**Research**

**Report** 2022-09

# Knowledge of and Support for Social and Emotional Learning Programs

## Perspectives of Parents and Caregivers

NOLA DALEY, DANA MURANO, & JEREMY BURRUS

ACT®

## About the Authors

**Nola Daley, PhD**

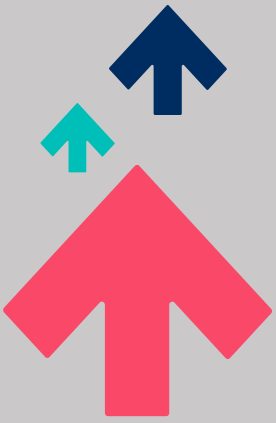
Nola Daley is a Research Scientist in ACT's Center for Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning. Her background is in Cognitive Psychology and her research focuses on examining techniques and instructional materials to support effective and efficient student learning.

**Dana Murano, PhD**

Dana Murano is a Research Scientist in ACT's Center for Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning. Her background is in Educational Psychology and her research focuses primarily on the development and assessment of social and emotional skills in students.

**Jeremy Burrus, PhD**

Jeremy Burrus is the Senior Director of ACT's Center for Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning. His main research interests are in developing innovative assessments of social and emotional learning skills, developing and studying curricula and interventions to improve social and emotional skills, and cognitive biases.



## Conclusions

Parents and caregivers play an important role in developing their child's social and emotional skills. As such, the current study examined their perceptions of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), or in-school programming designed to teach social and emotional skills. Consistent with past research, we found other program labels, such as "life skills," were ranked more highly than "social-emotional learning." Despite this relatively lower ranking, the term social-emotional learning was still highly supported by both Democratic and Republican parents/caregivers. Additionally, while parents/caregivers generally understood the skills a social-emotional learning program would teach, they thought of a life skills program as teaching skills such as financial literacy and cooking. Taken together, results provide little support for adoption of the term life skills.

## So What?

Inconsistent with recent research by the Fordham Institute, results from this study caution against the use of the term life skills to describe a course on social and emotional skills. Parents/caregivers do not necessarily think of social and emotional skills when they see the term life skills. As such, use of this term could lead to confusion. Additionally, high levels of support for social-emotional learning and a greater understanding of what this term entails support the continued use of this term.

## Now What?

Overall, parents/caregivers had relatively low familiarity with SEL-related programs. As such, defining terms related to SEL is critical when trying to accurately gauge parent/caregiver perceptions. Additionally, the high levels of support for teaching SEL-related programs in schools from parents/caregivers aligns well with the growing movement to incorporate SEL in student education.

# Social and Emotional Skills

Social and emotional (SE) skills are interpersonal, self-regulatory, and task-related behaviors that are important for adaptation to and successful performance in educational and workplace settings (Casillas et al., 2015). While core academic skills such as math and writing have long been recognized as important to student success, more recent research also provides support for SE skills. For instance, a recent meta-analysis including 267 studies found a positive relationship between SE skills and academic achievement from elementary school through postsecondary education (Mammadov, 2022). In addition to benefits to academic achievement, SE skills are related to other important outcomes such as job satisfaction (Judge et al., 2002) and life span (Roberts et al., 2007).

A robust body of research also shows that students can develop these skills through social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions or programming designed to teach SE skill development to students in school settings (e.g., Mahoney et al., 2018). These interventions lead to greater SE skills and other positive outcomes such as improved well-being and positive attitudes. These benefits persist for years after the initial intervention (Taylor et al., 2017). Taken together, research supports the use of SEL interventions to support student development of SE skills.

## The Role of Parents and Caregivers in SEL

Most SEL interventions aim to improve student SE skills in school settings, but there is also recognition that parents play an important role in this process. For instance, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) includes families and caregivers in their framework for SE skills. This inclusion emphasizes the important role that families and caregivers can play in developing their child's SE skills. This approach is also consistent with a growing emphasis in the field on how school-family partnerships can support student development of SE skills and increase the effectiveness of SEL interventions (Albright et al., 2011; Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2007). More broadly, research shows that parental engagement has various benefits for students, such as increased academic achievement (Erdem & Kaya, 2020; Kim & Hill, 2015). Taken together, parents/caregivers play a key role in developing their students' SE skills by extending learning opportunities to students' home environments and modeling SE skills to support their children's SE skill development.

## Perceptions of Parents and Caregivers

Parents and caregivers can play a critical role in their students' SE development, and they are more likely to participate willingly if they perceive SE skills and SEL interventions as beneficial. Several surveys have directly examined the perceptions of parents and caregivers towards SEL. For instance, two surveys found that parents generally had positive views toward SE skills and the perceived benefits of SEL, such as having a positive impact on academics and helping their children be more successful in the future (Hubbard, 2019 McGraw-Hill Education, 2021). Similarly, a recent survey found that families see value in SEL and think developing SE skills is important for themselves and their children (Daley et al., 2021).

In addition to these surveys, a recent report from the Fordham Institute examined parent perceptions of SEL-related programming (Tyner, 2021). This survey found parents agree that schools should be teaching specific SE skills, such as goal setting and approaching challenges in a positive way. However, they also concluded that the label Social-Emotional Learning itself was unfavorable and that the label Life Skills was preferable (Tyner, 2021). This conclusion was based on the study having asked parents to select three school programs in which they would most and least want their child to be enrolled from a list of 12 programs related to aspects of their child's development beyond academic skills. They then created a support index by subtracting the percentage of parents who indicated the program is one in which they would least want their child enrolled from the percentage that reported the program is one in which they would most want their child enrolled. This index found that Life Skills was the highest ranked program label and Social-Emotional Learning was the second lowest rank. Based on their findings, they concluded that the best way to sell SEL to parents is to "Discuss it concretely, honor the role of families in its development, and—whatever you do—do not call it social and emotional learning" (Tyner, 2021, p. 2). The current study aimed to follow up on the Fordham report and determine if the results would differ depending on the way in which parents were asked about their perceptions.

## Current Study

The current study aims to replicate the main findings from the Fordham report (Tyner, 2021) and examine how the rank-order method used in the study may have influenced the interpretation of parents'/caregivers' support for SEL. Replication of their findings is an important first step to establishing the robustness of the results (for recommendations on the importance of direct replication, see Pashler & Harris, 2012; Schmidt, 2009; Simons, 2014). Similar results between their study and the current study can provide some initial evidence for the comparability of results across samples and survey contexts.

Aside from replication, our first goal was to examine if the results would differ based on the response options provided for the rank-order questions. Specifically, both Social-Emotional Learning and Social-Emotional & Academic Learning were included in the list of 12 programs as response options. The inclusion of the similar label Social-Emotional & Academic Learning may have led to fewer parents selecting Social-Emotional Learning, given that Social-Emotional & Academic Learning may appear to be a more comprehensive term. That is, parents may be more likely to select this label simply because that program would teach everything included in a Social-Emotional Learning program and more. As such, we compared results when the label Social-Emotional & Academic Learning was and was not included as an option.

Our second goal was to examine what parents and caregivers knew about the program labels examined. Without definitions provided in the previous study, parents are assumed to have knowledge of each of the program labels. However, comparing the relative level of support for different programs is dubious if respondents lack knowledge of some or all the program labels or if respondents think some of the programs taught skills unrelated to SEL. To evaluate

parents' and caregivers' knowledge, we asked them about their familiarity and asked them to report on the skills they thought would be taught in a course for several of the program labels.

Our third goal was to provide a direct measure of support for each of the program labels. Due to the rank-order nature of the questions in the previous study, the overall level of support for each of the programs was unclear because individuals could only select up to three of the 12 programs. As such, support for all programs may be fairly low or relatively high. In the current study, we directly asked parents and caregivers about the extent to which they support each of the program labels being taught in school.

