



## ENHANCING SOCIAL EMOTIONAL OUTCOMES: COLLABORATING TO INCREASE MOVEMENT THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL DAY

Julie B. Kornbluth, MA, OTR/L & Linda Okonsky, MS, OTR/L

### STUDY OBJECTIVE

To examine how Occupational Therapy Practitioners (OTPs) and Teachers integrate movement to support Social Emotional Learning (SEL) amid increasing student needs, and to compare changes in perceived need, training, and collaboration from 2024 to 2026.

### WHY THIS MATTERS?

Movement Enhances: Regulation, Engagement & Academic Performance

- SEL competencies are foundational to student participation and learning.
- Despite increasing SEL needs, structured integration of movement remains inconsistent.
- Movement-based SEL integration aligns directly with OTP expertise in sensory processing, self-regulation, and participation.

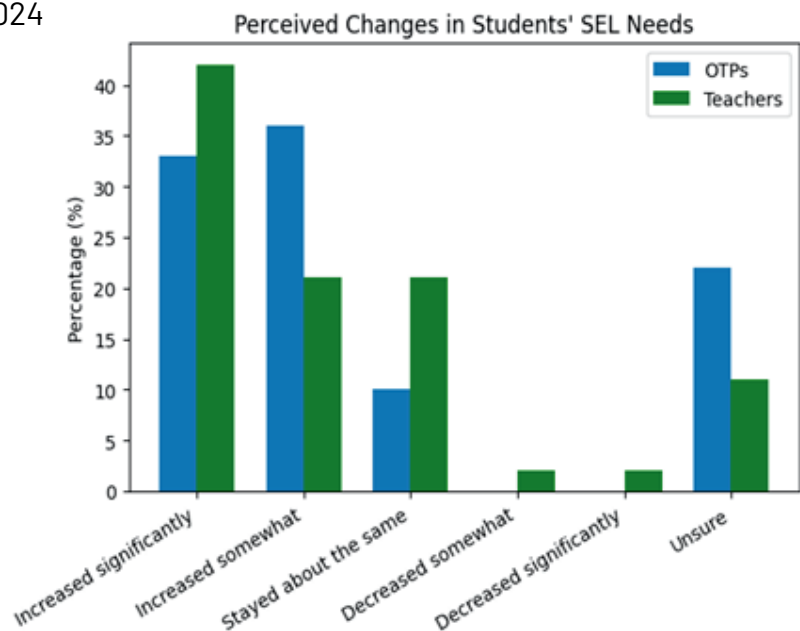
### METHODS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

**Design:** Nationwide voluntary online survey

**Participants:** 85 OTPs | 45 teachers (88% SPED)

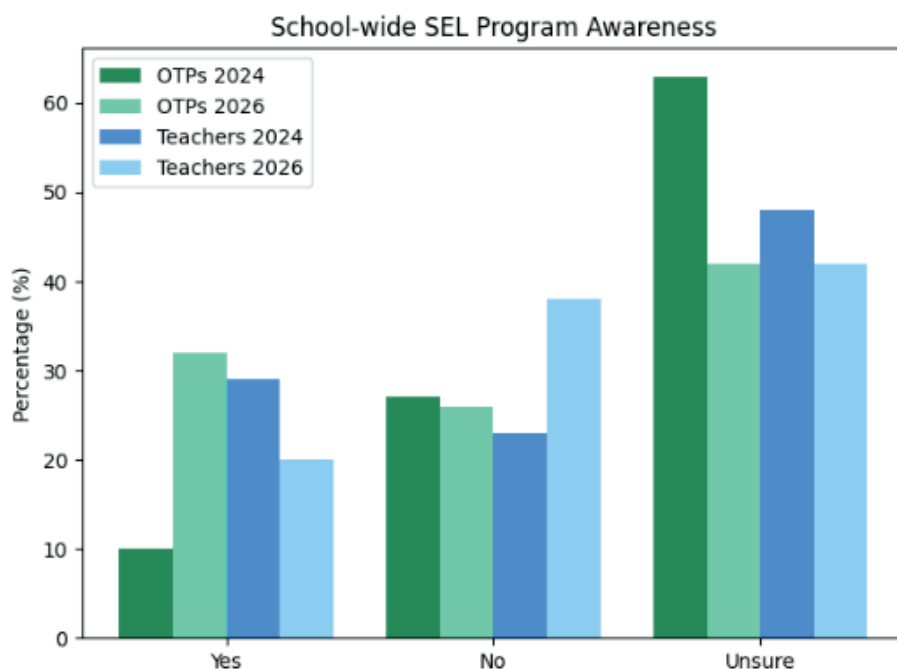
**Grades:** Preschool- High School (approx. 50% preK-5)

