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# **SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING DURING COVID-19 AND BEYOND: WHY IT MATTERS AND HOW TO SUPPORT IT**

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## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING DURING COVID-19 AND BEYOND: Why It Matters and How to Support It

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**FEBRUARY 2021**

As schools continue to engage in the monumental work of educating students during a pandemic, resources are invariably overextended. Teachers are working around the clock to modify instruction for virtual and hybrid delivery, while students are struggling to keep pace with their coursework. Schools are, and will be, understandably anxious to catch students up academically as they return to classrooms. As educators pursue the best strategies for success, social and emotional learning must be a fundamental cornerstone. Indeed, social and emotional skills—from maintaining composure to pursuing goals to working effectively as part of a team—are absolutely essential for success in the classroom, as well as longer-term success in the workplace and in life.

Unfortunately, social distancing during the pandemic is greatly exacerbating a challenge that digital media use has already wrought on the current generation: limited opportunities for social and emotional learning and reduction in social and emotional well-being. Though virtual platforms have given children and youth the chance for some form of socially distanced connection during COVID-19, research shows that it cannot take the place of face-to-face interaction for building social and emotional skills (Giedd, 2012; Uhls et al., 2014). Children need social and emotional instruction, practice, and feedback during sustained interaction and collaboration. In contrast, time spent on devices is linked to lower self-control, more distractibility, less emotional stability, and more difficulty making friends (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). Social and emotional development was in peril prior to the pandemic. After this time apart, it will take systematic, intentional, and intensive efforts to get social and emotional learning back on track.

### SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and youth learn and apply prosocial skills in five core competence areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Weissberg et al., 2015). These are the skills that young people need in order to effectively recognize and manage emotions, follow directions, work well with others, plan and achieve goals, and make responsible and caring short- and long-term life choices. In short, these are the skills that contribute to success in school and the workplace, as well as physical, mental, and interpersonal well-being (AEI/ Brookings Workgroup on Poverty and Opportunity, 2015). Moreover, SEL that targets cultural understanding, community-building, and collaborative problem-solving can shift school climate, enhance effective communication, and reduce racial and socioeconomic learning inequities (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Borowski, 2018).

Though SEL provided through the educational system may appear to compete with time for academics, considerable research shows that SEL is in fact a cornerstone necessary for both academic and career success. Children with higher teacher-rated social competence in kindergarten are more likely to graduate, attend college, and have a job 20 years later. They are also less likely to receive public assistance, have criminal justice involvement, or report mental health challenges in young adulthood (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015). These findings clearly support the broad influence of social and emotional development on life outcomes. Indeed, SEL skills influence educational attainment, employment, and earnings as much, or more than, academic achievement measured by standardized tests (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011). But can interventions successfully teach these skills and replicate these effects with young people who do not already display social competence in kindergarten? An overwhelming body of literature suggests that they can.

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A meta-analysis of 213 school-based universal SEL programs in K-12 found that introduction of these programs produced an average achievement gain of 11 percentile points on standardized tests, equivalent to the average effects of intensive academic interventions (Durlak et al., 2011). By addressing social and emotional skills rather than purely academics, however, SEL programs have a much broader scope of impact in addition to achievement gains. On average, school-wide SEL programs are associated with significant improvements in self-esteem, attitudes about school, and positive social behavior. Likewise, these programs are associated with reduction in conduct problems, bullying, delinquency, depression, and anxiety (Durlak et al., 2011; Smith & Low 2013).

