



School Counselors' Perspectives on Students' Social/Emotional Development: Highlights and Recommendations

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Foreword

We recognize the critical role of school counselors both in students' lives and in shaping transformation within school ecosystems. School counselors are champions for change while providing support and direction to students as they progress through school and transition to college and career.

ACT and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) are committed to supporting school counselors in their efforts to help meet the academic, career, and social and emotional development needs of all students. ACT and ASCA joined forces in a collaborative project to better understand the needs, challenges, and best practices of school counselors related to students' social and emotional development. To gain a broader view of the school counselor context, this project focused on perspectives from school counselors, school counselor educators, pre-service school counselors, and district directors. The findings further our understanding of school counselors' knowledge and application of social and emotional learning frameworks, how they develop students' skills through varied instructional methods, and the extent to which stakeholders support social and emotional learning. This project has resulted in recommendations to support school counselors in their efforts to help students develop social and emotional skills.

ACT's more than 60-year history with data and research helped power the project with expertise and insights into critical issues around student success, and ASCA's membership of more than 40,000 school counseling professionals brings valuable knowledge into professional development, as well as ways to enhance school counseling programs and school counseling practices. ACT and ASCA saw this project as an opportunity to support our mutual goal to further important research with school counselors and social and emotional learning.

Through collaborations like this, we hope to spotlight the important work of school counselors and the critical resources school counselors need to be successful. These resources are essential for leading school-wide social and emotional efforts and for providing necessary supports to all students, especially for students in under-resourced schools. We must advocate for social and emotional learning and effective strategies that meet our students where they are and ensure they are better able to fulfill their potential.

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Background

School counselors are absolutely necessary to student success. With the coronavirus pandemic exacerbating challenges already experienced by many students (e.g., digital access, mental health, behavioral issues), it has become even more imperative for school counselors to work to identify and address students' diverse social and emotional needs. School counselors understand that social and emotional growth is essential for student learning and for college, career, and life readiness. A growing consensus among educators, policymakers, and researchers suggests that social and emotional factors may be nearly as important as cognitive ability for education and workplace success.¹ These factors contribute positively to important outcomes such as GPA, high school graduation, school climate, number of disciplinary events, attendance, achievement test scores, job performance, job satisfaction, and health and well-being.² School counselors are pivotal in helping students develop social and emotional (SE) skills through school counseling programs. These programs are designed to help all students apply academic achievement strategies, manage emotions and apply interpersonal skills, plan for the future, and ultimately, be prepared academically, socially, and emotionally for any postsecondary options (higher education, military, workforce, etc.).³ Given the work of school counselors and the importance of SE skills for students, ACT and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) collaborated to identify school counselor perspectives, needs, challenges, and best practices related to the SE development of students.⁴

Social and emotional (SE) skills are defined as “individual capacities that (a) are manifested in consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, (b) can be developed through formal and informal learning experiences, and (c) influence important outcomes throughout the individual’s life.” Example SE skills are persistence, dependability, collaboration, empathy, helpfulness, problem-solving, stress management, planfulness, and flexibility.

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Skills for social progress: The power of social and emotional skills. OECD Publishing, 2015.

To gain a broader view of the school counselor context, we surveyed school counselors, educators who prepare school counselors, pre-service school counselors in training, and district directors with decision-making responsibility for school counselor staffing and resources.⁵ Survey items were tailored to each of these four participant groups, with a common focus on social and emotional learning (SEL) perspectives, models, practices, and professional development. Quantitative analysis was conducted for survey items having ordered categories (e.g., strongly agree, agree, etc.), and qualitative thematic analysis was used for open-ended responses.



