

Dear American Parents:

Our kids are underperforming in school. What went wrong, and how can we fix it?

For immediate release

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Introduction

Dear American parents,

Our kids are underperforming in school. For years, American students have lagged other developed nations in reading, science, and mathematics literacy. They are disengaged, disinterested, lack in direction and identity, and too often leave K-12 unprepared for college and the workforce. An outdated standards and academic achievement accountability system has conditioned our students to only concern themselves with test scores and graduation, with little incentive to take pride in classes and projects of lasting value, or projects that they are passionate about. While all students are feeling the pain, students from poor households suffer the most. The teachers and school administrators whom we rely on to care for and educate our youth are overworked, underpaid, stressed, and leaving the profession at an alarming rate. And what's more, COVID-19 and isolation from peers only exacerbated a tragic mental illness crisis among American youth.

This Op-Ed seeks to address these issues and offers an evidence-based roadmap to improve academic, social, behavioral, and professional outcomes for America's youth, positioning America as a leader in education.

We have the tools at our disposal, let's use them. It's time for a change.

Falling Behind: Academics in the United States

Roughly 49.5 million students attend public elementary and secondary schools in the United States, 3 million teachers educate America's students each year, and the U.S.

spent \$682 billion on public elementary and secondary schools in the 2019–20 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Despite spending more than any other OECD nation, the United States performs no better in academic outcomes, suggesting that it's not *how much* is spent, but how those resources *are allocated*.

America's youth struggle in reading, mathematics, and science. College enrollment is on the decline, and youth violence is epidemic among American teens. Mental health disorders are on the rise for American teens, with support and treatment resources in scarce supply. And once our kids leave high school, they find themselves less prepared than the youth of other rich, developed nations, leaving them disadvantaged in a competitive, rapidly evolving global economy.

America's academic system is underperforming — the facts:

- American literacy scores in reading, mathematics, and science are either stagnate or in decline.¹
- U.S. students scored higher than the OECD average in reading and science literacy but landed 11 points lower in mathematics literacy.²
- Globally, 30 countries outperform the United States in mathematics at the high school level, as of 2021, with several ahead in science as well (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

¹ According to the NAEP 2019 assessment, 4th grade, and 8th grade reading scores have declined since 2017. In mathematics, while 4th grade-students realized a considerable increase from 2017 scores, mathematics scores had declined for 8th grade- and 12th grade-students since 2017 and 2013, respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

² The Pisa Assessment (Program for International Student Assessment) looks at international comparisons for 15-year-old students in the application of reading, mathematics, and science literacy to problems within a real-life context, across all OECD countries.

- The U.S. performs below the OECD average in percentage of science and engineering professionals, in mean performance in reading (controlling for socioeconomic status), in the gender gap amongst top performers in mathematics and/or science, and in academic resiliency.³
- While the United States spends more per student than several countries (10-30% more than Canada, Ireland, and New Zealand), the U.S. performs no better in academic outcomes. These results hold controlling for socioeconomic status (OECD, 2019). Researchers at PISA suggest that these findings indicate that academic performance is determined less by how much is invested, but how the resources are allocated once the minimum threshold for academic performance is met.⁴
- Undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the U.S. dropped by 9 percent between 2009 and 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Contributing factors of this decline include concerns over student debt, a strong labor market for unskilled workers, and questions about college affordability, particularly at four-year colleges.⁵

³ Resilient students are disadvantaged students who score in the top quarter of performance in reading amongst students in their own country (OECD, 2019, Pg. 46).

⁴ PISA results show that there is a positive relationship between investment in education and average performance – up to a threshold of USD 50 000 in cumulative expenditure per student from age 6 to 15 (OECD, 2019, Pg. 20).

⁵ In a 2022 NPR report, aside from economic conditions and the pandemic, Doug Shapiro from the National Student Clearinghouse cited concerns over student debt, a strong labor market for unskilled workers, and questions about college affordability, particularly at four-year colleges, as major factors keeping prospective students away from getting a degree (Nadworny, 2022).

Backing Up: What is the Purpose of Education?

What is the primary goal of K-12 education? Is it to prepare students for the academic rigors of post-secondary college education? Or is it to build the practical skills needed to succeed in professional positions that require technical expertise? Or is it to develop the social skills needed to interact with other professionals, and collaborate in a fast-paced, globalized, service-driven economy? The answer depends largely on who you ask.

