

# ADVOCACY IN ACTION

Column Editor: K. Andrew R. Richards

*Social and Emotional*

**LEARNING POLICIES**

*and Physical Education*

By Jenn Jacobs and Paul Wright



**T**here is a current push to broaden the educational agenda by integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies into the academic curriculum (Elias, 1997). Several national organizations support this initiative, and states have begun adopting SEL frameworks into their educational policies. However, the implementation of these policies can be challenging as administrators and teachers may be unsure how to effectively align SEL standards with the curriculum. This article describes how physical education provides a strong platform for integrating SEL standards into the curriculum. The alignment between SEL and the affective learning objectives of physical education can be leveraged to advocate for the importance of physical education within the broader curriculum.

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## **The Social and Emotional Learning Framework**

The SEL framework posits that social and emotional skills such as managing emotions, setting goals, and building positive relationships are essential for youths' success in school, at home, and in community life (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2013). In particular, SEL programming focuses on competencies such as self-management, self-awareness and social awareness, building positive relationships, and making healthy decisions. Research demonstrates that students receiving quality SEL instruction tend to have higher academic performance, more positive attitudes, fewer negative behaviors, and reduced stress (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Many national organizations have integrated SEL objectives into their policies. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (<http://www.p21.org>) calls for policymakers and educators to adopt a broader understanding of the skills today's students need to be successful in school and the workplace. These skills include creativity, communication, collaboration, respect for diversity, and self-direction. The National Association of State Boards of Education (2013) has stated that SEL improves both student behavior and academic outcomes. With the momentum and concern over issues such as school violence and bullying, schools may want to consider making SEL a thread that runs throughout their curricula.

## **Physical Education as a Social and Emotional Learning Platform**

In light of the national support for SEL, there is a need to examine how physical education can embrace the integration of SEL competencies. Two of the national content standards articulated by SHAP America—Society of Health and Physical Educators (n.d.) are directly aligned with the SEL framework as they call for students to exhibit “responsible personal and social behaviors that respect the self and others” (Standard 4) and

to “value physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction” (Standard 5). There is great congruency within these physical education content standards and core SEL components, and they put physical educators in a strong position to advocate for content integration. Doing so may also bolster support for instructional practices and the relevance of physical education within their school and district curricula.

## **Recommendations for Integrating Social and Emotional Learning into Physical Education**

While physical education provides a natural opportunity to promote SEL, effective physical education teachers must implement teaching strategies that intentionally address SEL competencies. There are many well-developed instructional models that represent best practices for developing these competencies, including teaching personal and social responsibility (TPSR; Hellison, 2011), sport education (Siedentop, Hastie, & van der Mars, 2004), and adventure-based learning (Miner & Boldt, 1981). The TPSR model provides students with opportunities to take on responsible roles and to practice life skills such as self-control, goal setting, and leadership. This model empowers students to make choices and self-reflect, and therefore, aligns greatly with the SEL skills of decision making and self-awareness. Sport education organizes units around “seasons” where students are responsible for the instruction, assessment, and performance aspects of all activities, including taking on roles such as coach, referee, equipment manager, or scorekeeper. The sport education framework diversifies the skills students can learn from a sport lesson and inherently fosters SEL principles related to self-management and responsible decision making. Lastly, adventure-based learning integrates outdoor education with team building, problem solving, and trust activities, all of which closely align with the SEL standards of social awareness and relationship skills.

In addition to utilizing model-based instruction that intentionally addresses SEL, fostering a student-centered learning environment is another way to align physical education with SEL standards. Research studies highlight the importance of quality teacher–student relationships in facilitating SEL outcomes. When teachers foster a safe and inclusive learning environment, students feel a greater attachment to their school and are more motivated to learn (Durlak et al., 2011). Thus, teachers should strive to be emotionally supportive and employ an asset-based developmental approach that focuses on enhancing and improving students' strengths.

Research also points to the need for coordinating efforts across academic areas to allow students to practice and apply SEL principles in different learning contexts. This is consistent with the concept of “transfer” in the TPSR model, which relates to students' ability to apply the responsible behaviors they learn in the gym to broader contexts such as school, community, and home life (Hellison, 2011). To optimize the chances for transfer, physical education teachers should not only talk about the importance of SEL competencies in the gym, but also discuss

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ways to apply them elsewhere. These conversations could be aligned with school or district initiatives on specific topics such as substance abuse, sexual health, violence prevention, bullying, and character education. These messages could be reinforced through communication with other teachers, administrators, and parents. In this way, physical education teachers are ideally suited to take a leadership role in the greater school community. This allows physical education teachers to be role models for the development of a learning environment that fosters SEL as well as advocates of SEL within the school building.

## Taking Action

This article has argued that physical education provides an opportune setting for authentically teaching competencies from the SEL framework. In closing, the following are concrete examples of how physical education teachers can use an SEL platform to advocate for physical education as a subject area. First, physical education teachers can begin by aligning local physical education curricula with the SEL framework. For instance, they are encouraged to develop model activities, lessons, and units to highlight the integration of SEL into physical education. These activities, lessons, and units should be high-quality educational experiences in terms of planning, instruction, and assessment. Once the physical education program has gained momentum and developed evidence of student learning (e.g., photo or video documentation, completed projects, student quotes, self-assessments and peer assessments), educators are encouraged to share these successes in the school and community. With this approach, physical education teachers can position themselves as leaders in the area of SEL. They can serve as role models, support other teachers who are working on SEL integration, and even volunteer to lead a schoolwide committee on the integration of SEL across the curriculum.

Because most schools lack a coordinated plan for how to address SEL integration, those teachers who step up with a clear understanding of the area, concrete strategies for moving forward, and a willingness to be a resource for colleagues will be highly valued. Therefore, SEL presents a strong platform for physical education teachers to not only highlight the importance of their subject area, but also to assert its relevance in the broader curriculum and school community.

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## Submissions Welcome!

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The purpose of the *Strategies* column “Advocacy in Action” is to provide tangible, real world examples of grassroots and national-level advocacy activities taking place in the fields of physical education, health education and physical activity. Submissions should be written in a conversational, practical tone. Columns should be 1,000–1,300 words, or roughly four typed, double-spaced pages.