CASEL's Learning Series on Research-Practice Partnerships

THE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY: WHERE ARE WE NOW AND WHERE DO WE WANT TO GO?

District-Level Insights from Guilford County Schools

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CASEL HAS LONG PROPOSED THAT CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT HAS A PLACE IN THE ONGOING, REPEATED LIFE CYCLES OF ANY EDUCATION INITIATIVE.

Continuous improvement is a critical component of any effort to launch a new district- or school-based initiative. Yet, all too often, it is treated as an afterthought – something pursued only after the initiative is underway, separate from planning and implementation.

Instead, continuous improvement should be top of mind during the planning of new initiatives so stakeholders have a clear sense of where they are and where they want to go, which can then inform plans for how they are going to get there. In each stage of implementation of the initiative, continuous improvement activities – goal setting, action planning, progress monitoring, data reflection, and strategy improvement – should be woven throughout so that districts can assess progress and course-correct when needed.

These continuous improvement activities support large-scale, periodic continuous improvement efforts, providing the foundation and data to assess and reposition the initiative as needed. For this reason, we weave continuous improvement into our formulation of CASEL's theory of action for districtwide implementation of high-quality social and emotional learning (SEL).

This brief offers a case study focused on Guilford County Schools (GCS), a public school district in North Carolina, to illuminate the role of continuous improvement through a *research-practice partnership* (RPP). RPPs offer a unique collaborative experience with a dual benefit: **practitioners** get the chance to collaborate in research that has meaningful applications for their work, while **researchers** have access to a rich, "real-time" opportunity to test and assess their hypotheses. These processes support ongoing improvement of the education initiative to better support important outcomes for young people and educators and inform broader implementation of similar initiatives in other contexts.

We begin with a closer look at the definition of an RPP and then examine the process and outcomes of the RPP between CASEL and GCS. We record how this RPP offered an opportunity to explore how continuous improvement activities can be integrated across three stages of an SEL initiative: organization, implementation for adults and students, and improvement. We share insights we gleaned from this partnership and explore what supports are needed, the impact of the work, and the centrality of continuous improvement in sustaining the success of the initiative over the long term.

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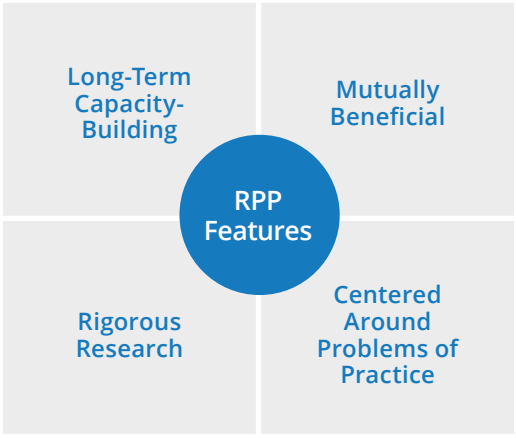
WHAT IS A RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP (RPP)?

CASEL's approach to RPPs is grounded in addressing problems of practice co-developed with a state, school district, or school education partner and aimed at improving outcomes. Ideally, the partnership is represented by team members with expertise in research and SEL implementation practice, so that the "research" and "practice" components are present in both CASEL and the partner organization. While there are a variety of continuous improvement (CI) methods in the education field, CASEL has anchored its CI model in the RPP approach to place additional value on the researcher's role in supporting larger-scale and multiyear research and implementation efforts (Yurkofsky et al., 2020).



CASEL RPPs are guided by the CASEL theory of action, which is divided into four "focus areas" that together create a systemic approach to implementing SEL policy and practice:

- Build foundational support and plan
- Promote SEL for students
- Strengthen adult SEL
- Reflect on data for continuous improvement

Activities in the first three focus areas are developed and supported through the fourth focus area—ongoing cycles of continuous improvement—in order to achieve and sustain high-quality systemic SEL. These four focus areas map onto the three broad stages of work that are the focus of this brief:

- In Focus Area 1, continuous improvement, is reflected in all strategic planning efforts ("Organize").
- In Focus Areas 2 and 3, we see continuous improvement using data for implementation planning and progress monitoring ("Implement").
- In Focus Area 4, summative data, reflection and learning, are used to assess progress toward goals and inform future planning for continuous improvement ("Improve").

This framework and the RPP approach guide our work with district partners, including Guilford County Schools.