The U.S. Department of Education leans toward economic competitiveness and equity, defining K-12 as a mission to “promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). The Center for American Progress, a public policy research and advocacy organization, sees K-12 education as a social development and career preparedness resource, a space for breaking down equity barriers, while advancing college, career and civic readiness (Center for American Progress, 2023). But how does the public think about K-12 education?

In 2022, global public opinion and data company YouGov partnered with data analytics firm Gradient Metrics to conduct a qualitative study based on feedback from a national private opinion survey⁶ to identify what respondents believe to be the purpose of K-12 education in America (Populace, 2023). Participants were surveyed across a wide array

⁶ Methodology: 1,010 American adults were recruited between September 12th to September 30th, 2022, and weighted by gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, and geographical region based on U.S. Census data. The survey conducted used a choice-based conjoint (CBC) instrument which forces respondents to make trade-offs according to their priorities. See Figure 1: Purpose of Education Index below for an example of the options, ranking system, proportionality, and Z-scores.

of quality and outcome-based profiles based on 1) what the participant personally thinks should be the purpose of the K-12 education system in America, and 2) what the participant thinks most people think should be the purpose of the K-12 education system in America. The top three results by personal share of preference (SOP) were:

1. Students develop practical skills (e.g., manage personal finances, prepare a meal, make an appointment)
2. Students are able to think critically to problem solve and make decisions
3. Students demonstrate character (e.g., honesty, kindness, integrity, and ethics)

Purpose of Education Index > Appendix A: Complete CBC Results > Gen Pop Results (2019-2022)

A1: Gen Pop Results (2019-2022)

(Table 1/6)
(Sorted by 2022 Personal Rank)

	2022						2021						2020						2019					
	Personal			Perceived Societal			Personal			Perceived Societal			Personal			Perceived Societal			Personal			Perceived Societal		
	#	SOP	Z	#	SOP	Z	#	SOP	Z	#	SOP	Z	#	SOP	Z	#	SOP	Z	#	SOP	Z	#	SOP	Z
Students develop practical skills (e.g. manage personal finances, prepare a meal, make an appointment)	1	2.55	2.85	8	1.95	1.03	1	2.64	3.24	3	2.06	1.60	1	2.26	3.03	8	1.91	1.23	1	2.64	3.53	28	1.77	0.08
Students are able to think critically to problem solve and make decisions	2	2.41	2.35	1	2.34	3.07	2	2.24	1.77	15	1.90	0.76	2	2.09	2.01	22	1.78	0.20	4	2.17	1.66	33	1.72	-0.18
Students demonstrate character (e.g. honesty, kindness, integrity, and ethics)	3	2.35	2.14	26	1.78	0.14	9	2.04	1.04	21	1.81	0.29	4	1.96	1.23	13	1.84	0.68	3	2.21	1.82	36	1.71	-0.24
Students can demonstrate basic reading, writing, and arithmetic	4	2.22	1.67	2	2.10	1.81	4	2.17	1.52	1	2.29	2.81	10	1.88	0.75	2	2.05	2.33	14	1.89	0.54	6	2.00	1.31
All students receive the unique supports that they need throughout their learning	5	2.17	1.49	5	2.05	1.55	16	1.89	0.50	10	1.94	0.97	19	1.83	0.46	29	1.74	-0.11	19	1.86	0.42	21	1.81	0.30

Figure 1: Purpose of Education Index (Populace, 2023)

Whether you believe K-12 education is about college prep, career readiness, or developing necessary practical or skills, the reality is that American students are underperforming compared to other developed nations on many levels.

Spillover Effects: What happens if we don't correct?

Youth violence

While academic underperformance can translate into negative economic outcomes, poor academic outcomes are correlated with violence as well. A 2015 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) reports that students who achieve higher academic outcomes are less likely than their peers with poor academic outcomes to experience some form of violence (CDC, 2015). While this does not imply causation, more research should be conducted to determine any causal linkages between academic performance and violence.

While youth violence is global problem⁷, it is particularly prevalent in the United States, with about 1 in 5 high school students reported being bullied on school property in 2015. Youth violence is responsible for the deaths of a third of people aged 10-24 in the U.S., with approximately 12 young people falling victim to homicide each day. Youth violence is costly, with youth homicides and nonfatal physical assault-related injuries resulting in an estimated \$18.2 billion annually in combined medical and lost productivity costs alone (youth.gov, 2022).

