

Ten Criteria for Describing and Selecting SEL Frameworks

Recognizing the value and importance of frameworks in guiding social and emotional learning (SEL) efforts and their measurement, a team of organizations convened a group of leaders, informally called the Assessment Work Group (AWG), to create the *Establishing Practical Social-Emotional Competence Assessments of Preschool to High School Students Project*. The project recognized the importance of solid SEL frameworks to guide not only how you measure SEL but also how you think about it, communicate it, and act upon it. The AWG's series of framework briefs is designed to help practitioners better understand and grapple with the challenges and opportunities multiple SEL frameworks can present.

This introductory series of three briefs is designed to:

1. Introduce the nature, types, importance, and uses of frameworks.
2. Describe current challenges that the multitude of frameworks present for practice and facilitate discussion of opportunities for addressing them.
3. Define criteria for rating the extent to which a framework is conceptually clear, is based on evidence, and has different types of implementation supports.

All the briefs are intended to support systems, schools, and community organizations as well as individual practitioners' working to advance their SEL efforts and improve youth's intra- and inter-personal social and emotional competencies.

Let's begin by clarifying the difference between frameworks and competencies. In essence, a framework is *a tool that helps to organize ideas in order to provide a foundation for thinking, communicating, and acting*. SEL frameworks are key ways of organizing and naming social-emotional competencies, the relationships between them, and aspects of the social and emotional learning process and contexts in order to better support efforts to understand, communicate, and work together to build those competencies. The competencies themselves are generally the basic building blocks of a framework, and they include knowledge, attitudes, and skills people need to be socially and emotionally competent and succeed in school, work, and life.

Frameworks can have different numbers and levels of competencies. This brief focuses on frameworks and not each specific competency. It defines 10 criteria for describing and selecting SEL frameworks for use in practice, from conceptual clarity to the availability of implementation supports. These criteria are intended to be applied to a whole SEL framework and not each specific competency.

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The 10 criteria presented here are the result of multiple discussions of the Assessment Work Group and its frameworks subgroup. No framework will meet all criteria fully, and there is no one ideal set of “scores” related to the criteria. Rather, the criteria are intended to help practitioners think about and prioritize what they need from a SEL framework to guide their SEL work. Then, given those priorities, the criteria can also help in reviewing any framework they wish to consider or develop. In a separate series of briefs, we will describe some of the more common frameworks and, working with the developers, use these criteria to assess the extent to which each framework meets them.

To learn more about specific competencies and how they relate to or appear in different frameworks, explore the [Harvard Taxonomy Project’s](#) efforts. Special thanks to Stephanie Jones and colleagues at the EASEL Lab at Harvard for all their work on the importance of frameworks, thinking about criteria and creating codes that have helped shape our thinking in so many ways.

Five Criteria for Conceptual Clarity

By “conceptual clarity” we mean broadly the degree to which a framework makes clear and important distinctions that connect directly or indirectly to what is known about social-emotional learning. A framework is conceptually clearer to the extent that it meets each of these five criteria. The more systemic your SEL efforts, the more you will want a framework with strong ratings across all these criteria and not just on a few of them.

1. **SPECIFICITY** – The extent to which a framework has competencies that are clearly and specifically defined.

For this to be the case, the individual competencies in a framework must be defined sufficiently so users do not have to make assumptions about what is meant. Users do not need just labels for the competencies but some form of specific definition or clarification of what the competencies are and look like in practice. Ideally the framework also clarifies whether the competencies are thought of as universal (i.e., applicable in many settings) or setting-specific (e.g., to a classroom).

This criterion is most useful in making sure the competencies in a framework are specific and definable in ways that allow users both to understand their meaning and connect it with similar ideas in other frameworks or other competencies that may use different language but mean essentially the same thing. To the extent a framework and its list of competencies have specificity it is easier to (i) design strategies and materials to help students learn and develop them, (ii) locate and use measures that fit these strategies, and (iii) know what they might look like in practice (including specific standards).