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THE CASEL-GUILFORD PARTNERSHIP: INTEGRATING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT INTO SEL IMPLEMENTATION

Guilford County Schools (GCS) first became aware of CASEL's work in 2018 through another school district that was working with CASEL. The Initial contact led to a formal partnership in January 2019 with an SEL Readiness and Engagement Analysis (SELREA). The goal of the SELREA was to assess where the district was in the journey toward systemic implementation of SEL and provide recommendations for advancing these efforts.

The SELREA served as the foundation for a longer-term partnership between CASEL and Guilford. The partnership's central goal was to advance SEL implementation in the district (the "practice" component of the RPP), through learnings about the processes and related outcomes (the "research" component of the RPP).

As a secondary focus, CASEL sought to deepen its own understanding of how SEL implementation is supported and advanced through the integration of continuous improvement processes throughout the entire implementation cycle (from building foundational support and planning, through strengthening adult SEL and promoting SEL for students, to reflecting on data for continuous improvement). To that end, from the start of the RPP, GCS intentionally integrated continuous improvement into SEL implementation. We examined how to incorporate continuous improvement across the three stages of the process outlined above: organization, implementation, and improvement. Following is what we observed, tested, and learned during each stage.

LESSON LEARNED

Hold regular, ongoing meetings

Regular standing meetings between CASEL and the district SEL team (i.e., Director of SEL and SEL Specialists/ Coaches) were critical. These weekly meetings offered a chance to get updated on the status of various aspects of the SEL initiative, problem-solve and plan to address any challenges, and use any available data to make decisions and help facilitate desired change.

STAGE 1

Continuous Improvement in Organizing the Journey

The first stage of the work was to plan how the district should proceed. The Organize stage coincides with Focus Area 1 of our theory of action, Build Foundational Support and Plan. We incorporated continuous improvement into the planning from the very beginning by setting out to answer three key questions:

- ***Where do we want to go?***
- ***Where are we now and where have we been?***
- ***How do we get from where we are to where we want to be?***

These questions laid the foundation for continuous improvement by helping Guilford set a baseline (where they are coming from) and a goal (where they are going) so the district SEL team would be able to measure and analyze progress on the work later.

LESSON LEARNED

Assemble a diverse multi-department, multi-partner team

The RPP process requires consistent engagement of representatives from across the district (SEL, research & evaluation, academics, equity, family engagement) and externally. Guilford identified district participants and external partners committed to work together toward equitable learning environments for young people. These partners included providers of an evidence-based curriculum that integrates SEL and equity with social studies and creators of two university-based survey tools that measure students' perceptions of learning environment and school climate. The interdepartmental collaboration has also provided a foundation for elevating SEL and continuous improvement as key to the district's work.

Here is a closer look at the work we undertook to explore each of these questions:

Where do we want to go?

To answer this question, the team created an SEL vision, working closely with the district's SEL leadership team, which was comprised of diverse district-level stakeholders. The goal was to develop a vision that connected to other district priorities.

For example, one of the goals for the 2020-2021 school year was: *By June 2022, 75 percent of teachers selected to implement the [social studies] academic integration model will report feeling a higher sense of efficacy with creating learning spaces that affirm and support equitable learning outcomes.*

GCS SEL Vision Statement

Through social emotional learning, Guilford County Schools nurtures safe, supportive, and equitable learning spaces where adults feel confident, empowered, and responsible for helping students develop into productive and responsible citizens who thrive in college, career, and life.

By setting a goal that connects academic and equity priorities in the district, the partnership leverages the expertise of those departments and also ensures that partnership supports and progress monitoring serve those priorities.

The CASEL consultants also worked with the GCS SEL team to formulate a problem of practice that district team members hoped to undertake. For GCS, the problem of practice was: **How do educators (in the district office and schools) develop equitable learning environments for young people?** With this problem of practice in mind, our teams worked together to develop a strategy around key areas aligned to the CASEL district theory of action:

- Supporting adult SEL competency and skill development
- Implementing schoolwide SEL
- Integrating SEL into academics to support equitable outcomes for young people

Where are we now and where have we been?

To address this question, the joint GCS-CASEL team took stock of Guilford's current SEL implementation as well as activities that could support future efforts using the CASEL Implementation Rubric. The rubric ratings helped Guilford establish a baseline for their subsequent work.

