

Maximizing ESSER funds for mental health and SEL

An educator's guide



Student mental health: An urgent issue

It's no secret that schools are seeing a tidal wave of mental health issues. With nearly a quarter of students experiencing depression and anxiety pre-pandemic, experts estimate there are millions more students now struggling.¹ As you've certainly experienced, this leads to lower student engagement and, ultimately, lower academic achievement.

You have an unprecedented opportunity to support your students with federal ESSER funds but deciding the best way to support every student while being a good steward of your school's funding is no easy task.

You know you want to invest your dollars in things that will have the broadest impact on your students, staff, and community. And, with the knowledge that the funding isn't permanent and mental health issues will be an ongoing problem, you need to prioritize actions that will have lasting impacts.

To have those lasting impacts, social-emotional learning requires small doses of interactions throughout a student's day. There is no single easy answer, but there are many opportunities to make a difference.



Recommended practices

The following tactics are based on recommendations from the U.S. Surgeon General's report "Protecting Youth Mental Health."² If you haven't already, form a Mental Health and SEL Task Force for your school or district and determine which strategies are right for your school community.



Focus on highly effective instructional practices, including hands-on learning

Student engagement has always been a top priority, but it's come even more into focus because of the disrupted learning students experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual learning, social isolation, not having access to hands-on learning materials — all these things have contributed to a decrease in student engagement.

But now is the optimal time to reinvigorate learning with engaging, hands-on, inquiry-based projects and activities that teach core concepts and enrich learning experiences. A project-based learning approach gives students agency in their learning and cultivates a feeling of empowerment and investment in the results.

Provide tools that offer support in school and at home

You experience your students' behavior for up to eight hours a day, but those same students are still struggling when they leave school grounds. Finding additional ways to offer mental health and SEL support outside of school provides longer-term benefits. Think about tools that travel with students and activities they can do at home, either for stress relief or to work on skills together with their families.

This investment in your students provides them with skills they can apply in school, at home, and in their community. Good mental health and SEL blends all those spaces.

Increase counseling services

Many schools are recognizing the need for additional school counselors. The needs of students in Tier 1 and 2 are growing, with many studies showing increases in mental health crisis events for all youth. Educators lament that many of these students don't have access to mental health professionals.

One high school teacher from Ohio recently shared the following: "Our specialist hosts monthly coffee/hot cocoa mornings or lunchtime gatherings where she has different topics they discuss, and she does more intimate conversations." However, not all students, she said, are confident enough to attend, and in between those monthly meetings, there's not always enough support to go around.





Strengthen family engagement

Along with school counselors, schools are adding social workers to their staff to assist families with basic needs such as housing and food. Some schools have created these connections through existing staff, assigning cohorts of students to each staff member to do check-ins with families to see what they need and connect them with support services.

Prioritize high-need and high-risk students

The National Education Association (NEA) outlines steps schools can take to ensure their more vulnerable students benefit from funding, including the following:

- Provide all students with equitable access to connectivity and technological devices, including any necessary assistive devices and adaptive technology.
- Bargain or collaborate to implement culturally responsive training and programs for educators and students.
- Ensure that all students have access to healthy and nutritious meals.
- Require that the district take clear steps to ensure that students and families are not subjected to bullying or harassment based on their race, ethnicity, or perceived national origin.
- Read more advocacy guidance from the [NEA](#).³

Create a peer mentorship program

Pairing students up with older peers can have a variety of benefits for all involved. Students who may have trouble working with adults can build strong relationships with older peers, benefiting from their guidance and positive behaviors they model.

Although not the main focus of the relationship, academic improvement can arise from this supportive relationship. Older student mentors benefit as well, gaining communication skills, empathy, and confidence that will help them in college and beyond.

Expand school-wide SEL programs to create a safe, welcoming school culture

The U.S. Surgeon General recommends anti-bullying policies, bystander interventions, and mental health education be put in place to create safe school environments. Look for tools that are evidence-based and focus on both prevention and mitigation supports and then ensure that you have buy-in from staff on implementation of practices.

Train staff on trauma-informed teaching practices

Children's responses to trauma often come in the form of poor behavior and decision-making, so their true origin can be hard to recognize.

