



SEL + MTSS:
HOW TO EMPOWER MIDDLE SCHOOLERS
TO NAVIGATE ROUGH WATERS



Introduction:

No question, middle school is a turbulent time for many students. Their rapid growth and hormonal fluctuations can profoundly affect their conceptions of self as well as their physical bodies. At the same time, they're expected to handle more responsibility and autonomy, along with facing heightened social pressures.

Social emotional learning (SEL) can be an anchor during this time of intense change, underscoring the fact that that each individual student has value, strengths, challenges, choices, and a vital role to play in building a positive school community.

For many school districts, it can be highly effective to integrate SEL within an existing Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. Keep reading to see how aligning SEL and MTSS goals can bring a bounty of benefits — including increased academic performance, a more positive school climate and a resilient SEL program that can help middle school students flourish for years to come.

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Why SEL is Critical to Middle School Success

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible
decision-making



Chapter 1: Why SEL is Critical to Middle School Success

The skyrocketing popularity of SEL in schools nationwide is good news for all students, but particularly for middle schoolers.

That is because social and emotional skills — such as teamwork, resilience, and confidence — speak directly to the needs of middle school students, who are at a vulnerable time in their lives for several reasons, including:

- The rapid physical, emotional, and social changes that come with adolescence can cause strong feelings, such as anger and depression.
- They no longer have the security of engaging with a small group of peers under the close guidance of a teacher, as they did in elementary school.
- They face a new world of individual schedules, changing classes, and the responsibility of keeping track of assignments.

While some students thrive under these new conditions, others struggle. Even students who have previously performed well can find themselves faltering. Without strong supports, students can be susceptible to academic disengagement, poor attendance, peer pressure, disruptive behaviors, and bullying.



SEL — which research shows can reduce emotional distress and problematic behavior while boosting grades and test scores¹ — can provide critical guidance for navigating this challenging passage, both for students who meet academic and behavioral targets as well as those who need additional support.

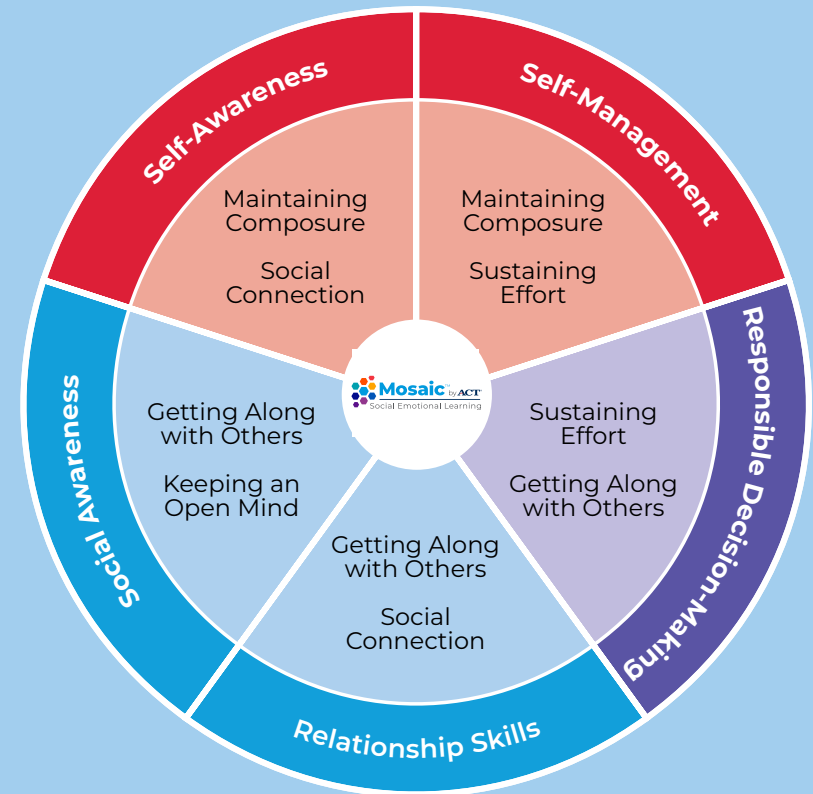
Engagement at school declines steadily each year after elementary school. While nearly three-quarters of 5th graders felt engaged, only 45% felt the same in 8th grade.²

¹ <https://hechingerreport.org/opinion-many-teachers-see-social-emotional-learning-as-the-missing-link-in-student-success/> Hechingerreport.org, "Opinion: Many teachers see social-emotional learning as the 'missing link' in student success," August 2019

² <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/211631/student-enthusiasm-falls-high-school-graduation-nears.aspx> www.news.gallup.com, "Student Enthusiasm Falls as High School Graduation Nears," June 2017

The five core competencies of SEL, as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL):

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decision-making



CASEL's five core SEL competencies (outer ring) align with those of Mosaic™ by ACT® Social Emotional Learning (inner ring).