These are not short-lived effects: follow-up studies completed an average of three to four years after SEL implementation show that gains not only last, but may grow. Achievement scores for K-12 students who received SEL instruction were an average of 13 percentile points higher three and half years later, in comparison to similar students with no SEL instruction. Likewise, programs remained protective against conduct problems, mental health concerns, and substance use (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). SEL programs also have measurable effects on real-world outcomes into adulthood: six percent increase in high school graduation rates, 10 percent increase in college attendance and graduation, six percent reduction in criminal justice involvement, and significant effects on income and job stability (Taylor et al., 2017). At a population level, these outcomes result in an incredible financial payback of at least \$11 in measurable benefits for every \$1 spent on SEL instruction (Belfield, Bowden, Klapp, Levin, et al., 2015). Clearly, an investment in childhood SEL

has striking benefits at both the individual and societal levels across the lifespan. Given this mounting evidence, many districts are beginning to align and embed SEL within academic content to ensure there is time for both and to aid in interdisciplinary application of skills (CASEL, 2018).

### WHY THIS MATTERS NOW, MORE THAN EVER: THE COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL IMPACTS OF COVID-19

Universal SEL instruction has proven overwhelmingly beneficial in normal times—it is now an urgent need. The COVID-19 pandemic has simultaneously introduced new stressors and removed comforting connections and routines in the lives of children, teens, and adults alike. In addition to the many students who have lost loved ones to the virus, students may be struggling with concerns about health and safety, social isolation, or the difficulties of learning remotely. They may worry about food insecurity or stable housing as unemployment rises. They may be carrying an added burden of anxiety amidst the increasingly tumultuous racial and political climate. They are certainly missing out on innumerable cherished events and activities with families, friends, classmates, and teammates.

All of this ongoing stress and loss will predictably take a toll on mental health, social connections, and emotional well-being. Indeed, economic downturns alone are linked to increased mental health difficulties for youth, likely due to impacts on household stress, adult mental health, and the corresponding increase in child maltreatment and intimate partner violence associated with economic recession (Golberstein et al., 2019). Though research on the mental health effects of the pandemic is just beginning, early studies suggest large-scale challenges. A study from China found a 76 percent increase in depressive symptoms in children and youth during pandemic quarantine (Xie, Xue, Zhou, et al., 2020). In the U.S., 14 percent of parents in a national sample have reported worsening behavioral health for their children since the pandemic began, with that number increasing to 40 percent for a sample of children quarantining at home (Patrick et al., 2020; Rosen et al., 2020). Similarly, the CDC found that between April and October 2020, the proportion of mental health-related emergency room visits increased by 24% for children aged 5-11 and by 31% for adolescents aged 12-17, as compared with the same time period in 2019 (Leeb et al., 2020). It is likely we will not know the full scale of COVID-19 mental

Information on evidence-based SEL curricula can be found in the CASEL guides to effective social and emotional learning programs:

■ **Preschool and Elementary School Edition:**

<https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/2013-casel-guide-1.pdf>

■ **Middle and High School Edition:**

<http://secondaryguide.casel.org/casel-secondary-guide.pdf>

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health repercussions for months or years to come. Due to how our brains and bodies react to stress, there are pandemic-related universal impacts on our mental health that aren't necessarily clinically significant but can still influence our health, well-being, and capacity for learning.

COVID-19 brings countless challenges and potential threats to well-being: physical, economic, social, and emotional. When a cue in our environment signals a possible threat, our bodies react by releasing stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. This begins the survival response of “fight, flight, or freeze,” which prepares us to take some form of self-protective action. These chemicals work by providing us with the energy and motivation to fight back, run away, or freeze like a deer in the headlights. In moments of immediate danger, these reactions may be lifesaving. Unfortunately, they also affect our thoughts, emotions, and physical well-being in ways that are not always useful in day-to-day life—especially school. First, stress hormones increase feelings of anxiety and aggression, disrupt sleep, and increase physical symptoms like headaches and stomachaches. Second, these chemicals significantly weaken activity in the “thinking” parts of the brain that manage concentration, problem-solving, learning, and impulse control. So, in times of pronounced or prolonged stress, teachers are left with students who are emotionally distressed, tired, and chemically restrained from fully engaging the thinking and learning parts of their brains. Student impulse control and attentional focus are limited. And all of this is equally true for the teachers, meaning students aren't able to retain information as effectively and simultaneously aren't being taught as effectively. Though this stress response has the potential to impact learning for all students, those from homes with higher stress and/or instability are at the greatest risk. As a result, schools are likely to see growing achievement gaps, particularly based on socio-economic status, in the months and years following the pandemic.

