

Landscape View: Social and Emotional Learning in Alaska



Snapshot

Alaska has been on the frontier of the district-wide implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) since the 1990s. The [Anchorage School District](#) (ASD) is nationally [recognized as an SEL pioneer](#) and has been featured in national media like [Edutopia](#) as well as the US Department of Education's [Doing What Works](#) website. US Assistant Deputy Secretary of Education for Safe and Drug-Free Schools Kevin Jennings called ASD "a model for the nation" in a February 2010 keynote address to 300 Anchorage educators, and Alaska Commissioner of Education Larry LeDoux has described Anchorage's SEL work as a "a model for the entire state."

At the state level, the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB) makes SEL a core element of its [Alaska ICE](#) school climate and community engagement initiative. These efforts already actively engage schools and communities across the state. This year alone 34 of 53 school districts (270 schools, and over 40,000 students and staff) participated in AASB's *School Climate and Connectedness Survey*. Findings from *Alaska's School Climate and Connectedness Survey* show correlations between student SEL levels and improved academic achievement and reduced risk behaviors, reflecting findings from rigorous national research.

There is growing recognition of SEL's potential to address Alaska challenges such as high dropout rates, teacher turnover in rural schools, student health issues, and language and cultural barriers. Alaska educators and youth development leaders support the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2009 (HR 4223). This bipartisan legislation will enhance efforts in Alaska by expanding access to high-quality tools, training, and technical assistance.

Policy Trends

SEL concepts are embedded across the state's education policy landscape, including:

- **Standards and Benchmarks.** In 2006, Anchorage School District adopted detailed [SEL Standards](#) and benchmarks that have become national models. At the state level, the *Skills for a Healthy Life* standards weave in SEL concepts like decision-making, communications, and conflict resolution.
- **Climate and Community Engagement.** The Association of Alaska School Boards' [Initiative for Community Engagement \(Alaska ICE\)](#) makes SEL a core element of its efforts to support youth success, build children's developmental assets, promote positive school climate, and strengthen the connection between students and their schools and communities.
- **Bullying Prevention.** School districts are required to adopt policies that prohibit harassment, intimidation, and bullying, and encourage personal responsibility and respectful conduct.

Major Initiatives and Results

Rigorous research links evidence-based SEL to a range of positive outcomes, including better school climate, improved attendance; stronger attachment to school; decreased negative behavior and emotional distress; and improved academic performance, including standardized test score gains of 11 percentile points or more.¹ (Visit www.casel.org for more information about SEL research.)

A 2005-08 evaluation of **Alaska ICE** found similar progress. The 15 communities most deeply connected with Alaska ICE showed substantial improvement in adult-youth relationships, along with measurable reductions in risky youth behaviors such as vandalism, fights and alcohol use. Alaska Native students in these 15 districts rated their peer relationships and school climate more positively, and earned substantial increases in reading and math on the state high school graduation exam.

The **Anchorage School District** began exploring SEL in the 1990s, using the Search Institute's Developmental Assets model, and later adopted the evidence-based Resolving Conflict Creatively Program. Anchorage's SEL initiative is institutionalized through formal learning standards and the [I Am, I Can, I Care, I Will Goals](#). District leaders have made strong commitments to sustaining high-quality SEL implementation across the district. ASD designates staff to coordinate SEL programming, trains teachers to model the behaviors they seek in students, visibly promotes SEL in schools and the community, and uses data to drive and track its progress.

The data suggest the strategy is paying off. The ASD graduation rate has risen 10 percentage points over five years to reach 70.5% in 2009, while dropout rates and other indicators of failure have declined. In 2010, ASD and the Devereux Center for Resilient Children presented a study of 1000 Anchorage 8th graders showing that 25% of the variation in math and reading grades can be traced to social and emotional skills – strong evidence that SEL is an effective strategy for raising achievement.

The focus on SEL also reaches into the broader Anchorage community. The **United Way of Anchorage** has developed a community impact plan for youth ([Anchorage United for Youth](#)) that strives to improve conditions for Anchorage youth by investing resources in results-based programs and projects that are known to contribute to increased high school graduation rates and decreased rates of substance use and delinquency.

Community indicators are tracked annually to measure progress toward these goals. Performance measures that are collected and aggregated from community partners include the number of youth participating in activities known to promote healthy youth development, as well as the number and percentage of youth who show increases in specific social-emotional competencies.

In 2001 the **Chugach School District** became one of the first education organizations to win the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for performance excellence. The district serves 214 students scattered over 22,000 square miles of remote Southcentral Alaska, accessible only by air and water. In 1994, the district began to address low test scores and high dropout rates by eliminating traditional grades and credits, developing individual learning plans for each student and building students' SEL skills.

¹ Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., & Schellinger, K. (in press). "The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-analysis of School-based Universal Interventions." *Child Development*.

The **Pribilof School District**, a remote two-site school district on islands in the Bering Sea, has had a focus on social emotional learning for several years. They are using a national curriculum in their K-12 classrooms and are currently working to complement those lessons with an integrated, schoolwide framework. The schools each serve the PreK-12 population in one building, so there are many opportunities for cross-grade/cross-age mentoring and modeling. Staff are committed to enhancing their “family-like” school atmosphere in the most positive, student-centered ways.

Assessments of SEL skills in Pribilof students show consistent and statistically significant improvements from 2006 to 2010, as well as significant improvements in peer climate, school safety, student involvement, connectedness to school, and reductions in risky behaviors at school.

Resource Landscape

Alaskans have blended public and private funds to support SEL initiatives, but face the same severe budget landscape as public education systems nationwide. Alaska ICE received federal funding for a longitudinal evaluation done in partnership with the American Institutes for Research, and in turn helped to fund the Anchorage SEL standards project. Districts also draw on the federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Safe Schools/Healthy Students programs to support SEL.

The provisions of the *Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act* will benefit Alaska’s schools by making technical assistance and professional development available to states and districts, establishing a grant program for districtwide SEL initiatives, and measuring and sharing the results of SEL initiatives.

Champions

- [Association of Alaska School Boards](#) and [Alaska Initiative for Community Engagement](#) (AASB Executive Director Carl Rose, Associate Exec. Director Joseph Reeves; Alaska ICE Director Sally Rue)
- [Anchorage School District](#) (Superintendent Carol Comeau, SEL Coordinator Victoria Blakeney, Safe and Drug Free Schools Supervisor Michael Kerosky)
- [Anchorage Youth Development Coalition](#) (Executive Director Jack Alcorn, Youth Development Specialist Thomas Azzarella)
- [United Way of Anchorage](#) (Vice President of Community Action June Soboscinski, Director of Community Action Sarah Sledge)

NOTE: This briefing paper was developed collaboratively by:

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