

# 1

## IS IT REALISTIC TO INCLUDE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS AND CHARACTER ON REPORT CARDS?

**Utility:** We provide overviews of social-emotional learning (SEL) and character development (CD) and identify specific behaviors representative of each. A description of the lack of support in research for current comment systems and some key rationales as to why report card comments should be changed are included. This chapter also includes an analysis of driving forces for making changes to comments and an overview of the inefficient nature of current comment systems.

**Maximizing Guide Resources:** Consider adapting or distributing this part of the Guide for key stakeholders or staff to promote awareness and buy-in.

### **Key Takeaway and Reflection Points:**

- SEL refers to a set of skills. A prominent categorization is the CASEL 5, which includes self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (see Table 1.1).
- CD refers to both moral character rooted in virtues (e.g., integrity, justice, and respect) and performance character (e.g., perseverance, optimism, and work ethic) (see Table 1.2).
- Taken together, SEL and CD can be referred to as SECD (social, emotional, and character development), highlighting the overlap and importance of both.
- States and countries are integrating SEL and CD into a variety of mandated programming, including early learning standards and the Common Core and related state standards.
- Current report card comment systems lack research demonstrating their efficacy in promoting student success in school and life.
- Consider the “Driving Forces for Adding SECD to Report Cards” bulleted points. How salient are practical and conceptual advantages for your school or district?

The saying “What is important is what gets assessed” is a bit too simplistic. In fact, the first question should be “What is important?,” followed by “How can we assess it?” So the answer to the question that opens the chapter, “Is it realistic to include social-emotional skills and character on report cards?,” depends on how important you feel those areas are to your students, fellow educators, school, and community.

If you value data, then you will be reassured that over 200 studies support the significance of the role of social-emotional and character development on student academic outcomes, classroom behavior, attitudes toward school, treatment of other students, and beliefs in their own competences and efficacy (Brown, Corrigan, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2012; Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015; see also [www.characterandcitizenship.org](http://www.characterandcitizenship.org)).

If you simply love children, believe in the developmental education of the whole child, understand what is necessary for college and career success, or want to prepare students for the tests of life and not just a life of tests, you may also value social-emotional and character development. While much has been written about this area, we want to share our perspective here.

## **WHAT IS SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT?**

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Simply put, social-emotional and character development represents the convergence of two trends in education, social-emotional learning (SEL) and character education (CE). Both SEL and CE have two flagship organizations, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and Character.org (formerly the Character Education Partnership), and each has a website that is an outstanding source of ongoing information about each perspective, [www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org) and [www.character.org](http://www.character.org).

SEL refers to a set of skills that are important elements of everyday life and are present and relevant from infancy through old age: recognizing and managing emotions, developing empathy and concern for others, establishing effective relationships in one-on-one and group contexts, making responsible and ethical decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively. These skills allow students to function well in classrooms, in schoolyards, on the bus, during recess, and in after-school programs. They are able to calm themselves when upset, initiate friendships and resolve conflicts respectfully, and make choices that are ethical and safe. Table 1.1 includes the most common definition of SEL mentioned earlier in the introduction, the CASEL 5, with detailed definitions and behavioral examples (see Payton et al., 2008, for additional detail). From even a cursory reading, it should be clear how essential these skills are for virtually everything that occurs in schools, whether in classroom or other contexts, because both the skills and what happens in schools are grounded in interpersonal relationships.

Character has two essential parts: moral character and performance character. Moral character encompasses the knowledge of essential virtues—such as integrity, justice, caring, respect, and citizenship—needed for successful interpersonal relationships,

**Table 1.1 The CASEL 5: Definitions and Skills Examples**

Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Social Awareness	Relationship Skills	Responsible Decision Making
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accurately assessing one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths</li> <li>Maintaining a well grounded sense of self confidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regulating one's emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in addressing challenges</li> <li>Expressing emotions appropriately</li> <li>Setting and monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being able to take the perspective of and empathize with others</li> <li>Recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences</li> <li>Recognizing and making best use of family, school, and community resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation</li> <li>Resisting inappropriate social pressure</li> <li>Preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict</li> <li>Seeking help when needed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions</li> <li>Applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations</li> <li>Contributing to the well-being of one's school and community</li> </ul>
<p><u>Skills Examples</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emotion recognition</li> <li>Identifying feelings</li> <li>Reflection on how one's behavior supports a caring community</li> <li>Recognizing how emotions make our bodies feel</li> <li>Understanding causes of emotions</li> </ul>	<p><u>Skills Examples</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Goal setting</li> <li>Self-calming and control</li> <li>Changing emotions</li> <li>Positive self-talk</li> <li>Self-control</li> <li>Appropriate expression of emotions</li> </ul>	<p><u>Skills Examples</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Considering different points of view</li> <li>Empathy</li> <li>Understanding facial, verbal, and situational cues</li> <li>Accurately assessing intentions</li> <li>Appreciating diversity</li> <li>Treating others fairly and being polite</li> </ul>	<p><u>Skills Examples</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communication and listening</li> <li>Demonstrating respect and fairness</li> <li>Being cooperative</li> <li>Initiating positive relationships</li> <li>Conflict resolution</li> <li>Handling criticism</li> <li>Teamwork</li> <li>Inclusion</li> </ul>	<p><u>Skills Examples</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cognitive, interpersonal, and group problem solving</li> <li>Flexible thinking</li> <li>Taking responsibility for one's self</li> <li>Evaluating possible consequences, solutions, and outcomes</li> <li>Fairness</li> <li>Participating in group decision making</li> </ul>