Over time, neurochemical reactions from a dysregulated stress response system can be literally toxic to neural connections in several brain regions. These changes in brain structure and function can cause long-term impairments in memory, attention, mood, decision-making, and impulse control (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012; van der Kolk, 2005). For children and adolescents, these neurobiological changes can, predictably, interfere with school functioning (Alisic, van der Schoot, van Ginkel, & Kleber, 2008; McLaughlin et al., 2013).

## STRUCTURING SEL IN EDUCATION

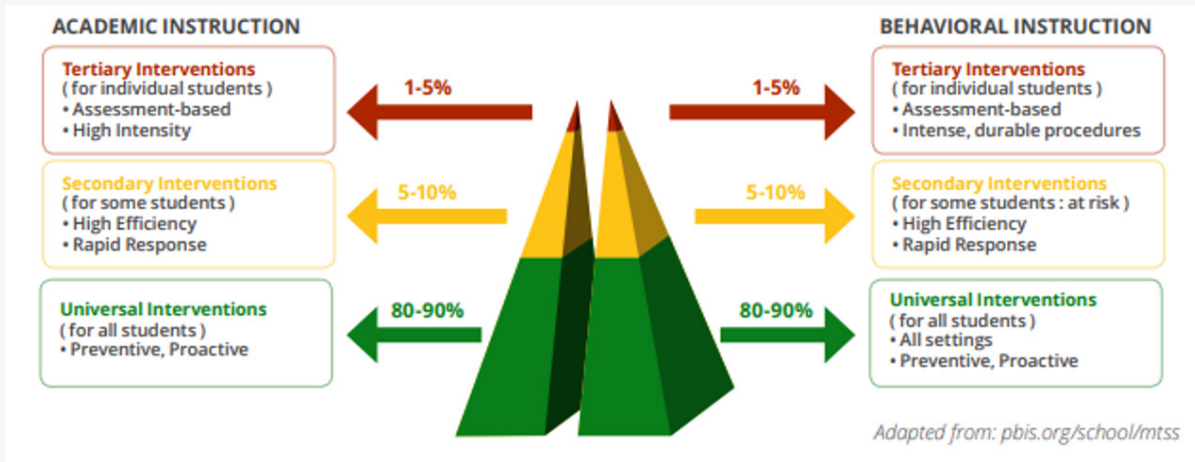
SEL is urgently needed as a means of teaching skills to connect with others, calming the stress response system and re-engaging the thinking brain so that students are capable of learning. At the same time, SEL is not just for struggling students—it can be a universal core instruction to build a common skill set and positive school culture, with a focus on proactive wellness promotion and self-regulating behavior and emotions. This universal approach creates a foundation of mutually reinforcing skills that improves prosocial interaction and resilience to stress for all students. Teachers and students alike strongly support the inclusion of SEL as an integral component of education. Ninety-five percent of teachers believe that SEL skills are teachable and important to teach in school as a foundation for academic and lifelong success (Civic Enterprises et al., 2013). Students not only report a preference for schools that provide SEL instruction, but experience significant differences in school climate as a result—high school students from schools with strong SEL programs are twice as likely to report that students get along well and teachers are supportive and respectful (DePaoli et al., 2018).

Increasingly, SEL in schools is structured within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. MTSS provides a model of instruction for all students within a school, spanning the content areas of both academics and social and emotional skills development. Ideally, MTSS includes universal screening to identify the level of instruction needed, tiered interventions that respond to level of need, and ongoing assessment to monitor progress. The first MTSS tier is universal, with core instruction provided to all students across the school (e.g., grade-level math instruction or school-wide SEL curriculum). Tiers two and three increase support to meet level of need, providing academic or SEL intervention in small-group or individualized settings (e.g., support from a math specialist or SEL small group with student support staff). The MTSS framework recognizes SEL as an educational need analogous to the development of academic skills like literacy: both require universal instruction on a hierarchy of skills that build in complexity over time, along with practice and coaching from supportive teachers as new skills are tackled. Some students will take longer to learn the skills of both literacy and SEL, but extra support and intervention can assist



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**MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT (MTSS) FRAMEWORK**



them in achieving mastery. In the end, for both, the goals are skill fluency that enable success across life domains.