**Comparison:** Similar sample size in 2024





## 2026 - Does your school have a school wide SEL program?



**Programs reported:** Zones of Regulation, Second Step, Social Thinking, 1-2-3 RESET, Unique Learning Systems, STARS, Mindfulness

**More than 50% of teachers surveyed reported the following positive impacts in student's social emotional well-being resulting from incorporation of movement or physical activities:**

- Improved self-regulation
- Increase focus and attention
- Positive effects on mood and emotions
- Improved classroom behavior

**High Need + Limited Training + Inconsistent Collaboration = Opportunity for OTP Leadership**

### Results: Key Findings

Four key themes emerged from the survey, as follows.  
Please read on for more information on each!

1. **SEL Training Gaps Persist**
2. **Needs Remain High & Increasing**
3. **Movement Is Used, But Often Brief**
4. **Collaboration Exists, But Is Inconsistent**



## SEL Needs Remain High & Increasing

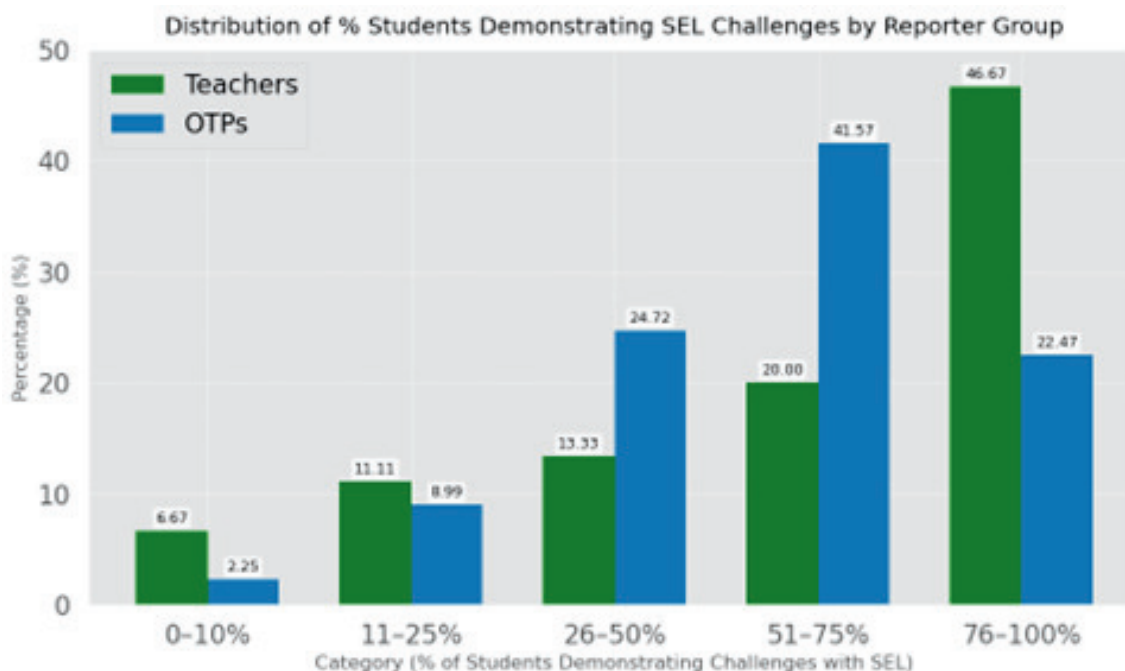
- "...children have changed and seek a lot more emotional needs."
- "A few years ago I would have answered this more around 50% however I truly feel children have changed and seek a lot more emotional needs than in recent years."
- "Especially when frustrated, many students have difficulty listening to standard coping and calming practices; many have difficulties with self-control during learning and self awareness when with peers."
- "Difficulty understanding their emotions, difficulty regulating their emotions, difficulty regulating their behavior and emotions when they're in a group setting."

