

A background image showing a male teacher with glasses and a pink shirt sitting on a desk, talking to a male student with a backpack. The scene is in a classroom with other desks and chairs visible.

Selecting Assessments and Programs to Support High-Quality SEL for Youth and Adults

Mylien Duong, Ph.D.

Stephen Kilgus, Ph.D.

Tricia Maas, Ph.D.

Nathaniel von der Embse, Ph.D., NCSP

Sherri C. Widen, Ph.D.

WHITEPAPER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children who have strong social-emotional skills, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills, are more likely to thrive both socially and academically (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Classroom-based social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions have demonstrated that social-emotional skills are teachable (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Cook et al., in press) and that stronger social-emotional skills lead to improved confidence, improved grades, decreased problem behaviors, and reduced absenteeism (Durlak et al., 2011; Yang, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting remote learning that many students experienced for more than a year have resulted in the need to support learning recovery for both academic and social-emotional skills. Academics and educators alike are calling on schools to address the trauma many students experienced in the last year by supporting their social-emotional well-being before focusing on academics (CASEL, 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Meyer, 2021).

As educators undertake this work, there are three types of tools that can support the development of social-emotional competencies for youth and adults as well as support equitable learning environments:






- 1. Programs to support adult SEL:** Strengthening educators' social-emotional skills reduces stress and burnout and enables them to support student SEL authentically and effectively.
- 2. Student-facing SEL curricula:** For SEL curricula to be effective, it's important to understand the purpose, what features to look for in selecting a curriculum, and how to implement it well.
- 3. Universal screening measures and best practices:** A good screening tool can help education leaders understand their communities' needs and develop plans to address those needs.

It is important that each of these tools be selected through the lens of each district, school, and community's context in order to achieve the desired outcomes. Additionally, effective implementation, driven by teacher and community buy-in and supported by professional learning, is critical to the success of SEL programs, curricula, and assessments.

When each of these factors is taken into account, research-based, systemic SEL programs can result in caring, motivating, and equitable learning environments for educators, students, and their families.

WHAT IS SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING?

The [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#) (CASEL) has been a leader in SEL research and practice for several decades. CASEL defines SEL as the “process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.” CASEL has identified five competencies that advance students’ and adults’ learning and development.

THE CASEL 5		Competency	Description
		Self-awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Knowledge of one’s own strengths and limitations, with a sense of self-efficacy, optimism, and a “growth mindset” (the belief in your ability to improve)
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ability to accurately recognize your emotions, thoughts, and values, and understand how they influence your behavior
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ability to identify personal and cultural assets, examine prejudices and biases, and integrate one’s personal and social identities
		Self-management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ability to effectively manage one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors across different situations
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Capacity to manage stress, control impulses, and harness motivation to accomplish personal and collective goals, take initiative, and demonstrate personal and collective agency
		Social awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ability to take others’ perspectives, empathize (the ability to understand or feel how others feel), and feel concern for others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Understand social and historical norms for behaviors across settings, including unjust ones, and recognize family, school, and community supports
		Relationship skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships and effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Include clear communication skills, active listening, cooperating and collaborating with others, resisting negative social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed
		Responsible decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Make caring, constructive choices based on the evaluation of the consequences of one’s actions
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Consider the ethical standards and safety concerns of all those involved

Systemic SEL

In recent years many educators and education leaders have recognized the importance of SEL. The next step is to take a research-based systemic approach to developing social-emotional competencies in their community. The Systemic SEL framework emphasizes the importance of fostering adult social-emotional skills, implementing school-wide SEL programs, and adopting a continuous improvement approach. This framework describes a process with four central elements (CASEL, 2019; Mahoney et al., 2020; Oberle et al., 2016):

1. Establish engagement and buy-in with stakeholders to increase awareness and create a shared vision for how systemic SEL will be achieved.
2. Strengthen adults' (e.g., educators, school staff, parents and caretakers, other community members) social-emotional skills. This can be achieved by adopting an adult SEL curriculum and/or establishing and supporting communities of learning (Wald & Castleberry, 2000).
3. Foster students' social-emotional skills through school-wide SEL programs. Ideally, these programs are also extended to include families and the broader community so that youth learn social-emotional skills across contexts.
4. Adopt a continuous improvement approach to ensure that the SEL programs (adult- and youth-focused) and their outcomes are reviewed, revised, and improved.