Select the Right Path for SEL Implementation



Selecting the right path for implementing SEL in your middle school or district can feel overwhelming, given the broad spectrum of SEL offerings on the market. Universal SEL initiatives that include freestanding SEL lessons, targeted teaching practices, and academic curriculum integration are most effective at helping achieve objectives such as positive school climate and improved student performance.

Aligning SEL goals with higher-level district priorities and gaining buy-in from district-level stakeholders strengthens the sustainability of SEL initiatives, helping SEL flourish and maximizing student impact.

A critical factor to consider when trying to help an SEL initiative “find its feet” is determining whether there’s a neat, coherent way to tie together SEL goals and pre-existing priorities. A common “easy fit” is to pair SEL with an existing MTSS framework.

Districts should frame their SEL evaluations as a five-step process.

Step 1: Identify Current Areas of Need and Longer-Term Vision

Step 2: Clarify Essential Requirements

Step 3: Conduct Research to Identify SEL Program Candidates

Step 4: Review Examples from Similar Districts

Step 5: Establish an SEL Foundation

The best SEL program frameworks are structured, yet flexible enough to adapt to each district’s unique needs. No matter the size or scope of the implementation, school leaders should know that investing in SEL practices makes a difference in the lives of all students — both those who meet academic and behavioral targets and those who need deeper levels of MTSS support.

Chapter 3:

How SEL Fits into MTSS



Chapter 3: How SEL Fits into MTSS

The three-tiered MTSS framework helps educators identify varying student academic and behavioral needs and match them with appropriate intervention and support strategies. A common misconception is that SEL programs are best utilized solely as Tier 2 or Tier 3 MTSS interventions.

In fact, to achieve the greatest impact on academic performance and school climate, it's most effective to embrace a whole-school focus on SEL that touches every middle school student in every classroom.³ SEL curricula can be implemented as a universal intervention in which all students engage in SEL activities, regardless of demonstrated needs. Many schools then find it beneficial to leverage smaller, more targeted Tier 2 and 3 SEL interventions to complement this universal Tier 1 initiative.

³ Humphrey, N. (2013). Social and emotional learning: A critical appraisal. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.



Tier 1 foundation

Most of the widely available SEL solutions are designed to be used for large populations of students, making them ideal to align with Tier 1 MTSS instruction and its basic supportive strategies. Whether taught through dedicated SEL programs or integrated with traditional academic curriculum, students can learn to build the confidence and SEL skills they need to succeed in middle school and beyond.

Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention

More intensive Tier 2 and 3 interventions can then be provided for students who need additional support meeting academic and behavioral goals. At these levels, SEL interventions may take the form of:

- Participation in small groups in order to reinforce Tier 1 SEL concepts and take them a step further, ensuring students have the tools to apply SEL skills to everyday challenges.
- Dedicated classes that apply SEL principles to improve an identified student need, whether it's strengthening English language skills or managing complex interpersonal relationships.
- One-on-one interventions that focus on building SEL competencies such as teamwork and resilience.

At every level, the ultimate goal is to leverage SEL to help students strengthen their confidence, sense of inner agency, and willingness to persevere through challenges, equipping them to thrive — inside and outside the classroom.



SEL assessment can also be leveraged to track student progress and guide interventions at every level. Student-reported data can be obtained through assessments, like that offered by Mosaic™ by ACT® Social Emotional Learning, which measures students' social and emotional skills and perceptions of school climate. With reliable information about student social and emotional skill development, areas of strengths and needs, and student perceptions of climate within the school, you can make well-informed SEL curriculum decisions that can most effectively support students.

