



Island Roots, Student Strength:

The Kaua'i High SEL Journey

Executive Summary

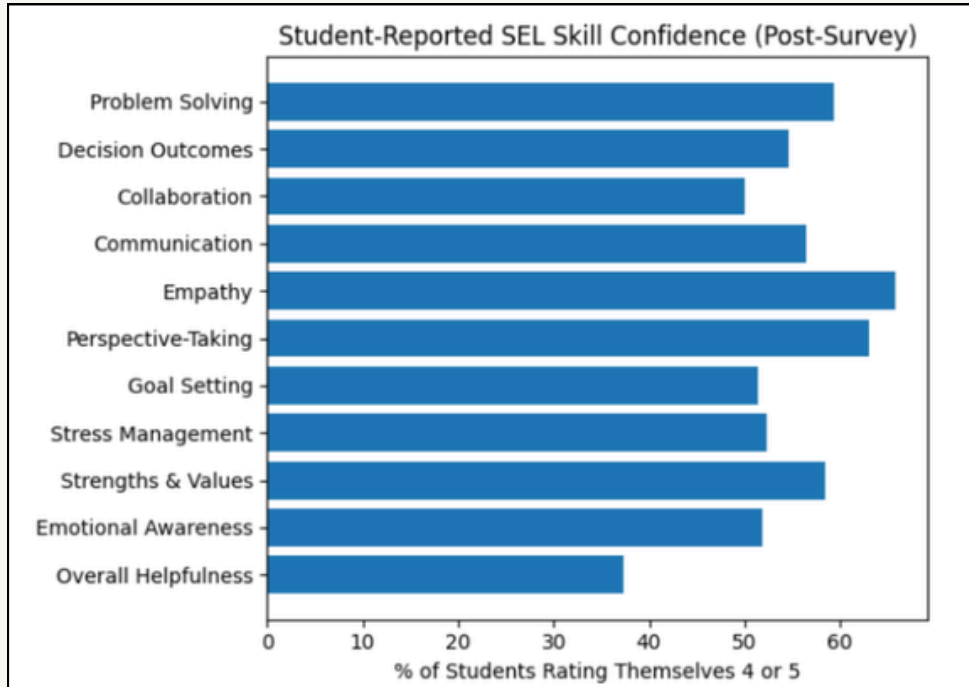
The Kaua'i High SEL Project was implemented between August and December of 2025 and designed to strengthen student well-being, promote equitable learning environments, and expand social and emotional skill development aligned to the CASEL framework. The project consisted of five SEL learning sessions, each focusing on one of the five core CASEL competencies: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making. This report summarizes (a) student demographics, (b) an overview of Kaua'i High School, and (c) the goals, activities, and outcomes of each SEL learning session.

The project findings indicate growth in student engagement, increased emotional literacy, improvements in peer relationships, and stronger decision-making skills. The work also contributed to Kaua'i High's broader MTSS and academy initiatives to support students' social, emotional, and academic needs.

Kaua'i High School, located in Lihue on the island of Kaua'i, is the oldest public high school on the island, established in 1914. It serves students in grades 9–12 and is part of the Hawaii Department of Education. Kaua'i High's mission emphasizes academic excellence, responsible citizenship, and personal growth. The school continues to refine its Freshman Academy and upper-grade academies to better support transitions and personalize learning for all students.

The school integrates multiple layers of student support, including advisory structures, academy-aligned pathways, and MTSS practices that promote student well-being. The Kaua'i High SEL Project aligns directly with these goals by embedding student skill-building into co-curricular learning structures and creating opportunities for relational, reflective, and culturally responsive learning.

Each session was designed to support a single CASEL competency. Activities were culturally aligned with Kaua'i's local context and emphasized practical skills students could use in daily life. Furthermore, each session directly addressed the specific developmental needs of teenagers and worked to be both relevant and informative.



Overall Project Impact

Across all five sessions, Kauai High students demonstrated measurable growth in SEL skill development. Key themes include:

- **Student Engagement:** Students were highly engaged in hands-on, culturally grounded activities. Teachers reported increased participation, improved emotional expression, and more positive peer interactions.
- **Skill Gains:** Growth was observed across all five CASEL competencies, from greater emotional awareness to more thoughtful decision-making.
- **School Climate Improvements:** Students reported feeling more connected to peers and more confident managing stress, which contributes positively to school climate.
- **Alignment with School Priorities:** The project supports Kauai High's MTSS, Freshman Academy structure, and whole-child initiatives by building a foundation of social, emotional, and behavioral readiness.

Despite mixed perceptions of overall helpfulness, the post-survey data reveal several clear strengths that indicate meaningful learning and skill development across the SEL sessions. First, students report moderate to strong confidence across all five CASEL competencies, with average ratings consistently near or above 3.5 on a 5-point scale. Notably, a majority of students (over 50%) rated themselves at the higher end (4–5) for nearly every skill area. This suggests that while students may not always label the sessions as "very helpful," they are nonetheless recognizing growth in their own abilities.

Project Findings

Another key bright spot is the discrepancy between engagement and learning. Although only 37% of students rated the sessions as highly helpful overall, significantly more students reported confidence in specific SEL skills. This suggests that learning occurred even when buy-in or enthusiasm varied — a common and expected pattern in adolescent SEL implementation. Finally, open-ended responses reinforce the quantitative findings. Students were able to name concrete skills they remembered and expected to use, particularly related to emotional regulation, self-awareness, and calming strategies. The ability to articulate specific takeaways indicates authentic learning and retention.

In summary, the data show that the SEL sessions successfully supported skill development (especially in empathy, perspective-taking, and responsible decision-making) even when students did not always perceive the sessions as highly engaging. These results point to a strong foundation on which to build, with future opportunities focused on increasing relevance, explicit skill labeling, and student connection to the purpose of SEL learning.

Conclusion

The Kauai High SEL Project successfully expanded students' social and emotional skills and strengthened the overall school community. By grounding the work in the CASEL framework and Kauai's rich cultural context, the project fostered meaningful student reflection, stronger relationships, and more responsible decision-making. The momentum generated by this project provides an opportunity for continued SEL integration and long-term positive outcomes for Kauai High's students.

