White Paper

Changing SEL Priorities Before and During COVID-19: Results of an Educator Survey

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Introduction

As schools scramble to pick up the pieces of the 2019-2020 school year, they must prepare for a very uncertain and unusual 2020-2021. Rethink Ed's Social Emotional Learning (SEL) platform provides a viable solution for supporting students and school staff through the current school closure, re-opening in a new school environment, and potential future school closures. Experts fear that the coronavirus pandemic and extended school closures are likely to cause long lasting trauma and mental health issues, and that children and teens may be hit the hardest over time, particularly those with existing mental health or behavioral challenges (American Psychological Association (APA), 2020).

> *"Part of Social Emotional Learning is being self-aware and understanding our weaknesses. I don't think that we've developed that skill in our children at home."*
> -Courtney Nelson, Director of SEL, Birmingham City Schools

SEL programs have been shown to be effective in numerous studies (e.g. Durlak et al., 2011). SEL is the acquisition of skills to identify and manage emotions, show empathy for others, behave responsibly and ethically, make reasonable decisions, maintain healthy and positive relationships, and avoid negative or dangerous behaviors (CASEL, 2003). Research indicates that students who have poor social-emotional skills have a tendency to experience greater stress and anxiety and have lower self-esteem and motivation to learn (Arslan, 2015), and are more likely to exhibit behavioral challenges and engage in dangerous behaviors such as drinking, drugs, or sexual promiscuity (Durlak, et al., 2011).

Those with stronger social-emotional skills are more likely to be lifelong learners (Akcaalan, 2016) and have been shown to have better academic performance, fewer behavior problems, more prosocial behaviors, and better impulse control (Durlak, et al., 2011). In the long run, better socialemotional skills improve high school graduation rates, college readiness, work preparedness, ability to maintain healthy relationships, mental health, stress, and engagement in life (Jones, Greenberg, Crowley, 2015).

Prior to COVID-19, the importance of SEL was clear and educators, policy makers, and developers have worked feverishly to address the increasing SEL needs of students, teachers, and school communities. The pandemic, quarantines, and school shut-downs have highlighted that SEL is needed now more than ever. In fact, some experts believe that SEL should take priority over academic subjects as students return to school in the fall, particularly when remote learning is in place (Kamenetz, 2020)

"I don't think we have enough self-talk about selfcompassion. We need SEL to change that self-talk in our minds about the errors and mistakes we've made. We are humans, it happens. You need to be able to tell yourself that."

- Stacey Heiligenthaler, Ph.D., Director of Pupil Personnel Services, Norwalk Public Schools

There are a range of skills that are essential for SEL (e.g. emotion regulation, growth mindset, self-control, self-management, resilience, friendship skills, conflict resolution, cultural competence, optimism, mindfulness) and they are all important for mental health, relationships, empathy, stress management, and development. But, are

educators SEL priorities different now during the pandemic and going into the upcoming school year than they were before the pandemic? The Rethink Ed research team conducted a survey with current users of the Rethink Ed SEL platform to determine whether educators had a shift in their SEL priority areas as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the evaluation addressed the following questions:

1. What are the top-rated SEL priority areas before and during COVID-19?

2. What significant differences are there in priority areas before and during COVID-19?

3. What tools or strategies have educators used for distance learning since the closure of schools and what tools would be most valuable moving forward?

Methods

To learn more about what educators saw as priority areas in SEL and to examine whether these priorities changed over time, the Rethink Ed research team developed an online survey. Requests were sent out to Rethink Ed schools notifying them of the survey and giving educators the opportunity to participate. In addition to demographic questions, participants were asked to rate content areas of the Rethink SEL curricula that they felt were of highest priority before COVID-19. They were then asked to rate the content areas based on what they thought should be the highest priority during COVID-19 and to share what resources and strategies they have used during school closures, and what would help them the most moving forward. Operational definitions of each content area were included in the survey for consistent messaging across participants. The average time to complete the survey was 13 minutes. Following survey collection, we used chi-square

