

SEL Smart Book

1st Edition | January 2025

Social
Emotional
Learning

WHAT IS IT? SEL

SEL (Social Emotional Learning) is an educational method developed between 1968 and 1994 at Yale University which transfers responsibility for children's personality development from parents to schools. SEL's curriculum emphasizes trauma and discourages self-reliance, leading teachers to de-emphasize academics in favor of emotions. It empowers administrators to shape how children relate to each other and their families, often at the expense of parents. It is also the vehicle, through its emphasis on trauma, for CRT (Critical Race Theory), which it justifies by saying that racial injustices create psychological trauma, stunting personality development. This makes it an entry point for many other ideologies like gender theory based on the connections it purportedly makes between gender discrimination and trauma.

Over the past twenty years, through the nonprofit CASEL and thanks to funding from the federal government and Liberal/Left philanthropies, SEL has become a presence in most public schools in the country and some private ones as well. SEL also receives unadvertised support from sources like the Fetzer Institute, which teaches New Age Spiritualism and Occultism and has links to socialist and Marxist thought.



Social Emotional Learning



How did SEL start?

1968-1995

Like a lot of bad ideas that hurt Americans, SEL started with tenured academics and establishment journalists.

Yale psychiatrist Dr. James Comer, its founder, set up a project in 1968 to address underperforming students in New Haven public schools by making schools responsible for their mental health, e.g. their “emotional intelligence,” meaning an education curriculum that didn’t just focus on traditional subjects (Math, English) but targeted the “whole child.” According to Comer, writing in Scientific American, this meant a “management team of about a dozen people led by the principal and made up of elected parents and teachers, a mental-health specialist and a member of the nonprofessional support staff.” They set up programs like a “Discovery Room” that “enabled ‘turned off’ children to form a trusting relationship with an adult” and a “Crisis Room” that “provided a refuge for children who were ‘out of control’”—with all of these judgments left to school representatives.

Statistics suggest that Comer’s program had no long-term effects in these neighborhoods, where the real problem was industrial job loss and its effects on kids’ prospects and attitudes.

But Comer gained important followers, chiefly Dr. Peter Salovey, a Yale psychology professor who founded the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and later served as Yale’s dean, provost, and president, stepping down in 2024.

In the 1990s, Daniel Goleman, a New York Times Science and Technology reporter who’d explored new age spirituality, got in touch with Salovey about Salovey’s work on emotional intelligence. Goleman eventually received funding for a book on the subject from the Fetzer Institute, which disseminated the teachings of Alice Bailey: a guru who preached a rigid curriculum of “spiritual growth” to guide people to “wholeness.”

Goleman’s breakout, 1995’s Emotional Intelligence, expanded Comer’s approach to preach a new gospel of educating every child to becoming “whole.” Comer thought that inner city kids acted out because they were emotionally affected by events at home. Using new research into actual trauma faced by returning soldiers and applying it to the classroom, Goleman argued that Comer’s model applied to all children because “the same circuitry” involved in PTSD is at work in “the more ordinary travails of



childhood.” According to Goleman, circumstances like “social rejection may never reach the fever pitch of trauma, but they surely leave their imprint on the emotional brain, creating distortions.” Since “distortions” in the brain could obviously affect learning, preventing them now became a legitimate task of schools.

This was despite the fact that the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) a publication by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) that classifies and diagnoses mental disorders, doesn’t endorse this expansive view of trauma; SEL practitioners are acting on their own.

But Goleman went further. Not only, in his view, did the complexities of brain “circuitry” require the expertise of schools. Equally, the stresses of modern life (two-

working-parent families; the influence of media and TV) meant that families weren’t capable of supporting their kids emotionally in the first place:

“as family life no longer offers growing numbers of children a sure footing in life, schools are left as the one place communities can turn to for correctives to children’s deficiencies in emotional and social competence...[using] tensions and trauma of children’s lives.”

Goleman’s work was a revolutionary shift for those academics and school professionals who would take a book by a New York Times reporter endorsed by Yale academics seriously. Suddenly, based on high academic and journalistic authority, child-raising was a matter for institutions not society.

