



Getting Good at Doing Good

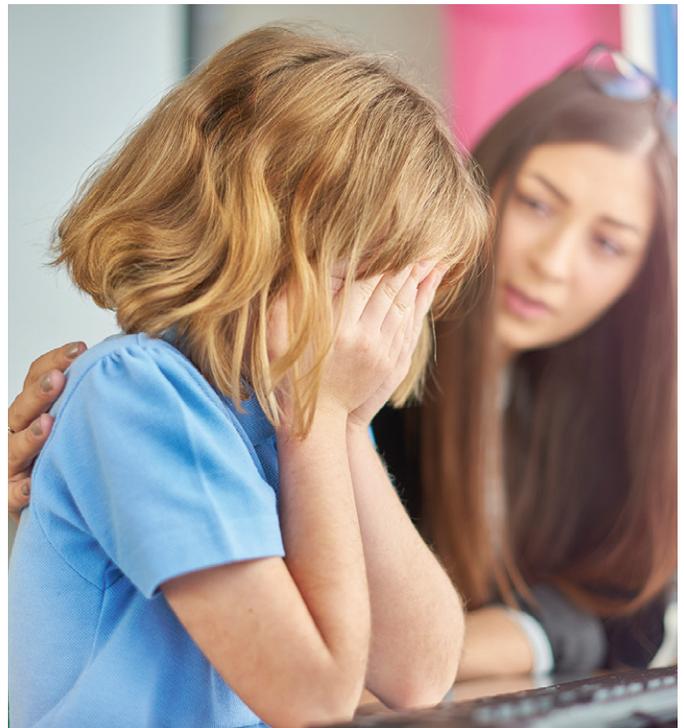
The Importance of Monitoring and Measuring the Impact of Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Efforts

Nathan Levenson

When we examine how school districts are addressing the social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) needs of students, two things are nearly always true, and one thing seldom is. What's true is (1) districts have seen an increase in student needs over the last decade, and (2) districts have added staff and programs to address this growing challenge. What's true far less often is school and district leaders' knowing for certain that these thoughtful programs and talented staff are having the intended impact. In fact, based on conversations with thousands of stressed-out teachers across the country, it is fairly clear that despite a multitude of actions by district leaders, many of the current efforts to address the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students are unfortunately falling short.

The failure to measure the success of SEB programs may explain why so many teachers and principals continue to ask for more SEB programs and more specialized staff like behaviorists and social workers despite the already significant increases over the last few years. It may be part of the reason teachers are burning out and leaving the profession as extreme student behaviors persist despite the extensive efforts to address this challenge.

Could the widespread call for more or different SEB efforts be because the wrong programs were selected or the specialized staff lacked the requisite skills? Based on our work with hundreds of districts across the country, the answer to these questions is a resounding "No." Programs like restorative justice and advisory periods and staff that includes mental health counselors and behavior specialists are critical components of a success plan. They are only effective, however, if they are well



implemented, are monitored closely, have their impact measured, and have their implementation tweaked as needed.

Measurement Matters

Despite the importance of social, emotional, and behavioral services, few districts monitor their implementation and measure their impact on a scale similar to that done for academic programs. Few districts roll out a new elementary literacy program without collecting baseline data and embedding progress monitoring. When districts share the success of their literacy programs, they often share *results* like, "The number of students reading at grade

level increased by 15%" or "Over half of our struggling readers now make more than a year's growth in a year." This is in stark contrast to how these same districts talk about their SEB efforts. "We have restorative justice in every school," they say, or "We added five behavior specialists over the past three years." They share *inputs*, not results.

The next step in the continuous improvement process of addressing students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs should be less focus on what to do and more focus on doing it well. This in turn requires far more extensive monitoring of implementation, measuring of impact, and tweaking of national programs to reflect local context. To be clear, it's still important that thoughtful programs be selected and talented staff be hired, but that alone won't be sufficient.

A Seven-Step Approach to Measuring the Impact of SEB Efforts

Measuring the impact of SEB efforts is conceptually straightforward: gather baseline data and track changes

over time. Unfortunately, in practice it is harder to measure SEB results than academic results like reading.

