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Every Student Succeeds Act and social emotional learning: opportunities and considerations for P-12 arts educators

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ABSTRACT

Relationships between the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), arts education, and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) have gone largely unexplored. The purpose of this article is to investigate how P-12 arts educators might use ESSA in support of new and existing SEL efforts and to examine how SEL might assist P-12 arts educators in meeting the aims of ESSA. States can include surveys of SEL as part of their school-wide success indicators, and school leaders can advocate for SEL as a possible means of improving the absenteeism and suspension rates that ESSA mandates they report. School leaders may also use the funds provided by the specific sections (titles) of ESSA to support SEL initiatives. These include funds designated for assisting academically struggling students (Title I), providing training and professional development for teachers (Title II), and fostering safe and health students (Title IV). In addition to advocating that these funds support SEL initiatives, arts educators might inform administrators and other stakeholders about how their work supports SEL and consider incorporating more content-specific SEL activities into their classrooms. Yet, arts educators might consider possible unintended consequences, including that ESSA funding for broad SEL initiatives might come at the expense of money for arts education.

KEYWORDS

Social emotional learning; ESSA; policy; arts education

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which passed with bipartisan support in 2015, is a United States law that plays a key role in P-12 public education policy. As a reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, ESSA replaced its immediate predecessor, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). While still requiring standardized testing, ESSA deviated from NCLB by transferring a significant amount of control over educational goals and standards from the federal government to states and districts. However, each state's ESSA plan must still meet numerous specific requirements and be approved by the U.S. Secretary of Education.

The 449-page ESSA is divided into nine sections or titles, each of addresses a different aspect of education. These sections are as follows: Title I: Improving Basic Programs Operated by State and Local Education Agencies; Title II: Preparing, Training, and Recruiting High-Quality Teachers, Principals, or Other School Leaders; Title III: Language Instruction for English Learners and Immigrant Students; Title IV: 21st-Century Schools; Title V: State Innovation and Local Flexibility; Title VI: Indian, Native Hawaiian, and

Alaska Native Education; Title VII: Impact Aid; Title VIII: General Provisions; and Title IX: Education for the Homeless and Other Laws. The main purpose of ESSA is to stipulate the distribution of federal education funding. This includes defining the allowable uses of these funds and mandating any reporting (e.g., student standardized test scores) that state leaders must do in order to receive this funding.

Authors have praised ESSA's emphasis on well-rounded subjects, including the arts and music (e.g., Jones & Workman, 2016).¹ ESSA defines a well-rounded education as:

courses, activities, and programing in subjects such as English, reading or language arts, writing, science, technology, engineering, mathematics, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, geography, computer science, music, career and technical education, health, physical education, and any other subject, as determined by the State or local educational agency. (p. 298)

A well-rounded education is referenced as a part of ESSA Titles I, II, and IV.

Darrow (2016) explained how music educators working with students with disabilities might utilize ESSA to fund added access to music instruction, and the Educational Theatre Association (2020), National Art Education Association (2020), National Association for Music Education (2019), and National Dance Education Organization (McGreevy-Nichols, 2016) have written about how arts educators might use ESSA to advance their work. Kos (2018), however, warned about the potentially detrimental impact of music being included in a long list of “courses, activities, and programming,” as opposed to 1 of 9 “core academic subjects” under NCLB. Despite this attention, relationships between ESSA, arts education, and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) have gone unexplored.

The purpose of this article is to investigate how P-12 arts educators might use ESSA in support of new and existing SEL efforts and to examine how SEL might assist P-12 arts educators in meeting the aims of ESSA. I begin by exploring how different sections of ESSA might interface with aspects of SEL. Next, I propose how P-12 arts educators might take advantage of the opportunities presented by ESSA to learn about and facilitate SEL. Finally, I consider potential limitations, including issues related to measuring SEL and possible tensions between SEL and other aspects of arts education.

