

# Enacting Social-Emotional Learning: Lessons from “Outlier Schools” in California’s CORE Districts

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Social-emotional learning refers to the beliefs, attitudes, personality traits, and behaviors that students need to succeed in school and life. Our study looks closely at ten “outlier schools” in California’s CORE districts whose students report strong social-emotional learning outcomes compared to other, similar middle schools. This brief—based on a longer technical report—describes the surprising breadth and variety of social-emotional learning practices found in these outlier schools, as well as commonalities in their approaches and implementation challenges that some are facing. Our findings offer ideas and lessons learned that may benefit other schools and districts seeking to implement social-emotional learning at scale.



California’s new accountability and continuous improvement framework relies on district and school leaders using multiple measures of school performance to identify where change is needed, and to monitor carefully the development, testing, and evaluation of improvement strategies over time. This process of continuous improvement requires that local leaders have access to research-based evidence and strategies that they can implement in their schools and opportunities to learn from one another about what works, under which conditions, and for which students. PACE’s series of Continuous Improvement Briefs aims to support education leaders at all levels in learning how to improve the performance of their schools and students.



Amid distressing headlines about school violence, the social and emotional health of students has emerged as a topic of great concern on the national stage. Social-emotional learning practices in schools may offer hope for beginning to address issues such as bullying, student mental health, adolescent suicide, and school shootings. But beyond these extreme circumstances, social-emotional learning more broadly shows promise for improving the overall well-being and academic success of all students.

While there is experimental research linking particular classroom practices to improved outcomes, the literature lacks a comprehensive, practical knowledge base of the strategies that educators can use to support social-emotional learning. In particular, little is known about how whole schools can implement social-emotional learning or how districts can support them. Our study aims to expand this knowledge base by looking closely at ten “outlier schools” in California’s CORE districts that report strong social-emotional learning outcomes compared to other, similar schools. We chose schools that serve high proportions of African American and Latinx youth, that show strong social-emotional outcomes among these students specifically, and that also have relatively strong growth in academic outcomes.

This brief—based on a longer technical report<sup>i</sup>—describes the surprising breadth and variety of social-emotional learning practices found in these outlier schools. We also discuss the commonalities in their approaches to reveal lessons that may be applicable to other schools and districts.<sup>ii</sup> We highlight the most common challenges these schools face, and finally, we discuss how districts and other entities can support schools in implementing social-emotional learning.

**“ Whether a student’s parents are going through a divorce, whether they are having problems outside of the classroom, whether they’re having friend drama... What’s happening with them to allow me to make sure that they’re able to learn in my classroom? Because if they have a million things going on, then knowing when Rome fell doesn’t really matter. It really doesn’t.**

— Teacher at an outlier school

## What is social-emotional learning and why is it important for schools?

When the term *social-emotional learning* emerged in the 1990s, it meant acquiring the ability to manage the social and emotional aspects of one’s life, including self-awareness, control of impulsivity, working cooperatively, and caring about oneself and others.<sup>iii</sup> In recent years, the term has become associated with a broader category of beliefs, attitudes, personality traits, and behaviors—distinct from academic achievement—that are foundational for success in school and life.

Research has shown that social-emotional learning competencies such as self-efficacy, self-control, and growth mindset are powerful predictors of academic, social, economic, and physical outcomes.<sup>iv</sup> Research also shows that these competencies are malleable and can be influenced by school and classroom practices.<sup>v</sup> Some research suggests that social-emotional learning support can be especially important for traditionally underserved groups, such as African American, Latinx, and low-income students, who often are more likely to face unwelcoming school climates.<sup>vi</sup>

## CORE districts: At the forefront of social-emotional learning

In California, the CORE network of eight large, urban school districts has been working for many years to implement social-emotional learning at scale. CORE developed its unique, multiple-measures accountability system when applying for a waiver to the federal No Child Left Behind Act. In addition to a broad set of measures of academic and behavioral outcomes, the CORE system utilizes an annual survey that measures four specific social-emotional learning competencies (growth mindset, self-efficacy, self-management, and social awareness) and four areas of school culture-climate (support for academic learning, sense of belonging and school connectedness, knowledge and perceived fairness of discipline rules and norms, and safety). These data and others are used to monitor school performance and provide targeted supports to schools.

