

Emerging Insights

Advancing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as a Lever for Equity and Excellence

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About the Equity Work Group

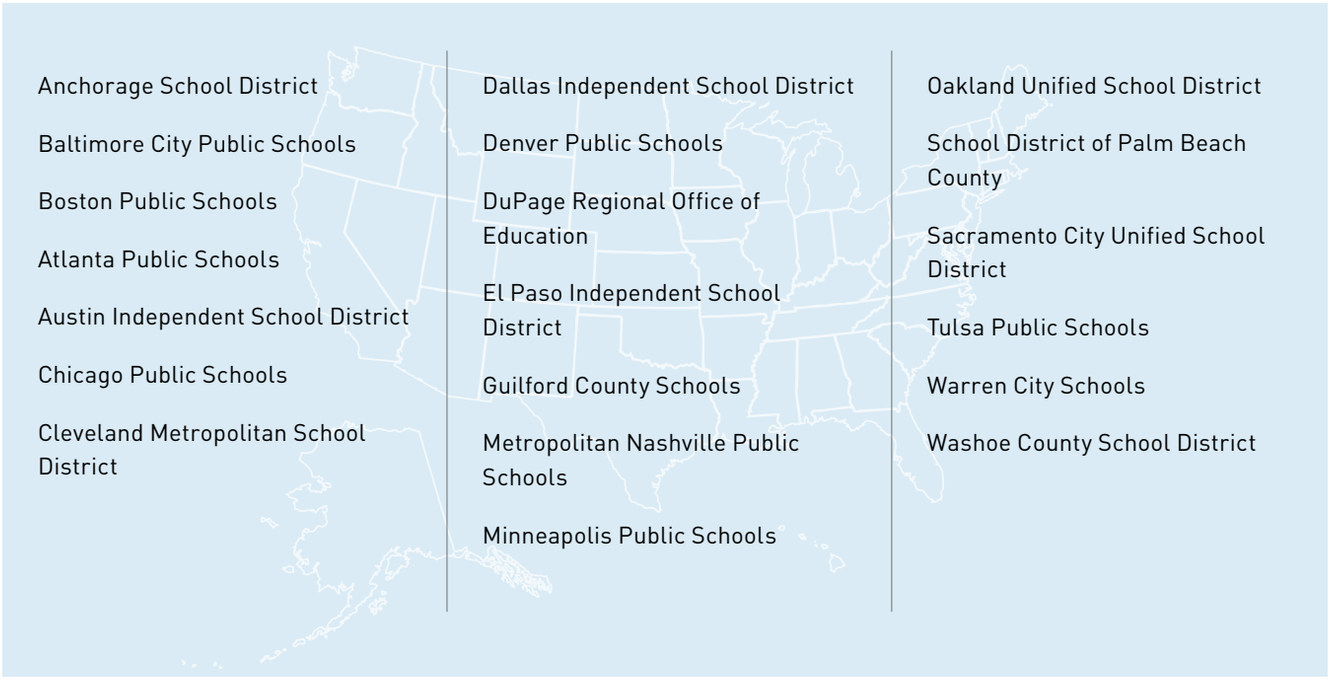
Since 2011, CASEL has been working closely with a wide range of school districts in the Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) to support their efforts to implement systemic high-quality SEL and to share those learnings broadly. As districts raised questions and explored intersections between their SEL and equity efforts, including how SEL implementation could be better leveraged to support broader goals around educational equity, the Equity Work Group (EWG) was formed in the spring of 2016 to provide a professional learning community for the SEL and equity leaders in the CDI districts.

The purpose of the EWG is to create a thriving community of learning that fosters awareness, knowledge, skills, and relationships necessary to implement SEL to create and sustain equitable educational ecosystems. Biannual meetings bring together practitioners and researchers in a cycle of internal learning and codifying and sharing learnings back to the broader field.

Through the EWG, CASEL aspires to learn and share how district partners approach, understand, and seek to leverage systemic SEL to surface and examine inequities, and co-construct solutions that result in more equitable learning environments and outcomes for students. Members have reported incorporating new practices and learning from the EWG into their districts, including deeper collaboration between academic, SEL, and equity teams; strategies for elevating youth and family voice; and professional learning aimed at building equitable learning environments. In the coming years, EWG efforts will expand across all CDI professional learning to support districts in creating a unified professional learning and implementation plan that develops a shared understanding of SEL in service of equity and excellence, grapples with broad issues of systemic racism and oppression in education and society, and delves into local strengths and challenges related to systemic implementation. Find updates about CASEL's efforts to advance SEL in service of equity and excellence at casel.org/lever-for-equity.

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Anchorage School District

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Introduction and Summary

As school systems across the country continue to wrestle with persistent inequities in students' opportunities and outcomes, we can and must advance high-quality, systemic social and emotional learning (SEL) in ways that support school districts and stakeholders in their larger efforts toward educational equity and excellence.

While SEL alone will not solve longstanding and deep-seated inequities in the education system or the broader society, SEL has the potential to cultivate knowledge, beliefs, practices, and relationships that:

- **Help individuals, groups, and institutions examine and interrupt inequitable policies and practices.**
- **Create opportunities for students, families, and educators to co-construct more inclusive, student-centered school environments.**
- **Reveal and nurture the interests, talents and contributions of children, youth, and adults from diverse backgrounds.**
- **Create more fertile learning environments and improved developmental outcomes for all individuals.**



For example, systemic SEL implementation can help schools and districts create conditions that support students and adults in developing self-awareness and self-management to discuss personal and group strengths and biases, social awareness and relationship-building skills to foster cross-cultural relationships, and responsible decision-making skills to reflect on and address the impacts of racism and other forms of inequitable treatment.

The process of defining equity is important and complex. For this report, we offer working definitions to guide our understanding:

Educational equity occurs when "every student has access to the educational resources and rigor they need at the right moment in their education across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background, and/or family income."[1]

Equitable learning environments "respond to the diversity of a school or classroom community, intentionally create rich opportunities for student action and reflection, attend to young people's psychological experience of learning, and develop their feelings of competence, connectedness, and purpose."[2] SEL implementation both contributes to and depends upon an equitable learning environment where all students and adults feel respected, supported, and engaged.[3]

1 The Aspen Education & Society Program and the Council of Chief State School Officers. (2017). Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Education Chiefs. Washington, D.C.
2 University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. (2020). Equitable Learning and Development.
3 Osher, D., & Berg, J. (2017). "School Climate and Social and Emotional Learning: The Integration of Two Approaches." Edna Bennet Pierce Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University.

While CASEL has a long-standing commitment to equity, we recognize there is significant work to be done if SEL is going to realize its full potential as a lever for fostering equitable environments and supporting all students in their cognitive, academic, social, and emotional development.

Our recent landscape scan (Jagers, Williams, Rivas-Drake & Romeo, 2018) began to surface and organize basic and applied research on the range of ways in which core SEL competencies are understood and the content and processes that are implemented across classrooms, schools, families, and communities. This work provides insights into the available evidence and reveals needs and opportunities for our emerging research-practice partnership agenda.

The ongoing efforts of the CASEL Equity Work Group (EWG) offer another access point into the intersections of SEL and equity. CASEL began convening district and research partners as an EWG in 2016. Since then, the EWG has aimed to facilitate integration of SEL and equity efforts both across and within districts and to support members with research, policy positions, and promising practices for leveraging SEL to promote equity and excellence for all youth in school and life. As a community of learners, members of the EWG have come together for a series of ongoing meetings and participated in other in-person and virtual forums to share strategies, resources, and frameworks their districts are using to advance SEL in service of equity.

In addition to convening the EWG, CASEL has engaged in ongoing efforts with practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to deepen what we know about SEL as a lever for equity, including through (1) ongoing reviews of relevant literature (such as neuroscience, civic education, character education, social psychology, and public health) and the development of conceptual frameworks and logic models for how SEL can help promote educational equity and excellence[4], (2) developing and revising tools and resources to support equity-focused SEL implementation (including CASEL's Guide to Schoolwide SEL, District Resource Center, Program Guides, and State Resource Library), and (3) developing an action research agenda in partnership with practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to understand ways in which SEL can support the creation of equitable learning environments and the improvement of developmental outcomes for young people and adults. This includes examining the cultural and historical context for understanding the relationship between systemic SEL and equity, as well as testing, refining, and communicating about the equity implications of the five core social and emotional competencies and the educational experiences that help foster the development of these competencies.[5] These insights will be incorporated into our CASEL guidance, tools, and resources to make them available to the broader field.