A seven-step approach can guide the process.

Clarity of Purpose

1. Leadership's Definition of Purpose
2. Staff Understanding

Necessary Prerequisites

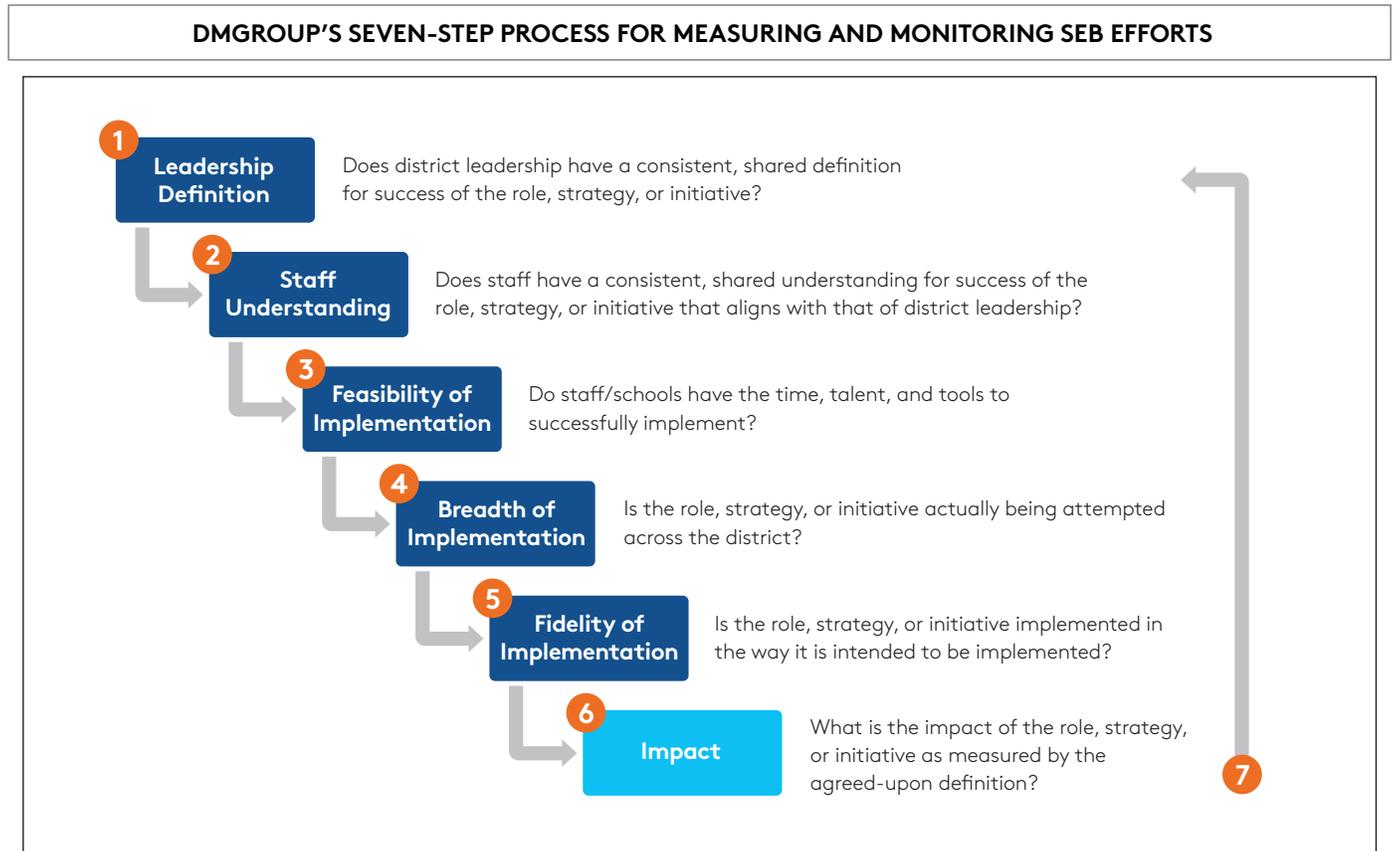
3. Feasibility of Implementation (Time, Talent, and Tools)
4. Breadth of Implementation

Do It Well

5. Fidelity of Implementation
6. Impact

Live and Learn

7. Revise and Repeat the Process



Source: DMGroup

A brief review of these major steps can help ensure that SEB efforts are working as planned and can shed light on why some may be coming up short.

