Four-Step Assessment Guide to Data-Informed Whole Child Instruction



SEL LABS

A 7 MINDSETS Solution

The education community has witnessed a proliferation of promising programs and practices to support students' social and emotional learning (SEL). For example, mindsets, whole child, character education, and portraits of a graduate all aim to help students develop foundational social-emotional skills for success in school, work, and life.

Alongside the increased availability of effective SEL programs, evidence-based social and emotional competence assessments have become increasingly available. However, the practice of **data-informed SEL instruction**—using assessment data to guide SEL instruction—is not yet widespread or well-understood across schools and districts.

Educators have an opportunity to support effective SEL with assessment data, and this guide describes a process for combining student social and emotional competency assessment with evidence-based SEL programming to support effective instruction and continuous improvement. We will introduce a four-step cyclical process—Assess, Reflect, Plan, and Teach—and provide examples and straightforward checklists to help schools implement this process to make data-informed SEL instruction a regular schoolwide practice.



SEL ASSESSMENT CYCLE

We define a four-step cyclical assessment process aimed at informing SEL instruction. First, use a validated SEL assessment measure. Second, review and interpret the assessment data to clarify student strengths and needs. Third, design and commit to an SEL action plan to build on student strengths and address student needs. Fourth, implement data-informed SEL instruction as identified in your plan. Finally, repeat the cycle to measure progress and gain new insights as students develop competencies over time.

In this way, schools can use findings from SEL assessment data to guide how they implement SEL programs and practices. Just as educators use good academic assessment data to decide which skills to emphasize in academic instruction, now they can use SEL assessment data to determine which skills to emphasize in SEL instruction.

Just as educators use academic assessment data to guide academic instruction, they can use SEL assessment to guide SEL instruction.

SEL ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

Step 1: Assess

Measure SEL strengths and needs

- ☐ Make a plan for assessment administration
- ☐ Confirm that technology setup works
- ☐ Conduct schoolwide SEL assessment(s)

Step 2: Reflect

Review and analyze SEL data

- ☐ Understand the assessment scores
- ☐ Reflect on and interpret the data
- ☐ Come to a shared understanding of students' strengths and needs
- ☐ Develop SEL skill development goals

Step 3: Plan

Outline plans to meet SEL goals

- ☐ Reinforce your SEL program implementation
- ☐ Replicate your effective SEL practices
- ☐ Implement SEL teaching best practices
- ☐ Commit to an action plan

Step 4: Teach

Implement data-informed SEL instruction

- ☐ Follow through on your action plan
- ☐ Reflect on implementation over time
- ☐ Adjust plans mid-stream if needed

Before You Begin
Identify SEL competencies and select assessment measure(s)

- ☐ Identify the social and emotional competencies that matter most for your students
- ☐ Select the relevant assessment type(s)—direct assessment, student survey, or educator survey
- ☐ Choose one or more SEL assessments to implement

Identify the Social-Emotional Competencies That Matter Most for Your Students

There are many frameworks, models, and definitions of SEL. As a result, it can get overwhelming when trying to come to grips with what SEL is. While there's little doubt that SEL includes a complex and multi-faceted set of skills, as you think about assessing and addressing SEL, it is important that your team **identifies the specific social and emotional competencies that matter most for your students**. This will guide your alignment of curriculum and instruction, assessment, and continuous improvement.



Increasingly school, district, and state education policies include SEL learning goals or definitions of SEL competency areas. This is often a great place to start. Another helpful resource is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) definition of Core SEL Competencies. With five SEL competency domains, this framework is easy to describe and widely used in schools nationwide.

If your school is already implementing an evidence-based SEL program, it can also be helpful to identify the skills that are its targets of instruction. By reviewing your SEL program's scope and sequence, you can identify the specific skills being taught. In the best of all worlds, your assessment will measure those targets of instruction.

Regardless of which overall framework or SEL program you use, it is important to critically examine the social and emotional competencies they outline and determine which areas of SEL development are most important for your students. This may vary by grade level and can shift over time.

Select the Relevant Assessment Type(s)—Direct Assessment, Student Survey, or Educator Survey

There are three approaches to measuring students' social and emotional competence: direct assessment, student surveys, and educator surveys.

TYPES OF ASSESSMENTS

Direct Assessment—students demonstrate their skills by solving challenging social-emotional tasks

Student Surveys—students rate their social-emotional skills or frequency of displaying a range of behaviors

Educator Surveys—educators rate how often students display a range of behaviors

With direct assessment, students demonstrate their skills by solving challenging social-emotional tasks. For example, students might demonstrate their problem-solving skills by answering questions about how a story character should resolve a conflict.

