



Operation Snowball and Illinois Social and Emotional Learning Standards

By Charla Waxman and Angela Halvorson

As communities and schools seek youth programming that meets the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Standards for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), they should look to Operation Snowball (OS).

OS is a school- or community-based, leadership development program empowering youth to be drug- and alcohol-free. Since 1977, OS has spread across Illinois, the country and the world with over 125 chapters.

Empowering teens to be the front-line of communication within their schools and communities is unique to the OS approach. Utilizing the energy and enthusiasm of youth, and the experience and care of adults as partners creates excitement unparalleled in traditional prevention programs.

It is these core elements that meet ISBE standards for SEL. The linkage to SEL has benefitted school-based OS programs by ensuring that participants:

1. Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success (SEL Goal 1).
2. Use social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships (SEL Goal 2).
3. Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school and community contexts (SEL Goal 3).

Goal 1: Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success

Participants attending a Snow event take part in several program components. *General sessions* are large group experiences. Staff and participants hear a presenter discuss topics like leadership, alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, conflict, relationships or others.

Discussion groups are small group settings of 10 to 12 participants and one youth staff and one adult staff. It is in discussion group where all are on equal footing, regardless of background, social class or academic standing.

All OS chapters are expected to conduct follow up activities. These follow up activities solidify the benefits of the event and cement the idea that Snowball is a process – not just a single experience. Evaluations of each Snow event help youth understand the need to monitor goals and performance. SEL standards stress follow-through for solidifying skills.

Key to student growth, the SEL standards indicate that students analyze not only the benefits of positive peers but the necessity of positive adult role models. The Snowball standard of facilitation requires at least two layers of adult support. First, adults are paired with a youth to monitor and direct the event. Second, youth and adults are trained to co-facilitate groups concentrating on skills, fun and facts.

Goal 2: Use social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships

The essence of a Snow event is the relationships developed between youth and adults. Utilizing *Bruce Tuckman's Group Process Stages* – forming, storming, norming and performing – Snow event participants recognize the perspectives of others, accept differences and communicate understanding.

As the group “forms”, group facilitators instill a sense of inclusion and form a “fit” for group members. ISBE’s standards of social skills that analyze differences and demonstrate understanding and empathy are utilized.



The “storm” occurs as participants communicate and contribute to the group experience. Small group work demonstrates compromise, constructive conversation and acceptance of skill levels among participants.

The SEL learning standards define planning, implementing and evaluating of life skills. As each

small group begins to “norm,” the acceptance felt among members of small group creates a team, allowing small group to function as a well-organized entity. Each group member is able to experience planning, implementing and evaluating as they lead, listen, follow and learn from each other.

In the “performing” stage of the Snow experience, youth and adults work to communicate feelings and opinions without regard for age, position or life experience. Participants understand that they are able to assist others and that feelings and opinions of others may be a reflection of their own.

Goal 3: Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts

Across Illinois, Snowball chapters contributed to the well-being of schools and communities as defined by SEL standard goal 3, C, through Project Sticker Shock. By placing stop sign stickers on alcohol products that might appeal to young drinkers, students were proactive in their stand against underage drinking.

Per the SEL standards, ethical, safety and societal factors in decision-making are key to citizenship in a democratic society. The very foundation of Snowball is democratic; everyone is involved equally; everyone is unique and while each person is responsible for him or herself, they are equally responsible for each other.



In Summary

Social and emotional education helps students develop attitudes, beliefs, behaviors and cognitive skills creating healthy and competent adults (*Elias.1997*).

Students receiving an education that is exclusively academic may not receive skills that meet the demands and challenges of the scope of their lives. Social emotional learning skills and ISBE standards are predictors of success, giving kids a package for life achievement. Operation Snowball supports SEL and ISBE standards. The school, community and OS are an inclusive team promoting youth-to-adult, life-enhancing competencies.

Sources:

- Tuckman, B. W. (1965) *Development Sequence in Small Groups. Psychological Bulletin*, 63, 384-399.
- Elias, Maurice J. (1977) *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning*.

About the authors

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