tests of independence to determine whether there were significant differences in priority ratings. Due to the small number of participants who scored subjects with a priority rating of a 1, 2, or 3, we focus our analyses on differences in priority ratings of 4 and 5. We then noted significant differences in SEL priorities and interviewed some of the participants to get insights as to why they thought these differences occurred.
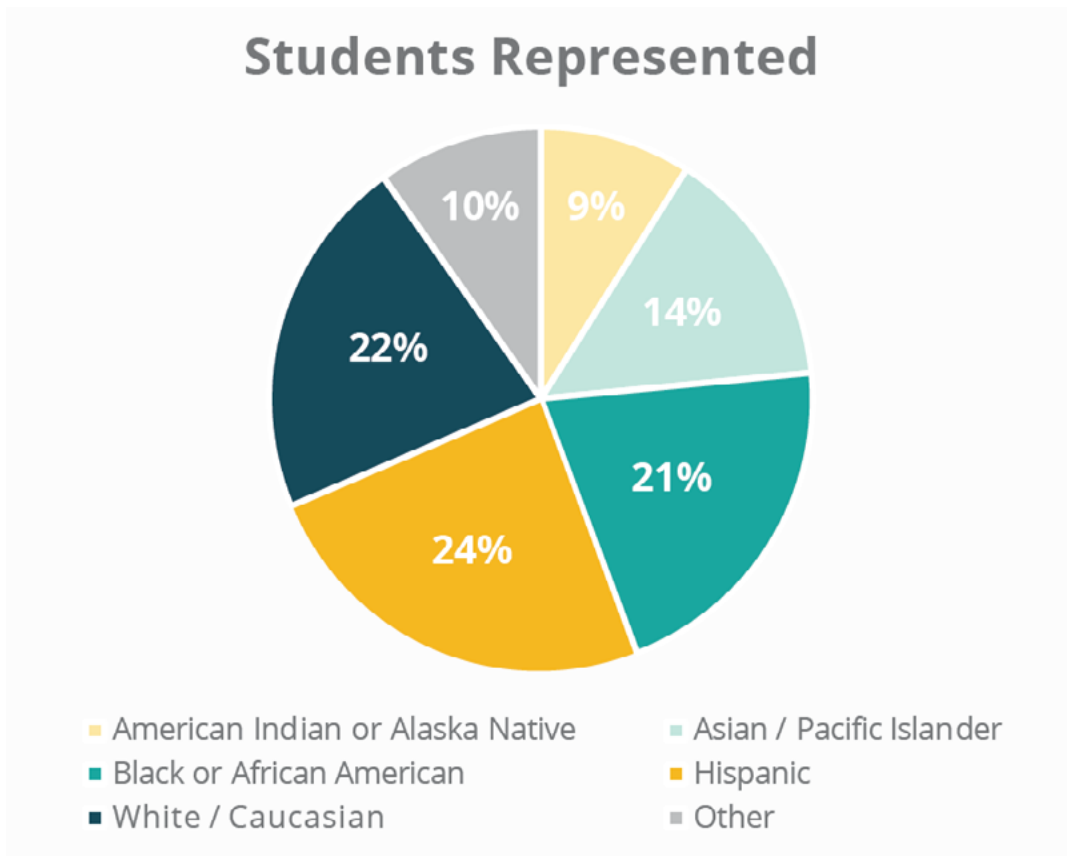
Findings

Participants

One hundred and forty-four educators responded to the survey. All participants completed the survey and all responses were used in this analysis. Our sample included a majority teachers (53%) along with counselors (12%), paraprofessionals (10%), administrators (9%), other educators (7%), psychologists (6%), and BCBA/ speech therapists (3%). A majority of the sample (50%) served primarily special education student populations, 8% of the sample served primarily general education students, and 39% served both special and general education student populations. There were an additional 3% of participants that reported that they served a student population other than general or special education students. At the time of the survey (May, 2020), 49% of participants reported that their school/district was engaging in online learning and providing grades for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. Twenty-three percent reported having no school for the remainder of the school year and the remaining participants reported optional or unknown school arrangements.
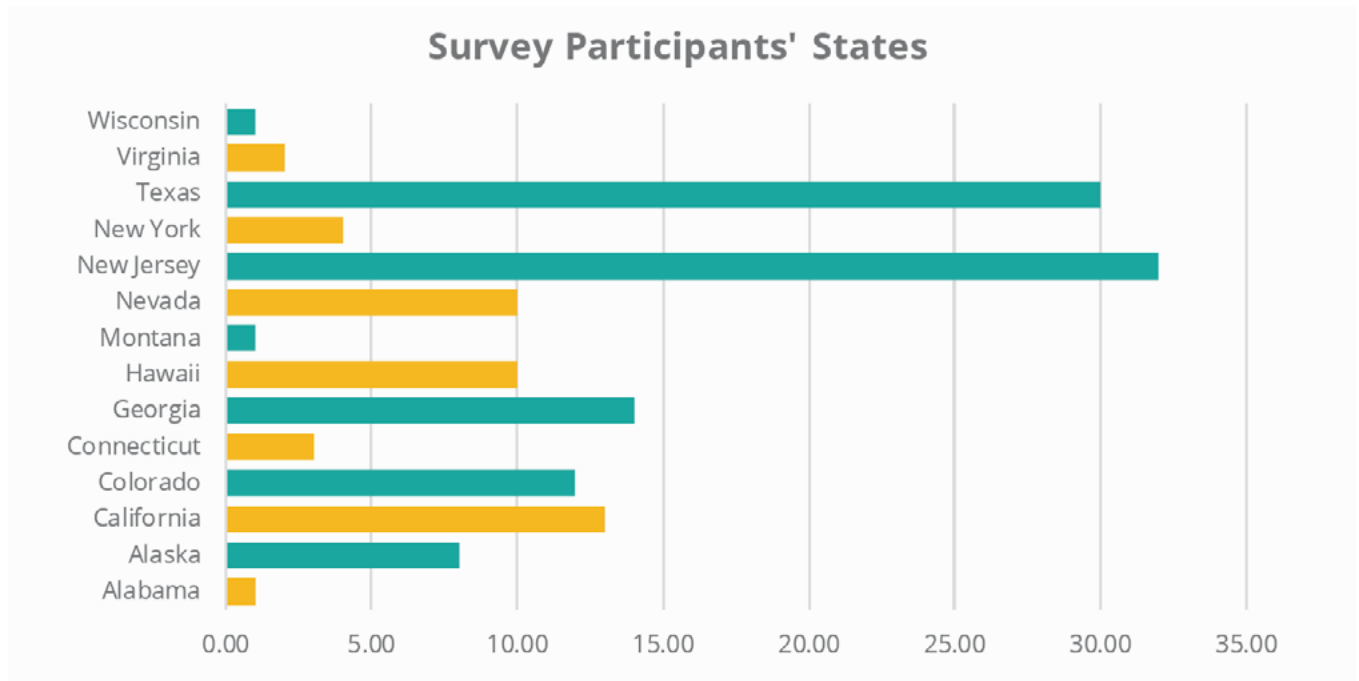
"As we return we have to look at anxiety levels and remember that we've been out of school for over 6 months. We need to have compassion as we come back in that not everybody is going to be in the same space both social emotionally, academically, engagement wise, and that's okay."

