

Fresno C2C
Early Care and Education
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Social Emotional Learning: A Key to Success in School, Work and Life

The Pivotal Role of Early Social Emotional Learning in Creating Tomorrow's Workforce

Employers across the nation are reporting that the most desirable skills they seek are too often difficult to find in a résumé. Skills such as employees who work well in teams—communicating clearly, taking the initiative, solving problems, recognizing and managing strong emotions (including impulse control), and just getting along with their co-workers—are highly valued and often challenging to find. These workplace traits, often called “soft skills,” or “life skills,” can make the difference between a good employee and one who just gets by. While such skills have always been desirable to employers, shifts in the economy over the past 30 years are making them increasingly important.^[1] Companies have increasingly been automating or outsourcing many routine tasks. The jobs that remain often require workers to take on broader responsibilities that demand human capacities such as critical thinking, empathy, problem solving, assertiveness, inter-personal skills, and other attributes that computers cannot easily simulate. Knowledge and skills that are specific to a job may change over time, but the skills acquired in social and emotional learning (SEL) remain constant and are essential to achieving business success. In a recent Wall Street Journal survey of nearly 900 executives, 92% said life skills were equally important or more important than technical skills, and 89% said they have a very or somewhat difficult time finding people with the



requisite SEL capacities.^[2] A recent survey of over 5,000 talent professionals conducted by LinkedIn's Global Talent Trends found that 91% of employers believe that social and emotional skills are more important than any other trend changing nature of the workplaces including artificial intelligence, remote learning, recruiting and hiring around the world. Eighty percent of employers surveyed said SEL skills are increasingly important to a company's success and 89% reported that "bad hires" typically have poor "soft skills."^[3]

What is true across the nation with regards to the need for SEL skills is true in Fresno. Kurt Madden, founder and executive director of Career Nexus, recruits interns from Fresno's low-income neighborhoods to help prepare them for the workforce. He intensively trains them in a range of soft skills such as team work, inter-personal communication, and conflict/anger management. Madden then connects them to local employers that have career pathway openings. His goal is to launch Fresno's young adults on a successful professional trajectory into local industries. Madden emphasizes his work on soft skills training, explaining that new technologies have increased the efficiencies of companies radically altering the nature of work from merely knowing how to do something. He also observes the challenges Fresno employers face in finding people who will consistently show up on time ready to work, get along with others, set positive goals, take the initiative, and work well in a team.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is Based in Science

Education does not start in "school." It begins in the womb and continues with our first handlers in the minutia of everyday baby care. This period of early learning is the underpinning of emotional and educational success. All learning is to some degree emotional. Our interests, our motivation to learn, our sense of competence to do a job, our curiosity and hunger for information, and our desire to concentrate are each emotionally influenced. In our culture, we have long valued and emphasized cognitive learning—affectionately known as the "3 Rs." We have seen a preschool child's mastery of cognitive content such as the ability to sing the alphabet song and count from 1 to 10 as the most important measure of whether they are ready for school. Meanwhile, we have downplayed or blindly ignored the importance that developing social and emotional capacities play in cognitive learning. This sorely misses the mark. The *Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning* (CASEL) defines SEL as the process through which children and

adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.^[4] We are now beginning to understand that kindergarten readiness goes beyond the academic preparedness of knowing the ABCs and 1-2-3s. Equally as important to school readiness and subsequent academic success is not only *what* a child learns, but *how* they learn. For example, attending to the teacher’s instruction, accepting guidance, showing curiosity, asking questions, focusing on a task at hand, persisting in the face of frustration, participating well in group activities and play, and taking pride in achievements are all critical. These basic social and emotional capacities are the foundation upon which academic learning is built in school and from which soft/life skills in the workplace emerge.^[5]

The primary school readiness goal for early learning is to have children enter kindergarten active, playful, curious, with some ability to manage negative emotions, getting along with their peers, and eager to learn.