4 Jagers, R. R., Rivas-Drake, D. & Williams, B. (2019). Transformative social and emotional learning (SEL): Toward SEL in service of educational equity and excellence, *Educational Psychologist*, 54:3, 162-184, DOI: 10.1080/00461520.2019.1623032

5 Jagers, R., Rivas-Drake, D., & Borowski, T. (2018). *Equity & social and emotional learning: A cultural analysis.* Retrieved from CASEL website: https://measuringsel.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Frameworks-Equity.pdf

THE ROLE OF SYSTEMIC SEL IN PROMOTING EQUITABLE LEARNING CONDITIONS

Systemic SEL is an approach to creating equitable learning conditions that actively involve all PreK-12 students in learning and practicing social, emotional, and academic competencies. These conditions require aligned policies, resources, and actions at state and district levels that encourage local schools and communities to enhance the personal and professional capacities of adults to implement and continuously improve evidence-based programs and practices; create an inclusive culture that fosters caring relationships and youth voice, agency, and character; and support coordinated school-family-community partnerships to enhance student development.

Based on learnings from research and district partnerships, CASEL has developed a Theory of Action for Systemic SEL Implementation that seeks to support schools and districts in promoting equitable learning environments and optimal outcomes for all students. Systemic SEL implementation extends beyond student skill-building to addressing systems-level change by attending to the role of adults while prioritizing the voices and perspectives of youth, families, and communities. CASEL has also shared *transformative SEL* as a way to focus systemic SEL implementation explicitly on equity goals. Transformative SEL is a process where young people and adults build strong, respectful, and lasting relationships that facilitate co-learning to critically examine root causes of inequity, and to develop collaborative solutions that lead to personal, community and societal well-being.[6]

CASEL'S PROCESS OF SYSTEMIC SEL IMPLEMENTATION IS CENTERED ON FOUR FOCUS AREAS:

Focus Area 1

Build Foundational Support and Plan for SEL

Launch SEL with a collective vision and robust plan and sustain efforts with aligned resources and ongoing commitment.

Focus Area 2

Strengthen Adult SEL Competencies and Capacity

Foster a staff community that cultivate adults' professional, social, emotional, and cultural competencies and their capacity to promote SEL and equity.

Focus Area 3

Promote SEL for Students

Ensure consistent, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate opportunities for all students to enhance and apply social and emotional competencies to daily tasks and challenges.

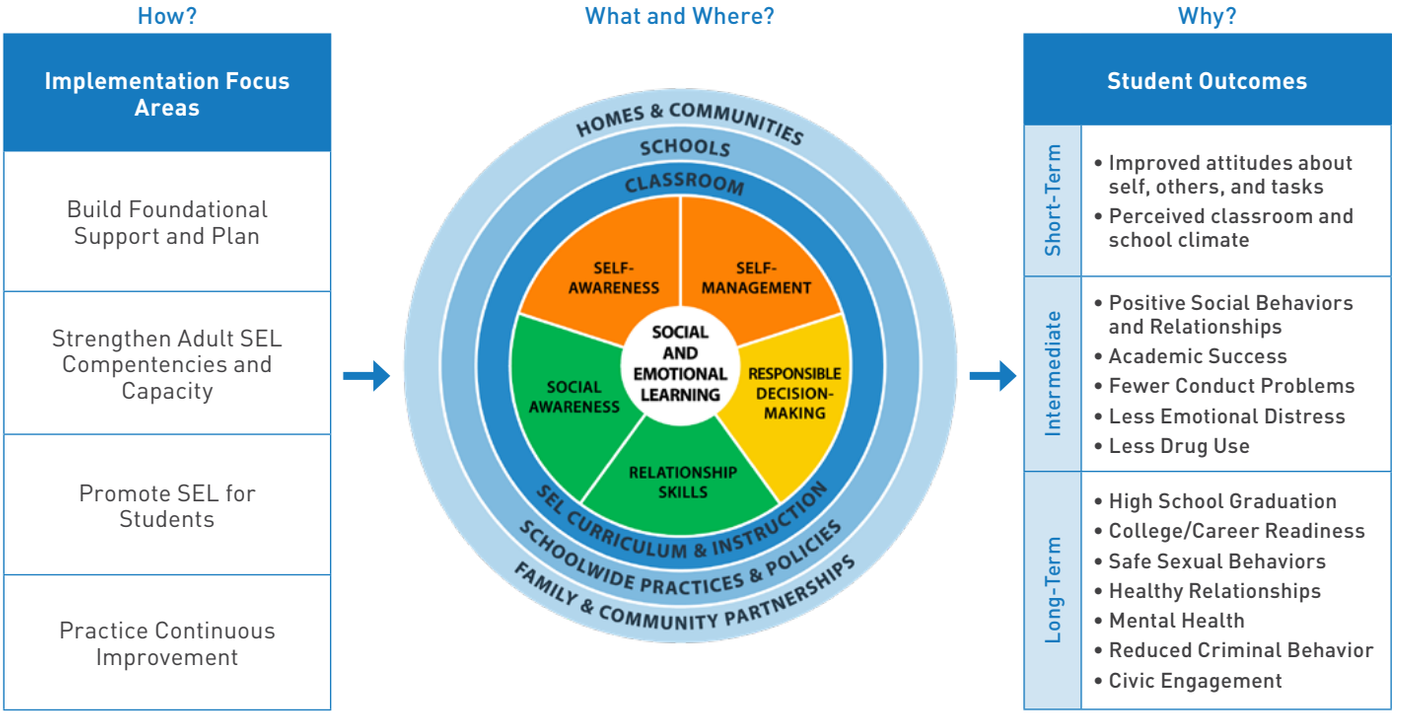
Focus Area 4

Reflect On Data for Continuous Improvement

Partner with school-community members to engage in continuous improvement cycles to set goals, examine data, track progress, and make changes that lead to equitable and optimal outcomes.

6 Jagers, R. R., Rivas-Drake, D. & Williams, B. (2019). Transformative social and emotional learning (SEL): Toward SEL in service of educational equity and excellence, *Educational Psychologist*, 54:3, 162-184, DOI: 10.1080/00461520.2019.1623032

CASEL's Theory of Action | Systemic SEL



CASEL has also offered ten Indicators of Schoolwide SEL that outline components of systemic implementation to promote equitable learning conditions:

- **Explicit SEL instruction:** Students have consistent opportunities to cultivate, practice, and reflect on social and emotional competencies in ways that are developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive.
- **SEL integrated with academic integration:** SEL objectives are integrated into instructional content and teaching strategies for academics as well as music, art, and physical education.
- **Youth voice and engagement:** Staff honor and elevate a broad range of student perspectives and experiences by engaging students as leaders, problem solvers, and decision-makers.
- **Supportive school and classroom climates:** Schoolwide and classroom learning environments are supportive, culturally responsive, and focused on building relationships and community.
- **Focus on adult SEL:** Staff have regular opportunities to cultivate their own social, emotional, and cultural competence, collaborate with one another, build trusting relationships, and maintain a strong community.
- **Supportive discipline:** Discipline policies and practices are instructive, restorative, developmentally appropriate, and equitably applied.
- **A continuum of integrated supports:** SEL is seamlessly integrated into a continuum of academic and behavioral supports, which are available to ensure that all student needs are met.
- **Authentic family partnerships:** Families and school staff have regular and meaningful opportunities to build relationships and collaborate to support students' social, emotional, and academic development.
- **Aligned community partnerships:** School staff and community partners align on common language, strategies, and communication around all SEL-related efforts and initiatives, including out-of-school time.
- **Systems for continuous improvement:** Implementation and outcome data are collected and used to continuously improve all SEL-related systems, practices, and policies, with a focus on equity.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

