



SEL Helps Valued Outcomes to Happen: *Leveraging SEL to Enhance Existing Anti-Bullying Efforts*

Anti-Bullying Efforts and SEL Integration

Bullying is a common form of violence in schools, defined as a pattern of negative or aggressive acts by peers in which there is an imbalance of power. Bullying can take a variety of forms and can lead to a range of negative outcomes for individual students, while disrupting the learning process for everyone. Bullying can be either direct, such as hitting or name-calling, or indirect, such as excluding others or rumor-spreading. Bullying is a problem which is exacerbated through adult modeling of bullying behavior, and inadequate efforts to prevent it and address it when it occurs. Bullying incidents must be quickly and thoroughly addressed. Serious behaviors such as sexual or racial harassment, hazing, and sexual assault, also are more likely to occur when adults do not intentionally create environmental conditions that discourage negative behaviors and instead foster the development of positive relationships¹.

Social and emotional learning frameworks have been proven to foster positive outcomes in schools, including the creation of warm, supportive, and inclusive environments where stakeholders have developed important social and emotional skills. These conditions can help reduce bullying.

Anti-Bullying and SEL in New Jersey

In New Jersey, the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights requires that schools take certain actions to address, reduce, and prevent bullying². Foremost is developing a positive and inclusive school climate for all stakeholders that shifts student norms so that bullying isn't a typical occurrence or considered "cool." Improving school climate involves collecting data to better understand the school and local issues, providing training for adults, involving all stakeholders, building positive relationships between staff and students, and incorporating opportunities to engage in effective social and emotional learning and/or character development. The process requires identifying needs, creating a strategic plan, and monitoring progress over time, and is especially important on re-entry to schools this fall³. Integrating anti-bullying efforts with existing initiatives to improve school climate and/or incorporate social and emotional learning leads to efficiency and effectiveness⁴.

Comprehensive, research-based social and emotional learning approaches can be aligned with anti-bullying approaches and attempts to create conditions where negative behaviors are reduced, and prosocial behaviors are modeled and encouraged. When staff have opportunities to develop their own SEL competencies and adults model positive relationships and behavioral norms, it sets the stage for students to do the same. In schools that have committed to developing a supportive school climate and culture overall, stakeholders will be supported in developing and enacting SEL skills that reduce bullying and promote strong peer relationships.

How SEL Competency Development Reduces Bullying Behavior

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified five social and emotional learning competencies, also reflected in the [New Jersey Social and Emotional Learning Competencies](#), which when integrated across school life and instruction in comprehensive and developmentally appropriate ways, can reduce bullying and aggression and promote positive behaviors and relationships⁵. These are:

¹ [School Bullying Checklist, NJ Coalition for Bullying Awareness, Stuart Green](#)

² <https://www.state.nj.us/education/students/safety/behavior/hib/>

³ <https://www.nj.gov/education/roadforward/reopening/insecurities/index.shtml>

⁴ [School Bullying Checklist, NJ Coalition for Bullying Awareness, Stuart Green](#)

⁵ https://www.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/3_SEL_and_Bullying_Prevention_2009.pdf

SEL Competency	Definition	Connection to Anti-Bullying Efforts
Self-awareness	Accurately identifying one's own feelings, interest, values, and strengths	Students can respond in calm and assertive ways to conflict if they are able to recognize and manage their emotions. They are less likely to react in a retaliatory way to internal stressors or social conflicts, decreasing their own aggressive behaviors in reaction to others.
Self-management	Regulating one's own emotions to handle stress and challenges, expressing feelings constructively, setting and monitoring personal goals	
Social awareness	Developing empathy and perspective-taking of others, appreciating differences, and following community norms	In schools where social awareness is practiced, bullying behaviors are suppressed, and kind and inclusive of peers becomes the norm.
Relationship skills	Developing healthy relationships, managing conflict, seeking help when needed, and resisting inappropriate social pressure	Students with good relationship skills can resist social pressure and become upstanders, discouraging or diffusing situations involving aggression. Students with strong relationship skills know when seek adult help.
Responsible Decision-making	Acting out of concern and respect for others, understanding the consequences of one's actions, contributing to the well-being of all	Students can assess and think through situations effectively, anticipate the consequences of their actions, and solve interpersonal problems in a positive way.

Considerations for the Upcoming School Year

At the start of the 2021-2022 school year, the tensions of the ongoing COVID pandemic, equity issues, and other stressors will put a strain on New Jersey communities and may lead to increased presence of conflict and bullying among adults. Students may observe these behaviors and react to present conditions in similar ways if alternatives are not modeled.

All adults want students to experience excellent educational opportunities in positive and supportive environments, protected from the distractions and negative effects of bullying and negative behaviors. By integrating social and emotional learning along with mental health supports, adults in schools can provide opportunities for all stakeholders to become more aware of themselves and others during periods of stress, to replace negative interpersonal behaviors with positive ones, and to develop some of the key SEL competencies that will support all of us in getting through challenges that lie ahead. In addition, it is critical that parents, caregivers, and families are meaningfully involved in the design and delivery of school climate and SEL efforts, and that these efforts are taken in an equity-informed and inclusive way⁶.

Students also are continuing to grapple with the ways that the pandemic and associated uncertainties have affected traditional social norms, relationships, and socialization among peers. This disruption may lead to new opportunities for bullying and aggression. Shifting formats (e.g., in-person, digital, or cyberbullying) can lead students to engage negatively in various ways without the supports and skill development to do otherwise. Providing ample opportunities for students to share their experiences, concerns, and ideas will enable adults to best support their needs.

This information sheet was provided by SEL4NJ, the Social-Emotional Learning Alliance of NJ, a voluntary, grass-roots organization working with schools and communities to promote social-emotional and character development and supportive, engaging, inclusive, equitable classroom and school environments for learning. Prepared by Alicia Raia-Hawrylak, Ph.D., SEL4NJ Leadership Team Member. You can reach us at info@sel4nj.org and join at www.SEL4NJ.org

⁶ Gregory, Anne, and Edward Fergus. 2017. "Social and Emotional Learning and Equity in School Discipline." *Future of Children* 27(1):117-136.