

## Choosing school-based programming interventions: Developing healthy relationships and reducing bullying behaviours

Creating welcoming, safe, caring and respectful learning environments requires a coordinated and collaborative approach in which school staff, students, families and community partners has a shared understanding and commitment. To create and support this shared focus on the social and emotional development and positive mental health of students, schools may choose to implement a school-wide instructional intervention program with clearly articulated goals and authentic and engaging learning activities that support a comprehensive approach. There are a number of these instructional programs available, ranging from single workshops to more in-depth, multi-year initiatives. Some programs have a strong evidence base; many do not.

Bolstering student strengths and preventing social problems such as bullying behaviour or early school leaving is most effective when multi-year, integrated efforts are aimed at developing student's social and emotional skills and positive mental health. This is best done through a comprehensive approach that includes effective classroom instruction, student engagement in positive activities in and out of the classroom, and parent and community involvement in supporting positive learning environments.

When selecting a specific instructional program for your school, consider the following six criteria.

1. Program effectiveness is documented, credible and aligned with school needs.
2. Program design is robust, intentional and manageable.
3. Program content incorporate sound instructional practice and addresses student and culture differences.
4. Supports for implementation enhance school staff's capacity to create learning environments and experiences that develop students' social and emotional learning and positive mental health.
5. Program emphasizes a shared responsibility for student success through family involvement and community partnerships.
6. Content and strategies align with and support key initiatives in Alberta, including Safe and Caring Schools & Communities renewed vision, Alberta's Social Policy Framework, the Education Act and cross-curricular competencies.

The following checklist provides brief descriptions for each of these six criteria. When considering implementing an instructional program for improving social and emotional learning and positive mental health, school staff can use this checklist to help select an evidence-based program that will best meets the needs of their students and school community.

Completing the checklist requires access to programming materials and information, often available on the web, and will be more effective if a small team undertakes the review and compares and discusses findings.

## CRITERIA CHECKLIST

### 1. Program effectiveness is documented and credible and aligned with school needs.

- There is **strong and reliable evidence** from at least one carefully conducted and unbiased evaluation that documents positive impacts on student behavior and/or academic performance.\*
  - strong*       *promising*       *marginal*       *none*
- Documented impacts align with **identified student needs** in your school. For example:
  - improved academic performance
  - decrease in bullying behaviour
  - increase in social skills and improved relationships
  - substance abuse reduction and prevention
  - strong*       *promising*       *marginal*       *none*

**SUMMARY:**  **meets criteria**    **does not meet criteria**

### 2. Program design is robust, intentional and manageable.

- The program recognizes that all student benefit from approaches designed to enhance their social and emotional development and is designed for **the general student population\***, including but not exclusive to students who are considered at-risk of problem behaviour.
  - yes*       *no*
- The program is of sufficient **intensity and duration** to be effective:
  - provides at least eight learning experiences per year\*
    - yes*       *no*
  - provides a **clear sequencing** of activities and skills\*
    - yes*       *no*
  - creates meaningful opportunities for **practice, review and reinforcement** from grade-to-grade and from year-to-year
    - yes*       *no*
  - facilitates **long-term commitment** (i.e. three-to-five years) needed to support transformational change to the learning environment
    - yes*       *no*
  - majority of program can be **delivered by classroom teachers** and other school staff
    - yes*       *no*
  - majority of program activities can be **incorporated into classroom instruction** and can be linked to curriculum and day-to-day learning experiences
    - yes*       *no*

**SUMMARY:**  **meets criteria**    **does not meet criteria**

### 3. Student activities incorporate sound instructional practice and address student and cultural differences.

- Provides strategies for changing the learning environment, including school and classroom policies and practices, and providing ongoing support and structure that enhances positive behaviour and student success.
  - strong*       *promising*       *marginal*       *none*
- Instructional strategies and student learning experiences are grounded in **evidence-based instructional practice** for engaging students and enhancing learning, and include opportunities for:
  - activating/building background knowledge  *yes*    *no*
  - making personal connections  *yes*    *no*
  - accessing information in multiple ways  *yes*    *no*
  - expressing learning in multiple and personally relevant ways  *yes*    *no*
  - participating in experiential and creative activities  *yes*    *no*
  - developing personal strategies  *yes*    *no*
  - meaningful review and guided and independent practice  *yes*    *no*
  - transferring learning into everyday life.  *yes*    *no*
- Strategies and learning experiences can be **easily adapted for the local context** and unique strengths and needs of the school community
  - yes*       *no*
- Student learning activities explicitly **teach core social and emotional competencies\***, that lead to positive mental health, including:
  - self-awareness  *strong*    *promising*    *marginal*    *none*
  - social awareness  *strong*    *promising*    *marginal*    *none*
  - self-management  *strong*    *promising*    *marginal*    *none*
  - relationship skills  *strong*    *promising*    *marginal*    *none*
  - responsible decision-making  *strong*    *promising*    *marginal*    *none*
- Program encourages the use positive and people-first language and helps students and staff build a **vocabulary of hope** and empowerment. (For example, uses neutral and respectful language, avoids hyperbole and labelling people as “victims” or “perpetrators”.)
  - yes*       *no*
- Instructional materials and activities are flexible enough to accommodate a **range of students’ learning needs**, strengths, preferences and ways of knowing.
  - strong*       *promising*       *marginal*       *none*
- Instructional materials and activities acknowledge, accommodate, respect and celebrate **cultural differences**.
  - strong*       *promising*       *marginal*       *none*

**SUMMARY:**  **meets criteria**    **does not meet criteria**

#### 4. Supports for implementation enhance school staff's capacity to create learning environments and experiences that develop students' social and emotional learning and positive mental health.