Social emotional learning and ESSA

While the authors of ESSA do not use the term “social emotional learning,” the legislation’s requirements provide various opportunities for SEL proponents. These include determining school-wide indicators of success and advocating for funding described in the following sections of the law: Title I: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged; Title II: Preparing, Training, and Recruiting High-Quality Teachers, Principals, or Other School Leaders; and Title IV: 21st-Century Schools. Given the distinct nature of each opportunity, I address them individually. Since neither SEL leaders nor I have identified possible links between SEL and ESSA Titles III, V, VI, VII, VIII, or IX, I will not address those titles in this essay.

Defining success: SEL and school-wide indicators

In addition to measures of students’ academic achievement, Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (2015–2016) mandates that states collect at least one indicator of “school quality or student success” from

all public schools (p. 129). This indicator must be valid and reliable across the state as well as enable “meaningful differentiation in school performance” (p. 129). While the ESSA authors ultimately enable state leaders to choose any indicator that meets these criteria, they name five possibilities, one of which is school climate and safety.

Proponents of SEL have noted that such language provides a key opportunity for state leaders to define student success broadly, including with reference to social and emotional development (Gayl, 2017). More specifically, Melnick et al. (2017) explain that “surveys of school climate, learning opportunities, and support for SEL” all meet the aforementioned ESSA criteria for a required nonacademic indicator of school or student success (p. vii). In other words, such surveys are valid, reliable, and substantial enough to distinguish one school from another. Melnick et al. (2017) clarify that neither teachers’ observations of students’ social-emotional competencies nor performance assessments of students’ social-emotional competencies currently satisfy the valid and reliable criteria. Therefore, while state leaders may choose to use such observations or assessments as a part of state or local policies, they cannot use them as part of their ESSA school-wide success indicators. (For more information about SEL and arts assessment, see the accompanying article by Halverson and Lashley in this issue of *Arts Education Policy Review*.)

It is worth noting that since all states had to submit their ESSA plans to the federal government in 2017, any changes to school-wide indicators of success necessitate filing an amendment. For instance, a state that wanted to add a survey of learning opportunities, including support for SEL, to their plan in addition to or in place of their current nonacademic indicator(s) for the 2019–2020 school year would need to have filed an amendment not later than March 1, 2019. Given that the amendment process is not particularly burdensome (see Brogan, 2018), SEL proponents may still advocate for SEL-related alterations to state-specific indicators of school-wide success. Alternatively, SEL proponents might focus on how SEL could assist schools in improving whatever state leaders have currently mandated as a measure(s) of school-wide success (e.g., specific types of data on student engagement).

ESSA requires that all public schools submit data on “measures of school quality, climate, and safety,” including suspension and absenteeism rates as well as incidences of bullying and harassment (p. 129). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2019) collected data from six large

school districts that implemented SEL programs. Researchers found that, following implementation, attendance improved in four the six districts and suspensions declined in all five of the districts that collected such information. Since correlation is not causation, advocates should not promise a link between SEL initiatives and lower absenteeism and suspension rates. However, given that federal law requires reporting of these numbers, they might use the possibility that SEL may contribute to lower suspension rates and improved attendance as one of many potential reasons to implement such curricula.

Moreover, there are interrelationships between school climate, safety, suspension and absenteeism rates, and bullying. SEL advocates might make the case to school leaders that, in comparison with targeted initiatives addressing only one or two of these metrics, emphasizing SEL has the potential to positively affect all of them. As such, SEL might be a particularly efficient use of limited school financial resources and professional development time, including in the arts.

SEL and ESSA Title I: Improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged

Currently, schools in which at least 40% of students come from low-income families can receive Title I funds. These schools are referred to as Title I schools. The funds can be used both for programs targeting low-achieving students and for school-wide programs that serve all children. As the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) (2016a) highlights, although the federal government distributes Title I funds based on overall school poverty, targeted programs directly assist academically struggling students, rather than students from low-income families. Since ESSA lists music and the arts as part of a well-rounded education, Title I funds can be used for such instruction (NAfME, 2016a).