While there is much to learn and document about effective ways to advance SEL as a lever for equity, this report summarizes five emerging insights based on the efforts of school districts in the Equity Work Group. We use the phrase "SEL as a lever for equity" to refer to efforts that seek to establish a shared understanding of SEL as a driver of systems-wide change, increase the cultural responsiveness of SEL implementation, and employ transformative SEL approaches. While CASEL's district partners have sought to leverage SEL to promote equity across many factors - including immigration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, special education, etc. - many have prioritized addressing pervasive racial inequities that negatively impact the educational experiences and outcomes of Black and brown students. These inequities are closely tied to socioeconomic indicators and impact developmental opportunities and outcomes

These five emerging insights are aligned to CASEL's Theory of Action and based on what has been learned from the EWG, interviews with district partners, and a review of relevant research:

Insight 1: Explicitly position and communicate about SEL as a lever for equity

Insight 2: Prioritize adult learning and critical reflection about their own social, emotional, and cultural competencies

Insight 3: Elevate students' cultural assets, voice, and agency

Insight 4: Partner authentically with families and communities to develop culturally responsive approaches to SEL

Insight 5: Establish SEL data strategies that help to share power, dismantle inequities and build more equitable learning environments

For each of these insights, we provide (✔) **examples of current practices** that CASEL's district partners are using to drive this effort. These practices are not exhaustive but were provided by partners as examples of districts' emerging and current equity and SEL strategies with varying degrees of integration, implementation, and impact. CASEL is working with district partners to promote the collection and review of data that can demonstrate whether and in what ways these practices lead to and/or can be improved on to achieve intended student, adult, and organizational outcomes. We also provide **additional considerations** and **reflection questions** to guide schools and districts in equity-focused SEL implementation, as well as potential **continuous improvement and research questions** to help inform action research agendas for systematically testing these emerging insights to create a more robust evidence base.

It is our hope that districts at all stages of SEL implementation will reflect on these emerging insights as they shape their own strategies for leveraging SEL in service of equity. At the same time, we know much is yet to be learned about how these efforts are best implemented to translate into high-quality educational opportunities and equitable outcomes for all students.

This calls on researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to work hand in hand to further our collective understanding of how systemic SEL can contribute to more just and caring schools and communities where all individuals can thrive.

KEY INSIGHT 1:

Explicitly position and communicate about SEL as a lever for equity

The SEL movement grew out of a desire to provide effective, coordinated strategies that address all students' needs holistically.[7] Building on research on child development from the Comer School Development Project and others, early SEL advocates argued that the lack of attention to children's social and emotional needs was a major reason why students of color and those from marginalized communities were consistently underserved by public education. The W.T. Grant Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence released an early framework that helped broaden conversations around targeting students for behavioral interventions to a universal, strengths-based approach to SEL that could benefit students of all backgrounds. SEL advocates have also emphasized practices and programs that contribute to more equitable learning environments (for example, restorative approaches to discipline that minimize punitive and harmful practices such as out-of-school suspensions). In other words, "concerns about equity have motivated the SEL movement from the start."[8] Similarly, many districts have launched SEL implementation efforts with an explicit goal of improving equitable educational experiences and outcomes.

However, as the field of SEL has grown, concerned scholars, caregivers, community stakeholders, and policymakers have raised questions about how to ensure that SEL is communicated and



implemented with the intended asset-based frame that affirms the strengths, values, cultures, and lived experiences of students from diverse backgrounds. Miscommunication or poor implementation may lead to a misperception of SEL as a way to "fix" the behaviors or attitudes of poor or Black/brown children or as a means to offer even greater social and economic advantages to those in well-resourced schools and communities. Adding to this challenge, opinions vary on the type of educational content and processes needed to close persistent opportunity gaps and fully develop young people's interests and potential in an increasingly complex global context.

7 Weissberg, R. P., Durlak, J., Domitrovich, C. & Gullotta, T. P. (2015). Social and emotional learning: Past, present, and future. *Handbook for social and emotional learning: Research and practice*. 3-19
8 Shriver, T. & Weissberg, R. P. (2020). a response to constructive criticism of social and emotional learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 101. 52-57. 10.1177/0031721720917543.

With these concerns in mind, districts in the EWG are at various stages of aligning SEL to their broader equity efforts and goals. They have paid close attention to how SEL is communicated throughout their school systems, and how SEL and equity initiatives are linked, prioritized, staffed, and funded. Some districts have expressed concerns that SEL could be misunderstood by some as reflecting "white, middle-class values" and therefore an "easier sell" to families, board members, district leaders, and/or funders than do equity initiatives, which seek to shift the balance of power and privilege or call on stakeholders to examine and address biases and related opportunity gaps.

Adding to this disconnect, equity and SEL efforts have often been led by different departments or individuals in district offices, contributing to, for example, lack of communication, miscommunication, and/or a sense of competing priorities. When this occurs, equity and SEL initiatives can become parallel streams of work rather than integrated for systemic improvement. Or, in the absence of either an SEL or equity office or position, district staff may feel unclear about how their work relates to SEL and equity. District organizational structures, and associated allocations of budget and staff, can implicitly communicate district priorities and beliefs. For example, many districts begin SEL implementation within departments overseeing special education or targeted student support services, which risks implying that SEL efforts are intended as an intervention for subgroups of students who are often disproportionately Black or Brown.[9] Over time, many of CASEL's district partners have shifted SEL teams to departments related to academics, equity, or other universal efforts to spur strategic alignment and communicate that SEL benefits all students.



EWG districts have worked to communicate that systemic implementation of SEL goes beyond a narrow focus on student skill-building or behavior management. They have sought to embed SEL and equity into all other work across departments to avoid the perceptions that they are separate initiatives but rather are foundational to high-quality education for all students. This includes addressing the role of adults and school climate in setting the conditions for student learning and engagement; aligning discipline policies, school improvement plans, and instructional frameworks to SEL and equity goals; embedding SEL into human resources and professional learning practices; and aligning SEL priorities with those of families and community partnerships.

District stakeholders note that these efforts to position SEL as a lever for equity often depend on committed and supportive district leaders who frequently and clearly communicate this message. With strong leaders in place, districts use their visions, strategic plans, and frameworks to codify how their systemic approach to SEL supports educational equity.

9 Grindal, T., Schiter, L., Schwartz, G. & Hehir, T. (2019). Racial differences in special education identification and placement: Evidence across three states. *Harvard Educational Review.* 89. 525-553. 10.17763/1943-5045-89.4.525.

District practices aim to explicitly position and communicate about SEL as a lever for equity by

(1) establishing values, commitments, or standards that communicate districts' priorities around equity and the alignment of SEL to these priorities and

(2) creating organizational structures and partnerships to synergistically coordinate SEL and equity efforts.

1. Identify core values, commitments, and standards to align SEL implementation with equity goals.

- For example, Tulsa Public Schools' Commitment to Excellence in Equity includes four key components: intentionally honor diversity, courageously discuss inequities, authentically engage communities, and continuously learn and improve. Social and emotional competencies, including self- and social awareness, support each of these priorities.
- Minneapolis Public Schools has completed their first draft version of their Equity & SEL Standards. These standards are based on the language found in Teaching Tolerance's Social Justice Standards, which leverage social and emotional competencies to promote anti-bias attitudes and behaviors.

2. Deepen partnerships between district SEL and equity teams, including through organizational structures and aligned strategies.

- In Denver Public Schools, the Social, Emotional, and Academic Department is housed within Academics and reports directly to the Culturally Responsive Education Department.
- Minneapolis Public Schools has connected the departments of SEL, equity, and research and evaluation in one office to align priorities, funding and staffing.
- In the Dallas Independent School District, the Student Engagement (SEL) and Racial Equity Office serve on each other's advisory teams and are working to develop joint plans to integrate efforts toward creating systemic SEL and equity practices.
- In the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, the cross-functional Equity & Inclusion Strategy Team, which is working to improve the workplace culture to embrace individuals and practice inclusion, includes members from Cleveland's Humanware (SEL) department.
- In Guilford County (N.C.) Schools, leaders from the equity, SEL, and academic departments are collaboratively developing a framework for integrating SEL and equity into academic instruction.
- In Austin Independent School District, the SEL and Cultural Proficiency & Inclusiveness teams collaborate to support schools in implementing Campus Improvement Plan goals related to equity-centered SEL.
- In Washoe County (Nev.) School District, the Equity and Diversity Department and the SEL Department are working toward intentional collaboration, including reflecting common language and aligned priorities in the district's Equity Framework and SEL Standards.



