



June 5, 2025

The Honorable Linda McMahon
Secretary of Education U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202

Submitted via Federal eRulemaking Portal at www.regulations.gov

Re: Docket ID: ED-2025-OS-0020, Proposed Priorities and Definitions-Secretary's Supplemental Priorities and Definitions on Evidence-Based Literacy, Education Choice, and Returning Education to the States

Dear Secretary McMahon –

After reviewing the [Supplemental Priorities](#) proposed by the U.S. Department of Education (Department) for use in discretionary grant programs (Docket ID: ED-2025-OS-0020), we write to express our serious concerns with the Department's continued mischaracterization of social and emotional learning as "discriminatory diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) ideology."¹ Social and emotional learning is not, as the press release accompanying the notice states, part of a discriminatory agenda, "infusing many grant programs with divisive race stereotypes and even racial quotas."²

Social and emotional learning is an evidence-based, non-partisan educational approach backed by three decades of rigorous research. Because it helps students succeed, social and emotional learning is widely supported and implemented in rural, urban, and suburban schools across the country.³ Social and emotional learning has been consistently recognized by the federal government as a proven method for addressing civil rights concerns in schools. The Department's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the Department of Justice (DOJ), including during President Trump's first term, cited the presence or absence of social and emotional

¹ U.S. Department of Education releases secretary McMahon's supplemental grant priorities. U.S. Department of Education. (2025, May 20). <https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-releases-secretary-mcmahons-supplemental-grant-priorities>

² *Ibid*

³ Skoog-Hoffman, Alexandra, Asher A. Miller, Rista C. Plate, Duncan C. Meyers, Andrew S. Tucker, Gabrielle Meyers, Melissa Kay Diliberti, Heather L. Schwartz, Megan Kuhfeld, Robert J. Jagers, Lakeisha Steele, and Justina Schlund, Social and Emotional Learning in U.S. Schools: Findings from CASEL's Nationwide Policy Scan and the American Teacher Panel and American School Leader Panel Surveys. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2024. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1822-2.html.



learning as a significant positive factor in civil rights investigations. In numerous cases, OCR resolutions⁴ and DOJ consent orders⁵ have explicitly identified social and emotional learning as a remedy, especially in response to findings of hostile school climates. These actions underscore the role of social and emotional learning in creating learning environments where all students are treated fairly and justly, regardless of race, color, or national origin.

Parents, educators, and students overwhelmingly support social and emotional learning because it enhances academic success, lowers rates of bullying, improves student well-being, strengthens relationships between educators and students, and builds the foundational skills students need to succeed in school and in life.⁶ The Department’s misrepresentation of social and emotional learning is an unlawful effort to control local curriculum decisions.⁷ As a U.S. District Court said in the recent ruling in *American Federation of Teachers v. Department of Education*, “the government cannot proclaim entire categories of classroom content discriminatory to side-step the bounds of its statutory authority.”⁸ Schools need clear guidance and evidence-based tools, not confusion, as they address academic achievement, attendance crises, student well-being, future readiness, and school climate concerns.

Misrepresenting social and emotional learning undermines critical efforts to improve literacy, which the NPP identifies as a national priority. Research shows a strong relationship between social and emotional learning, cognition, and learning, demonstrating that it is important to build on foundational reading skills with the integration of social and emotional learning to enhance student literacy.⁹ In fact, studies demonstrate a narrow focus on foundational literacy skills (i.e. phonics, decoding, and fluency) results in students’ literacy gains only in the short term.¹⁰ Indeed, a narrow set of foundational literacy skills is insufficient to prepare students with the meaning-making resources to comprehend the content area texts they encounter beginning

⁴ Letter to Dr. Jason Reynolds, Peoria Unified School District OCR Findings, U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (Sept. 30, 2022). <https://ocrcas.ed.gov/sites/default/files/ocr-letters-and-agreements/08221273-a.pdf>

⁵ Consent Order, *United States v. Madison County Board of Education*, No. 5:63-CV-613-MHH (N.D. Ala. filed July 5, 2022) <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/press-release/file/1517546/dl>

⁶ Cipriano, Christina, et al. “The state of evidence for social and emotional learning: A contemporary meta-analysis of universal school-based SEL interventions.” *Child Development*, 94(5), 13 July 2023, pp. 1181-1204., <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13968>

⁷ Department of Education Organization Act, Pub. L. No. 96-88, 93 Stat. 668 (1979).