- Stacey Heiligenthaler, Ph.D., Director of Pupil Personnel Services, Norwalk Public Schools

Demographics of the students represented in the participating schools/districts is shown below:

Students Represented

Pie chart — Students Represented:
- American Indian or Alaska Native: 9%
- Asian / Pacific Islander: 14%
- Black or African American: 21%
- Hispanic: 24%
- White / Caucasian: 22%
- Other: 10%

The geographic breakdown of our sample is presented below:

Survey Participants' States

Next, we present findings from our chi-square test of independence for each SEL content area.

Changes in Priorities

Self-Care. The self-care content area includes the following subjects -- mindfulness, self- efficacy, optimism, self-compassion, self-advocacy, and healthy boundaries. Significant findings were not found for healthy boundaries nor for self-advocacy although there was some increase in priority for healthy boundaries and a very small decrease in priority for self-advocacy. Our results indicate a significant increase in participants' priority ratings for s**elf-efficacy** (i.e. knowing that we have the ability to accomplish goals and overcome adversity; $X2$ (1, N = 83) = 13.84, p = .000), **self-compassion** (i.e. believing in oneself and

having the confidence to embrace one's own abilities and characteristics; $X2$ (1, N = 84) = 9.55, p = .005), **optimism** (i.e., having a positive outlook on life and believing that there is hope and a way to make a situation better; $X2$ (1, N=87) = 8.152, p =.007), and **mindfulness** (i.e., being present in the moment and aware of our own minds and bodies; $X2$(1, N=77) = 7.569, p =.014). Specifically, more participants rated self-efficacy and self-compassion as highly relevant and very important during COVID-19 than the number of participants that rated these topics as such prior to COVID-19.\

SEL Subject Areas with Significant Changes in Priority:

Self-Efficacy, Self-Compassion, Optimism, Mindfulness, Emotions, Wants and Needs, Empath, Safe and Ethical Behavior, Support Systems, Social Contributions, Self-Control, Stress Management

Due to the mixed sample of educators, we also examined whether these differences were significant for different samples of educators— namely teachers and non-teachers (i.e., administrators, paraprofessionals, school psychologists). Our results indicate that for **self-efficacy** ($X2$ (1, N=42) = 4.67, p=.077), **self- compassion** ($X2$ (1, N=45) = 3.95, p=.082), **optimism** ($X2$ (1, N=47) = 4.157, p=.076), and **mindfulness** ($X2$ (1, N=41) = 4.626, p=.051) there were no significant differences between pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19 priority ratings for teachers. We did note a significant difference in priority ratings for non-teachers for the self-efficacy and self-compassion subjects (self-efficacy: $X2$ (1, N=41) = 9.92, p=.005;

self-compassion: X2 (1, N=39) = 6.26, p=.028). Specifically, non-teachers felt that selfefficacy and self-compassion are topics that should be more of a priority during COVID-19 than was reported prior to COVID-19. The bar graph below shows the percentage of participants who rated the subject area as a 4 (relevant and somewhat important) or a 5 (relevant and very important) on a 5-point Likert scale before COVID-19 and during COVID-19.