ethical conduct, and productive living. Performance character represents the qualities and competencies individuals need to live up to their potential for excellence, including enacting the virtues of moral character. Attributes and skills such as perseverance, optimism, a sound work ethic, emotion regulation, interpersonal and communication skills, and problem solving are all needed to perform in a way that reflects one's moral character in school, after school, vocationally, in higher education, and in the community.

Table 1.2 presents a set of character strengths based on the work of Paul Tough and the KIPP schools cited earlier in the introduction. These strengths are commonly identified as part of positive psychology and often included as part of character education programs. In Table 1.2, the strengths are accompanied by behavioral indicators.

**Table 1.2 Character Strengths and Behavioral Indicators**

Zest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Approaching life with excitement and energy; feeling alive and activated</b></li> <li>• <i>Example Indicators:</i> Actively participates, shows enthusiasm, invigorates others</li> </ul>
Self-Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Regulating what one feels and does; being self-disciplined</b></li> <li>• <i>Example Indicators:</i> Comes to class prepared; pays attention and resists distractions; remains calm even when criticized or otherwise provoked; keeps temper in check</li> </ul>
Gratitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Being aware of and thankful for opportunities that one has and for good things to happen</b></li> <li>• <i>Example Indicators:</i> Recognizes what others have done; shows appreciation for others; appreciates and/or shows appreciation for his/her opportunities</li> </ul>
Curiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Taking an interest in experience and learning new things for its own sake; finding things fascinating</b></li> <li>• <i>Example Indicators:</i> Is eager to explore new things; asks and answers questions to deepen understanding; actively listens to others; asks appropriate, probing questions</li> </ul>
Optimism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it</b></li> <li>• <i>Example Indicators:</i> Gets over frustrations and setbacks quickly; believes that effort will improve his or her future; can articulate positive future aspirations and connect current actions to those aspirations</li> </ul>
Grit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Finishing what one starts; completing something despite obstacles; a combination of persistence and resilience</b></li> <li>• <i>Example Indicators:</i> Finishes whatever he or she begins; tries very hard even after experiencing failure; works independently with focus, despite distractions</li> </ul>
Social Intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Being aware of motives and feelings of other people and oneself; ability to reason within large and small groups</b></li> <li>• <i>Example Indicators:</i> Able to find solutions during conflicts with others; demonstrates respect for feelings of others; knows when and how to include others</li> </ul>

SOURCE: <http://www.kipp.org/our-approach/strengths-and-behaviors>

As with SEL, whether one looks at the strengths or the indicators, it is hard to imagine a well-functioning school in the absence of appropriate character development on the part of children.

In this Guide, we refer to SEL, CE, and their more descriptive combination, SECD—social-emotional and character development—to integrate these ideas and show that regardless of whether a school chooses to emphasize one or the other, both concepts include a combination of skills and values necessary to prepare students for success in school and life.

## **WHY SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED ABOUT SEL OR CHARACTER?**

### **SEL and Character Are Connected to Current and Emerging Mandates**

More and more states and countries are turning their attention to early learning standards; bullying prevention; alcohol, drug, and tobacco prevention; whole-child

education; career and college readiness, and the Common Core and related state standards. In each of these areas, social-emotional and character competencies are essential, as we will elaborate below and in case examples in Chapters 4 and 5. For the Common Core State Standards and those that have been substituted for them, strong social-emotional and cognitive learning skills are required on the part of students. These skills include emotion vocabulary and recognition, careful and accurate listening, self-regulation, persistence, inquiry, teamwork, reflection, nonviolent conflict resolution, and problem solving (<http://www.casel.org/state-standards-for-social-and-emotional-learning/>).

In addition, states, districts, and schools with some kind of SEL or CE or related mandate are coming under greater pressure to have systematic assessment in these areas. Ideally, these assessments will be closely linked to the SEL or CE approaches being used in their settings. Among the most efficient and effective ways to accomplish this is via existing school report cards.

### **We Are Already Rating These Areas but Ineffectively**

In fact, educators have always been concerned about students' social-emotional and character development. Usually, this has been referred to under general categories of *behavior*, *citizenship*, and *work habits*, but they have long been a focus of educators' concerns and parent-teacher conversations. These have found their way onto report card comment sections as the primary avenue teachers have consistently used for providing feedback to parents and students on behavior. Originally, those comments would be written in open-ended spaces, but in recent years, these spaces have been supplemented and often supplanted by drop-down menus or checklists of comments from which educators choose some that are most applicable. However, most of these comment systems are problematic.

