

How To Guide: Promoting Equity Through Social and Emotional Learning



APERTURE EDUCATION

BRINGING THE WHOLE CHILD INTO FOCUS

How To Promote Equity with SEL

Now more than ever, our classrooms are changing, and student populations are growing more diverse. As student populations become more racial, socially, and economically varied, high school graduation classes are continually changing – and are expected to look significantly different by the year 2025.

In addition to greater diversity in schools, the ways we teach students are also changing. A sweeping effort is being made to deliver high-quality education to all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, income, disability, or learning style.

As we consider how to help all students achieve, we must ensure our teaching practices are equitable. Equity must be a central goal for all educators — in all forms of instruction and in all subject areas.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) can help promote equity in a number of important ways. Professional development for school staff that is centered around building social and emotional competence can encourage equity in the classroom. SEL and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) can help schools reduce inequitable disciplinary practices. Most importantly, using SEL assessments, educators can identify students' unique strengths and needs and provide tailored supports to help them succeed.

This playbook explores how SEL can help promote equity so all students are treated fairly and receive the resources they need to achieve. We hope you enjoy exploring these resources, activities, and lessons to help you get started today!



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What is Equity in Education?

Equality and equity are sometimes used interchangeably, but their meanings are very different. Equality is about ensuring students have equal access to the resources needed to succeed in school. Equity takes into consideration that some students need more resources to succeed than others.

Learn More About Equity in Schools

Teachers, student support staff, and out-of-school staff: explore and understand equity and how it can be incorporated into your teaching practices. Share this article, [Preparing for Cultural Diversity: Resources for Teachers](#), for helpful insight, activities, and lessons around equity.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Advancing Equity with the DESSA: Practical Applications to a Crucial Issue

One of the most important issues in education today is ensuring that we are providing equitable services. That is, making certain that each student is equipped with the skills that they need to be successful in school and in life. One of the most important skill sets for our students is social and emotional competence.

This webinar will focus on specific, practical tools and techniques embedded in the DESSA to advance educational equity.

Participants will learn:

- new approaches for recognizing and honoring student strengths
- differentiating SEL instruction to support equity
- identifying and countering implicit bias.

So many of us strive to promote equity in our classrooms and out-of-school time programs; this webinar will give us new insights, tools, and techniques to advance that goal.

WATCH THIS WEBINAR

Creating Equity with SEL

Equity in education is comprised of two main principles. The first is based on fairness: Students should be treated fairly, regardless of factors like race, ethnicity, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, and more. The second is based on our society's belief that all students should have basic foundational knowledge in areas like reading, writing, and simple math.

SEL can play a role in achieving both of these principles. SEL helps educators treat students with fairness and better understand where students are coming from. SEL also impacts students' academic achievement. [Research](#) shows that universal social and emotional interventions can help all students improve academically, regardless of factors like race, disability status, or family income.

Learn More About the SEL and Equity Connection

Explore how SEL promotes equity with CASEL's *guiding questions for educators*. This helpful resource explains how equity fits into each of CASEL's five core SEL competencies.

SEL and equity can improve academic outcomes of all students by:

- Helping staff and students build prosocial skills
- Driving a district-wide policy to reduce suspensions and expulsions
- Teaching adults how to use restorative practices
- Establishing a school environment that encourages and supports positive behaviors
- Enabling the use of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to meet the needs of all students
- Promoting culturally responsive teaching whereby every student is treated fairly
- Helping school staff identify and provide extra resources to students who need them through equitable assessments

Read on to discover how SEL can promote equity and academic success for all students.

4 Easy Ways to Build Equity with SEL

Before educators can effectively incorporate equity into teaching practices, they must understand what equity is and why it is important.

These four SEL activities can introduce staff to equity; help them understand how their own views can affect how they interact with and discipline students; and offer tips, resources, and strategies for treating students fairly and providing them with the resources they need to succeed.

1. Increase Self-Awareness: A deeper self-awareness can have a profound impact on how school staff interact with students and react to disruptive behaviors. Ask staff to take time to consider how their social identities (i.e. race, gender, income status, etc.) have shaped their beliefs. Challenge them to also consider where students are coming from and how their views may differ from their own.

Activity: Try one or more of these [33 self-awareness](#) activities for adults and students.

2. Teach Ways to Build Trust with Students: Strong and healthy relationships between educators and students can be the lynchpin to academic success. Find ways to help staff nurture trusting relationships with students, and you will likely see increased cooperation and engagement.

Activity: Check out our past blog, [3 Strategies for Building Relationships with Students](#), for ways to improve educator-student relationships.



3. Close the Culture Gap: School staff don't need to share the same backgrounds with students to connect with them. But they do need to practice cultural sensitivity, and this can be an effective way to help students feel accepted and valued and foster meaningful relationships.

