

SEL in Online and Blended Classrooms: Biggest Challenges According to Teachers

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With an on-going global pandemic and civil unrest, social-emotional learning is a necessity in today's classrooms – whether online or brick and mortar. Undoubtedly, students' social-emotional wellbeing goes hand in hand with their academic success, but in practice, it's rarely that simple. To better understand SEL in online and blended settings, we asked teachers from across the country what challenges they faced supporting their students' social and emotional development online. Here's what we learned from the 100 teachers who responded:

Not Enough Time (59%)

Meeting the “standard” of academic standards takes considerable time and effort so it's not surprising that a lack of time was the biggest challenge teachers faced in being able to address SEL. Perhaps that's why an overwhelming majority of teachers (72%) indicated they used only “informal lessons” on SEL in their regular teaching practice. Although most teachers (79%) indicated they “understand the perspectives of (their) students and can pay attention to their emotional cues in an online environment,” they still lack time or structure to address the various SEL needs that arise daily.

Most teachers (80%) want to improve their ability to teach SEL, but there are simply not enough hours in the school day let alone the PD calendar.

Not enough social-emotional learning curriculum or programs (55%)

Without enough time to adapt traditional “stand and deliver” SEL curricula and programs to the online environment, the second biggest challenge online teachers identified was a lack of SEL curriculum or programs. So, it makes sense that less than a third of online teachers (31%) included formal SEL curricula in their normal teaching practice.

Similar to how we leverage technology to teach traditional academic standards, we should expect technology to magnify a teacher's impact and personalize student learning of SEL. An effective SEL strategy must also ensure continuity of learning across different environments, particularly as schools address safety concerns brought on by COVID-19.

Lack of support from families of students (51%)

Although 63% of online teachers affirmed their school culture supports the social-emotional development of students, the majority of respondents perceived lackluster support from parents as a challenge. This differs greatly from [other research](#) (not specifically of online teachers or parents) that shows strong parental support for SEL in schools.

A lack of support from families could be based on a variety of factors: general unfamiliarity with SEL, fear of unwanted indoctrination, or perhaps the inability to reinforce SEL at home. Regardless of the possible reasons, parents always deserve to know what their students are learning and why. When talking to weary families, teachers and administrators can point to the countless studies demonstrating the [practical](#) and [academic](#) benefits in addition to the practicality of SEL standards adopted by their state (if applicable).

Need more professional development or training (47%)

The unique skillset needed for effective teaching in an online environment doesn't just apply to the traditional academic subjects. In fact, almost half of teachers we surveyed identified a need for more SEL professional development or training. Even more telling, 84% of respondents agreed that all online teachers should receive *specialized* training to support the social and emotional wellbeing of their students online.

Of course, some concepts are just easier to teach face-to-face versus online. When asked, the majority of online teachers identified these specific social and emotional skills as the most difficult to cultivate online:

- Read social cues and respond constructively
- Develop an awareness of personal emotions
- Regulate emotions and behaviors by using thinking strategies that are consistent with brain development

Now more than ever, teachers will need professional development and support that reimagines how to model these skills for students without relying on dated sage-on-the-stage or one-size-fits-all methods.

Need more support from administrators (12%)

Compared to the majority of teachers who identified the lack of support from families as a challenge in supporting online students' social and emotional development, only 12% of teachers identified a need for more support from administrators. Most teachers evidently feel that administrators are doing all they can to promote a meaningful and robust SEL culture. In fact, almost two-thirds (63%) of online teachers agreed their school culture supports SEL, indicating a significant disconnect between administrative support and school leaders' ability to impact school culture.

Undoubtedly, administrators have a responsibility to address each one of the larger systemic challenges that teachers are experiencing with SEL in their classrooms. Administrators must help teachers find time in their busy day, provide formal yet flexible SEL curriculum and programs, engage support and buy-in from families, and prioritize the professional development teachers need to successfully deliver SEL in online or blended environments.

For any SEL strategy to truly prepare students for life, it must purposefully mitigate the real challenges teachers experience in the classroom or risk becoming just another competing priority. Regardless of whether we're teacher, administrator, or family, we can each contribute to building an environment where students can develop the vital social and emotional skills needed to navigate the world and its craziness.

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