## How do outlier schools in the CORE districts support social-emotional learning?

In the ten outlier schools, we found a broad array of strategies for implementing social-emotional learning, falling into six general categories:



## 1. Strategies to promote positive climate and relationships

- *Whole-school culture-building strategies*, such as using the first two weeks of the school year intentionally to build school culture, promoting school values in messages around the school, or playing music outdoors between classes to foster a positive environment.
- *Promoting personal interaction to build trust and relationships*, for example by greeting students by name and shaking hands at the beginning of school or class.
- *Advisory periods* that provide teachers and students time to form relationships, learn social skills, discuss issues like bullying, and process difficult events happening on or off campus.
- *Organizing schedules and students to support relationships*, for example by offering bridge programs for students just entering the school,

Figure 1. Visual Cues for Inclusion and Equity



## 2. Supporting positive behavior

- *Positive behavior management and restorative practices* that help teachers focus on why a student acted out, help students develop more appropriate skills, and in some cases, mend damaged relationships between educators and students. Strategies range from formal, packaged programs to everyday strategies such as "cooling off" rooms where students can get support and avoid suspension.
- *Setting and enforcing clear values and*

“ Students don’t like to be corrected around their behavior, but they also don’t feel comfortable when there are no rules. They like structure. The best way that we saw fit was to make our expectations clear.

— Administrator in an outlier school

*expectations*, through direct instruction, specific programs or events, rewards systems for positive behavior, and visuals posted throughout the school.

- *Targeted approaches for struggling, at-risk, or historically marginalized students*, ranging from professional counseling, multi-tiered systems of support for struggling students, and programs meant to support equity, particularly for African American youth.

## 3. Elective courses and extracurricular activities

- *Elective courses* such as music or PE as opportunities to model good communication and group interaction skills, and to form trusting relationships between adults and students.
- *Student clubs* that specifically promote kindness, compassion, and positive behavior, with some clubs going further to support students facing trauma. Several schools also have leadership programs that teach students to model good behavior on campus, help other students, and mediate conflicts.
- *Afterschool programs and activities* (e.g., music, yoga, sports) that are intentionally designed to give students opportunities to connect with students from other backgrounds, form relationships with adults, or relieve stress.

## 4. SEL-specific classroom practices and curricula

- *Strategies for creating a positive classroom environment*, such as seating students in groups to reinforce norms of getting help from peers, taking on specific roles in a group, and learning to receive feedback.
- *Strategies for managing emotions*, such as permitting students to redo homework assignments and tests to reduce pressure and show students they can improve over time with consistent effort.
- *Modeling appropriate language and mindsets*, for example by providing concrete protocols for how students should communicate with one another or by coaching students to say "I can't do it YET" instead of "I can't do it."

## 5. Hiring, organizing, and training personnel

- **Staff leadership** teams charged with overseeing the behavior and school climate approaches at the school.
- **Use of non-instructional staff** in creative ways, such as staffing a “Listening Room” where students can find a trusted adult, training PE teachers as life coaches for frequently truant students, or explicitly recruiting staff members who are a good fit with the values of the school and the racial/ethnic makeup of the student body.
- **Opportunities for adults to learn about social-emotional learning**, such as professional development on topics like growth mindset; staff meetings where educators model the kinds of behaviors and language expected of students, or pairing experienced teachers with new teachers for coaching on social-emotional learning practices.

## 6. Measurement and data use

- **Use of CORE survey data to guide and improve school efforts**, often led by the staff leadership teams mentioned above.
- **School- or staff-led local data collection efforts** to provide more rapid or specific feedback, such as developing short student surveys, administered monthly, to track whether students feel safe, have friends, and have a trusted adult connection at school.