The commitment to SEL and equity should show up in every part of district work--from how the central office is organized to how classroom instruction is delivered.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

As we see a growing embrace of SEL and equity across the nation's schools, both terms run the risk of becoming amorphous and can easily be used—or misused—as catch-all terms. A primary concern for districts is establishing a shared understanding of the purpose of SEL and its connections to equity. This begins with consistent communication that positions SEL as a universal, strengths-based approach that affirms and promotes understanding of diverse identities, strengths, values, lived experiences, and cultures.

The commitment to SEL and equity should show up in every part of district work —from how the central office is organized to how classroom instruction is delivered. This requires not only breaking down the ingrained silos in many district departments, but creating coherence across all of the programs, practices, policies, initiatives, frameworks, professional learning,
and assessments across a district.

Broad conceptual and implementation frameworks for SEL (including CASEL's widely used framework) have aspired to encourage districts and schools in different contexts and with various priorities to highlight the educational goals they want to prioritize. These types of frameworks can offer a foundation for aligning systemic SEL implementation to equity goals. Research-practice partnerships can help examine how these frameworks are implemented and whether they translate to equitable and optimal outcomes.

Reflection questions to support school and district leaders in positioning and communicating about SEL as a lever for equity:

- How do we frame and communicate about the purpose of SEL, including making explicit connections to overarching equity goals?
- How do we ensure all school and district leaders understand and pursue SEL through an equity lens?
- How do we elevate a strengths-based and culturally relevant understanding of SEL across aligned programs, practices, policies, initiatives, frameworks, professional learning, and assessments?
- How do we organize fiscal and human resources to support coherent efforts around SEL and equity?

Examples of research and continuous improvement questions to inform an aligned action research agenda:

- How do district commitments, communications, and standards around SEL and equity influence the mindsets and practices of district staff from various departments? Which district organizational structures and processes most effectively and coherently align SEL with equity efforts and link them with the work of other units (e.g., teaching and learning and research and evaluation)?
- How can education leaders at the school, district, and state levels effectively communicate with and create opportunities for parents, community members, and other stakeholders to actively engage in equity-focused SEL initiatives?

KEY INSIGHT 2:

Prioritize adult learning that fosters critical reflection on one's own social, emotional, and cultural competencies

To reach the goals they've set for SEL and equity, district leaders have learned that efforts to create deep, systemic improvements rely on adults. Recent research has highlighted the importance of teachers' social and emotional competencies in the teaching and learning process. [10, 11] Studies have found that teachers with stronger social and emotional competencies are less likely to report burnout,[12] demonstrate higher levels of patience and empathy,[13] and have more positive relationships with students,[14] contributing to their academic, social, and emotional development.



Educators' cultural competence is a core component of social and emotional competence. By *cultural competence*, we mean the ability to critically examine the social and cultural identities of oneself and others, understand and appreciate diversity from a historically grounded and strengths-focused lens, recognize and respond to cultural demands and opportunities, and build relationships across cultural backgrounds. For example, high levels of social awareness involve being able to take the perspectives of those of different backgrounds and cultures and to empathize and feel compassion.[15] Research across multiple fields has demonstrated that reflecting on potential biases,[16,17] along with emotion regulation, perspective taking, and collaborative partnerships,[18] can help to reduce racial bias that contributes to inequitable outcomes.

10 Schonert-Reichl, K. (2017). Social and emotional learning and teachers. *Future of Children*, 27(1), 137-155. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1145076.pdf

11 Williford, A. P. & Wolcott, C. S. (2015). SEL and student-teacher relationships. In J. A. Durlak, C. E. Domitrovich, R. P. Weissberg, & T. P. Gullotta (Eds.), *Handbook of social and emotional learning*. New York: Guilford Press.

12 Brackett, M. A., Palomera, R., Mojsa, J., Reyes, M., & Salovey, P. (2010). Emotion regulation ability, job satisfaction, and burnout among British secondary school teachers. *Psychology in the Schools*, 47, 406-417.

13 Palomera, R., Fernández-Berrocal, P. & Brackett, M. (2008). Emotional intelligence as a basic competency in pre-service teacher training: some evidence. Electronic Journal of Research in Educational Psychology, 15.

14 Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 491–525. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693

15 Jagers, R., Rivas-Drake, D., & Borowski, T. (2018). *Equity & social and emotional learning: A cultural analysis.* Retrieved from CASEL website: https://measuringsel.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Frameworks-Equity.pdf

16 Devine P. G., Forscher P. S., Austin A. J., Cox W. T. Long-term reduction in implicit race bias: A prejudice habit-breaking intervention. *J Exp Soc Psychol*. 2012 Nov;48(6):1267-1278. doi: 10.1016/j.jesp.2012.06.003. PMID: 23524616; PMCID: PMC3603687.

17 Pope, D. G., Price, J., & Wolfers, J. Awareness reduces racial bias (February 25, 2014). CESifo Working Paper Series No. 4675, Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2411444

18 Burgess, D., van Ryn, M., Dovidio, J., & Saha, S. (2007). Reducing racial bias among health care providers: Lessons from social-cognitive psychology. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*. doi: 10.1007/s11606-007-0160-1

Unfortunately, research also shows that many teachers hold negative stereotypes of non-white students or those who speak other languages, expecting less competent behavior and lower levels of academic performance.[19] Low expectations are often accompanied by microaggressions,[20] small or subtle comments or actions that convey prejudice or stereotyping—for example, complimenting non-white students for "speaking properly." It can also lead to less feedback, less rigorous and engaging instruction, limited access to "advanced" classes (e.g., A.P. courses), and curricula that do not reflect students' community and culture.[21] It is not surprising that achievement gaps are greater in schools where Black and Latino middle school students report more discrimination, feel less safe and less connected with adults, and have fewer opportunities to participate.[22] These impacts may be exacerbated by the reality that teachers in the U.S., who are mostly white and raised in this country, also bring their own cultural perspectives that are influenced by their families, communities, and the larger society. Their experiences shape their social identities, preferences, expectations, and behaviors.

Additionally, the quality of teacher SEL implementation can impact and be impacted by the stress associated with teaching. SEL implementation can be seen by some as an additional stressor—one more "to-do"—for educators already engaged in a stressful profession that some feel is undervalued.[23] This can be especially problematic for teachers in under-resourced/disorganized schools, who tend to have less professional preparation and experience and fewer supports and who may have greater difficulty with regular classroom structures and processes.[24]

While classroom teachers are hugely important to implementing SEL programming and instruction, other adults throughout the school system also play key roles. School and district administrators in particular play a pivotal role in ensuring that educators and other school personnel are supported as they engage in the complex tasks of overcoming their biases and providing culturally responsive instruction while leveraging SEL to prepare students for our rapidly changing diverse society.

As districts in the EWG have worked to address these complex issues, many have identified challenges in turning thoughtfully constructed frameworks on SEL and/or equity into sustainable, supported change within the classroom. Even more complex, they have found that some adults—especially those who have not had constructive conversations about issues of race, bias, and privilege—may struggle to engage in critical self-reflection about their own social, emotional, and/or cultural competencies. For example, this type of reflection may ask educators to reflect on how their social or cultural identities have worked to their advantage or disadvantage in life. In some cases, this has led to racial tensions and conversations about stress experienced as a result of challenges to the sense of privilege associated with being white. This can trigger negative emotions and defensive behaviors.[25] These already difficult challenges can be exacerbated if the district's work climate reflects staff fear or distrust of leadership or among coworkers.

