were conducted. Survey responses were analyzed through a *t*-test. Discipline and attendance data were analyzed through a *z*-test. The overall tests did not show significance. Themes were determined through qualitative research. Themes included growth in social-emotional skills in regards to the CASEL competencies. Improvement behavior and discipline was also indicated by staff. Evaluation of qualitative methods showed no improvement in student attendance. Chapter Five offers a full discussion of the results of the study and insight into the differences noted between the various findings, as well as conclusions that can be drawn from the findings.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The study, *The Impact of Social-emotional Learning on Intermediate Grade Levels*, was a mixed-methods investigation, conducted to examine the perceived impact of social-emotional learning on the five core competencies within the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) framework. This includes self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Qualitative research was conducted through surveys and interviews. The perceived impact of social-emotional instruction on student behavior and attendance was studied. Quantitative research was utilized to analyze behavior and attendance data.

The study began in August 2025 and concluded in December of 2025. Educators at the site were provided training and professional development on social-emotional learning. The district administration provided staff with a set time to teach weekly SEL lessons using the PATHS curriculum. Teachers were also encouraged to interweave social-emotional lessons into everyday classroom instruction.

In August 2025, prior to social-emotional instruction beginning, staff completed a survey indicating their students' proficiency in the various CASEL competencies. Teachers took the corresponding post survey in December 2025 after a semester of social-emotional learning. The survey contained several descriptive statements and open-ended questions. Interviews were also conducted to further gather evidence on teachers' perspectives. Secondary data were also reviewed and analyzed. This included discipline data as well as attendance data.

There were seven null hypotheses that were explored. There were three research questions. The null hypotheses and research questions are listed below.

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no increase in student self-awareness and self-management after explicit social-emotional learning than before instruction.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no increase in student relationship skills and social awareness after explicit social-emotional learning than before instruction.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no increase in student responsible decision-making after explicit social-emotional learning.

Null Hypothesis 4: The rate of total discipline infractions per student enrollment will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Null Hypothesis 5: The rate of major discipline infractions per student enrollment will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Null Hypothesis 6: The rate of minor discipline infractions per student enrollment will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Null Hypothesis 7: The rate of absences will not decrease after social-emotional learning instruction is implemented.

Research Question 1: How do teachers perceive the impact of social-emotional learning instruction on the five core social-emotional competencies defined by CASEL?

Research Question 2: How do teachers perceive the impact of explicit social-emotional learning instruction on student outcomes related to discipline?

Research Question 3: How do teachers perceive the impact of explicit social-emotional learning instruction on student outcomes related to attendance?

Discussion of Qualitative and Quantitative Results

The research questions and null hypothesis were designed to complement one another and provide a broader understanding of the impact of social-emotional learning.

Research question one aligned with null hypotheses one through three. Research question two aligned with null hypotheses four through six. The third research question aligned with the seventh null hypothesis.

Research Question One and Null Hypotheses One, Two, and Three

The first research question, how do teachers perceive the impact of social-emotional learning instruction on the five core social-emotional competencies, defined by CASEL? Qualitative research methods including descriptive survey data, open-ended survey questions, and interviews were reviewed and analyzed. The theme of positive growth in social-emotional CASEL competencies was evident. The survey results showed growth in all competencies. The open-ended survey responses indicated growth and the interviews indicated that teachers perceive a positive impact on self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness and responsible decision making.

The first research question was linked to null hypotheses one through three. A *t*-test was completed to statistically review the results of the survey responses. This test did revealed statistical significance. The combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods concluded with significant results.

Research Question Two and Null Hypotheses Four, Five, and Six

The second research question focused on how teachers perceived the impact of explicit social-emotional learning instruction on student outcomes related to discipline. Qualitative research methods of open-ended survey questions and interviews were reviewed and analyzed. It was determined that staff noted social-emotional learning had a positive impact on student behavior. The open-ended question and interviews proved differently with teachers noting significant growth in students' behaviors.

The second research question aligned with null hypotheses four, five, and six. A z-test was run to analyze the statistical difference in total referrals, major referrals, and minor classroom referrals over the course of social-emotional learning implementation. The z-test concluded that there was insufficient evidence to believe that social-emotional learning impacted behavior and discipline. The combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods resulted in mixed results.

Research Question Three and Null Hypotheses Seven

The third research question focused on how teachers perceived the impact of explicit social-emotional learning instruction on student outcomes related to attendance. Qualitative research methods of open-ended questions and interviews were used to analyze teachers' perspectives. Responses to both methods indicated that teachers did not perceive any change in attendance.

This research question aligned with null hypothesis seven. Quantitative results were analyzed through a z test. There was insufficient evidence that social-emotional learning impacts students' attendance. Both qualitative and quantitative methods indicated that social-emotional learning did not impact attendance.