Steps 1 and 2: Ensure Clarity of Purpose

Surprisingly, one of the hardest aspects of measuring the success of SEB programs and staffing roles is having clarity on the purpose of the program or position. A recent meeting with leaders of a mid-sized midwestern district exemplified the challenge. District Management Group was asked to help measure the effectiveness of the district's SEL efforts, specifically classroom teachers using restorative circles. The work started with a single prompt: "Turn to a neighbor and share your aspirations for this effort." Despite the animated discussion, a problem surfaced quickly: in a group of about 40 educators, about two dozen divergent goals for the program emerged, including:

- Reducing playground bullying
- Building student empathy
- Changing social media behavior
- Addressing severe student behaviors
- Reducing minor classroom interruptions
- Increasing academic achievement (via fewer distractions for the teacher during instruction)
- Reducing office visits
- And many, many more

The breadth of differing opinions was surprising. Some expected the program to raise reading scores, others to address Tier 3 extreme behaviors, and others to alter what's posted to TikTok. Still others saw it as a means of improving community, increasing understanding, and mitigating bullying.

But most surprising of all was that the program had been in place for three years and nearly all school and district leaders felt it was working pretty well even though they didn't agree on what "working well" meant. It shouldn't be surprising that teachers reported much less satisfaction with the program.

Clarity of purpose requires common answers to four questions:

1. What would an observer see when this effort is implemented well?



Measure impact of specialized staff, not just programs

When districts leaders think about measuring the impact of SEB efforts, they often think first about evaluating programs that they purchased or adopted such as restorative circles, Responsive Classroom, or a specific social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum. These are great candidates for monitoring and measuring, but most often a district's biggest investment in meeting the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students isn't an investment in a program but an investment in a group of highly talented staff. In recent years, many districts have added behaviorists, social workers, school adjustment counselors, mental health counselors, and others to meet the SEB needs of students. These highly specialized staff can have great impact but aren't always able to have the hoped-for results.

Measuring and monitoring the impact of a role, not individual practitioners in that role, can help students and staff alike. Such a review can build the case for expanding staffing in a particular area or identifying structural obstacles that make it hard for staff to be as effective as they could be.

2. What group of students does the effort target? (e.g. grade span, tier, specific student need)
3. Who is intended to utilize the effort? (e.g. classroom teacher, certified behaviorist, paraprofessional)
4. What specific changes would occur if implemented well? (e.g. reduction in bullying at recess, students feeling more connected to an adult in the school, fewer explosive student outbursts)

Before the impact of any SEB program can be measured, school and districts leaders need to agree among themselves on the goal of the effort. In our example, after a few months of discussion, the school, department, and district leaders were finally able to settle on a reasonable, focused set of goals for restorative circles focusing on Tier 1 and 2 behavior interventions.

After consensus is gained at the top, checking that the staff implementing the program share that common understanding is also needed. In the same district, about half of the teachers believed the effort was primarily targeting minor behavior infractions, while the other half believed it was intended for the most severe behaviors (and they were quite disappointed in the program as well).

Steps 3 and 4: Check for Necessary Prerequisites

Unfortunately, sometimes even the most thoughtful, research-based SEB efforts are hobbled from the start. Good ideas don't deliver good results if key ingredients are missing. Before taking the time to collect and analyze impact data, review whether all the key prerequisites are in place. Too often, disappointment is baked in from the start, like making a cake but forgetting to add the eggs. The three most common missing ingredients are time, training, and talent.

One school shared proudly that they had researched, reviewed, and provided extensive training on a new SEL curriculum. They were anxious to see if it had moved the needle on school climate, its intended outcome. The program called for two 20-minute lessons a week, but the schedule wasn't altered to make room for these lessons. A bit of turf fighting between the SEL and academic leaders resulted in its being left to the teachers to "find the time each week." Most didn't. There was no need to spend the time and energy measuring impact, because few teachers had faithfully given the curriculum an honest try.