This brief distills key findings from a more detailed study published by ACT.⁶ These findings further our understanding of school counselors' knowledge of SEL, show that a majority of respondents perceive these skills to be important, and reveal that school counselors develop students' SE skills through instruction both inside and outside the classroom, one-on-one and in small groups.⁷ The results also demonstrate that school counselors apply standards such as the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors⁸ for Student Success in developing students' SE skills. In addition, school counselors indicate that in-school stakeholders are more likely to support SEL than those outside the school. We recommend ways to support school counselors in their efforts to help students develop SE skills.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is

“the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”

For more information, see: *2013 CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs—Preschool and Elementary School Edition* (Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012).

School counselors know that SE skills are important

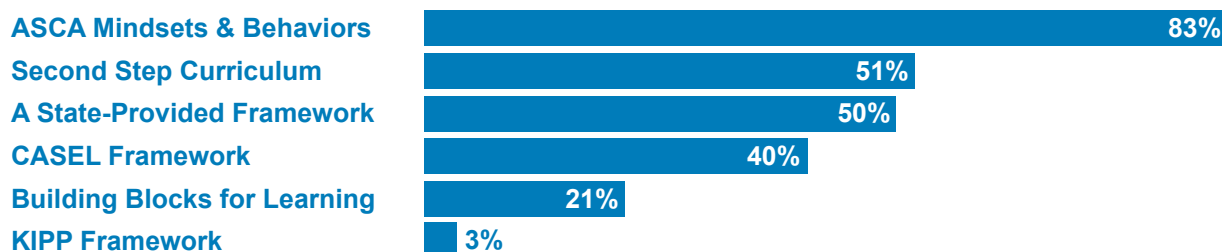
An overwhelming majority of survey participants agreed that developing students' SE skills is important. More than four in five (85%) school counselors reported being very interested in incorporating SEL into their programs. District directors indicated that developing students' SE skills was as important as (72.5%) or more important than (25%) developing academic knowledge for student success. Pre-service school counselors provided an almost unanimous perspective on the importance of SEL, with 91% of them reporting that SEL would be a very important focus of their future work. School counselor educators who prepare pre-service school counselors reinforced the importance of SE development in their school counselor education programs. Two-thirds of them (65%) indicated that their programs focus a great deal on preparing school counselors in training for developing the SE skills of K–12 students.



School counselors use SEL standards, frameworks, and curricula

SEL standards and frameworks inform which SE services school counselors provide to K–12 students. These include the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success, Building Blocks for Learning, CASEL Framework, the KIPP Framework for Excellent, and Second Step curriculum.⁹ When asked how knowledgeable they were about these SEL resources, the majority of school counselors indicated that they were very or moderately knowledgeable about at least one. The ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors was the most well-known resource, cited by more than four in five of school counselors (83%), followed by the Second Step curriculum (51%) and a state-provided framework (50%; Figure 1). There were differences in knowledge about the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors across participant groups.¹⁰ School district directors were more likely (59%) than pre-service school counselors (15%) to report they were very knowledgeable about the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors. Experience and training likely account for this difference. With all but one of the surveyed school district directors licensed as a school counselor, and about half of them (49%) in their current positions for five or more years, they are likely more familiar with ASCA standards.

Figure 1. School Counselors' (n = 263) Rating That They Were Very or Moderately Knowledgeable About SEL Standards and Frameworks