**indicates p<.05, ** indicates p<.01
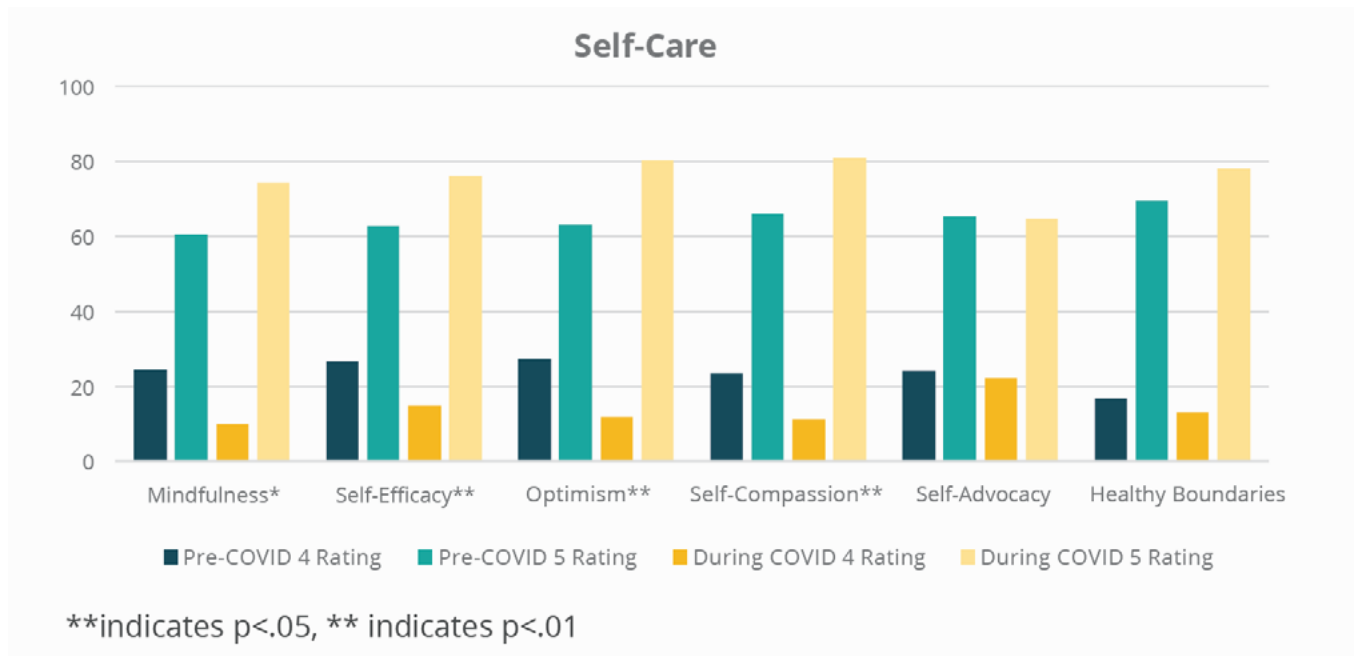
Awareness of Self and Others

Awareness of Self and Others. Awareness of Self and Others includes the following subjects—self-knowledge, emotions, values, wants and needs, learning skills, and growth mindset. There were no significant differences in priority for self-knowledge, values, or growth mindset, although there was a slight increase in priority for these areas. There was a small decrease in priority for learning skills, but it was not significant.

When asked to rate priority of these topics before COVID-19 and during COVID-19, our results indicate a significant increase in participants' priority ratings for emotions (i.e. feelings and reactions to thoughts and events; $X2$ (1, N=91) = 13.26, p =.001) and wants and needs (i.e. things that we desire or need for survival; $X2$ (1, N=75) =6.60, p =.023). Specifically, more participants rated emotions and wants and needs as relevant and very important during COVID-19 than the number of participants that rated these topics as such prior to COVID-19.

Due to the mixed sample of educators, we also examined whether these differences were significant for different samples of educators— namely teachers and non-teachers (i.e., administrators, paraprofessionals, school psychologists). Our results indicate that there was a significant difference in teachers' priority ratings of emotions ($X2$ (1, N=47) = 6.41, p=.028) though this result was not significant for non-teachers a ($X2$ (1, N=44) = 4.23, p=.101). Teachers felt that emotions should be more of a priority during COVID-19 than was reported prior to COVID-19. For wants and needs, there was no significant difference between pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19 priority ratings for teachers ($X2$ (1, N=38)= 1.33, p=.337) but there was a significant difference in this rating for non-teachers ($X2$ (1, N=37) 6.58, p=.021). Specifically, non-teachers felt that wants and needs should be more of a priority during COVID-19 than was reported prior to COVID-19. The bar graph below shows the percentage of participants who rated the subject area as a 4 (relevant and somewhat important) or a 5 (relevant and very important) on a 5-point Likert scale before COVID-19 and during COVID-19.