Economic effects

Expanding on economic implications, millennials in the U.S. workforce are tied for the lowest level of basic skills of all industrial countries tested (NCEE, 2022). As of 2021, the United States now has the worst-educated workforce in the industrialized world

⁷ Youth violence is the 4th leading cause of death in young people worldwide, according to the World Health Organization, and globally about 200,000 young people die each year due to violence **Invalid source specified..**

(Tucker, 2021). As the world moves further toward a more diverse, complex, service-oriented economy, underperformance in America's workforce will likely leave the nation vulnerable to global economic competitors.

Health effects

While youth mental illness is a persistent global challengeⁱ, the United States in particular has struggled to respond to the crisis. In an interview with NPR, Kathleen Ethier of the CDC stated that prior to the pandemic, the health agency was seeing increases in persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness (Rascoe & Narro, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic only made matters worse.ⁱⁱ The implications are dire. Suicides and attempted suicides have increased, particularly for LBGT youth. According to the NCES, 35% of high school students in the United States with a mental health disorder drop out of school each year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Despite the gloomy state of youth mental health in the U.S., just over half of U.S. public schools (55%) provided students with diagnostic mental health assessments to evaluate them for mental health disorders during the 2019-20 school year, with even fewer schools providing treatment options (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).ⁱⁱⁱ

The consequences of failing to address adolescent mental health conditions are bad enough for the nation's youth, but the World Health Organization suggests that these conditions often extend into adulthood, impairing both physical and mental health and limiting opportunities to lead fulfilling lives as adults (World Health Organization, 2021).

Causes of American K-12 Underperformance

There is no shortage of opinion into why the American education system is failing, but a summary of purported causes can include:

- **Teacher shortage:** In 2022, all 50 states reported teacher shortages in at least one subject area, according to Brookings. While the causes and degree of the shortage can vary across states and districts, Brookings reports that teacher shortages are largely attributed to differentials in pay, and poor working conditions. Findings through a series of a of surveys found stress to be the primary reason former educators left the teaching profession (García, Kraft, & Schwartz, 2022).
- **Disinvestment:** Related to teacher shortages is the massive disinvestment of many states away from public education since the 2008 Great Recession — with most states spending less per pupil in 2018 than they were in 2008 (Center for American Progress, 2018). Reduced funding affects all angles of the student experience — the lower salaries to teachers as discussed above —but consider also impact on the quality of school meals, the availability of school resources such as books, telecommunications, and computer equipment, the access to specialized pupil support such as school psychologists and social workers⁸, and the quality of infrastructure and the school buildings themselves. A 2011 study found that countries with higher teacher salaries tend to have higher student achievement — theorizing that paying teachers a higher wage attracts new teacher, promoting competition, and in turn, higher-quality applicants (Dolton & Gutierrez, 2011).

⁸ McLeod et al. (2012) find that mental health and behavioral issues—including delinquency, attention difficulties, and substance abuse—are significantly associated with lower achievement.

- **Childcare:** Limited access to childcare places unnecessary strain on American parents. According to the First Five Years Fund, an advocacy and public education organization based in Washington, D.C., the average annual price of childcare in America has risen by 220% in the past three decades (Fillion, 2022). With the cost of childcare growing exponentially, many families are forced to choose lower-quality education options, or in many cases, drop out of the workforce temporarily.
- **Poverty:** Evidence shows that students' background has an impact on their academic achievement, and this is consistent across OECD countries. Students with low parental education, low socio-economic status, first or second generation immigrant background, as well as boys have higher risk of low performance (OECD, 2012). Challenges such as inadequate access to educational resources, poor nutrition, and lack of social and emotional support can have a significant impact on academic performance (Samuels, 2019).
- **Social skill decline:** Although a narrative exists that social skills among America's youth is in decline, the evidence to support this thesis is mixed^{9,10}. While it is difficult to prove any longitudinal trends in social skills ability, we can gauge the social and emotional health of American youth in other ways, namely

⁹ Downey and Gibbs (2020) compared teachers' and parents' evaluations of children's social skills among children in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study 1998 and 2010 cohorts. The researchers found no evidence that teachers or parents rate children's face-to-face social skills as poorer among more recent cohorts, even when accounting for family characteristics, screen time use, and other factors (Downey & Gibbs, 2020).