In the first meeting of the SEL leadership team, departmental leaders participated in a group reflection and discussion to rate the district along each of the rubric's dimensions. In small groups, the leadership team discussed the district's progress in each of the four focus areas to create baseline rubric ratings. This initial launch helped to orient the leadership team to continuous improvement as an integral part of systemic SEL implementation.

How do we get from where we are to where we want to be?

The development of an SEL vision and the rubric ratings enabled Guilford to respond to this third continuous improvement question by setting long- and short-term SMARTIE goals. Developing SMARTIE goals is a concrete way to drive results and reach desired outcomes by guiding the incremental steps toward effective implementation and desired outcomes.

CASEL offered a series of goal-setting and action-planning workshops to build the district team's capacity so they could support individual school teams, available in the Districtwide SEL Action Planning Workbook. This tool, developed by CASEL, guides the SEL strategic planning process, from creating a vision to developing an annual action plan with measurable milestones. Using this tool, the district SEL team determined when key continuous improvement activities would take place throughout the year, and how those activities would support the path forward for systemic SEL implementation.

To better understand where we want to go, the S.M.A.R.T.I.E. goals were aligned to each of the activities in Guilford's **implementation plan** to serve as a three-year roadmap for building systemic implementation. The plan highlighted annual priorities and strategies, including priorities that aligned with strengthening adult SEL competencies and capacity, such as implementing an effective SEL professional learning program for school staff.

SMARTIE goals are:

Specific: The goal clearly states what will be accomplished, where, and by whom.

Measurable: The goal includes a measurable outcome. The team will be able to know whether the goal has been accomplished by looking at measurable evidence.

Attainable: The goal can be reasonably achieved given the current status of the district and any prior progress toward the goal.

Relevant: The goal matters for improving the quality of students' educational experience and aligns with district priorities and improvement goals.

Time-bound: The goal includes a specific time frame for achievement and regular, shorter-term benchmarks to check in on interim progress before the final goal deadline.

Inclusive: The goal invites members of traditionally excluded or marginalized groups to make decisions and contribute in a way that shares power.

Equitable: The goal includes an element of fairness or justice that seeks to address systemic injustice, inequity, or oppressi

Supporting continuous improvement in every part of the work included engaging with the Guilford Research and Evaluation team to develop an **evaluation plan** for measuring the efforts of SEL cohort schools, the target sites for rolling out the SEL implementation plan. The evaluation plan included a staff survey used in cohort and comparison schools to gauge school-level implementation and a streamlined process for collecting professional learning feedback from cohort school staff. Alongside cohort schools, the district identified comparison schools to compare results that could potentially be linked to SEL implementation.

The district also administered the CASEL **Staff Implementation Survey** to capture staff perceptions of systemic SEL implementation in their schools. The staff survey is aligned to the 10 indicators of schoolwide SEL, essential components of systemic implementation. With the integration of the staff survey and the rubric as implementation tools, Guilford was able to corroborate their implementation efforts as well as identify areas for growth and improvement. The data collected using these tools help the district assess progress with implementing the action plan aligned to the SEL goals and that will ultimately lead to outcomes for young people and adults.

The teams reflected on the data to set Year 1 goals and identified areas of growth related to adult professional learning and the use of strategic practices in GCS's SEL cohort classrooms. For example, based on the summer 2020 rubric reflection with the SEL team, the district rated itself as a "2.5" for element 3B: adopt and implement evidence-based programs and practices. Particularly relevant to professional learning is the description for this element that reads, "the district provides professional learning to all staff who will implement and support the programs and practices." The SEL specialists determined that the schools were largely implementing with a "checklist" approach to SEL, rather than truly implementing SEL-aligned practices. Consequently, they decided to create professional learning opportunities to better equip school staff to apply SEL practices in the classroom:

GUILFORD COUNTY SCHOOLS' GOALS

Year 1

By June 2020, amongst all of the GCS adults that have engaged in SEL professional development, 70% feel more confident and better equipped to engage in SEL practices.

Year 2

- By June 2021, of all of the GCS adults that have engaged in SEL professional development, 70% will feel more confident and better equipped to engage in SEL practices, as measured by PD feedback, SEL leadership team feedback.
- By June 2022, 75% of teachers selected to implement the academic integration model will report feeling a higher sense of efficacy with creating learning spaces that affirm and support equitable learning outcomes.

