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## Policy Forum Examines Social-Emotional Learning in Theory and Practice

(BOSTON) [MassINC](#), the [Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy](#), and [Transforming Education](#) hosted an education policy forum this morning on supporting the social and emotional development of students. The forum presented research from all three organizations that synthesizes the evidence on social-emotional learning (SEL) and examined the state of practice in public schools today, especially the innovative work taking place in schools and districts across Massachusetts.

Skills such as social awareness, emotional intelligence, and self-efficacy are in particularly high demand by employers. Studies have demonstrated that stronger SEL competencies are also correlated over the long term with higher employment rates and wages, as well as lower risk of substance abuse, obesity, and criminal activity. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that students are not currently building enough of the competencies they need to succeed.<sup>1</sup> For example, a recent study of almost 150,000 middle and high school students indicated that only 29% of students believe that their school provides an environment that supports the development of key SEL skills.

To synthesize this research and speak to the importance of promoting social-emotional development, today's forum brought together local and national leaders, including Dr. Martin West, Associate Professor of Education at Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Commissioner Mitchell Chester of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, who provided videotaped remarks to participants. Rep. Alice Peisch, Chairwoman of the Joint Committee on Education, closed the program by discussing the need to address social-emotional learning for all students across the Commonwealth. As Rep. Peisch notes, "Every member of a school community has a role to play in supporting students' social and emotional needs. Promoting social-emotional development also produces important benefits for the entire school community, including academic achievement and school climate."

Presenters made clear that social-emotional learning—one of a number of related phrases (such as "non-cognitive skills") that differentiate this field from academic skills and knowledge—includes a wide range of specific skills and competencies. According to Sara Krachman, Executive Director and Co-Founder of Transforming Education and co-author of that organization's upcoming working paper on the research case for policy action on non-cognitive skills, "Skills such as self-management and social competence are well-established predictors of success in academics, career, and well-being. A

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<sup>1</sup> Farrington et al. (2012) Teaching adolescents to become learners – The role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance: A critical literature review. Consortium on Chicago School Research; Dweck, Walton & Cohen (2011) Academic Tenacity: Mindsets and Skills that Promote Long-Term Learning; Snipes, Fancsali & Stoker (2012) Student Academic Mindset Interventions: A Review of the Current Landscape.

strong evidence base points to the need for responsible policy action to address the development of students' non-cognitive competencies and to help place them on a trajectory toward long-term success.”

This morning's policy forum, which was attended by an overflow crowd of nearly 300 attendees, featured a distinguished panel of experts and practitioners, who discussed the importance of social-emotional learning from early education through college and career attainment: Colleen Lennon, Principal of the Wetherbee School in Lawrence; Meg Mayo-Brown, Superintendent of Fall River Public Schools; Harriet Tolpin, Senior Advisor for Workforce Development & Community Health at Partners HealthCare; Joan Wasser Gish, Member of the Massachusetts Board of Early Education and Care and Director of Strategic Initiatives for the Boston College Lynch School of Education.

Along with discussing the need for consistent attention to SEL, speakers also highlighted the special importance of supporting social-emotional development among the most vulnerable students. As Ben Forman, Research Director of MassINC, notes, “Especially in Gateway Cities, where we often find concentrations of at-risk and trauma-exposed youth, it is crucial to support the development of the social-emotional skills that will help create stronger citizens for inclusive urban communities and more effective workers for the industries of the future.”

Given the connection between SEL and long-term success in higher education and the workforce, speakers highlighted the importance of developing state policies that connect educators with appropriate supports and resources. According to Chad d'Entremont, Executive Director of the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, “While Massachusetts leads the nation in terms of academic performance, there is more work to do to support the needs of the whole child by implementing social-emotional learning in schools. Promoting students' social-emotional development will also help with efforts to close achievement gaps, ensure college and workforce readiness, and attend to health and well-being for students across the Commonwealth.”

For more information on social-emotional learning in Massachusetts, see MassINC's recent report on [Building Community-Wide Social and Emotional Support Systems in Massachusetts Gateway Cities](#), and keep an eye on the [Transforming Education](#) and [Rennie Center](#) websites for copies of their upcoming reports. You can also follow the conversation on Twitter at [#SELPolicy](#).

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