

Social Emotional Learning

Position of the Florida Psychological Association

August 2022

On April 15, 2022, Richard Corcoran, the Commissioner of the Florida Department of Education, issued a press release in which he declared that Florida rejects the “publishers’ attempts to indoctrinate students.” Textbooks were considered inappropriate if they included references to “Critical Race Theory (CRT)...and the unsolicited inclusion of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in mathematics.” In 2021, the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) solicited bids from publishers of mathematics instructional materials. The FDOE notified publishers that they should not include “unsolicited strategies such as SEL in their instructional materials.” The press release characterizes SEL as “strategies of indoctrination.” This was one factor in the rejection of 54 Mathematics textbooks, or 41% of the textbooks submitted for review.

Social Emotional Learning has been researched by psychologists and educators since the 1970s, such as Dr. Maurice Elias, a Psychology professor at Rutgers University. It originally was based on the concept of “emotional intelligence”, in an attempt to create a curriculum for special educators serving children with emotional and behavioral disorders. In the 1990s, the focus of research shifted to the development of a primary prevention curriculum that can be implemented school-wide. The model includes five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision making. The curriculum includes lesson plans and instructional materials so that any teacher can teach the core concepts in their classroom. One example of a school-wide SEL curriculum is “Second Step” published by the Committee for Children. There is also a parent education component within this curriculum.

The FDOE opposition to SEL appears to contradict the intent of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act, passed by the Florida legislature in 2018, which provided for continuing education and in-service training for youth mental health awareness and assistance. In the aftermath of a pandemic that diminished opportunities for social interactions amongst students, SEL is more essential than ever. Furthermore, anxiety, depression and bullying are increasing, while mental health resources in the community are struggling to satisfy historic demands. Despite these needs, Florida is not alone in the attack on SEL. Texas, Indiana, Idaho, Georgia and Oklahoma have attempted to ban SEL altogether. For example, a proposed bill in Oklahoma forbids the use of “funds to promote, purchase or utilize the concepts of social emotional learning for training, instruction or education of students.” Meanwhile, a Parents’ Bill of Rights authored by Indiana Attorney General Todd Rokita stated that “SEL programs represent a fundamental shift in the role of teachers from educators to therapists and expand the reach of government into domains of the family.” One organization that opposes SEL is the Pioneer Institute, claiming that SEL is an attempt to create a “new-age nanny state.”

Criticisms of SEL obscure difficult questions about the role of education. It is important that education include critical thinking in order for today’s students become informed citizens in a participative democracy. Responsible decision making helps prepare our future citizenry. But it

is also increasingly important that we help children learn to regulate their emotions, while developing empathy for their fellow citizens. Social Emotional Learning is a method that can bring parents, educators and students together to make our communities safer for all. The Florida Psychological Association asks that the Florida Department of Education reverse its objection to the inclusion of SEL concepts in STEM curricula.