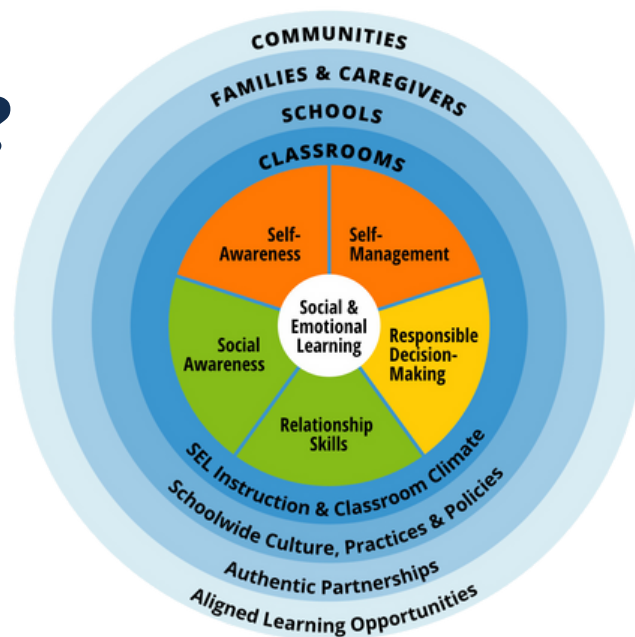
How did SEL spread?

SEL’s BACKERS: 1995-2004

Like a lot of bad ideas that affect Americans, SEL spread from universities and journalists via nonprofits, philanthropies, Democratic state governments, and the federal government. The flagship program was the nonprofit CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), where Daniel Goleman was a founder as was a member of the Fetzer Institute.

CASEL’s contribution to SEL theory was to create a framework for SEL implementation. The framework has five competencies which it claims will teach children to make them more successful in life. The competencies are self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-

making, relationship skills, and social awareness. Additionally, the framework has four outer rings: classrooms, schools, family and caregivers, and communities. It’s not a coincidence that classroom and schools are the first two rings—emotional development, in this view, starts in the classroom.



CASEL's contribution to SEL practice was to funnel money and connections into its nationwide spread. Funding came from Left-of-center philanthropic foundations like the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the NoVo Foundation, the Gates Foundation, and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. These foundations have an obvious interest in SEL: teaching kids to “manage their emotions” based on feedback from administrators is good for training future workers at highly-managed companies like Meta. CASEL also helped inspire different versions of SEL: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs); the Neuro-Sequential Model in Education (NME); Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS); Responsive Classroom; and Building Assets Reducing Risks (BARR).

CASEL's Democratic political connections helped drive the spread. A founding board member of CASEL was Linda Darling-Hammond, an academic education specialist based until recently in Chicago who headed the Education transition team for the Obama White House. One of SEL's biggest supporters, who has connections to both Peter Salovey and Linda Darling-Hammond, is longtime Leftist Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro (D. CT), who grew up and lived in and whose district includes New Haven, where Yale is located. During the budgeting process for 2022, when schools received unprecedented funding for SEL, the Department of Education's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Local, State and National Engagement, was Aaliyah A. Samuel, who months later became the president and CEO of CASEL. A year later she released a statement praising the Biden Administration's funding of SEL, which she'd lobbied for as president and CEO, without acknowledging her past role in the Administration.



SEL's DOMINANCE AND ITS ADOPTION OF CRT:

2004-2025

Funding from Illinois Democrats and then by Illinois resident-turned-President Barack Obama was what pushed SEL, at first via CASEL, into a real powerhouse. In 2003-2004, Illinois became the first state to adopt SEL standards, “as part of their curriculum and daily school life” meaning that “students are expected to meet certain benchmarks, such as recognizing and managing feelings, building empathy and making responsible decisions.” But the landmark moment was 2014, with ESSA, the Every Student Succeeds Act. Meant to revise George W. Bush's sprawling No Child Left Behind Act, which had been attacked by small-government conservatives, and



return control over education to the states, ESSA came with federal strings: 10 percent of its \$4 billion funding was allocated through at least six channels to SEL. To get more funding, in other words, schools had to commit to CASEL.

