



# Social-Emotional Learning in the Early Years: Preparing Students for Success

By Sophie Barnes, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Research shows that high-quality early education and care has many benefits. Chief among these is the impact on young children's social-emotional development, which may be as important or more-so than traditional pre-academic skill development (e.g., number and letter recognition). The social-emotional benefit of such programs strengthens the argument for increasing public investments in high-quality early childhood education.

We must set children up to do well in the classroom and beyond, thus it is important to invest in early education and care programs that will promote social-emotional skill development and prepare students for success in school and life.

## Policy Context: Standards and Definitions

In Massachusetts, The Department of Early Education and Care is currently developing a set of preschool and kindergarten social-emotional learning standards. These standards are a high-priority. While Massachusetts excels academically and has had preschool learning standards since 2003, it is the last state to develop free-standing preschool social-emotional standards.<sup>1</sup>

The developing SEL standards in Massachusetts reflect the shift in the recognition of classrooms as a strictly academic environment to one that must foster "non-academic" success/social and emotional learning. These standards are supported by practitioners and a robust body of empirical work that highlights the necessity of fostering the social-emotional development of children.

The Massachusetts standards target five competencies, as defined by CASEL<sup>2</sup>:

- **Self-Awareness:** The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior.
- **Self-Management:** The ability to effectively regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations.
- **Social Awareness:** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and culture and to understand social and ethical norms for behavior.
- **Relationship Skills:** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups by communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, and resolving conflict.
- **Responsible Decision Making:** The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions.

### What is social-emotional learning?

According to the research and policy organization Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL),

"Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions."

### About the report

In spring of 2015, Strategies for Children worked with graduate student intern Sophie Barnes to understand the research base on social-emotional learning (SEL) in the early childhood years. Research shows SEL is important for children, serves as a foundation for a range of child outcomes (i.e. kindergarten readiness, academic performance, career-readiness), and is valued by employers. Investing in SEL for young children today will ultimately impact the economy of tomorrow.

Sophie's research experience at the graduate and undergraduate levels give her a depth of insight into this topic and have helped Strategies for Children expand its knowledge and capacity in SEL research and policy.

To learn more about the information in this research brief, contact Titus DosRemedios, director of research and policy at [tdosremedios@strategiesforchildren.org](mailto:tdosremedios@strategiesforchildren.org).

## Building Academic, Behavioral, and Social Foundations

The five social-emotional learning competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making), lay the foundation for academic, behavioral, and social success. Given the high number of children who enter kindergarten with low levels of readiness and without skills necessary to succeed, particularly in low-income populations, strong foundations are critical.<sup>3</sup> These foundations support the positive outcomes listed above. Furthermore, children who struggle and fall behind in kindergarten often continue to lag behind their higher-achieving peers, thus widening the achievement gap.<sup>4</sup>

- **School Readiness:** Targeting social-emotional skills can improve school readiness and success in kindergarten. This is evidenced by a randomized-controlled trial of 356 children from low-income families. The study found that a social-emotional intervention in preschool improved outcomes in reading achievement, learning engagement, and positive social behavior in kindergarten.<sup>5</sup>
- **Academics:** Children with stronger social-emotional skills, such as emotion knowledge and the ability to sustain attention, are more likely to succeed academically. A study of 91 Head Start children found that the emotion knowledge and regulation, a large part of social-emotional learning, predicted pre-literacy performance.<sup>6</sup>
- **Behaviors:** Behaviorally, children must learn how to regulate and manage their emotions and behaviors in the classroom environment. If a child is able to sit still and focus on the task at hand, more learning will occur.
- **Social:** Much formal and informal learning occurs through interactions with peers, teachers, and other adults, thus the ability to form and maintain relationships is critical to a child's success. Classroom relationships, especially those experienced between peers, can help children develop communication, problem solving, and social skills, which are necessary for school adjustment and long-term academic success. Furthermore, children who are engaged in mutual friendships are more likely to think positively about school and the learning process.<sup>7</sup>

Children must develop core social-emotional competencies in order to succeed in the complex classroom environment, both academically and socially. These skills are also important for positive outcomes beyond the classroom. In fact, there is growing evidence that these skills are crucial for college readiness and success as well as for a place in the increasingly competitive global labor market.

