



Info brief for mental health leadership teams

Purpose: to support mental health leadership teams in taking [identity-affirming](#) approaches to planning, introducing, supporting and sustaining social-emotional skill development in Ontario schools and classrooms.

Introduction

Social-emotional skill development is a cornerstone of education in Ontario and foundational to mental health, well-being and academic achievement. Identity-affirming approaches to social-emotional skill development help staff in Ontario schools to support student social-emotional well-being and development in ways that reflect student identity and lived experiences.

Key terms

Social-emotional skill development is a lifelong process that follows predictable stages and can be enhanced through interaction and support. It is nurtured at home, at school and in the community. It can include the following:

- **Social-emotional skills** help individuals and groups achieve their goals, build trusting relationships and cultivate identity and resilience (e.g., skills for problem-solving, building friendships, coping with disappointment, etc.).
- **Social-emotional skill categories** offer ways of grouping social-emotional skills for instruction. Different organizing systems for social-emotional skills have been used, but none is deemed better than another.
- **Social-emotional learning (SEL)** is a term used to describe teaching, learning and practicing social-emotional skills at school. This learning is most effective when it is developmentally appropriate, identity-affirming and embedded into all aspects of a student's school experience. It is designed to help students build on or develop intra- and interpersonal skills to flourish throughout life.

Social-emotional skill development occurs through relationships, environments and everyday interactions, not only through programs, lessons or curricula. Every staff role—whether instructional or relational—contributes to it by shaping the conditions in which students learn, feel safe and belong. Identity-affirming approaches to social-emotional skill development centre students' dignity, agency and voice, recognizing that who they are and what they experience deeply influence how they learn and grow.

Potential benefits and cautions of social-emotional learning

As a mental health leadership team, it is important to understand both the **benefits** and **cautions** of social-emotional learning, so that decisions regarding the selection of related initiatives, programming, resources and learning opportunities are supportive for every student.



BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS		BENEFITS FOR STAFF
Potential benefits for students include:		There are potential benefits for staff as well, such as:
Improved...	Reduced...	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social development • academic performance and achievement • ability to communicate and handle interpersonal conflict effectively • ability to recognize and manage emotions • self-esteem and self-confidence • mental health and well-being • coping skills • attitudes toward self, school and others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • internalizing problems and disorders, including emotional distress, stress, anxiety, depression, suicide • conduct problems/externalizing behaviours, including bullying, aggression, violence, conflict and anger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less work stress and burnout • improved mental health and well-being • improved positive relationships with students

While SEL at school can yield important benefits, **significant and serious concerns** have been raised about the impact on students who are racialized, marginalized and underserved by the education system when this learning is delivered without attention to identity and wellness.

Students who experience oppression or racism or who do not see themselves reflected in the teaching of social-emotional skills may not benefit from this instruction, and in fact may be negatively affected or further harmed.

Mental health leadership teams play an important role in guiding implementation so that social-emotional skill development is supported in ways that are equitable, culturally responsive and supportive of all students. The following considerations highlight key **concerns and cautions** to support thoughtful resource selection, professional learning and ongoing implementation:

Examine system context.

Social-emotional skill development takes place within education systems that have historically marginalized and underserved some students. Without deliberate attention and action, implementation can inadvertently reproduce these inequities rather than reduce them.

Reflect on bias and interpretation.

Adult perceptions of behaviour and emotion are shaped by bias. Without reflection, natural or culturally grounded expressions of emotion may be misinterpreted or problematized. Identity-affirming approaches to social-emotional skill development at school honour multiple ways of expressing feelings, communicating and engaging.

Broaden definitions of well-being and competence.

Many SEL approaches are grounded in Western, individualistic norms. These may not reflect worldviews that centre collective care, interdependence, family, land, culture and community responsibility. Expanding our lens helps ensure that students' cultural strengths and ways of being are recognized, valued and supported—rather than unintentionally filtered through a single dominant perspective.



Pair skill development with adult and system responsibility.

Building individual coping or self-regulation skills is important, but not sufficient when students are navigating systemic barriers such as racism, discrimination, bullying or violence. Effective approaches combine student learning with active adult advocacy and changes to policies, practices and environments so that students are supported and not left to manage harm on their own.

Centre student skill development, not compliance.

Social-emotional approaches are designed to promote student well-being, belonging and skill development rather than to manage behaviour or secure compliance.