STAGE 2-3 Continuous Improvement in Implementation

In answering the question, "how do we get from where we are now to where we want to be?", the team identified actions from their implementation plan that were aligned to Focus Areas 2, Strengthen adult SEL competencies and capacity, and Focus Area 3, Promote SEL for Students. While Focus Area 3 is also implied in the question "how do we get to where we want to be," in this stage of implementation Guilford chose to focus exclusively on strengthening adult SEL competencies and capacity.

A focus on professional learning of adult SEL practices

To prepare adults for SEL implementation with strategies and practices to improve school and classroom conditions and outcomes, Guilford explored adult SEL professional learning opportunities so the SEL specialist could schedule trainings for the SEL cohort schools.

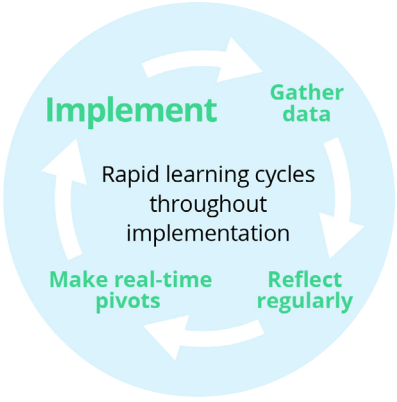
LESSON LEARNED

Build the District Team's Adult SEL and Capacity

Using qualitative coaching log data, the SEL specialists determined that the schools were largely implementing with a "checklist" approach to SEL, rather than truly implementing SEL-aligned practices. Consequently, they decided to create professional learning opportunities to better equip school staff to apply SEL practices in the classroom.

As a foundation, the SEL team worked to bolster its own capacity for this work. In partnership with CASEL, the team gathered resources to deepen their understanding of SEL, what systemic SEL implementation looks like, and how to lead school SEL teams in this work.[1]

As in Stage 1, continuous improvement activities were embedded throughout the work. The district documented successes and challenges and monitored the process through rapid learning cycles in which they collected and reviewed data to help teams course correct when needed. We modeled how rapid learning cycles could be utilized to improve professional learning sessions by collecting attendees' feedback after the professional learning sessions. Coaching logs were also used to document and track implementation activities in schools, which helped inform action planning while providing school leadership with high-level takeaways about progress toward schoolwide SEL implementation.



1 Facilitated sessions on how to effectively use the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL are available to school leaders.

In addition, the district team took part in a midyear check-in (another continuous improvement activity) to reflect on the implementation rubric and monitor progress on the year's goals. During these reflections, the team was careful to note any adjustments to the goals, action plans, or metrics that might be needed.

School-level work in adult SEL

During this stage, we used a co-development approach to work with the district SEL team to carry out various continuous improvement processes. As an example, the CASEL and GCS partners initially drafted a plan for administering a survey to measure school staff's SEL implementation practices. The district SEL team took the lead in presenting the plan to the principals and getting their feedback to revise the plan.

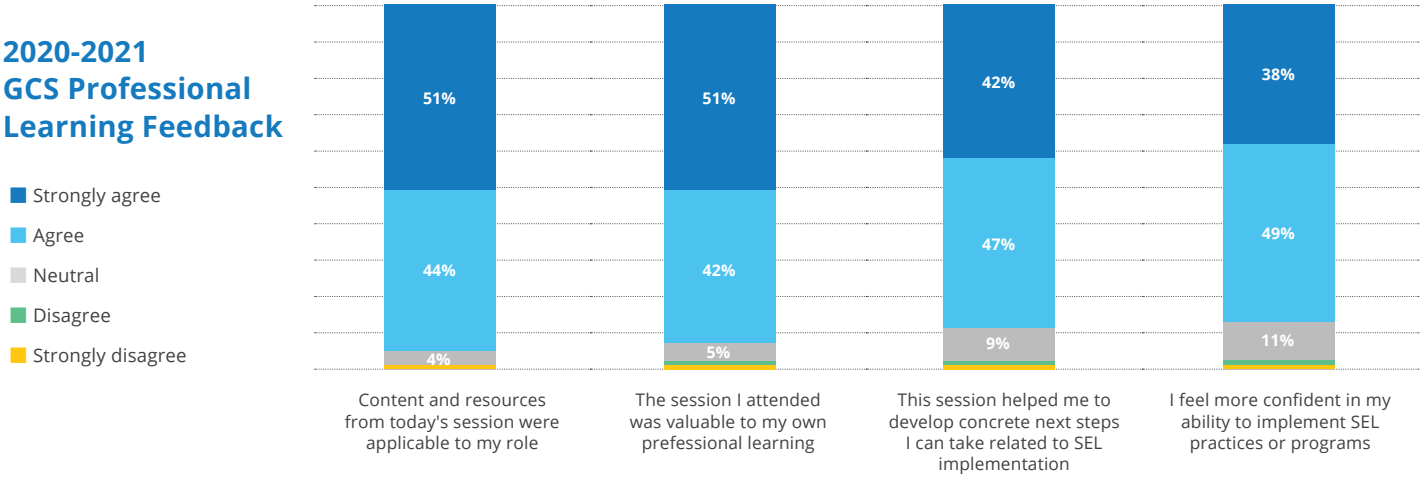
Integration of continuous improvement also took place at the school level. Guilford's SEL specialists provided access to CASEL's tools, such as the implementation rubric and staff survey. They also provided insights from co-learning sessions between both organizations to the school-level SEL teams. In addition, they provided professional learning opportunities that contributed to building capacity for classroom educators through activities such as setting goals, action planning, and progress monitoring. These activities help school-level teams understand a systemic continuous improvement approach to SEL.