## Linking SEL Foundations to Child Outcomes

Social-emotional learning is linked to many critical short- and long-term outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

**Short-term** outcomes include:

- Improved grades and test scores
- Greater school engagement and commitment
- Higher levels of empathy and pro-social behaviors
- A more positive school and classroom climate
- Increased self-efficacy and confidence

**Long-term** outcomes include:

- Increased preparedness for post-secondary education
- Career success
- Better mental health
- Decreased antisocial behaviors
- Decreased substance abuse
- Positive and productive work and family relationships
- Decreased emotional distress, conduct problems, and risk behavior
- Active and involved citizenship

## Economic Benefits

In addition to improving the educational outcomes of children, there is a strong economic argument for supporting social-emotional learning and skill development. More prepared students and citizens can boost the economy by reducing costs related to criminal activity, both arrests and imprisonment, and by increasing levels of employment, thus generating new income.<sup>9</sup>

- The rate of return on investment for early childhood programs that improved “soft skills” is high. For example, the rate of return for The Perry Preschool Program is between 7% and 10% each year.<sup>10</sup>
  - “Soft skills,” are often described as the personality traits, motivations, and goals that are needed in the labor market.<sup>11</sup>
- Although interim outcomes, often measured by test scores, may fade out as other students catch up, early childhood education can have important impacts on later outcomes, such as earnings at age 27.<sup>12</sup>
- Nobel laureate Dr. James Heckman argues that IQ and other measures of cognitive ability do not measure the “soft skills” that are valued for real-world success such as perseverance, responsibility, organization, and conscientiousness.<sup>13</sup>

### Do test score effects fade? Re-emergence due to soft skills

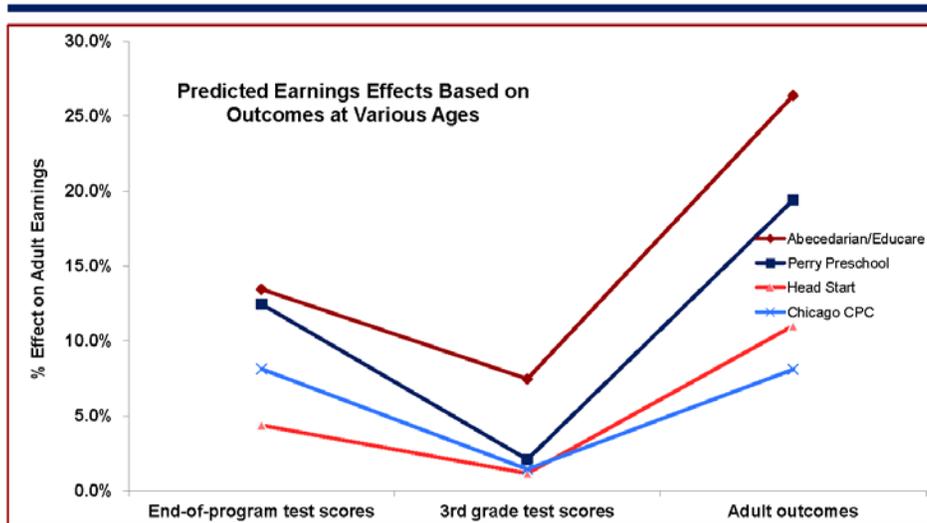


Chart source: Bartik, T. (2014). Figure 4.1. From *Preschool to Prosperity*. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

“This fading and reemergence of effects could be due to non-cognitive skills, which are important to adult earnings but harder to measure using standardized tests. Social skills and character skills are at least as important as cognitive skills in making a worker more employable and more productive.”

