



Understanding the Attacks on Social–Emotional Learning: Strategizing on the Response and Advocacy of School Mental Health Practitioners

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Abstract

Since 2020, a network of actors and organizations have united in the implementation of education censorship—posing school-wide implications and impositions on the practice of mental health practitioners. States have outlined race and diversity curricula bans, sports and restroom bans, anti-Diversity, Equity and Inclusion legislation, and laws to undermine Social–Emotional Learning. In this paper, we explore the impact of education censorship and anti-Social-Emotional Learning legislation in relation to school mental health. To discuss the responses and advocacy of school mental health practitioners, we provide an overview of education censorship, noting the scope, prevalence, and evolution of topics to explicate a deeper understanding of the legislative action imposed over the last few years. Next, we delineate three non-exhaustive explanations of the legislation: the evolution of education censorship, education governance and corporate curricula control, and the shift to transformative Social–Emotional Learning. To strategize on how to respond to these trends we provide two alternative response pathways, offer implications, and discuss aspects of advocacy, resistance, and action. In conclusion, we provide a discussion to extend each response pathway, providing additional considerations, implications, and outline calls for action.

Keywords School mental health practitioners · School social work · School counseling · School psychology · Social–Emotional Learning · Education censorship · Education policy

Introduction

Over the last few years, a network of influences has instilled a movement of education censorship (Joyce, 2022), including widespread curricula bans and recensions on youth rights (López et al., 2021). As the movement evolves in scope and prevalence, legislation has been directed at Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI; Lu et al., 2023) and Social–Emotional Learning (SEL; Anderson, 2022). School mental health practitioners (SMHPs) play an important role in the school ecosystem, especially in the context of anti-racist, equity-based support (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022), and the critical implementation of SEL (Humphries & McKay-Jackson, 2022). In this paper, we examine the movement of education censorship as it relates to SEL, to begin strategizing on avenues of resistance and new pathways of equity promotion. We explore the questions of *where* the anti-SEL legislation is coming from, *why* it developed, and propose two alternative pathways to discuss *how* to respond to these changing school and political dynamics.

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Background: Education Censorship

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, actors and organizations ushered in a movement to undermine public education—most recognizable as anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) discourse. Manhattan Institute fellow Christopher Rufo made his first appearance (September 2020) on Fox News, where he spoke about federal government training sessions: “It’s absolutely astonishing how critical race theory has pervaded every aspect of the federal government.” It was at this moment that CRT—an obscure academic theory—was brought to the mainstream consciousness. The influence of this interview on Tucker Carlson Tonight permeated all the way to the White House, resulting in Executive Order 13950—signed into law by President Trump on October 22, 2020. The Order—rescinded by President Biden—banned concepts of race and sex stereotyping at training sessions in the federal government and nine additional concepts (see Table 1), which laid the foundation for education censorship and became later known as: “divisive concepts” (White House, 2020). The divisive concepts are crucial to understanding the movement of education censorship as an increasing number of topics (e.g., DEI; SEL; CRT) are purportedly tied these to concepts (Allen, 2022).

Rufo is often credited as the steward of the anti-CRT movement (Wallace-Wells, 2021), and though he is a unique figure with substantial influence, he works alongside a network of influences (Cunningham, 2022). Specifically, this includes lobbyists, legislators, corporations, think tanks, media conglomerates, nonprofits, school board advocacy groups, and political action committees, among an extensive group of actors and organizations united in their pursuit of educational governance and capture (Joyce, 2022). Table 2 provides a summative and chronological overview of education censorship and recent restrictions on youth rights, including Executive Order 13950, race and diversity curricula bans, and restroom facilities bans, sports bans and bans on gender-affirming care that target transgender, non-binary and gender-expansive youth. In the last two years, the movement has evolved with recent legislation targeting DEI and SEL (see Table 2). The coordinated action of network influences can also be observed in the anti-immigration legislation spreading across states that is unified by a mutually beneficial policy agenda and sustained through cohesive legislation proposed by state legislatures (Chen, 2024).

