



Statement before the House Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies  
On Social and Emotional Learning and Whole Child Approaches in K-12 Education

# The Trouble with Social Emotional Learning

Four major concerns regarding a burgeoning education industry.

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The Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) sector has grown dramatically in a very short period of time. From November 2019 to April 2021, SEL spending grew by 45% to \$765 million.<sup>i</sup> It is likely to soon become – if it isn't already – a billion dollar education industry. During that short time, the ideological character of SEL also changed substantially. It seems likely, if not inevitable, that SEL will therefore become the next elite vs. populist, or perhaps more conventionally partisan, conflagration in American public education. Reminiscent of the Common Core and Critical Race Theory controversies, with aspects of both rolled into one.

My research leads me to be far more concerned than excited for the prospects of SEL. I wish to make four points in my testimony. First, claims that SEL is “evidence-based” have been vastly oversold. Second, SEL has become an ideologically charged enterprise. Third, the data collection involved in SEL implementation poses major risks to the privacy of students and families. And fourth, even without the ideological turn and data privacy concerns, SEL implementation tends to resemble the practice of unlicensed therapy.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning is the single most important entity within the SEL sector. CASEL insists that SEL is “evidence-based.” They tout several meta-analyses suggesting benefits and promote the claim that a dollar investment in SEL yields an 11 dollar return.<sup>ii</sup> Certainly, there have been many studies – but how much do they actually tell us? A clear-eyed examination of research demands that we not simply take top-line findings as gospel, but that we examine studies for their internal and external validity.

Internal validity: How confident should we be that the study really says what it says it says? External validity: Does the subject of the study bear close resemblance to the programs it is used to justify? A 2017 RAND Corporation review identified 68 SEL studies meeting three tiers of evidentiary rigor.<sup>iii</sup> No studies within the top tier of evidentiary strength demonstrated

benefits to academic achievement. Only one study within the second tier found benefits to academic achievement. Studies categorized within the third, weakest, tier of evidentiary rigor showed benefits across a variety of metrics, and we could debate how much stock to put in them.

But the entire literature now also faces a major threat to external validity: In 2020, CASEL fundamentally changed the ideological character of SEL in 2020. Before 2020, SEL was a broadly bipartisan enterprise. In 2018, the DeVos Department of Education touted it in their school safety report.<sup>iv</sup> In 2019, the Aspen Institute released a report on the promise of SEL based on the findings of a bipartisan commission.<sup>v</sup> Why, then, did *The Washington Post* run an article last month titled: “In Social Emotional Learning, the Right sees Critical Race Theory?”<sup>vi</sup> Well, because in 2020, CASEL infused SEL with CRT-aligned ideology. SEL 1.0, as we could call it, focused on morally neutral student “competencies,” such as “self-awareness” and “self-management.” Back in 2019, it struck me as an unsustainable enterprise: a morality-free attempt at moral education. In 2020, those neutral competencies became value-laden – with values derived from the left-academic ideology popularly known as CRT. CASEL embraced this ideological shift under the name of “Transformative SEL.”<sup>vii</sup>

In “Transformative SEL,” “self-awareness” encompasses “identity,” with “identity” defined now through the lens of “intersectionality.”<sup>viii</sup> “Self-management” encompasses “agency,” with “agency” defined through “resistance” and “transformative/justice-oriented” citizenship.<sup>ix</sup> “Transformative SEL” also embraces “culturally relevant/responsive” pedagogy. This approach was pioneered by Gloria Ladson-Billings, the professor who brought Critical Race Theory to K-12 education.<sup>x</sup>

Whether or not one chooses to call the set of related ideological impulses that CASEL has embraced “Critical Race Theory,” they are clearly not morally or politically neutral. Indeed,

CASEL’s public documents and leadership statements suggest an open embrace of leveraging social and emotional learning toward political and ideological ends. In its “Roadmap to Re-Opening,” CASEL defines “self-awareness” as “examining our implicit biases,” and defines “self-management” as “practicing anti-racism.”<sup>xi</sup> CASEL’s former CEO, Karen Niemi, declared “we believe that our work in Social and Emotional Learning must actively contribute to anti-racism,” and that SEL can “help people move from anger, to agency, and then to action.”<sup>xii</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, author of *How to Be an Anti-Racist*, has declared that Critical Race Theory was foundational to his work.<sup>xiii</sup> Work that openly calls for racial discrimination to redress past injustices: “The only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination. The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Given that CASEL sits atop the SEL ecosystem and has embraced a partisan political agenda, it is not unreasonable for parents to suspect that the burgeoning, near-billion-dollar sector is *largely* an ideological enterprise. Whether that is a reasonable assumption, or whether it paints with vastly too broad of a brush, is difficult to know for certain at this point. There are a variety of programs and vendors who take a variety of approaches. Overall assessment of the ideological character of SEL is further complicated by the presence of programs and practices that go beyond CASEL, in terms of ideology, that come with the SEL label. For example, Parents Defending Education has publicized an example of an elementary school teaching gender identity ideology under the name of “SEL.”<sup>xv</sup>

Even parents who are broadly sympathetic to liberal ideology on race and gender may still be perturbed by the school surveys that have become central to SEL implementation. These surveys ask students highly sensitive questions about their mood, their beliefs, their family, and

even their sexuality.<sup>xvi</sup> Parents are not always informed about the nature of these questions, nor do they have strong reason to trust that the answers will remain private. Earlier this year, hackers stole personal information of over 820,000 students in New York City Public Schools.<sup>xvii</sup> If SEL encourages schools to create more robust and sensitive datasets on their students, we should expect further hacks and data privacy violations.