Implementing systemic SEL requires SEL programming that supports both adult and youth social-emotional skills, and SEL assessment as part of a continuous improvement approach.





ADULT SEL

In recent decades, there has been increasing focus on adult SEL defined as “efforts to foster a supportive staff environment that cultivates social and emotional competence and capacity of adults in the building” (CASEL, 2020). This focus came as SEL initiatives for youth gained popularity and it became clear that most students benefit from adult-provided SEL supports that extend beyond structured lessons. The benefits of adult SEL are broad.

Adult SEL impacts:

- ▶ SEL program implementation
- ▶ Healthy youth-teacher relationships
- ▶ Effective classroom management
- ▶ Positive classroom climate
- ▶ Youth social-emotional and academic outcomes

Implementing youth SEL programs with fidelity requires teachers to model social-emotional skills and to spot teachable moments to prompt and coach youth to practice their own social-emotional skills. It also requires integrating SEL into the fabric of the classroom, including academic instruction (Greenberg et al., 2003; Oberle et al., 2016).

Given these factors, it may be unsurprising that teacher social-emotional well-being influences their implementation of youth SEL programs (Larson et al., 2018; Ransford et al., 2009). Teachers who feel stressed and burnt out are less likely to deliver SEL lessons and to reinforce social-emotional skills throughout the school day (Jones et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Moreover, addressing teacher stress prior to introducing new initiatives has been shown to improve adoption and implementation (Larson et al., 2018).

Teachers with strong social-emotional competencies are also more likely to actively monitor the classroom, engage youth in learning, demonstrate patience, listen attentively, and maintain their composure during challenging student interactions (Beltman et al., 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Kunter et al., 2013).



Teacher psychological variables were stronger predictors of classroom quality than were teacher educational attainment and experience.

In a study of 730 classrooms, La Paro et al. (2009) found teacher psychological variables were stronger predictors of classroom quality than were teacher educational attainment and experience. Conversely, teachers with weak social-emotional competencies talk with youth less and are less likely to model pro-social behaviors and coping strategies, and their classrooms rate lower on emotional climate, organization, and instructional quality (Irvin, 2012; Jennings, 2015). Youth in these classrooms exhibit higher rates of disruptive behaviors and concentration problems, and lower academic achievement (Herman et al., 2018).

Finally, improving social-emotional competencies can improve teacher stress management, which lessens teacher burnout and mitigates early attrition. Teaching consistently ranks among the highest stress professions, second only to nursing (Gallup, 2017), and 41 percent of educators leave the profession within the first five years (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Difficulty managing work-related stress leads to teacher absenteeism and early attrition (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). Teacher turnover costs \$7.3 billion every year (Barnes & Crowe, 2007).

Selecting an Adult SEL Program

Despite the attention on adult SEL, there is a shortage of research-based adult SEL programs. Because SEL for adults programs are new, particularly in comparison to youth-facing programs, evidence supporting their effectiveness is just emerging. Still, programs do exist. Below, we spotlight one recently-released adult SEL program.

Second Step® SEL for Adults

[Second Step SEL for Adults](#) is a two-year program (with the possibility of continued learning) that covers four content areas:

- ▶ Teachers' relationships with youth and colleagues
- ▶ Stress management
- ▶ Equity
- ▶ Individual and collective efficacy

Second Step SEL for Adults provides on-demand, bite-sized, digital “microlearnings” (Schmidt, 2007) that demonstrate best practices using multimedia; engage learners in the practice of new skills; and provide opportunities to collaborate with colleagues (Becker et al., 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; M. M. Kennedy, 2016). A suite of integrated implementation supports are available to leadership teams to help them support and monitor their staff’s learning, understand SEL concepts so that they can “walk the talk,” and create school-wide routines and structures that support staff well-being and implementation of Second Step SEL for Adults.



Additionally, social-emotional well-being, in and of itself, can help educators act in **more consistent and less biased ways**.

Adult SEL and Equity Initiatives

Adults in school buildings play a large role in determining the context in which SEL is implemented. Because inequities are systemic, many aspects of the educational system that perpetuate them, such as Eurocentric curricula and biased discipline policies, reflect adult choices. Adults, then, are responsible for dismantling these inequities.

However, social-emotional competencies are key to implementing equity initiatives because even when effective, these initiatives can be emotionally taxing and can surface tension and conflict in relationships (Kennedy, 2019; Kingston & Wilensky, 2018). A foundation of trust and self-awareness can help educators respond productively to these challenges.