Grant et al. (2017) propose that school leaders use Title I funds to incorporate SEL into both targeted assistance programs and school-wide assistance programs. Such action necessitates that SEL proponents link SEL to academic achievement. In other words, using Title I funds for targeted assistance programs involves arguing that SEL may improve the academic performance of academically at risk students, and using such funds for school-wide assistance programs necessitates arguing that SEL may benefit all students' academic performance. Advocates might do so by pointing to an examination of four large-scale meta-

analyses by Mahoney et al. (2018). In analyzing 356 research reports involving an overall population of hundreds of thousands of students who participated in school-wide SEL programs, the researchers found correlations between such programs and improvements in academic achievement. While I again caution that correlation is not causation, possible relationships between SEL and academic achievement may serve as but one of many reasons for school leaders to consider further such programs.

SEL and ESSA Title II: Preparing, training, and recruiting high-quality teachers, principals, or other school leaders

As the name suggests, Title II is the part of the ESSA focused directly on teacher and school leader improvement, rather than on student success. The funds, which congress appropriates annually, come in the form of both block grants to states and subgrants to local education agencies, with more money going to districts with higher poverty rates. NAfME (2016b) explains that these funds are usually spent at the district level, rather than by individual schools. Much of Title II address specific curriculum areas, including literacy, American history, and STEM initiatives.

While ESSA does not include any direct references to SEL, Grant et al. (2017) explain that school leaders can use Title II funds not linked to specific subjects for developing educators' SEL knowledge and teaching practices. Grant et al. summarize:

States may consider utilizing Part A: Supporting Effective Instruction funds to support their educators by building their capacity to provide instruction that promotes students' social and emotional competencies. States may also apply for Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) and School Leader Recruitment and Support grants to provide SEL-related professional development. (p. 2)

In short, Title II enables school leaders interested in SEL multiple opportunities to grow their own and teachers' SEL understandings.

As opposed to Title I funding, which necessitates advocating for SEL in terms of its potential contributions to academic achievement, Title II funds can be used to improve teacher and school leader effectiveness more broadly. SEL advocates can therefore encourage school leaders to use Title II funds by explaining what they see as the most convincing reasons for more SEL, without referencing other aims. Additionally, ESSA plans from the states of Illinois, Massachusetts, and Ohio specifically mention the possibility of using Title II funds to support SEL work

(Grant et al., 2017). For example, the Massachusetts Department of Education's plan (2017) states: "[Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education] has encouraged schools and districts to consider using Title II, Part A funds to holistically address students' social, emotional and academic learning needs" (p. 89).

Yet, Title II funds have three potential drawbacks. First, because the funds are often spent at the district level, advocates need to find allies at that tier of administration. This may prove more challenging than working mainly with one's immediate principal. However, if communities have a district-wide arts supervisor, then parents and teachers may have an entry-point for such relationships. Second, given the wide variety of activities and supports for which district leaders can use Title II funds, they must be convinced not only that SEL professional development is a worthwhile endeavor but that it is a more valuable in comparison with other potential opportunities, such as sessions focused on differentiated instruction or higher-order thinking skills. Third, while Title II, Part A is authorized for \$2.295 billion, congressional appropriations fell more than \$200 million below that number, with legislators funding it for \$2.05 billion in 2018 and \$2.06 billion in 2019 (Shape America, 2019).

With each district receiving less funding than anticipated, leaders have even more difficult decisions regarding what supports and professional development to implement. Furthermore, the Trump administration's proposed 2021 budget recommends eliminating Title I-A, Title II-A, and Title IV-A programs, consolidating them into a block grant that states could school districts can allocate (Office of Management and Budget, 2020). While this greater flexibility could present opportunities for SEL, because the total block grant is a 20 percent cut from 2020 funding levels, there would be even more competition for these funds.

SEL and Title IV: 21st-century schools

Title IV, Part A provides funding for activities in three broad areas: access to a well-rounded education; supporting safe and healthy students; and improving technology use. Like Titles I and II, Title IV provides states with block grants. States then allocate funds to local educational agencies (LEAs) using the same formula as for Title I distributions. LEAs receiving less than \$30,000 have great flexibility in how they use their funds; while they cannot use more than 15% of the funding on technology equipment and software,

they can otherwise distribute the funds among one or more of the three types of activities as they please. In addition to abiding by the 15% technology cap, LEAs receiving more than \$30,000 from Title IV must: conduct a needs assessment; spend at least 20% of the funds on activities supporting safe and healthy students; spend at least 20% of the funds on a well-rounded education. Working within the three aforementioned areas, these LEAs have leeway in deciding how to spend the remaining 60% of the funds.

