

Social and emotional learning essential for children's educational success

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The Trump administration hopes to slash \$10.6 billion from current

education initiatives, channeling part of the money to expanding charter schools and providing vouchers for private and religious schools, recent reports indicate.

Expected to be released soon, the first detailed education budget is an attempt by President Donald Trump and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos to shrink the role of the federal government in education and give parents the freedom to choose their children's schools.

Under the new plan, money currently used for mental health and other services could be cut. One potential target could be services to improve social and [emotional learning](#), a critical ingredient for overall academic success, according to the latest issue of *The Future of Children*, a publication produced by Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and The Brookings Institution.

"Social and emotional learning skills may be just as important as academic or purely cognitive skills for understanding how people succeed in [school](#), college and careers," said Stephanie Jones of Harvard University, co-editor of the latest issue of *the Future of Children* along with Emily Doolittle of the Institute of Education Sciences. "Preliminary evidence suggests that social and [emotional skills](#) could be central to understanding and remediating stubbornly persistent gaps in achievement defined by income and racial/ethnic differences. But research has also found a great deal of variation in what works, for whom, and under what conditions."

Interest in social and emotional learning, also referred to as non-cognitive skills, "grit," and character education, has surged in recent years within the education community. Yet, this widespread enthusiasm coexists with a healthy skepticism about teaching such skills in schools, according to the journal, released March 31 at The Brookings Institution.

The Future of Children's Social and Emotional Learning issue examines the state of the science of social and emotional learning intervention and assessment. It sheds light on how best to support social and emotional learning in schools and how the teaching of these skills in schools might affect important questions of education policy. Looking at interventions across early childhood, elementary school, and adolescence, as well as in after-school programs, three interrelated themes emerge from the issue:

- Social and emotional learning interventions are most effective when their content and method of delivery are matched to children's developmental stages;
- Apparently contradictory research findings may result from misalignment between the skills that social and emotional learning interventions seek to impart and the student outcomes that are measured afterward; and
- The adults who deliver social and emotional learning programs are, in large part, responsible for the success or failure of the program. If adults lack social and emotional learning skills themselves or suffer from stress or poor physical and mental health, their ability to support their students' social and emotional learning may be severely compromised.

The findings in the issue have clear implications for policymakers and researchers:

- Because most children spend a large part of their lives in school, social and emotional learning can support a public health approach to [education](#)—that is, a universal, rather than an individualized approach, to preventing behavioral problems, promoting positive outcomes and producing engaged citizens;
- Local efforts to reduce school discipline by incorporating social and emotional learning practices have so far failed to reduce large racial and gender disparities. Social and emotional learning-

oriented discipline practices should consider the role that adults like teachers and school administrators play in promoting students' social and emotional learning, as well as how culture and societal beliefs about power and privilege affect the way discipline is meted out.

- Teachers need pre-service training and professional development in social and emotional learning, as well as support for their own mental wellbeing, which many of them don't currently get; and
- For school-based social and emotional learning to achieve its promise, sophisticated assessment tools need to be developed that meet rigorous scientific and ethical standards. Only then can students' progress be accurately gauged, but this process is likely to require a considerable investment of resources.

Provided by Princeton University

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