RECOMMENDATION

When schools and community organizations partner to support student’s academic and social emotional development, students reap the benefits in positive gains and equitable results supporting the whole child across the day and year. Policies and public funding should reflect this best practice encouraging partnerships and coordination in order to provide opportunities for children and youth to thrive both in and out of school.

A growing body of research tells us that today’s children and youth need opportunities to develop social emotional skills to thrive in school and be prepared for productive careers.

Social emotional learning is broadly understood as a process through which people build awareness and skills in managing emotions, setting goals, establishing relationships, and making responsible decisions that support success in school and in life.1 When we develop these skills, we improve our ability to form relationships and connect with individuals of diverse perspectives, cultures, languages, identities, and abilities helping to create more equitable and better performing schools and communities.

Expanded learning opportunities offered outside the traditional school day by their design have the flexibility to engage young people in hands-on, experiential learning that build these critical social emotional skills.

WHAT DATA SAYS ABOUT SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

In 2011, a team of researchers conducted a comprehensive meta-analyses of school-based universal social emotional interventions with findings that students receiving social emotional interventions improved significantly in social behaviors, academic performance, attitudes towards self and others, and conduct problems were reduced and emotional distress lessened.3

For three decades, School’s Out Washington (SOWA) has served a critical role as the expert and backbone organization working closely with programs offered outside the traditional school day. We work to ensure high-quality expanded learning opportunities offered afterschool and during the summer are available so all of Washington’s youth—but especially low-income youth and youth of color—have opportunities to thrive.

In Washington, SOWA led the process of developing a set of Quality Standards for the expanded learning field rooted in social emotional learning practices. These Standards provide a benchmark to guide youth development professionals in delivering quality programming with specific Standards on Cultural Competency & Relevancy, Relationships, Youth Leadership & Engagement all of which get to the heart of social emotional skill building.

Over 600 expanded learning opportunities in our state have participated in a continuous quality improvement process aligned to the Standards utilizing a validated, research-based assessment tool from the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. Through training and coaching support, SOWA helps programs identify and work towards quality improvement in specific areas.

Evaluation results show that over 90% of youth programs engaged in the quality initiative have shown improvement in one or more measured areas with the greatest gains in the areas of youth engagement and interaction.

In 2015, the Washington State Legislature directed OSPI to “convene a workgroup to recommend comprehensive benchmarks for developmentally appropriate interpersonal and decision-making knowledge and skills of social and emotional learning for grades kindergarten through high school that build upon what is being done in early learning.”

Based on this directive, the Social Emotional Learning Benchmarks Workgroup developed a framework with guiding principles, standards and benchmarks that provide the foundation and system for effective SEL programming. The workgroup includes members representing the education sector, expanded learning field, workforce development, family support, mental health and additional sectors providing perspectives from a whole child approach.

The workgroup has recommended to the legislature adoption of the framework developed over the past year, and continuation of the workgroup as a statewide advisory committee.

In 2017, Tacoma Public Schools and the Greater Tacoma Community Foundation received a grant award from the Wallace Foundation to support the Tacoma Social Emotional Learning Initiative. Tacoma is one of six cities across the country selected to engage in this project to support elementary school children, both during and after school, to develop positive social and emotional skills, such as self-control, persistence, teamwork and goal-setting, which are linked to success in school, career and life.