Finally, a fourth goal of the current study was to examine potential subgroup differences based on political affiliation. We focused on political affiliation instead of other subgroup differences for two main reasons. First, Tyner (2021) found the largest and most consistent subgroup differences in political affiliation versus other variables examined, such as race, class, and religion. Specifically, the report concluded that Republicans had an especially negative perception of the term Social-Emotional Learning and were more wary than Democrats about SEL potentially diverting schools' attention away from core academic skills. Additionally, our sample was primarily White (73.4%) and female (84%), making it difficult to examine differences by race/ethnicity or gender meaningfully. We used a mixed-method survey approach to achieve these four goals.

# Method

## Participants

A total of 25,000 parents/caregivers of ACT® test takers were invited to participate in a survey following the April 2nd, 2022, National ACT test administration. The initial invitation email told parents/caregivers the survey was being conducted to learn more about their familiarity and perceptions of programs that teach skills that contribute to student success. Parents/caregivers were informed that the survey was voluntary and unincentivized. In total, 1,383 parents/caregivers began the survey, 1,084 respondents completed at least one block of the survey, and 485 completed the entire survey. Partial responses were included in the analyses below. Regarding gender, 83.9% of respondents were female, 12.4% were males, .2% were another gender, and 3.5% preferred not to respond. Regarding race/ethnicity, 73.4% identified as White, 7.2% identified as Black/African American, 3.9% identified as Hispanic/Latino, 2.5% identified as Asian, 1.4% identified as American Indian/Alaska Native, .2% identified as Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 1.2% identified as two or more races, and 9.3% chose not to respond. The average age of parents/caregivers was 48.02 years (SD = 7.2). Parents/caregivers were also asked to report their political affiliation, and 22.5% selected Democrat, 24.4% selected Republican, 18.4% selected independent, and 34.7% preferred not to respond.

## Materials

Parents/caregivers were randomly assigned to answer one of two versions of the survey. The first version of the survey was an exact replication of the ranking item in the Fordham study. The first item stated:

> The following school programs could relate to aspects of child development beyond academic skills. Based on the names only, which of these programs would you most want your child enrolled in? Please select the programs you would most want your child enrolled in. You may choose up to three.

The response options included the following programs: Social-Emotional Learning, Character Education/Development, Life Skills, Soft Skills, Emotional Intelligence, Positive Youth Development, 21st-Century Skills, Social-Emotional & Academic Learning, Whole Child Development, Behavioral Skills, Success Factors, and Developing Grit and Growth Mindset. Response options were displayed in a random order for this question and all other closed-ended questions. The next question asked:

> The following school programs could relate to aspects of child development beyond academic skills. Which would you least want your child enrolled in? Please select the programs you would least want your child enrolled in. You may choose up to three.

The same 12 response options were provided. The second version of the survey was similar and included the same questions with one exception, namely the option for Social-Emotional & Academic Learning was omitted.

The remaining questions were identical for both versions of the survey and went beyond the forced-choice questions asked by the Fordham study to further understand perceptions of SEL-related programs. To examine overall familiarity, respondents were asked: “How familiar are you with each of the following school programs?” The 12 programs listed above were included for ratings, and respondents rated their familiarity on a 4-point scale: 1 (not familiar) to 4 (very familiar). Following this item, respondents were asked, “How supportive are you of each of the following programs being taught in school?” The 12 programs listed above were included, and respondents rated their support on a 6-point scale: 1 (very unsupportive) to 6 (very supportive). Afterward, respondents were asked several open-ended questions with the following prompt: “Please list three skills you think you would be taught in this program.” The programs included Life Skills, Soft Skills, Social-Emotional and Academic Learning, Social-Emotional Learning, and Behavioral Skills. These programs were chosen based on their ranking in the previous study (i.e., Life Skills and Soft Skills were ranked lowest and highest respectively), as well as our interest in understanding perceptions about and knowledge of the term Social-Emotional Learning and related terms (i.e., Social-Emotional & Academic Learning and Behavioral Skills). Respondents were provided with three blanks to fill in with their chosen skills for each program. Finally, respondents answered several demographic questions, including gender, race/ethnicity, age, and political affiliation.

## Data Analysis Procedure

Each survey contained a screening question to identify respondents as a student, parent or guardian, school counselor, or other participant in the ACT registration process. Only parent or guardian responses were included in the survey. Cases were also eliminated from the data set when respondents did not complete at least the first survey block, which included the two rank-choice questions. All individuals who completed at least the first block were retained for the remaining analyses. Relevant sample sizes are reported for all results. Descriptive information for the close-ended survey items is presented below. In addition, to examine differences as a function of the inclusion of the response option Social-Emotional and Academic Learning in the proportion of parents that selected each of the programs, we ran chi-square tests of independence.

For the open-ended responses, we used a binary coding scheme to differentiate skill responses that could or could not be categorized as an SE skill. To determine whether a skill fell into the SE skill category, we used the definitions provided by the behavioral skills framework within the ACT® Holistic Framework® (Casillas et al., 2015). We then calculated the overall percentages of SE skills included across all responses for each of the programs examined. We used this approach for each of the five programs included as open-ended questions. We also examined the data by individual skill responses for the Life Skills label given our particular interest in this program label. We computed the number of times each unique skill was listed by respondents across all three possible skill responses.

For the subgroup comparisons, we compared responses for those who identified as Democrat versus Republican. Those who identified as independent were excluded. Chi-square tests of independence were used to examine potential subgroup differences in the proportion of parents who selected each program. For familiarity and favorability, independent samples t-tests were used to examine potential differences by political affiliation. We also report effect sizes for all comparisons in the form of Hedge's *g* (standardized mean differences) or φ (2x2 contingency tables).