### **The Inefficient Nature of Current Comment Systems**

There is little published research on existing comment systems. Systematic examination by the Rutgers Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Lab of report cards from twenty-three schools in five districts has supported the findings of Friedman and Frisbie's (1995) study that revealed that comment systems can vary tremendously across schools. Formats range from unstructured space for teachers to write comments to computerized drop-down menus of as many as eighty different possible comments, from which teachers select two per student per subject area per marking period. Many comments examined by our Lab do not identify a specific observable behavior, skill, or skill set. Instead, comments are stated broadly, lacking definition of what exact behavior or behaviors students must display or how consistently they must do so to support a comment. Examples include the following: tries hard but finds the subject difficult; shows improvement; interferes with class progress; needs to seek help; and shows excellence. These dilute or misdirect the potential impact of the feedback and create immense potential for different interpretations of the same comment among teachers, parents, and students.

To maximize educational efforts and prepare students for both academic tasks as well as the tests of life, additional consideration should be given to the immense potential

impact of well-designed comment sections. What is realistic will remain the ultimate question for any modification to current practices, as schools continually face pressures to promote academic achievement with limited resources and seemingly endless lists of responsibilities. Addressing behaviors that have systematically been found in research and practice to promote academic success can be done in a feasible way by modifying current report card comment systems.

## **DRIVING FORCES FOR ADDING SECD TO REPORT CARDS**

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Any change in educational practice asks many individuals to look at what they are doing and do things differently. This cannot be asked or considered without well-thought-out justification. In that light, consider the following driving forces for making changes:

- Pedagogical requirements of Common Core State Standards and related standards require social-emotional and character competencies.
  - The Common Core has requirements, such as “attending to text complexity and close reading of text,” that are in direct contrast to what students experience outside of school. Their text messages are anything but complex, and much of their close reading is focused on picture captions. Indeed, text is often seen as cumbersome for young people. So while they can and should learn about text complexity and close reading, the process of learning will engender inevitable frustrations, for which a range of SECD competencies will be essential for mastery. Perhaps even more explicitly, the Common Core requires students to question one another, give feedback, work in groups effectively, and exhibit curiosity—also part of SECD competencies.
- Teachers already allocate time to assigning report card comments.
  - Three or four times per year, teachers spend time in grading tasks.
- Comments are often the only formal rating made of student behavior.
  - Yet the comment section, as noted earlier, is often not designed with a systematic focus on school or district priorities.
- Report cards already feature a section for comments.
  - By linking SEL and character to comment sections, a built-in assessment and delivery system that is scalable would be established. Bringing in any new instrument would require a fundamental change in the task of reporting on student behavior.
- Finances are already allocated for the production and distribution of report cards.

- More formal measures of SEL would involve the need for resources to be allocated to obtaining and distributing the measures, having “expert” personnel score and interpret them, and developing a separate feedback system so that results could be distributed to parents and students. Report cards are already in place and behavioral indicators focused on SECD can be more efficiently linked to existing school data warehouses and more easily retrieved for reporting purposes than current comment systems.
- Parents and students could receive feedback on student progress toward demonstrating specific skills shown in research and practice to influence academic achievement as well as a number of positive and negative behaviors.
  - As we will discuss in Chapter 6, parent–teacher, parent–student, and student–teacher conversations focused on SECD rest on a far stronger empirical and practical base than conversations based on the current comment system ratings.
- Student progress toward skill development can be tracked in a meaningful way on an individual, school, and district level.
  - SEL, in particular, calls for strong developmental articulation. This will lead to grade level differentiation in indicators that can, in turn, be linked to age-appropriate interventions. Individual data can be examined to look at a student’s progress within a universal (e.g., whole school) or Tier 2 (i.e., more targeted to specific student groups) intervention. Classroom, school, and district data can be looked at to evaluate programs or approaches brought in for SECD improvement.
- Ratings of SEL skills and character can be used as early indicators of students at risk or who may be able to serve as positive role models and resources for their peers.
  - Criteria can be developed to identify students who are consistently not functioning at grade or age level expectations. This can trigger mainstream classroom-based and/or Tier 2 interventions sooner than might otherwise occur because the indicators are directly tied to best-practice intervention approaches. Relatedly, students who are consistently above grade or age level can be models and buddies for students who need skill development.
- SEL and character ratings present a natural opportunity for emphasizing positive behaviors.
  - In an age of accountability, there can be a tendency to focus on the negative—to point out what children are not doing well. SEL and character ratings allow for positive conversations to take place through both the framing and focus of well-constructed indicators.

## SUMMARY

Teacher comments have long been provided alongside academic grades to portray each individual student's academic school life in a way that recognizes the essential role of many abilities and competencies in academic performance and potential. Experts are increasingly clear that judgments of individuals' success in most life areas includes not only intellectual prowess but their interpersonal performance. We have all served on committees with colleagues who are extremely smart but not productive members of the team; indeed, their actions often impede the collective work. Educators in the field are recognizing the convergence of the need to promote skills essential for learning and the opportunity to provide feedback on these skills through report card comments. In the world into which our students will enter as adults, there can be no *either-or* of academic or social-emotional and character competencies. Students require *both-and*. Therefore, feedback about students in schools must incorporate both aspects, systematically and carefully.