¹⁰ Using data from the OECD PISA survey, researchers found that the number of U.S. high school students who experienced loneliness increased by 100.82% between the years 2012-2018. The authors attribute the rise in loneliness to less social interaction, with fewer opportunities to socialize in person and more opportunities to socialize online than the average adolescent in 2000 (Twenge, et al., 2021).

through research on the state of youth mental health. And as of late, the findings are stark.

- **Mental health decline:** America is amidst a youth mental health crisis that requires immediate attention. Data from the OECD finds that the U.S. has the highest suicide rate¹¹ of any wealthy nation. The OECD attributes the high suicide rate in the U.S. to the unusually high burden of mental illness, a lack of mental health screening, inadequate investment in social services, and the inability of many people to pay for mental health treatment. Moreover, in recent years, the U.S. has experienced an uptick in suicides and deaths related to substance use and drug overdoses, often referred to as “deaths of despair” (The Commonwealth Fund, 2020). Mental Health America, a community-based nonprofit dedicated to addressing the needs of those living with mental illness, finds that more than 60% of children with major depression do not receive any mental health treatment (Mental Health America, 2022).
- **Standardized testing:** Some attribute the struggle of the American student to an overreliance on the standardized testing system. Many public high schools in America have relied on the SAT or ACT to assess student academic achievement, and preparedness for college. However, in several high schools, researchers at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) have discovered there is no connection between students’ ACT scores and eventual college graduation (The American Educational Research Association, 2020). What’s more—according to the same AERA report—is that in some high schools, the students who achieve

¹¹ Suicides account for 14 deaths per 100,000 people in the U.S. according to the OECD (The Commonwealth Fund, 2020).

the highest standardized scores are less likely to succeed in college! In 2014 there were about 850 test-optional colleges in the U.S. That number had expanded to over 1,835 by 2022 (Nietzel, 2022). In a 2022 article in Forbes, FairTest Executive Director Harry Feder added that “schools recognize that standardized test scores do not measure academic ‘merit.’ What they do assess quite accurately is family wealth, but that should not be the criteria for getting into college” (Nietzel, 2022). While students are spending hours memorizing test taking strategies, they are missing out on time for engaging with teachers and other students, building projects of lasting value, and finding passion in their work.

- **A Befuddled Culture of Learning:** In the decades of education in the U.S., the mental model has slowly shifted from learning to achieving. Due to rigid standards-based policies of the past, states and districts have been conditioned to meet academic outcomes that are contingent on students passing tests and graduating. In turn, students are conditioned to memorize material, pass standardized tests, and graduate, and in the process, student engagement, autonomy, creativity, and passion for work is deprioritized. Jacob Jarrett, a high school student in Wilmington, NC, put it this way in a piece in The New York Times: “The biggest issue facing our education system is our children’s lack of motivation. People don’t want to learn. Children hate school. We despise homework. We dislike studying. One of the largest indicators of a child’s success academically is whether or not they meet a third-grade reading level by the third grade, but children are never encouraged to want to learn. There are a lot of potential remedies for the education system. Paying teachers more, giving

schools more funding, removing distractions from the classroom. All of those things are good, but, at the end of the day, the solution is to fundamentally change the way in which we operate” (Network, 2019).

While some of these causes may be surprising, it’s likely that the readers of this column will be familiar with most (i.e., inadequate school funding has been a pain point for decades, going back to the 1970s). If we know the root causes to underperformance, why such little action to correct for it?

Attempts to Fix the U.S. Education System

Recent bipartisan attempts to improve academic outcomes have been met with mixed results. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), or federal bill S.1177, signed into law under President Obama in December 2015, marked a departure from previous standards authorized under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law of 2002, which established a goal of 100% proficiency in math and reading grades by 2014 and a strong emphasis on standardized test scores as a single indicator of K-12 academic performance. ESSA still requires standardized test scores but gives states more autonomy in what standards are applied and how their schools would be held accountable. While the verdict is still out on how has ESSA performed, there have been some troubling trends, such as the under prioritization of equity measures, failure of districts to assume the proper oversight role, difficulty in generalizing results, and the absence of a strong sustainability plan in all but one of the states reviewed (Ross, 2018). States, districts and school leaders have increased flexibility in setting a unique organizational structure, pedagogy, curriculum, set of standards, and system for

measuring those standards. But do these stakeholders, already stretched thin on resources, have the capacity to manage all these deliverables?