**64%** of OTPs & **67%** of teachers report 51-100% of students demonstrate SEL challenges.

### Comparison to 2024:

- Elevated SEL need across both years.
- Increased perception of "significant increase" in 2026.

**Interpretation:** Movement is not supplemental, it is essential to classroom functioning.



### Training Gaps Persist

- "I don't know where to start/where to find resources."
- "We try strategies, but we don't really know what aligns with SEL goals."

**30%** of OTPs report no specific training in movement-based SEL.

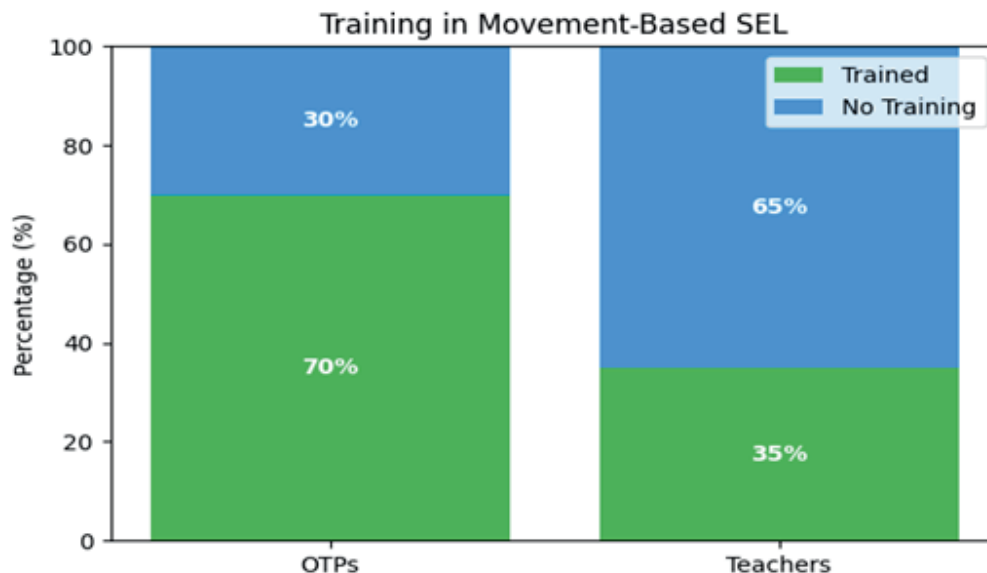
**65%** of teachers report no training; Of those trained, only 18% received it from an OT.



## Comparison to 2024:

- Similar training deficits & training gaps reported

**Interpretation:** A sustained professional development gap represents a leadership opportunity for OTPs.



## Movement Is Used, But Often Brief

- “We squeeze in quick movement breaks when students look dysregulated.”
- “Systemic barriers: staff support, staff training, limited time, budget constraints”

### OTPs: 65% integrate movement into 40% of session time

- Primary purposes: Sensory Processing, Motor Skills, Behavior
- Most common strategies: Heavy work activities/proprioceptive input, exercises, and mindful breathing exercises.
- Positive impacts: Increased focus and attention, Improved self-regulation, and Positive effects on mood and emotions

### Teachers: 40% integrate 1-15 min daily

- Primary purposes: Behavior, Sensory Processing, SEL
- Most common strategies: Short movement breaks (e.g., YouTube Videos, Mindful Breathing Exercises, Exercises & Classroom Transitions)
- Positive impacts: Increased focus and attention, Improved classroom behavior, and Improved self-regulation
- Limitations: Student dysregulation impacting readiness for learning, Concerns about disruption to the learning environment, Difficulty aligning movement activities with academic goals
- 31% report SEL components challenging to add
- Movement remains present across settings, but primarily in brief or reactive formats