## What do all the outlier schools have in common?

*They build on existing assets, such as an established program or particular individuals.* For example, one outlier school uses a well-developed sports program as a primary vehicle for supporting social-emotional

learning; another uses its strong music program. In each school, an existing program was re-purposed to help build student confidence, promote teamwork, build positive relationships with peers and adults, and improve student attendance and motivation. The specific content of these programs seems to be less important than the fact that they are authentic to the school’s strengths and needs, are deeply embedded in the school culture, and are explicitly designed to advance social-emotional learning.

*They implement with intention.* Practices used to foster social-emotional learning and positive campus climate are implemented intentionally, not in a spontaneous or ad hoc manner. When formal programs are implemented, there are clear roles for staff, specific trainings, and purposeful rules and incentives. Appropriate levels of staffing and financial investment also appear to be important to success.

*They promote student agency and leadership.*

Educators in outlier schools believe that youth-led efforts help students engage and also promote positive behaviors and a school culture of trust and inclusion. Strategies range from buddy programs to kindness clubs and student-led lessons on respect.

## What are the challenges to implementing social-emotional learning at scale?

*Using a common definition of social-emotional learning.* We found wide variation in how educators define social-emotional learning. Some describe it as supporting student mental and emotional well-being, while others emphasize creating a safe and supportive school climate, developing social skills and behavior, supporting adolescent development, building a culture of inclusion and acceptance of difference, or addressing the needs of the whole child (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Six Categories of Respondents’ Conceptions



We also found misunderstandings about the meaning of social-emotional learning and conflation of the terms social-emotional learning (which refers to an individual's competencies) and campus climate (which refers to the school environment). If educators are unclear, imprecise, or simply lacking agreement about what they are trying to achieve, implementation will suffer.

**Achieving overall coherence and alignment.** Large schools are complex environments, making it challenging to implement consistent social-emotional learning strategies in every classroom—not to mention complementary strategies on the schoolyard, in afterschool programs, among non-instructional staff, in personnel matters, in parent/community meetings, and so on. In addition, it can be challenging for educators to understand their district's vision and connect it to their everyday activities in the classroom. In our study, we found that even some of the outlier schools struggle to achieve alignment and consistency of implementation. Schools' chosen social-emotional strategies are not always practiced consistently across classrooms and departments, and they are not always consistent with their district's vision.

**Integrating social-emotional learning with a school's larger improvement approach.** Some of the educators in outlier schools seem to conceptualize social-emotional learning as an independent strand of reform work, but it is possible that it may be more effective when integrated with a school's broader approach to improvement. First, many of the strategies detailed above are good for school improvement generally—treating them as part of a special initiative runs the risk of diminishing their importance and impact. Second, a school's larger improvement strategy sets the stage for implementing social-emotional learning. For example, if a school has broader improvement structures and routines already in place, school leaders can more easily build buy-in and train students and staff on new systems. Established trust and communication across administrators, staff, students, and parents can also facilitate the process. Each of these pieces contributes to authenticity and depth of social-emotional learning implementation, which we observed among those schools that had longer histories of improvement generally.

On the other hand, if schools are still struggling with basic problems regarding school climate and safety, they will need to address those first before implementing social-emotional learning. For example, one of the outlier schools previously had an entrenched problem of students roaming the halls during class time and non-students loitering on campus, undermining the learning culture and overall climate of the campus. As a first step, this school needed to establish basic rules for getting students into classrooms during class time and securing the campus. Once this basic need was met, the school was able to initiate more sophisticated efforts to support social-emotional learning.

## How can districts—and other entities—support social-emotional learning?

Our research of outlier schools suggests several ways that districts, counties, or other intermediaries/partners can support schools.