After the administration of the staff survey, the CASEL team provided a one-page summary of the results for each cohort school. At one elementary school, the district SEL specialist conducted a session with the school-level SEL team to reflect on what the staff survey data presented.[2] Together they selected an area of growth to address and made a data-informed decision to create a goal that could help strengthen adult SEL.

Example: Area of Growth

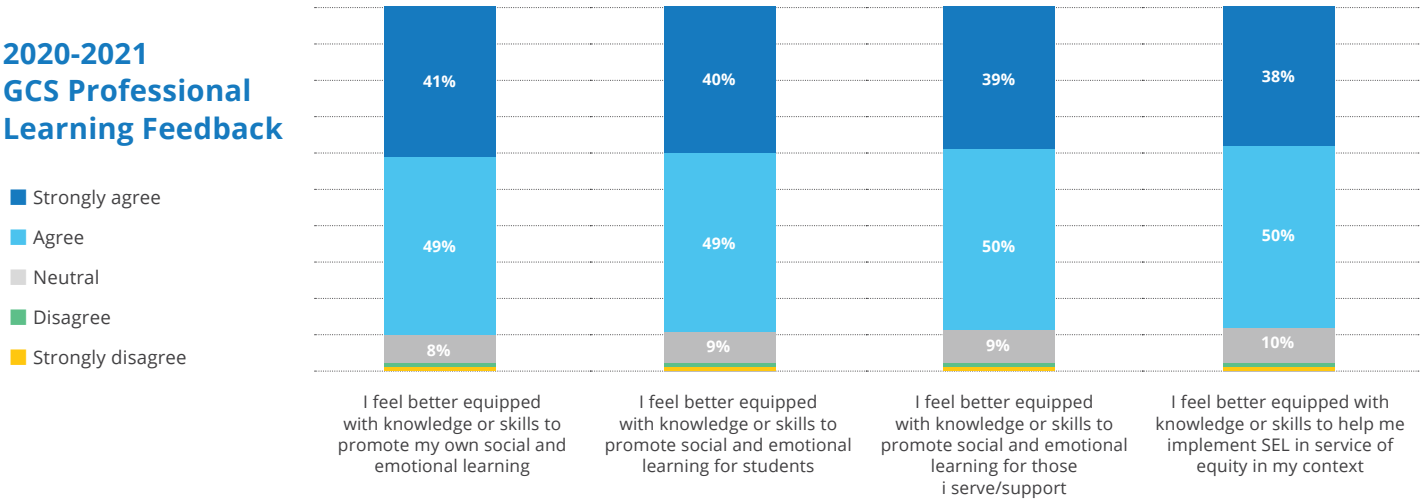
We will increase our knowledge and understanding of social and emotional learning by actively participating in a minimum of 10 hours of professional development and collaborative working sessions to improve the 38% of staff that reports that they strongly agree the adults in the school interact with one another in a way that models social and emotional competence.