Hundreds of independent studies show that SEL leads to better academic performance, improved well-being, and safer schools. It creates positive school environments where children learn the skills they need to succeed in school and in their future. Research in human development establishes that social, emotional, and cognitive development are deeply intertwined and are integral to academic learning and success. Social, emotional, and cognitive activities are often processed in the same regions of the brain. This biological reality often plays out in behavior. For example, our cognitive capacities to rationally process information and appropriately respond to a serious threat (executive function) may become impaired in the face of fear. In other words, fear can literally render us stupid. ^[6]



The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) did an analysis of 10 years of employer surveys across the country and found that all gave the highest value to the same five sets of skills. ^[7]

■ The Foundation for Social and Emotional Health is Laid in Earliest Childhood

In Fresno we are experiencing enormous challenges with our children’s social and emotional well-being. Teachers across the Central Valley are reporting a growing number of children from Pre-K to early grades arriving at school with dysregulated behaviors that cause chaos in the classrooms. The symptoms exhibited include high activity levels, aggression, tantrums, limited eye contact, restricted play choices, or being stuck obsessively on a tablet. These behaviors may be mistaken for autism but may, in fact, be rooted in developmental reactions to early trauma, and lack of socialization during the pandemic. Emotional and social learning starts in infancy as babies learn to form relationships and to manage and express emotions to build confidence and learn. The complex issues underlying the historical rise in the deterioration of children’s social and emotional health have been accelerated by the alteration of family dynamics during the pandemic. Parents are too often overwhelmed by the impact of their own early trauma, structural racism, isolation, ongoing financial uncertainty, lack of affordable housing, work demands, fear, grief, and lack of access to positive parental role models. As a result, they are unable to calm and regulate themselves let alone respond consistently to the needs of their children. Each of us in our traumatized nation, especially already vulnerable low-income families and people of color, are experiencing high levels of stress resulting in decreased social and emotional health. This is especially true for our children.

■ Fresno’s High Poverty Rate is Giving Rise to Many Child Development Challenges

With Fresno County’s high rate of child poverty (45% for children under age 6),^[9] children are facing serious developmental challenges, especially children of color who, in addition to the cumulative impacts of structural racism, face higher poverty rates than white children. Children living in poverty are at higher risk of being born prematurely or at low birthweight, suffering from abuse and neglect, and lagging behind in educational achievements.

Poverty has been a longstanding challenge in Fresno as evidenced by holding the highest poverty rate in California. According to the most recent census data released in March 2023, nearly one out of every five Fresno County residents lived in poverty from 2016 through 2020. But in some areas, the percentage of people whose incomes fell below the poverty level was much higher.^[9] One third of all

Fresno children live in poverty and for children of color the number is even higher. More than half of Black (55.6%) and Latinx (58.7%) households do not have the minimum income needed to maintain the average standard of living in Fresno County.^[10] Research shows that stable and supportive relationships with nurturing adults can mitigate and even reverse the effects of poverty and other adverse life events. High quality programs such as those in Fresno’s Home Visitation Network, for example, reduce child abuse, help in the early identification of developmental delays, and support family self-sufficiency.^[11] Also educational child care and Pre-K provide a child with opportunities to learn how to share and get along with others in group play and to attend to adults when it is time to pay attention.

Recent C2C Data on the Status of our Children is a 5-Alarm Warning

A growing body of research shows that strategic investments in a range of high-quality early childhood services have a high return over time. The reality is that we do know a lot about what works and have some good programs and efforts currently underway in Fresno County.

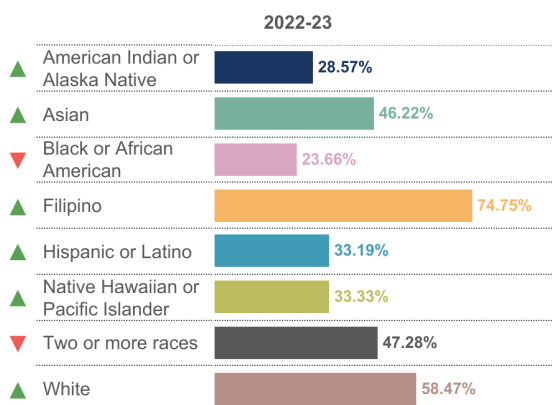
However, the recently launched **Cradle to Career Fresno County Data Dashboard** shows that we are falling seriously short in the face of the high needs of children and families.

Early Grade Reading

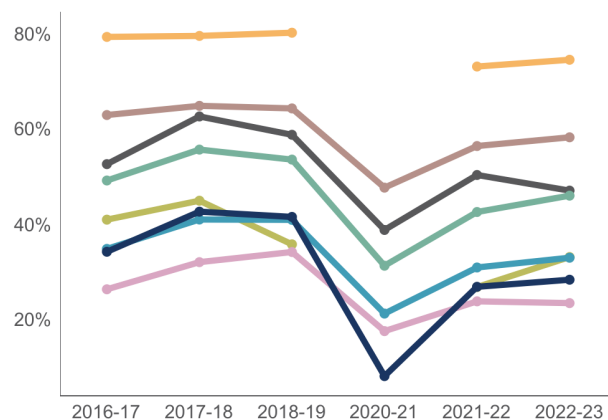
Percentage of third grade students achieving scores met or exceeded in the English Language Arts Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments.