Table 1 Conceptual Bans Outlined in Executive Order 13950

1	One race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex
2	The United States is fundamentally racist or sexist
3	An individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously
4	An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of his or her race or sex
5	Members of one race or sex cannot and should not attempt to treat others without respect to race or sex
6	An individual’s moral character is necessarily determined by his or her race or sex
7	An individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex
8	Any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex
9	Meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist or were created by a particular race to oppress another race

Table 2 domains of education censorship

Domain	Policy Impact	Timeframe
Executive order 13950	DEI prohibitions federal government “divisive concepts” outlawed (Table 1; White House, 2020)	2020 (Rescinded 2021)
Anti-critical race theory curricula bans	19 states; 25 policies (Alexander et al., 2023; Friedman et al., 2023; Kelly, 2023)	2021–2023
Gender-affirming care bans	22 states (Human Rights Campaign, 2023)	2022–2023
Restroom bans	10 states (Movement Advancement Project, 2023b)	2022–2023
Sports bans	25 states (Movement Advancement Project, 2023a)	2022–2023
Anti-Diversity, Equity and Inclusion	8 states; proposed legislation continues (Lu et al., 2023)	2023–2024
Anti-social-emotional learning	0 states; proposed legislation in at least 25 states (Anderson, 2022)	2023–2024

Efforts to Undermine SEL

Since 2021, NPR reported evidence of disputes over SEL in at least 25 states (Anderson, 2022). Table 3 provides an overview of anti-SEL legislation alongside proposed bills in support or expansion of SEL. We argue that this legislation should be understood in context with the previous ramifications of education censorship that have unfolded over the last few years (Kelly, 2023). That is, the movement against SEL is inextricably related to the previous movement against CRT—as can be seen in the discursive evidence from political operatives (Warner & Browning, 2001). For example, The Arizona Department of Education (2023a) illustrated this concern on their website: “SEL is a gateway method—a ‘Trojan Horse’—to introduce the elements of CRT into the schools.”

Considering the proposed legislation outlined in Table 3, there appears to be concern over the relationship between SEL curricula and gender identity awareness. For example, two bills (Indiana SB 143; Kentucky SB 102) may be designed to inform parents regarding any identity-based changes in their child, whereby SEL is perceived to be linked to instruction around developing gender identity awareness. These concerns were present at school board meetings in West Hartford, Connecticut with parents raising concerns about students being taught “gender theory” and “teaching students that the sex you’re assigned at birth is wrong” (Newton, 2022). Finally, it is important to note how the legislation and mainstream discourse privileges the propagation and continuation of the parents’ rights movement, to promote school vouchers, and for-profit education (Francisco & Burris, 2023). Although legislation opposed to SEL is on the rise, there is also continued support for SEL (Table 3).

Enacted legislation is only part of the impact, as ramifications conjoin (a) the initial introduction of proposed legislation, (b) secondary forms of influence through media sensationalization, and (c) local-level support that is leveraged from the influences of legislation and media discourse (Alexander et al., 2023; Caspian Kang, 2021). For example, after the introduction of SF 85 in Iowa, during the 2023 legislative session, the Department of Education removed all SEL-related resources from their website. Second, as noted in Table 2, the domains of education censorship continue to expand, whereby the turmoil created may undermine public education through the sustainment of social and political fear. As media discourse spreads, the prevalence of school board contention has increased—adding complexity to the elite-driven censorship by reinforcing trends on the local level (Roegman et al., 2022). Similar to the anti-CRT discourse, public resistance at school board meetings has ensued even in regions *without* education censorship policies enacted on the state level. For example, in response to an equity resolution policy proposed in a Michigan school district, the public resistance at school board meetings led to the elimination of all anti-racist action items due to the community backlash (Natanson, 2021).

Ravitch (2021) and Cunningham (2022) underscored how the influence on school board meetings is funded by the same operatives shaping state level censorship often under the guise of local advocacy groups such as Moms for Liberty and Parents Defending Education (Gilbert, 2023; McFadden, 2021). This movement to undermine and control public education is consistent with the republican agenda, as former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon previously opined: “The path to save the nation is very simple—it’s going to go through the school boards” (Nichols, 2022). School board contention has also led to widespread district and school level book bans. During the first half of the