Help teachers become better equipped to meet students where they're at by providing professional development on trauma-informed practices. Training can provide teachers with a better understanding of trauma's effects on behavior and best practices for de-escalation.

Use evidence-based prevention practices

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has created a research-based framework to help guide schools in establishing "learning standards and competencies that articulate what students should know and be able to do for academic success, school and civic engagement, health and wellness, and fulfilling careers."⁴

Learn more about the [five core social-emotional competencies](#) they've identified: Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills.

Focus on staff mental health and support

It's hard to fill other people's tanks when yours is empty. Along with making sure staff feel valued for the work they do, find ways to reduce their stress. This could include finding coverage to give them more prep time, providing more mental health days, encouraging candid conversations around mental health, setting up a teacher buddy system for mentorship, and providing tools and advice for supporting students that they can easily put into practice in their classrooms.

ESSER funds can also be used to increase salaries, benefits, and working conditions, all of which contribute to better job satisfaction.³



How SEL kits can help

The hours in your day are precious, and you need SEL solutions that don't require a massive time investment or additional stress on staff. That's why Nasco Education has designed time-saving SEL kits that maximize your funding so you can reach every student. Each kit provides a curated selection of effective tools and empowers teachers and students.

On the following pages, you'll read about areas that are vitally important to focus on for mental health and SEL, and gain insight into the top kits and tools that were specifically designed with your time-strapped schedule in mind.



How all-in-one kits address widespread educator challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic

Educator challenges	How all-in-one kits help solve those challenges
Increased need for mental health and SEL supports	Kits provide lessons and supplies for individual, small-group, or whole-class practice for self-awareness, relationship-building, cultural awareness, mental health and well-being, and more.
Need to deliver engaging lessons that help students meet standards Disengagement has increased because of the pandemic and disrupted learning	Kits provide engaging lessons and hands-on materials aligned to standards that get students thinking critically, problem-solving, and invested in their learning.
Extremely limited prep time, especially since the pandemic started New teachers and new staff need to be able to easily implement lessons	Out-of-the-box lessons and supplies equal minimal prep time for teachers.
Need ways to increase parent involvement	Many kits offer parent connections and easy tools to use at school and home.
Need to keep supplies separate to cut down on germ spread	Individual student kits cut down supply sharing and germ transfer.
Need to flex from in-class to virtual Increased need for summer school, after-school, and interventions	Individual kits offer portability and flexibility to take learning anywhere — classroom, home, interventions, and after-school programs.
Increased focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion	SEL kits help students discuss these important issues and give all students access to the same learning supplies.
Supply chain crisis is making learning supplies hard to find	Nasco Education sourcing experts can provide cost-effective, high-quality alternatives and help create custom SEL kits.

Mainstream mental health conversations

We all need help sometimes, and it's important to know how to ask for it. Talking about mental health is so important that the National Alliance on Mental Health has made #SayItOutLoud into a movement. Starting these conversations with younger students is important to normalize conversions about emotional regulation, depression, anxiety, and trauma-informed practices.

Learning to pause and recognize signs within ourselves as we struggle mentally is vitally important but rarely done. Practicing self-reflection and quick grounding exercises can be an effective five-minute exercise or less in class each day. These same exercises can be used in school, at home, or anywhere. Teaching students to regularly reflect on their emotions and practice a quick self-care exercise can be a transformational lifeline in their lives.

Click on the links below to explore these teacher favorites

Supplies for
30 students!

Nasco Mental Health
Classroom Kit
Grades K-5
NE40156



Nasco Mental Health
Classroom Kit
Grades 6-12
NE40157



Strengthen the mind-body connection

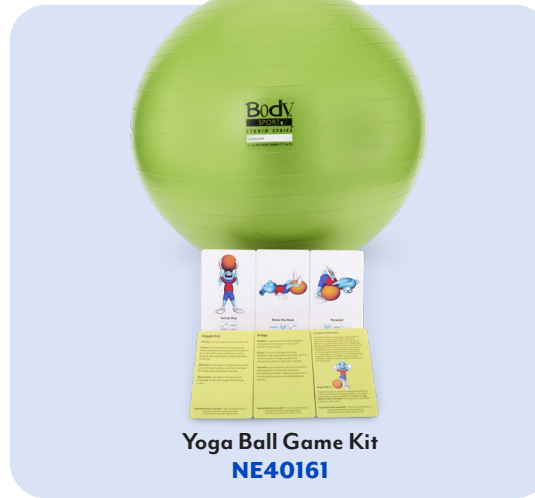
Exercise and a healthy lifestyle are important pillars of good SEL and student well-being. Research has proven that a healthy body supports a healthy mind and vice versa. Physical movement promotes strong

self-awareness, social awareness, and self-management. And, working out, whether through yoga or playing with friends, is proven to improve moods, build community, and increase collaboration.