FIVE CRITERIA FOR CONCEPTUAL CLARITY

1. **Specificity** – The extent to which a framework has competencies that are clearly and specifically defined.
2. **Balance** – The extent to which a framework balances intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive competencies and includes knowledge, skills, and attitudes.
3. **Developmental** – The extent to which a framework includes and utilizes a developmental lens that illustrates that competencies are malleable, how they develop over time, and what they look like at different ages and stages of development.
4. **Culturally Sensitive** – The extent to which a framework is (i) sensitive to and addresses cultural variations in SEL processes, (ii) includes culturally related competencies that matter for success, and (iii) does not favor any one cultural group over others.
5. **Empirically Grounded** – The extent to which the social and emotional competencies named in a framework are grounded in empirical studies that demonstrate their importance for success in school, work, and life.

2. BALANCE – The extent to which a framework balances intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive competencies and includes knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

This criterion refers to how well a framework covers the range of inter- and intrapersonal competencies as well as cognitive competencies that the literature has shown to be important. It is not about whether the framework is exhaustive and includes all competencies but whether it is balanced enough to include major dimensions of SEL versus being focused on only a few dimensions (e.g., only emotional factors or single competencies like grit).

We now know that intrapersonal competencies (such as self-management skills), interpersonal skills (such as social awareness), and cognitive competencies (such as critical thinking and problem solving) matter for success in school, work, and life. We also know these types of competencies come together and influence other competencies such as responsible decision-making in specific contexts. Frameworks that emphasize only one type are less balanced.

Similarly, we now know that social-emotional competencies involve not just behavioral skills (e.g., the ability to think before acting) but also knowledge (e.g., the awareness that others' emotions matter) and attitudes or mindsets that influence how we act (e.g., growth mindset). Thus, frameworks that look only at behavioral skills are less balanced than those that include a mix of skills, knowledge, and attitudes, all of which are important to social and emotional competence.

Frameworks that are described as less balanced may still prove useful in the area they capture, but they are less likely to include all the different types of social-emotional competencies that make a difference. The degree of balance needed depends in part on the intended purpose and use of a framework. Systematic SEL initiatives at a state and district level are more likely to need balance across these dimensions than more targeted efforts, such as in a single classroom or organization that is focusing only on specific competencies and not SEL broadly.

3. DEVELOPMENTAL – The extent to which a framework includes and utilizes a developmental lens that illustrates that competencies are malleable, how they develop over time, and what they look like at different ages and stages of development.

For frameworks that are applied across different ages and stages of development, such as the [University of Chicago Foundations for Young Adult Success](#), or frameworks used to define state standards, it is important that the framework be developmental and the competencies be appropriate for different ages. This might be done in a number of different ways, such as through differential emphasis on different competencies, different processes for learning them at different ages, different sets of competencies appropriate for different age groups, or connections to explicit standards for how a particular competency plays out at different ages. Only 6% of the 136 frameworks examined by American Institutes for Research (AIR) explicitly dealt with development¹.

¹Berg, J., Osher, D., Same, M.R., Nolan, E., Benson, D. & Jacobs, N. (2017) *Identifying, defining, and measuring social and emotional competencies - final report*. American Institutes for Research. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <https://www.air.org/resource/identifying-defining-and-measuring-social-and-emotional-competencies>

A Special Topics [brief](#) by Susanne Denham focuses on why a developmental lens is so important to SEL improvement efforts and the frameworks that guide them.

4. CULTURALLY SENSITIVE – The extent to which a framework is (i) sensitive to and addresses cultural variations in SEL processes, (ii) includes culturally related competencies that matter for success, and (iii) does not favor any one cultural group over others.