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Sufficient staff training for new SEB efforts is another prerequisite that is often missing. To be fair, nearly every district provides professional development on new social, emotional, and behavioral programs, but in interviews with many hundreds of teachers, they shared frustrations that included the following:

- "The district offered extensive training three years ago when the program was first rolled out, but I joined the district a year ago and got no training at all!"
- "Yes, we got some PD, but it was from a colleague that only just learned the program herself a few weeks ago. She just couldn't answer any of our real-world questions like how to actually do this in a busy day."

Finally, the hardest to overcome, oft-missing prerequisite is having staff with the right skillset. This is not to suggest that schools do not have talented staff, but too often staff are assigned roles requiring skills different from the ones they have. One district exemplifies the issue. They did almost everything right. They researched different approaches to managing problematic behavior, selected a research-based effort (Ross Green's lagging skills), and revamped the budget to hire five Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) to lead the work.

Unfortunately, four of the five had no training in prevention-based behavior management, the underpinning of the selected strategy. The certified BCBAs utilized an incentive-based approach instead of a prevention-based strategy, which reflected their formal training, and unintentionally undermined the district's effort. In another large district, 35 behavior specialists

were hired, a bold commitment. Unfortunately, while all were highly qualified school psychologists, less than half had any training in behavior management. Some left the district and even more became frustrated with their work. In each case, a thoughtful, research-based program achieved few of its intended goals.

Collectively, these missing ingredients led to spotty implementation. Schools without appropriately skilled behaviorists or with classroom teachers who receive little or no effective professional development aren't able to roll out the thoughtful plans intended by district leaders. Especially before rolling out a program or initiative across the district and utilizing precious resources, it is critical to ensure you have clarity of purpose and the necessary prerequisites in place across the district.

Steps 5 and 6: Do It Well

Only after a district is confident that the first four steps are going well should they embark on measuring the effectiveness of their SEB efforts. At this point the monitoring and measuring should turn to the question of fidelity of implementation. Are staff using the program as designed? This is both easy to measure and, at the same time, difficult. It's easy because selecting a random sample of teachers or students can lessen the burden of assessment. There is great leverage in a random sample: a lot can be learned without spending a lot of time observing.

The hard part is overcoming the hard-wired shortcomings of human nature. Thanks to the groundbreaking work of behavioral economists, we know a lot about how the mind works — it's biased in many ways. Confirmation bias is the biggest worry. All humans see what they expect to see. Additionally, social bias makes us all see what we think we want to see. This means if the champion of the restorative justice effort goes into classrooms to observe its implementation, he or she will likely "see" it going well, because that individual may have conducted the training. If a close colleague did the observing, they too may "see" success because they don't want to disappoint a friend. Conversely, a principal who philosophically didn't gel with the effort will likely "see" poor implementation. Checking for fidelity requires dispassionate, independent third parties to do the observation.

At the end of the day, what really matters is that outcomes improve for teachers and students. While steps one through five are necessary, they are insufficient. If, for example, advisory periods have a clear and agreed-upon purpose, such as building stronger relationships for disconnected students with at least one adult in the school in order to increase student engagement, and the prerequisites are all in place and the plan is being followed faithfully, it's still too soon to hang the "mission accomplished" banner. Districts need to know that formerly disconnected students actually are more engaged because an adult cares about them.





Are your SEB programs like a Swiss Army knife?

Oddly, managers and planners of SEB efforts can learn a lot from the Swiss Army knife. At first glance, the Swiss Army knife seems clever and useful. It has scissors, a bottle opener, two screwdrivers, a little saw, and, of course, a knife blade. It does it all. Unfortunately, it doesn't do any of these things very well. The saw can't cut much; it's hard to cut straight with the scissors; and the blade isn't big enough for much, either.

How does this relate to managing SEB efforts? Based on District Management Group's reviews, many school systems are asking their SEB programs to do too much — to be like a Swiss Army knife — resulting in programs and staff roles that aren't great at any one goal.