Click on the links below to explore these teacher favorites



**Yoga Spinner
Game Kit
NE40162**



**Yoga Ball Game Kit
NE40161**



**Nasco I Spy, I Move: Self-Management
Adventures in Body and Mind Kit
NE40047**



**Nasco PE Student Kit for Elementary School
NE40006**



**Nasco PE Student Kit for Middle School
NE40007**

Provide opportunities for creative self-expression

Creative self-expression and reflection allow students to foster a sense of self-awareness and compassion. Sharing and discussing creative works of art builds relationships, communication skills, trust, and understanding of others.

Exploring concepts through art or writing also helps students grapple with the complexities of this seemingly out-of-control world. Studies show that finding a creative outlet even helps people struggling with clinical depression.⁵

Click on the links below to explore these teacher favorites



Cultivate mindfulness

Mindfulness is one of the simplest concepts in SEL, but when it's practiced, it's one of the most powerful. Teaching students to clear their minds and focus purposefully on what is in front of them is a proven practice to decrease stress and increase emotional regulation skills.

Click on the links below to explore these teacher favorites

One of the most difficult aspects of teaching mindfulness is getting student buy-in and trust. To get students to open up, introduce assignments that are just marked for completeness and not graded.



Nasco SEL Reflections
Journal Kit
NE40004



Nasco Mindfulness
at School and Home
SEL Kit
NE40160



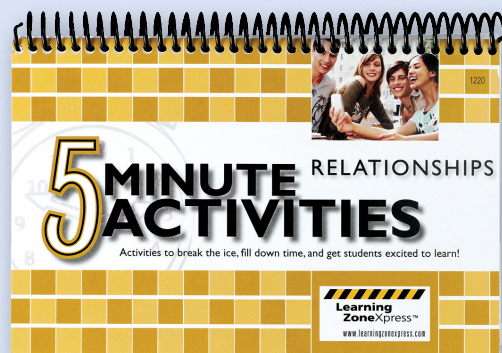
Nasco Managing
Our Emotions at
Home SEL
Student/Family Kit
NE40005

Build executive function skills

Paying attention, organizing and planning, starting and following through on tasks, managing emotions, and keeping track of your work are the five tasks that are referred to as executive functions. Find ways

to pair those skills with empathy, understanding, adaptability, focus, and responsibility and the content that students are learning will set them apart in the job market.

Click on the links below to explore these teacher favorites

Curiosity Cubes Conversation Starter Kit
NE40165

5-Minute Relationships Activities



**Nasco Responsible
Decision-Making Desk Pet Kit
NE40144**

Create a sensory room or calming corner

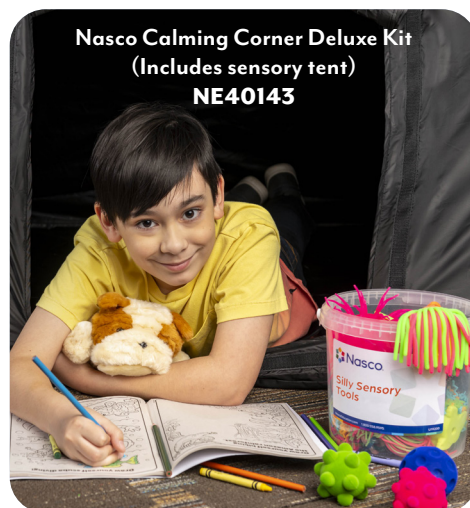
Sensory spaces, calming corners, or peace corners have become growing self-regulation tools used in schools and classrooms. Early studies demonstrate that these spaces decrease negative student behaviors and create a better learning environment for all.⁶

Help students understand that these spaces aren't for punishment but are there to help them when they need time to decompress or regain focus by using sensory tools. Learn more about how to set up a calming corner in "[6 steps to creating your classroom calming corner](#)."

