

# THE SUCCESS OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING: BUILDING “CRITICAL MASS”



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### SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IS FOR ALL

Early childhood, primary and secondary curriculum frameworks, including ACARA, today incorporate personal (emotional) and social skills (SELs) as an essential aspect of student learning. However, schools must be ready to teach social-emotional skills and values to all students and not just those who present as “at-risk”, “welfare” or with behavioural problems. SELs are essential aspects of education in order for students to be able to take responsibility for their own learning and achievement, behaviour and emotional health.

### BUILDING “CRITICAL MASS” FOR SEL SUCCESS

I have visited hundreds of schools over the years that have chosen You Can Do It! Education (YCDI!) as their school-wide student wellbeing program. During my

visits, I discovered that some schools are implementing YCDI! more successfully than others. By success, I mean most students at the school demonstrate the five YCDI! SEL keys of confidence, persistence, organisation, getting along, resilience and positive attitudes (e.g., self-acceptance, working tough, optimism). This insight comes from what students say about their use of the five keys and the significance of their thinking in determining how they feel and behave. Feedback confirmed this when I meet with parents who describe the changes they have observed in their children’s behaviour and happiness.

In schools ineffectively implementing YCDI! programs, I discovered common characteristics. In these schools, apart from lessons taught from, Program Achieve, YCDI’s core curricula, the students were not immersed in the language and culture of YCDI! during academic learning and outside of the classroom. The lack of a school-wide

immersion of SELs applies to the success of any SEL program. While the core SEL skills and attitudes can be successfully introduced to students in their SEL class time, reinforcing and using these ideas throughout the school day (and at home) is the key.

I remember witnessing an example of a missed opportunity for reinforcing SEL skills outside the scheduled SEL lessons at a school heavily committed to teaching YCDI! in the Northern Territory. Students were taught Program Achieve lessons twice a week in their tutor groups. However, staff expressed frustration that YCDI! was only benefitting their “better” students, not those who were struggling. In the afternoon, I observed a physical education class where the coach handed out uniforms and prepared the school’s footy team for an upcoming state-wide competition. Not once did the coach take this opportunity to discuss with and remind students that the keys to success in playing football had a lot to do with the 5 key SELs of confidence, persistence, organisation (goal, setting, time management), teamwork and resilience.

Does everyone at your school need to contribute, or can critical mass be built by a few SELophiles? The evidence here is clear.

Every day, everyone needs to play a part. With what I call “collectivity,” a critical mass will be built that will result in a steep increase in the developmental SEL trajectory of all students. So, don’t dodge this initiative. It is too important.

How will you know when SEL has achieved the critical mass needed to impact your total student population? You’ll see that you have been successful when you observe all students using the language of SEL and walking the talk. And when this day arrives, I can assure you that all staff members will experience collective goosebumps.

## KEY PRACTICES YOU CAN TAKE TO BUILD CRITICAL MASS

For successful implementation of any SEL, a critical mass of school-home practices must support the teaching of SEL lessons.

Here is a list of actions that experience has shown will build the critical mass needed for SEL to become an intrinsic part of your school’s culture so that all students are influenced.



### Awards

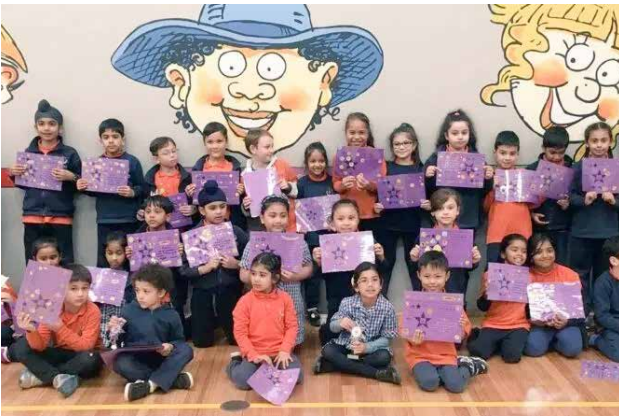
See if you can modify your existing classroom and school-wide awards so that students are acknowledged by their teachers for displaying confidence, persistence, organisation, getting along and resilience.

