



# Teaching SEL Digitally

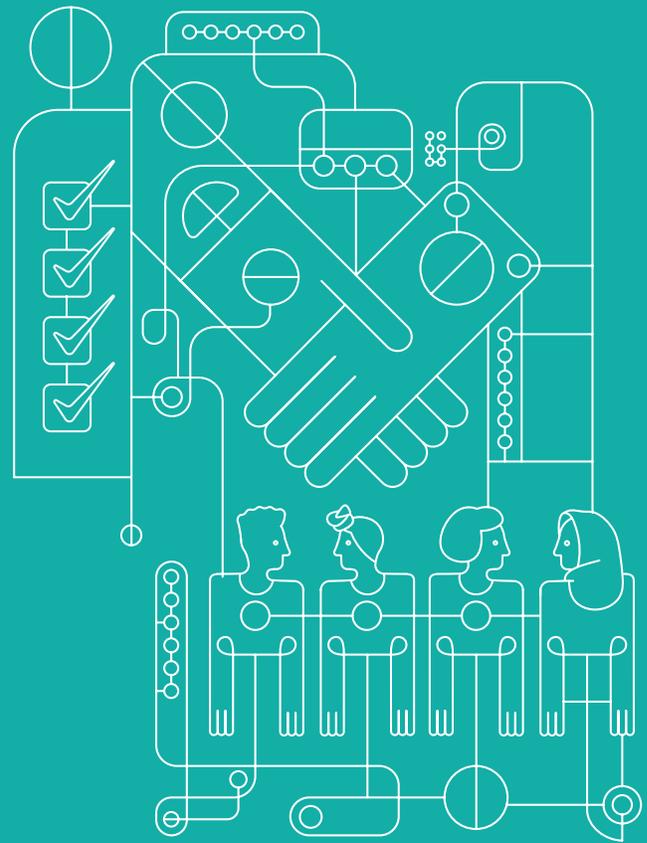
The Opportunities and Challenges Presented by a Digital Approach to SEL





# Introduction

Since the early 1990s, social and emotional learning (SEL) has moved from a “soft” subject on the periphery of curriculums to an essential component of how students learn and thrive. As the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development states, “It is not a distraction from the ‘real work’ of math and English instruction; it is how instruction can succeed.”<sup>1</sup> Teachers have largely embraced SEL’s growing importance: three-quarters say they are devoting more time to SEL than they were five years ago.<sup>2</sup> But given limited time and resources in classrooms, how can teachers best incorporate social and emotional learning? Can digital education play a role in providing dedicated SEL lessons? What are the challenges and opportunities of teaching SEL digitally?



This paper will explore teacher attitudes towards social and emotional learning and digital education. From analysis of survey data from nearly 2,500 teachers using a digital education resource provided by EVERFI, we see teachers value SEL and many want schools and districts to place more emphasis on SEL instruction. One way to incorporate SEL into classrooms is by using digital education resources. Teachers express some concern about using technology to teach topics like empathy and managing emotions. At the same time, they recognize that technology is an increasing part of students lives and that digital education reaches them where they are. Additionally, teachers say there is added value to teaching SEL digitally that is not available through face-to-face instruction: privacy for exploring sensitive topics and feedback on their students’ SEL skills.

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<sup>1</sup> The Aspen Institute, “From A Nation At Risk to A Nation At Hope: Recommendations from the National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development.” January, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> McGraw-Hill, “2018 Social and Emotional Learning Report.” October, 2018.

# Key Findings

94%

An overwhelming 94 percent of teachers surveyed say digital education is an effective learning tool. Most teachers say all of their students, not just those ahead or behind in class, benefit from digital education.

79%

79% of teachers say SEL improves interpersonal relationships in their classroom and academic performance across subjects. Despite these perceived benefits, 44 percent of teachers say their school places 'too little emphasis' on developing students' social and emotional skills.

While teachers express some concern about a digital approach to teaching SEL, they also see many benefits unique to a digital learning experience.

71%

- 71% say digital education can engage the unengaged

64%

- 64% say digital education allows SEL to extend beyond the classroom.

87%

87% teachers say teaching SEL digitally makes sense for students now, when young people spend more time online than ever, and nearly nine-in-ten teachers say digital education can provide feedback about their students' SEL skills.



# The Effectiveness of Digital Education

For most teachers, technology use in the classroom is ubiquitous: 80 percent of teachers say they use technology at least daily, with nearly half (48%) saying they use technology multiple times a day.