As a result of the action planning process, professional learning opportunities for teachers were provided by the district SEL specialists. District SEL specialists delivered sessions that covered the foundations of SEL, the 5 core SEL competencies, and other related topics. Feedback survey data from over 1,300 attendees demonstrated that those sessions were valuable in strengthening their confidence and capacity to promote SEL. The school-level team then facilitated follow-up SEL activities to further support and engage the school staff in implementing SEL practices in staff and grade-level meetings.



2 See the Data Reflection Protocol in the Guide to Schoolwide SEL under Focus Area 4

2020-2021 GCS Professional Learning Feedback



There are other instances where GCS's cohort schools integrated continuous improvement into how they approach SEL. Schools have created their own surveys to improve professional learning sessions, assessed school-level professional development needs, and gathered feedback on teachers' perceptions of the implementation of particular SEL practices. Schools have also continued to put the implementation rubric and staff survey to use to inform their own goal setting, action planning, and progress monitoring.

Throughout this stage, it was important to recognize the need to provide ongoing capacity-building for SEL specialists who support SEL implementation in schools. CASEL facilitated a series of continuous improvement workshops to support the SEL specialists in developing goals and strengthening their skills for coaching school teams to carry out their own continuous improvement processes. These workshops focused on setting goals aligned to the school SEL vision and identifying SEL practices that will help schools progress toward those goals (a key part of continuous improvement).

STAGE 4 Continuous Improvement for Improvement

Finally, we moved on to the last stage in the continuous improvement cycle to answer the questions, "Are we moving in the right direction?" and "What are we learning on our journey?" This stage coincides with **Focus Area 4**, Practicing continuous improvement.

The team studied the evaluation plan and summative data collected (end-of-year rubric ratings and the latest staff survey data) to determine if their goals were met. This allowed the team to reflect on the successes and challenges noted during the implement stage and aided them in drawing conclusions to help inform next year's implementation and continuous improvement planning.

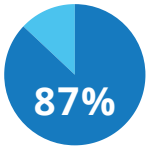
LESSON LEARNED

Anticipating implementation outcomes for future planning

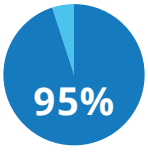
The team was intentional about embedding continuous improvement throughout the systemic implementation process. They were able to document implementation actions, engage in rapid learning cycles, and monitor progress. The progress captured by implementation tools (i.e., rubric and staff survey) in the form of results and outcomes came as no surprise. Reflection of findings in stage 4 will help data-informed decisions in the future.

For Guilford, there was much to be learned from the rubric ratings and staff survey findings. Results helped the team gauge if it was moving in the right direction toward fulfilling its goals for developing adult SEL capacities (Focus Areas 2). The team also found that rubric elements for Focus Area 4 increased. This indicates that as Guilford implemented ways to prepare educators, they also documented implementation, collected data that indicated progress, reflected on that data to inform changes, and engaged in action planning for future improvements to implementation.

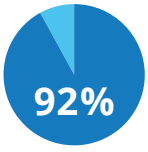
Staff survey findings from the 2019-2020 academic year noted positive growth for Guilford around adult SEL. Cohort 1 SEL schools showed higher markers of promotive adult SEL than their matched control schools with:



of staff at cohort 1 schools agreed that they were trusted to make sound instructional decisions



of school staff were more likely to attend professional development opportunities to improve interactions and their positioning to support students' social and emotional growth



of staff at cohort 1 schools had higher levels of agreement that their school was a good place to work and learn

The data suggest that district planning and implementation that targets strengthening adult SEL has set Cohort 1 schools on a path to experience positive school environments that support professional growth and development. In addition, Guilford's school environments that supported rich adult SEL experiences were associated with high retention and lower staff burnout.

92% of staff at cohort 1 schools agreed that they planned to stay in this role next year in the district

83% of cohort 1 school staff reported they were excited to come to work each day

Similar gains were noted in the 2020-2021 academic year staff survey, suggesting that professional learning experiences allowed educators to cultivate their own SEL growth and professional capacity. Professional growth and development were also accompanied by staff perceptions that promoted culturally responsive practices that impacted both classroom and school learning environments.

