A Smarter Approach to Social Emotional Learning
Explore SEL is a new interactive hub that gives education leaders and decision-makers better tools and more targeted knowledge to address their priorities

The field of social-emotional learning (SEL) is complex — encompassing a vast range of non-academic skills that are increasingly considered essential to student success but are nonetheless loosely defined. Even the term "SEL" is murky. It describes efforts to support students' capacity to direct their thoughts, feelings, and actions in ways that help them succeed, but it gets applied to everything from bullying prevention in high school to self-control in preschool.

A new digital hub launched today by a research team at the [Harvard Graduate School of Education](#) seeks to provide clarity and practical tools to decision-makers working to address their schools' and districts' particular needs. [Explore SEL](#), the hub created by Professor [Stephanie Jones](#) and her colleagues at the [EASEL Lab](#), is an interactive resource built to empower stakeholders by letting them navigate SEL frameworks with greater precision and transparency, helping to smooth the transition from research to practice. The site builds upon the lab's prior work on projects designed to provide clear, detailed information for key stakeholders about [SEL programs](#) and [executive function and self-regulation measures](#).

The goal is to help educators, organizations, and policymakers identify common ground in SEL frameworks — which typically consist of a set of skills or competencies that are often linked to pedagogical or curricular guidelines or standards — and make judgments about what's distinct about any particular framework. With that knowledge, schools can make more informed and targeted decisions about their approach to social and emotional learning.

Explore SEL rests on a [thorough data collection and coding system](#) that the EASEL Lab developed to identify whether and how specific SEL skills are related to one another across different frameworks. Once that taxonomy project was complete, the team built the resulting database of coded [frameworks](#), SEL [domains](#) (or areas), and [SEL terms](#), deploying interactive visual tools that make these concepts accessible and make it remarkably easy for decision-makers to trace connections and determine which frameworks meet their needs.

"For a number of years, we have been working on developing and testing the interactive tools that we're now gathering in this central hub — a resource we hope will support practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and brokers across the education sector as they navigate the field of social-emotional learning," says Jones. "The field of SEL is crowded with frameworks and terminology that can feel disconnected and hard to parse. We think this site will add much-needed coherence to the field — and, in the end, will allow decision-makers to pursue the specific kinds of social and emotional learning experiences that will best serve their local student populations."

As things stand, decision-makers often have little to go on. Social and emotional frameworks may organize and describe SEL or non-academic skills using entirely different or contradictory language, Jones says. Different names are used to refer to the same skill — terms like self-control, self-management, self-regulation, for example — or one name is used to refer to two or more different skills.

That vagueness has left SEL stakeholders, including funders, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, in an uncertain place, often adopting a particular framework that is actually not well suited to their needs, or overlooking an approach that could successfully target their priorities. Students, of course, pay the price for when these programs fail to meet the need, as do school-based educators who have to adopt the ill-suited practices.

Using Explore SEL, a district leader, for example, can identify similarities, differences, and priorities across many departments spanning different ages and purposes, such as early learning, human services, K–12, workforce development, and more. They can target more precisely the skills they want to build in their communities. There's even a thesaurus that will help leaders embrace a common vocabulary across their efforts.

"We learn from the Explore SEL website that an SEL skill by any other name may not necessarily be the same, depending on the framework that defines it," says Carly Tubbs Dolan of New York University's Global TIES for Children, one of Explore SEL's partner organizations. "By identifying big-picture relationships and trends across frameworks, Explore SEL empowers practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and donors to organize and communicate their approach to SEL without being forced into a structure that is not appropriate for the unique context of their work."

The site will continue to grow and evolve, linking programs and measures that will allow users to define their goals and align their efforts —all to achieve results more effectively and deliberately. "Our ultimate goal is to create greater precision and transparency in the field of SEL," says Jones, "and to facilitate more effective communication, collaboration, and translation between research and practice."

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ABOUT EXPLORE SEL
Explore SEL is produced by the EASEL Lab (https://easel.gse.harvard.edu/) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. It is a product of the Taxonomy Project, the Easel team's response to calls for greater transparency and precision in the field of SEL. The Taxonomy Project is a multi-year research project that seeks to create an evidence-based system for organizing, describing, and connecting frameworks and skills across the "non-academic" domain.

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ABOUT THE WEBSITE
Explore SEL was designed and developed by Friends of The Web, in collaboration with the EASEL Lab.

CONTACT US
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