Awareness of Self and Others

*indicates p<.05, ** indicates p<.01
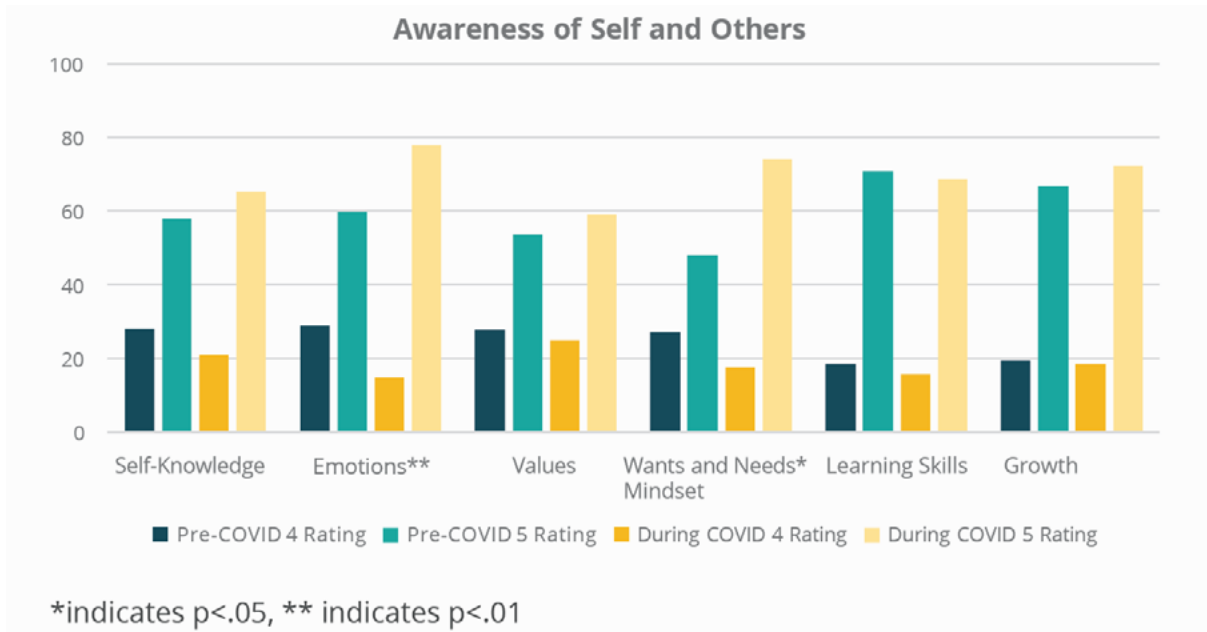
Social Awareness

Social Awareness. The Social Awareness content area includes the following subjects—cultural competence, empathy, safe and ethical behavior, support systems, social contributions, and actions and consequences. No significant differences were found for actions and consequences although there was a small increase in priority for this area. There was a small decrease in priority for cultural competence, but this was not significant. When asked to rate priority of these topics before COVID-19 and during COVID-19, our results indicate a significant increase in participants' priority ratings for **safe and ethical behavior** (i.e. having the knowledge to make decisions that keep ourselves and others safe; $X2$ (1, N = 83) = 6.5, p = .022), **support systems** (i.e. people who can help us through challenging situations; $X2$ (1, N=84) = 6.87, p =.018), **social contributions** (i.e. giving back to others; $X2$ (1, N=71) = 8.03, p =.013), and **empathy** (i.e., taking the perspective of another and understanding and showing that you know how they feel; $X2$ (1, N=81) = 7.150, p=.015).

Specifically, more participants rated these subjects as relevant and very important during COVID-19 than the number of participants that rated these subjects as relevant and very important prior to COVID-19.

When examining differences for samples of teachers and non-teachers, our results indicate that there was a significant difference in teachers' priority ratings of social contributions ($X2$ (1, N=39) = 5.25, p=.033) though this result was not significant for non-teachers ($X2$ (1, N=32) = 2.98, p=.121). Teachers felt that social contributions should be more of a priority during COVID-19 than was reported prior to COVID-19. There were significant differences in non-teachers' ratings of safe and ethical behavior ($X2$ (1, N= 38) = 6.624, p=.035) and support systems ($X2$ (1, N=38) =7.296, p=.019). Specifically, non-teachers felt that these two subjects should be more of a priority during COVID-19 than was reported prior to COVID-19. The bar graph below shows the percentage of participants who rated the subject area as a 4 (relevant and somewhat important) or a 5 (relevant and very important) on a 5-point Likert scale before COVID-19 and during COVID-19.