And the real boom came after 2020, when, in the wake of the COVID pandemic and racial unrest, the Biden Administration funneled money into SEL: \$122 million in 2021 alone. The Department of Education’s reasoning was to help kids cope with the year’s “trauma,” especially related to the race riots over the death of George Floyd. This was based on SEL’s 2019 expansion of Goleman’s definition of causes of trauma: now racism and sexism were added to the list; or rather, “systemic racism/oppression” as a legitimate cause of trauma. Enter CRT (Critical Race Theory).

In a nutshell, Critical Race Theory is the idea that America is systemically racist/oppressive and this status quo is maintained to sustain a white supremacy dominant culture. People who believe this theory work to expose what they believe is racism/oppression in every situation. This ideology uses identity politics (race, gender ideology, sexual preference, socioeconomic status, etc.) to divide people into groups of oppressed vs. privileged. The praxis of CRT

influences people to identify against each other and to view American history as defined by oppression.

Social Emotional Learning uses a method of instruction called Culturally Responsive Teaching (the other CRT.) This method filters lessons through a Critical Race Theory viewpoint to purposefully engage students in conversations that critique society as systemically racist/oppressive. Culturally Responsive Teaching was coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings, a self-proclaimed Critical Race Theorist, and activist. She explains that using this method develops a critical consciousness for students that challenge inequities (systemic racism/oppression) that institutions perpetuate. Teaching to create a “critical consciousness” is a theory developed by Paulo Freire, a Marxist, revolutionist who believed education was the way to advance the Communist agenda.

In 2019, CASEL funneled this instruction into SEL by changing SEL’s core competencies to include CRT by changing the delivery of these competencies: teaching children to adopt the skills through an “equity lens,” aka the viewpoint of a critical race theorist, as well as oppression theorists of other kinds. Based on this change, Linda Darling Hammond, one of SEL’s founding

board members who had moved from Chicago to Stanford, led the California Board of Education in recommending that teachers talk to kindergarteners about gender identity. Also, CASEL praised California schools for “adopt[ing] holistic policies that support SEL and equity” including “support for transgender/nonbinary students in athletics and in all school spaces.”

Dividing people by identity and convincing them that only national institutions can protect them from identity-based discrimination is good politics for Democrats. It’s not a coincidence that the husband of Rep. Rosa DeLauro—whose district, again, encompasses New Haven and who is publicly associated with both Yale President Peter Salovey and Linda Darling Hammond—is married to Stanley Greenberg: the Democrats’ most powerful political pollster since the 1980s based on preaching exactly that identity-based gospel. What could be more attractive to these players than getting their message direct to people at their most vulnerable age—as kids?



WHAT DOES SEL LOOK LIKE IN SCHOOLS?

SEL has changed the priorities of administrators competing for federal funding. In areas as distant from Yale and Washington and Chicago as the Quad Cities, four superintendents listed Social Emotional learning as either top or near top of their education priorities. One of these superintendents was competing for “a federal, four-year \$3.8 million grant to expand and conduct SEL projects at the high school.” Superintendents like the one of Minneapolis Public Schools spent six years there garnering national attention by making SEL one of the top four priorities in the system’s 72 schools. What does this funding actually do?

One of many grants to Minnesota Public Schools, provided by the NoVo Foundation supports daily Wellness Checks on students “integrating . . . trauma; restorative justice; and maintaining good mental, physical, and community health.” A grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation supports regular school walkthroughs by CASEL teams to measure progress. Minnesota Public Schools funds one PhD who studies SEL implementation along with a CASEL-funded PhD. And it supports SEL off the efforts of the District’s Chief of Accountability, Research, and Equity as well as through its Equity and School Climate Department.

In Missouri, Alive and Well Communities, a statewide nonprofit which contracts with the Missouri Department of Education, has as its goal “re-orienting the trauma-informed movement . . . to recognize the trauma caused by...anti-Black racism and white supremacy...” Under this influence, some Missouri districts have stopped suspending students for substance abuse and instead referred them to counseling.