Moreover, the MTSS framework recognizes that SEL skills are a co-requisite for learning academic skills and content. One must be able to manage impulses and regulate emotions, focus attention, follow rules in the classroom, and persist on difficult tasks in order to achieve academically. It also helps to be able to get along well with classmates and teachers. When SEL is left out of the equation, academics are bound to suffer.

**IMPLEMENTATION MATTERS**

As states, districts, and schools consider their SEL action plans, it is important to note that not all strategies are equally effective. For instance, SEL programs that are optional or targeted only to certain students will do little to alter the overall school culture and behavioral norms. Even more important, however, is the issue of implementation. Frequently, given limited time and competing priorities, SEL resources are delivered to teachers as a list of strategies, a manualized curriculum, or a single training, with little to no follow-up on the “how” and “why” of implementation. Teachers may be left to learn the materials on their own and deliver as they choose. With that lack of structure, teachers may vary considerably in the amount and quality of instruction they deliver. That variability makes a difference in outcomes, with strong program implementation resulting in significantly larger student benefits (Durlak et al., 2011).

Regardless of implementation challenges, universal SEL curricula achieve larger effects when delivered directly by classroom teachers, particularly with regard to academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). Student support staff, like counselors and social workers, should deliver tier two and three interventions to students with identified need for more intensive services, but teachers themselves are best for tier one. When teachers lead SEL instruction and discussion, they become more engaged in the material and are more likely to weave ongoing skills coaching throughout the entire school day. They are also able to plan lessons that support academic and SEL curricular components simultaneously, such as discussing social and emotional factors in literature or historical events.

To reap the full benefits of SEL strategies, schools will need more than just a curriculum—they will need for teachers to experience the benefits of SEL themselves through modeling and practice. They will need high-quality teacher preparation and training paired with ongoing monitoring, reflection, and coaching. They will need for SEL practices to become ingrained within the mindset of the educators and culture of the school. Effective SEL initiatives will incorporate all these components, shaping teacher behavior and school climate right alongside student skills and behavior (Brock, Nishida, Chiong, Grimm, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Brown, Jones, LaRusso, & Aber, 2010; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008). The simple fact, though, is that teachers are already dealing with social and emotional issues in their classrooms every day. SEL planning and training can provide them with the information and skills

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they need to do so more intentionally and effectively. Ultimately, the behavioral gains that result will leave them with more time for academic content.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPING SEL AS A STATE- LEVEL PRIORITY

The following resources provide a state-by-state look at SEL policy indicators and legislation:

■ **CASEL State Scan:**

<https://casel.org/state-scan-scorecard-project-2/#info>

■ **Table 1, page 6 of the Collaborating States Initiative Emerging Insights Brief, 2020:**

<https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CASEL-CSI-Emerging-Insights-Brief-2020.pdf>

■ **Social and Emotional Learning Bills by state, summarized by Committee for Children:**

<https://www.cfchildren.org/policy-advocacy/bills-we-track/social-and-emotional-learning-bills/>

To date, at least 20 states have adopted SEL standards for education through the end of high school, with equivalent adoption rates by Democrat- and Republican-led states (Committee for Children, 2020). This suggests that SEL is an education strategy with bipartisan support, along with rapidly growing state-level attention. State leadership is critical in developing the shared vision and sustainable policy and practice needed for effective and equitable SEL within public education. This effort begins with making SEL a statewide priority, both in word and action. The following recommendations present current best practices for setting a state-level agenda around SEL, with the goal of preparing each student for success in their education, their workplace, and their community (drawn from findings in AEI/Brookings Working Group on Poverty and Opportunity, 2015; CASEL, 2019; Yoder et al., 2020).

