

— Evolving CASEL's Approach to Research:

THE ADOPTION OF THE RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP MODEL

An Introductory Brief by
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ABOUT CASEL'S LEARNING SERIES ON RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS (RPPS)

CASEL has produced a series of briefs documenting insights from our efforts to understand how educators and researchers can build relationships that support a shared action research agenda around social and emotional learning (SEL).

This five-part series shares the perspectives of researchers and practitioners on developing and sustaining collaborative inquiry in classrooms, schools, districts, and states. The goal of the series is two-fold: (1) to articulate an overview of CASEL's research-practice agenda and, (2) to explore our learnings at the school, district, and state level about developing research-practice partnerships (RPPs), action research, continuous improvement, and adult SEL capacity.

This inquiry seeks to demonstrate the emerging coherence of CASEL's theories of action across the tiers of our education system and provide insights into where additional action and support are needed to foster equitable learning and development for children from diverse backgrounds. The cases in this series have been shared with all CASEL stakeholders, including state, district, and school leadership and SEL team members; educators; youth and families; community and research partners; and funders.

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How the Research-Practice Partnership (RPP) Model Aligns to CASEL's Mission

Since 1994, CASEL has been a thought leader, field builder, collaborator, and convener for advancing research, practice, and policy on systemic SEL. Contributions include several guides (program, [school](#), and [assessment](#)), resources ([district](#) and [state resources](#)) and tools (theories of action, staff survey, walkthrough tool). In the past, CASEL's research has sought to offer the broad outlines of the SEL field and mainly engaged in synthetic research—aimed at establishing standards and an evidence base for high-quality SEL and establishing links between SEL and short-term academic, social, and emotional growth and development and longer-term life success.

Thus, considerable effort has gone into organizing, critically assessing, and synthesizing the available research literature. This is reflected in the series of program guides that we continue to produce. CASEL has also co-authored meta-analyses—studies of studies—that systematically examine the state of the research evidence on SEL. The meta-analyses revealed that well-designed and well-implemented SEL programs can produce positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes and that these impacts can be sustained over time (Durlak et al., 2011). These studies included featured random assignment to condition (RCT) or quasi-experimental designs in an effort to make causal inferences about program impacts.

While this approach is important, there is increased recognition that practitioners often find “available research may not be useful or credible because researchers are not always focused on answering questions relevant to school districts' most pressing needs” (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013). Engaging with the various layers of the nation's education system has revealed, however, that a more directly embedded approach to research is necessary. While the past several decades of attention to SEL have primarily focused on field-building, we are now seeing a need to strengthen our collective capacities for field testing.

CASEL has also partnered with external partners to examine the influences and impact of our district theory of action with the initial cohort of eight partner districts (2011-2017) in our Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI). While these districts varied in how they pursued systemic SEL, all made progress. Student data (grades 3, 7, and 10) revealed improvements in school climate, achievement, and discipline across grades and growth of social and emotional competence for elementary school students. These results offered initial support for this approach (Kendziora et al., 2016).

CASEL staff and collaborators have continued to review and advance scholarship on SEL through papers and briefs on a range of topics including systemic SEL, SEL and equity, SEL assessment, and theories of action for the implementation of high-quality SEL at the state, district, and school levels. More recently, we conducted a landscape scan focused on equity, adult SEL, and the integration of academic, social, and emotional instruction to understand and leverage this growing body of literature to refine our resources for states, districts, and schools more fully.

CASEL has continued to refine strategies and tools to better document the ways that technical assistance aids partner districts in advancing high-quality implementation of systemic SEL. We have determined that our work and the field would benefit from greater research attention to continuous improvement (CI) and that our district and state partnerships uniquely position us to help advance this work. As such, our recent efforts have been aimed at sharpening our CI approach and tools through our RPP model.

This has prompted us to refine our theories of action, surveys, and observational tools to better guide and document our partners' work to continuously improve their efforts to achieve high-quality systemic SEL. Additionally, we have determined that a RPP approach affords opportunities to collaborate closely with administrators, practitioners, families, and students to develop a local SEL vision for SEL, monitor to this work, and identify on an ongoing basis barriers and facilitators for achieving specified annual benchmarks and goals.