When looking specifically at digital education, an overwhelming 94 percent of teachers who took our survey say digital education is an effective learning tool. When asked why teachers found digital education effective, nine-in-ten teachers said digital education was particularly adept at supplementing instruction by teachers, providing individualized learning, and allowing for the independent practice of skills.

Smaller majorities of teachers say digital education is effective at delivering instruction directly to students (86%) and facilitating collaboration between students (80%).

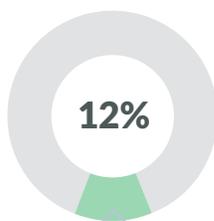
Most teachers say digital education is a tool that works for all students: 84% say digital education is an effective learning tool for their entire classroom, not just those who are ahead or behind in class.

**80%** of teachers say they use technology at least daily

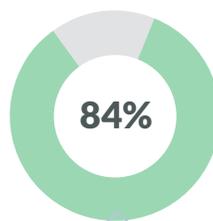
**48%** say they use technology multiple times a day.

**94%** of teachers say digital education is an effective learning tool.

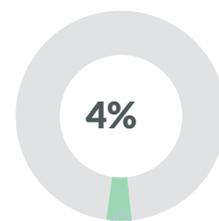
**9 in 10** teachers said digital education was particularly adept at supplementing instruction provided by teachers



The students who are **ahead of the rest of the class** and need extra activities to stay engaged



**All of my students generally benefit from digital education.**



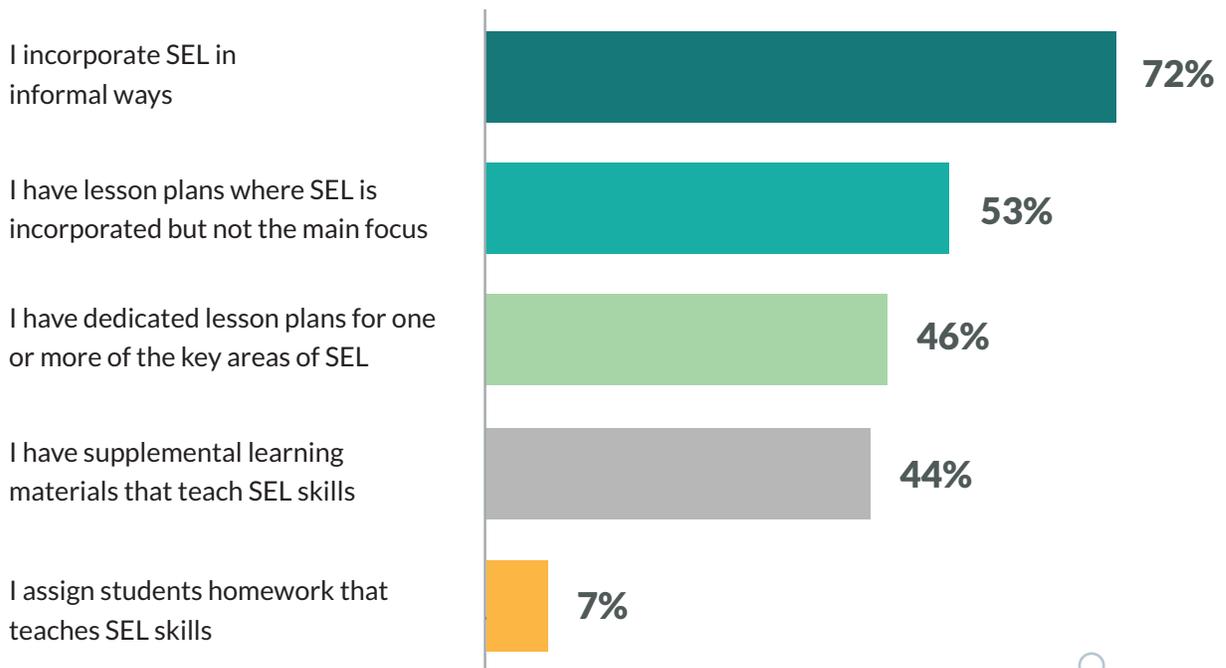
The students who are **behind and need supplemental instruction** or reinforcement of topics

# SEL in the Classroom

Teachers and schools are increasingly turning to social and emotional learning (SEL) as an important part of their classroom. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of teachers say they incorporate SEL into their curriculum.