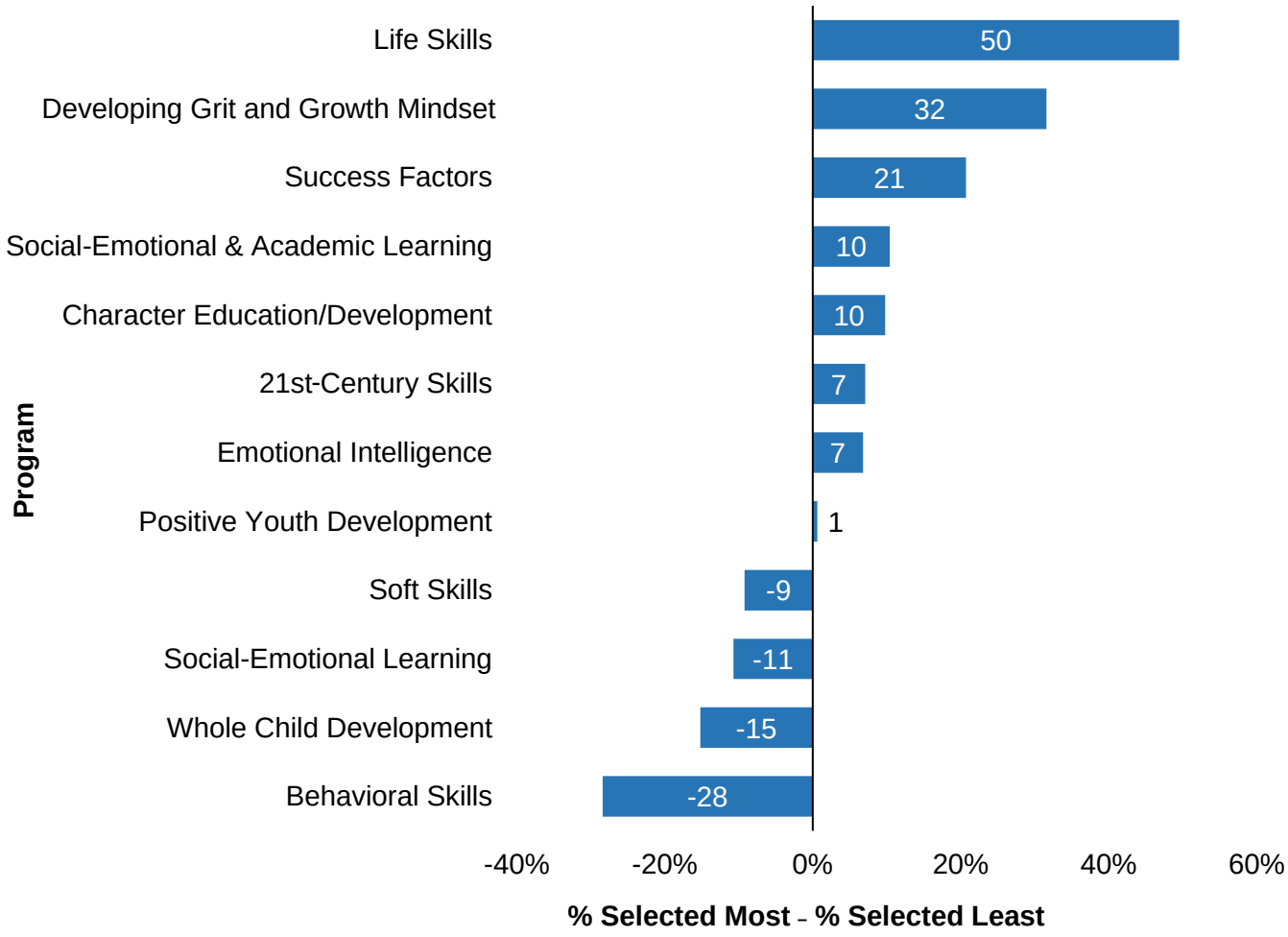
# Results

## Replication of Previous Results

We first aimed to replicate the basic pattern of findings with the rank-order items from Tyner's (2021) study. As Figure 1 shows, consistent with the previous study, we also found that parents and caregivers had the greatest support for the label Life Skills and the least support for the label Soft Skills. In addition, the label Social-Emotional Learning had relatively low levels of support, with more parents/caregivers selecting it as a program they would least want their child enrolled in versus one they would most want their child enrolled in. Although we found some

differences in terms of the rank-order of the programs, these results replicate the main findings from the Fordham study.

**Figure 1.** Support Index for Various Program Labels




*Note.* N = 532. For consistency with the Tyner (2021) study, the "support index" represents the percentage of respondents who indicate that the program is one they would most want their child enrolled in minus the percentage responding to it as the one they would least want their child enrolled in. Responses are ordered from most to least support.

## Perceived Importance of Social and Emotional Skills for Academic Success

Next, we examined the impact of including both Social-Emotional Learning and Social-Emotional & Academic Learning in the list of program labels. Chi-square tests of independence were carried out to examine potential differences in terms of the proportion of individuals who selected each program as one they would most and least want their child enrolled in based on whether individuals were assigned to the direct replication survey with the label Social-

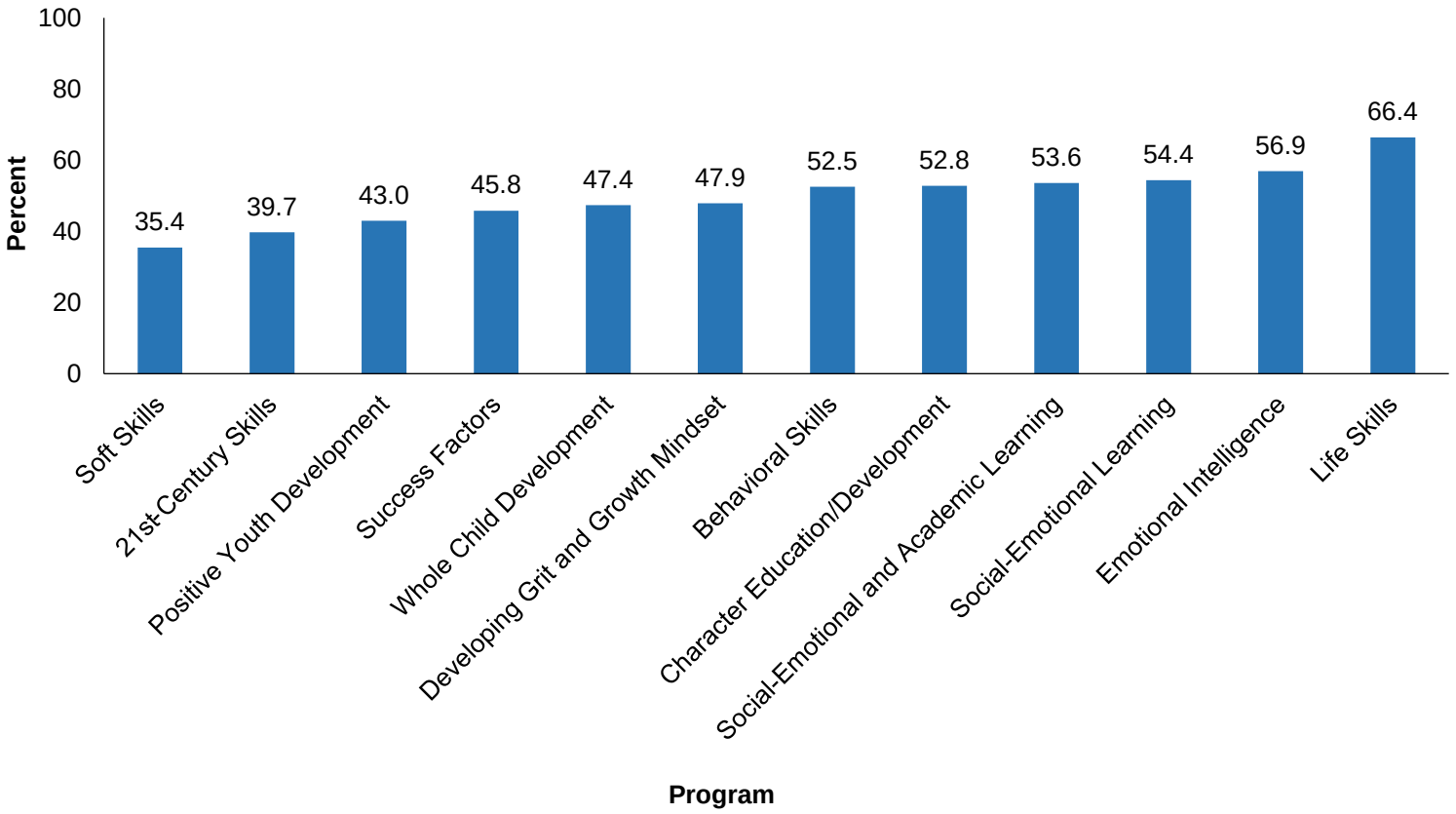
Emotional & Academic Learning or the version in which this label was omitted. All the results from these analyses are presented in Table A1 in the Appendix.

We found that 10% of parents and caregivers selected the program Social-Emotional Learning as one they would most want their child enrolled in when the program Social-Emotional & Academic Learning was also included. In contrast, more than double that percentage (20.5%) selected the program Social-Emotional Learning when the program Social-Emotional & Academic Learning was excluded from the options, $X^2$ (1, $N$ = 1084) = 22.14, $p$ < .01, and φ = .14. In addition to this difference, we also saw a greater proportion of parents/caregivers selecting the program Emotional Intelligence when the program Social-Emotional & Academic Learning was excluded (27.2%) versus included (21.1%, $X^2$ [1, $N$ = 1084] = 5.54, $p$ = .02, and φ = .07). None of the differences based on survey version were statistically significant for the other program labels parents/caregivers would most want their child enrolled. Additionally, none of the differences based on survey version were statistically significant in terms of the programs they would least want their child enrolled. These results suggest including Social-Emotional & Academic Learning likely resulted in a less positive interpretation of the program Social-Emotional Learning in the Fordham report.

## Knowledge of Program Labels

Our second goal was to examine what parents and caregivers know about the program labels. We examined this in two ways. First, we examined reported familiarity with each of the program labels. Figure 2 shows overall familiarity with each of the program labels, specifically, the percentage of people who said they were somewhat or very familiar with the program label. Familiarity was fairly low across programs. Additionally, familiarity varied substantially between programs; for example, only 35% of individuals were familiar with the program Soft Skills, and 66% of individuals were familiar with the program Life Skills.