*indicates p<.05, ** indicates p<.01
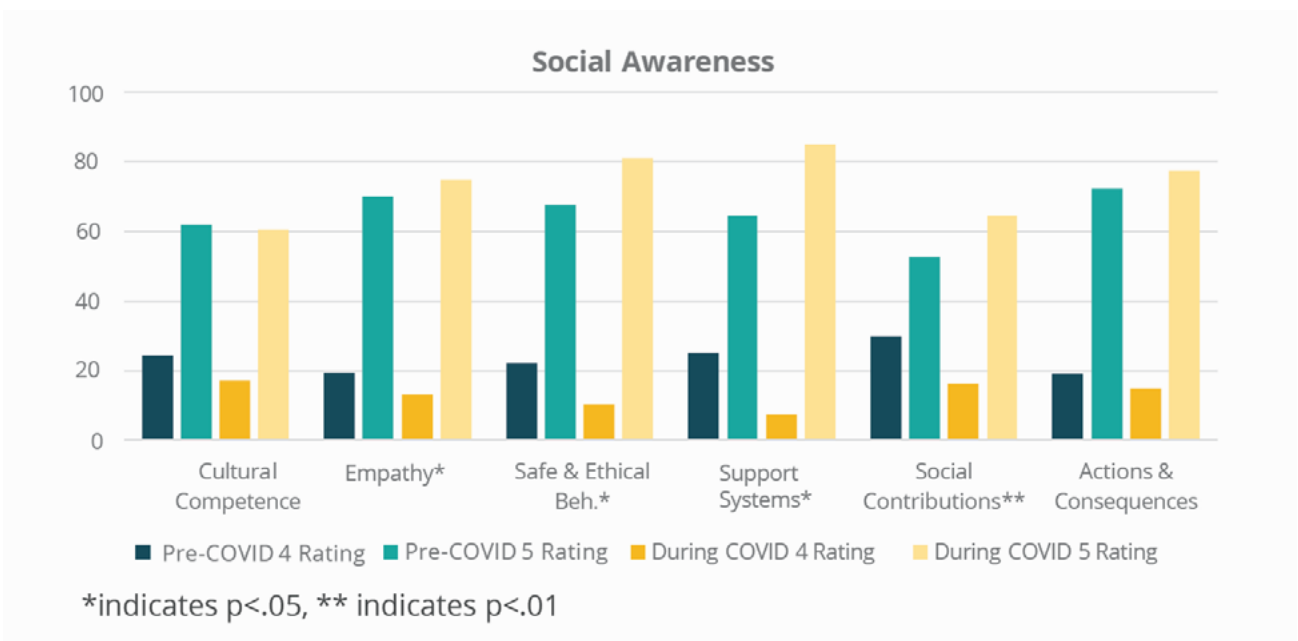
Self-Management

Self-Management. The Self-Management content area includes the following subjects—self-control, stress management, focus, problem-solving, goal setting, and resilience. No significant differences were found for focus, problem solving, goal setting, and resilience although there was a small increase in priority for these areas. When asked to rate priority of these topics before COVID-19 and during COVID-19, our results indicate a significant increase in participants' priority ratings for **self-control** (i.e. the ability to control one's own behavior and emotion regulation; $X2$ (1, N=90) = 4.534, p =.049) and **stress management** (i.e. being able to manage emotions and stress and respond in productive ways and use relaxation tools; $X2$ (1, N=89) = 5.219, p =.035). Specifically, more participants rated these subjects as relevant and very important during COVID-19 than the number of participants that rated these subjects as relevant and very important prior to COVID-19.
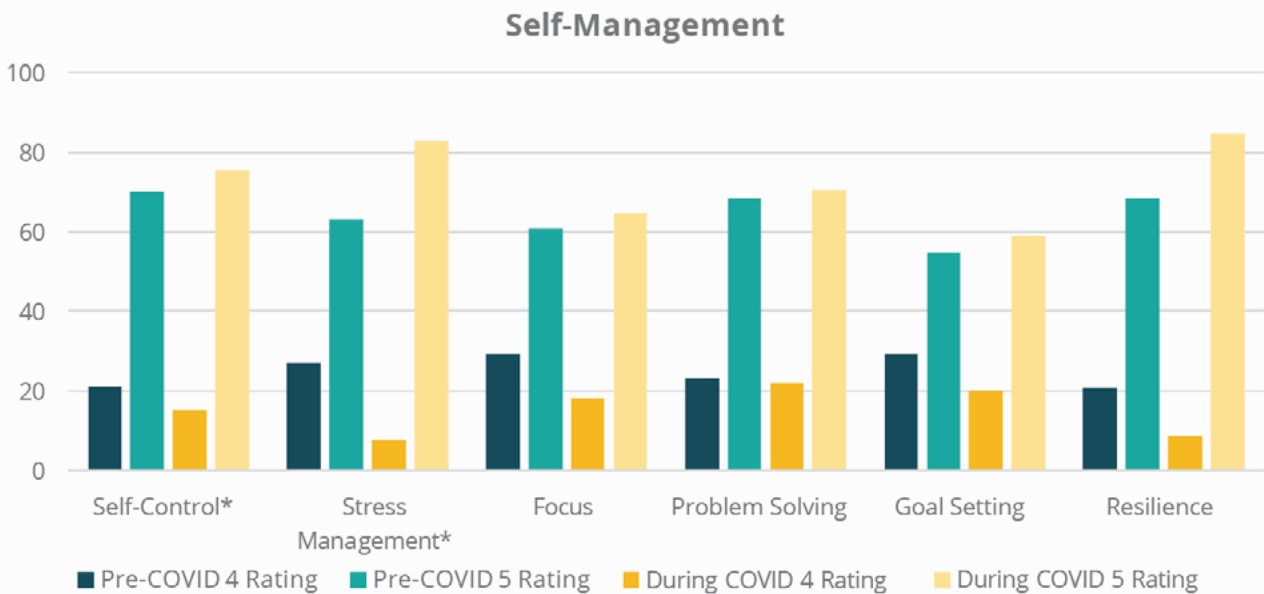

*indicates p<.05, ** indicates p<.01

When examining differences for samples of teachers and non-teachers, our results indicate that there was no significant change in priority of these subjects within the individual samples. The bar graph below shows the percentage of participants who rated the subject area as a 4 (relevant and somewhat important) or a 5 (relevant and very important) on a 5-point Likert scale before COVID-19 and during COVID-19.

