

BREAKTHROUGH RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

HARNESSING THE POWER OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) PROGRAMS

Teachers work daily with students who exhibit social and emotional problems that can disrupt classrooms and negatively impact their own learning and that of other students. Dorothy Espelage discovered the key to effective use of social-emotional programs that help students have fewer behavior issues, less emotional distress, and improved academic performance.

IDENTIFYING THE KEY TO MAKING SEL PROGRAMS THRIVE

Bullying prevention programs that flourish outside of the U.S. don't do nearly as well inside our country, according to Dr. Dorothy Espelage, the nation's foremost expert on bullying and school violence. The effectiveness of a program hinges on how it is implemented—and in the U.S., implementation is often a piecemeal approach. That approach might give teachers greater latitude in what material they present and how they present it—but it has an overall deleterious effect, which Espelage found through a multi-year study funded by a \$1.18 million grant issued by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

Espelage, an Edward William Gutgsell & Jane Marr Gutgsell Endowed Professor and Hardie Scholar of Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, conducted a multisite evaluation of Second Step, a popular middle school social-emotional program that has not been rigorously evaluated in U.S. schools.

REDUCING NEGATIVE AND HARMFUL BEHAVIORS

Espelage's study involved 36 middle schools in Kansas and Illinois

in a three-year, randomized clinical trial. In all, about 3,600 children received 41 social-emotional learning lessons. The lessons addressed risk and protective factors associated with bullying, sexual harassment, and homophobic name-calling, including emotion regulation, communication skills, problem-solving strategies, empathy, and cooperative group work. Espelage found evidence of Second Step's effectiveness—reduced physical aggression in the first year, significant reductions in sexual harassment and homophobic name-calling in the second year, and a positive impact on all forms of aggression by year three. "We also drilled a little deeper and found when teachers spent more time prepping for the lessons and prepared the lessons with other staff, the reductions in forms of aggression were even more enhanced," Espelage says.

“If you don't attend to implementation fidelity, you won't get the reductions we saw. If you implement with fidelity, your results are enhanced.”

—Dorothy Espelage



DOROTHY ESPELAGE

Professor, Educational Psychology
espelage@illinois.edu

SEL PROGRAMS WORK WHEN FULLY COMMITTED TO

The reason Second Step implementation was more effective in her study than other programs is because the teachers in her study stayed true to the entire curriculum.

"If you don't attend to implementation fidelity, you won't get the reductions we saw," she says. "You can't pick some lessons out and do it piecemeal. If you implement with fidelity, your results are enhanced."

Espelage also found that teachers, rather than social workers, are best placed for implementing social-emotional programs, because through the lessons they are building relationships with the students. She also found that students report both less perpetration and less victimization in multiple forms of aggression when programs such as Second Step are fully committed to and fully implemented by schools.

LEARN MORE

To learn more about social-emotional learning programs at casel.org or contact Espelage at espelage@illinois.edu.



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HARNESSING THE POWER OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) PROGRAMS

Through a multiyear study funded by a **\$1.18 million grant** issued by the **U.S. Department of Health & Human Services**, Professor Dorothy Espelage found that the effectiveness of Social-Emotional Learning programs hinges on how well they are implemented—and in the U.S., implementation is often piecemeal.

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1310 South 6th Street, Champaign, Illinois 61820

(217) 333-3023 | ber@education.illinois.edu

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