Additionally, social-emotional well-being, in and of itself, can help educators act in more consistent and less biased ways. For instance, research shows that individuals are more prone to cognitive biases when they are under stress (King et al., 2016).

Therefore, in order to advance equity in schools, attention to adult SEL is necessary.

Implementing Adult SEL Programs

Education leaders can support adult SEL program implementation—like other program implementation—with extensive communication, integration with other programs, and systems of learning and improvement. However, there are several special considerations when implementing adult SEL programs. First, educator buy-in is arguably even more important than with youth programs because adult SEL programs are aimed specifically at educators' skills. It is beneficial, then, that the rollout involves educators' input (Merriam & Bierema, 2013), ideally prior to program purchase (Hickey et al., 2018). If SEL for adults programming lacks widespread buy-in, a pilot program with a small group prior to wider adoption might be beneficial. Finally, leadership modeling of adult SEL will also be critical to successful implementation of any adult SEL program (Price, 2012; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

Adult SEL programs are an important part of systemic SEL, but they are intended to support, not replace, youth-facing SEL programs. The next section discusses what to look for when selecting an SEL program and how to successfully implement it.

SEL FOR YOUTH

There's strong evidence that explicit SEL instruction guided by SEL programming supports the development of essential skills. High-quality SEL programs, both in schools and out-of-school time environments, have demonstrated short- and long-term benefits (Durlak et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2017), including positive social behavior, academic success, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and less drug use (Taylor et al., 2017). SEL programming is also related to improved self-perceptions, increased school bonding, and improved social behaviors, grades, and school attendance rates (Durlak et al., 2010).

Selecting an SEL Program for Youth

Research headlines about the positive effects of SEL programming have led many districts to adopt an SEL curriculum. But behind these headlines, SEL program designs and corresponding youth outcomes vary substantially. Before selecting a program, education leaders should consider:

1. How programs' concepts and frameworks align to language and ideas in mission statements or strategic plans
2. Each program's inclusion of features that research has identified as characteristic of effective SEL programs
3. How programs meet a community's contextual needs

Considering which Frameworks a Program Uses and which Concepts it Covers

Although many commonly-used SEL programs address at least a subset of the five core SEL competencies outlined in the CASEL framework, underlying frameworks vary. District leaders should ensure that the frameworks and topics are consistent with other SEL programs used in their district or community, for example, those used in out-of-school time (Schwartz et al., 2020) or early learning spaces.

Look for a program with a research-based design

Meta-analyses of SEL programs have identified four key features, referred to as SAFE characteristics, that differentiate more and less effective programs (Durlak et al., 2010, 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Those characteristics are:

- (S):** Intentionally **sequenced** in a logical progression
- (A):** Use **active** learning to help children gain skills and knowledge
- (F):** Are **focused** on developing social-emotional skills
- (E):** Are **explicit** about the competencies they aim to develop



Research-based programming should reflect SAFE characteristics. Additionally, research has demonstrated that SEL programs are most effective when learners engage with them over the span of multiple years (CASEL, 2013; Greenberg et al., 2003; Nation et al., 2003) and when programs provide regular opportunities for youth to practice social-emotional skills learned in the context of the SEL program and apply those skills to other parts of their life (CASEL, 2013; Durlak et al., 2010, 2011; Hawkins et al., 2004). Therefore, selecting a program that provides developmentally-appropriate content for multiple grade bands is an ideal choice.

Evaluating Programs for Contextual Fit and Equity Advancement

Even with a strong research base, an SEL program may imperfectly fit a specific community's needs. When selecting a program, district leaders should therefore consider how SEL programs fit with and support their community's stated mission and priorities, resourcing, and capacity.

Resource and capacity considerations

Although financial resources are often the most obvious aspect of capacity to consider, deeply investing in supports for school climate and culture, ongoing SEL training and program use, and continuous improvement are key to high-quality SEL implementation (Hodges & Wotring, 2004; Jones et al., 2018).

