

Applications of Positive Psychology

Within the past year, at least eight states have introduced legislation to limit or ban the teaching of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in primary and secondary schools.¹ At its basic level, SEL is intended to improve student decision-making, increase responsibility, refine collaboration skills, and improve emotional regulation and self-understanding.² Criticism of SEL mainly comes from conservative circles who claim that SEL is covertly linked to Critical Race Theory (CRT), thus teaching gender diversity and indoctrinating students into “the woke agenda”. Other critics have claimed that schools should focus on purely teaching “academic” topics.³ All 50 states have SEL standards for Pre-K classes, and over 20 states have SEL standards for K-12 instruction, including Pennsylvania.⁴

The core of SEL draws upon positive psychology which can be broken down into temporal categories: the past (“well-being, contentment, and satisfaction”), the present (“flow and happiness”), and the future (“hope and optimism”). Well-being is the primary evaluative tool or measure of positive psychology, with an end goal of increasing flourishing through not solely the absence of negativity but the presence of positive relationships, emotions, and accomplishment.⁵ Further, the foundation of positive psychology can be broken down on a personal and group level. Individually, positive psychology increases positive traits, like interpersonal skills. At a group level, positive psychology is about institutional structure and “civic virtues,” like work ethic.⁶

Positive psychology was developed through the philosophies and studies of numerous psychological figures. William James’ research into mental health and thriving in the late 19th century provided foundational content for the field, though it was Abraham Maslow who coined the term “positive psychology” in the 20th century. More recently, in the 20th and 21st century, Martin Seligman focuses on not only the absence of illness but the presence of well-being and flourishing in mental health studies and the concept of learned optimism.⁷ However, it wasn’t until Seligman popularized the term and field of positive psychology during his tenure as

¹ Zara Abrams. “Teaching Social-Emotional Learning is Under Attack.” *American Psychological Association* 54, no.6, (September 1, 2023) <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2023/09/social-emotional-learning-under-fire> .

² Meg Anderson, “How social-emotional learning became a frontline in the battle against CRT,” *npr*, September 26, 2022 <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/26/1124082878/how-social-emotional-learning-became-a-frontline-in-the-battle-against-crt> .

³ Katie Reilly, “How ‘Social and Emotional Learning’ Became the Newest Battleground in the Classroom Wars,” *TIME*, April 27, 2022. <https://time.com/6170755/social-emotional-learning-schools-conservative-backlash/> .

⁴ Stephanie M. Jones and Emily J. Doolittle, “Social and Emotional Learning: Introducing the Issue,” *The Future of Children*, 27, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 3-11 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44219018> .

⁵ Martin Seligman, *Flourish* (Great Britain: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2011).

⁶ M. E.P. Seligman and M. Csikszentmihalyi, “Positive psychology: An introduction,” *American Psychologist*, 55 no. 1, (2000): 5–14 <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5> .

⁷ “The 5 Founding Fathers and A History of Positive Psychology,” *Positive Psychology*, February 12, 2015, <https://positivepsychology.com/founding-fathers/>

American Psychological Association (APA) president in 1998 that the field and its research expanded and were seen as legitimate.

The research and concepts behind positive psychology have permeated the classroom, clinical psychology, workplace, policy making, and the corporate world. The industry of self-help books, often drawing from foundational teachings of positive psychology, is a multi-billion-dollar industry and is expected to continue growing in the next few years.⁸ Research suggests that SEL, through positive psychology research and tools, has created engagement in the classroom, fewer disciplinary infractions, and higher test scores with long-term effects increasing graduation rates and well-being in adulthood.⁹ Workplaces have implemented concepts of positive psychology to increase productivity through increasing employee happiness.¹⁰ Whether at an individual or institutional level, the core teachings of positive psychology and well-being are ever present in the structures and order of daily life.

⁸ “Here Are Some Interesting Statistics on Self-Help Books,” Medium, published June 13, 2023, <https://medium.com/the-writing-space/here-are-some-interesting-statistics-on-self-help-books-e9895a848c8f#:~:text=The%20numbers%20look%20impressive.,to%20%2414%20billion%20by%202025.>

⁹ “What Is Social–Emotional Learning? + Training Courses.” Positive Psychology, published August 31, 2023, <https://positivepsychology.com/what-is-social-emotional-learning/> .

¹⁰ “The science of happiness at work: How positive psychology can increase productivity,” University of Pennsylvania, published October 6, 2023, <https://lpsonline.sas.upenn.edu/features/science-happiness-work-how-positive-psychology-can-increase-productivity> .