Social Skills

Social Skills. The Social Skills content area includes the following subjects — fairness, respect, friendship, relationships, cooperation, and conflict resolution. When asked to rate priority of these topics before COVID-19 and during COVID-19, our results indicate that there was no significant change in participants' priority ratings of fairness, respect, friendship, relationships, cooperation, and conflict resolution. Though these results were not significant, there was a slight increase in relationships and a slight decrease in priority ratings of "relevant and very important" for friendship, cooperation, and conflict resolution.
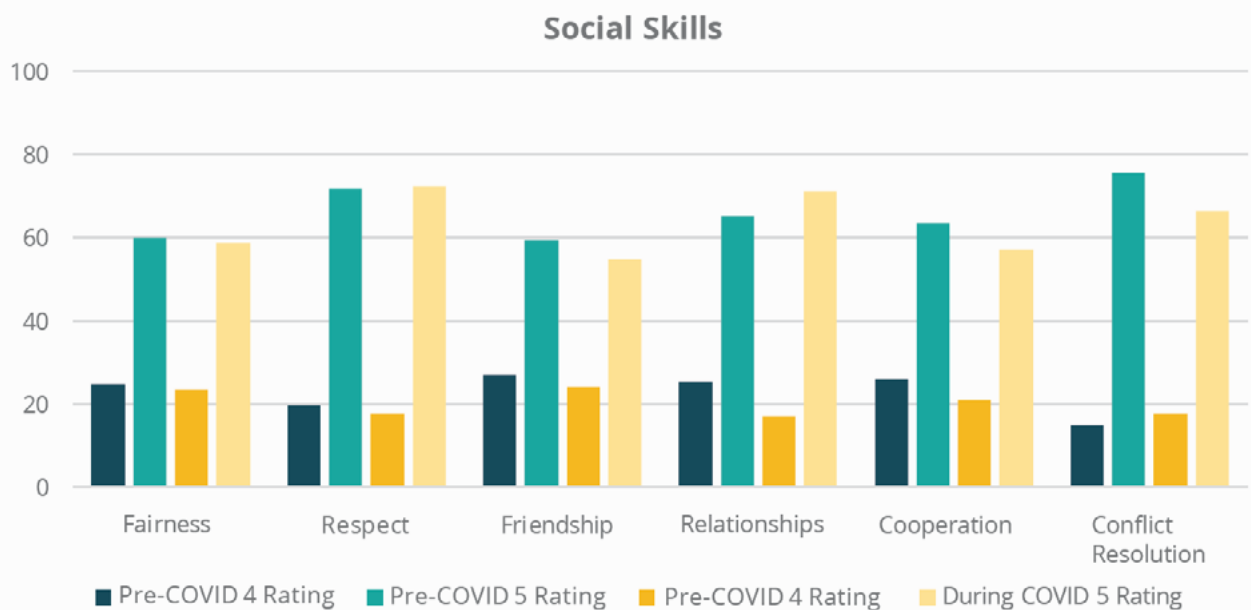

no significant findings

Content Area Ratings

Participants were asked to rank their highest content area priority during school closures. Self-Care was rated as the highest priority by 25% of participants followed by Social Awareness (23%), Self-Management (21%), Awareness of Self and Others (18%), and Social Skills (13%). Each content area includes 6 subjects - see graphs above to see which subjects each content area includes.

Highest Priority during school closures
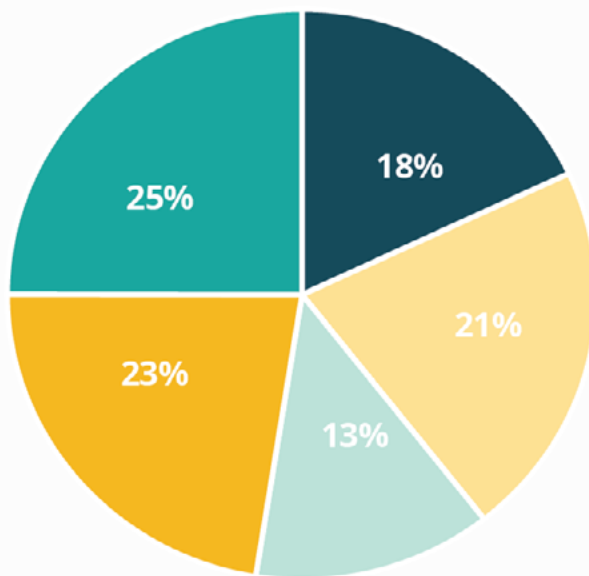
Legend: ■ Awareness of Self and Others ■ Self-Management ■ Social Skills ■ Social Awareness ■ Self-Care

Strategies, Resources, and Tools

Participants were asked what strategies, resources, and tools they were using with students during COVID-19 and school closures.