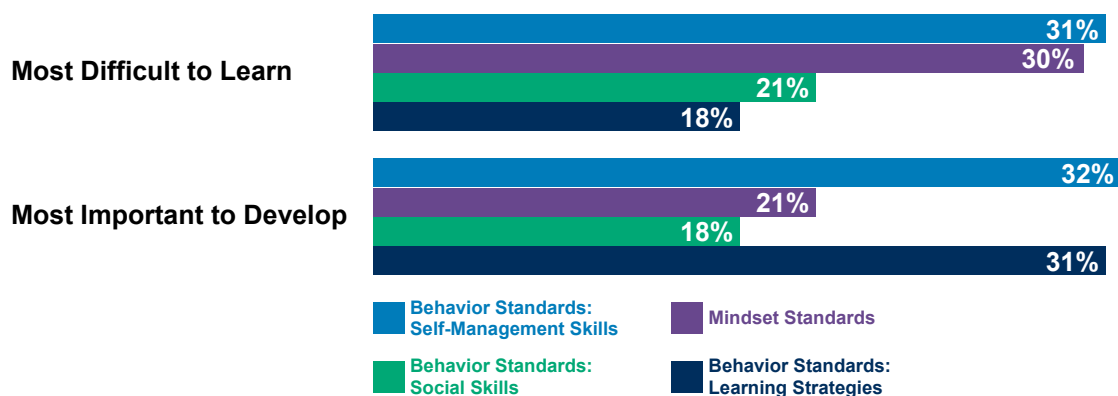


School counselors not only know about SEL resources but are also using them in their work. Nearly all school counselors (92%) used at least one resource to guide their work. The most well-known SEL resource, ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors, was also the most widely used, with three out of four school counselors reporting using it. The two primary sources that school counselors relied on for selecting mindsets and behaviors were needs assessments (45%) and whether there was alignment between the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors and state-specific standards (25%). When asked how easy it was to use SEL resources, a large majority of school counselors (ranging from 79% to 88%) reported that the SEL tools they used were very or somewhat easy to implement. The highest percentage (52%) of school counselors rated the Second Step curriculum as very easy to use, followed by the CASEL Framework (38%). It is important to distinguish between standards (ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors) and curricula as their respective characteristics may influence how easy they are to use. School counselors commonly used SEL standards, frameworks, and curricula when creating practice strategies or activities for developing students' SE skills. They also benefited from SEL resources that offer additional supports such as classroom curriculum and professional development, which make them easier to implement.

The most important ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors standards are the most difficult for students to learn

From the 35 ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors standards, school counselors selected the top five that students should develop and the top five that would be most difficult to learn. There was a moderately positive relationship between the most important and the most difficult standards selected ($r = 0.59$), indicating that school counselors considered the same standards both most important to develop and most difficult for students to learn. More specifically, among the four areas in the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors,¹¹ school counselors identified the standards for self-management skills as both most important to develop (31%) and most difficult for students to learn (32%; Figure 2). For standards important to develop, this was closely followed by the mindset standards (30%). For standards difficult to learn, this was closely followed by learning strategies (31%).

Figure 2. ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors Standard Areas Selected by School Counselors ($n = 199$) as Most Important to Develop and Most Difficult for Students to Learn



Note: Participants' top five choices were aggregated across the four areas.

Recognizing that students may experience challenges in learning certain SE skills, school counselors can use effective, evidence-based approaches to target the development of these critical SE skills.

School counselors use varied methods, strategies, and resources for building SE skills

School counselors who employ effective strategies and resources are better able to foster the development of students' SE skills. The three most popular methods with which school counselors delivered or reinforced SEL included one-on-one instruction outside the classroom (84%), instruction in the classroom (82%), and small-group instruction outside the classroom



(73%).¹² These results highlight that considerable SEL instruction occurs outside classroom settings, either with individual students or with small groups of students. In addition, the results correspond to the typical role of school counselors in providing instruction to students in classrooms, in large and small groups, and individually. Regarding in-classroom instruction, research has shown that SEL instruction is highly effective when integrated into ongoing classroom activities.¹³ Integrating SEL directly into the classroom setting provides the opportunity for students to apply newly learned SE skills more regularly in classroom situations.¹⁵

School counselors cited role play as the most common strategy for implementing SEL.¹⁴ Other strategies included games, mindfulness practices, coping strategy practices, and writing or coloring. Additionally, 44% of school counselors indicated that they used existing standards, frameworks, or curricula as resources. Other tools used by school counselors included online resources, videos, books and stories, visual displays, and forms and worksheets.