To begin building a supportive staff culture that promotes critical self-reflection, many districts have embedded reflection and community-building practices as regular routines in professional learning and staff meetings. These reflective practices include supporting staff in examining their own social and emotional competencies, as well as their social and cultural

19 Weinstein, R.S. (2002), Overcoming inequality in schooling: A call to action for community psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30: 21-42. doi:10.1023/A:1014311816571

20 Allen, A., Scott, L. A., & Lewis, C. W. (2013). Racial microaggressions and African American and Hispanic students in urban schools: A call for culturally affirming education. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 3(2), 117-129.

21 Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L. & Rose, T. (2018). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*. doi:10 .1080/10888691.2017.1398650.

22 Voight, A., Hanson, T., O'Malley, M., & Adekanye, L. (2015). The racial school climate gap: Within-school disparities in students' experiences of safety, support, and connectedness. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 56(3-4), 252-267.

23 Jennings, P. A., Brown, J. L., Frank, J. L., Doyle, S., Oh, Y., Davis, R., & Greenberg, M. T. (2017). Impacts of the CARE for teachers program on teachers' social and emotional competence and classroom interactions. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 109(7), 1010-1028. https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000187

24 Schonert-Reichl, K. (2017). Social and emotional learning and teachers. *Future of Children,* 27(1), 137-155. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1145076.pdf

25 DiAngelo, R. (2011). White fragility. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3(3), 54-70.

identities and implicit and explicit biases. In addition to reflective practices, districts have focused on building staff capacity to implement SEL in culturally responsive ways, create inclusive learning environments, and collaborate on districtwide equity efforts. Districts are at varying stages of attempting to measure whether these efforts translate into changes in adult mindsets, knowledge, and practices.

District SEL and equity leads have emphasized that in order to create a districtwide culture that supports SEL and equity goals, these opportunities for learning and reflection are critical for all adults in the system, beginning with senior leadership. District leaders note that these efforts require designated resources—including time, people, and funding—to ensure that all educators have access to high-quality opportunities.

Additionally, many districts are working to "operationalize" how staff contribute to districtwide SEL and equity efforts and provide opportunities for staff to learn and practice new strategies. For some, this has included developing clear standards or expectations for adults' social, emotional, and cultural competencies. These expectations can also be reinforced and communicated through human resource policies and practices, such as job descriptions, interview processes, and staff evaluations that reflect the priorities around SEL and equity.

District practices have aimed to prioritize adult learning and critical reflection on their own social, emotional, and cultural competencies by

(1) engaging staff in reflecting on their own social and emotional competencies, beliefs, and biases,

(2) engaging staff in examining inequities and co-designing strategies to promote equity across the district,

(3) building staff capacity for engaging in practices that promote culturally responsive SEL and equitable learning environments, and

(4) embedding SEL and equity into teaching standards and frameworks; and

1. Engage staff in reflecting on their own social and emotional competencies, beliefs, and biases.

- ✔ In Sacramento City School District, the SEL team designed a set of reflection cards intended to guide adults through reflections on their social and emotional competencies with an equity lens, including recognizing their racial and cultural identity and the way that impacts their views and interactions, and reflecting on whether and how they are communicating care and high expectations for all students.
- ✔ Guilford County (N.C.) Schools is engaging district and school staff in SEL professional learning that begins with exploring self-awareness and implicit bias.
- ✔ In Warren (Ohio) School District, the annual two-day district administrator retreat, which includes the cabinet and all principals and assistant principals, has focused on building awareness of personal and schoolwide values and beliefs and connecting these values and beliefs to SEL and equitable learning spaces.

2. Engage staff in examining inequities and co-designing districtwide solutions for equity.

- ✔ In Tulsa Public Schools, the district developed an Equity Allies program in which teacher peer groups collaborate to improve their practice. The first-year cohort, Equity Explorers, develops foundational anti-racism and social and emotional competence, including understanding and processing their role in maintaining and disrupting inequitable systems. Equity Ambassadors, the second-year cohort, continues learning about systemic factors, explores the implications for their classrooms or leadership, and redesigns critical components to build strong classroom culture, inclusivity, and belonging.
- ✔ In the Austin Independent School District, a Cultural Proficiency & Inclusiveness (CP&I) Cohort model offers an extensive professional learning opportunity for staff to engage in deep critical self-reflection and examine their interactions with students, families, and the Austin community. In the first year of a two-year model, staff engage

in an action research project. In year two, they work with the Race Equity Administrative Supervisor to design equity-centered professional learning on self-reflection and educational practices to offer to a wider district staff audience.

3. Build staff capacity for engaging in practices that promote culturally responsive SEL

- In Anchorage School District, Project Ki'L provides teacher professional learning designed by experts in Native culture and languages on how to support SEL and academics while affirming the needs of Native students. They are also working to incorporate cultural competency into the professional learning of other existing teacher leader cadres.
- In Metro Nashville Public Schools, Equity and Diversity University includes courses organized into "colleges" centered on cultural awareness, equity, and diversity. The Equity and Diversity Department also hosts an Equity and Diversity Summit that focuses on implicit bias, culturally responsive teaching, and SEL competencies.
- In Baltimore City Public Schools, cohorts of schools that are launching SEL implementation begin by engaging in conversations around the context and communities they serve. Participants reflect on different parts of the city where students live and explore data related to students' health, well-being, and economic indicators.

3. Build staff capacity for creating equitable school climates that prioritize relationships and minimize punitive discipline

- In Austin Independent School District, a collaborative effort among the Cultural Proficiency & Inclusiveness, SEL, and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support teams supports principals in understanding how to use culturally responsive restorative practices as a lens to reach campus-specific culture and climate goals and objectives.
- Atlanta Public Schools provides professional learning to all school-based police officers to help them use restorative practices to lead community-building circles and build positive relationships with students. The district reports that these practices have led to a significant reduction in arrest rates.
- In Sacramento City Unified School District, the district's academic team works collaboratively with the SEL team to provide teachers with coaching, content, and instructional support for creating equitable learning environments.
- In Oakland Unified School District, the SEL, equity, and academic departments collaborated to embed SEL and equity into professional learning for principals, teachers, and support staff.

4. Embed SEL and equity into teaching standards and frameworks.

- Oakland Unified School District embedded equity-focused Adult SEL standards into its Teacher Growth and Development System to connect effective teaching with goals around classroom community, growth mindset, culturally responsive teaching, and student voice and collaboration.
- In the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, the Collective Bargaining Agreement includes SEL initiatives, such as professional learning, to promote equity-focused SEL strategies and tools that educators can use at their discretion. This was a result of union representation on the district's Humanware Executive Committee, which leads districtwide SEL through collaborative decision-making.
- Tulsa Public Schools has redesigned the coaching model for teacher growth and expectations. The newly developed Tulsa Way for Teaching & Learning features equity at the center of the Relationships, Relevance, & Rigor framework, and is grounded in foundational "Core Equity Practices" for creating culturally, socially, and emotionally inclusive classrooms.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

Transformative SEL offers a way for adults to reflect on how their own social and emotional competencies, and the policies and practices that they put in place, may impact equity. For districts to leverage SEL to create equitable and thriving classrooms and schools, all adults must take on the responsibility of fostering learning environments that promote students' sense of engagement and belonging. Districts must intentionally cultivate in adults the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required for this type of critical examination and collaborative action to address root causes of inequities.[26] As districts expand professional learning to engage staff in reflecting on their own identities, examining biases, and developing equitable learning environments and culturally responsive practices, a commitment to continuous improvement will help ensure professional learning translates into intended outcomes and long-term systemic changes.

At the same time, addressing these adult issues goes beyond professional learning to an examination of the district work culture, including deep-seated issues related to racial tensions, staff morale, and myriad other relational dynamics that may exist across district staff. Systemic SEL calls on districts to expand their efforts to intentionally develop social connectedness, authentic relationships, and a sense of collective efficacy.