This criterion describes a framework and its competencies based on the extent to which it explicitly discusses and incorporates cultural or group differences (whether racial, ethnic, linguistic, or ability- or gender-related) and/or directly addresses equity considerations. Few frameworks do so either for an explicit group or culture or across cultures. Social-emotional competencies are learned and used differently in different cultures. For example, collectivist cultures tend to value interdependence and responsibility to community, where more individualistic cultures might emphasize self-reliance. Failure to recognize the importance of this can lead to views about competence being applied inequitably in assessing social-emotional competencies in schools and other settings. This criterion is especially important since so many SEL frameworks do not adequately consider cultural factors. Based on the same analysis of 136 SEL-related frameworks, AIR found only 24 (less than 18%) explicitly reference culture and diversity². A Special Topics Series [brief](#) by Robert Jagers, Deborah Rivas-Drake, and Teresa Borowski focuses specifically on equity, race, and ethnicity in SEL frameworks and ways of addressing these issues.

5. EMPIRICALLY GROUNDED – The extent to which the social and emotional competencies named in a framework are grounded in empirical studies that demonstrate their importance for success in school, work, and life.

For competencies in a framework to matter to key stakeholders, they often need to show the connection to success in school, work, and life. This criterion is most useful in making sure a framework is empirically grounded and the competencies in it have been studied and a strong case can be made for their importance. The empirical link should be clear, explicit, and easily accessed and used by practitioners. Although strength with regard to this criterion is important, some frameworks may use language that is easier to understand but is less directly tied to empirical and theoretical studies. The importance of an evidence base in making the case for your SEL efforts should influence the priority you assign to this criterion.

Five Criteria for Implementation Support

Although conceptual clarity is important, just as critical to the use of a framework is whether it has tools and resources that support effective communication and implementation of the framework. Even excellent research frameworks may not be very useful in practice if they lack needed translational and support materials.

By implementation supports we mean the extent to which the framework and its developers or

² Berg, J., Osher, D., Same, M.R., Nolan, E., Benson, D. & Jacobs, N. (2017) *Identifying, defining, and measuring social and emotional competencies - final report*. American Institutes for Research. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <https://www.air.org/resource/identifying-defining-and-measuring-social-and-emotional-competencies>

users have created a set of different types of accessible resources that will help practitioners use and implement the framework. These resources can be either publicly available or available for a fee. We identified the following five criteria that are important considerations in selecting and deciding to use an SEL framework in practice. We believe these criteria build on one another such that when all are available it is more powerful than simply the sum of the parts.

1. INTENDED FOR PRACTICE – The extent to which a framework is designed for and/or has been useful to informing or guiding implementation of an SEL effort to build social-emotional competencies.

This criterion involves both the intended purpose of the framework and the extent to which it has been used in SEL improvement efforts, particularly those in schools and out-of-school-time programs. Included in this criterion is the extent to which the framework is widely known, used, and found helpful in shaping and informing practice. In a sense, this is a rough indicator of whether the framework is likely to have been used by practitioners who have experience with it and who may have developed resources that could support its implementation. Wider use alone is not necessarily a good measure of quality, but it can indicate that others are involved on a similar journey.

2. RESOURCES FOR PRACTITIONERS – The extent to which a framework has a set of resources and tools that support the use of the framework by preparing and supporting practitioners responsible for implementation.

This criterion captures the extent to which the framework has resource material for practitioners that are publicly available (though not necessarily free of charge). It includes whether the framework has explicit resources for preparing and supporting the people responsible for implementation, including professional development resources, tools, standards, a professional learning community, or online or printed materials that support the use of the framework in guiding SEL practice.

Although criterion 1 describes the potential usefulness of a framework based on its intended purpose and level of use, this criterion refers to the existence and potential utility of resources and tools for practitioners directly connected to and intentionally using the framework.

3. RESOURCES FOR USE WITH AND BY CHILDREN AND YOUTH – The extent to which a framework has a set of resources and tools that use the framework and are designed for use directly by children and youth.