Activity: Read [this article](#) by the National Education Association (NEA) to learn more about building cultural sensitivity; included are real-life examples and success stories.

4. Learn About Racism: Expanding knowledge about racism — including its history and lasting effects — can help school staff become more empathetic toward students. Be sure to explore unconscious bias and strategize ways to minimize its effects.

Activity: Read through [this three-part series](#) by EdWeek to learn about racism, common mistakes made when addressing racism, and how to avoid them.

Integrating PBIS and SEL into Teaching Practices

Inequity in disciplinary practices is a problem for many schools around the country. [Research](#) shows that students of color (especially African-American students) receive significantly higher rates of disciplinary action, including more office referrals, more suspensions, and more expulsions. Disciplinary action can have lasting effects on students and may impact their future education, employment, and income.

As educators, it is important to implement equitable practices in schools and communities to ensure that all students are treated fairly — no matter their race, ethnicity, gender, family income, disability, cultural background, or religious affiliation.

Where to Start

[Schools can tackle](#) the problem of inequity and unconscious bias with a multi-tiered strategy that includes shifting disciplinary practices within a PBIS framework and building social and emotional competence for students and staff. SEL and PBIS work together to address the root cause of disproportionate disciplinary actions and referrals while providing a flexible framework that addresses the unique needs of a school.

PBIS and SEL can be integrated into a range of school practices and procedures, including new teacher onboarding processes focused on equity, collaborative professional learning, district policies aimed at reducing suspensions, and restorative practices. Using SEL and PBIS, schools and districts can:

- Help staff and students build prosocial skills
- Establish a school environment that discourages problem behavior
- Utilize multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to meet the needs of all students
- Promote culturally responsive teaching whereby every student is treated fairly

Equitable SEL In Practice

In order to disrupt inequity in schools, examine your own unconscious biases and strive to overcome them. This infographic can help you begin this process:



5 Equitable Action Activities for Educators Using Social and Emotional Learning

1

SELF-AWARENESS

Equitable Action to Reduce Unconscious Bias:

Increase awareness of diverse social identities.

Recognize possible biases and explore constructive ways to overcome those biases.

Example Activity:

Have staff [read this article](#) and ask them to consider whether they hold negative stereotypes or unconscious bias. For example, are they prone to assume students who sag their pants are more likely to disrupt class? Talk through ways to identify and prevent unconscious bias.

2

SOCIAL AWARENESS

Equitable Action to Reduce Unconscious Bias:

Research different cultures and learn why diversity exists.

Example Activity:

Share [Dr. Melissa Crum's TEDx Talk](#) with your staff to explore the learning experiences of African-American youth and ways educators can reduce bias and disproportionate discipline.

3

SELF-MANAGEMENT

Equitable Action to Reduce Unconscious Bias:

Understand and learn about equitable behaviors as a first step to managing one's behavior.

Learn strategies for coping with stress caused by discrimination or prejudice.

Example Activity:

Involve your staff in the process of creating school norms and rules around disciplinary action. Address unconscious bias and build in checks and balances to ensure all students are treated fairly.

4

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Equitable Action to Reduce Unconscious Bias:

Build relationships with diverse individuals and groups.

Example Activity:

Encourage staff to build relationships with diverse individuals in low-stakes settings, such as volunteering activities or multi-cultural networking events.

5

DECISION-MAKING

Equitable Action to Reduce Unconscious Bias:

Strive to build inclusivity and define mutually beneficial solutions.

Consider how decisions affect others.

Example Activity:

Encourage educators to [reflect](#) on how a suspension or expulsion might affect a student's future. Set a school or district goal to decrease disciplinary referrals by a certain percent.

To truly address the issue of inequity in schools, we need to understand how discipline disparities and unrealized bias impact students of color. The best approaches to achieving equity include a multi-tiered system that uses PBIS and SEL.

Want to download this infographic?

[CLICK HERE](#)

We Have Implicit Bias Toward Students. Here are 3 Ways to Reduce its Effects.

[Research](#) shows that we all have implicit biases.

Neuroscientists have found that our brains tend to quickly categorize others as a way to identify threats. These categorizations are often based on institutional race or gender stereotypes that we have been exposed to from a young age. Different than stereotypes or racism, implicit bias is an unconscious and involuntary belief or attitude about a particular group.

Implicit bias can be subtle, such as setting an expectation for a student based on race, appearance, or another external factor. Even the most progressive among us has implicit bias. At some point, every educator has judged a student solely based on the student's appearance — “that student looks like she's going to be a troublemaker,” or “that student looks like he is going to be someone important later in life.”

These judgements are part of our subconscious, so they can be difficult to change. But there's good news. [Research](#) shows that we can overcome these implicit biases by learning to identify when it occurs and practicing effective responses.

