

Second Step® Insights

Making Long-Term SEL Implementation Work: 5 Tips for Leaders

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This article is a recap of an interview with Dr. Dorothy Espelage, distinguished professor of education at the University of North Carolina, on our Grow Kinder® podcast.

High-quality social-emotional learning (SEL) programs can benefit students in many ways--both in the classroom and throughout their lives. But how much instruction do kids need? And how long does it take for schools to see results?

We spoke to SEL expert Dorothy Espelage, PhD, a distinguished professor of education at the University of North Carolina. For more than 30 years, Dorothy has focused her research on how to implement social-emotional learning programs and measure their success. Here, she shares five tips to ensure kids get the most benefits from SEL.

- 1. Teach social-emotional skills from Kindergarten through Grade 12.** As students grow older, they'll need to learn new social-emotional competencies to apply to new situations. Dorothy explains, "In first and second grade, bullying is much more physical, but in late elementary school it becomes more verbal ... and involves social media." Dorothy suggests implementing SEL programs that are age-differentiated to ensure the content is appropriate for students' developmental stage. She also stresses that social-emotional learning is a lifelong process: "We even have SEL in higher ed for our 18-to-23-year-old students!"
- 2. Integrate SEL into the fabric of your school.** Schools see the greatest success when they align their SEL program with other initiatives in the school, Dorothy says. Administrators should consider how SEL fits into their school climate, improvement process, MTSS framework, and other goals and systems. Her studies validate this approach: "The research shows very, very clearly their academic test scores, if that's what they focused on, will be better. Their school climate will be better; [students will] be more engaged."
- 3. Continue teacher training beyond year one.** Training at the start of a new program is vital, but "just because you trained in one year doesn't mean you don't have train in year two," Dorothy cautions. "You have new people coming in. Teachers change." Continued learning is important for staff. Teachers need to see and understand the curriculum's relevance in their classrooms. "If the program is just an add-on, another thing to do," Dorothy points out, "then it's not going to be implemented with fidelity or be sustainable."
- 4. Be patient. Change comes slowly.** Invest in SEL over time to see the greatest outcomes. "If schools want to see significant change, there has to be a solid commitment of three to five years in elementary schools," Dorothy advises. For high school, she recommends four and five years: "It breaks my heart when schools throw in the towel after one or two years because [we experts] just know, the minimum is three years."
- 5. Get parents involved.** Talk to parents. Dorothy's research shows that involving families makes SEL implementation stronger. "It's more than sending a letter home that never comes out of the backpack or an email blast that never gets opened," Dorothy says. She recommends including parent representation on the committees that select the SEL program. "Involve parents, listen to their feedback," Dorothy urges. "Parents talk to parents. Bring them and spread the word, versus them being on the outside and making things up about what we're doing in the school."

Dorothy believes the time and effort involved in implementing long-term SEL is more than worth it. "The evidence and the science is clear that when kids are engaged in social-emotional learning, we are creating a workforce that is going to be strong and creating individuals who are good citizens," she says.

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Learn more about Dorothy's ongoing research at [UNC's Espelage Rave Lab](#).

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