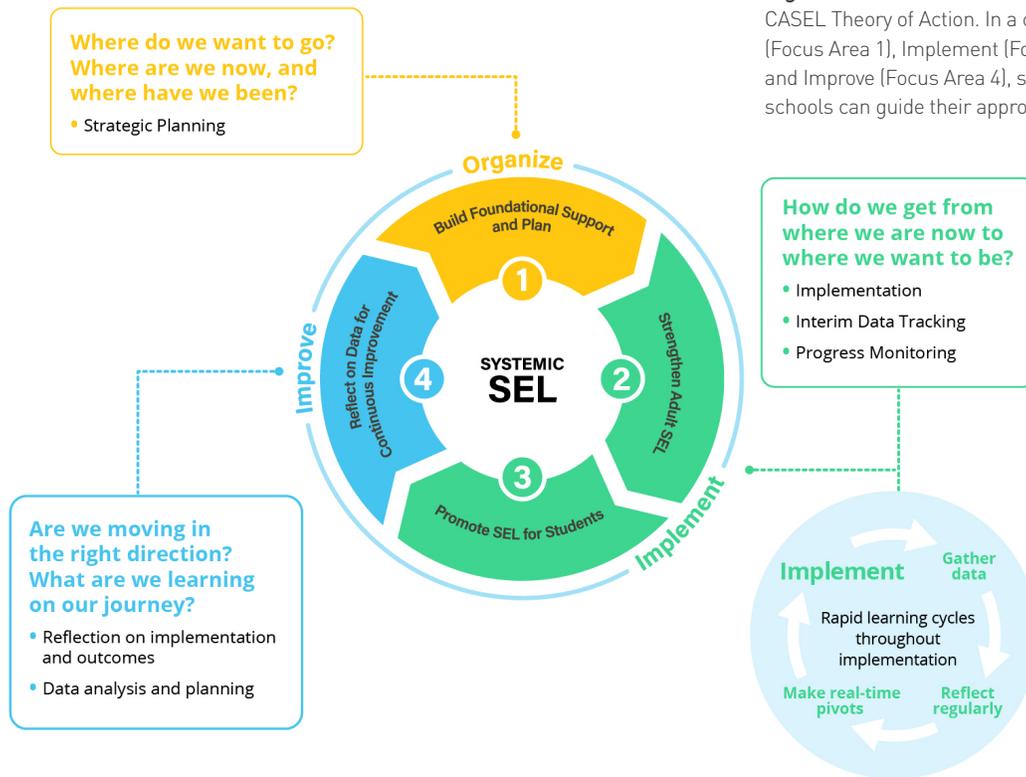


Figure 1. CASEL Theory of Action. In a cycle of Organize (Focus Area 1), Implement (Focus Areas 2 & 3), and Improve (Focus Area 4), states, districts, and schools can guide their approach to systemic SEL.

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CASEL'S CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT (CI) MODEL

ORGANIZE	IMPLEMENT	IMPROVE
<p>CASEL recommends beginning with the key activities in Focus Area 1 to build a strong foundation to help ensure efforts are sustained and outcomes are met. This requires broad stakeholder commitment—engaging practitioners and partners from multiple domains within the educational ecosystem—and a comprehensive strategic plan for implementation. Whether an education agency (school, district, or state) is just beginning or is seeking to expand implementation, building deep organizational support based on an SEL vision will help strengthen its impact.</p>	<p>An informed approach to SEL implementation includes interim data tracking of implementation efforts using rapid learning cycles throughout the year. These cycles allow stakeholders to course correct based on formative data throughout the academic year. This aspect of continuous improvement aligns to how stakeholders are both strengthening adult SEL (Focus Area 2) and promoting SEL for students (Focus Area 3).</p>	<p>A structured process for CI (Focus Area 4) drives high-quality implementation aligned to strategic goals and supports informed decision-making toward equitable learning and development for all youth. This includes collecting, reflecting on, and sharing actionable data regularly to identify needs and create goals and plan.</p>

Research for the Next Generation: Evolving our RPP Approach

Since diverse viewpoints are critical to growing the field to advance equity and excellence, CASEL has always promoted collaboration. This approach aligns with a National Research Agenda for the Next Generation (Jones, Farrington, Jagers, & Brackett, 2018) put forth by The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (NC-SEAD), which called for a research paradigm that supplements the field's over-reliance on experimental designs.