Table 3 Trends of SEL legislation

Policy	Overview	Scope
Indiana SB 143	Proposed parent’s rights	Anti-SEL
Iowa SF 85	Proposed the elimination of SEL guidance and resources	Anti-SEL
Kentucky SB 102	Proposed parent’s rights in health, education, and development	Anti-SEL
Maine HB 616; LD 618	Proposed prohibitions on CRT; SEL; DEI	Anti-SEL
Nebraska LR 149	Proposed an interim study of SEL	Anti-SEL
Oklahoma SB 1027	Proposed funding prohibitions on SEL	Anti-SEL
California AB 1479	Proposed increases in Tier 1 funding	Pro-SEL
Connecticut HB 6207	Proposed integration of SEL and restorative practices	Pro-SEL
Massachusetts S248	Proposed expansion of SEL and trauma-informed practices	Pro-SEL
Federal SR 105	Proposed Social and Emotional Learning Week	Pro-SEL
New Jersey AJR101	Proposed Social–Emotional Learning Day	Pro-SEL
Texas HB 3573	Proposed school safety funding (e.g., SEL coordinators)	Pro-SEL
Utah HCR 006	Proposed funding increases for school mental health	Pro-SEL

2022–23 school year PEN America’s Index of School Book Bans lists 1477 instances of individual books banned, affecting 874 unique titles, an increase of 28 percent compared to the prior six months, January—June 2022. School systems are situated within the collective influence of policies, media discourse and school board contention and are also subject to ongoing social and political turmoil. In light of these trends, it is important to understand how the efforts to undermine SEL are inextricably tied to the previous domains of education censorship and how school mental health professionals should respond.

From SEL to Transformative SEL

The implementation of SEL is a recognized way to engage youth and develop skills, knowledge, and practices related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Jagers et al., 2019). SEL began in Connecticut schools in the 1960s (Beaty, 2018), and by the 1990s evolved through the backing of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Since then, CASEL has been adopted by schools across the country, written into legislation, and informed state education standards. As SEL spread across the US, the terminology shifted to a *transformative* approach to boost relationships and critical orientations (CASEL, 2023a). The adaptation of Transformative Social–Emotional Learning (TSEL) may represent a shift from developing *individual* student skills to a more *structural* approach to connect to the intersectional domains of oppression that affect schools and youth development (Rivas-Drake et al., 2021). School mental health has increasingly aligned itself with the implementation of SEL.

SEL and School Mental Health Professionals

All professional domains of SMH play an important role in the skill development and SEL support for youth in schools. Van Velsor (2009) noted that the promotion of SEL is fundamentally aligned with the mission of school counseling and collaboration with other school-based professionals. Ginns and colleagues (2020) underscored the role of school psychologists in the implementation of SEL—noting the relationship between facilitators of SEL and increased use of data, evidence-based practice, and implementation. McCabe and Best (2023) outlined the critical role of school nurses in the promotion of SEL as a crucial component of youth well-being, health, and academic development. Finally, the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) developed the School Social Work National Standards for SEL in 2014 (Lindsey et al., 2014) which provides a detailed

description of the competencies as they relate to School Social Work (SSW). Seeing that all SMHPs have an ongoing role in the integration and implementation of SEL, it may be useful to understand the anti-SEL movement to discuss the strategies and advocacy needed to move forward.

Conceptual Overview and Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of SMHPs relative to education censorship and efforts to undermine SEL. First, we outline the depth of criticism put forward against SEL amid three non-exhaustive explanations. Then, we explore the expansion and re-defined nature of SEL in relation to those in opposition (i.e., support of education censorship). To consider strategies moving forward, we present two alternative response pathways and the implications of each pathway. We conclude with a discussion to tie these sections together.

Understanding the Criticism of SEL

To understand the critique of SEL, we present three intertwined explanations: (1) the evolution of education censorship, (2) corporate education governance and curricula control, and (3) the shift from SEL to transformative SEL. These explanations are not intended to be an exhaustive list, rather a starting point to discuss the purported justifications for education censorship and the critiques of SEL. Explanations in this section are informed by the movement of education censorship over the last few years (Allen, 2022), privatization and expansion of educational governance (Saltman, 2022), and the rapid expansion of SEL and terminology shifts (Jagers et al., 2019).

Explanation One: Evolution of Education Censorship

The first explanation is that the attacks on SEL represent an expansion of education censorship (Allen, 2022). As denoted in Table 2—education censorship continues to evolve to comprise additional domains of influence, whereby the effects of censorship extend well beyond the policies enacted. That is, proposed legislation, media discourse, local level censorship (e.g., school boards and book bans) all work independently and collectively to undermine public education (Francisco & Burriss, 2023). The most successful way to serve this agenda is through ongoing ramifications of *fear*, where momentum of censorship is sustained through continual expansion of censorship, and with solutions positioned to empower parents and pull youth from public schools (Giroux, 2022). Finally, any contention or response to censorship is often *reactionary*, where preventative school wide efforts

such as SEL are undermined by conservative activists and resistance efforts often reify the social and political divides which are useful to perpetuate the movement of censorship (Caspian Kang, 2021). Thus, the evolution from anti-CRT to anti-SEL may represent a mere continuation of the education censorship movement due to the purported relationship between progressive educational trends and CRT (Rufo, 2023).

