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**State Board of Education Public Comment  
Tracy Nájera, Children's Defense Fund-Ohio  
March 15, 2022**

Board President McGuire members of Ohio's Board of Education, my name is Tracy Nájera, Executive Director for the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio (CDF-Ohio), and I appreciate the opportunity to provide public comment during today's meeting.

Born out of the civil rights movement, with more than four decades of advocacy in Ohio, the Children's Defense Fund champions policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure their access to appropriate and targeted health care, quality education, and nutritional wellness.

As an organization, we believe that while children make up 22% of Ohio's population, they represent 100% of our future. We all want our children to receive a high-quality education today that helps them develop the critical life skills they need to achieve their goals and be informed, active citizens in our democracy tomorrow.

However, our students are facing unprecedented mental and behavioral health challenges, and to unlock their full potentials, they need our full support. Even before the pandemic, we know from [Ohio data](#) that 1 in 7 children had three or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) ranking us 46th worst out of all 50 states and that Ohio's rates of youth suicide spiked 46% in just four years. According to national experts, before the pandemic, 13%-22% of all school-age children in the United States experienced some mental health challenge – today though, researchers estimate that figure is closer to [80%](#). Given this alarming data, it is critical that we are equipping young people with the tools they need to recognize, manage, and learn from difficult emotions and seek help when needed.

**In 2019, the State Board of Education adopted standards for Social Emotional Learning (or SEL) life skills curriculum in Ohio's schools – I am here today to urge this board to maintain those standards to set Ohio's students up for future success.**

The research is clear: social emotional skill sets – such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision-making – help everyone, especially youth, cope with stress, uncertainty, and the complex realities that have complicated our daily lives before, but especially since, the COVID-19 pandemic began.

SEL is not the same as mental health treatment and instead supports mental health by providing education about avoiding risky behaviors and creating protective factors against mental health risks. As part of a system of supports in schools, SEL helps in early identification of children struggling with behavioral health challenges that require referrals for treatment by a behavioral health professional.



[Social emotional learning](#) is defined as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.” Also referred to as “life skills” or “soft skills”, SEL prepares children to build and maintain positive relationships, excel academically, make responsible decisions, and collaborate in the workplace.

These skills are the foundation for learning, and they improve academic outcomes. An [analysis](#) of 213 classroom-based SEL programs showed that participants saw an 11-percentile-point gain in academic achievement. Integrating SEL in student learning reduces rates of disciplinary infractions and justice system involvement, prevents bullying, and improves the relationships students have with their educators. Research also demonstrates that SEL in classrooms increases the likelihood of students graduating on time, attaining post-secondary education, and gaining full-time employment by age 25.

There’s a saying that “you get hired on the hard skills and fired on the soft skills”. SEL critically prepares youth for the world of work and as part of a modern 21<sup>st</sup> century economy. According to the World Bank Group, nearly 80% of employers say SEL skills are the most important qualities for job success, and McKinsey & Co. expects the value of SEL skills to be even higher in 2030. In fact, SEL skill sets are exactly what the Ohio business community is seeking in the workforce - the 15 job readiness skills identified by Ohio business leaders in the OhioMeansJobs-Readiness Criteria all align with the competencies in our Ohio SEL standards.

The recent announcement of Intel Corporation opening a facility in Licking County and the investment in \$20 billion is a cause for hope and excitement and has the potential to be an economic engine for the state of Ohio well into the future. Part of this investment also includes \$100M toward partnerships to build the pipeline of talent here in Ohio to fill these jobs. Intel has a longstanding commitment to education and have developed what they call the Intel Skills for Innovation. These include:

- Computational Thinking
- Programming & Coding
- Simulation & Modeling
- Data Science
- AI & Machine Learning
- Design Thinking
- Social-Emotional Skills

Showing leadership at every level of government is critical to the success of this partnership and that begins with making sure we’re preparing our children for success in the world of work.



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It's important that we recognize Ohio's SEL standards were a response to efforts already being made in schools throughout Ohio. Many of which were a direct result of feedback from parents, health service providers, educators, students and business advisory councils. Further, the standards, which are voluntary, were developed over a 10-month period in a transparent stakeholder process to help each district consider their own local implementation based on community needs and values.

No matter who we are - whether we are parents, school administrators, educators or counselors, business leaders, public officials, engaged community members, faith leaders— we all have a role to play in the future wellbeing of our children and our communities.

The development of these life skills happens both at home and in school – to be successful, children depend on schools and families working together to strengthen, not counter, the supports they receive from the trusted, caring adults in their lives.

Abandoning Ohio's SEL standards would jeopardize our students' opportunities for future success, and we cannot in good conscience let this happen. We must prioritize SEL and other family and student-centered approaches to learning that our children need. I appreciate the opportunity to speak today and welcome any questions you may have. Thank you.