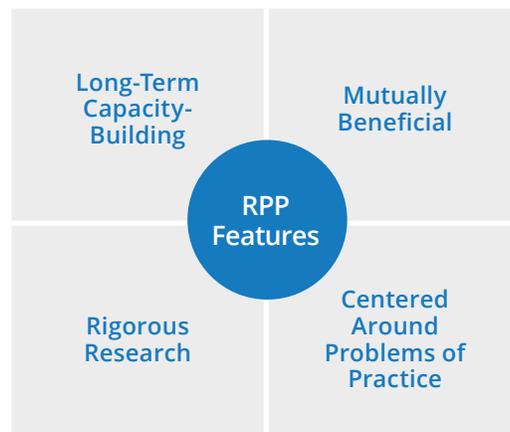
There are a few features that this “next generation” of research will need to incorporate. It should foster a dynamic bidirectional relationship between research and practice in which communication and learning goes both ways. Ideally, it would be practice-focused, grounded in improvement science, iterative, collaborative, and action-oriented. We specifically strive to address the challenges raised for research of the next generation to “reliably inform meaningful changes in school practice or design or in the quality of youth programming,” and offer educators, school leaders, out-of-school time providers, and district administrators guidance “in a form that actually helps them apply research evidence to their work” (Jones, Farrington, Jagers, & Brackett, 2018).

Expanding our research-practice partnership approach addresses these various considerations and thus has great potential to advance our work.

Tseng, Easton & Supplee (2017) offer that RPP are long term, mutually benefiting collaborations between practitioners and researchers that are purposefully organized to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving outcomes.

Although the RPP model is seen as a relatively recent innovation (Henrick et al., 2017), the growing popularity of this approach signals a major shift toward the ongoing co-construction of actionable knowledge that can improve practice and demonstrably result in more equitable learning environments and greater student learning. Such partnerships can take various forms. For example, Coburn, Penuel & Geil (2013) point to (1) research alliances, which keep research fairly independent; (2) design research partnerships, which feature co-design and testing of new innovations; and (3) network improvement communities, which unite practitioners from various sites with research and other content experts to generate and test practice improvements in multiple contexts. Hybrid RPP models that represent variants and combinations of these three forms have also emerged (Henrick et al., 2017).

In many respects, CASEL's previous research emphasized research alliances. This has merit. However, we aspire to develop research partnerships and network improvement community (NIC) approaches. We are currently moving toward a NIC with our collaborative work partners in the Equitable Learning and Development Project and Building Equitable Learning Environments Initiative. Many of our current projects with existing CDI districts have prioritized a design research approach in collaborating with our school, district, and state partners. This allows us to interrogate the obstacles of systemic SEL implementation, documenting those barriers, and more importantly, elevating attention to the key levers for shifting policy and practices creating and maintaining equitable learning conditions for students and adults who support them. While we have continued to engage in technical support with our district partners, we have become explicit in the naming of this research methodology to be clear with all stakeholders that partners work collaboratively and are not siloed.



We believe the design-based research partnerships model is critically important to our organization-wide aims of better understanding systemic SEL and promoting equitable voice and learning for both researchers and practitioners (be they teachers, school leaders, district personnel, or state-level employees). CASEL intentionally co-constructed these RPP engagements with practitioners at the school, district, and state levels to uncover new knowledge related to both systemic SEL implementation and how the RPP model can be leveraged to the promote educational equity.

CASEL has always promoted the importance of evidence-based practices that are rigorously studied. Securing the benefits of SEL for all students demands a complementary collection of practice-based evidence—that is, the probing and measuring of impact across the diverse settings comprising this nation’s schools and students. As a design-based endeavor, the bulk of CASEL’s current RPP engagements investigate the best processes for combining rigorous research methodology with a recognition of practical, actionable findings generated by and for practitioners.

CASEL’s First RPP Engagements

Through RPPs, we aim to better understand the ways practitioners resolve impediments to SEL implementation in the service of educational equity and excellence. We hope to reveal how SEL can be a critical component of equipping states, districts, and schools to address inequities and foster healthy academic, social, and emotional growth and development for students and adults. Within a subset of our collaborating districts and states, CASEL has pursued RPP engagements that are likely to afford an opportunity to tackle the implementation challenges that prevent the integration of equity-focused SEL efforts into schools and classrooms.