Source: Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments from the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) website, California Department of Education (2019-20 data is not available due to the COVID-19 pandemic)

Demographics
Race and Ethnicity



Academic Year
2016 to 2022



Although there has likely been a negative impact on third grade reading skills from pandemic fallout, our community has struggled for years with low third grade reading scores. C2C data shows that we need to monitor and intervene earlier because many children are already struggling when they enter kindergarten.

The Desired Results Development Profile (DRDP) is an assessment instrument developed by the California Department of Education which uses 18 domains to show a continuum of a child’s development from infancy to preschool age. Children’s skills develop on a continuum where each skill builds onto the next and one skill cannot develop without the child mastering the previous skill. C2C data shows that nearly 50% of Fresno preschoolers are failing to show developmental mastery on nearly half of the DRDP domains. Two of these domains jump out as particularly worrisome.

Kindergarten Readiness (DRDP)

The chart below shows the percentage of students who reach the highest two levels on several selected domains from the Desired Results Development Profile (DRDP). Source: DRDP student ratings from Fresno Unified School District

A Sample Selection of Domains	2017	2019	2021	2022	2023
Phonological Awareness	37%	35%	29%	35%	26%
Number Sense of Math Operations	44%	42%	43%	44%	36%
Comprehension of Age-Appropriate Text	46%	44%	39%	46%	38%
Self-Control of Feelings and Behavior	45%	45%	31%	48%	42%
Reciprocal Communication and Conversation	51%	47%	45%	50%	44%
Classification	51%	48%	43%	49%	42%
Social and Emotional Understanding	49%	49%	47%	51%	45%
Relationship/Interactions with Familiar Adults	49%	49%	40%	55%	51%

In 2023 only 42% of preschoolers demonstrated mastery in the area of Self-Control of Feelings which focuses on a child being able to regulate their own feelings and behavior with diminishing need for adult guidance over time (**impulse control**). And only 45% demonstrated mastery of the Social and Emotional Understanding domain which focuses on a child’s awareness of the feelings and behaviors of others (**empathy**).

The cortical brain-based capacities for impulse control and empathy are at the heart of SEL capacities and are essential for school success and development of life skills and success in the workplace. The foundations for these capacities are laid in place— or not—from the very beginning. The research shows that emotional, social, and physical health in the earliest months and years are the foundation upon which cognitive and language skills develop. Additionally, when it comes to succeeding in school, children with social and emotional difficulties tend to have trouble following directions and participating in learning activities. They may be more likely to suffer rejection by classmates, have low self-esteem, do poorly academically, and be suspended.^[12] Also, two additional DRDP domain findings signal potential future workforce competency gaps: In 2021 only 58% of preschoolers demonstrated mastery of the Engagement and Persistence domain, and just 50% for the domain of Reciprocal Communication and Conversation. These measures also dropped in 2023 from 58% for Engagement and Persistence to 52% and from 50% to 44% for Reciprocal Communication and Conversation. This DRDP data in these four key domains is a five-alarm warning that Fresno employers are facing an impending workforce disaster.

How Can We Improve Early Social and Emotional Learning in Fresno?

#1 Fully Implement C2C's Preconception to Age 5 Blueprint and support the work of the Prenatal to Age-5 Networked Improvement Community (P5 NIC)

The Blueprint provides a framework and services that create a sense of safety, trust and belonging that are at the heart of lifelong social, emotional, mental and physical health. The Blueprint advocates for a dual-generation approach where, beginning in the womb, the needs of parents and children are supported in tandem with interventions, programs and services that both support parents and directly affect the lives and educational outcomes of their children. Significant efforts are now underway to actualize the Blueprint recommendations and are worthy of additional attention and funding as a designated high policy priority.