With student surveys, students rate their social-emotional skills or frequency of displaying a range of behaviors. For example, students might rate to what extent they believe that their success depends on time and effort to measure their growth mindset. Well-designed survey questions can help ascertain students' beliefs and mindsets and are suitable for students in fourth grade and above. Surveys are often quick for students to complete.

With educator surveys, educators rate how often students display a range of behaviors. For example, in many educator surveys, educators rate the frequency with which they observe students engaging in cooperative and positive social behavior. Some educator surveys also ask educators to rate the frequency of problem behaviors.

Each approach has different strengths. Because direct assessments require students to demonstrate their skills, they provide an objective assessment of student skills, unbiased by their perceptions or educators' perceptions of the skills. Direct assessment can be used with very young children, including those who can't read yet.

Although direct assessments are preferred in many cases, student and educator surveys can provide useful information. Self-report surveys are particularly well-suited to assessing students' beliefs and attitudes. Educator surveys are particularly well-suited to measuring the frequency of highly observable behaviors. One of the disadvantages of educator surveys is that they can take a lot of time to complete, particularly if educators are tasked with rating all students in a class.

Once you have defined the social and emotional competencies that you want students to develop and the type(s) of assessment that will work best, select your assessment(s). CASEL has an SEL Assessment Guide, which can help guide your selection. Your state education department may also have a guide, such as this Evidence-Based SEL Assessments List from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

In addition to assessing students' social and emotional competence, it can also be helpful to measure the conditions of learning, or school climate. Research shows that SEL and school climate are inextricably linked—SEL programs and practices influence school climate, and the conditions for learning impact students' ability to develop social and emotional skills. The National Center on Safe and Supportive Schools has great resources for selecting school climate measures.

Now that you have selected assessment measure(s), it’s time to implement your assessment(s).

Step 1: Assess

Measure SEL strengths and needs

- ☐ Make a plan for assessment administration
- ☐ Confirm that technology setup works
- ☐ Conduct schoolwide SEL assessment(s)

Make a Plan for Assessment Administration

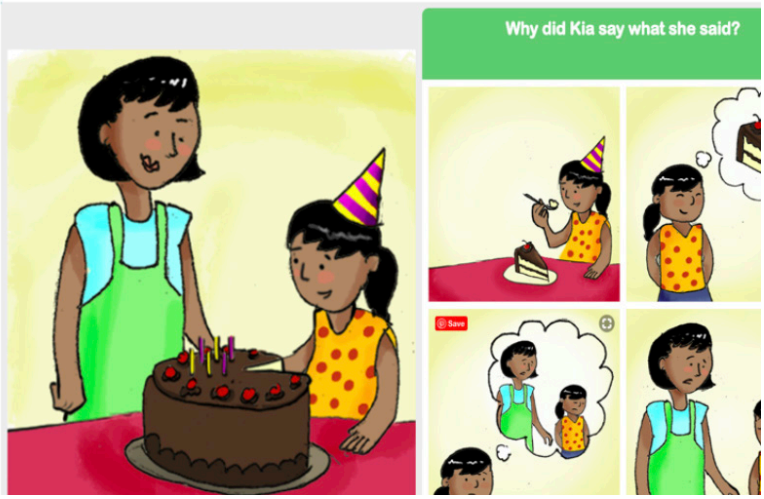
As with any school-based endeavor, it helps to have a well-conceived plan. Start by ensuring you have a liaison who will lead plan development and execution and serve as the point of contact for staff and assessment provider(s). Your plan should include assessment timing—this typically includes a fall and spring administration. For assessments completed by students, consider where that will happen and who will oversee the assessment. It is often less disruptive to administer assessments in class instead of pulling students out of class. Be sure to schedule sufficient time for assessment administration.

Test Technology Tools

If your assessment involves technology, it's important to test and confirm the setup in advance. This may include tests of hardware, software, and network connections. Direct assessments of students often include audio and may require headphones.

Conduct Schoolwide SEL Assessment(s)

Now you are ready to conduct schoolwide SEL assessment(s). It's a good idea to also pull relevant data from your student information systems and dashboards, such as attendance, office referrals, and academic outcomes, to inform your analysis. In addition, as noted above, measures of school climate provide important context to student social and emotional competence assessment.



Once you've administered your assessment(s), you can begin to review and analyze the data.

