As more districts and schools introduce social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies and programming into their work, demand is growing for accurate and practical assessments to measure whether students are mastering the recommended skills and schools are improving their culture and climate. To help pool the know-how of researchers, test developers, and educators, CASEL has formed an [Assessment Work Group (AWG)](#) in close partnership with California's CORE Districts, Transforming Education, RAND, and Harvard University.

We spoke with AWG members Clark McKown (Executive Director, [Rush Neurobehavioral Center](#) in Chicago and an expert on SEL assessments) and Noah Bookman (Chief Strategy Officer at California's eight [CORE districts](#) that collectively educate 1 million students). Excerpts follow:

Why so much focus on SEL assessment these days?

Clark McKown: If you want to move the needle on something, you'd better have a needle. In contrast to academic achievement, where we have many wonderful, technically sound instruments, we are way behind in SEL. Good assessments would strengthen both practice and policy—helping teachers in classrooms and providing greater confidence about SEL's impact.

Noah Bookman: Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are fundamental aspects of teaching and learning. As districts address new ways to measure learning, SEL factors provide valuable diagnostic information to help identify the biggest needs. Districts like Long Beach are using SEL factors to help with their annual budgeting and strategic planning. Looking at strengths and weaknesses, they may decide they need to invest in more psychologists, intervention specialists, or counselors, for example. Many districts also are using this data to help close achievement gaps, especially in Grades 4-8 math. The data has shown a significant relationship between academic mindsets and math achievement. Anecdotal information based on interviews with teachers and students is now backed up with quantitative data.

What are some of the key challenges in developing such assessments?

McKown: One challenge is finding common ground on terminology. The field is a Tower of Babel. CASEL defines competencies one way, the Chicago School Research Consortium another, and the National Research Council/National Academy of Sciences has another framework, for example. Because of this, everyone means something a little bit different when they are talking about SEL. Does social and emotional competence include being able to take some else's perspective? Does it include grit? Growth mindset? Self-efficacy? If we all mean something different in defining SEL, we'll have a crazy quilt of practices, including assessment systems. Fortunately, the Assessment Work Group, in collaboration with Stephanie Jones at Harvard, is working very thoughtfully on reviewing and aligning different SEL frameworks.

Second, resources are a challenge. To create the Common Core assessment, PARCC, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, took more than $300 million. That's what it takes to make a good assessment that is scalable, technically sound, and useful. There's nowhere near that level of investment in SEL assessment. From our own work creating SELWeb [link], we know school districts are eager to have good SEL assessment.

Bookman: You can only give surveys occasionally, maybe once or twice a year. They're good for system- and school-level diagnoses. But they don't help classroom teachers try out new strategies. For that you need more frequent direct assessments looking at whether the kids actually developed the skills versus whether they perceive they did.

How do you anticipate districts will use this data?
McKown: Currently available assessments should be used formatively. At a grade-level team meeting, for instance, teachers could go over reading, math, and SEL data and evaluate the level of support being provided to kids. Having concrete indicators of SEL development elevates the level of the conversation.

What kinds of assessments are the CORE districts using? Are any using performance-based assessments yet?
Bookman: I'm sure there are pockets, but I'm not aware of anything systemic.

Tell us about the Design Challenge and what role you hope it will play in increasing supply?
McKown: Through the [Design Challenge](#), the Assessment Work Group is hoping to discover and shine a light on great and creative ideas about how to assess SEL. We're anticipating submissions from teachers, researchers, and even test companies. Besides the prize, we will use what we learn from the submissions to clarify the design principles that should drive SEL assessment development and share what we learn with the field.

We recognize up front that some ideas may be in the very early stages of development. Others will be fully developed and validated. We want the best ideas, whatever stage of development. We think the submissions will be just the tip of the iceberg, but we want to get a better sense of the iceberg.

Winners will receive a cash prize of up to $5,000, public recognition of their accomplishment, and access to a network of leaders in the field.

It is really important we get this done right. The whole field is waiting for quality assessments. If we don't have good ways to assess children's SEL, it's too easy for the SEL movement to be dismissed as a fad.

Bookman: I have two main hopes. One, that we'll get some really good ideas about how to improve indirect assessments, such as surveys. On these summative

assessments, I'm thinking there may be some hidden opportunities in what schools already are doing. For example, how much time are students spending on really hard questions, which gets at perseverance? Or can we ask them to reflect on what they just did, getting at mindsets and self-awareness?

And second, I'm hoping we'll get some good ideas for more frequent direct assessments. It's only year 1. It would be great to get some good ideas that the field can build on.

What's the timeline?
McKown: Submissions are due by April 20, and we plan to announce the winners later this spring. For those who want to get involved and/or stay up to date on this work, the best bet is to go to the Assessment Work Group [web page](#).

Any other insights to share with the field based on the work of the CORE districts over the past couple of years?
Bookman: Much of our initial work was framed through the lens of accountability since we started by applying for a waiver from No Child Left Behind rules. We sought to reframe accountability to focus on what matters most, and as a tool for continuous improvement, as opposed to sanctions and blame. We looked at what we thought were the most important aspects of schooling. As important as math and English, if not more so, are whether students can manage their emotions, set and achieve goals, interact with their peers, and other work-life skills. Our schools are hungry for the next step—how to look at student progress on these skills more frequently in connection with the school's improvement strategies.

With ESSA and through the work of the AWG, I'm hoping we can reframe how we think about assessments — not as mainly a high-stakes accountability tool, but as a fundamental part of teaching and learning.

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Report
Measuring Hard-to-Measure Student Competencies
A Research and Development Plan
Stecher, B. M., and Hamilton, L. S.

Are You Ready to Assess Social and Emotional Development?
American Institutes for Research

Blog
Tools to Assess Social and Emotional Learning in Schools
Q&A Clark McKown and Noah Bookman — April 2017
Edutopia blog by Susanne Denham

Articles
Direct assessment of children's social-emotional comprehension
McKown, C., Allen A.M., Russo-Ponsaran, N.M., Johnson J.K.

Measuring 21st Century Competencies
Guidance for Educators
Soland, J., Hamilton, L.S., and Stecher, B.M.

Assessing Deeper Learning
A Survey of Performance Assessment and Mastery-Tracking Tools
Schneider, C. and Vander Ark, T.