The flexibility of Title IV provides significant opportunities for SEL proponents, and ESSA plans from the states of Connecticut and Massachusetts specifically reference the possibility of using Title IV, Part A funds in support of SEL-related work (Grant et al., 2017). Since SEL can be justified as a means of supporting safe and healthy students, LEAs could decide to use the majority of Title IV funds for school-wide or targeted SEL-related initiatives. This can include partnering with community-based SEL organizations (Gayl, 2017). Although schools likely have pressing needs beyond SEL, theoretically, LEAs receiving less than \$30,000 could put all of their funds into SEL programs, and those receiving more than \$30,000 could use up to 80% of their funds for such work. While LEAs ultimately determine how to spend these funds, Gayl (2017) notes that state education leaders might promote SEL initiatives by developing a uniform SEL-conscious needs assessment or application process that LEAs would submit in order to receive funds.

Like Title II, the opportunities for implementing SEL-related programs under Title IV rely on congress appropriating the authorized funding levels. While congress drastically underfunded Title IV in 2017, they appropriated significantly more money in 2018 and 2019. Given the significant potential for SEL within Title IV, SEL advocates might understand encouraging congress to fully fund Title IV as a key initial step.

In summary, while ESSA does not directly guarantee funding for SEL, it provides multiple potential avenues for states and LEAs to support SEL initiatives. States can include surveys of SEL as part of their school-wide success indicators, and school leaders can support SEL as a potential means of lowering absenteeism and suspension rates, which ESSA mandates that they report. If school leaders think that SEL may contribute to students' academic achievement, then they may use Title I funds for SEL endeavors. In addition to using Title II funds to support SEL-related training and professional development for teachers,

school leaders who understand SEL as fostering safe and healthy students can use Title IV funds to support SEL activities.

ESSA, SEL, and arts education: Now what?

Arts educators passionate about students receiving SEL can join with parents and other SEL proponents to advocate that local and state school leaders take advantage of the funding opportunities, including for teacher professional development in SEL, that ESSA provides. In addition to advocating for SEL-supportive plans at the state level, questioning how local leaders currently use block grants and which funds they might consider redirecting to SEL activities can inform advocates' next steps. Understanding the rationale behind and requirements of the various parts of ESSA described above provides SEL proponents with the language needed to make specific funding asks from school-level administrators and district leaders.

More locally, arts educators might make administrators and other leaders aware of how their work contributes to SEL as well as how SEL might benefit arts students. Farrington et al. (2019) suggest that, through common activities such as drawing, dancing together, and playing a musical instrument, most arts educators already naturally promote SEL-related growth. Given possible links between SEL and the school-wide success indicators mandated by ESSA, informing administrators about both their SEL work and its relationship to ESSA may assist arts educators in their ongoing advocacy efforts. If administrators, parents, or other stakeholders are unfamiliar with relationships between SEL and arts education, then easily read informational sheets, such as NafME's (2020) "What is Social Emotional Learning?" brochure, might serve as a starting point for shared understandings and discussion.

Within classrooms, arts educators might draw on resources, such as Edgar (2017), to add subject-specific content directly focused on SEL. Arts educators might also partner with colleagues in other disciplines to experiment with collaborative SEL-centered projects or exchanges. Intersections between arts education, SEL, and a state's selected school-wide success indicators may serve as key talking points when teachers, parents, administrators, or other stakeholders need to make the case for arts education.