Step 2: Reflect
Review and analyze SEL data

- ☐ Understand the assessment scores
- ☐ Reflect on and interpret the data
- ☐ Come to a shared understanding of students' strengths and needs
- ☐ Develop SEL skill development goals

Now that you have SEL assessment data that is relevant to your students, it is time to consider two important questions: "So what?" and "Now what?" The first ("So what?") is shorthand for "What do the assessment data tell us about our students?" The second ("Now what?") is shorthand for, "Now that we understand something about our students' social and emotional competence, what do we do with that information?"

A lot of activities might seem like "data use" but aren't. Emailing a summary of findings to staff is not data use. A five-minute presentation in a staff meeting is not data use. Talking about the SEL assessment findings in the lunchroom is not data use. District leadership interpreting the findings and sending a directive to building-level staff is not data use.

So how do you accomplish high-quality data use? The mechanics will depend on your district's practices and constraints, but there are several actions that, if done with sufficient vigor, can increase the chances that everyone will come to a very good answer to the questions, "So what?" and "Now what?"

Understand the Assessment Scores

Scores and skills. The foundation of data use is a good understanding of score reports. This consists of two parts. The first is understanding what skill each score in the assessment report reflects. You should know what each of these skills looks like in practice—how the skill expresses itself in children's daily lives.

What's in a number? You also need to know what the numbers mean. Reliable measures are normed, which means that they compare student social-emotional competence results to a large sample of same-aged peers. They will typically express scores relative to a scaled mean and standard deviation. For example, if scores are scaled to a mean of 100 with a standard deviation of 15, a student who receives a score of 100 performs equivalent to the average score of their same-aged peers. A student who scores 115 (one standard deviation above the mean) performs better than 84% of their peers, while a student who scores 85 (one standard deviation below the mean) performs worse than 16% of their peers.

Other assessments may be criterion-referenced, in other words, benchmarked against a predetermined criterion. For example, imagine a survey that includes ten items, each of which is rated on a five-point scale, with one meaning, "Not at all true of me," and a five meaning, "Really true of me." The survey results in a single score, which is the average of the respondent's ratings across all ten items. The score will range from one to five, and you will interpret the meaning of that number in relation to the descriptions of each point on the five-point scale.

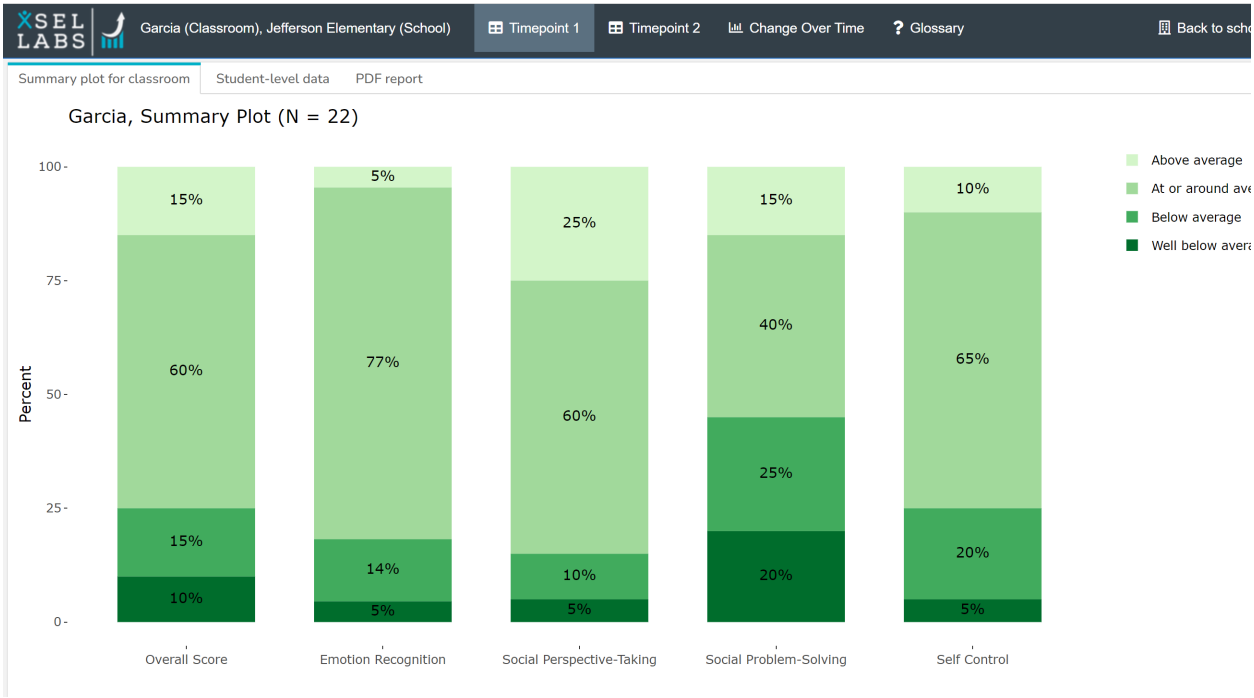
Your job is to be clear about the meaning of the numbers. To get comfortable with what the scores mean, consult the assessment documentation. If it is still not clear, contact the test publisher. Your school psychologist can also provide guidance, as school psychologists are highly trained in test scoring and interpretation.