Other capacity aspects to think about are:

- ▶ Stakeholders' motivation to engage in the work
- ▶ General organizational capacity like culture, climate, and leadership quality
- ▶ An organization's capacity specifically related to SEL like preexisting knowledge and the presence of "champions" for the work (Scaccia et al., 2015)

Equity Considerations

In addition to resource and capacity, leaders should consider how SEL programs support equity in their community. Some of these considerations require leaders to reflect on programs' fit with their community context, while others relate to how equity considerations are written into SEL programs. A few guiding questions that district leaders may consider are:

- ▶ How do the programs reflect and support the culture and values of the community?
- ▶ Have creators of the SEL programs and screening tools been thoughtful about inclusion and equity? Can you find evidence of this on their website/ program materials? In the program itself? Consider using evaluation processes and scorecards like the one found here.
- ▶ Will the programs (adult- and student-facing SEL programs) advance holistic, "transformative" SEL (CASEL, n.d.; Jagers et al., 2019) that supports:
 - ❖ Ongoing professional learning related to SEL, including SEL support for adults
 - ❖ A positive school climate
 - ❖ Feelings of belonging and engagement for everyone in the community
 - ❖ Learners in connecting content to their own and others' lived experiences
 - ❖ Individual and collective agency to advance social justice

Implementing an SEL program for youth

Finding SEL programs that match your community's needs is crucial for a successful and equitable SEL implementation. But how SEL programs are implemented is also critical for the success and sustainability of the chosen program (Meyers et al., 2019).

Two key ways leaders can support high-quality SEL implementation:

- ▶ Intentionally supporting program integration throughout youth's educational experience
- ▶ Continuous learning and improvement throughout implementation

Need Guidance in Choosing a High-Quality SEL Program?

The **CASEL Program Guide** is a Consumer Reports-style resource that educators can browse and search to discover and compare evidence-based programs built on priorities and needs.

Integrate at the district, school, and classroom levels. To be most effective, SEL needs to be reinforced consistently across grade levels and contexts in a school (e.g., classrooms, lunchroom, playground), integrated with youth's academic work, and modeled and practiced in the context of school-based relationships.

Learn and respond. It's important for district and school leaders to establish systems for collecting data to help them understand and continuously improve implementation. Leaders can do so by collecting stakeholder community feedback through informal surveys or focus groups from a broad range of stakeholders (e.g., administrators, teachers, youth, families, community partners). Educators can also use formative assessments to understand content that youth have mastered and what lessons they may need to revisit, and to identify instructional approaches that are more and less effective. Some SEL programs, like the Second Step® family of programs,, feature formative assessments as part of their program. Finally, most district leaders will eventually want to use a formal evaluation to determine if and how SEL initiatives are working. Many universal screening tools can support both formative assessment and evaluation.



UNIVERSAL SCREENING

Universal screening involves the use of brief assessments across an entire population (e.g., classroom, school, district) to identify students who need supplemental academic or SEL instruction. To be effective, screening methods must be brief and efficient (i.e., fewer than 25 items) and completed in a few minutes for each student.

The purpose of universal screening is threefold:

- 1. Identify early indicators of a student's need for additional support**, such as through the use of behavioral strategies or supplemental SEL instruction (Kamphaus, 2012). Ideally, a universal screening should employ a dual-factor model of mental health (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008) that recognizes the presence of behavioral problems as well as the potential absence of social-emotional skills; tools that are solely deficit or strength-based may be missing key characteristics predictive of long-term need.
- 2. Identify adults in need of support.** For example, if classrooms score low on an SEL assessment, teachers might consider using additional or different strategies to teach SEL. Low scores could also suggest that teachers need social-emotional support themselves.
- 3. Evaluate the efficacy of universal SEL programming.** Oftentimes, schools rely on reactive data such as discipline referrals to determine the efficacy of proactive and preventive supports. Rather, screening offers the benefit of periodic review of programming effectiveness by examining school-wide trends in both areas of strength and prevalence and type of student risk.

Finding the Right Screening Tool

There is no one right screening tool for every student and school. Below are key factors that educators should consider in evaluating whether a particular screener is right for their context, including technical adequacy, usability and feasibility, and contextual appropriateness (see Romer et al., 2020).





Checking for Technical Adequacy

The technical—or psychometric—properties of an assessment are directly related to the usefulness of the data and the defensibility of the decisions derived from the data. A screening tool should utilize multiple forms of psychometric evidence:

- 1. Reliability:** A strong research-based social-emotional behavior (SEB) assessment should be shown to be effective in two or more research studies with different groups and settings of students.
- 2. Validity:** The screener should also have evidence that the resulting data led to meaningful and effective interventions. This is provided through structural validity that indicates if the screener provides meaningful information relevant to its stated purpose, and criterion-related validity that speaks to whether a screener predicts other important outcome variables.
- 3. Diagnostic accuracy:** The screener should reliably identify students who are at risk for SEB concerns and those who are not (Streiner & Cairney, 2007).
- 4. Fairness:** The screener should have evidence of performing the same across demographic characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and ability status. This ensures that the screener is free from bias for or against any subgroup (American Educational Research Association et al., 2014) that may unintentionally reinforce inequitable access to critical mental health services and worsen disproportionality.