Negative Impacts of Implicit Bias on Students

Implicit bias lowers equity in schools and negatively impacts students, and these effects can be far-reaching. Research consistently shows that minority students receive harsher and more frequent discipline referrals than white students who engage in the same behavior. Special Ed students don't always get equal praise for working hard to succeed. Female students are often marginalized from science and math because “girls aren't good at those subjects.”

All students who are subject to implicit bias face lower expectations for success, which can have a long-term, negative impact on their motivation and confidence. Also, educators may unconsciously limit students' learning opportunities, which can reduce their options later in life.



3 Ways to Reduce Implicit Bias

Professional development, social and emotional learning (SEL), and the DESSA can help educators identify implicit bias and reduce its prevalence and negative impact on students.

Here are three actionable steps you can take to mitigate implicit bias:

1. Increase general knowledge about implicit bias. Awareness is the first step for reducing implicit bias toward students. Host professional development to teach educators about implicit bias and how it affects students. Help staff explore the research behind implicit bias, identify when it is occurring, and take actions to avoid it.

2. Use the DESSA to help educators identify implicit biases toward students.

Start by having educators complete the [DESSA](#) or [DESSA-mini](#) on their students. Educators should then examine their DESSA ratings at the item level and note whether any answers surprised them, especially those that were rated in the strength range. Surprise at students' strengths based on observations of their behavior versus an expectation of a lower rating might be an indicator of implicit bias. They should also analyze the data to identify patterns among ratings for certain groups of students, including demographics like race, gender, and special education status. Ask if any of these groups were rated higher than another group and explore possible reasons why. If no valid reason can be identified, it might be a reflection of bias.

3. Reduce implicit bias with SEL. SEL teaches educators ways to reduce implicit biases. For instance, when educators develop empathy for students, they can better reflect on where students are coming from, and this has shown to reduce discipline referrals. Mindfulness can help lower educators' stress levels, which can indirectly impact implicit bias. Building a growth mindset in themselves can help educators change the language they use around student success. This can have a lasting positive impact on students and give them confidence to succeed.

Often, when educators learn about implicit bias, they are surprised to discover that they may unconsciously treat one group of students differently than another. The best way to tackle this problem is to address it head-on and teach educators ways to overcome it. Part of this involves giving educators opportunities to see when and how implicit bias occurs (i.e. through an analysis of their DESSA ratings) and using SEL and effective professional development to improve how they act toward certain groups of students.

Ready to get started? [Contact our SEL experts](#) to learn more about the DESSA today.

Choosing an Equitable SEL Assessment

Educators must understand students' needs before they can determine how to help them succeed. To accurately measure students' SEL competence, it is important to utilize an equitable assessment.

The best SEL assessments align to SEL standards and are nationally normed. Comparing students to well-defined national norms increases data accuracy and provides a clearer, more reliable picture of where students should be in their social and emotional development. SEL data, along with quality professional development on equitable best practices (see more on page [X – insert page number of the 4 Easy Ways to Build SEL section]), provides a strong roadmap for how to help all students develop these important skills.

Not sure if your SEL assessment is equitable? Take this short quiz to find out.

5 Minute Quiz: Is Your SEL Assessment Equitable?

When selecting an SEL assessment, choose one that was designed with equity in mind. Answer these questions to determine if your SEL assessment provides accurate insight into students' diverse needs and guides you toward the right supports.

1. Does the assessment measure widely accepted social and emotional constructs, such as CASEL's five competencies?

It is important to measure SEL skills that have been carefully researched and defined. CASEL's constructs were derived from more than two decades of research and are widely considered to be the standard set of social and emotional skills students need to thrive in school and in life.

2. Are educators able to use the SEL data to adjust their instructional practices to better meet the needs of their students?

The SEL assessment should provide insight into students' social and emotional competence so you are able to adjust instruction to focus on specific areas that need improvement.

3. Can the assessment data be used to develop interventions that are tailored to each student's needs?

Some students need additional support to fully develop their social and emotional competence. The SEL assessment should help you create an intervention plan that is tailored to each student's needs.

4. Are the assessment reporting norms and comparisons comprised of racially, demographically, and geographically diverse populations?

Well-defined national norms increase data accuracy and provide a clearer, more reliable, picture of where students should be in their social and emotional development.

5. Does the assessment measure students' social and emotional growth and development over time?

Assessing students' social and emotional skills is like taking a snapshot in time. Social and emotional skills change and develop, and it is important to be able to measure how students are improving to identify and focus on areas that need additional growth.

The [Devereux Student Strengths Assessment \(DESSA\)](#) is a [nationally recognized](#) and [award-winning](#) assessment that meets rigorous research and equity standards. The DESSA is standardized and norm-referenced, meets or exceeds recommended standards for reliability and validity, is grounded in social and emotional learning and resilience theory, and aligns with CASEL's five core SEL competencies. [Contact Aperture Education](#) to learn more.