⁸ *AFT v. U.S. Department of Education*, No. 1:24-cv-01885 (D.D.C. Apr. 18, 2024). <https://democracyforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/AFT-v.-DOE.pdf>

⁹ Lee, C. & Ward, A. (2024). The Role of SEL in Improving Literacy Development Introductory Brief, <https://casel.org/role-of-sel-in-improving-literacy-development-introductory-brief/?view=1>

¹⁰ Pearson, P. D., Salinger, T., Lee, C.D., Uccelli, P., Alexander, P., Vogt, M., Immordino-Yang, M., Osher, D., Jagers, R., Fenwick, L., Steele, L. (2024). Bridging sciences: an integrated approach to supporting student literacy development [White paper]. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education https://casel.org/student-literacy_white-paper/



around the fourth grade, as students transition from learning to read to reading to learn.¹¹ Therefore, a more comprehensive approach to literacy development is needed.

Current research indicates that learning environments and instruction must support students' social and emotional development and well-being in order to drive student literacy development. Supporting students' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making can foster students' literacy development, and vice versa.¹² In addition, studies show that social and emotional interventions support improvements in executive functioning that are consistent predictors of improved pre-literacy skills in preschoolers.¹³ Furthermore, research shows elementary school students have demonstrated significant improvements in reading skills when provided social and emotional learning supports.¹⁴

There is substantial support in the field for the necessity of a comprehensive approach to improving student literacy development. In 2024, the nonprofit, non-partisan Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) joined leading researchers across the diverse disciplines of human development, learning sciences, and neurosciences to publish a white paper urging policymakers to leverage the full breadth of research on literacy to enable strong reading development and to improve teacher knowledge and their ability to deliver rigorous instruction.¹⁵ The white paper, and subsequent research briefs from CASEL and leading scholars point to numerous evidence-based studies in calling for an integrated approach to building foundational reading skills that also focus on comprehension, language, knowledge, and social and emotional learning.¹⁶

Now is not the time to abandon evidence-backed strategies, like social and emotional learning that help students learn to read and ultimately prepare them to read to learn. We call upon the Department to refrain from further misrepresenting social and emotional learning and to acknowledge (as per statute) the state and local authority to determine what students learn in schools. Furthermore, we strongly urge that the Supplemental Priorities be updated to correct the mischaracterization of social and emotional learning and to prioritize leveraging the full breadth

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ward et al (2025) How Social and Emotional Learning Supports Student Literacy, Pre K – Grade 5, <https://casel.org/how-social-and-emotional-learning-supports-literacy-pre-k-grade-5/?view=1>

¹³ Bierman, K. L., Nix, R. L., Greenberg, M. T., Blair, C., & Domitrovich, C. E. (2008). Executive functions and school readiness intervention: Impact, moderation, and mediation in the Head Start REDI program. *Development and Psychopathology*, 20(3), 821–843. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579408000394>

¹⁴ Jones, S. M., Brown, J. L., & Lawrence Aber, J. (2011). Two-year impacts of a universal school-based social-emotional and literacy intervention: An experiment in translational developmental research. *Child Development*, 82(2), 533–554. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01560.x>

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid



of research on literacy and how students learn to enable strong literacy and social and emotional development to foster academic and lifelong success.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Lakeisha Steele, Vice President of Policy.

Sincerely,

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President and CEO

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