Considering Usability and Feasibility

Beyond technical adequacy, universal screening tools should be sufficiently usable and feasible.

Usable screeners yield scores that users can access immediately and understand without time-intensive or costly training. The usability of screening tools is often facilitated through digital solutions, which enable automated scoring and comprehensive reporting features along with integrated support materials.

Feasible screeners can be completed, analyzed, interpreted, and used with available time, resources, and personnel. Screeners must also be affordable. Even when a screener is “free,” costs can still be incurred because of school personnel time spent on data collection, scoring, analysis, and reporting.

In other words, screeners (and the associated screening process) should be quick, cheap, and easy.

Appraising Contextual Appropriateness

A universal screening tool might be technically adequate, usable, and feasible, but it must also fit within a school's unique context and address its needs if the tool is to be appropriate for the school's use. Such a fit can be established in several ways:

1. The screener should predict social, emotional, and behavioral constructs that are of interest to the school. For instance, if a school is only interested in detecting students who are at risk for internalizing concerns, in the interest of feasibility, it should select a screener that is specific to internalizing concerns alone.
2. The screener should be suitable for use with the ages/grades to be assessed.
3. The screener should be available in the languages spoken within the district, particularly by families and students.
4. The screener should be aligned with the school's particular service delivery model. If the school wants a screener that will support immediate triaging of students to different levels of support (Tier 2 vs. Tier 3), the tool should differentiate students with moderate or high risk. If the school wants a screener to support a more titration-based approach, wherein all students with advanced need initially receive Tier 2 intervention and then receive more intensive supports only if necessary, the school can adopt a screener that does not differentiate students by level of risk.

Readiness for Screening

Before administering universal screening, school teams are strongly encouraged to evaluate several key prerequisites to screening (Romer et al., 2020):

1. Teams should identify what they hope to accomplish by connecting the screening process to the vision and mission of the school by using guiding questions. Some schools may be prioritizing program evaluation while others may be concerned about large numbers of students falling through the cracks. This process also includes engaging teachers to describe how screening will be administered and how data will be used to improve student outcomes.
2. Teams should examine current capacity through resource mapping. Typically, this involves a determination of current levels of treatment capacity (i.e., number of student support personnel) as well as the availability of various intervention supports. This process is critical to facilitate how to match needs with services.
3. Teams should develop a follow-up plan for data usage. Teams are strongly encouraged to communicate with teacher raters about when they should expect data to be returned to them, and most important, when data will be used to inform various levels of student, classroom, and school-wide support.



Procedural Considerations

There are important questions to answer prior to screening for the first time. Answers to these questions will establish the procedures through which screening data are collected and used to support decisions related to student and teacher support.

How often will your school universally screen?

Many schools screen three times per year, in the fall, winter, and spring. This approach allows schools to track student progress throughout the school year, as well as evaluate if the school's health is changing in response to systems change efforts. This approach also allows schools to detect students who, due to changing circumstances, are in need of support later in the year.

Who will complete the universal screening?

Research shows that who is best equipped to complete the screening varies depending on the age of the student (Dowdy & Kim, 2012):

- ▶ **Preschool/Kindergarten:** Parents are particularly appropriate informants at school entry as they have spent the most time with their child.
- ▶ **K–12:** Classroom teachers spend a large amount of time with their students and tend to have a good norm-referenced understanding of what behaviors and emotions they can expect from their students at this age/grade level.
- ▶ **Grades 5–12:** Older students become particularly appropriate informants as they spend less time with any single adult. Asking students about their own internal states becomes the best bet for understanding their social-emotional and behavioral functioning.

How can your school approach screening in a way that supports equity?

As noted previously, evidence of fairness should be a key consideration when selecting a screening tool. Additionally, once schools have collected their data, they should disaggregate scores to determine the degree of disproportionality across student subgroups.