Reflect On and Interpret the Data

Now it's time to start making sense of the data. The first step is for each team member to review the assessment reports. They should spend enough focused time with the data to develop an initial interpretation of what the data means. Their job is to be able to answer the question, **"What are our students' social-emotional strengths and needs?"**

The next step is to convene the team. Your meeting goals are: (1) come to a common understanding of what the data say; (2) interpret what the data mean; and (3) generate testable hypotheses about student social-emotional skill development. You can do this by engaging in an exercise called "see, think, wonder."

See—the facts in the data. The first step is to describe what is seen. In this stage, the conversation focuses strictly on the facts. So, for example, it is fair game to say, "I see that on emotion recognition, students in my class are on average 5 points below national averages." That is a description of fact. It strays into interpretation to say, "Emotion recognition is a weakness in my students." During the "see" part of the conversation, the facilitator's job is to keep the team reporting facts without straying into interpretation or planning.



Sample social-emotional competency assessment results

Come to a Shared Understanding of Students' Strengths and Needs

Think—interpret and make connections. In the next stage, the "think" part of the conversation, participants can start imposing interpretations of the data onto the facts. The question here is, "What do these facts make you think?" Here are some fair interpretations:

- "We think the high scores on social problem-solving show that our students are generally good at working out differences, but there are a few outliers."
- "The low scores on social perspective-taking shows that we have room to work on that skill, even though some of our students are clearly really good at this."
- "There was wide variation in scores for self-control, so for many students, this is a strength while for many others, it is an area of need."

As was the case during the "see" phase of the conversation, the facilitator's job is to elicit thoughts from participants until the group has articulated multiple interpretations of the data.

Wonder—develop hypotheses about what's going on. The final phase of this conversation is the "wonder" part, and it involves generating testable hypotheses. In this phase of the conversation, discussion participants ask questions that the data raised. Respondents are encouraged to start their responses with, "I wonder . . ." Examples might be, "I wonder if our kids are missing out on opportunities to learn social problem-solving because the adults intervene to solve problems and kids don't learn to work them out," or "I wonder whether the troubles we're seeing on measures of self-control are contributing to my difficulties with classroom management."

All of these statements draw connections between assessment scores and other things that might be going on in students' experiences at school. All can be rephrased as testable hypotheses. For example, "The more adults solve children's problems for them, the fewer children will learn to solve their own problems" or "If we spend more time practicing skills like calm breathing and positive self-talk, more of our students will excel at self-control." In this way, wondering about the data can easily generate interesting and testable ideas, some of which may be grounds for action.

Develop SEL Skill Development Goals

Your work to discuss the meaning of your SEL assessment data will lend itself to identifying a manageable number of measurable goals. If you noticed that students' social problem-solving skills are all over the map, you might set a goal of increasing the percentage of students with problem-solving skills in the average range from X to Y, or if you identified self-control as a challenge area, you might set a goal of increasing average performance on self-control measures by Z points.

With your data-informed SEL goals in hand, you are ready to develop a plan to meet these goals.

Step 3: Plan
Outline plans to meet SEL goals

- ☐ Reinforce your SEL program implementation
- ☐ Replicate your effective SEL practices
- ☐ Implement SEL teaching best practices
- ☐ Commit to an action plan

Once the skill development goals are clear, you can decide what you can do to achieve those goals. This is really the heart of the matter when answering the second important question, "Now what?" Consider strategies that build on students' strengths in addition to those aimed at addressing students' needs.

Reinforce Your SEL Program Implementation

If your school already uses an evidence-based SEL program, start by using existing SEL program resources to meet your new, data-informed goals. A key question will be, "What is the relationship between what our SEL assessment measures and what our SEL program is designed to teach?"