**Figure 2.** Percentage of Respondents Who Were Familiar With Each SEL-Related Program




*Note*. The sample size for familiarity ratings was 773.

## Open-Ended Responses: Conceptualizations of Program Labels

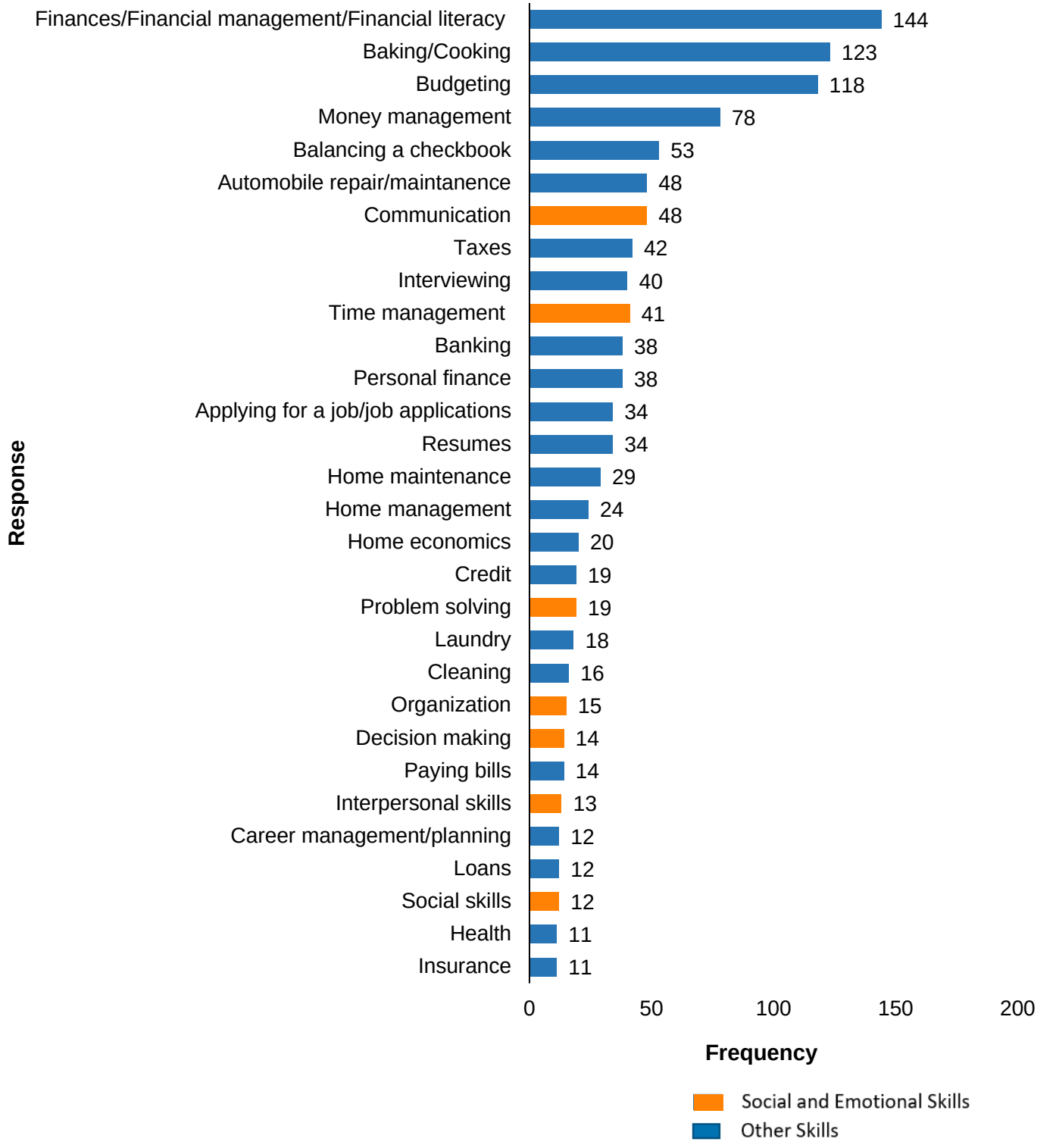
In addition to examining familiarity, we also examined conceptualizations of these programs through a series of open-ended responses. We asked parents/caregivers to list three skills that they thought would be taught in each program. We categorized responses based on if the skill fell into the SE skill category provided by the behavioral skills framework within the ACT Holistic Framework (Casillas et al., 2015). We calculated the number of responses representing an SE skill for each program label. Table 1 shows the percentage of responses within each program category that represented an SE skill.

**Table 1.** Percentage of SE Skill Responses within Each Program Category

| Program Title | *N* Responses | Percent of SE Skill Responses |
|---|---|---|
| Behavioral Skills | 794 | 67.0% |
| Social-Emotional Learning | 725 | 64.8% |
| Social-Emotional and Academic Learning | 865 | 62.6% |
| Soft Skills | 1,077 | 53.1% |
| Life Skills | 1,664 | 17.5% |

Given the low percentage of SE skills reported in the Life Skills program category, we examined individual responses to the open-ended question about Life Skills to try to ascertain what people believe a Life Skills program entails. Respondents were asked to list three skills they thought would be taught in a Life Skills program. Figure 3 shows the most frequent responses that were listed by respondents, and we highlight skills that are SEL-related versus those that are not (e.g., communication versus taxes). As shown in Figure 3, the majority of skills respondents reported were not related to SE skills.