While most teachers are incorporating SEL into their instruction, there are indications that it is not getting the time and attention it deserves. Among the teachers who are using SEL in their curriculum, 72% say they incorporate SEL in informal ways. Just over half (53%) say they have lesson plans where SEL is incorporated but not the main focus, 44 percent say they have supplemental learning materials that teach SEL. Under half of teachers surveyed (46%) say they have dedicated lesson plans for one or more of the core SEL competencies. This tracks with a 2017 survey of principals, where just 35 percent of respondents said their schools was fully implementing a plan to incorporate SEL into their policies and classroom work.<sup>3</sup>

## How do you incorporated SEL in the Classroom?



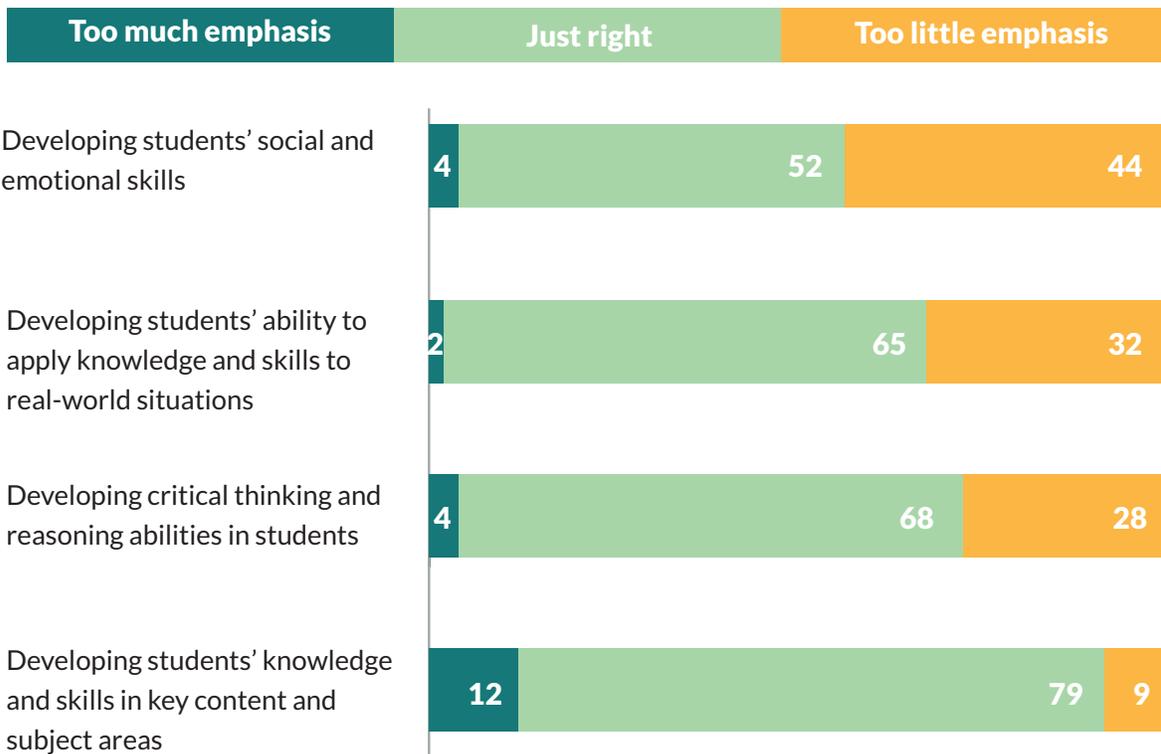
<sup>3</sup> CASEL, "Ready to Lead: A National Principal Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Prepare Children and Transform Schools." November, 2015.

# Benefits of SEL

The vast majority of teachers say teaching SEL improves student and teacher relationships and academic performance. Fully 95 percent of teachers surveyed say teaching SEL has a positive effect on relationships between students and teachers and 89 percent say it improves relationships between students and reduces bullying. More than nine-in-ten (91%) say teaching SEL leads to better academic performance across subject areas.

Teachers see many benefits and few drawbacks to teaching SEL in their classroom. The largest concern voiced by teachers is about resource allocation: 34 percent of teachers say teaching SEL eats into valuable time needed for teaching core academic competencies. Minorities of teachers also express concern about lack of proven benefits of SEL (20%) and that SEL tools are ineffective (15%).