Explanation Two: Corporate Education Governance and Curricula Control

A second explanation explores the deeper agenda of network influences that may include efforts to expand conservative curricula and corporate education governance. Explanation two aligns with an economic understanding of the anti-SEL legislation, where censorship may ensue as a mechanism of increasing corporate competition over curricula, consulting, and governance (see Saltman, 2022). It is important to contextualize education censorship by the longstanding efforts aimed at educational privatization, consulting, school choice movement, school vouchers, parent's rights, high-stakes testing and data-based paradigm, and the increasing movement to schooling as an alternative to public education (Francisco & Burris, 2023; Jabbar & Menashy, 2022). Allbright and Marsh (2022) noted how the accountability movement may have shifted in light of SEL expansion—highlighting the threat to the corporate governance as SEL expansion may outmaneuver other accountability frameworks such as the school choice movement. Therefore, efforts to undermine public education can (a) support educational privatization, (b) increase enrollment in private, parochial and charter schools, and (c) enhance the corporate governance of K-12 education. For example, states such as Arizona are prioritizing character-based curricula with an emphasis on trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, citizenship, and caring (Arizona Department of Education, 2023b). As all aspects of the school are vulnerable to privatization—we must consider the efforts of economic control (Au & Ferrare, 2015).

Explanation Three: Shift from SEL to Transformative SEL

A third explanation of the efforts to undermine SEL may stem from the shift in schools from promoting SEL to Transformative SEL (TSEL). It is plausible that legislation has targeted SEL due to the expansion and critical orientation of TSEL—previously critiqued amid anti-CRT legislation (Alexander et al., 2023). To improve SEL, scholars have re-defined SEL in *transformative* terms to address inequities and expand the reach and benefits to students (CASEL, 2023a). The shift to TSEL aims to acknowledge the larger

contexts, including the centrality and intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and culture on youth experiences in school and their environment (Olson, 2022)—which may illuminate a point of contention. For example, these points of concern were present in Virginia schools: “Parental and conservative activists nationwide say Social–Emotional learning is priming students to learn critical race theory while sidelining parents from caring for their children's mental health” (Poff, 2021). Christopher Rufo (2023) has been a vocal advocate against SEL due to purported connections to CRT. Opposition to SEL may have occurred as proponents of TSEL increasingly linked youth skill development with structural understandings of educational inequities. It is possible that critiques of SEL may be driven by narratives of bad-faith; however, there appears to be a relationship between the critical components of TSEL and the concerns of actors shaping education censorship. In light of these considerations, we strategize on specific advocacy and response efforts amid the ongoing effects of censorship.

As a School Mental Health Practitioner—What Should You Do?

In consideration of the previous sections and to help strategize on how best we can respond to these educational shifts, we propose two alternative response pathways and the implications of each course of action. **Pathway One** includes the proposition that: SEL skills are crucial regardless of the terminology used. **Pathway Two** includes the proposition that: we must advocate to maintain the use of SEL and TSEL.

Pathway One: SEL Skills are Crucial Regardless of the Terminology Used

As state legislators work to eliminate SEL resources, they continue to support similar standards. For example, some newly adopted standards incorporate skills, including grit, perseverance, gratitude, personal responsibility, volunteerism, critical thinking, problem-solving, empathy, citizenship, and honesty—with districts already renaming SEL skills to fit with their new terminology (Sokol, 2023). Should it matter what name SEL is called if the core skills are taught? Many of the studies showing positive impacts of SEL were based on the implementation of core SEL skills. That is, SEL has been shown to have a positive impact on youth in academic achievement, mental health, and behavioral outcomes (Durlak et al., 2022; Espelage et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2017). In fact, it is often reported that for every \$1 spent on SEL, there is an \$11 return on investment (Belfield, 2015). Meta-analyses of SEL found decreases in problem behaviors and emotional distress, noting positive impacts on school behaviors, attitudes about self and

others, and achievement scores (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011, 2022; Murano et al., 2020). Other studies have found early SEL skills in kindergarten were positively associated with later life employment, and education, and fewer incidents of criminality, substance abuse, and mental health challenges (Jones et al., 2015). Schools that utilized SEL were found to have improved test scores, behaviors, graduation rates, college enrollment, and reduced school-based arrests—although it is unclear whether SEL is a causal influencer (Porter et al., 2023). Importantly, much of the research and data-based support have been evidenced by SEL research. As the shift to TSEL ensues, more data are needed to understand the validity, provide data-based evidence, and gather perspectives of youth, SMHPs, families, and administrators.