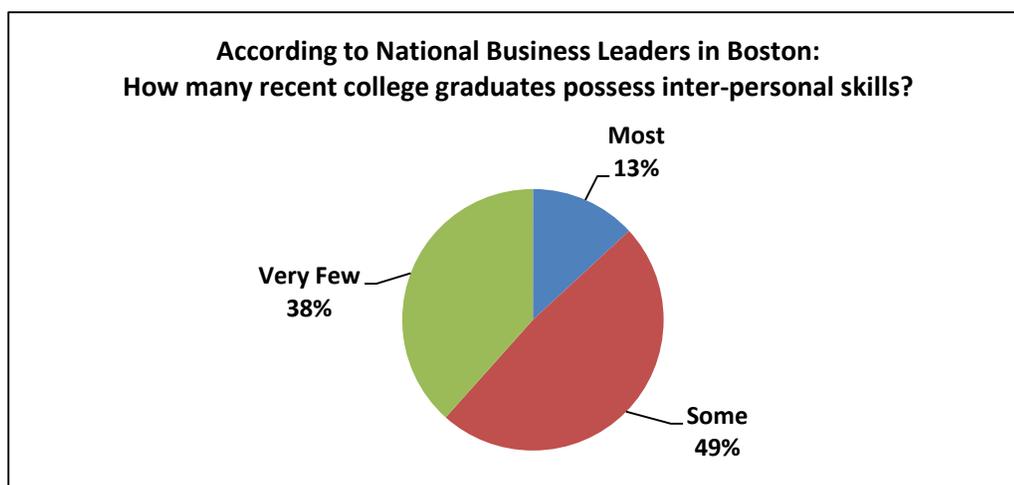
Timothy Bartik  
W. E. Upjohn Institute for  
Employment Research

## The Skills Gap

In light of an identified “skills gap,” which refers to a deficit in the needed skills for the U.S. workforce, business leaders are urging schools to cultivate “21<sup>st</sup> century skills” or “soft skills” such as self-management, inter-personal skills, and communication, that are crucial for college and career readiness.<sup>14</sup>

This skills gap is a national problem, but it is also highly problematic in Massachusetts. According to a poll of National Business Leaders in Boston:

- 64% of the National Business Leaders in Boston said that there is currently a skills gap in the U.S. workforce.<sup>15</sup>
- These business leaders ranked inter-personal skills as the most important skill for a recent college graduate.
- Inter-personal skills map closely onto many of the previously mentioned social-emotional domains, particularly social awareness and relationship skills.
- Communication skills and a strong work ethic were ranked as the next most important.



## Policy Recommendations

In light of the research supporting the necessity of fostering social-emotional skill development, there are many ways that the Department of Early Education and care, state legislators, and other policymakers can improve educational outcomes for children based on this knowledge.

- The state should **continue to invest** in high-quality early education and social-emotional programs across the Birth – Grade Three continuum. Policymakers should ensure that programs and supports are in place across a child’s developmental trajectory and that standards are aligned along the educational continuum.
- Practitioners will need adequate training and support in implementing these standards. Thus policymakers should support **professional development** programs that build the social-emotional capacities of teachers and early childhood educators, and teach how to foster these skills in children. The Department of Early Education and Care can build off its own history of SEL professional development, including its use of the CSEFEL Pyramid model statewide, supported with federal stimulus funding in 2009-2012.
- Expertise should be cultivated and valued in the field. While all teachers and early educators should have basic training, experts or **“master teachers”** could provide additional support or training. To facilitate this expertise, degree programs could expand their offerings to include social-emotional learning concentrations or degrees.
- The state’s education funding formula, known as **Chapter 70**, should address SEL learning. A Foundation Budget Review Commission has met throughout FY15 and is charged with making recommendations to the Legislature. The funding formula and its assumptions about the cost of education have not been thoroughly examined since the Education Reform Act of 1993, when educators and behavioral researchers had much less knowledge about SEL and its importance.
- It is widely understood that though SEL is important, it is harder to measure than basic academic skills (literacy and math). Although **assessment** is on the forefront of the minds of researchers and practitioners alike, it is important to stress that these standards are not regulations, rather they should be viewed as benchmarks meant to benefit teachers and students. However, investment in the development of an early childhood SEL assessment could help track children’s progress and ensure that the standards are best meeting the needs of children.

As mentioned, The Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) drafted Preschool and Kindergarten Standards for Social and Emotional Learning. EEC has engaged in a process of public feedback, revisions, and on April 14, 2015, the EEC Board voted to approve the Standards. Next steps include review by the Legislature’s Joint Committee on Education, Senate and House Ways and Means, for at least sixty (60) days prior to anticipated implementation. In addition, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education will review the standards for approval to use as an optional resource by districts that can guide curriculum, instruction, assessment and family engagement practices as well as professional development. For more information and a draft of the standards, see [learningstandards.wikispaces.com](http://learningstandards.wikispaces.com).

## About the Researcher

Sophie Barnes is enrolled in the Child Advocacy strand of the Human Development and Psychology program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and expects to graduate with an Ed.M. in May 2015. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Applied Psychology from New York University.

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