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARP), passed in 2021 under the Biden administration, infused \$130 billion to assist elementary, middle, and high schools with reopening following the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically citing equity concerns, the bill set aside funding at the local and state level to ensure states and districts address the learning loss and social and emotional needs of students disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 (Segers, 2021).

Countries with higher teacher salaries tend to have higher student achievement — suggesting that higher paid teachers will attract new teachers, promote competition, and in turn, higher-quality applicants (Dolton & Gutierrez, 2011). Education researchers Karen Hawly Miles and Nicole Katz wrote in a 2018 report that



Figure 2 Teachers and supporters in the Los Angeles Unified School District area rally for higher pay. Damian Dovarganes / AP

“supporting teachers as the professionals they are is a critical step that will lead the way to achieving student performance goals” (Miles & Katz, 2018). Jon Hage, Founder and CEO of Charter Schools USA, suggests that providing teachers with quality professional development and coaching can lead to better outcomes for students (Reiss, 2015). Researchers examining student achievement and teacher salary in Ohio found that higher teacher pay can impact student growth (Yontz & Wilson, 2021). Over and over, the data show that a healthy public school system is dependent on a robust teaching

base, and the call for increased teacher pay is being heard loud and clear in the U.S. Some states are listening. Since 2019, California, Colorado, Florida, Texas, and Virginia have passed legislation to increase teacher funding, provide support for school counselors, and other support staff. In 2023, Sen. Bernie Sanders I-Vt introduced a bill titled the Pay Teachers Act aiming to set a national minimum salary for teachers to \$60,000. Currently, the median annual pay for a teacher in the U.S. is \$61,000 (McNair, 2023).

Several states have attempted to circumvent the public-school academic outcomes issue altogether by offering voucher programs—often in the form of education savings accounts (ESAs)—allowing families to cover costs associated with private school tuition and fees, online learning programs, private tutoring, and more (EdChoice, 2023).

The U.S. has worked through a range of top-down adjustments to education policy, and some states have begun turning to innovative school programs to turn the tide on the academic and health struggles among America’s youth. Policymakers should continue to build on success from the past, while working on known tools to improve academic outcomes, such as increased resources for school districts, programs to improve teacher morale, and alternatives to the standardized testing framework. While education policymakers work to fill those gaps, we can look to perhaps the most promising area of opportunity — socio-emotional learning (SEL).

Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL)

From 1987-1992, an education and research team spearheaded by Timothy Shriver and Dr. Roger P. Weissberg began the New Haven Social Development program, pioneering SEL strategies for K-12 education (CASEL, 2023). CASEL, an organization founded in 1994 whose mission is to establish high-quality, evidence-based SEL as an essential part of preschool through high school education, defines socio-emotional learning (SEL) as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, 2023).

Popular SEL programs include lesson plans encompassing students in CASEL core competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making and more. Students are guided through lessons that have them explore factors crucial to social and emotional well-being, which can include but are not limited to:

- Exploring aspects of identity
- Assessing individual interests and strengths
- Discussing healthy factors in pursuing interests
- Considering the future self and mapping a path forward
- Understanding the social factors behind bullying and methods to disrupt harmful bullying patterns
- Identifying stress and anxiety, and strategies for managing stress

- Identifying core values and the behaviors that demonstrate these values
- Managing relationships and recognizing other perspectives
- Managing unhealthy relationships and conflict resolution

See a full Scope and Sequence lesson plan for middle school students at [SecondStep.org](https://www.secondstep.org) (Second Step, 2023).

Grade 6

Unit 3: Thoughts, Emotions & Decisions

Program Themes: Conflicts, Resilience, Staying Calm, Thoughts and Emotions

CASEL Core Competencies: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, Responsible Decision-Making

Lesson Title	Objectives Students will be able to:
Lesson 14 What Emotions Tell You	Describe why emotions matter in their lives.
Lesson 15 Emotions and Your Brain	Describe what happens in their brains when they feel a strong emotion.
Lesson 16 How Emotions Affect Your Decisions	Describe how strong emotions can influence the decisions they make.
Lesson 17 Managing Your Emotions	Demonstrate and evaluate strategies for managing their emotions.
Lesson 18 What Works Best for You?	Determine the emotion-management strategies that work best for them and choose the best strategy to use in a situation, given the context.
Lesson 19-Performance Task Raising Awareness About Managing Emotions	Apply their knowledge from the unit to promote awareness about emotion-management strategies at school.

