

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL INDICATORS

An Overview

Social-emotional (SEL) indicators measure non-academic traits and skills such as “grit” or “self-management.” (Note: SEL indicators are not the same as measures of school climate, which may look at how students, educators, and sometimes parents experience their school environment.)

Research shows that certain SEL characteristics, such as grit and a growth mindset, are positively correlated with academic outcomes. Studies are less clear about how best to harness and encourage these characteristics in students.¹ Moreover, researchers who developed and/or are studying these measures warn against including them in school ratings because of concerns about reliability, validity, subjectivity, and the possibility of cultural bias.²

How are social-emotional characteristics measured?

Social-emotional characteristics are typically measured through teacher observations and student self-reports and include, but are not limited to, grit or perseverance, growth mindset, self-management, and social awareness.

What concerns are there about including these measures in school ratings?

- Researchers who have been studying these measures warn against including them in school ratings because of concerns regarding their reliability and validity, as well as their subjectivity and the possibility of cultural bias.³
- Researchers and advocates have expressed concerns about the message that these measures can send about children.⁴ Reporting that some students have poor self-management could, for example, contribute to a negative view of students and a deficit-oriented mindset, and be used to explain away underperformance.
- Since these measures are mostly based on student and teacher surveys, they may be easily biased under the weight of accountability.

Given all of the concerns about the validity, reliability, and possible bias in these measures, as well as their potential to contribute to a deficit-oriented mindset toward students, SEL measures should not be included in school ratings.

¹ CORE Districts and Policy Analysis for California Education, *Select Lessons from the CORE School Quality Improvement Index for California Equity Coalition*, March 16, 2016.

² Angela Duckworth and David Yeager, “Measurement Matters: Assessing Personal Qualities Other Than Cognitive Ability for Educational Purposes,” *Educational Researcher* 44, no. 4 (May 2015): 237–251.

³ Angela Duckworth, “Don’t grade schools on grit,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/opinion/sunday/dont-grade-schools-on-grit.html?_r=1.

⁴ Kate Zernike, “Testing for Joy and Grit? Schools Nationwide Push to Measure Students’ Emotional Skills,” *The New York Times*, February 29, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/01/us/testing-for-joy-and-grit-schools-nationwide-push-to-measure-students-emotional-skills.html?_r=0.