Finally, it is important to recognize that screeners—regardless of psychometric evidence—are subject to teachers' bias. It is important that schools engage teachers in professional learning and ongoing technical assistance that promotes their awareness of their bias and its influence on their perceptions and behavior.

CONCLUSION

There are many elements to consider as you work to achieve systemic SEL in your school or district, including how to select and implement tools to support adults' SEL, youth SEL, and SEL assessment. Implementing adult SEL reduces educators' stress levels and burnout so they are better able to establish positive, authentic relationships with their students. Student SEL helps youth develop the skills they need to thrive as they grow into adulthood. And SEL assessments provide critical data for screening, continuous improvement, and program evaluation. Together, these tools provide a suite of resources that support effective and systemic SEL in your community.

[Request a demo](#) to learn more about how the Social, Academic, Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS) can help K–12 educators identify the social-emotional strengths of students and areas for growth. Plus, see how the research-based, teacher-informed, and classroom-tested [Second Step® family of programs](#) work to promote the social-emotional development, safety, and well-being of students PreK–Grade 8.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Mylien Duong, Ph.D.

Dr. Mylien Duong contributed to this white paper while she was a Senior Research Scientist at Committee for Children. She is now Director of Research at OpenMind Platform, a nonprofit educational technology organization that leverages behavioral science to help people bridge divides. With support from the Institute of Education Sciences, the National Institutes of Health, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), and private foundations, her research focuses on developing and evaluating interventions that promote social-emotional and academic success and prevent and treat mental health problems. She believes that every child deserves the opportunity to excel and thrive, and that access to opportunity should not be determined at birth. Her aim is to develop empirically-supported interventions that are responsive to the needs of ethnic and economic minority youth. Even the most effective interventions cannot benefit children and adolescents if they are not implemented. She aims to develop interventions that are brief, that fit within the routines and rituals of schools, and that can be delivered by personnel without specialized mental health training.



Stephen Kilgus, Ph.D.

Dr. Stephen Kilgus is Associate Professor in the School Psychology Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where his research primarily relates to social-emotional and behavioral assessment. His work has resulted in the development of evidence-based assessment procedures, as well as the validation of tools for universal screening, problem analysis, and progress monitoring. Dr. Kilgus has authored and contributed to the development of a number of assessments, including the SAEBRS screener and Direct Behavior Ratings (DBRs). He currently serves as a principal investigator on a grant from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) regarding the validation of the Intervention Selection Profile (ISP), a suite of tools to inform the selection and modification of Tier 2 targeted interventions. Dr. Kilgus is also researching the development and evaluation of Tier 2 targeted interventions.



Tricia Maas, Ph.D.

Dr. Tricia Maas is a Senior Research Scientist at Committee for Children where she leads research for the organization's Second Step® SEL for Adults and Second Step® Out-of-School Time programs. Prior to her career in research, Dr. Maas taught high school math in Charlotte, NC and San Jose, CA. Dr. Maas holds an M.A. in education policy from Stanford University, and a Ph.D. in education policy from the University of Washington.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Nathaniel P. von der Embse, Ph.D., NCSP

Dr. von der Embse is an Associate Professor of School Psychology at the University of South Florida. He serves as an associate editor for the Journal of School Psychology, and his research interests include universal screening for behavioral and mental health, teacher stress and student test anxiety, and training educators in population-based mental health services. He received the 2018 Lightner Witmer Award for early career scholarship from Division 16 of the American Psychological Association. He is one of the authors of the Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS) assessment suite and is an author and behavior team member with FastBridge.



Sherri Widen, Ph.D.

Dr. Sherri Widen is the Research Manager at Committee for Children. Her expertise is the development of children's concepts of emotions and social-emotional skills. In 2013, she transitioned from basic research in psychology to more applied research in education settings with a focus on increasing children's social-emotional skills to support their academic outcomes. Dr. Widen has been the manager of research at Committee for Children since 2018 where she oversees research assistants as they help develop SEL products that are both research informed and evidence based. Dr. Widen holds a B.A. in psychology and an M.A. in developmental psychology from the University of British Columbia, and a Ph.D. in developmental psychology from Boston College.

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Illuminate Education equips educators to take a data-driven approach to serving the whole child. Our solution combines comprehensive assessment, MTSS management and collaboration, and real-time dashboard tools, and puts them in the hands of educators. As a result, educators can monitor learning and growth, identify academic and social-emotional behavioral needs, and align targeted supports in order to accelerate learning for each student.