This criterion describes the extent to which a framework has resources for children and youth that practitioners who wish to focus on them can use. It

FIVE CRITERIA FOR IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT

1. **Intended for practice** – The extent to which a framework is designed for and/or has been useful to informing or guiding implementation of an SEL effort to build social-emotional competencies.
2. **Resources for practitioners** – The extent to which a framework has a set of resources and tools that support the use of the framework by preparing and supporting practitioners responsible for implementation.
3. **Resources for use with and by children and youth** – The extent to which a framework has a set of resources and tools that use the framework and are designed for use directly by children and youth.
4. **Resources for measurement and data use** – The extent to which a framework has a set of resources or tools that support assessment of the competencies and the use of the resulting data to inform and improve practice.
5. **Empirically tested** – The extent to which a framework has studied how it has been or is being used effectively in practice to guide SEL efforts.

includes whether or not there are links to resources that provide activities, materials, programs, or curricula that can help practitioners work with children and youth in building these competencies, as well as materials that build youth agency by engaging youth more fully as partners in thinking about and developing SEL.

4. RESOURCES FOR MEASUREMENT AND DATA USE – The extent to which a framework has a set of resources or tools that support assessment of the competencies and the use of the resulting data to inform and improve practice.

This criterion describes the extent to which the framework has been used to drive or inform the development of children and youth competence measures specifically related to the framework or, when appropriate, to assess the learning environment, organizational climate, or adult SEL skills, as well as the quality of implementation. Since gathering data on social-emotional competencies is one critical way both to support and assess implementation, this criterion lets users know whether such tools are readily available for the framework. The tools may have been developed by the framework developers themselves or others who used the framework to develop the assessments. It is not a rating of the quality or utility of these assessments, just their availability.

See the [Measuring SEL Assessment Guide](#) and related guidance information and blogs about different issues surrounding assessment on the Measuring SEL website. See also briefs on selecting assessment measures developed by the University of Minnesota³ and the American Institutes for Research⁴.

5. EMPIRICALLY TESTED – The extent to which a framework has studied how it has been or is being used effectively in practice to guide SEL efforts.

In order to strengthen evidence-informed practice, we feel it is critically important to know the extent to which a given framework is actually being studied, including evidence of how the framework is being used and whether it is effective in changing practices and building young people's competencies. Programmatic frameworks with specific curricula are more likely to have this kind of evidence related to implementation. Ultimately, we hope commonly used frameworks will develop and capture this type of evidence and make it widely available to the field, schools, and practitioners.

Using These Criteria

These criteria have been designed for three primary uses. **First, we hope they are helpful to practitioners who are trying to describe and decide what they need in a framework.** Not all these criteria are equally important in all situations. If you are searching for a framework that can help get your staff on the same page, you may want to pay particular attention to frameworks that better meet Implementation Support Criteria 2 and have supports for professional development. If, on the other hand, you are looking for a framework that can be particularly helpful in identifying specific resources

³ Blyth, D.A. and Flatin, K. (2016) *Assessing social & emotional skills in out-of-school time settings: Considerations for practitioners*. University of Minnesota Center for Youth Development Retrieved from <https://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/195128>

⁴ AIR. Are you ready to assess social and emotional development toolkit. Retrieved from <http://www.air.org/resource/are-you-ready-assess-social-and-emotional-development>

to be used with children and youth, Implementation Support Criteria 3 may be more important. We hope practitioners at various levels will build a profile that prioritizes what they need based on these criteria and then seek out frameworks that are a good fit and that score high on the criteria most important to the user. A tool at the end of this brief encourages you to prioritize these criteria based on your context and practice needs.

The second use is to help you evaluate different frameworks in which you are interested. The criteria can be a tool to help you review different frameworks you hear about or are considering. You can then use your ratings to see whether a framework is strong in the areas of your highest priorities. This work will help you select a framework that meets your needs.

The third use is to review and provide information on the most frequently used frameworks in a systematic way. Such use can be helpful in teaching about SEL and communicating about and aligning different frameworks in your work. This topic will be explored further in the Descriptive Series of Briefs. For each framework we review, we will include descriptive information, helpful links, and ratings and narrative related to these 10 criteria.

To make the use of the criteria most accurate and useful, we are guided by the following principles:

- Work with the people who developed and/or are responsible for the evolution and use of the framework in practice to the extent possible. They are the ones most likely to know about key links, uses, and relevant resources.
- Work to make sure the people writing up the descriptions and finalizing the ratings are as neutral as possible and do not have any conflicts of interest. Where that is unavoidable, use other parties to ensure potential bias is both minimized and acknowledged.