Time spent on SEL varies among school counselors

To deliver SEL to students effectively, school counselors must invest time into designing and implementing programs that support developing SE skills. Overall, slightly more than one-third (39%) of school counselors indicated that they spent 50% or more of their time on SEL. A similar percentage (35%) of school counselors spent 20% or less of their time on SEL. Elementary school counselors were more likely to spend a greater amount of time developing students' SE skills than high school counselors.¹⁶ An emphasis on SEL in early grades is well-timed as many younger students are just beginning to develop SE skills.¹⁷ In addition, school counselors in larger schools tended to spend less time developing students' SE skills than school counselors in smaller schools.¹⁸ School counselors serving higher numbers of students in larger schools may have less time available to focus on SEL.

School counselors receive support mostly from in-school stakeholders

Overall, school counselors reported that in-school stakeholders were more supportive of developing students' SE skills than out-of-school groups.

In-school groups

were defined as supportive groups that had regular direct interactions with students in the school environment, including teachers, administrators, support staff and paraprofessionals, and other school health professionals.

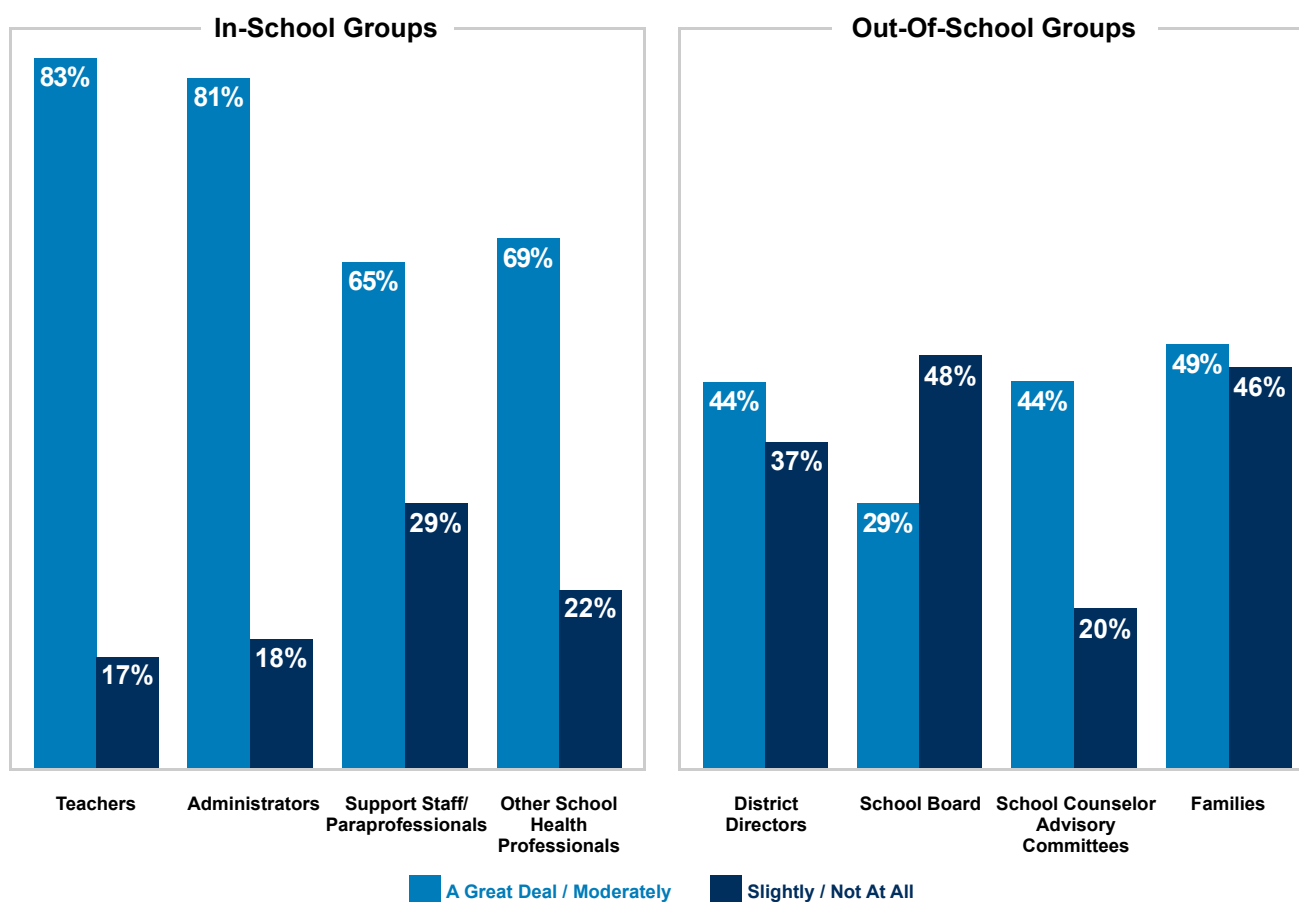
Out-of-school groups

were the supportive groups that also functioned as important stakeholders but were not typically engaged in daily interactions with students inside the schools, such as district directors, school boards, school counselor advisory committees, and families.



A large majority of school counselors considered teachers and administrators the most supportive in-school groups, with about half of school counselors reporting families and district directors as the most supportive out-of-school groups (Figure 3). However, school counselors expressed concern that other stakeholders overlooked the importance of SEL and commented on the challenges of not having the necessary buy-in for effective teaching and learning of SEL strategies.

Figure 3. Percentages of School Counselors (n = 263) Rating Perceived Level of Support for Developing Students’ SE Skills From Other Stakeholder Groups



Note: If the percentages for a group do not add up to 100%, it is because some participants selected “I don’t know” or “Not applicable.”