Fresno County Superintendent of Schools (FCSS) views earliest child development as the foundational building block of school readiness and success. Through the FCSS Department of Data, Strategy and Improvement an organizational framework grounded in Improvement Science known as a Networked Improvement Community (NIC) is facilitating work in the P5 space. A NIC project brings together EVERYONE who is part of working with a challenged target population in Fresno County to close achievement gaps. FCSS and Fresno C2C are now partnering to build an early childhood P5 NIC from the ground up, ensuring that EVERYONE—grassroots to treetops—who impact infants, toddlers and preschoolers are in a room together on a structured basis sharing data, exploring issues in depth, setting outcome goals, and tracking results. The goal of the P5 NIC is to build on the Blueprint recommendations to “have a well-functioning, culturally responsive two-generational model of family support in place that reduces pre-term births, promotes kindergarten readiness, and produces notable gains in third grade reading and math assessments.” FCSS has developed a central strategy for achieving these outcomes by integrating a P5 NIC into Community Schools Initiatives already under way across Fresno County. The pilot P5 NIC began in January 2024 in high needs zip codes: 93704, 93210, 93705, 93722, and 93706 to improve health and education outcomes for moms and children currently receiving services in doula care, home visits, and early childhood care and education. The P5 NIC is worthy of being designated as a high policy priority and should be broadly supported with attention and resources as the project moves forward.

#2

Implement a System of Universal 3x3 Early Childhood Developmental Screenings

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) strongly recommends the use of an evidence-based tool to integrate three developmental screenings for all infants and toddlers (not just those with suspected developmental challenges) into primary pediatric care at ages 9-months, 18-months and 24-months with autism specific screening at 18-months and 24-months. Screenings should identify not just physical issues, but prioritize attention to social, emotional, and behavioral development which are fundamental to cognitive learning and school success. Monitoring the health status of the brain’s developing cortical capacities for self-regulation and empathy should be a primary goal of the 3X3 screening system.

One screening tool should be uniformly used across multiple settings and tracked so there is consistency and accountability in what is being measured and evaluated.^[13] Include funding for 3X3 screenings and follow up in school budgets as a primary strategy for building school readiness with a goal of shrinking the burden of special education needs and achieving third grade reading success.

For more please see the first paper in the C2C ECE Policy Series:

Three x Three: Creating a Comprehensive Early Developmental Screening System for Fresno County



Support Business and Other Community Employers in Creating Family-Friendly Places of Work

Everyone has a Role in Raising the Next Generation

Fabiola González, Executive Director

First 5 Fresno County

There is a clear business case to be made that child-friendly workplace policies benefit everyone—employers, families and society as a whole. Investing in children at the start of their lives is both the right and the smart thing to do. Investing in family-friendly policies helps improve workforce productivity and a company’s ability to attract, motivate and retain employees. Employers have a crucial role to play to supporting parents in providing and caring for their children, setting them on the path to life success. **UNICEF has identified 10 ways any company can become more child and family friendly.**^[14] But these family-friendly policies, such as paid parental leave, breastfeeding breaks and affordable high-quality childcare, are not a reality for too many Fresno parents. Fortunately, we do have some good examples here of how to create child-friendly work environments. Since 2006, First 5 Fresno County (F5FC) has given a Child-Friendly Business Award to nearly 90 businesses and organizations (five per year) from various industries and fields, including speech therapy centers, an HVAC company, a Foundation, and an Accounting/Auditing firm – all prioritizing their parent employees. The award recognizes those leading employers who have successfully

integrated work and life policies by creating a work culture that supports the demands of parenthood. These businesses report they have enjoyed employee loyalty, reduced turnover, higher productivity, and they have contributed to Fresno's economic stability.

Note: For Fresno employers interested in creating a Family Friendly Workplace, First 5 San Luis Obispo has developed a useful toolkit for how to do it; available at <https://www.slofamilyfriendlywork.org>

Early Investments Now Will Positively Shape Fresno's Future

As Fresno employers wrestle with the growing shortage of employees who have the life skills needed in the rapidly transforming workplace, it is time to reorder our policy priorities and elevate early child development to a top ranking. There is a cultural disconnect—a blindness—to connecting the dots between the missing soft /life skills in so much of the existing workforce and what happens—or doesn't happen—early. We continue to fail to make these connections at our future peril. The child development science is clear that the earliest months and years form the foundation for all that follows. The best school readiness investments are those that will prepare our young children to enter kindergarten happy, playful, curious, able to manage strong emotions, and eager to learn. **It is impossible to overstate the power of an early on-track life course trajectory.** Children who are socially and emotionally competent are more likely to graduate from high school, enter and graduate from college or earn professional certifications, succeed in their careers, have positive work and family relationships, better mental and physical health, reduced criminal behavior, and to become engaged citizens.^[15]

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Notes:

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