Reflection questions to support school and district leaders in prioritizing adult learning and critical reflection:

- How do we strengthen staff relationships and adult social and emotional competencies in ways that allow our staff to reflect on and collectively address inequities?
- How do we strengthen adult cultural competence and support educators in using SEL to more effectively interact with and facilitate the growth of all students, including affirming and promoting the cultural assets that all students bring to their classrooms?
- How do we build the capacity of adults to create equitable learning environments where all students can thrive socially, emotionally and academically?
- How do we provide support necessary for educators to recognize and assess the impact of their own beliefs, perspectives, and biases?

Examples of research and continuous improvement questions to inform an aligned action research agenda:

- What qualities of professional learning—including type of content and mode of delivery; duration and frequency; facilitator and participant background, skillset and diversity, etc.—contribute to educator critical reflection and desired shifts in mindset?
- What educator supports are necessary and sufficient for shifts in educator mindsets to translate into practices that reliably foster students' social, emotional, and academic learning (e.g., sense of identity, belonging, and agency)?
- How does staff collaboration and collective problem-solving influence adult social and emotional well-being (e.g., identity, agency, and belonging) and job satisfaction?
- In what ways do equity-focused adult and student SEL contribute to school climate and culture?
- How can district and school administrators create opportunities for educator collaborations that explore and enact adult and student SEL strategies that are appropriate for the local school community?

26 Jagers, R., Rivas-Drake, D., & Borowski, T. (2018). *Equity & social and emotional learning: A cultural analysis*. Retrieved from CASEL website: https://measuringsel.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Frameworks-Equity.pdf

KEY INSIGHT 3:

Elevate students' cultural assets, voice, and agency

CASEL has suggested that SEL can be leveraged to build authentic relationships between students and adults that facilitate co-learning to examine inequities and co-create solutions that lead to greater inclusion and better outcomes for all.[27,28,29] This transformative approach to SEL supports districts in broader efforts to foster equitable and optimal developmental outcomes that extend beyond achieving individual success in school or career, to also engaging students in understanding how their social, emotional, and academic learning connects with and can influence the social and historical contexts in their communities and larger society.

Transformative SEL can position young people alongside adults "as experts in understanding and fashioning a world that is more just and equitable."[30] SEL content and implementation can be leveraged to explicitly grapple with broader issues of social justice by elevating student assets and agency to resist oppressive forces and circumstances and advocate for and co-create equitable solutions. Promising approaches to transformative SEL include:

- Culturally responsive education including culturally grounded SEL skill development, which promotes social and emotional competencies by emphasizing communal values and affirming student identities and lived experiences.



- Project-based learning, in which students identify a challenging problem or question, actively examine it, reflect on their learning with peer and teacher feedback, and develop a solution to the problem.
- Youth participatory action research, a youth-centered form of community-based participatory research, which is used to engage underserved children, youth, and adults in identifying, researching, and addressing local, real-world problems.

These approaches are not yet widely used and/or examined in experimental research designs but offer much potential for advancing SEL implementation in service of equity and excellence. As districts in the EWG begin to explore transformative SEL approaches, many are building on their efforts to elevate student voice and agency. Districts have increased opportunities for students to share their perspectives and educational priorities, which has helped to advance the work in innovative ways. This has included positioning students as leaders in SEL and equity work.

27 Jagers, R., Rivas-Drake, D., & Borowski, T. (2018). *Equity & social and emotional learning: A cultural analysis.* Retrieved from CASEL website: https://measuringsel.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Frameworks-Equity.pdf

28 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2020). Equity and SEL." *CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL*. https://schoolguide.casel.org/what-is-sel/equity-and-sel/

29 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2020). SEL as a lever for equity. *CASEL's District Resource Center*. https://drc.casel.org/sel-as-a-lever-for-equity/

30 Jagers, R. J. (2016). Framing social and emotional learning among African-American youth: Toward an integrity-based approach. *Human Development,* 59, 1-3.

District practices aimed at elevating students' cultural assets, voice, and agency have focused on

(1) providing opportunities for youth to lead and co-create solutions in their schools and districts,
(2) promoting instructional practices that elevate all students' voice and agency,
(3) engaging students in learning about their own and others' identities, cultures, and backgrounds, and
(4) engaging students in SEL curricula that examine broader historical and social contexts.

1. Provide opportunities for youth to co-create and recommend solutions to relevant issues in their schools and communities.

- In Tulsa Public Schools, a liberatory design approach has provided multiple opportunities to engage students in redesigning their school. An Equity Analysis Advisory Group used a variety of empathy practices, including bus ride-alongs, empathy interviews, and student observations to better understand the ways students are experiencing school. The SEL & Equity Design pilot, now in its third year, provides teachers and leaders the opportunity to practice liberatory design thinking, identify their equity aspiration, and engage in rapid-cycle hacks to make immediate, powerful changes to classroom and school practices.
- Washoe County (Nev.) School District produces the "Strength in Voices" Conference in which students lead breakout sessions on topics such as SEL, equity, school climate, and challenges that students face.

2. Position young people as trusted advisors to leadership.

- Cleveland Metropolitan School District's student advisory council, comprised of 10 students per high school, meets quarterly with the superintendent to provide input on the district's Conditions for Learning survey and address issues related to graduation, attendance, social media, relationships with local law enforcement, and other pertinent topics.
- Chicago Public School's 20-member Student Advisory Council works in subcommittees with district leadership to develop action plans to address school-related policies and issues. They meet with a variety of stakeholders and provide recommendations to the district's chief executive officer and chief education officer.

2. Promote instructional practices that provide all students with opportunities to be leaders, problem-solvers, and decision-makers.

- In El Paso Independent School District, the district has adopted an Active Learning Framework, a small-group, project-based model that engages students in SEL while encouraging student leadership.
- In Metro Nashville Public Schools, the SEL Department and Equity and Diversity Department have worked with the Curriculum and Instruction Department to develop a model for SEL and academic integration focused on elevating student voice. They developed and train teachers on principles of powerful instruction that include (1) instruction is both accessible and rigorous for everyone, (2) all students are doing the heavy lifting/thinking first, (3) all "student talk" exceeds "teacher talk," and (4) all students regularly reflect on SEL and academic skills.

3. Engage students in learning about their own and others' identities, cultures, and backgrounds.

- In Sacramento City Unified School District, all ninth-graders take a course on ethnic studies, which focuses on identity analysis, cultural heritage, and deepening self-awareness and social awareness.

4. Adopt SEL curricula that engage students in examining broader social and historical context and issues of equity.

- Cleveland Metropolitan School District recently adopted Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO) as the district's high school SEL curriculum and pedagogy. FHAO, listed in the CASEL Program Guide as an evidence-based program, is designed to integrate issues of race/ethnicity into instruction and leverages historical examples of conflict, injustice, and discrimination to teach tolerance, social skills, and civic responsibility. The district is rolling out FHAO professional learning that begins with ninth- and tenth-grade social studies teachers and will eventually reach teachers across all content areas and grade levels.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

Transformative SEL can offer ways to position students as experts in their own lived experience, capable of working with peers and adults to co-create equitable solutions. To cultivate this type of learning, districts must cultivate supportive relationships and equitable learning environments where all students and adults feel a sense of belonging and agency. These relationships and learning environments create a foundation for more democratic classrooms and schools that share power between students and adults and offer meaningful and developmentally appropriate opportunities for all students to express their opinions, take on leadership roles, collaborate with adults on strategies for school improvement, and inform decision-making around issues that they prioritize.

Contrary to traditional ideas of how to manage classrooms and schools, transformative SEL potentially includes viewing resistance to injustice as a core feature of healthy social and emotional development that begins in early childhood. For example, educators may encourage students to practice collaborative problem-solving and responsible decision-making by engaging in constructive processes to resist stereotypes and oppressive roles and expectations.

Districts can begin by supporting staff in learning about students' identities, cultures, and backgrounds and in fostering authentic relationships with diverse students. Beyond instructional practices, transformative SEL will also involve district policies, accountability measures, staffing, professional learning, time, and resources that are needed to create truly democratic learning environments.