While less than half of school counselors (44%) reported that school district directors supported their efforts to develop students’ SE skills, most school district directors (88%) thought they advocated “a great deal” for resources to support school counselors in developing students’ SE skills. Perhaps the resources being provided are insufficient for school counselors to do their SEL work effectively, or other kinds of support (e.g., help integrating SEL into academic instruction, professional development opportunities) are needed from school district directors to change the perceptions of school counselors.



School counselors agree that involving families and teachers is critical

Given the ongoing, direct, and influential interactions that teachers and parents/guardians have with students, school counselors recognize these individuals as critical stakeholders in the SEL process. An overwhelming majority of school counselors (98%) considered it important for parents/guardians to be involved in helping their children develop SE skills. However, more than three-quarters of school counselors (78%) thought it was very or moderately difficult to involve them. The difficulty with involving parents/guardians was more obvious in lower socioeconomic status (SES) schools, where 90% of school counselors reported this to be very or moderately difficult, compared to 69% of school counselors in higher SES schools.¹⁹ Possible difficulties with involving parents/guardians may be lack of time due to other responsibilities within and outside the home, lack of awareness of the importance of SE skills, and lack of resources for developing SE skills at home.²⁰

School counselor efforts to communicate more with teachers and students' families throughout elementary, middle, and high school about the importance of SEL may increase involvement among these stakeholders. As SEL leaders, school counselors would be primed for developing collaborative relationships with teachers or families related to meeting the SE needs of their students.

School counselors request professional development in SEL

Nearly two-thirds of school counselors (63%) reported that they have received a great deal or a moderate amount of professional development (PD) related to SEL. At the same time, a large majority of school counselors (91%) thought they would benefit a great deal or at least moderately from PD in SEL. Some school counselors also indicated a need for more guidance on how to apply and implement SEL standards, frameworks, and curricula, such as the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors, in the classroom. They also welcomed more curriculum and activities based on specific standards or frameworks and directly applicable to students. Additionally, pre-service school counselors may benefit from additional professional training, particularly in areas where they indicated more limited knowledge, such as strategies, tools, and resources to help students develop SE skills.



