

# State Efforts to Promote Social and Emotional Learning in Students



## A Status Report

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### Abstract

Momentum has been growing across the country to support statewide implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL) in preschool through high school. In this brief we present an update on states' involvement in articulating goals and developing guidelines for student SEL.

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In 2015 the [CASEL state scan](#) found that all 50 states had articulated what preschool students “should know and be able to do” with regard to social and emotional learning (SEL). States use a variety of terms for this, including “guidelines,” “frameworks,” “competencies,” “learning goals,” and “learning standards.” Further, we found variability across the 50 states at the preschool level. For example, the number of developmental benchmarks for SEL at the preschool level ranged from less than 10 in one state, to more than 500 in another.

We found that most preschool guidance and benchmarks have many of the important features CASEL recommends, based on research (Dusenbury et al., 2015). These include free-standing statements of what students should know and be able to do along with developmental benchmarks, as well as guidance for adults on: (1) how to create conditions in the environment that support social and emotional development, (2) how to support student social and emotional development through teaching practices and instruction, (3) and how to make learning culturally and linguistically appropriate. Some sets of guidance documents at the preschool level also are also directly connected to implementation supports. For example, the Massachusetts SEL standards for preschool and kindergarten are closely linked to systematic professional learning offerings.

Beyond preschool, in the CASEL state scan we have found that at least six states have SEL benchmarks that extend from preschool into the early elementary grade levels, and only three additional states currently have adopted free-standing standards or competencies for SEL (with developmental benchmarks) that extend all the way from kindergarten through high school. In 2004 Illinois was the first state to adopt K-12 SEL standards. In 2012 Kansas and West Virginia also articulated goals for student SEL. There is growing momentum, however, and CASEL is aware of at least four additional states that have already drafted K-12 benchmarks and are moving through the full approval process. We also know of at least as many additional states that are moving toward developing grade level benchmarks and goals for SEL.

Indeed, perhaps in part because of the Every Student Succeeds Act, but also because of growing awareness of the importance of student SEL for future success in the workforce (Schanzenbah, Nunn, Bauer, Mumford, & Breitwieser, 2016), at the state level there now appears to be dramatically growing interest in developing policies, guidelines, and grade-level benchmarks to create

conditions for statewide implementation of SEL approaches. In 2016 CASEL issued a Request for Proposals to launch the [Collaborating States Initiative](#) (CSI), and 26 states participated in the bidder’s call. A total of 20 teams developed plans and ultimately submitted proposals.

All of the proposals reflected the unique context for SEL in each state. Based on the proposals we have learned that there are a wide variety of policy initiatives at the state level that support SEL, including initiatives related to 21st-century learning, health education, student mental health, whole child initiatives, substance abuse prevention, safe and civil schools, safe and supportive schools, guidance, student support, youth health surveys, school climate, after-school time, culturally responsive schools, safe children, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), positive behavior supports, character development, safe and respectful learning environments, early learning, positive youth development, bullying, school turnaround, educator effectiveness, school improvement, adolescent development, and gender identity and sexual orientation.

Although all of the proposals developed goals that can be broadly described as “creating conditions for statewide implementation of SEL,” not all of the states actually proposed to develop “learning standards.” In part this is due to resistance in a few states to new standards related to the Common Core State Standards, but it also often reflects a desire that SEL “standards” be voluntary and not require accountability measures. For that reason, some of the CSI states proposed to articulate what students should know and be able to do with regard to SEL as “competencies,” “goals,” or “benchmarks” rather than “standards.” Still other state teams proposed to create guidance documents or revise policies to integrate SEL, rather than standards.

## Conclusion

There is growing interest at the state level, in intentionally supporting student social and emotional development. However, we have found that state teams have many questions about what this actually means in practice. To do this work well, and to be sure that it is grounded in evidence-based practices, states are likely to need support. CASEL is committed to creating a collaborative learning community for state teams that wants to learn from each other as they advance their own state’s implementation of SEL.

CASEL is committed to supporting any state that wants to engage in this work. We view each state as the expert on what needs to happen in the state, and we are learning from states about how their needs vary, and what plans and approaches will be appropriate in different contexts. Some states may want to develop guidelines or professional development to support student SEL. Others may want to articulate learning goals for student

SEL. Still others may want to do both. We encourage each state to develop a plan that will meet the unique needs of their state's students and families. Whatever plan a state develops for creating conditions to support student SEL, CASEL is happy to offer support. Specifically, we share findings from research and information about best practices, as well as other resources that may be helpful.

## References

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