86% of staff at cohort schools perceived that their school was a supportive community of adult learners

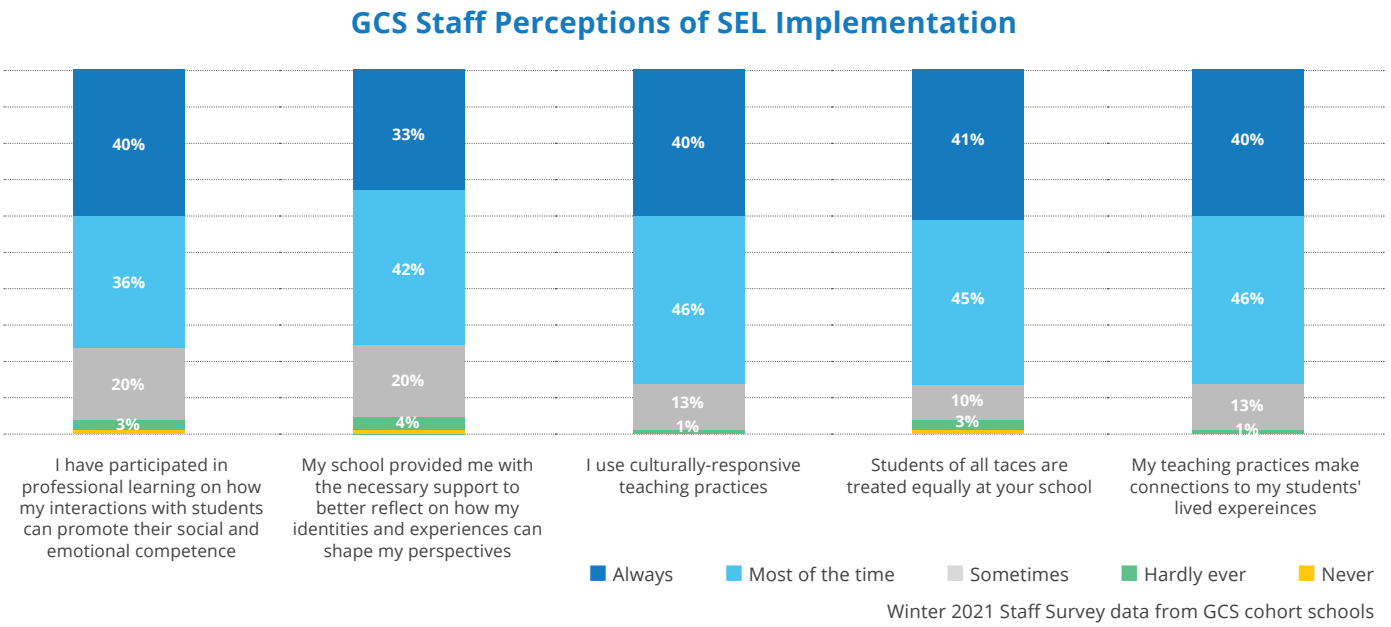
76% of cohort staff reported having participated in professional learning opportunities that informed them of how their interactions with students could promote their social and emotional competence

75% of cohort staff felt their school frequently provided them with the necessary support to better reflect on how their individual identities and experiences can shape their experience

86% of GCS cohort staff felt confident of their use of culturally responsive practices

87% of staff agreed that students of all races were treated equally at their school

86% of cohort teachers frequently engaged in practices that made connections to their students' lived experiences



These findings indicate that Guilford's efforts at strengthening adult SEL skills through targeted implementation support continue to move in the right direction.

Using data to communicate to leadership

The findings also offered an opportunity to communicate about goals and data to executive district leadership (superintendent and department chiefs) and provide evidence of SEL's impact. Since the SEL team had a strong knowledge of the district's landscape, dynamics, and priorities, the team knew continuous improvement would be important to provide strong evidence of the value of the SEL work. As one CASEL team member shared: "*SEL is a new department, so the leadership has been very aware that they should be able to speak to the impact of this work very early on. [The team] can't just rely on past laurels. And they see continuous improvement as the way to tell that story.*"

By sharing goals progress with the district leadership, the team was able to advocate for the value of their work and garner resources. For example, in spring 2020, GCS SEL leadership and the CASEL team developed a plan for the expanded partnership to begin in fall 2020. The data collected in 2019-2020 provided useful learnings to report to district leadership about the progress of the work so far as it relates to adult practice (from staff survey data), and about the potential for greater progress with more resources.

Conclusion

Continuous improvement is an ongoing, iterative process to co-construct ways to improve implementation and co-learn as new insights emerge. In the journey to build a strong foundation for SEL and strategically plan and execute systemic SEL implementation across the district, continuous improvement must be part of the bedrock of the effort.

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