1. Convene and support cross-sector working groups to develop an SEL vision statement, organize SEL planning, and lead ongoing policy and practice initiatives
2. Conduct a landscape scan to learn about current SEL programs, initiatives, and needs within each district.
3. Communicate SEL as a statewide priority, both to educators and community members. Consider launching a state-specific website to share the importance of SEL along with guidance and resources to support SEL implementation.
4. Support statewide adoption of PreK-12 SEL competencies or standards, with age-appropriate benchmarks to guide learning goals. This lays the foundation and roadmap for instruction, assessment, and intervention within an MTSS framework, in parallel with academics.
5. Support inclusion of SEL and mental health screening tools in school data collection and monitoring. This ensures that SEL is a prioritized area of instruction and intervention, based on student-specific strengths and needs.
6. Develop state-specific implementation guidance and resources for SEL. This might include lists of vetted practices, evidence-based curricula, and validated screening and assessment tools from which schools can select. State-level working groups might specify implementation best practices, along with trusted resources for support or consultation.
7. Align financial and human resources to support effective SEL.
  - a. Allocate funding that districts can use to implement and scale evidence-based SEL curricula.
  - b. Increase funding for student support staff positions to lower the ratio of students to counselors/social workers. This will be particularly critical in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, when a larger number of students are likely to need intensive social and emotional instruction, support, and intervention.
  - c. Identify funding streams for co-location of mental health services within schools. Co-location greatly increases the likelihood that students will receive and complete counseling when they have mental health needs (Jaycox et al., 2010).
  - d. Support and sustain SEL implementation teams at state and district levels to provide technical assistance and promote best practices.
8. Reflect on data for continuous improvement. This means monitoring SEL implementation as well as student

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outcomes in social and emotional wellness, behavior, and academics to identify successes and areas for change.

9. Engage the business community in supporting state and local SEL initiatives. Social and emotional competency is crucial to an effective workforce, so these stakeholders may find SEL investment particularly rewarding in the years to come.

### CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought enormous stress and systemic upheaval to our schools, staff and students alike. We can anticipate (and already see) significant emotional, social, behavioral, and academic challenges to result from these many months of crisis. Even when schools are able to return to operations as normal, it is going to take quite some time to overcome the disconnection and address the developmental gaps caused by spending so much time socially distanced from one another, and under conditions of considerable stress and anxiety. Indeed, without purposeful intervention, the delays caused by pandemic conditions could easily result in long-term detriment to academic, workplace, interpersonal, and mental health outcomes.

To return students and staff to the calm, connected, and self-regulated state that they need as a foundation to learning, SEL instruction and coaching is going to be more critical than ever. We have the opportunity to rebuild school communities to be stronger social and emotionally and academically if we intentionally and systematically target universal SEL within the context of structured, consistent, and caring staff-student relationships. If we invest in SEL for all students, research tells us that the benefits will far outweigh the costs.

### SPOTLIGHT ON SEL PRACTICES IN NORTH CAROLINA DURING COVID-19

North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction has joined the CASEL Collaborating States Initiative to work towards a strong state-level SEL plan. This work includes:

1. Strengthening SEL competencies and capacities for all educators so that the work is woven throughout the school day;
2. Promoting adoption and implementation of evidence-based SEL programs;
3. Supporting SEL integration with academic standards, including specifying PreK-12 SEL competencies; and
4. Creating a state-level SEL data evaluation plan to monitor SEL implementation and student outcomes.

As part of this work, educators have access to free online courses on SEL practices as well as assessments and materials from CASEL resource centers. Though this work is ongoing, school assessment data collected by the state show growth in the use of SEL assessment and curricula, even in the face of virtual learning during the pandemic.