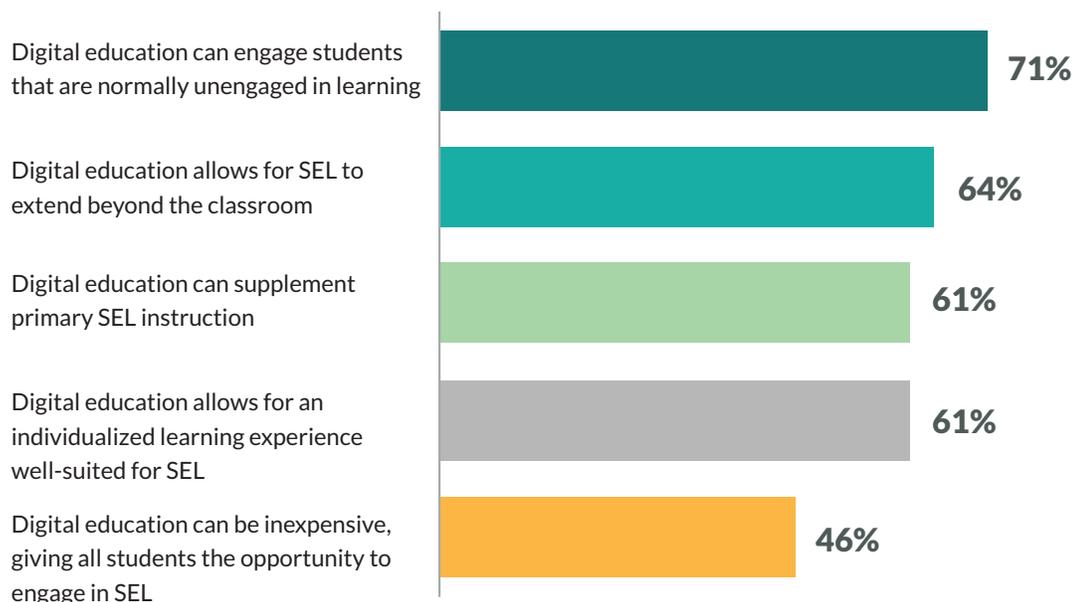
Despite the benefits cited, many teachers say their school places ‘too little emphasis’ on developing students’ social and emotional skills. About half of teachers (52%) say schools place the right about emphasis on social and emotional skills while 44 percent say there is too little emphasis on SEL. When tested against real-world skills, critical thinking, and core subject matter knowledge, more teachers said there was too little emphasis on SEL than any other domain.



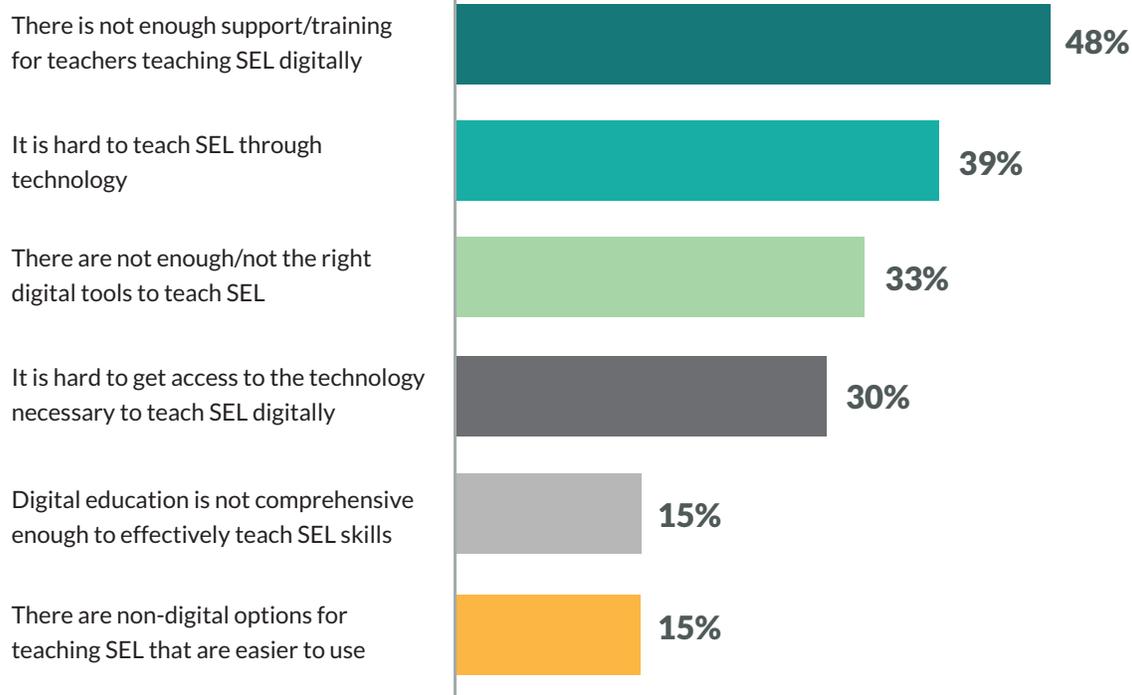
# Teachers See Potential in Teaching SEL Digitally