## Comparison to 2024:

- Continued reliance on brief movement breaks
- Limited structured SEL alignment

**Interpretation:** Movement is widely implemented yet not consistently embedded within structured SEL frameworks.

## Collaboration Exists, But Is Inconsistent

- *"I would love more support from OT on how to embed movement throughout the day."*
- *"It is still not fully recognized (benefits of movement for SEL), but there seems to be more awareness despite the increased demands of seated academics at an earlier and earlier age"*

## OTPS:

- **40%** report frequent collaboration, most often with SPED teachers (informal discussions & modeling strategies)
- **65%** report increased buy-in from staff regarding the benefits of movement for SEL
- Limitations: Limited time, Space, Student dysregulation impacting readiness for learning

## Teachers:

- **35%** report collaboration (primarily with other SPED teachers, OT, or SLP)
- **50%** report familiar-very familiar with the role of OT supporting SEL through movement
- Teachers report wanting: Resources (29%); Training (21%); Co-planning support (19%)
- Limitations: Limited time, Space, Curriculum demands

## Comparison to 2024:

- Collaboration present in both years with clearer discrepancy in perceived partnership.

**Interpretation:** Opportunity exists to strengthen structured partnerships = OTP integration is not yet maximized.

## SEL Domains Most Addressed

- OTPs: Relationship Skills & Responsible Decision Making
- Teachers: Self-Management & Self-Awareness
- Domains intersect with OTP expertise in: Sensory regulation, participation, and social engagement.
- *"Systemic barriers: limited staff support & training, limited time, budget constraints."*



## Implications for Practice

*Movement should shift from “breaks” to intentional SEL intervention.*

OTPs are uniquely positioned to:

- Align movement with CASEL competencies
- Provide structured staff training and education
- Co-plan SEL-aligned classroom embedded movement routines
- Advocate for system-wide integration
- Leadership in movement-based SEL is within OTP scope/aligned with participation-focused practice.

**Action Framework:** Shift reactive movement break → to intentional SEL-aligned practice

### 1. EDUCATE

- Provide staff in-services on movement-based SEL
- Develop micro-learning modules on regulation strategies
- Share structured SEL-aligned movement toolkits

### 2. EMBED

- Align movement strategies with specific SEL competencies
- Integrate regulation routines into daily classroom transitions
- Use data to guide targeted movement interventions

### 3. ELEVATE

- Advocate for school-wide movement frameworks
- Collaborate with administrators for sustainable implementation
- Position OTPs as leaders in whole-child, participation-focused practice

## What This Means For Schools

- Professional development needed
- Structured collaboration time
- SEL alignment within MTSS frameworks

## Successful Implementation Ideas:

- Special Education staff training at the beginning of the year and strong support from staff to carryout OTP accommodations.
- Providing teachers with videos/movement ideas to incorporate throughout their day to improve readiness.

## Conclusions

- SEL needs remain elevated
- Training and structured collaboration have not kept pace
- Movement is widely used, but often without intentional alignment to SEL outcomes
- Findings across 2024 and 2026 highlight an opportunity for OTPs to lead movement-based SEL integration through education, collaboration, and advocacy.
- System-level integration is the next step

## Future Directions

- Examine long-term outcomes of structured movement-based SEL models
- Evaluate impact of OT-led staff training initiatives
- Explore systems-level implementation across districts
- Continue longitudinal comparison beyond 2026

### Reflection Prompt:

***“If movement were intentionally aligned to one SEL competency daily, what would change?”***

***\*When movement is intentional and collaborative, it becomes a catalyst for student success.\****

**Movement + SEL + Collaboration = Student Success**

**WANT TO LEARN MORE? SCAN THE QR CODE FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND RESOURCES:**



AOTA INSPIRE 2026; April 23, 2026 | Kornbluth & Okonsky  
[Home - SSG Website \(thesteppingstonesgroup.com\)](https://www.thesteppingstonesgroup.com)



**THE STEPPING STONES GROUP**  
Transforming Lives Together