Figure 3 Second Step SEL module at [SecondStep.org](https://www.secondstep.org)

You don't have to search far to find associations between the social and emotional characteristics and student mental health and academic outcomes. The following are a few recent examples:

- Researchers studying the association between social behaviors and academic achievement found that social behaviors are more strongly correlated to grades than competencies, and that peer problems relate more strongly to achievement than prosocial behavior (DeVries & Rathmann, 2018).
- Researchers studying the association between social and behavior skills and outcomes among kindergarteners found that 5-year-old children entering kindergarten who are not socially-behaviorally ready are at greater risk of being retained in grade, receiving services and supports through an IEP or 504 plan (tools to provide students with accommodations and support for special needs), or being suspended/expelled by the time they reach fourth grade (Bettencourt, Gross, Ho, & Perrin, 2018).
- In 2021, researchers found through a longitudinal study of a Swedish cohort of 3–5-year-old students that stable low social skills increased the risk for poor school performance, while stable high social skills increased the chance for good school performance in primary school (Frogner, et al., 2022).
- In a 2021 study in Aragon, Spain, researchers found a significant association between life skills (a set of psychosocial abilities that allow the individual to act competently and behave adequately in a range of day-to-day situations and scenarios) and academic performance (Sánchez-Hernando, et al., 2021).

“In 2019, more than 1 in 3 American teenagers reported feeling so sad or hopeless at some point over the past year that they had skipped regular

activities, a 44 percent rise since 2009, and 1 in 6 had contemplated suicide.”

— Adam Piore in Newsweek, 2022

SEL programs are associated with improved attitudes, behavior, and academic performance, preparing students for professional environments and real-world challenges.¹² As of 2022, 27 states are well underway taking advantage of this promising educational tool. Some recent success stories include:

- **SEL in Tacoma, Washington:** Looking to reverse years of low graduation rates, schools in Tacoma put in place a plan to train teachers, community leaders, and parents in socio-emotional disciplines to increase sharing, develop empathy skills, improve listening skills, and develop more meaningful relationships. Following implementation of the program, Tacoma was gearing up to graduate more than 90 percent of its students, up 55 percent from 2010. Alcohol use among high schools dropped, marijuana use fell, and reports of anxiety, depression and suicide declined, countering trends across the U.S. (Piore, 2022).
- **Collaborating Districts Initiative:** a districtwide initiative spearheaded by CASEL in 2011 studied the implementation of SEL programs and the outcomes of student participants across 8 regions: Anchorage, Austin, Cleveland, Chicago, Nashville, Oakland, Sacramento, and Washoe County, Nevada. The initiative

¹² See the Durlak et al. (2011) meta-analysis titled ‘The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions’ that shows an 11-percentile-point gain in academic achievement for students exposed to SEL programs.

found positive trends in the academic and behavioral growth of students in schools within districts implementing systematic SEL approaches. Included in these findings were consistent improvements in the social and emotional competence of grade 3 students, an improvement in academic performance in four districts, a significant decrease in suspensions across the six districts where data was available, a significant upward trend in GPA, and a significant upward trend in attendance (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016).

- ***INSIGHTS Approach:*** *INSIGHTS* is a preventative school-based intervention designed to serve low-income primary grade students particularly at-risk for academic and behavioral difficulties. *INSIGHTS* included a) teacher sessions, b) parent sessions, and c) universal classroom sessions. Results from a 2015 study consistently demonstrated a mediation of math achievement in first grade with improvements in both classroom emotional support and organization. Additionally, findings showed program impacts on reading achievement in first grade mediated through improved classroom organization. Findings reflected recent analysis which suggests emotional support and organization in classroom settings are particularly important for the development of math skills among low-income urban elementary school children (McCormick, Cappella, O'Connor, & McClowry, 2015).
- **RULER Approach: At-risk students engagement and conduct behavior:** a 2017 longitudinal study of at-risk students found that participation in a RULER (recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating) program significantly increased engagement a year later for sixth

graders, and improved conduct the following year when those students reached seventh grade (Cipriano, Barnes, Rivers, & Brackett, 2019).