**Figure 3.** Top 30 Most Frequent Responses Listed by Parents/Caregivers for the Life Skills Program Category

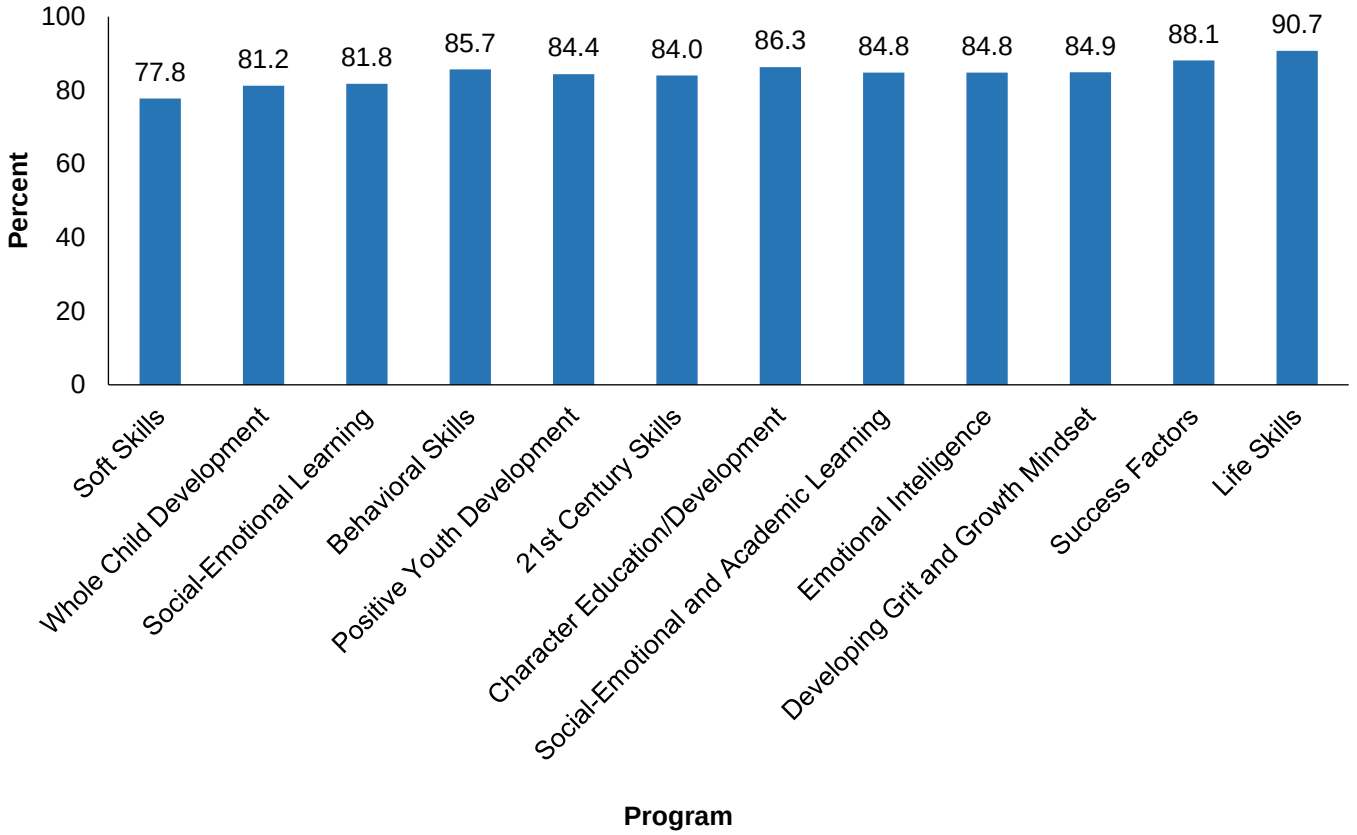


## Overall Support for Programs

Our third goal was to examine the overall level of support for each of the programs. Figure 4 shows overall support for each of the program labels, specifically those who said they were somewhat supportive, supportive, or very supportive of the program being taught in school. The overall support was high for all the programs. Support ranged from 77.8% for Soft Skills to 90.7% for Life Skills, and 84.5% of parents/caregivers reported some level of support across programs. Additionally, 81.8% of parents/caregivers supported the Social-Emotional Learning program. In contrast to the forced-choice format, these results suggest parents are generally supportive of SEL-related programs.

In addition to examining overall support, we also conducted exploratory analyses to examine the relationship between familiarity and favorability. Overall, level of support and familiarity were related across all programs ($r$ = .22, $p$ < .01, $n$ = 9,276). These results suggest familiarity may be playing a role in ratings of support for these programs.

**Figure 4.** Percentage of Respondents Who Supported Each SEL-Related Program




*Note.* The sample size for support ratings was 773.

## Subgroup Differences by Political Affiliation

### *Selection of Programs Most/Least Wanted*

Chi-square tests of independence were carried out to examine potential differences based on political affiliation in the proportion of individuals who selected each program as one in which they would most and least want their child enrolled. Table A2 in the appendix shows these comparisons. Significant differences in terms of the percentage who selected each program as one they would *most* want their child enrolled occurred for four programs. Social-Emotional Learning was selected by a greater proportion of Democrats (26.9%) versus Republicans (10.3%); $X^2$ (1, $N$ = 225) = 10.38, $p$ < .01, and φ = .22. Similarly, Emotional Intelligence was selected by a greater proportion of Democrats (33.3%) versus Republicans (19.7%); $X^2$ (1, $N$ = 225) = 5.43, $p$ = .02, and φ = .16. Additionally, Social-Emotional & Academic Learning was selected by a greater proportion of Democrats (32.7%) versus Republicans (14.3%); $X^2$ (1, $N$ = 108) = 5.14, $p$ = .02, and φ = .21. In contrast, Character Education/Development was selected by a greater proportion of Republicans (29.9%) versus Democrats (17.6%); $X^2$ (1, $N$ = 225) = 4.68, $p$ = .03, and φ = .14.

For the programs they would *least* want their child enrolled, significant differences were found for six programs. Social-Emotional Learning was selected by a greater proportion of Republicans (29.9%) versus Democrats (8.3%); $X^2$ (1, $N$ = 225) = 16.63, $p$ < .01, and φ = .27. Similarly, Emotional Intelligence was selected by a greater proportion of Republicans (23.1%) versus Democrats (5.6%); $X^2$ (1, $N$ = 225) = 13.78, $p$ < .01, and φ = .07. Additionally, Whole Child Development was selected by a greater proportion of Republicans (35.0%) versus Democrats (21.3%); $X^2$ (1, $N$ = 225) = 5.21, $p$ = .02, and φ = .15. In contrast, Success Factors was selected by a greater proportion of Democrats (13.9%) versus Republicans (4.3%); $X^2$ (1, $N$ = 225) = 6.41, $p$ = .01, and φ = .17. Additionally, Character Education/Development was selected by a greater proportion of Democrats (15.7%) versus Republicans (6.8%); $X^2$ (1, $N$ = 225) = 4.51, $p$ = .03, and φ = .14. Finally, 21st-Century Skills was selected by a greater proportion of Democrats (26.9%) versus Republicans (15.4%); $X^2$ (1, $N$ = 225) = 4.47, $p$ = .04, and φ = .14.

