

Policy Surveillance: Preschool Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

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Why Look At Preschool SEL Laws?

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has a strong association with outcomes important to public health, from increased high school graduation rates to reduced drug use. This project aims to locate and analyze preschool learning standards, competencies, and benchmarks in all 50 states. Identifying and comparing important elements of state laws, early learning standards, benchmarks, and policies related to preschool SEL across jurisdictions will create a dataset for other researchers, single out provisions of innovative and effective state laws, support policy development, reveal gaps in law and policy, and suggest whether additional state laws and policies are needed to improve educational and health outcomes.

Policy Surveillance: What is it?

Policy surveillance is the systematic collection, analysis, and dissemination of laws and policies, whether at the state or local level. With leadership from the Center for Public Health Research at Temple University, policy surveillance has emerged as a rigorous, interdisciplinary method for comparing laws, for evaluating the outcomes related to those laws, and, ultimately, for promoting the spread of effective, evidence-based laws.

The Method: Once the scope of a project is defined and background research has been conducted, the policy surveillance methodology includes:

- Question development
- Collection of the law
- Coding the law

The process requires several layers of quality control before the results can be published and disseminated. Results may be updated over time. Where limitations of time or resources do not permit all of the redundancy set forth in policy surveillance protocols, the resulting analysis may be referred to as a legal scan.

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What Has the Research Told Us So Far?

SEL requirements may not be found in laws or regulations: State social and emotional early learning standards are frequently not set forth in state statutes or regulations, but are found in early learning standards and guidance documents. This provides less assurance that standard legal research methods can capture a complete and current picture of SEL requirements. While states like Minnesota have laws requiring public preschools to utilize curriculum aligned with state social and emotional learning standards, Kansas requires compliance with state early learning standards (which include SEL) as a condition of receiving preschool grant funds, but lacks any laws or regulations to that effect.

It's More than Just the Content: The effectiveness of SEL standards does not depend upon the substance of the standards alone, but varies based upon how the standards are funded and implemented. State laws or regulations that include the standards, or require schools to adopt or implement those standards, can impact who, when, and how preschool children are developing social and emotional skills at school. In Louisiana for example, preschools must provide training in SEL if they receive state or public funds or seek academic approval for a specific type of early learning center license.

SEL in Public Preschools: State laws related to SEL in preschools differ dramatically and may apply differently to public and private preschools, the latter of which may be regulated as child care facilities. With about 33% percent of 4-year olds attending public preschools, it's worth taking a look at state laws that apply to publicly funded preschool. However, public preschool enrollment varies significantly by state, ranging from 85% of 4 year olds enrolled in public preschool in Washington DC, to 0% enrolled in public preschool in 6 states.

States use varied terminology for SEL in public preschools. Some states, like Wisconsin, require school districts to teach specified social and emotional skills, such as decision-making, while other state laws, such as those in Illinois, specifically identify "social emotional development" as a goal of state funded public preschools, and still others, like New Jersey, simply require that public preschools meet the state's early learning standards, which typically include social and emotional learning standards.

Next Steps: Question Development

Question Development The research team has completed background research on laws and policies related to preschool SEL in 5 states. It is now ready for question development, in which researchers devise questions (ideally with a yes/no binary answer or a limited set of potential answers) that illuminate important elements of a law and how it varies by state. Importantly, the question and answer must accurately reflect the law without interpretation or judgment.

Preliminary Constructs The background research suggests some key variables in state laws and policies related to SEL. These include:

- Is there any explicit reference to SEL or individual SEL competencies? Where? (law, regulation, early learning standards, other)
- Is adherence to state early learning standards required in order to receive public funds?
- What are eligibility requirements for children to attend public preschools? (None, family income, etc.)
- Are private preschools and child care centers required to adhere to early learning standards?
- Do kindergarten readiness standards include SEL competencies?

Please Weigh in Which of the preliminary constructs above would be the most relevant to your work? Are there other questions you would recommend that researchers explore? Please use one of the post it notes provided.