Data from a recent survey of educators from 12 elementary schools and three middle schools across North Carolina tell a similar story. District and school staff are painfully aware of how challenging these last eight months have been, both for students and staff, and many have responded by shifting SEL and staff wellness to the top of the priority list. Creative strategies for SEL instruction, relationship-building, and student outreach have been the result. The most common approaches to keep SEL strong during the pandemic have included the following (all of which can be offered virtually or in person):

■ **Relationship Building:** To settle the stress response system so that students feel safe, supported, and ready to learn, the most foundational student need is a caring, consistent relationship with the teacher. When asked about their current strategies for supporting social and emotional well-being, the top priority listed was one-on-one connections with students online or by phone or email. Several schools are also using "wellness clubs," where students and staff can connect around shared interests and hobbies.


■ **Morning Meetings:** As the name suggests, these are classroom discussions typically held in the morning to allow students to connect, check in with the teacher, share how they are doing, and work towards building a sense of community. These less formal discussions also give students a chance to practice (and receive teacher coaching on) social skills like taking turns, listening respectfully, considering other perspectives, and following class rules for group behavior. Though they can be more challenging to manage virtually than in person, teachers reported that this time has been invaluable to maintain relationships, give students a chance to share their feelings, and learn what additional supports each student might need. With both in-person and virtual

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learning, morning meetings are most successful when the school's schedule devotes a set time for school-wide implementation.




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**Structured SEL Curricula:** Across elementary and middle schools, the most common SEL approach is direct instruction using a structured curriculum, typically delivered by the teacher but sometimes facilitated by student support staff like school counselors. Schools reported a range of instructional frequency, from once a week to daily, offered during morning meetings, lunch, or other breaks in the academic schedule.
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**Coaching SEL Skills throughout the school day:** Many teachers also noted that they are spending more time scaffolding student social and emotional skills during group work and class discussion time in an effort to provide intentional practice and feedback, both online and in person.
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**Brain Breaks:** Short breaks in instruction, with structured activities or games, provide an ideal way to teach and practice coping and wellness skills, as well as strategies for re-engaging when attention begins to wane.
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**Mindfulness Apps:** Many teachers are building in short mindfulness moments throughout the day to encourage stress relief and self-regulation.
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**Online Calm-Down Space:** Teachers have found or created online spaces that include resources to support calming down, similar to a calm-down space in a classroom. Students can temporarily "visit" these spaces when they need a moment to settle, and then return to the larger group after a few minutes.
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**Staff Communication:** Staff meetings at some schools have intentionally built in time for sharing information about students who might need extra support or outreach. This process facilitates communication so that all teachers have the information needed and students do not fall through the cracks.
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**Formal Referral Mechanisms:** Schools have implemented student and parent wellness surveys, as well as online referral/self-referral systems, to better identify those students who need extra support.
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**Individual and Small Group Interventions:** For students with more significant pre-existing or new social and emotional or mental health needs, schools have transitioned individual and small group interventions

to virtual platforms, as needed, to continue offering enhanced support from school counselors and social workers.

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**Other Strategies:** include mentoring programs, affirmations, SEL tips during morning announcements, fun connection activities, shout-out days and celebrations, virtual recess, encouraging students to exercise and spend time outside, art projects for self-expression, reading/discussing books about feelings and character traits, and implementing reflection journals where students can share experiences and express their feelings.

As critical as these strategies are during COVID-19, they will be equally valuable to maintain for staff and student wellness as schools gradually transition back to in-person learning. This time of pandemic instruction has been an enormous upheaval to our educational systems. With this upheaval, however, has come a wealth of new strategies, skills, and heightened awareness of the importance of relationships, connection, and equity. These experiences can inform ongoing state planning, and certainly provide a ready environment for moving the state SEL agenda forward.

### Resources:

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 NC SEL Newsletter: <https://www.smores.com/7hp69>
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 NC MTSS website: <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/districts-schools-support/integrated-academic-behavior-systems>
- 
 NC MTSS Implementation Guide: <https://www.livebinders.com/play/play?id=2052295>

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