Implications of Pathway One

Given the potential for positive impacts through SEL implementation, it is crucial that SEL skills continue to be taught to students and that SMHPs are leading in these efforts. There is a real possibility that by separating the core SEL skills from the more controversial aspects, SEL can be taught in a way that satisfies those criticizing SEL. In Montana, whole child skill development competencies are used to address student social, emotional and behavioral concerns (Montana Office of Public Instruction, n.d.). Other states have proposed curricula and training for parents and educators to engage in teaching and coaching students in resiliency and character education (Sokol, 2023). In Florida, resiliency coaches are community members who take Florida-specific training on resilience education and are seen as the first line of support for students (Florida Governor, 2023).

Further, SMHPs must address social injustice and systemic barriers facing students while creating safe, supportive, and equitable spaces for all students. However, separating the core skills of SEL from TSEL may allow for the development of these skills to continue to be supported by SMHPs. This approach encourages addressing social justice, equity, and disparate discipline practices as a distinct and separate effort. If SMHPs are removed from their work with SEL, there may be limited control over how, or even which skills youth are taught. Distinctly categorizing SEL from elements of social justice may allow equity efforts to continue while not giving up a crucial component of student success. Pathway Two offers an alternative approach.

Pathway Two: We Must Advocate to Maintain the Use of SEL

Pathway two is aligned with maintaining the use of SEL, TSEL, and what it now stands for, including important

school-based movements of social justice. The tenants and skills that reflect what we know today as SEL have existed and been taught for decades in schools under different names, including Character Education and Resiliency Education (Florida Department of Education, 2023). The name given to this set of skills has been used interchangeably to reference the same thing. However, there are distinct differences between SEL and Character or Resiliency-based approaches.

It is likely that the decisions of what is good and valued is a privilege of the dominant class and status quo, and at times, inequitable for youth, although a similar critique could be aimed at SEL more generally. Some virtues may be universal in their consensus of importance, including respect, responsibility, honesty, fairness, and compassion. However, when viewing the teaching of virtues and values to students, it is critical to consider the individual interpretation within the context of the environment, culture, bias, and experiences—such as within a TSEL approach (Rivas-Drake et al., 2021). Transformative SEL aims to present the core competencies within the larger contexts of social awareness, curiosity, and empathy to facilitate equitable learning environments (Jagers et al., 2021).

Using terms like Character or Resiliency Education may operationalize a hyper-focus on youth whereby those who are not successful or unable to improve may be to blame for their inadequate character or individual resiliency inequities (James et al., 2022). This ignores the cultural contexts youth live in, and the impacts of institutional bias and racism. Therefore, as character-based education approaches may incorporate an enhanced focus on skills such as grit and resilience, an undue burden of responsibility may be placed on youth, potentially overshadowing systemic inequities, and barriers (James et al., 2022). Valencia (2010, p. 9) delineated some of the characteristics of deficit-based thinking that occur through blaming the victim, stating: "...deficit thinkers avoid systemic approaches to school reform and focus on this simple kind of solution: 'Fix' the individual student." Without addressing these contextual issues some youth will continue to be marginalized and subject to educational inequities.

While Character and Resiliency Education might seem on the surface to mirror SEL, these frameworks may overlook the broader institutional biases and impacts on the personal interpretation that may come into effect when considering values, virtues, and/or goodness. SEL is an essential part of academic, behavioral, and educational growth. While SEL skills are taught directly to students, there are additional influences that impact a child's experience and developmental success (Mahoney et al., 2020). Systemic SEL may acknowledge the interaction and inter-relatedness of a student's immediate setting and the more distant environment.