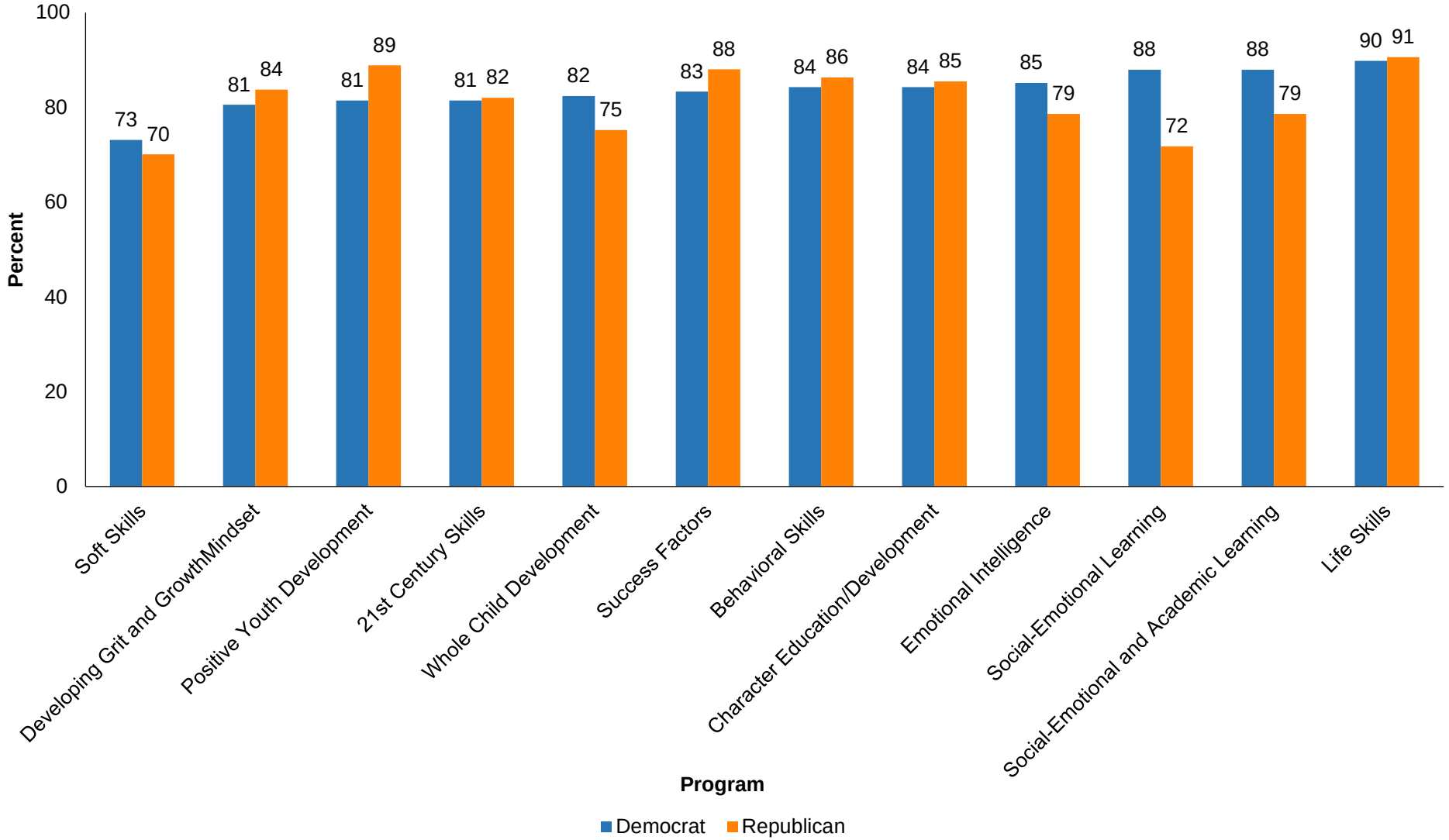
### *Familiarity*

We also examined potential differences based on political affiliation on reported familiarity. Levels of perceived familiarity were important to examine because any differences in familiarity by political affiliation may help to interpret potential differences in support for these labels. Table A3 in the appendix shows familiarity for each of the programs by political affiliation. In general, familiarity was similar for Democrats and Republicans. For Emotional Intelligence, familiarity was higher for Democrats (2.75) versus Republicans (2.37); $t$(223) = 2.53, $p$ = .01, and $g$ = .34. Conversely, for Success Factors, familiarity was higher for Republicans (2.39) versus Democrats (2.02); $t$(223) = 2.67, $p$ = .01, and $g$ = .36.

### *Support*

Table A4 in the appendix shows support for each of the programs by political affiliation, and Figure 5 displays these results. In terms of support, subgroup differences based on political affiliation emerged for five programs. In each case, support was higher for Democrats versus Republicans. For Social-Emotional Learning, support was higher for Democrats (4.75) versus Republicans (4.10); $t(223) = 3.43$, $p < .01$, and $g = .46$. Additionally, for Emotional Intelligence, support was higher for Democrats (4.87) versus Republicans (4.36); $t(223) = 2.81$, $p = .01$, and $g = .37$. For 21st-Century Skills, support was higher for Democrats (4.70) versus Republicans (4.33); $t(223) = 2.07$, $p = .04$, and $g = .27$. For Whole Child Development, support was higher for Democrats (4.58) versus Republicans (4.15); $t(223) = 2.47$, $p = .01$, and $g = .33$. Finally for Social-Emotional and Academic Learning, support was higher for Democrats (4.90) versus Republicans (4.25); $t(223) = 3.53$, $p < .01$, and $g = .47$. In addition to examining support by political affiliation, we also conducted exploratory hierarchical regression analyses for the five terms that significantly differed in support based on political affiliation. In each of these analyses, we predicted support based on political affiliation when controlling for familiarity. For all five terms, political affiliation remained a significant predictor when accounting for familiarity (Social-Emotional Learning: $\beta = -.21$, $p = .001$; Emotional Intelligence: $\beta = -.16$, $p = .017$; 21st-Century Skills: $\beta = -.14$, $p = .036$; Whole Child Development: $\beta = -.17$, $p = .013$; Social-Emotional and Academic Learning: $\beta = -.22$, $p = .001$). Additionally, for three of the five terms, familiarity remained a significant predictor when accounting for political affiliation (Emotional Intelligence: $\beta = -.16$, $p = .019$; 21st-Century Skills: $\beta = .20$, $p = .003$; Social-Emotional and Academic Learning: $\beta = .16$, $p = .011$). These results suggest political affiliation predicts support for these five programs independent of familiarity.

**Figure 5.** Percentage of Respondents Who Supported Each SEL-Related Program Across Political Parties



## Discussion

The focus of the current report was to examine parent/caregiver support for SEL and related programs as a replication and extension of a recent Fordham Institute report examining these issues in a national sample of parents (Tyner, 2021). Among the conclusions of that report were (a) the term Social-Emotional Learning is unpopular among parents, (b) the term Life Skills is the most supported SEL-related program label among parents, and (c) Republicans are "especially turned off" by the term Social-Emotional Learning (Tyner, 2021, p. 11). These conclusions were based on the results of a forced-choice ranking task in which parents were provided with a list of SEL-related programs and asked to choose the three they most supported and the three they least supported. We surmised that some modifications to the survey methodology could lead to different results and conclusions, which was the impetus for the current study.

First, both Social-Emotional Learning and Social-Emotional & Academic Learning were provided in the list of programs. Parents/caregivers may have been disinclined to choose Social-Emotional Learning as a preferred program simply because another program listed included the same content and more. It is analogous to asking a car buyer, "Do you prefer a car with air conditioning and satellite radio, or do you prefer a car with air conditioning, satellite radio, and self-driving capabilities? And by the way, these two cars are the same price." Second, no program definitions were provided. Because of this, it is unclear whether parents/caregivers were even thinking about SEL-related content when rating all programs. Third, rank-ordering does not provide information about absolute levels of support. That is, the simple fact that one program is rated over another does not imply that the lower rated program is disliked. To provide another analogy, this is like asking a person, "Would you prefer a free vacation to Europe or a free ice cream cone?" Although we predict that most people would choose the vacation, we would not interpret this finding to mean these same people do not like ice cream.

We were motivated to conduct the current study for several reasons. First, the finding that the term Social-Emotional Learning is not popular is inconsistent with our own research findings and previous research findings (e.g., Hubbard, 2019; Daley et al., 2021; McGraw-Hill Education, 2021) or with the fact that SEL is a growing movement (Schwartz et al., 2022). Furthermore, misinterpretations of the results have been found in national media, and proliferation of these misinterpretations may be harmful to the field. For example, an *Education Week* article on the report stated that parents react negatively to the term Social-Emotional Learning and Republican parents especially disliked it (Prothero, 2021). These misinterpretations have the potential to be especially damaging if one concludes that dislike for the term equates to dislike for the entire field of SEL, which could potentially lead to harmful policy implications.

## Summary of Findings

Our study expanded on Tyner's (2021) work. Key findings are summarized below.

- We replicated the Fordham institute finding that other programs, such as Life Skills, were more highly supported in a rank-ordering item than Social-Emotional Learning. However, support for Social-Emotional Learning doubled when the term Social-Emotional & Academic Learning was removed from the list, suggesting the inclusion of the latter term made the former less likely to be chosen.
- We found that familiarity was relatively low across programs. Furthermore, when we asked parents/caregivers to list three skills they thought were taught in each program, only 18% of skills listed for Life Skills programs were SE skills, with the most frequently listed skills related to financial literacy and cooking. Financial literacy and cooking are indeed important skills to learn, but these are not included in SE skill frameworks. In contrast, 65% of the skills listed for Social-Emotional Learning were SE skills.
- Although other program terms such as Life Skills were rated ahead of Social-Emotional Learning in the rank-ordering question, the term Social-Emotional Learning was still highly supported by parents/caregivers. Eighty-two percent of parents/caregivers indicated at least some level of support for the term Social-Emotional Learning. Thus, a conclusion that the term Social-Emotional Learning is unpopular based on the rank-order item alone would be unwarranted.
- Consistent with the Fordham Institute report, we found that Democrats were more supportive of SEL than were Republicans. However, Republicans were still highly supportive of SEL, with 82% of Republicans indicating support across all SEL-related programs and 72% of Republicans indicating support for the specific term Social-Emotional Learning. Note that this is essentially the same issue as the rank-order versus absolute levels of support issue above. Although Democrats are "ranked" ahead of Republicans in terms of their support for SEL, it is not appropriate to conclude from this finding alone that Republicans are unsupportive of SEL.

Overall, contrary to some of the conclusions of the Fordham Institute report and subsequent media attention, we found that parents/caregivers (including Republicans) were strongly supportive of the term Social-Emotional Learning. Furthermore, our analysis suggests that comparisons between Social-Emotional Learning programs and other programs that superficially appear to be related to SEL may be inappropriate.