Recommendations

Incorporate SEL initiatives into comprehensive school district plans. School counseling and school district professionals confirmed, via their survey responses, the importance of developing students' SE skills. However, the school system must support the development of these skills strategically and intentionally. It is recommended that stakeholders in the educational system work toward common goals by having school districts include agreed-upon SEL initiatives in their comprehensive plans and create vertical alignment of their goals and strategies throughout the K–12 experience. These plans must also consider the support school counselors and educators need to develop students' SE skills, such as SE curriculum, after-school programs, and professional development opportunities. Through these comprehensive efforts, stakeholders across elementary, middle, and high schools can better understand the relevance of SEL and more appropriately meet students' SE development needs.

Inform SE skill development with evidence. School counselors indicated that they employed needs-assessment data or state standards to help determine which SE standards to tackle. They used different types of evidence to inform decision-making and identify the most relevant SE skills and effective approaches to developing these skills. Additional evidence may be available through existing school or district data, such as attendance rates or the number and type of disciplinary incidents. To create a unified approach, stakeholders should establish which data (e.g., achievement, attendance, and discipline data) would shed light on the SE skills students need to develop and subsequently use the data to show improvement. The unified approach should describe the mechanisms through which to collect those data and explain how the data will be used in the decision-making process. It is important to emphasize that implementation of the plan should be tailored to the needs of the students and the school (for example, by grade bands and school size in SE knowledge, use, and needs).

Support professional development for school counseling professionals. It was reassuring to see that school counselors believed they would benefit from PD in SE skill development. Districts and schools should support opportunities for ongoing education and specialized training in the key SEL areas reported by the school counselors in this study. This training would focus on developing collaborative methods by which teachers and school counselors could integrate SE strategies and interventions into the classroom; develop methods for teaching learning strategies, self-management skills, and social skills; and model concrete examples for SE development. Additionally, opportunities to learn more about implementing evidence-based strategies for family and community engagement would be important, since this was both viewed as a benefit to students' SE development and reported as a difficulty in identifying effective ways to engage. This PD and training would serve both in-service school counselors and pre-service school counselors as they support the development of students' SE skills in schools.



Ensure school counselors lead SEL efforts within schools. Considering the limited time for SEL in schools, the varying amounts of support among stakeholders, and the difficulty involving families, our results suggest the need to emphasize the role of school counselors in delivering SEL education and interventions and serving as consultants and collaborators for all SEL efforts with other educators in their schools. As consultants, school counselors could lend SEL-related support to educators, keep up-to-date on the cutting-edge work of SE development, provide advice for action, and connect individuals across the educational system based on SE needs. As collaborators, school counselors could integrate their lessons with academic content or co-teach SEL lessons with teachers. As SEL leaders, school counselors could expand the perspective on who can engage in SE skill development and how SEL can occur in schools. There would be more opportunities for school counselors to increase awareness of students' SE needs among educators, families, and other school staff, and to use limited resources to address these needs more widely.

Promote the availability of and improvements to SE skill development supports through federal and state funding. School counseling professionals reported that they need additional support to effectively develop students' SE skills. Considering the call for support and the above recommendations, improving students' SE skill development requires state and federal funding. This would include funds for professional development opportunities, SEL-related resources to support students, SE data collection and management, and continuing research to identify best practices and curricula for developing students' SE skills. With the negative impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on students' academic growth, social and emotional development, and mental health, it is even more important for students to have increased access to high-quality, school-based SEL services.



