

Development and Implementation of Standards for Social and Emotional Learning in the 50 States



A Brief on Findings from CASEL's Experience

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Abstract

There is growing momentum across the country to support statewide implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL) in preschool through high school. In this brief we report on how many states have developed learning standards to support SEL. We have observed commonalities in the process states have used, and we share some of the lessons we have learned.

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Results of the [CASEL state scan of learning standards for social and emotional learning \(SEL\)](#) indicate there is growing momentum across the country for developing such standards. At the preschool level there are now free-standing standards for social and emotional development in all 50 states. Further, most state standards at the preschool level have many of what CASEL describes as [key features of high-quality standards](#), including developmental benchmarks, as well as guidelines for teachers on how to support students' social and emotional development, how to create safe and nurturing classroom and school environments, and how to make instruction culturally and linguistically appropriate.

At the K-12 level, work on SEL standards is still emerging, but in recent years it has begun to accelerate. Specifically, although we are aware of only four states that have completed free-standing SEL standards that include K-12 developmental benchmarks ([Illinois, 2004](#); [Kansas, 2012](#); [West Virginia, 2012](#); and Pennsylvania, 2012, whose standards are currently in the process of revision), we know of two additional states currently developing K-12 standards for SEL.

Additional features of high-quality standards are important to ensure the standards will be implemented. Kansas has developed guidelines for teachers to support social and emotional development, and Illinois provides guidelines for creating positive school climate. In the past some states developed general standards that did not include grade-level benchmarks, and those may have been less likely to have been implemented or to have affected instruction. Developmental or grade-level benchmarks are important in helping teachers know what to anticipate, which is why we identify them as a key feature of high-quality standards and why we recommend that states include them.

At the K-12 level we found that five additional states ([Washington](#), [Idaho](#), [Connecticut](#), [Ohio](#), and [Massachusetts](#)) have developed free-standing standards for SEL that extend from preschool into the early elementary grades. Several additional states have also developed free-standing guidelines to support implementation of SEL (e.g., [New York](#), [Massachusetts](#), and [Tennessee](#)).

Illinois became the first state to develop standards for SEL at the K-12 level, and today CASEL is aware of at least 12 other states that are in the process of developing standards and guidelines to support SEL implementation. Further, we are aware of two other states that have begun laying the groundwork for developing standards although

they have not yet initiated a formal process. Of the 13 states that have already begun developing standards or guidelines for SEL implementation at the K-12 level, CASEL has supported 10 to varying degrees, and this has given us the opportunity to learn about the typical process of developing standards in many states. Although every state is unique, with a variety of characteristics and politics, we have observed that there are commonalities in the process across states, and we believe other states can benefit from knowing about them. In the remainder of this document we share some of the lessons we have learned.

External Initiatives or Funding May Inspire Standards

To begin, we have observed that at least four states were prompted to begin developing SEL standards because of funding or collaborative initiatives organized by external agencies or organizations. For example, three states that were participating in a National Governor's Association initiative focused on aligning early childhood and early elementary standards. The work in Kansas was supported by a funding opportunity from the U.S. Department of Education, Partnership for Character Education Program, and these activities resulted in the development of learning standards. However, although several states began developing SEL standards because of funding or other initiatives, most began the work independent of external initiatives or funding.

Outside Experts Appear to Support the Process

All 10 of the states with which we are familiar that developed learning standards for SEL consulted with outside experts or organizations (including, but not limited to, CASEL). This makes a lot of sense, given that educators do not typically have a background in research or practice related to social and emotional development. We encourage states to continue to partner with researchers and external organizations that may be helpful in providing content for standards and benchmarks that is drawn from research, i.e., that is evidence-based.

Bills and Legislation May Be Helpful

Four states began developing SEL standards because of legislative bills either under consideration or enacted. The level of detail varied across the examples we have identified (e.g., [Illinois](#), [Kansas](#), [Washington](#), and [West Virginia](#)). We are aware of at least one other state that is considering developing legislation following the development of standards.