Not surprisingly, these programs haven’t improved schools. Minneapolis’s superintendent and super-SEL booster stepped down in 2022 after being nearly ousted by his school board in response to parental frustration over declining literacy rates; that year, families left the district for private and charter schools while teachers went on strike. In Ferguson-Florissant, the site of the 2014 Ferguson riots which received Alive and Well’s curricula and instructional sessions from its staff, 9 percent of high schoolers are proficient in math, and 32 percent are proficient in reading. One mother said that 42 fights had broken out at one of the high schools in the last school year, and teachers staged strikes or de facto walkouts over violence and drug use. Finally, research from even Leftist analysts has recently shown that trauma-based learning makes kids traumatized, rather than freeing them from trauma.

WHAT DOES SEL LOOK LIKE ON THE GROUND?

CASEL's trauma-informed practices to prevent children's misbehavior are meant to be proactive. This means universal screeners are used to psychologically profile children as a way to target "at-risk" students. School counselors, teachers, and administrators use the data from the screeners to implement increased interventions for anyone whom they determine may need additional mental health support. The universal screeners are often given to students as a questionnaire/survey and the questions can appear harmless.

One example of a universal screener question is "Do you ever worry?" The student would use a scale to indicate the extent that they worry. Depending on where the student ranks compared to the other students, they may be chosen to receive additional support. This could include group interventions or individual sessions with school counselors who support an extremely progressive ideology including gender fluidity and the sexualization of minors. Incredibly, school counselors have the power to determine if withholding this information from the parent is in the best interest of the student.

The student data collected from these screeners are managed by private contractors working with schools who then feed the information back, creating a statewide data system that exists long after students have left school. Many of these screening questions include family details, on the theory (dating back to Comer) that family dynamics at home affects kids' behavior in schools. So family information is now being transmitted, permanently, to states and Washington, D.C.

Given this lack of transparency, the best way to find out what's actually going on with SEL on the ground is first person testimony from practitioners, teachers, and intrepid parents who dig deep. [Kristine Strachan, a mom in Oregon, had the presence of mind to screenshot the lessons her son was being taught during remote learning during the COVID pandemic](#), showing how SEL and CRT have eroded actual teaching:



Sample Morning Lesson Plan for Oregon 5th Grade Student, showing SEL related content prioritized over academic learning.

9:00am – 9:30:

Community Circle

- Review SEL [Social Emotional Learning] lesson – Create a “Heart” that has things in it that describes you in pictures, drawings and words. It should be in color. (This will be included at the end of your Culture Bag/Google Slides) DUE 9/25
- Review & continue Google Slides (Culture Bag. Remember that you were going to include information in your culture bag that Uses the cultural iceberg.) DUE 9/25
- 9/22/20 Check-in – Assignment to be shared during class on canvas.

9:30am – 10:00:

- Race & Racism – finish Lesson 2
- Race Justice – begin Lesson 3

10:00am – 11:00:

- Math Lesson #3 (Highlighting Cultural Assets)
- Worktime for Dreambox lessons.
- (if time permits) Number String

12:00pm – 1:00:

- Growth Mindset discussion/videos
- Reading Identity – Assignment to be shared during class on canvas. (Lesson #2)
- (if time permits) Google slide/cultural bag worktime

Strachan also found material that showed the ways in which gender and sex equity was being moved into the school day via an emphasis on trauma. These included the dissemination of materials in advisory class under the heading Erin’s Law, an Oregon bill passed in 2015 mandating that public schools “implement a prevention-oriented childhood sexual abuse program” through, among other techniques, “narrating emotional experiences” and “emotional regulation.” Along similar lines was a “Breaking the Silence” activity, where students were given the option to “[not] talk to anyone for the day until your chosen . . . activity.” Activity suggestions included “reading a poem aloud about the discrimination you’ve faced” or “joining GLSEN’s (Gay and Lesbians Independent Teachers’ Network) rally being held via Instagram.

Matthew Sanchez, a Minneapolis Public Schools social studies and homeroom teacher who’s supportive of SEL, made much the same point in a different tone when he told a Minnesota newspaper that “he never knows when he’ll need to pivot and change the direction of his class” since “I’ll be up at my desk, teaching . . . and a

kid will come up and out of nowhere talk about this incident of encountering severe personal violence a few years ago.” Sanchez was describing a new approach: traditionally a child that displayed significant behavior concerns would be supported individually but under SEL the entire class must be involved in the intervention; this way, they can learn empathy and “put themselves in their classmates’ shoes.”