Reflection questions to support school and district leaders in elevating students' cultural assets, voice and agency:

- How do we create developmentally appropriate opportunities for all students to engage in discussions with each other, raise problems and identify solutions in their schools and communities, productively challenge the inequities that they see, have a voice in how the school district operates, and take on authentic leadership roles?
- How does our school or district affirm all students' cultural heritage and their racial-ethnic identities?
- How do we create schoolwide or districtwide expectations that academic concepts and skills should connect to students' cultural assets, such as designing history lessons that resonate with students' backgrounds?
- How do we facilitate student reflection on their own lives and society, and support student cultural competence by facilitating learning about their own and other cultures?

Examples of research and continuous improvement questions to inform an aligned action research agenda:

- What SEL programs, approaches, and practices are most effective at promoting equitable and engaging learning opportunities?
- How do SEL practices and programs that engage students in examining their social and cultural identities and promote student voice, leadership, and decision-making impact on student's academic learning and other important developmental outcomes?
- How do equity-focused SEL practices and programs impact school climate and contribute to community well-being and thriving?

31 Jagers, R., Rivas-Drake, D., & Borowski, T. (2018). *Equity & social and emotional learning: A cultural analysis*. Retrieved from CASEL website: https://measuringsel.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Frameworks-Equity.pdf

32 Way, N. & Rogers, L. O. (2017). Resistance to dehumanization during childhood and adolescence. In N. Budwig, E. Turiel and P. D Zelazo (Eds.), *New perspectives on human development* (pp. 229-257). Cambridge University: Cambridge, UK.

KEY INSIGHT 4:

Partner with families to develop a culturally responsive approach to SEL

In unpacking potential tensions between SEL and equity efforts, many districts have examined how best to ensure their approaches to SEL and subsequent implementation reflect and affirm the cultural assets of all students. Culturally responsive and relevant approaches to education connect students' cultural references to concepts and skills, use inclusive curricula and activities that encourage student reflection on their own lives and society, support students' cultural competence by facilitating learning about their own and other cultures,; and pursue social justice through examining power and oppressive systems.[33]



The work of informing and co-constructing a culturally responsive approach to SEL requires that districts recognize families as authentic partners with critical perspectives on educational goals and experiences. As children's first teachers, families bring deep expertise about their lived experiences, their culture, and the issues they care about. District SEL and equity leads have cautioned that excluding these important family voices can lead to poor implementation driven by "color-blind" or "whitewashed" strategies that do not fully reflect the perspectives, cultures, or values of all students and families, particularly those from marginalized groups.

Additionally, district SEL and equity leaders have emphasized the need to engage in authentic partnerships that equitably share power with families, rather than the contrived collaboration that some experience when district staff seek to "check off a box" by asking for feedback without valuing families' perspectives. Authentic and equitable partnerships mean that students and families are actively and fully engaged from the beginning and throughout SEL implementation. In this way, districts are hoping to begin situating SEL within the larger cultural and historical contexts of their communities.

33 Aronson, B., & Laughter, J. (2016). The theory and practice of culturally relevant education: A synthesis of research across content areas. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(1), 163–206. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315582066

District practices aimed at promoting family partnerships seek to

(1) engage family partners to collaboratively design SEL efforts and

(2) elevate parent leadership and advocacy.

1. Engage families to define, shape, and guide work around equity and SEL.

- ✔ Minneapolis Public Schools met with families early in their work to co-identify how SEL should look, feel, and sound in their schools. Additionally, the Achievement, Research and Equity division has been partnering with parents to better capture parent and family voice around issues of school climate and culture using a Parent Participatory Evaluation process.
- ✔ Parents in Chicago Public Schools engaged in an SEL Discussion Series for Parents and Caregivers as a 10-week series of discussions on strategies to promote SEL in the home that have been led by parents for parents.

2. Combine equity and SEL strategies to support parent advocacy and empowerment.

- ✔ Sacramento City Unified School District's Parent Leadership Pathway Training supports parents in developing the skills necessary to become equal partners in their children's education and school site/district committees or decision-making. The 10-week program includes themes such as SEL and cultural competency.
- ✔ Austin Independent School District's Families as Partners (FAP) initiative aims to build trusting relationships and equal partnerships between school staff and families. Parents collaborate with staff and administrators on school priorities and strategies including SEL and equity.
- ✔ Cleveland Metropolitan School District's Family Partnership Institute supports parents and caregivers in advocating for their children and develops communities of parents and caregivers that can support one another in their advocacy work.



Create space for families and communities to inform and co-construct SEL efforts from the beginning and throughout implementation—including developing a shared vision and establishing a structure for regular two-way communications.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

The relationships between school and district staff, students, families, and communities are foundational to equity and systemic SEL. While some districts have taken first steps by offering parents greater access to SEL activities or opportunities to provide feedback, families—particularly those from traditionally marginalized backgrounds—often remain at the periphery of district decision-making.

Bridging this gap will mean creating space for families to inform and co-construct SEL efforts from the beginning and throughout implementation. Key issues include how families are engaged in developing a shared vision and plan for their childrens' education; what structures are available for external stakeholders to communicate regularly with district leadership; and how districts align SEL efforts with community groups. Priorities also include providing meaningful opportunities for staff to learn and reflect on the cultures, lived experiences, and perspectives of families and communities.

Partners in community-based organizations and out-of-school time programs, including youth workers, also have deep relationships with students and bring their own expertise in creating engaging and supportive learning environments. These relationships are also critical in order to create alignment between in-school and out-of-school learning.



Reflection questions to support school and district leaders in partnering with families around SEL:

- Do family members believe that our schools and district value their voices and perspectives, embrace their languages and cultures, treat them respectfully and fairly, and reflect their personal and cultural values?
- How can we authentically engage families, community partners, and students in shaping the vision and plan for SEL?
- How can we ensure our SEL programs and practices are culturally responsive, reflecting the educational goals, priorities, values, and perspectives of our families?
- Are our staff's racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds reflective of the broader school community, and how are staff supported to better understand the cultures and lived experiences of families and students?



Examples of research and continuous improvement questions to inform an aligned action research agenda:

- What are effective strategies and processes to ensure that families are meaningfully engaged in vision-setting and decision-making around SEL in education?
- What does a sustained, equitable SEL partnership between districts/schools and family look like in practice?
- What impact does staff social, emotional, and cultural competence have on the quality of family partnerships?
- What are the influences and impacts of family participation in collaborative inquiry on quality of SEL implementation, student perceptions of school climate, and equitable student outcomes?
- What are the ways in which community stakeholders can effectively engage in school-family-community partnership efforts?

KEY INSIGHT 5:

Establish SEL data strategies that help to share power, dismantle inequities, and create more equitable learning environments

All SEL efforts should use a continuous improvement approach, employing logic models and formative and summative data to achieve high-quality implementation processes and outcomes. While data can provide many insights, there is a need to be intentional about making sure that what is designed, collected, and reported shows the full reality of those represented, including their strengths, priorities, and lived experiences. With an equity lens that informs the alignment of (1) frameworks, (2) programs/approaches for adult and student SEL, and (3) assessment, conversations about data can avoid "one-size-fits-all" solutions or inaccurate conclusions that obscure assets and biases and ignore the relevance of environment, identity, and culture.

For example, a framework that connects student outcomes to their sense of belonging or engagement in school can help districts expand beyond a focus on student test scores to how students perceive the quality and relevance of their educational experiences. Additionally, by aligning SEL assessments to a comprehensive framework that incorporates all five social and emotional competencies, districts can avoid overemphasizing students' emotional regulation (self-management) and incorporate issues of identity (self- and social awareness) that are pivotal to healthy development of both students and adults.

Some EWG members have also highlighted the need for culturally responsive data strategies that consider



power dynamics in traditional data collection and continuous improvement processes. **Culturally responsive data strategies take into account how data is captured and used, who it is shared with, and whose stories it represents.** These considerations help address concerns such as how disparities in academic performance data may be used to blame or shame families or students rather than address inequities in resources or district practices, as well as lack of trust in the district's commitment to serving marginalized communities or district staff and priorities that are not reflective of the community, cultures, or needs of youth and families.