Notes

1. Brent W. Roberts, Nathan R. Kuncel, Rebecca Shiner, Avshalom Caspi, and Lewis R. Goldberg, “The Power of Personality: The Comparative Validity of Personality Traits, Socioeconomic Status, and Cognitive Ability for Predicting Important Life Outcomes,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 2, no. 4 (December 2007): 313–345.
2. J. David Hawkins, Rick Kosterman, Richard F. Catalano, Karl G. Hill, and Robert D. Abbott, “Effects of Social Development Intervention in Childhood 15 Years Later,” *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 162, no. 12 (December 2008): 1133–1141; Damon E. Jones, Mark Greenberg, and Max Crowley, “Early Social-Emotional Functioning and Public Health: The Relationship between Kindergarten Social Competence and Future Wellness,” *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 11 (October 2015): 2283–2290.
3. *ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K–12 College- and Career-Readiness Standards for Every Student* (Alexandria, VA: American School Counselor Association, 2014).
4. “The School Counselor and Social/Emotional Learning,” American School Counselor Association, accessed April 23, 2021, <https://schoolcounselor.org/Standards-Positions/Position-Statements/ASCA-Position-Statements/The-School-Counselor-and-Social-Emotional-Developm>.
5. School counselors (n = 263), school counselor educators (n = 26), pre-service school counselors in training (n = 68), and district directors (n = 41)
6. Becky Bobek, Joyce Schnieders, Raeal Moore, Jason Way, and Jeremy Burrus, *School Counselors’ Perspectives on the Social and Emotional Development of Students* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2021).
7. School counselors were the largest group, and the response rate was not high enough for the other groups to warrant generalizations about their SEL perspectives. Further, self-selection into the survey limited the representativeness of the sample.
8. ASCA updated and renamed the Mindsets & Behaviors student standards in summer 2021. The ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success describe the knowledge, skills and attitudes students need to achieve academic success, college and career readiness and social/emotional development. Review the revision process here: <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/aaa85b20-de6b-4a7d-8ab0-74ccf9733168/summary-of-changes-21.pdf>
9. For more information, see the following: ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors (<https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/home/MindsetsBehaviors.pdf>), Building Blocks for Learning (<https://turnaroundusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Turnaround-for-Children-Building-Blocks-for-Learningx-2.pdf>), CASEL Framework (<https://casel.org/sel-framework/>), KIPP Framework (<https://www.kipp.org/approach/character/>), and Second Step Curriculum (<https://www.secondstep.org/what-is-second-step>)



10. A non-parametric test (chi-square test of independence) was conducted, and the difference between groups was significant at a .05 alpha level.
11. The four areas in the ASCA model were Mindset Standards, Behavior Standards: Learning strategies, Behavior Standards: Self-management skills, and Behavior Standards: Social skills.
12. Percentages do not add up to 100% because respondents could choose more than one response. An additional 14% said they had before- and after-school programs.
13. Rosemarie O’Conner, Jessica De Feyter, Alyssa Carr, Jia Lisa Luo, and Helen Room, *A Review of the Literature on Social and Emotional Learning for Students Ages 3–8: Teacher and Classroom Strategies That Contribute to Social and Emotional Learning (Part 3 of 4)* (Washington, DC: Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic, 2017).
14. Responses were given to an open-ended question.
15. Mary Ann Clark, and Jennifer Crandall Breman. “School counselor inclusion: A collaborative model to provide academic and social emotional support in the classroom setting.” *Journal of Counseling & Development* 87, no. 1 (2009): 6-11.
16. About 60% of elementary school counselors estimated they spent 50% or more of their time on SEL, while only 5% of high school counselors spent this amount of time.
17. Joseph L. Mahoney, Joseph A. Durlak, and Roger P. Weissberg, “An Update on Social and Emotional Learning Outcome Research,” *Phi Delta Kappa* 100, no. 4 (November 2018): 18–23.
18. About one-half (46%) of school counselors in larger schools estimated they would spend 20% or less of their time on SE skill development, compared to approximately one-quarter (28%) of school counselors in smaller schools.
19. The SES of schools was identified using the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch; a non-parametric test (chi-square test of independence) was conducted, and the difference between groups was significant at a .05 alpha level.
20. E. Patrikakou and R. Weissberg, “School-Family Partnerships to Enhance Children’s Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning,” in *Educating People to Be Emotionally Intelligent*, ed. J. Reuven Bar-On, J. G. Maree, and Maurice Jesse Elias (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 49–61; Patricia Van Velsor and Graciela L. Orozco, “Involving Low-Income Parents in the Schools: Communitycentric Strategies for School Counselors,” *Professional School Counseling* 11, no. 1 (October 2007): <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X0701100103>.





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