Regarding ESSA Title II funding, if administrators make SEL-focused professional development available, then arts educators might take advantage of such

opportunities. While few arts-specific SEL professional development workshops currently exist, such opportunities are becoming increasingly available, largely in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (S. N. Edgar, personal communication, June 12, 2020). Since content-specific SEL professional development opportunities will likely facilitate better SEL practices within arts classrooms, P-12 and collegiate educators interested in this topic might consider developing their skills to a point where they feel comfortable leading such workshops.

When advocating for SEL-related Title I and Title II funds, arts educators might carefully consider possible competing aims. Since school leaders can also allocate these funds for arts-specific initiatives not related to SEL, arts educators, in consultation with students and other stakeholders, need to decide what they deem most important for their local community. Yet, given the limited amount of Title I and Title II funding, arts educators will rarely find all of their requests fulfilled. Joining SEL proponents in other disciplines or advocating for arts-specific initiatives as a means of supporting SEL may increase arts educators' chances of receiving any of these funds. For instance, a drama teacher may have more success arguing for Title I funds supporting a summer theater club targeted at academically struggling students if they make the case that the activities will include specific attention to SEL.

In terms of competing interests, Title IV funds may prove particularly contentious. Since local educational agencies receiving over \$30,000 in Title IV grants must devote at least 20% of the funds to supporting safe and healthy students, including through SEL initiatives, and at least 20% for well-rounded education initiatives, which specifically include music and the arts, arts education and SEL do not compete directly for those portions of the funding. Yet, they are in direct competition, along with many other stakeholders, for the remaining 60% of Title IV funds. As with Title I and Title II funds, collaborating with SEL proponents may make arts educators more likely to receive Title IV funds.

Given that arts and music are only 2 of 18 subjects enumerated as part of a well-rounded education in ESSA, any form of joint effort may make funding more likely. Additionally, arts education advocates might work with SEL proponents in encouraging congress to fully fund Title IV, which could potentially benefit both groups. Yet, if calls for arts education funding become drowned out by attention to SEL (or any other interest), arts educators may risk receiving

little or no funding for other resources that they deem pressing. As such, arts educators and their allies who support SEL might be cautious in how they approach Title IV.

Closing considerations

In writing this article, I noticed that the idea of measuring SEL pervaded literature related to intersections of ESSA and SEL. For example, Gayl (2017) and Grant et al. (2017) promote the development of more reliable and valid measurements of SEL. These authors express hope that the creation of such measures will enable greater incorporation of SEL into states' ESSA plans. ESSA is first and foremost a means by which states and the federal government hold schools accountable. It follows that measuring SEL might be the most practical way of having it play a significant role in schools' and states' ESSA-related policies. I have serious concerns about such action.

Like all standardized tests, mandated school-wide SEL assessments have the potential to take time away from arts education. Such action may also encourage teachers to teach to the test rather than to focus on the SEL endeavors most appropriate for specific students and classes. Given possible links between arts education and SEL, I can also foresee the possibility of school leaders requiring arts educators to ensure students' success on SEL assessments. Such action would limit arts educators' professional freedom and confine students' arts education experiences. Moreover, I find the idea of systematically measuring emotional development an intrusive, neoliberal process that diminishes students' and teachers' agency. Standardized assessments of students' SEL growth negate the complexity of students' emotional lives and resist the divergent, creative potential crucial to arts education.

In conclusion, since ESSA is currently the main federal law addressing American P-12 education, SEL proponents might take advantage of the opportunities it provides, including through funding related to school-wide indicators of success and Titles I, II, and IV. Arts educators might also inform administrators and other stakeholders about how their work supports SEL and consider incorporating more content-specific SEL activities into their classrooms. However, arts educators should always consider possible unintended consequences, including that funding for broad SEL initiatives might come at the expense of money for other key aspects of arts education. They might also contemplate the potential impact of measuring SEL achievement as well as the drawbacks of education

accountability policies more broadly. As educators familiar with SEL know, making responsible decisions, including those related to policy, involves an emotional awareness that encourages proceeding with care.

Note

1. As illustrated in the following definition of well-rounded education, ESSA mentions "music" and "arts." It does not directly reference dance, theatre, or media arts, thus subsuming those disciplines under "arts." As such, it could also be said that music is double-listed.

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