Even if the entire SEL sector recanted and uprooted its explicitly ideological components and could assure perfect data privacy, one fundamental problem would still remain. As my colleague Robert Pondiscio has argued in a recent AEI report, SEL in practice effectively asks teachers to act as therapists.<sup>xviii</sup> Without much legitimate training, teachers are encouraged to uncover and address “trauma,” to otherwise probe into students’ psyches, and to promote a holistic schema through which children comprehend their family and friend relationships. This is all well-intentioned – but could also go horribly wrong in a variety of ways. Suffice for now to say that there is a reason why medical ethics prohibits the practice of therapy by unlicensed and untrained individuals.

No one is opposed to the notion that it is good for students to develop social and emotional skills, or to the idea that schools have a role to play in the realm of human development. But many parents are – and I expect more parents will become – alarmed by, and opposed to, an effort to leverage the words “social and emotional” to promote ideological and political ends. And many parents will be perturbed by the resemblance of SEL practices to the practice of unlicensed therapy. Rather than uncritically embracing another buzzword fad and condescending to parents with serious and substantive concerns, policymakers should address the political, data privacy, and ethical concerns that SEL raises.

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- <sup>i</sup> Ariana Prothero, “Pandemic, Racial justice Fuel Surge in Demand for Social-Emotional Learning,” *Education Week*, October 22, 2021.
- <sup>ii</sup> Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, “What Does the Research Say?”, <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-does-the-research-say/>.
- <sup>iii</sup> Grant et al. “Social and Emotional Learning Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review.” Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2133.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2133.html).
- <sup>iv</sup> Betsy DeVos et. al, “Final Report of the School Safety Commission,” U.S. Departments of Education, Justice, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, December 18, 2018, <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/school-safety/school-safety-report.pdf>.
- <sup>v</sup> “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope: Recommendations from the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.” The Aspen Institute, 2019, [http://nationathope.org/wp-content/uploads/cde-practice-base\\_final.pdf](http://nationathope.org/wp-content/uploads/cde-practice-base_final.pdf).
- <sup>vi</sup> Laura Meckler, “In ‘social-emotional learning,’ right sees more critical race theory,” *Washington Post*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/03/28/social-emotional-learning-critical-race-theory/>.
- <sup>vii</sup> “Transformative SEL.” CASEL, September 9, 2021. <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/how-does-sel-support-educational-equity-and-excellence/transformative-sel/>.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*, p 169.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Ibid*, p 171.
- <sup>x</sup> Ladson-Billings, Gloria and Tate IV, William F. “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education. University of Wisconsin. <https://www.unco.edu/education-behavioral-sciences/pdf/TowardaCRTEduca.pdf>
- <sup>xi</sup> “Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Roadmap for Reopening School.” CASEL, August 23, 2021. <https://casel.org/casel-gateway-sel-roadmap-for-reopening/>
- <sup>xii</sup> CASEL. “CASEL CARES: SEL As a Lever for Equity and Social Justice.” YouTube Video, June 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPWmBA2274>.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Jason Johnson, “Critical Race Theory is a Convenient Target for Conservatives,” *Slate*, June 12, 2021, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/06/critical-race-theory-ibram-kendi-racism-racists.html>.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *How to be an Anti-Racist*, One World, 2019.
- <sup>xv</sup> Parents Defending Education, “West Hartford publishes ‘elementary social justice lessons standards and mentor texts,’ transgender content introduced in Kindergarten,” <https://defendinged.org/incidents/west-hartford-publishes-elementary-social-justice-lessons-standards-and-mentor-texts-transgender-content-introduced-in-kindergarten/>.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Sanzi, Erika. “Make intrusive school surveys ‘opt-in’ rather than ‘opt-out.’” American Enterprise Institute, March 9, 2022. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/make-intrusive-school-surveys-opt-in-rather-than-opt-out/>.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Elsen-Rooney, Michael. “Data of 820,000 NYC Students Compromised in Hack of Online Grading System: Education Dept.” *nydailynews.com*. New York Daily News, March 26, 2022. <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/ny-hack-illuminate-online-gradebook-compromised-personal-data-20220325-ahy3b3b3t5cjzajau63muqcnq-story.html>.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Pondiscio, Robert. “The unexamined rise of therapeutic education: How social-emotional learning extends K–12 education’s reach into students’ lives and expands teachers’ roles.” American Enterprise Institute, October 13, 2021. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-unexamined-rise-of-therapeutic-education-how-social-emotional-learning-extends-k-12-educations-reach-into-students-lives-and-expands-teachers-roles/>.