Implications

The literature review in Chapter Two shares information regarding the rise in mental health concerns for students and the increase in behaviors seen in classrooms. Many students do not receive the support they need to address these issues. While it is not a substitute for mental health care or behavior support, social-emotional learning can be a tier 1 intervention to support students. Components of it, such as a specific strategy, can be integrated into the tier 2 MTSS support systems. CASEL has been a leading

foundation for developing a framework for social-emotional learning. Information regarding implementation strategies and curriculums to support instruction are available. Yet with all of this information, there was little insight on teachers' perceptions on the impact of social-emotional learning and comparison to the quantitative behavioral and attendance data. The conclusions of this study sought to answer questions revolving around perceptions and beliefs and their connection to results and statistical data.

All educators at the site were provided with professional development and training on social-emotional learning. Administration for the school arranged a set time to allow all staff to implement structured SEL lessons during the week. Teachers were instructed to utilize the PATHs curriculum to instruct students on social-emotional skills. They were also encouraged to interweave social-emotional learning concepts into everyday instruction.

Mixed methods of both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used throughout the study. The quantitative research methods did not achieve significant results. However, qualitative research methods including surveys, open-ended survey questions, and interviews indicated that the intervention was impactful. It was evident that teachers perceived a positive impact on students' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. It was also evident that teachers perceive a positive impact on students' behaviors.

The researcher's finding can be used when considering future practices regarding social-emotional learning instruction. Teachers implemented social-emotional instruction once a week through a designated curriculum. Many teachers also implemented SEL skills into their everyday classroom routines and academic subject matters. Overall,

teachers perceived a positive impact from the intervention. They noted increased ability in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Teachers also saw an improvement in student behavior and discipline. The improvement in these areas is justification for continued social-emotional instruction and continued growth in programming and practices.

Limitations

Limitations of the study must be considered when reviewing the results of the findings. Both qualitative research methods, the survey and interview questions, were created by the researcher. They are connected to the Illinois state social-emotional standards and the CASEL framework. Due to the connection and the design of the state social-emotional standards, the first null hypothesis addressed two of the CASEL competencies: self-awareness and self-management. The second null hypothesis addressed two additional competencies: relationship skills and social awareness. The questions for the survey were reviewed by the dissertation committee. However, the questions were not previously studied or tested prior to their use in this research.

Additional limitations existed as the respondents to the surveys and interview were the staff implementing and instructing students on social-emotional learning skills. Investigating their perceptions on the impacts of social-emotional learning could be skewed, due to their involvement in the implementation and instruction of students on this material.

Inconsistent reporting of classroom discipline infractions also served as a limitation to the study. Each teacher had a different threshold for behaviors in their

classroom and what may seem minor and be unreported from one classroom, may be considered a behavior concern in another classroom.

In order to attempt to control this, teachers were provided a flow chart from administration and PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) teacher teams at the beginning of the year. The chart explained and outlined interventions and methods for addressing misbehavior. It highlighted using reflective and restorative conversations to address behaviors and utilizing these types of conversations as learning opportunities for students. It also elaborated on what behaviors should be managed in the classroom and what behaviors should be sent to administrators to handle.

An additional limitation for consideration is that not all staff that took the pre survey at the beginning of the year also took the post survey. To further this, some staff that answered the post survey did not answer the pre survey. In order to control for this, participants provided their initials when taking the survey. Initials from the pre- and post-survey were matched to see responses from consistent individuals. However, a limited number of participants participated in both the pre-survey and post-survey.

Recommendations

In reviewing and analyzing the findings of the study, it is recommended that the study be conducted over a longer period of time. Social-emotional learning was implemented in August 2025. The study was conducted over the first semester of the school year and concluded in December of 2025. A longer study duration would allow students to have additional social-emotional lessons, implementing and practicing strategies. This would allow further development of these strategies and may affect the

impact. With a longer duration, a clearer determination could be evaluated regarding the true impact of social-emotional learning.

Additionally, various grade levels should be included in further research. This study focused on fifth and sixth grade. The impact of social-emotional learning on different grade levels should be considered. It is possible that social-emotional learning instruction may have a different impact on primary grade levels. Secondary grades should also be included in future studies to review the impact at that level. Expanding the study to encompass a larger age range of students could provide additional insight into the impact social-emotional learning instruction has on students. It is possible that younger grades would find social-emotional learning more impactful, while older grades may see less of an impact. Having the insight on the impact for all ages and grades allows for a more thorough understanding.

While the survey questions were designed to align with the social-emotional learning standards and the CASEL competencies, the questions were not previously tested. Additional studies should be conducted using a normed social-emotional learning screener. This would provide additional data and information in regards to student responses and normed data. Results may vary with a different screening or survey tool. When surveying staff, teachers must read and understand the questions. With a different tool, verbiage may be altered which could affect the responses.