CASEL’s first set of RPP engagements developed projects with partners representing three tiers of education practitioners: schools, districts, and state education agencies. We seek to find where investments of time, energy, and resources in these tiers are separately and jointly assigned and aligned to optimize the equitable learning and development of children and youth. This allows us to co-create knowledge regarding systemic SEL implementation with practitioners in each context while also identifying common threads for creating and fostering an RPP for any context.

Reflecting on the first year of CASEL’s RPP engagements, many of our learnings arose from the process of establishing RPPs where education practitioners work (i.e., schools, districts, state departments). While there have certainly been significant learnings related to the aims of each engagement (which will be shared later in this series of learning briefs), we choose to first share the learnings relating to the creation and nurturing of these unique partnerships.

We observed emerging common threads at the school, district, and state level that elucidate broad considerations for any organization looking to engage in an RPP. These learnings are beneficial to both CASEL in developing our approach towards RPPs and the education research field in general where RPPs are an emerging paradigm. What follows is an overview of insights gained in our RPP work thus far. These insights will be explored more thoroughly in the subsequent briefs.

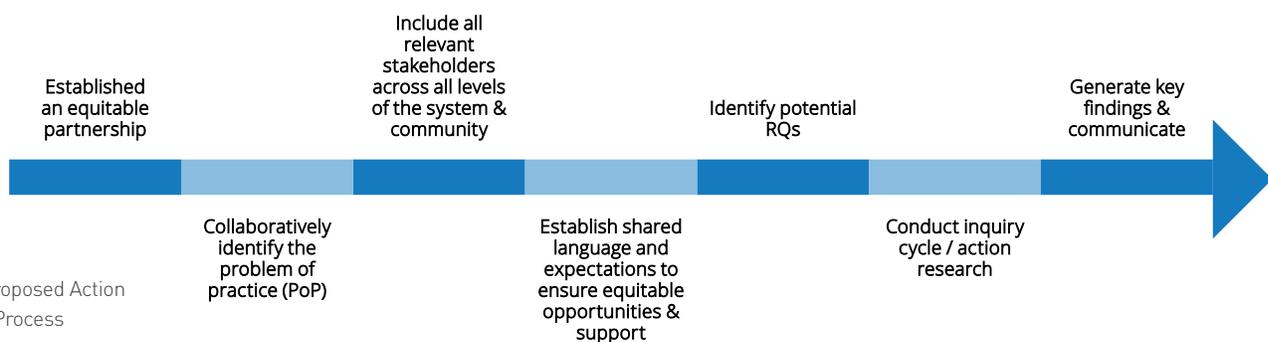


Figure 3.
CASEL’s Proposed Action
Research Process

Overarching Insights

Insight 1: Allowing ample time for project planning and building relational trust between stakeholders is imperative to a successful RPP.

While all three of our partnerships were forged within existing district or state collaborators, preparation took longer than we had anticipated. Establishing early trust and clarity about aims has proven critical, especially when addressing challenges such as changes in the scope of work or personnel. Coordination of personnel between CASEL and the district partner served as an important mechanism, especially when responding to challenges regarding data sharing agreements and leadership turnover. As Lopez, Turley, and Stevens (2015) note, building trust requires substantial time and effort, but the return on those investments can be well worth it.

It is not surprising that, for each of our three RPP engagements, our initial key learning related to the extensive timeline need to formalize partner sites. Educators face many competing priorities. State education agencies have their own research priorities, and these teams often do not have the money or staff to fulfill the many research needs. At the district level, departments often do not have the capacity to interpret and implement the latest research.

Researchers in RPPs must be flexible and demonstrate mutualism—a core pillar to the RPP model defined as the “sustained interaction that benefits both researchers and practitioners” Coburn, Penuel, & Geil (2013). They must also be willing to share the research priorities and ownership and adjust and amend ideas to ensure they provide the right kind of support while sustaining a rigorous research agenda. This flexibility and development of shared agreements may involve extra time and labor for the researcher; however, the CASEL research revealed that flexibility and openness builds trust with partner teachers.

Insight 2: Practitioners’ problems of practice drive the work.