In one district, the behavior specialists were asked to teach an SEL Tier 1 anti-bullying curriculum, train classroom teachers in Tier 2 behavior interventions, and provide detailed behavior plans for students with severe behaviors. All are worthwhile and needed, but very hard for one person to do well. In another district, teachers and administrators reported using restorative circles for virtually every type of incident, from acting out in class to cyber bullying to drug abuse to severe physical altercations. The strategy is a good for some of these issues but not for all of them.

Forgetting to carefully match a specific SEB strategy to a specific need, or not clearly stating what tier of support and what type of precipitating incident the strategy or staff member is most appropriate for, can often lead to dissatisfaction with the effort. Too often, staff lose confidence in a good idea and the district moves on to a new approach when the best course of action would have been to narrow the use of the strategy, not to eliminate it.

“ *Teachers across the country are asking for more, but what they really want aren't more programs or staff, but more effective efforts that achieve the intended impact.* ”

Answering this most critical question requires three kinds of data: baseline, change over time, and target population. Relying on anecdotal observations or a few stories is problematic given the bias hard-wired into all of us. One SEL director who championed advisory periods when she was a high school principal explained that she didn't need all these measures because she was so close to the work. This perceived strength was actually a weakness. She had a multitude of stories of highly engaged students and credited advisory for this great outcome, but the hard data told a much more nuanced story. Yes, most students were highly engaged and had an adult in the school who cared about them. Unfortunately, the 35% of students who entered high school not liking school continued to not care about school and still felt no one cared about them either. In fact, many of the students at whom the program was targeted reported that they disliked their advisory teacher and believed the feeling was mutual. Most surprisingly, this hard data was long available in the district from years of administering school climate surveys, but no one had looked at the data in detail because they were so confident the program was working well.

Step 7: Live and Learn: Revise and Repeat the Process

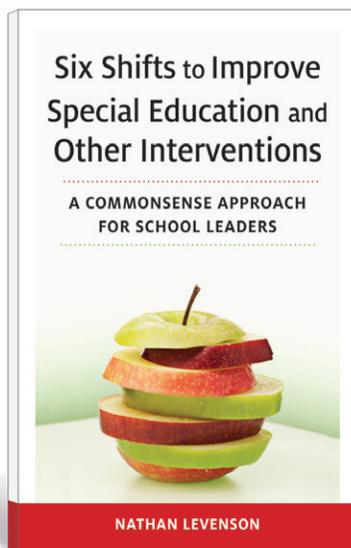
Addressing the growing challenge of students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs is difficult, challenging work and is new for many schools. It should be no surprise if a thoughtful new program isn't implemented perfectly. It would be more surprising if the six steps are in place on the first try.

Some may be wondering, why not just start at step 6, and figure out whether the program is working? This would be quicker but is fraught with danger. The first five steps give critical insights into why an effort may not be as effective as hoped and can help shed light on how to tweak the implementation.

If there aren't agreed-upon goals (steps 1 and 2), then any assessment of success is debatable. If implementation is not done well (steps 3, 4, and 5), a district might conclude a strategy is unsuccessful and drop it for a new program. If critically necessary ingredients are missing and implementation is not effected appropriately, disappointing results should not come as a surprise; the effort should not be jettisoned for a new program but rather should be fixed and tried again.

Today's students bring greater challenges than ever before, and schools are asked to prepare them for success in a complex world. Every district is taking big steps and making large investments to rise to this challenge. This effort is commendable, but good intentions and thoughtful research-based plans aren't enough. Teachers across the country are asking for more, but what they really want aren't more programs or staff, but more effective efforts that achieve the intended impact. Rigorous and disciplined monitoring and measuring of SEB initiatives can turn promise into reality. ♦

For more on this topic, read Nathan Levenson's forthcoming book, Six Shifts to Improve Special Education and Other Interventions: A Common Sense Approach for School Leaders (Harvard Education Press, 2020), available for preorder at Amazon.com.



Are your social, emotional, and behavioral efforts having the intended impact?

DMGroup can help your school district improve and expand supports for students and build capacity and systems to measure the impact of your efforts.

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