Click on the links below to explore these teacher favorites



Nasco Calming Corner Standard Kit
NE40142



Nasco Calming Corner Deluxe Kit
(Includes sensory tent)
NE40143



Nasco Quiet Bag SEL Kit
NE40148



Fidget Phone Sensory Tool
NE40176



Nasco Silly Sensory Set
SN02929



Fidget Fun Set 2
SN36978



Portable Weighted Lap Pad
NE40177



Wiggle Seat Little Sensory Cushion
SN37244

Provide learning opportunities through play

Indoor recess, free-explore time, and enrichment periods often leave students time to play games in the classroom. Stock your shelves with popular games that get students thinking about and practicing their social-emotional skills. Board games are a fun way to learn basic concepts and important relationship skills.

You can use them as whole-class learning opportunities or provide rotational pull-outs for small groups to focus on specific skills.

Click on the links below to explore these teacher favorites



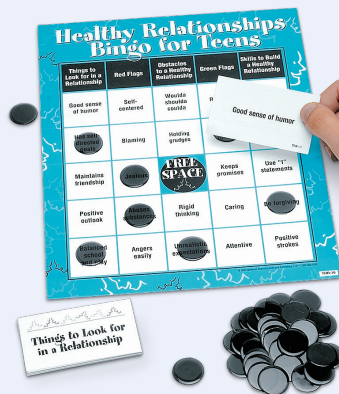
The Coping Skills Game
SN37253



Social Skills Board Game Set
SN02905



Social Skills Board Game
SB46274



Healthy Relationships Bingo for Teens
SB38558



Emotiblocks
SN36464



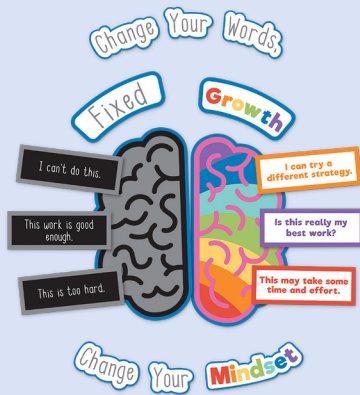
Remote Control Worry Control™ Game
SN36518

Design your classroom environment for focused learning

Getting a classroom decorated and designed for learning is often the most exciting part of planning the start of school in the fall. But, like Goldilocks found out, not all seating options work for all students; some students like to wiggle, others like to stand, and some need to snuggle somewhere.

Reducing the effects of harsh lighting can also improve mood, as well as adding biophilic elements to your room such as plants. So, find ways to equip your classrooms and learning areas with the flexible supplies and inspirational colors and messages that your students need to learn.

Click on the links below to explore these teacher favorites



Growth Mindset Bulletin Board Set
NE40151



Cozy Shades, Set of 4
SN36466



SensaSoft™ Squeeze Seat
Z51212



Scoop Rockers, Set of 6
SN36990



OPCOM® Farm GrowWall
Hydroponics System
Z50812



Hands Around the World
Classroom Carpet
Z51301



Natural Environments Imagination
Cube with Cushion
Z46426



AlphaBetter®
Desk
Z47811

Explore tools, tips, and advice for implementing SEL



Discover time-saving kits and teacher-tested tools

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Not sure about the best tools for your school? We can help!

Your educational consultant can help you assess your needs and determine which mental health and SEL materials are best for your school community.

Contact us today!

phone: 1.800.558.9595

email: custserv@nascoeducation.com

online: nascoeducation.com

Resources

1. “Covid Harmed Kids’ Mental Health–And Schools Are Feeling It,” Vestal, Christine, The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2021
2. “Protecting Youth Mental Health,” U.S. Surgeon General Advisory, 2021
3. “The ESSER Funds: Bargaining and Advocacy Guidance for Safe and Equitable Schools,” National Education Association, 2021
4. “What Is the CASEL Framework?” CASEL, accessed March 2022
5. “For Depression Relief, Creativity Can Help,” reviewed by Bhandari, MD, Smitha, 2022
6. “The Impact of a Classroom Calm Down Corner in a Primary Classroom,” Thompson, Clairissa, 2021