Implications of Pathway Two

The politicization of SEL appears to be related to concerns over its connection with social justice, equitable education, and acknowledging biases within the educational experiences of youth. As SMHPs, we are called by our ethical principles to consider the dignity and worth of each person and the importance of human relationships. Supporting the dignity and worth of a person includes being respectful and mindful of cultures and diversity. SMHPs should be concerned that not only are words such as SEL being banned or becoming hot-button issues—but so are a host of other terminology relative to social justice (Allen, 2022).

SMHPs are well-positioned to address systemic racism and equity concerns and promote cultural responsiveness. SMHPs play a key role in addressing SEL, reducing barriers to equity, and navigating opposition to acknowledge and redress historical and contemporary effects of educational injustice (McGee et al., 2022). Our professional ethical mandates help to align SMHPs to stand up and address social injustice. Separating SEL skills from TSEL may be one pathway that enables injustices to continue. Perhaps it is a privilege of SMHPs to separate these issues, but youth may not have that luxury. SEL skills are difficult for students to learn and apply when still confronting injustice and institutional level factors inhibiting the ability to receive an equitable education (DeMartino et al., 2022; Jagers et al., 2019). Until those issues are addressed, students may never fully integrate these skills into their lives.

Summary of Response Pathways: Implications, Cost, and Benefits

To help readers distinguish some key differences in the two alternative response pathways and decide on an appropriate course of action—we provided an overview in Table 4,

including the response pathways, implications, costs, and benefits. Pathway 1 may privilege the re-alignment to character-based educational curricula, but may also allow for continued efforts to address structural inequities outside of the context of SEL interventions. If character-based curriculum is privileged, or SEL is distinct and separate from TSEL, this may support reinvigorated efforts to assess the overlap of character-based, SEL, and TSEL frameworks. Finally, it is posited that this pathway may help to overcome social and political divides that may have been exacerbated by education censorship and repressive SEL policies. The alternative response pathway 2 may allow for skills to be developed in cohesive alignment with critical thinking skills and a macro-level focus on structural awareness. This pathway may support the implementation of pre-existing SEL and TSEL programs, but may confound social and political divides if there is a continued concern of the purported relationship of SEL with CRT. To conclude this paper, we explore some additional points of consideration regarding both pathways, to add nuance and complexity beyond the dichotomized response options.

Additional Considerations and Discussion of Pathways 1 and 2

In this paper, we presented an overview of the education censorship movement and the specific attacks on SEL before proposing two alternative pathways to resist or respond to these trends. We recognize that state, district, or school-level factors may inform your decision to emphasize one pathway over the other. Understanding your school climate may be crucial to deciding which pathway may best support social cohesion and youth development. In other words, choosing a given pathway must accommodate the consideration of political and environmental factors relevant to your school

Table 4 Response pathways: implications, costs, and benefits

	Response pathway one	Response pathway two
Definition	SEL skills are crucial regardless of the terminology used	We must advocate to maintain the use of SEL
Implications	May lead to the separation of SEL and transformative SEL	May privilege attention to structural and critical orientations to be included in SEL
	May privilege the focus on individual skill development	May support the continued the use of SEL; TSEL
Costs and benefits	May privilege character-based educational curricula	May add to social and political divides
	May impose extractive frameworks of skill development	May support youth in SEL skills and critical thinking development
	May allow for structural-based interventions to persist outside of the alignment with SEL	May support the schools in continuing to emphasize pre-existing models
	May support future analysis to identify the overlap on skill-based curricula	May individualize the responsibility of structural inequities onto youth
	May help to overcome social and political divisions	May impose restrictions on the affective emotional exploration

system, and as an active SMHP, you are well positioned to understand which pathway may best represent the needs of your school system.

Although we presented two alternative pathways and their implications, we admit there is likely more nuance than our current argument entails. For example, we acknowledge the hegemonic structure now associated with SEL. As Saltman (2023, p. 27) noted: "...what appears to be universal in SEL are some key assumptions about the need for *learned self-control* of emotion, behavior, and affect for students to *adapt to existing circumstances* and social arrangements, and for this learned self-regulation to be the basis for expanded individual capacity of *responsibilized adaptive choice making* (emphasis original)". In other words, the potential for deficit-thinking may persist even within well-intended frameworks such as TSEL, ultimately posing harm on minoritized youth through culturally absent pedagogy (DeMartino, et al., 2022). It is for these reasons that our paper does not strictly align with the ongoing advocacy and promotion of SEL. As researchers and practitioners, we must be mindful of the strengths and limitations of certain frameworks (e.g., Character-based; SEL; TSEL), while recognizing the political implications amid the ongoing challenges imposed on school systems and SMH.