- Effective and engaging **professional learning** materials and opportunities are available for school staff at both the start of the program, and throughout the duration of the initiative.\*
  - strong*       *promising*       *marginal*       *none*
- **Classroom implementation** tools such as instructional materials, graphic organizers and learning resources are available.
  - strong*       *promising*       *marginal*       *none*
- **Implementation tracking** strategies and tools are available, with clear procedures for gathering, analyzing, using and sharing data about how the program is being implemented.
  - strong*       *promising*       *marginal*       *none*
- Strategies and tools for assessing school strengths and needs and **establishing baseline data** are available, with clear procedures for gathering, analyzing, using and sharing data.
  - strong*       *promising*       *marginal*       *none*
- **Student assessment** strategies and tools are available\*, with clear procedures for gathering, analyzing, using and sharing data.
  - strong*       *promising*       *marginal*       *none*

**SUMMARY:**  **meets criteria**    **does not meet criteria**

#### 5. Program emphasizes a shared responsibility for student success through family involvement and community partnerships.

- Provides information, strategies and tools for **school-wide coordination\***
  - strong*       *promising*       *marginal*       *none*
- Provides information, strategies and tools for meaningful **family involvement\***
  - strong*       *promising*       *marginal*       *none*
- Provides information, strategies and tools for meaningful and effective **community partnerships\***
  - strong*       *promising*       *marginal*       *none*

**SUMMARY:**  **meets criteria**    **does not meet criteria**

## 6. Content and strategies align with and support key initiatives in Alberta, including:

- **Safe and Caring Schools & Communities** renewed vision and guiding principles (2013)  
<http://safeandcaring.ca/about-us/safe-caring-overview/>
  - Evidence-based and grounded in reliable research and best practice for the Alberta context
  - Promotes healthy relationships, respect and dignity as a way of supporting diversity and inclusion
  - Empowers schools and communities by teaching prevention and intervention strategies
  - Supports youth action
  - Encourages collaboration with partners and stakeholders

**SUMMARY:**  meets criteria  does not meet criteria

- **Alberta Social Policy Framework's goals and principles**  
<http://socialpolicyframework.alberta.ca/>
  - Reduce inequality
  - Protect vulnerable people
  - Enable collaboration and partnerships
  - Everyone has inherent and equal worth.
  - We all have a role to play in helping out where we can, and creating environments for positive change.
  - Diversity encompasses a range of human experience, including age, gender, sexual orientation, culture, ethnicity, language, and physical or mental ability, as well as socio-economic, immigration and citizen status.
  - Proactive approaches work over the long term to prevent or address social problems before they start.

**SUMMARY:**  meets criteria  does not meet criteria

- **Alberta Education Act's vision, principles and values**

<http://education.alberta.ca/department/policy/education-act.aspx>

- Students are entitled to welcoming, caring, safe and respectful learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self.
- The role of education is to develop engaged thinkers who think critically and creatively and ethical citizens who demonstrate respect, teamwork, and democratic ideals and who work with an entrepreneurial spirit to face challenges with resiliency, adaptability, risk-taking and bold decision making
- Education is a shared responsibility and requires collaboration, engagement and empowerment of all partners Shared responsibility and accountability

**SUMMARY:**  meets criteria  does not meet criteria

- **Cross-curriculum competencies**

<http://education.alberta.ca/department/policy/standards/goals.aspx>

- Know how to learn .... to gain knowledge, understanding or skills, through experience, study and interaction with others
- Think critically .... conceptualize, apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate to construct knowledge
- Identify and solve complex problems .... Have the confidence and capacity to solve a range of problems, from simple to complex
- Manage information ... access, interpret, evaluate and use information effectively, efficiently, and ethically
- Innovate ... create, generate and apply new ideas or concepts
- Create opportunities ... through play, imagination, reflection, negotiations, and competition, with an entrepreneurial spirit
- Apply multiple literacies .... reading, writing, mathematics, technology, languages, medial, and personal finance
- Demonstrate good communication skills and the ability to work cooperatively with others
- Demonstrate global and cultural understanding ... considering the economy and sustainable development
- Identify and apply career and life skills .... through personal growth and well being

**SUMMARY:**  meets criteria  does not meet criteria

### What if your program does not meet criteria?

If a program your school is currently using does **not** meet the majority of these criteria:

- reconsider using the program, or
- consider how to augment current programming efforts with additional programs and approaches that have stronger evidence of results.

### \* Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

CASEL is an American organization that is focused on the development of academic, social and emotional competence for students. Their mission is to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning an integral part of education from preschool through high school. They collaborate through research, practice and policy development.

The criteria descriptions marked with an asterisk (\*) are adapted from the *CASEL Guide*. This online guide provides a systematic framework for evaluating the quality of classroom-based social and emotional learning programs and applies this framework to rate and identify well-designed, evidence-based Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs with potential for broad dissemination to schools across the United States. For more information on this resource see:

<http://www.casel.org/guide/>

The CASEL criteria are intended for the use of trained academic researchers; the criteria in this checklist are designed to be used by school staff, in consultation with their school community.

## REFERENCES

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Public Health Agency of Canada. *Canadian Best Practices Portal---Preventing Violence*. <http://cbpp-pcpe.phac-aspc.gc.ca/interventions/browse-categories-by-icon/>