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To help answer this question, some SEL assessment and program providers have collaborated to develop alignment documents, which show the overlap between what each program lesson is designed to teach and what each assessment area is designed to measure. Such alignments provide an at-a-glance resource to help educators devise program-specific plans to address skill development goals identified through assessment. If you are not sure how your SEL program and assessment align, contact your assessment providers to request an alignment document.

Use these alignments to identify the lesson(s) that were designed to address the SEL skill(s) that you have identified in your learning goals. Programs may differ in their lesson structure and format, but here are some common strategies that should apply to most programs:

1. Reteach the entire lesson or key parts
2. Teach a related supplemental lesson
3. Implement a suggested extension activity
4. Teach the lesson earlier in the sequence (NOTE: use with caution as the program's evidence base may rest on its defined scope and sequence)

If your learning goals do not apply to your entire class, in addition to the above strategies, you may also consider pre-teaching the lesson or key parts with the indicated student(s).

Replicate Your Effective SEL Practices

Regardless of whether your school uses an SEL program, you are likely implementing SEL practices. Take a look in the mirror and reflect on any actions you are already taking that might help you achieve your goals. These may be practices that select team members are doing but your school has not implemented widely, systematically, or intensively. Perhaps, for example, an educator has identified a highly effective and feasible way to form strong connections with hard-to-reach students, scaffold conflict resolution, or take others' perspectives. How are they doing that? How could you replicate this strategy schoolwide?

Spend time discussing these possibilities because the easiest thing to do is what is right in front of you. Beware the conclusion, however, that "We're already doing that." What you want is for people to commit to stretching themselves. Even if they're already engaging in these practices, push them to do them more effectively or more often.

Implement SEL Teaching Best Practices

There are also several SEL teaching practices that are particularly relevant for developing specific SEL skills. These best practices are helpful regardless of which SEL program you use or even if you do not yet use an SEL program. They include:

1. Model and narrate the use of the targeted SEL skill, e.g., "(deep breath) I'm working to stay calm while this Smartboard setup is frustrating me."
2. Acknowledge students' uses of the targeted SEL skill, e.g., "I really appreciate how everyone collaborated well with their teammates on that group work."
3. Integrate practice of the targeted SEL skill into academics, e.g., discuss the feelings and perspectives of different characters in a read-aloud story.
4. Ask students to reflect on their use of the targeted skill, e.g., ask them to describe situations where they used the skill in the past week.
5. Collaborate with students to monitor progress toward development of the SEL skill, e.g., conduct daily or weekly check-ins to reflect on and discuss progress (particularly useful with indicated small groups or individuals).

For more guidance on SEL teaching best practices to address your identified SEL goals, see the following resource: Developing Targeted SEL Skills Worksheet.

Now that you have taken stock of the options and selected the internal and external resources that you think will give you the best chance of achieving your skill development goals, put the resources into action.

Step 4: Teach
Implement data-informed SEL instruction

- ☐ Follow through on your action plan
- ☐ Reflect on implementation over time
- ☐ Adjust plans mid-stream if needed

Follow Through on Your Action Plan

With your action plan in hand, it is time to implement it. Whether your plan includes lessons or activities from an SEL program or implementing new SEL teaching practices, be sure to include time for educator development related to these revised or new approaches. Keep in mind that changes in educator SEL instruction and students' skills and behavior take time and sustained effort.

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Reflect on Implementation Over Time

Take time to reflect on implementation progress. Are you implementing the plan as intended? It is helpful for team members to meet for reflection—either in professional learning communities (PLCs), grade-level or subject-matter teams, or another grouping.

Adjust plans mid-stream if needed

If you discover challenges with your plan, make adjustments. This could include adding or changing approaches, increasing the frequency of new activities, or additional educator development. Learn from each other about what approaches are proving most effective and replicate this best practice.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT CYCLES

By assessing student social and emotional competence in the fall, using the data formatively to guide teaching and learning, then evaluating student progress later in the year, educators can gain insights into what is working and what is not so that they can adjust the strategies they employ to support student learning.

For more in-depth guidance, see the book *Assessing Students' Social and Emotional Learning* by Dr. Clark McKown.

Learn more about how xSEL Labs can help you
With evidence-based, informative, and usable social-emotional assessment



xSEL Labs, a 7 Mindsets solution, partners with K-12 schools and districts across the country to assess and address social and emotional learning (SEL) outcomes. xSEL Labs' core assessment, SELweb, is a reliable and easy-to-use direct assessment of the social and emotional competencies in the CASEL framework, state standards, and evidence-based SEL programs. Learn more and request a consultation at https://xsel-labs.com/request-information.