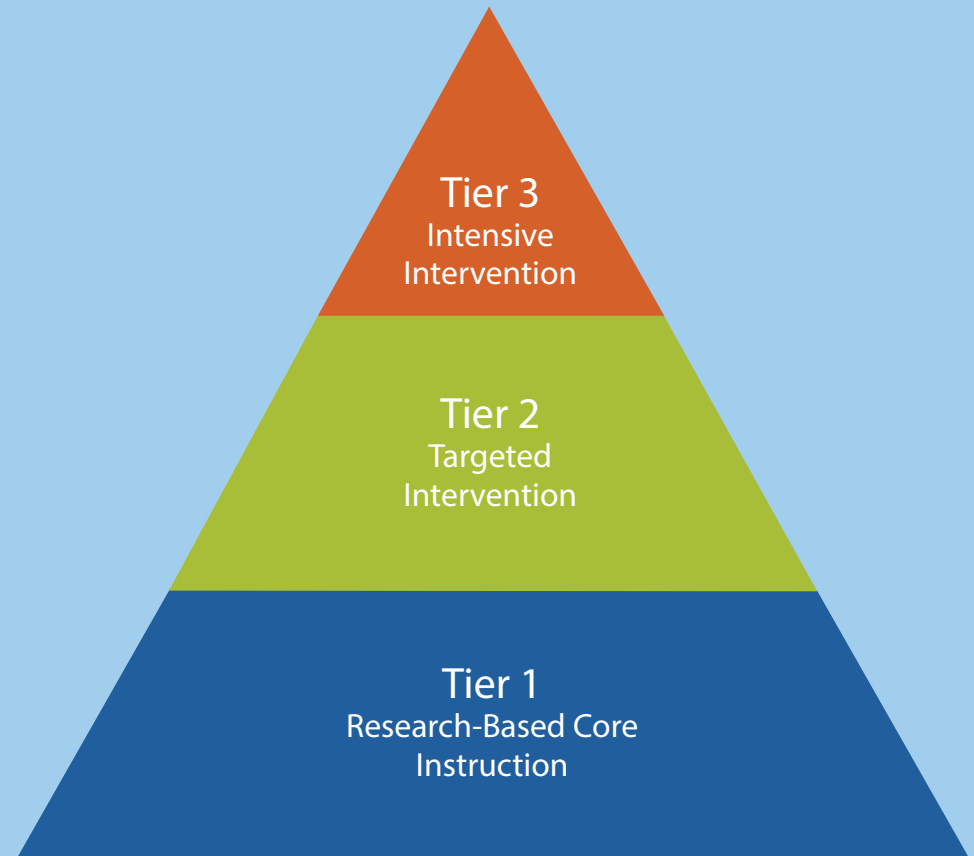
80% of students in Tier 1

15% of students in Tier 2

5% of students in Tier 3⁴

⁴ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1115900.pdf>

Distribution of Students in MTSS Tiers



Chapter 4:

The Power of SEL + MTSS



While SEL implementation will vary by school and district, any universal SEL initiative should ensure that all members of a learning community — including students, teachers, administrators, staff and parents — share a common SEL language.

A universal SEL initiative rooted in MTSS Tier 1 interventions and reinforced at Tier 2 and 3 levels can prove highly effective, not only in establishing this language, but in driving positive change in middle school culture, long recognized as a challenging environment for many students.

There is no one-size-fits-all SEL solution or implementation path, but it can be valuable to take a close look at aligning SEL and MTSS goals. Successfully integrating SEL into your MTSS framework can empower students with critical SEL competencies and deliver a multitude of benefits including enhanced academic achievement, improved school climate, and a sustainable SEL approach.

SEL and MTSS benefits:

- 1 Enhanced academic achievement
- 2 Improved school climate
- 3 Sustainable SEL approach



About Mosaic™ by ACT® Social Emotional Learning

Mosaic by ACT Social Emotional Learning is a recognized leader in evidence-based student curriculum and educator professional development focused on building social and emotional skills. Through its online and blended SEL programs, the curriculum empowers students and educators to put SEL principles into action by leveraging grade-appropriate mental models, tools and frameworks that build a foundation for success, both in and out of the classroom. Mosaic by ACT Social Emotional Learning also offers an easy-to-use, comprehensive SEL assessment tool that evaluates student progress and is an integral part of a comprehensive SEL approach.

The tools and services have been used by students in all 50 states and more than 1 million students worldwide to build growth mindset, resilience, and other foundational SEL skills. The middle school curriculum, Turbo Leader, was selected for inclusion in CASEL's 2019 *Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs Guide*.

For more information Visit

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