To learn more about how we used these criteria to rate some common SEL frameworks as illustrations, please see the [Descriptive Series](#) of ten briefs.

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Criteria for Prioritizing, Describing, and Selecting SEL Frameworks

FIVE CRITERIA FOR CONCEPTUAL CLARITY	LOW PRIORITY	MEDIUM PRIORITY	HIGH PRIORITY
1. SPECIFICITY – The extent to which a framework has competencies that are clearly and specifically defined			
2. BALANCE – The extent to which a framework balances intra-personal, inter-personal, and cognitive competencies and includes knowledge, skills and attitudes			
3. DEVELOPMENTAL – The extent to which a framework includes and utilizes a developmental lens that illustrates competencies are malleable, how they develop over time, and what they look like at different ages and stages of development			
4. CULTURALLY SENSITIVE – The extent to which a framework is 1) sensitive to and addresses cultural variations in SEL process, 2) includes culturally related competencies that matter for success and 3) does not privilege any one cultural group over others			
5. EMPIRICALLY GROUNDED – The extent to which the social and emotional competencies named in a framework are grounded in empirical studies that demonstrate their importance for success in school, work, and life			

FIVE CRITERIA FOR IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT	LOW PRIORITY	MEDIUM PRIORITY	HIGH PRIORITY
1. INTENDED FOR PRACTICE – The extent to which a framework is designed for and/or has been useful to informing or guiding implementation of a SEL effort to build social-emotional competencies			
2. RESOURCES FOR PRACTITIONERS – The extent to which a framework has a set of resources and tools that support the use of the framework by preparing and supporting practitioners responsible for implementation			
3. RESOURCES FOR USE WITH AND BY CHILDREN AND YOUTH – The extent to which a framework has a set of resources and tools that use the framework and are designed for use directly by children and youth			
4. RESOURCES FOR MEASUREMENT AND DATA USE – The extent to which a framework has a set of resources or tools that support assessment of the competencies and the use of the resulting data to inform and improve practice			
5. EMPIRICALLY TESTED – The extent to which a framework has studied how it has been or is being used effectively in practice to guide SEL efforts			

The Measuring SEL Series of Frameworks Briefs

The *Establishing Practical Social-Emotional Competence Assessments of Preschool to High School Students* project as guided by the Assessment Work Group (AWG) is dedicated to helping advance the effective use of data to inspire practice in SEL. In deciding how the AWG could best contribute to advancing the field and complement rather than compete with other efforts underway to address the challenges of multiple frameworks and inconsistent use of language, the AWG Frameworks Subgroup, led by Stephanie Jones and Roger Weissberg, developed four series of briefs designed for practitioners. Each series and each brief in the series is designed to help advance how people think about the issues and make reasonable choices that work best for them and their context. We hope they provide a set of “building blocks” that systems and practitioners can use to advance and improve their SEL efforts. Learn more at <https://measuringssel.casel.org>

Introductory Series

These briefs are about what frameworks are, how they are useful, the challenges and opportunities they present in practice, and defining criteria that are helpful when considering what frameworks to use.

Comparative Series

These briefs explore efforts underway to categorize and align ways of thinking about comparing unique frameworks. The briefs also describe tools available to aid systems and practitioners in their selection and use of a framework.

Special Issues Series

These briefs identify critical issues that frameworks must address or that influence how they are used that are important to consider when selecting and using frameworks, such as equity and SEL, and developmental considerations.

Descriptive Series

These briefs each describe an individual framework currently in use. They are intended to illustrate how frameworks can be analyzed and help practitioners learn to evaluate frameworks on the types of criteria that matter most in their settings. *(The briefs are not an endorsement of these frameworks.)*

The Assessment Work Group is committed to advancing dialogue on key issues in the field and stating a perspective when appropriate. The views and opinions expressed in these briefs reflect the general position of the Assessment Work Group. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of CASEL or any of the individual organizations involved with the work group.