- As described above, more work is needed to help schools achieve a **common understanding of social-emotional learning** and to **align social-emotional learning activities**, both within a school and between the school and district levels. Certainly, this is an area where district leadership can make a substantial difference. In our study, we found the strongest conceptual and programmatic coherence in the district with the most comprehensive approach, which includes social-emotional learning standards for students and adults, use of the adult standards in personnel evaluations, use of social-emotional learning priorities and measures in school performance evaluations, relevant professional development, and financial investment in these social-emotional learning interventions. This level of formal alignment may be necessary to make social-emotional learning a true priority for school-level educators and bring coherence to varied practices and supports within a school or district.
- To advance social-emotional learning, it appears that schools and districts need to **invest in relevant staff positions and adult learning activities**. Sometimes these decisions are made at the school level, but often, district support is needed to fund school-level positions or professional development. In addition, districts can invest in district-level personnel who coordinate or support social-emotional learning, as several CORE districts do. All of the outlier schools we studied received some form of professional development around social-emotional learning topics.
- Districts—or other entities—can help by **measuring social-emotional learning outcomes** and **providing support to use the data**. The CORE districts have an annual survey to measure social-emotional learning outcomes and can use it to monitor school performance and provide targeted supports to schools. Districts use the survey data in a variety of ways: for evaluating school and educator performance, for public reporting to parents, and for grouping schools into cohorts for specialized training. As a result of these and other activities, administrators are quite aware of social-emotional learning outcomes and take them seriously.
- Districts can help schools **integrate social-emotional learning and racial equity efforts**. While many of the educators in our study approach their work with a strong equity orientation, not all connect their specific social-emotional learning strategies to their equity goals. As a result, schools

may be left with an incomplete or incoherent approach. This may be an area where district (or network) leadership can make a substantial difference, by addressing the issue head-on, inviting dialog, and explicitly articulating how social-emotional learning efforts relate to racial equity goals.

- Districts can **provide support to help schools integrate social-emotional learning and subject area content**—an area that even the strongest outlier schools are just beginning to explore. One CORE district has integrated social-emotional learning into its content standards. A few others have curricula that include or emphasize social-emotional learning topics. At the same time, some teachers in the outlier schools argue that social-emotional learning should be considered a pedagogical approach rather than a component of course curricula. Moving forward, policymakers and educational leaders could consider what content-specific social-emotional learning practice looks like and how to support it at scale.

## Conclusion

We found plenty of good news in our study of outlier schools. Educators are doing a great deal to support students' social-emotional development. Their approaches are numerous, creative, and varied, touching virtually every part of the school and school day. There is much more to learn about which particular practices are most effective, but one thing is clear: Schools in large, urban districts can achieve strong outcomes in social-emotional learning, including for African American and Latinx students. This offers hope that we can build stronger and safer learning environments for all students and help them develop skills for success in school and life.

For detailed findings and recommendations, please see the full technical report.<sup>vii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup><http://www.edpolicyinca.org/publications/sel-practices>

<sup>ii</sup>This study does not evaluate the impact of specific practices or strategies identified in the outlier schools, and we do not necessarily attribute the schools' social-emotional learning outcomes to these practices or strategies. Instead, this is an exploratory study intended to highlight specific practices that educators in outlier schools discuss as being effective.

<sup>iii</sup>Elias, 1997.

<sup>iv</sup>Almlund, Duckworth, Heckman, & Kautz, 2011; Bandura, 1997; Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Borghans, Duckworth, Heckman, & Weel, 2008; Duckworth, Tsukayama, & May, 2010; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Jackson, Connolly, Garrison, Leveille, & Connolly, 2015; Moffitt et al., 2011; Sklad, Diekstra, Ritter, Ben, & Gravesteyn, 2012; Strayhorn, 2013; West et al., 2016; Zimmerman, 2000.

<sup>v</sup>Almlund et al., 2011; Blackwell et al., 2007; Yeager & Walton, 2011.

<sup>vi</sup>Aronson, Cohen, & McColskey, 2009; Blair & Raver, 2015; Borman, Grigg, & Hanselman, 2016; Elias & Haynes, 2008; Strayhorn, 2013.

<sup>vii</sup><http://www.edpolicyinca.org/publications/sel-practices>



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