## Limitations and Future Research

The current study has several limitations, with most related to sample characteristics. First, although our sample was large, our response rate was low. People who respond to surveys may have different characteristics than those who do not respond. For example, they may be more supportive of SEL in general. Second, our email distribution list was limited to parents/caregivers of ACT test takers. As with the response rate issue, parents/caregivers of

ACT test takers may have different characteristics than the general population. Additionally, our sample was primarily White and female, limiting the generalizability of our findings. Furthermore, our sample size for the political affiliation analyses were relatively small because the majority of the sample chose not to report their political affiliation. Finally, we had a limited number of survey questions we could ask. One implication of this limitation was that we were unable to ask open-ended items about every SEL-related program listed in the survey.

Future research should work to address these limitations by surveying a more diverse sample that more closely represents the population of the United States. Indeed, one of the major strengths of the Fordham Institute study was the representativeness of surveyed parents. Another avenue for future research would be to diversify the types of items asked to further explore parent/caregiver motivation to support SEL. For example, parents/caregivers can be asked to indicate how much they would be willing to contribute financially to provide their students with SEL programing. Finally, future research can do more to understand exactly why Republican parents/caregivers tend to be less supportive of SEL than Democratic parents/caregivers.

## Conclusion

SE skills are important determinants of success in school, work, and life in general (e.g., Mammadov, 2022) and these skills can be taught in school (e.g., Mahoney et al., 2018) via SEL programs. Many research studies clearly demonstrate these conclusions. The current study shows that parents/caregivers seem to agree on the importance of SEL and support its inclusion in school. As SEL grows in popularity, however, it will also be a target of criticism. To advance the field, it is imperative that we continue to rigorously research how SEL is best implemented, how SE skills are best measured, the consequences of implementation and assessment, and how these practices are perceived. Just as important is continuing to critically digest research in the field as it is released to avoid unintended negative consequences. We hope that this paper has both advanced our knowledge of parent/caregiver perceptions of SEL and SEL-related programming and aided in the interpretation of existing research.

## References

Albright, M. I., Weissberg, R. P., & Dusenbury, L. A. (2011). School-family partnership strategies to enhance children's social, emotional, and academic growth. *National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, Education Development Center*.

Casillas, A., Way, J., & Burrus, J. (2015). Behavioral skills. In W. Camara, R. O'Connor, K. Mattern, & M. A. Hanson (Eds.), *Beyond academics: A holistic framework for enhancing education and workplace success* (pp. 25–38). ACT.

Daley, N., Murano, A., Casillas, A. (2021). *Social and emotional learning implementation with Latinx learners. Brief 5: Family knowledge and engagement.* ACT.

Erdem, C., & Kaya, M. (2020). A meta-analysis of the effect of parental involvement on students' academic achievement. *Journal of Learning for Development*, *7*(3), 367–383.

Hubbard, B. (2019). Developing life skills in children: A road map for communicating with parents. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, *19*(3), 33–54.

Judge, T. A., Heller, D., & Mount, M. K. (2002). Five-factor model of personality and job satisfaction: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *87*(3), 530–541.

Kim, S. W., & Hill, N. E. (2015). Including fathers in the picture: A meta-analysis of parental involvement and students' academic achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *107*(4), 919–934. doi:10.1037/edu0000023

Mahoney, J. L., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2018). An update on social and emotional learning outcome research. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *100*(4), 18–23.

Mammadov, S. (2022). Big Five personality traits and academic performance: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Personality*, *90*(2), 222–255.

McGraw-Hill Education. (2021). *2021 social and emotional learning report*. https://www.mheducation.com/unitas/school/explore/sel-report-2021.pdf.

Patrikakou, E. N., & Weissberg, R. P. (2007). School-family partnerships to enhance children's social, emotional and academic learning. In R. Bar-On, J. G. Maree, & M. J. Elias (Eds.), *Educating people to be emotionally intelligent* (pp. 49–61). Greenwood Publishing Group, Incorporated.

Pashler, H., & Harris, C. R. (2012). Is the replicability crisis overblown? Three arguments examined. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *7*(6), 531–536.

Prothero, A. (2021). Parents like social-emotional learning, but not the name. *Education Week.* https://www.edweek.org/leadership/parents-like-social-emotional-learning-but-not-the-name/2021/08*.*

Roberts, B. W., Kuncel, N. R, Shiner, R., Caspi, A., & Goldberg, L. R. (2007). The power of personality: The comparative validity of personality traits, socioeconomic status, and cognitive ability for predicting important life outcomes. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *2*(4), 313–345.

Schmidt, S. (2009). Shall we really do it again? The powerful concept of replication is neglected in the social sciences. *Review of General Psychology, 13*(2), 90–100.

Schwartz, H. L., Bongard, M., Bogan, E. D., Boyle, A. E., Meyers, D. C., & Jagers, R. J. (2022). *Social and emotional learning in schools nationally and in the collaborating districts initiative: Selected findings from the American Teacher Panel and American School Leader Panel surveys*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1822-1.html.

Simons, D. J. (2014). The value of direct replication. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 9*(1)*,* 76–80.

Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development*, *88*(4), 1156–1171.

Tyner, A. (2021). *How to sell SEL: Parents and the politics of social-emotional learning.* Thomas B. Fordham Institute. fordhaminstitute.org/how-to-sell-sel.

# Appendix

**Table A1.** Chi-Square Tests of Independence Based on the Inclusion of Social-Emotional and Academic Learning

| Program | With Social-Emotional & Academic Learning | Without Social-Emotional & Academic Learning | $\chi^2$ | *N* | *p* | *φ* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | %Selected Most | % Selected Most | | | | |
| **Social-Emotional Learning** | 10.0% | 20.5% | 22.14 | 1084 | <.01 | 0.14 |
| **Emotional Intelligence** | 21.1% | 27.2% | 5.54 | 1084 | 0.02 | 0.07 |
| **Success Factors** | 31.8% | 35.3% | 1.54 | 1084 | 0.22 | 0.04 |
| **Character Education/Development** | 22.0% | 18.8% | 1.66 | 1084 | 1.66 | 0.20 |
| **Life Skills** | 56.6% | 60.3% | 1.57 | 1084 | 0.21 | 0.04 |
| **Soft Skills** | 8.6% | 8.9% | 0.02 | 1084 | 0.89 | 0.00 |
| **Positive Youth Development** | 13.2% | 10.7% | 1.58 | 1084 | 0.21 | −0.04 |
| **21st-Century Skills** | 28.0% | 27.7% | 0.01 | 1084 | 0.95 | 0.00 |
| **Whole Child Development** | 7.0% | 9.1% | 1.62 | 1084 | 0.20 | 0.04 |
| **Behavioral Skills** | 3.9% | 5.1% | 0.80 | 1084 | 0.37 | 0.03 |
| **Developing Grit and Growth Mindset** | 42.7% | 46.0% | 1.23 | 1084 | 0.27 | 0.03 |
| **Social-Emotional Learning** | 21.0% | 21.6% | 0.08 | 1084 | 0.78 | 0.01 |
| **Emotional Intelligence** | 14.3% | 13.2% | 0.26 | 1084 | 0.62 | −0.02 |
| **Success Factors** | 11.1% | 11.4% | 0.03 | 1084 | 0.87 | 0.01 |
| **Character Education/Development** | 12.0% | 15.2% | 2.06 | 1084 | 0.15 | 0.04 |
| **Life Skills** | 7.1% | 7.1% | 0.00 | 1084 | 0.96 | 0.00 |
| **Soft Skills** | 17.8% | 37.1% | 0.09 | 1084 | 0.77 | 0.01 |
| **Positive Youth Development** | 12.6% | 13.9% | 0.43 | 1084 | 0.51 | 0.02 |
| **21st Century Skills** | 21.0% | 19.6% | 0.28 | 1084 | 0.59 | −0.02 |
| **Whole Child Development** | 22.0% | 25.5% | 1.69 | 1084 | 0.19 | 0.04 |
| **Behavioral Skills** | 32.3% | 31.9% | 0.03 | 1084 | 0.88 | −0.01 |
| **Developing Grit and Growth Mindset** | 11.1% | 11.0% | 0.10 | 1084 | 0.76 | −0.01 |