- **Mindfulness and SEL intervention in Southwestern US:** A 2021 analysis of 116 middle school students found significant intervention effects for the treatment group in students' changes in stress tolerance, social curiosity, executive functioning, and academic achievement (English, science, social studies). (Lemberger-Truelove, Ceballos, Molina, & Carbonneau, 2021)
- **The Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS):** The PATHS program is a classroom-based SEL program for elementary school students designed to foster self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible and decision-making (Greenberg & Celene E. Domitrovich, 2017). In PATHS, treated children become less impulsive, less disruptive, and display less opposition to teachers and parents. In class, treated children become less likely to disturb lessons and more likely to focus on the teaching content (Sorrenti, Zölitz, Ribeaud, & Eisner, 2020).
- **Meta-analyses:** Results from a 2011 meta-analysis including data from more than 270,000 K-12 students found that students participating in SEL programs were significantly more likely to show positive outcomes with respect to enhanced SEL skills, attitudes, positive social behavior, and academic performance, and had significantly lower levels of conduct problems and emotional distress. Students participating in an SEL program realized an 11 percentile-point gain in achievement, suggesting that SEL programs bolster student academic success (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). The major findings in the Durlak et al. study have been replicated three

times (Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Wigglesworth et al., 2016) since the initial analysis. A 2023 meta-analysis of universal school-based SEL interventions found that students participating in SEL programs realized significantly improved skills, attitudes, behaviors, school climate and safety, peer relationships, school functioning, and academic achievement, compared to control conditions (Cipriano, et al., 2023).

While SEL interventions are proving effective, limitations in existing programmatic application can include insufficient dosage, duration and effectiveness, fragmentation or marginalization, sole focus on classrooms, and limited staff training (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Proponents of SEL find the educational resource to be most effective when exercised at a whole-school perspective, where learning is not exclusive to students, but for teachers, principals, lunchroom monitors, bus drivers, librarians, and other specialists (Shafer, 2016). Marguerethe Jaede, a former teacher who now works with Ohio school districts on SEL implementation, was quoted in a 2023 NEA report stating that “if you don’t have self-awareness, you can’t teach it to somebody else” (Walker, 2023).

SEL Backlash

With any innovative social policy in America brings some degree of backlash. Not everyone is on board with SEL programs. In some conservative circles, there is concern that SEL programs act as a “trojan horse” for liberal policymakers, a tool to indoctrinate America’s students with liberal ideals (Piore, 2022). Adam Piore writing for Newsweek

found that, despite failing to be signed into law, policymakers in at least seven states had introduced legislation to ban SEL programs outright.

The fear, emotional disconnect, and lack of awareness that block promising interventions—such as SEL—that could help America’s youth are attributed to the very cognitive and behavioral weaknesses that SEL programs aim to address and strengthen. Without proper self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and decision-making skills—skills fundamental to most SEL programs—we are more vulnerable to the emotional manipulation and poor decision making that leaves us in a state of social and intellectual paralysis.

“One of the largest indicators of a child’s success academically is whether or not they meet a third-grade reading level by the third grade, but children are never encouraged to want to learn.”

— Jacob Jarrett, a high school student in Wilmington, NC

A New Normal: A socially and emotionally educated

American population

To encourage investment from public and private stakeholders, we should lean on a backward mapping leaning on Mariana Mazzucato as a guide. In Mazzucato’s book *Mission Economy*, the author uses the US Apollo mission to depict how mission-oriented thinking can inspire cohesion and passion among several actors—in this case government, private industry, and the public— to work together toward a common goal,

putting a man on the moon (Mazzucato). Mazzucato suggests defining an exciting and ambitious outcome, and moving backwards through the objectives, stakeholders, and processes to achieve this outcome.

Imagine for a moment a new normal where American students lead the world in academic outcomes that are more conducive to success in the real world. Not only are American students setting the global benchmark for graduation rate, but more students of all social and economic backgrounds are identifying their personal and professional identities, working on projects that they are passionate about, and are continuing this passion into post-secondary school or fulfilling careers.