Act on SEL Assessment Data

We all know the saying: What's assessed gets addressed. SEL assessment data gives educators critical insight into why a student is struggling — information that traditional measures alone, such as attendance and behavior incidents, do not provide. When used effectively, SEL data can improve instruction and promote equity.

Take action on your SEL data by using it to identify students who need additional supports, understand why they are struggling, and create tailored interventions to meet their specific needs.

Get Started

Hold weekly data meetings that combine a variety of data sources, including SEL, academic, attendance, and behavior incident data. As a group, review the data and use it to identify a subset of students with the most need for improvement. Create a plan for these at-risk students to provide additional resources according to their individual needs and check for improvements each week.

By combining SEL data with traditional data measures such as attendance and behavior incidents, educators can put together a comprehensive plan for creating tailored interventions. SEL data is a critical addition to this process because it provides a better picture of the whole child, shedding light on reasons why a particular student is struggling and what resources are needed to help that student succeed.

How This Looks

Say, for instance, that a student, Johnny, is always tardy or missing class. His grades are slipping and his teachers report that he is falling asleep at his desk. When the data team examines his social and emotional data, they learn that Johnny struggles with self-management. He has trouble managing his homework schedule because he works in the evenings to help support his family. The SEL data provides a much clearer picture of why Johnny is struggling and enables educators to create an intervention that more effectively addresses the root cause of Johnny's absence and poor grades.

In another example, Kira is failing social studies. She acts out during group projects and doesn't cooperate with others. Teachers assume she just wants attention and is not motivated. But when Kira's social and emotional data is taken into consideration, educators discover that she does not have someone at home who provides academic support and does not know how to ask for help. This information helps educators create an intervention designed to help Kira learn how to build strong relationships. They pair her with an older student mentor and reach out to her family to engage them in providing proper supports.

These are just two examples of how SEL data promotes equity by uncovering why students are struggling and guiding effective, individualized interventions that meet students' unique needs.

Conclusion

As our classrooms become more diverse, we must consider how to help all students achieve, regardless of their race, income status, religion, gender, etc. Equity ensures that schools provide the resources students need to succeed.

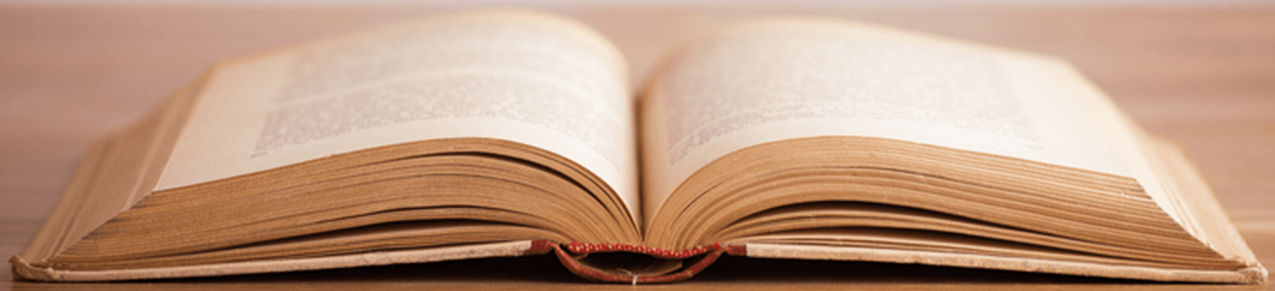
Like core instruction, SEL programs need to be designed with equity in mind. Educators need to understand equity so they can effectively promote it within their teaching practices. Schools should utilize an equitable SEL assessment and incorporate SEL and PBIS within disciplinary practices.

The DESSA

Looking for an equitable SEL assessment? Aperture Education's [DESSA](#) Comprehensive SEL System is a [nationally recognized](#) and [award-winning](#) suite of SEL assessments that meet rigorous research standards and equitable best practices. The DESSA assessments are standardized and norm-referenced and meet or exceed recommended standards for reliability and validity. The DESSA assessments are grounded in resilience theory and are directly aligned to CASEL's five core SEL competencies. Additionally, [the DESSA-mini, a brief, eight-item SEL screener](#), can help school staff accurately identify students' overall social and emotional competence and conduct progress monitoring throughout the year in less than one minute per student.

[Learn more](#) about the DESSA System and how these measurement tools can support equity within your SEL program.





Glossary

Equality refers to the practice of making sure all students have equal access to the resources needed to attain a high-quality education.

Equity refers to providing all students access to the resources they need to learn and succeed.

Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) use evidence-based strategies and systems designed to increase academic performance and safety, decrease problem behavior, and establish positive school cultures.

Social and Emotional Learning is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. — The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

Unconscious Bias happens when a person's decisions are unknowingly influenced by either positive or negative stereotypes. Unconscious bias can happen even if the person knows the stereotype to be inaccurate.