The potential downsides of a hegemonic and corporate orientation of SEL are numerous, including the tendency to search for corporate viability above and beyond youth well-being (Diaz-Diaz, 2022). Richerme (2022) noted that the structure of SEL skill development may individualize failure, reify a surveillance state in the schools, and the emphasis on traditional components of morality may dislocate youth from their ability to navigate difficult emotions. These foci may be disproportionately damaging to the development of marginalized youth. Additional scholarly criticisms of SEL include the overly prescriptive and hyper-focus on a specific set of skills, minimization of affective emotional exploration (Stearns, 2018), focus on correcting youth behavior—rather than alleviating systemic challenges, and the normative impacts of SEL which may exacerbate oppression, especially for youth with intersecting marginalized identities (Clark et al., 2022). While it can be argued that the shift to TSEL aims to address some of these shortcomings, there is an additional concern that the overreliance on Social–Emotional “correctness” may suppress youth emotions, undermine development, and privilege the normative educational demands such as obedience, appropriate behavior, and classroom control (Diaz-Diaz, 2022). In speaking to the limitations of TSEL, DeMartino and colleagues (2022) underscored the need for abolitionist frameworks to build inclusive support and skills for Black, Indigenous and youth of color. Collectively, this research shines a light on the potential contradictions of our response pathways, whereby continued efforts should critically examine SEL, TSEL, and

character-based education, including the overlap and potential distinctiveness of these frameworks.

The legislative efforts to undermine SEL may provide an opportunity to eradicate the extractive forms of SEL and realign school structures to more holistic avenues of support, that allow for a range of youth experiences, emotions, and behaviors that are not punitively controlled and where development is not overly prescriptive (Greer et al., 2023). That is, SEL may work to ascribe a necessary set of behavioral skills where deviation from this normative standard may be punished amid the punitive educational landscape (Richerme, 2022). We must consider this possibility, especially as police presence in schools increases, surveillance mechanisms are on the rise (e.g., security cameras; metal detectors; internet and data-based surveillance), and metrics of systemic pathologization and disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline ensue (Mitchell & Greer, 2024). Scott McLeod (2023) emphasized these concerns in a recent blog, noting: “Nearly all school systems say that they are trying to improve the Social–Emotional learning skills of students, foster better relationships, and enhance feelings of belonging. The learning model and relationship-building activities of deeper learning schools may show us a different path.” McLeod is speaking of environments that strive to build community, promote non-academic activity blocks to discuss, collaborate, play, check-in, share out, overcome challenges, build relationships, and talk about emotions, and well-being.

Potentially, the critiques of SEL offer an opportunity to better understand the overlap in seemingly divergent frameworks of youth-based support and skill development. Maybe there is more in common between SEL and character education than we care to admit. First, it may be useful to acknowledge that the politically divergent skill-based frameworks both begin from a perspective that youth need added support and specific skills taught. Second, there is political overlap in the desire to provide skill development, even though we may disagree on the specificities of each approach. With this in mind, what might it look like if concessions were made, commonalities were illuminated, and political divisions were overcome? Maybe there is more in common than at first glance, but potentially it is easier to rest on the political divisions and perceptions of evil ideology permeating on the opposing side. As political divides ensue, we must explore questions of the ramifications on schools, youth development, and burnout of school-based professionals.

Implications for School Mental Health

Moving forward, we must create space for these difficult conversations without an easy answer or best solution, where we can grapple with the ramifications of political oppression

and strategize on how best to respond to promote equitable SMH services and inclusive mechanisms of support for youth in schools. Our intent in this paper was to examine the potential for overlap in seemingly divergent ideological frameworks, explore the complexity, and showcase how the reliance on social and political divides will likely impact youth in unforeseen developmental ways. Admittedly, there is no easy solution, and it is not our intent to provide concrete answers to these difficult questions, but to begin the discussion. As we strategize on how to support youth, we must attend to the influential forces outside of the school system that aim to disrupt, undermine, and create political turmoil in the school system. As our efforts toward prevention, advocacy, and inclusivity take shape we must simultaneously search for professional viability through mechanisms that best support positive youth development and healing—above all this means staying abreast to the current social trends.

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