Apart from school-level outcomes, Americans have reigned in the tragedy that is the nation's youth mental health crisis. America is experiencing a lower aggregate crime rate, reductions in conflict that leads to violence, and a gross reduction in gun-related violence. Due to better decisions in preventative health care, Americans are experiencing the most significant cost savings in the history of the American health system. Because more Americans are healthier, more workers enter workforce, filling positions in health, education, science, engineering, technology, adding a boost to the American economy, and leading to advances that benefit not just the United States, but the world.

Further, using methods derived from behavioral science research, we will need to approach the problem from three different motivational perspectives: the Rider, the Elephant, and the Path.^{13,14} I propose the following:

- **Speak to the Rider:** Build knowledge of SEL programs, their basic components, and the mounting evidence of positive outcomes.
- **Speak to the Elephant:** Motivation via social and cultural narratives that illustrate the promise and opportunity of the SEL programs in K-12 education to improve social and emotional skills, and socioeconomic well-being.
- **Chart the Path:** Guidance via simple roadmaps for policymakers and the public, guiding us through the steps needed to build support and awareness around SEL programs, and how to measure and improve upon policies.

Mirroring a causal analysis framework designed by researchers Sinan Aral and Dean Eckles to identify trends in mis- and disinformation, we can identify the nature of messaging campaigns to build awareness around SEL capabilities, assess how effective the messaging campaigns are at driving participation in SEL programs, evaluate causal effects across individuals and segments, and measure deviations from expected behavior (Aral & Eckles, 2019).

¹³ In *The Happiness Hypothesis*, social psychologist and bestselling author Jonathan Haidt depicts the metaphor of a rider on an elephant to describe two motivating forces that guide behavior—the smaller, more decisive Rider as the logical, rational actor. The larger, more physically commanding Elephant as the emotional, irrational actor (Haidt).

¹⁴ In *Switch*, authors Chip and Dan Heath call on Jonathan Haidt’s metaphor of the rider and the elephant, and add a third actor, the Path, to suggest that often the environmental contexts are just as important for guiding behavior (Heath and Heath).

A blueprint for empirical investigations into the effectiveness of SEL interventions in K-12 schools

Assess Targeting and Exposure	⇒	Assess Causal Behavioral Change	⇒	Assess Effects on Academic & Social Outcomes
How effective are messages at encouraging adoption or participation of SEL in K-12 education?		How does SEL change behavior? What are the causal effects across individuals and segments?		How does behavior change inform life choices over time? Measure deviations from expected behavior.

Table 1 A blueprint for empirical investigations into the effectiveness of SEL interventions in K-12 schools

Conclusion

SEL holds the promise to improving academic outcomes for American students but should not live in a vacuum. Policymakers should continue to increase school funding, provide school staff with the resources they need to build new skills, increase teacher morale, and allow them sufficient time to engage with their students. We should work diligently to reduce the poverty gap and expand access to childcare resources, two issues that deeply hamper the academic potential of so many American students. And we should prioritize the funding and access of mental health resources to reverse the devastating trend of mental illness among American youth.

This is the vision that will bring America to the forefront of academic, social, and economic achievement. We know SEL is effective. The American Rescue Plan provided an opportunity to invest in the social and emotional health of American students, we have built momentum in several states who are seeing positive academic and life

outcomes attributed to socio-emotional learning programs. We have the power to reverse decades of academic underperformance, now is the time to act. Write your local, state, and federal policymakers and let them know that you care about the social and emotional health of America's youth, and the future economic and social health of this nation.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Globally, one in seven 10-19-year-olds experiences a mental disorder, accounting for 13% of the global burden of disease in this age group. Depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders are among the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents. Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15–29-year-olds (World Health Organization, 2021).

ⁱⁱ In a survey conducted by the CDC, researchers found that one in three high school students experienced poor mental health (most of the time or always) during the COVID-19 pandemic (37.1%) and during the past 30 days (31.1%) (Jones, et al., 2022). Also realized through the survey were persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (44.2% of students), serious consideration of attempting suicide (19.9% of students), with 9% attempting suicide in the 12 months prior to the survey (Jones, et al., 2022).

ⁱⁱⁱ In a 2019-2020 survey conducted by the NCES, U.S. public schools cite 1) inadequate funding, 2) inadequate access to licensed mental health professionals, and 3) policies regarding school's requirement to pay for services as the three top limiting factors to providing mental health services for their students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).