61% reported using videos for students (such as those included in the Rethink Ed SEL curriculum).

49% reported using online homework assignments.

35-40% of participants reported using on-demand professional development (such as those included in the Rethink Ed SEL curriculum), online 1:1 lessons with students, paper and pencil homework packets for students, suggested resources for parents/caregivers, SEL curriculum (e.g. Rethink Ed), and/or special education tools (e.g. Rethink Ed).

18-31% of participants reported using small or class-size group online lessons, project-based assignments for students, and/or online parent training.

Participants were also asked to suggest tools, resources, or supports that would be of most value at this time for themselves, their students, and the families they serve. Suggestions included more on-demand professional development for SEL, ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis), and trauma. Other suggestions included more technology for students and themselves (e.g. wi-fi, computers, and access to programs for teaching online), training for how to engage students in distance learning, emotional support from administration and other staff, additional resources and supports for parents/caregivers, strategies for improving student and family engagement remotely, and mental health resources for students, families, and staff.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In examining our research questions, we found that Self-Care was the toprated SEL priority area, though a visual examination suggests that three content areas (i.e., Self-Care, Self- Management, and Social Awareness) were fairly close in being highly rated. Indeed, a statistical analysis of this data did show that there was no significant difference in these ratings. This suggests that school personnel see the importance in all content areas of SEL and may make decisions on what to prioritize at the subject level instead of at the content area level. We encourage educators to start from either the subject level or content area level when considering top priorities for SEL in the coming year.

In examining research question 2, we note two important findings. First, there were differences in prioritization of several subjects by teachers compared to non-teachers. This finding suggests the need for SEL teams to consider priorities across school personnel groups and work with these various groups to ensure a SEL plan that takes priorities from across groups into account. One recommendation for doing so is to include both teachers and non-teachers on the SEL team and ensure that the various roles served in the school building are represented during SEL planning meetings. Our second finding showed that there was no significant change in prioritization of subjects under social skills.

Furthermore, visual analysis of the data on social skills suggests a decrease in priority ratings for friendship, cooperation, and conflict resolution but because these findings are not significant, we are unable to say with confidence that these areas became less of a priority during COVID-19. It is possible that this content area and its subjects were just as important as prior to COVID-19 but at the time of the survey more focus was being

placed on supporting students as individuals instead of on social interaction. Though the focus on individual student needs is necessary, we encourage schools to consider social skills as children begin this school year under new guidelines related to COVID-19 to determine what supports are needed to foster the social skills of students in this altered environment.

In examining research question 3, teachers requested additional support in several areas that the Rethink Ed team is equipped to provide resources for, namely on-demand PD for SEL, and trauma-informed care curriculum. Information about the Rethink Ed Professional Development suite with on-demand tailored implementation supports and effective professional learning options is available. Our Trauma Toolkit with resources to support social, emotional, and mental well-being following a traumatic event will be available this August. More information about the Trauma Toolkits K-12 curriculum equipped with strategies and resources for supporting your school community is available [here.](#)

As suggested by the Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning's Implementation guide, we recommend that schools create a needs assessment in light of the COVID-19 pandemic to map out priority areas of SEL for their students and staff. We also suggest that schools expand this assessment to include parents as they are now taking on a larger role in their children's schooling. As our findings suggest, these priorities may differ across various groups within a school and we expect differences between school and home priorities. To support SEL needs widely, it is important to include stakeholders from each group (i.e., teachers, non-teachers, parents, students) in determining the needs of your school population. This assessment can be the first step in determining how best to use the Rethink Ed curriculum to support your school community. In addition, we urge schools to explore new resources provided byRethink Ed to combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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White **Paper**

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About Us

Rethink Ed was founded on a simple, yet powerful idea: To re-think education. To make it better and easier. To unburden school districts and empower educators. To improve outcomes and elevate accountability. To promote collaboration and inspire learning. And most importantly, to make a difference in the school day for everyone – administrators, educators, and students.

The Rethink Ed solution is part of Rethink First, a global company that is transforming behavioral healthcare. Similar to Rethink First's other solutions that are innovating and improving outcomes for clinicians and employers globally, Rethink Ed is pioneering EdTech with our relentless pursuit of innovative methods that put evidenced-based, data-informed, digitally delivered instruction and assessments into the hands of educators, clinicians, and parents who share our singularly minded focus: To power the potential of all children and to work together to help them succeed.

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