The key to a purposeful RPP is an agenda for study driven by the needs of the practitioner. This is true at any level to ensure that the plan of action addresses immediate local concerns, revealing key mechanisms that can be translated with possible variations to test in other locations. In design research, the aim is to build and study solutions at the same time in real-world contexts. We found that prioritizing these problems of practice was mutually beneficial in addressing the problems of practice that our partners were navigating while allowing CASEL to better understand and field test elements of our theories of action.

We followed these partners’ direction to help determine a research agenda that would produce more useful findings. The educators raised a variety of problems of practice, which are discussed in the briefs in this series. Briefs 2 and 3 examine the desire to investigate the intersection of SEL, equity, and academic instruction in a single school.

Brief 4 describes how our district partner focused on their continuous improvement process to investigate how its processes, resources, and implementation encourage the development of equity within a cohort of schools. Brief 5 explores the questions raised by our partner state team about their technical assistance model and how it emphasizes systemic SEL implementation practices and policies in districts and schools (these practices and policies were built around the CASEL’s Guide to Schoolwide SEL).

Insight 3: Knowledge is shared from all perspectives.

More generally speaking, co-constructed action research requires a change in orientation towards using and participating in research. Providing opportunities for researchers and practitioners to work together to explore patterns, develop hypotheses, discuss findings, and gain insights from the data requires an added element of translation. From establishing research questions to reviewing data, researchers and educators are perspective-taking from one another's viewpoints. Having the time and space for both educators and researchers to develop their own knowledge and skills and be able to translate ideas between research and practice is necessary for successfully conducting research together.

These RPPs also revealed that the dissemination of research findings must incorporate the partners' points of view. In addition to catalyzing the investigation by identifying problems of practice and collaborating in inquiry, the practitioner partners have been actively reviewing the process and products of this research. Teachers, leaders, and specialists at every level have been co-constructing and/or reviewing the reporting, and we plan to partner in the dissemination and uptake of learnings to fellow educators.

Preview of Series

You have just read:

Brief 1 – Evolving CASEL's Approach to Research: The Adoption of the Research-Practice Partnership Model, in which we summarize CASEL's history of research, describe an evolution of our research approach, and articulate the plan for our RPPs across school, district, and state levels of the education system.

Brief 2 – School-level Learnings From the Field: Insights in Establishing a Collaborative Research-Practice Partnership delves into insights relating to the process of establishing a RPP. Using the school-based RPP that CASEL engaged in during the 2019-2020 school year as a case study, Brief 2 explores learnings that contribute to the continuous improvement of CASEL's approach to co-creating inquiry with practitioners. Insights include the imperative of flexibility on the part of the researcher in an RPP and understanding relational trust between the researcher and school staff as the key ingredients for a sustainable partnership.

Brief 3 – School Level Learnings from the Field: Insights into Understanding SEL as a Lever for Equitable Outcomes and Integrating SEL in Math Instruction continues exploring CASEL's school-level RPP, focusing on insights relating to adult SEL, integrating SEL into mathematics instruction, and collaborative data reflection. Specifically, these insights are viewed through an equity lens by interrogating how certain practices can be leveraged to promote equitable outcomes. This brief aims to present these learnings through both the research and teacher perspective, with excerpts from the brief written by teachers who participated in the RPP.

Brief 4 – Collaborating to Integrate Continuous Improvement into School-Level SEL Implementation: District-Level Insights from the Minneapolis Public Schools-CASEL Research-Practice Partnership

shares insights from a district-level RPP involving a subset of SEL cohort schools in the Minneapolis Public Schools district. The RPP focused on supporting the continuous improvement of systemic SEL implementation in service of equitable learning environments for youth in three cohort schools. Insights were developed based on the experiences and perspectives of school-level leadership, a data scientist at the district, and CASEL researchers and SEL consultants. The brief highlights factors relevant for navigating the RPP process, schools’ native continuous improvement processes and how the RPP facilitated the integration of continuous improvement into schools’ systemic SEL implementation processes.

Brief 5 – States Charging the Way to Support Systemic Social and Emotional Learning: State-Level Insights from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction-CASEL Research-Practice Partnership

explores how a state education agency can provide technical assistance (TA) for region, district, and school-level systemic SEL implementation. including (1) what necessary professional learning training factors relate to schoolwide SEL implementation, and (2) what are the necessary district- and school-level environmental factors that related to systemic SEL implementation.

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