A St. Louis teacher who wishes to remain anonymous because she opposes SEL reports that these “pivots” affect both school and home. She’s seen students tell her excuses along the lines that “I couldn’t finish the homework because mom and dad were fighting, so I was dis-regulated.” This creates rifts between children and parents, especially minority parents who work in blue collar jobs or service jobs, who may not have finished high school themselves and who are both intimidated by and alienated from SEL. “I get along well with the parents of the kids I deal with,” the teacher says. “I feel just like them; I can sense their frustration with the district and their intimidation.”



Arguments

1. The Partisanship Angle

a. Based on its supporters and funders, SEL is a Left and Liberal project based out of Democratic nonprofits and Democratic politicians in Washington, D.C. Regardless of your politics, schools receiving taxpayer funds shouldn't be pushing partisan agendas not approved by voters.

2. The Profit Angle

a. Judged solely on the metrics, SEL is a for-profit initiative. Schools create positions to focus on SEL, and entire nonprofits are created to feed it into schools.

3. The Results

a. Self-generated trauma, acting out in school, making excuses for poor performance, and tensions in families are all results of SEL.

4. Who's Left Behind?

a. Judging by reports, the people most turned off by this are the people whom SEL should help, since it's a program provided mostly by public schools: working class parents alienated by SEL's jargon, which creates rifts between them and their children.

Actions

1. The National Government

- a. Write, tweet, or lobby via M4L the current administration to stop federal funding for SEL in schools, as well as any funding directly or indirectly going to nonprofits which practice SEL.

2. State Legislatures

- a. Write or call your state representatives urging them to pass legislation stopping their state Departments of Education from disseminating any SEL material in schools.

3. School Districts—THE MOST IMPORTANT

- a. Republican governors like Missouri’s try to “pass the buck” to local districts to handle SEL in the name of local control. These school boards are the ground zeros of the fight
 - i. Research the SEL program your school uses and expose the radical agenda.
 - ii. Attend all school board meetings and stop any contracts or grants that extend the use of SEL programs.
 - iii. Choose to have your child “opt-out” of school screeners.

FURTHER READING

SELECTED SECONDARY SOURCES: CRITICISMS OF SEL:

Leila Centner, A Miami Private School Leader, Speech at TPUSA's AMFEST 2022 about Fighting SEL

Dr. James Lindsay, An academic and philosophical expose of SEL and the Fetzer Institute, New Discourses

Matt Wolfson, The Origins of SEL, Compact Magazine (paywalled)

Matt Wolfson, Reports on SEL's infiltration of states, cities, and school districts in **American Thinker**; Beck & Stone's **CREATED**; and Restoration of America News (Parts **One**, **Two**, and **Three**)

Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff trace how the use of "trauma" outstripped any official psychological definitions in The Coddling of the American Mind
A Takedown of Trauma-Based Learning from the Left, (As in, "even some on the other side see the harms...")

SELECTED PRIMARY SOURCES: SEL PRACTITIONERS' WRITINGS AND SYMPATHETIC NEWS REPORTS:

Dr. James Comer's report on the first SEL program in Scientific American (paywalled)

The SEL "bible": Daniel Goleman's book Emotional Intelligence (mostly paywalled)

Details of ESSA Funding of SEL beginning in 2014

Details of Biden Administration funding of SEL in 2021-2022, 2023, 2024

News reports from Chicago (paywalled), St. Louis, and St. Paul and Minneapolis on SEL in the classroom

Radical Underground member and Obama supporter Bill Ayers's endorsement of Linda-Darling Hammond for Secretary of Education

Linda Darling-Hammond's testimony before the U.S. Congress, panel chaired by Rep. Rosa DeLauro

Rosa DeLauro and Yale President Peter Salovey

Stanley Greenberg's book, GOP, RIP, laying out his plan for an identity-based permanent Democratic majority (mostly paywalled)

M4LU.ORG