**Table A2.** Chi-Square Tests of Independence Based on Political Affiliation

| Program | % Selected Most | | $\chi^2$ | *N* | *p* | φ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Democrat | Republican | | | | |
| **Social-Emotional Learning** | 26.9% | 10.3% | 10.38 | 225 | < 0.01 | −0.22 |
| **Emotional Intelligence** | 33.3% | 19.7% | 5.43 | 225 | 0.02 | −0.16 |
| **Success Factors** | 25.0% | 35.9% | 3.14 | 225 | 0.08 | 0.12 |
| **Character Education/Development** | 17.6% | 29.9% | 4.68 | 225 | 0.03 | 0.14 |
| **Life Skills** | 52.8% | 63.2% | 2.53 | 225 | 0.11 | 0.11 |
| **Soft Skills** | 10.2% | 11.1% | 0.05 | 225 | 0.82 | 0.02 |
| **Positive Youth Development** | 8.3% | 8.5% | 0.00 | 225 | 0.95 | 0.00 |
| **21st Century Skills** | 26.9% | 21.4% | 0.93 | 225 | 0.34 | −0.06 |
| **Whole Child Development** | 8.3% | 4.3% | 1.59 | 225 | 0.21 | −0.08 |
| **Behavioral Skills** | 7.4% | 6.8% | 0.03 | 225 | 0.87 | −0.01 |
| **Developing Grit and Growth Mindset** | 44.4% | 44.4% | 0.00 | 225 | 1.00 | 0.00 |
| **Program** | **% Selected Least** | | $\chi^2$ | *N* | *p* | φ |
| | Democrat | Republican | | | | |
| **Social-Emotional Learning** | 8.3% | 29.9% | 16.63 | 225 | < 0.01 | 0.27 |
| **Emotional Intelligence** | 5.6% | 23.1% | 13.78 | 225 | <0 .01 | 0.25 |
| **Success Factors** | 13.9% | 4.3% | 6.41 | 225 | 0.01 | −0.17 |
| **Character Education/Development** | 15.7% | 6.8% | 4.51 | 225 | 0.03 | −0.14 |
| **Life Skills** | 8.3% | 2.6% | 3.70 | 225 | 0.05 | −0.13 |
| **Soft Skills** | 30.6% | 39.3% | 1.89 | 225 | 0.17 | 0.09 |
| **Positive Youth Development** | 13.9% | 13.7% | 0.00 | 225 | 0.96 | 0.00 |
| **21st Century Skills** | 26.9% | 15.4% | 4.47 | 225 | 0.04 | −0.14 |
| **Whole Child Development** | 21.3% | 35.0% | 5.21 | 225 | 0.02 | 0.15 |
| **Behavioral Skills** | 37.0% | 31.6% | 0.73 | 225 | 0.39 | −0.06 |
| **Developing Grit and Growth Mindset** | 19.4% | 11.1% | 3.04 | 225 | 0.08 | −0.12 |

**Table A3.** Political Differences in Familiarity

| Program | Democrat | | | Republican | | | *p* | *g* | lower | upper |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *N* | *SD* | *M* | *N* | *SD* | | | | |
| **Social-Emotional Learning** | 2.62 | 108 | 1.13 | 2.37 | 117 | 1.11 | 0.09 | 0.23 | −0.04 | 0.49 |
| **Emotional Intelligence** | 2.75 | 108 | 1.16 | 2.37 | 117 | 1.10 | 0.01 | 0.34 | 0.07 | 0.60 |
| **Success Factors** | 2.02 | 108 | 1.01 | 2.39 | 117 | 1.08 | 0.01 | −0.36 | −0.62 | −0.09 |
| **Character Education/ Development** | 2.40 | 108 | 1.16 | 2.38 | 117 | 1.09 | 0.93 | 0.01 | −0.25 | 0.27 |
| **Life Skills** | 2.66 | 108 | 1.11 | 2.83 | 117 | 1.10 | 0.25 | −0.15 | −0.42 | 0.11 |
| **Soft Skills** | 1.89 | 108 | 1.06 | 1.89 | 117 | 1.10 | 1.00 | 0.00 | −0.26 | 0.26 |
| **Positive Youth Development** | 1.95 | 108 | 1.02 | 2.18 | 117 | 1.03 | 0.10 | −0.22 | −0.48 | 0.04 |
| **21st Century Skills** | 2.13 | 108 | 1.17 | 2.14 | 117 | 1.11 | 0.96 | −0.01 | −0.27 | 0.26 |
| **Whole Child Development** | 2.19 | 108 | 1.08 | 2.25 | 117 | 1.03 | 0.66 | −0.06 | −0.32 | 0.20 |
| **Behavioral Skills** | 2.36 | 108 | 1.15 | 2.50 | 117 | 1.03 | 0.33 | −0.13 | −0.39 | 0.13 |
| **Developing Grit and Growth Mindset** | 2.36 | 108 | 1.20 | 2.23 | 117 | 1.09 | 0.40 | 0.11 | −0.15 | 0.37 |
| **Social-Emotional and Academic Learning** | 2.53 | 108 | 1.11 | 2.38 | 117 | 1.08 | 0.33 | 0.13 | −0.13 | 0.39 |

**Table A4.** Political Differences in Support

| Program | Democrat | | | Republican | | | *p* | *g* | lower | upper |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *N* | *SD* | *M* | *N* | *SD* | | | | |
| **Social-Emotional Learning** | 4.75 | 108 | 1.36 | 4.10 | 117 | 1.46 | <0.01 | 0.46 | 0.19 | 0.72 |
| **Emotional Intelligence** | 4.87 | 108 | 1.37 | 4.36 | 117 | 1.36 | 0.01 | 0.37 | 0.11 | 0.64 |
| **Success Factors** | 4.65 | 108 | 1.28 | 4.70 | 117 | 1.16 | 0.75 | −0.04 | −0.30 | 0.22 |
| **Character Education/ Development** | 4.55 | 108 | 1.40 | 4.55 | 117 | 1.25 | 1.00 | 0.00 | −0.26 | 0.26 |
| **Life Skills** | 4.96 | 108 | 1.30 | 4.98 | 117 | 1.25 | 0.91 | −0.02 | −0.28 | 0.25 |
| **Soft Skills** | 4.25 | 108 | 1.38 | 4.16 | 117 | 1.29 | 0.62 | 0.07 | −0.20 | 0.33 |
| **Positive Youth Development** | 4.45 | 108 | 1.36 | 4.51 | 117 | 1.20 | 0.73 | −0.05 | −0.31 | 0.22 |
| **21st Century Skills** | 4.70 | 108 | 1.30 | 4.33 | 117 | 1.38 | 0.04 | 0.27 | 0.01 | 0.54 |
| **Whole Child Development** | 4.58 | 108 | 1.35 | 4.15 | 117 | 1.30 | 0.01 | 0.33 | 0.07 | 0.59 |
| **Behavioral Skills** | 4.68 | 108 | 1.31 | 4.40 | 117 | 1.15 | 0.10 | 0.22 | −0.04 | 0.48 |
| **Developing Grit and Growth Mindset** | 4.69 | 108 | 1.44 | 4.56 | 117 | 1.33 | 0.45 | 0.10 | −0.16 | 0.36 |
| **Social-Emotional and Academic Learning** | 4.90 | 108 | 1.33 | 4.25 | 117 | 1.43 | 0.00 | 0.47 | 0.20 | 0.73 |

## ABOUT ACT

ACT is a mission-driven, nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success. Grounded in 60 years of research, ACT is a trusted leader in college and career readiness solutions. Each year, ACT serves millions of students, job seekers, schools, government agencies, and employers in the U.S. and around the world with learning resources, assessments, research, and credentials designed to help them succeed from elementary school through career. To learn more, visit http://www.act.org/.