Conclusion

The study examining the impact of social-emotional learning was conducted at the intermediate grade level and focused on teachers' perceptions of the impact of social-emotional learning. It also analyzed quantitative discipline and attendance data to

determine the alignment with the teachers' perceptions. The study began in August 2025 and concluded in December 2025. Teachers completed pre- and post-surveys regarding student proficiency in social-emotional learning competencies. They also were provided with open-ended questions to further elaborate on their perspective. Interviews were also conducted to gain additional insight. Teachers noted a positive impact on student social-emotional learning competencies and noted an impact on behavior. They did not notice a change in attendance.

Quantitative analysis was completed to review student behavioral and attendance data. The data did not show significant difference overall for behavior or attendance, although positive trends were noted in the behavioral data. Despite the quantitative measures not achieving significance, qualitative research methods indicated that social-emotional learning to be a worthwhile intervention and impactful on SEL competencies and student behavior.

To further investigate the impact of social-emotional learning, additional studies should be conducted. Studies of longer duration should be explored for greater understanding of the impact. The use of normed social-emotional screeners would also be beneficial. To further understand the impact of social-emotional learning instruction, it is also recommended that multiple grade levels be included in future studies.

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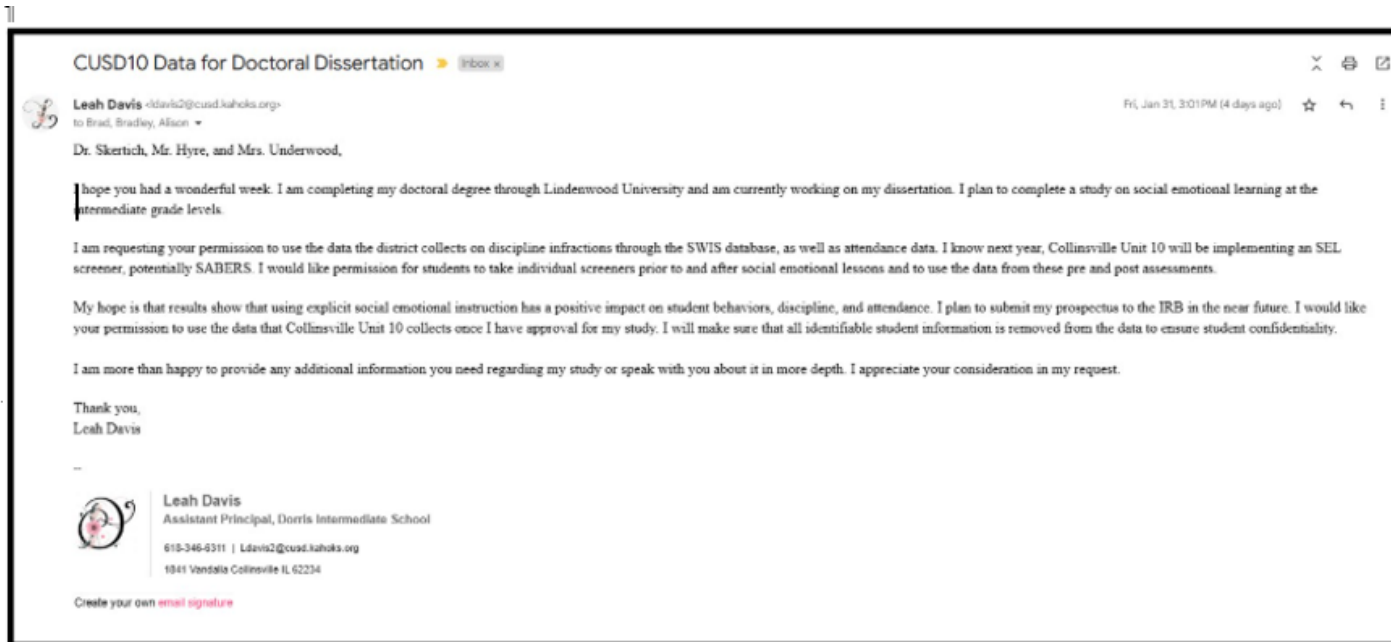
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Appendix A



Appendix B



Vitae

Leah Frances Davis

Academic Degrees

Doctor of Education - Lindenwood University **Expected 2026**

Educational Leadership

Dissertation Title: The Impact of Social-emotional Learning on Intermediate Grade

Levels

Master of Arts - McKendree University **May 2016**

Teacher Leadership

Bachelor of Science - Southern Illinois University Edwardsville **May 2012**

Elementary Education

Professional Experience

Collinsville School District **2012-Present**

Assistant Principal, Teacher

McKendree University **2024-Present**

Adjunct Faculty, Field Supervisor

Certifications & Endorsements

Principal

Teacher Leadership

Special Education

Elementary Education

Middle School Endorsed in: Mathematics, Science, Social Studies