To establish SEL data strategies to support equity goals, several districts have engaged students, families, and communities to collectively gather, reflect on, and act upon data, including integrating storytelling through qualitative data alongside quantitative data. Families and community partners may offer deeper understanding of the perspectives behind the data, and students bring expertise on their learning and environments that helps better identify issues and develop authentic solutions. Many districts have also begun to use SEL data strategies to support their equity priorities, such as analyzing disaggregated data to illuminate racial disproportionality in school climate and discipline practices. They have used these analyses to focus conversations on the root causes of those disparities and shape SEL-related strategies that promote greater equity.

District practices aimed at establishing SEL data strategies that help to illuminate and dismantle inequities focus on

(1) partnering with students on continuous improvement,
(2) examining and acting on inequities in climate, academic, and discipline data, and
(3) examining and acting on potential biases in social and emotional competency assessments.

1. Partner with students to identify problems of practice, examine and act on data.

- ✔ Minneapolis Public Schools' Youth Participatory Evaluation teams research topics related to school climate or student engagement and make recommendations to their schools, district, and city council.
- ✔ Metro Nashville Public Schools partnered with the Oasis Center to work with the Restorative Practice Student Groups at four schools to plan a "student voice in data" session at the monthly principal leadership network meeting. Students approved a protocol for how to engage with principals and led conversations about the district's School Climate Survey on topics including student voice, engagement, and diversity and inclusion.

2. Examine climate, academic, and discipline data for inequities and use these data to drive root cause analysis and decision-making.

- ✔ In Chicago Public Schools' review of discipline data, the district interrogates subjective infractions such as "persistent defiance," which is applied to higher percentages of Black students than their classmates. This led to partnering with student, parent, and community groups to revise their discipline policies to better align with the district's commitment to a more consistent, equitable policy that keeps students in class.
- ✔ Washoe County (Nev.) School District provides data books for every principal that include a message from the Equity and Diversity department and guidance on how to examine data related to school climate, discipline, student engagement, and academic achievement with an equity lens. This includes asking school leaders to consider what marginalized groups are affected/impacted by school policies, programs, practices, or decisions and whether assessment strategies and accountability measures are equitable.
- ✔ The School District of Palm Beach County developed a Master Schedule Analysis Protocol to examine racial disparities in access to advanced coursework. This analysis is used as a coaching tool to help staff reflect on their perceptions of race and achievement and to critically examine how these perceptions might contribute to limiting some students' access to advanced coursework.

3. Examine potential biases in social and emotional competency assessments.

- ✔ For example, when several districts noticed racial disparities in how teachers rate students' social and emotional competencies, they developed professional learning strategies to address implicit biases and focus on strengths-based approaches to assessment.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

As districts work to develop approaches to SEL and equity, these should be driven by a process of ongoing continuous improvement. Careful implementation backed by science, high-quality data, and deeply reflective processes will help ensure that district efforts translate into intended outcomes that benefit all students. This begins with ensuring a clear framework that helps focus, align, and mobilize districts' many initiatives and strategies with their SEL and equity goals. For example, if a district prioritizes students' identity development, their programs and assessments should reflect this goal.

Additionally, we suggest districts pay careful attention to classroom and school contexts and use data to drive thoughtful conversations about how to create more equitable learning environments. Assessments of students' social and emotional competence can be used appropriately as a formative measure to guide and improve equitable practices, especially when support is also provided to educators in examining their own biases or potential biases.[34,35] However, we also urge caution: social and emotional competencies are not stable over time or across contexts, and we do not recommend SEL measures be used to screen students for services.

Reflection questions to support school and district leaders in establishing equity-focused SEL data strategies:

- What data do we need to assess and continuously improve SEL efforts to advance equity?
- How can we use data processes and continuous improvement (e.g., collect, analyze, interpret, innovate on practices) to share power and be inclusive of students, families, and community members in decision-making?
- Whose voices may be left out of the data collection and analysis process?
- How can we develop data strategies that are transparent, nonintrusive, and allow for issues of equity to be studied and acted upon, including examining how students and families perceive school climate and relationships?
- Have we addressed racial disparities in discipline and ensured discipline policies align with SEL practices?
- Do we engage in strengths-based SEL assessments and avoid using a deficit lens when framing student behaviors and skills?

Examples of research and continuous improvement questions to inform an aligned action research agenda:

- What professional learning strategies are most effective in supporting schools and districts in collecting and using data to continuously improve SEL efforts to ensure equitable and optimal outcomes for students and adults?
- What strategies are most effective in supporting schools and districts in the ongoing use of culturally responsive data collection and continuous improvement processes that engage students, families, and community partners?
- What are the best ways that schools can position educators to share and examine data with colleagues on successes and challenges associated with SEL implementation efforts?

34 Assessment Work Group. (2019). Student social and emotional competence assessment: The current state of the field and a vision for its future. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

35 National Practitioner Advisory Group. (2019). Making SEL assessment work: Ten practitioner beliefs. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning and the American Institutes for Research.

Conclusion



There is much untapped opportunity for SEL to serve as a lever for equity, addressing issues such as power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination. In our work with school systems across the country, we have seen many examples of districts moving toward transformative approaches to SEL. We have also seen a pressing need to fully operationalize adult and student competencies to implement SEL in ways that support equitable learning environments and outcomes. These SEL strategies can then be connected and coordinated with districts' broader efforts to create systems-level improvements to promote equity and excellence. This is complex work that requires the alignment of frameworks, programs, practices, and professional learning, as well as formative and summative assessments.

> SEL can serve as a lever for equity, addressing issues such as power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination. This is complex work that requires systems-wide alignment and continuous improvement."

One of the biggest priorities is ensuring high-quality systemic implementation of strategies that is backed by research and sound policies. Rather than a "quick fix" approach to SEL and equity driven by the loudest voices in the room, advancing SEL in service of equity requires rigorous commitment to ongoing continuous improvement and implementation backed by science.

More research is needed to better understand the impact of the strategies that districts and schools are using to promote SEL in service of equity. In our experience, districts are often challenged by incomplete data or a lack of robust continuous improvement systems to fully assess the influences and impacts of their efforts. CASEL is committed to

supporting this work through our Research-Practice Partnership engagements, through which we have begun studying how schools, districts, and states can connect SEL to equitable access, opportunities, and outcomes for students. These partnerships aim to demonstrate the coherence of CASEL's theories of action for systemic SEL implementation across different levels of the education system, and provide insights into where additional action and support are needed to foster equitable learning and development for children from diverse backgrounds. During the 2019-2020 school year, CASEL's Research-Practice Partnerships engaged in design-based inquiry through collaborative rapid-learning cycles and data collection to address local problems of practice around SEL and equity. The learning and insights from these partnerships are shared in a five-part Learning Brief Series, available at https://casel.org/research/current-research. These briefs include insights on the importance of supporting school leaders in strategically planning and collaborating around continuous improvement of SEL implementation that promotes equity, and helping educators connect their classroom SEL practices to district priorities around equity.

Through additional collaborations with practitioners, policymakers, and researchers, CASEL is also creating, testing, measuring, and refining practical approaches to transformative SEL with important implications for promoting identity, agency, belonging, and civic engagement among children, youth, and adults.

As we continue to learn about effective practices on SEL and equity, we are sharing these insights with the broader field in CASEL's Guide to Schoolwide SEL (schoolguide.casel.org), District Resource Center (drc.casel.org) and State Resource Library (casel.org/csi-resources-equity) .

We recognize that this work is multifaceted and evolving, and that there is much more we must learn and do to ensure SEL is fully positioned to support equity. Through our work at CASEL, we are committed to continuing the collaboration with researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to advance SEL as a powerful lever for creating caring, just, inclusive, and healthy communities that support all individuals in reaching their fullest potential.



The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is the world's leading organization advancing one of the most important fields in education in decades: the practice of promoting integrated academic, social, and emotional learning for all children. The nonprofit, founded in 1994, provides a combination of research, practice, and policy to support high-quality social and emotional learning in districts and schools nationwide.

Thank you to CASEL's many critical collaborators—our partner educators, researchers, policymakers, civic leaders, program providers, funders, and others—for contributing to and supporting efforts to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning an integral part of education, preschool through high school.

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