Social-emotional skill categories and the Ontario curriculum

Supporting social-emotional skill development has long been embedded in Ontario schools through everyday interactions and learning experiences. In 2020, the Ontario Ministry of Education updated some curricula to include SEL as a distinct component. In 2023, [PPM 169: Student Mental Health](#) was released and included SEL as one of 11 requirements for supporting student mental health. In curriculum we see social-emotional skills:

- in the elementary Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum
- in the elementary Mathematics and other recently updated curricula
- in the revised Early Years program
- through opportunities for students to develop their social-emotional learning competencies across all K-12 curriculum

Six social-emotional skill categories (sometimes called competencies) have been identified as essential for the academic and personal growth and success of students in Ontario.

STUDENTS WILL LEARN SKILLS TO...	SO THAT THEY CAN...
identify and manage emotions	express their feelings and understand the feelings of others
recognize sources of stress and coping with challenges	build onto their personal resilience skills and adapt to help them navigate their circumstances and thrive
maintain positive motivation and perseverance	foster a sense of optimism and hope and the will to keep trying to achieve their goals
build relationships and communicate effectively	continue to build healthy relationships and a respect for diversity
develop self-awareness and self-confidence	continue to build their sense of identity and feelings of belonging
think critically and creatively	make informed decisions and solve problems

Note: In [December 2020, the Ministry of Education sent a memo](#) to school boards to indicate that, while social-emotional learning should be supported and embedded into all areas of daily life at school, it should not be assessed because of the negative impact it can have on particular groups of students.



Supporting social-emotional skill development in schools and classrooms

Social-emotional skill development is most effectively supported when practices and resources are woven into daily instruction or modelled as consistent everyday practices. In the past, there was a reliance on sequenced manualized programs as an entry point into instruction in this area. These programs are often costly to introduce, scale and sustain, and more importantly, may not support every student in the ways intended, as mentioned in the cautions above. More recent guidance recommends instruction that is **flexible, responsive, meaningful, differentiated and strength-based**.

Identity-affirming approaches to social-emotional skill development carefully consider the identities of students who will participate in the learning and acknowledge that they come to school with skills already shaped by their families, communities and previous experiences. Instruction can build on these existing skills, recognizing, valuing and learning from the diversity of strengths and experiences that students bring with them while addressing barriers they encounter associated with their identities. Through co-learning and co-leading in this manner, school staff can create meaningful opportunities and strategies that support students' social-emotional skill development and flourishing in school and throughout life.

There are many ways schools can intentionally support social-emotional skill development within the learning environment. While development itself unfolds naturally over time, schools can strengthen it by creating daily opportunities for learning, modelling and practice. These opportunities may occur in both informal (implicit) and formal (explicit) ways.

Implicit support

Implicit support of social-emotional skill development is embedded in all aspects of the school environment through everyday interactions. Staff support this by:

- modelling skills through interactions (e.g., with students, staff, parents/caregivers)
- recognizing and responding to teachable moments to explore social-emotional concepts as they naturally occur
- reinforcing skill development through consistent supportive relationships

Explicit support

Explicit support of social-emotional skill development is intentionally taught through dedicated lessons and structured activities. This can include:

- facilitating stand-alone lessons focused on specific skills where staff can co-lead and co-learn with students
- embedding brief 'kernels' or daily activities into classroom practice that promote social-emotional skill development (e.g., [Everyday Mental Health/Faith and Wellness resources](#))
- integrating the learning into academic instruction across subject areas

To support application, a companion [Reflection tool for mental health leadership teams](#) provides guidance on selecting and using social-emotional learning resources, alongside key implementation considerations and conditions for learning grounded in identity-affirming practice.



Summary

Momentum for intentionally teaching and supporting social-emotional skill development in schools has increased in recent years with growing recognition of the value of schools as important settings for mental health promotion. There are many potential benefits to this learning in schools, and there is a long tradition and explicit Ministry of Education support to advance practice in this area. There are also important cautions, particularly for students who experience oppression and marginalization. Students who don't see themselves reflected in school efforts to support their social-emotional skill development, or who receive instruction that diminishes their ways of knowing and being or minimizes their experiences of racism, oppression and/or marginalization, will not benefit and may in fact be harmed. In response to these cautions and concerns, the field of SEL has been engaged in a process of reflection and reckoning, and practice is shifting accordingly.

Supporting social-emotional skill development requires schools to intentionally create daily conditions, relationships and learning opportunities that nurture students' growth. There has been a shift away from sequenced manualized programs that are often costly to introduce, scale and sustain, and more importantly, may not support every student in the ways intended. More recent guidance recommends identity-affirming instruction that is flexible, responsive, meaningful, differentiated and strength-based.

Related resources

- [Identity-affirming school mental health: a frame for reflection and action](#)