States Follow a Systematic Process

All states that have developed standards for SEL followed a relatively systematic process, although the exact sequence of activities varied. For example, some states may develop standards in response to legislation while others may later circle back to create legislation after standards are developed. Some states begin the process by developing standards and then develop guidelines or plans for implementation. In other cases, states may begin by developing guidelines for implementation.

In a few states we have observed that in the early stages, a passionate advocate for SEL may be important in moving the process forward. However, this is not a universal finding.

All the states we have worked with began by forming a writing team that was typically coordinated by a lead writer or editor. Our observation is that the lead writer played a critical role in determining the final content and quality of the standards and ultimately shaping the standards. Lead writers can also benefit from consultation with outside experts, particularly if they are not themselves experts in SEL. We noted that many state teams may not have internal expertise in SEL.

Writing teams typically consisted of a variety of important stakeholders from within state departments of education, as well as one or more members who were external agency stakeholders and one or more consulting experts in SEL. Teams varied in size across states, from 4 or 5 to 10 or more. Sometimes writing committees form subcommittees that focus on specific subsets of standards or benchmarks. At other times the full committee has worked together to develop the full set of standards.

Except in the case of Illinois, writing teams usually began the process of drafting standards by reviewing and drawing heavily from standards and guidelines for SEL that already existed in other states or districts (such as those of Anchorage, Alaska). Almost always the teams considered the pioneering Illinois standards. Once draft standards were developed they were then shared with a broader audience of stakeholders. Draft standards were typically then posted on the state's website for public comment. At the end of the process, which often took a year or more, the standards were submitted to the state board of education for approval.

In working with states over the years CASEL has made several observations about this process. First, we have

learned that there are often political sensitivities in states, particularly in light of undercurrents related to the Common Core State Standards. Depending on the level of anticipated resistance to the idea of any new standards, we have observed that standards-writing teams are often cautious during the early phases of their work not to draw too much attention – “until there is a well-developed draft set of standards to defend.” Further, all of the SEL standards to date have been voluntary. They have been designed to articulate goals for students related to social and emotional learning, but, in contrast to academic standards, they have not been required.

Statewide Advocacy May Help

In approximately one-third of states we have seen state standards work supported by coordinated statewide advocacy efforts (e.g., [Massachusetts](#), [Washington](#)). The sequence of advocacy activities has varied, however. Coordinated advocacy typically precedes the development of standards, but in some cases it has been organized following the release of standards in order to help support their implementation.

Most states do not have ways of monitoring implementation once SEL standards are released, and there are questions in many states about whether and how standards are being implemented. More work is needed to develop systems for monitoring the implementation of SEL standards. Stronger communication and advocacy strategies may enhance the rollout of standards and promote implementation. It is also critical to connect standards to professional development efforts.

Conclusion

There is currently growing momentum in the states in favor of social and emotional learning, and increasingly states are developing standards to support SEL implementation. Standards may take root and grow over time, but we have observed that planning is important if high-quality implementation is to occur. Further, we have observed that states are more successful when they have developed coordinated plans for implementation, particularly when they develop plans for professional development to support standards.

As part of the CASEL state scan of learning standards for SEL, we have also observed that standards may be unnecessarily detailed and complex, and we believe this may complicate implementation. For example, standards documents may include a large number of benchmarks (e.g.,

500 or more) for a single grade level, or a single standards statement or benchmark may cover multiple core competencies. CASEL is working to develop national model standards that are simple and clear in order to assist states in developing high-quality, evidence-based standards.

Ultimately CASEL will conduct a Collaborating States Initiative to explore best practices to support states developing standards for SEL. Our goal is to partner with states at varying points in the process—including states that are at

the very beginning and currently have no standards for SEL beyond preschool, to states that may have SEL standards from preschool into the early elementary grades, to states that have fully developed sets of SEL standards for preschool through high school that want to develop goals and plans for implementation. With funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, CASEL is about to launch a Collaborating States Initiative that will establish a professional learning community of states. Please continue to visit the CASEL [website](#) for details.

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