Teachers are finding innovative ways to incorporate SEL into their classroom. From classroom yoga to breathing exercises to promote mindfulness, many teachers are finding new ways to equip their students with social and emotional learning skills needed to succeed. One way teachers are incorporating SEL into their lessons is through digital education resources. From our surveys, we see teachers express optimism about the benefits of teaching SEL on a digital platform. However, there is some concern that digital tools do not effectively convey SEL topics in an authentic way. At the same time, many say using digital education provides unique advantages not available in face-to-face education.

Teachers say there are many benefits to teaching SEL skills digitally. The top advantage cited was activating unengaged students, followed by allowing for SEL instruction to extend beyond the classroom. About seven-in-ten teachers (71%) say the biggest advantage of teaching SEL digital is that it can engage students that are normally unengaged in learning. More than six-in-ten teachers (64%) say the top benefit is that digital education allows for SEL to extend beyond the classroom. About six-in-ten teachers say providing supplemental instruction and allowing for an individualized learning experience well-suited to SEL (both 61%) are the top benefits to teaching SEL digitally.



When looking at the challenges of teaching SEL digitally, the top concern cited by nearly half of teachers (48%) is that there is not enough support and training. Nearly four-in-ten teachers (39%) say they are concerned that it is hard to teach SEL through technology. A third of teachers (33%) say there are not enough or the right digital tools available and 30 percent of teachers say lack of access to the necessary technology is the biggest obstacle to teaching SEL digitally. Smaller shares of teachers say the biggest challenges are that digital education is not comprehensive enough to teach SEL skills (15%) and that there are non-digital options that are easier to use (15%).



# Challenges and Opportunities for Teachers

Teachers recognize the challenge of using technology to teach emotional and self-management skills that have been traditionally taught interpersonally. More than half of teachers (57%) say it is hard to make a digital SEL experience authentic. A smaller share of teachers (43%) say that they find it hard to see how something like empathy can be taught on a computer screen.

At the same time, teachers recognize that students are increasingly living their lives online and we need to meet them where they are. Nearly eight-in-ten teachers (79%) say teaching SEL digitally makes sense for students now, who spend more time online than ever.

But digital education does not replace face-to-face instruction. Digital education can provide teachers with additional resources and opportunities to reach their students and reinforce the lessons that they are teaching face-to-face. In fact, 91% of teachers using Character Playbook - EVERFI's middle school resource on cultivating and maintaining healthy relationships - say that digital course enhances material that they are already teaching in the classroom.

Digital education can provide teachers with added benefits that are not available in face-to-face instruction. Nearly all teachers (94%) say teaching SEL digitally allows students to explore sensitive topics with more privacy than group instruction. This suggests that when constructed properly, digital education is uniquely suited to SEL. Further, nearly nine-in-ten teachers (87%) say teaching SEL digitally can provide important feedback to teachers on their students' SEL skills.

Digital education can be a powerful addition to your SEL toolbox. From our survey, we see excitement about the benefits of SEL and a desire for more SEL instruction in schools. A digital SEL course can help teachers elevate their SEL instruction and provide an SEL solution for this generation of students.

**94%** say teaching SEL digitally allows students to explore sensitive topics with more privacy than group instruction

**87%** say it can provide important feedback to teachers on their students' SEL skills.

## Methodology

The results presented are from a survey of 2,491 teachers who had used an EVERFI product. The survey was conducted from September 24th to October 15th, 2018.



## About the Author

**Bridget Parker, Senior Manager, Research**

At EVERFI, Bridget researches the impact of K12 courses on the attitudes and beliefs of middle school and high school students. Using survey and assessment data from over 2 million K-12 learners she reports on changes in opinion and knowledge retention. Bridget is a graduate of The George Washington University with a degree in Political Science and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill with a Masters in European Governance.

**Learn more about EVERFI  
and SEL at [everfi.com/SEL](https://everfi.com/SEL)**

## About EVERFI

Using today's technology to connect learning to the real world, EVERFI partners with organizations across the globe to equip their communities with the skills needed for success in the 21st century. These courses reach millions of learners a year, from elementary school students to adults.





# EVERFI

EVERFI is the leading education technology company that provides learners of all ages education for the real world through innovative and scalable digital learning.

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