### Assemblies

Use assembly time to celebrate students who demonstrate strengths in one or more of their SELs and invite guest speakers to share how SELs have been important in their lives.

### Excursions

Ensure adults accompanying students on excursions prepare students for successful outings by reviewing in advance how different SELs can make their excursion a success. Have the accompanying adults acknowledge students during the excursion



when students display different SELS (“Your organisation has helped us get away on time.” “You showed you are a real team player.” “That took confidence.”).

**Celebration of Student “Success” Stories**  
Have staff regularly share stories of student who have shown development of SELs and the impact of strengthening SELs on their motivation-engagement, achievement, behaviour and/or emotional wellbeing. Your school’s SEL/wellbeing coordinator should gather these stories as evidence of your school’s successful SEL program.



### Feedback to Students

Students need to hear from their teachers when they are engaged in SEL-related behaviour. Increase the number of times you interact with students who show different forms of SEL behaviour, verbally and non-verbally (thumbs up). Examples are: “That was confident – you weren’t afraid to make a mistake.” “You persisted, massive effort.” “Being organised helped you budget time for studying for the exam and look how

successful you were.” “Solving that conflict without fighting was awesome—you are showing strong social intelligence.” “You certainly stayed calm in that situation – resilience paid off.”



### Student Representative Council

Show students as representatives of their peers how their own use of SELs can reinforce SELs for others. Discuss how they can use different SELs in planning school events, gathering student opinion through surveys, passing student concerns onto school administration and in fundraising activities. Have student representatives take an active role in planning school assemblies that focus on SELs. Encourage the student council to design fun activities and games that explicitly incorporate SELs for the whole school. Include one or more student representatives on your school’s SEL and wellbeing planning committee.

### School and Classroom Signage

Capture the opportunity to engage students in the design of posters, artwork, IT construction, and outdoor murals that visually communicate the core SELs being taught in your school. Display this artwork in prominent locations around the school, in the library, reception area, corridors, even outer building walls.

### Involve Sporting Coaches

Students are very open-eared to their sports coaches. It is vital that all physical education staff and sporting coaches are involved in SEL professional development. Have them

brainstorm how SEL messages can be communicated to students on a regular basis as students are preparing to compete as well as during competition.



### Helping Students Begin the Day with a Positive Mindset

At the beginning of the day, in home room, in pastoral care or in other settings, have teachers remind students to use different SELs they have learnt throughout the day. These “teachable” moments can also be used by teachers to emphasise to students different positive and negative ways of thinking (attitudes) that contribute to an overall positive (or negative) mindset. Your SEL/wellbeing coordinator should provide teachers with examples of conversations, discussions and questions/ answers that can assist teachers in sending their students on their way with a positive mindset.



### Assessment

For students and staff to take SEL seriously, it is good practice for your school's student

report card to reflect a formal assessment of a student's use of their social and emotional learning skills. Once your school has been teaching SELs for a while, have students complete a survey that asks them how successful their teachers, coaches and school has been in teaching different SELs –and suggestions for how you can do it better! Social and Emotional Learning Curricula

There is no doubt that effective teaching of SELs is aided when teachers use a comprehensive SEL program with student-friendly activities that explicitly teach the knowledge and skills surrounding specific SELs, which students then apply to their lives.



### Integration of SELs in Academic Learning

Integration of SELs in all academic learning is a core SEL practice. Teachers can scaffold SELs in a variety of classroom learning activities including reminding students of the “hard yakka” of an upcoming lesson and the importance of having a “working tough” way of thinking; students conducting an analysis of a “character” (e.g., Harry Potter) in terms of his/her SELs; reinforcement of the “do’s” and “don’ts” of teamwork; setting goals for what students wish to learn in a lesson and how SELs can help students manage their own learning.

## Ongoing SEL Professional Development of All Staff

A robust staff professional development program where teachers are given time to discuss, unpack and enliven SEL learning activities and to explore ways to bring SEL alive at school is fundamental to success.

Finally, it is clear that school-home collaboration aids the success of any SEL program's implementation. Provide ongoing parent education in SEL through your school's newsletters and meeting with parents.

## REFERENCES

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