2011 TO 2021

10 YEARS OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN U.S. SCHOOL DISTRICTS

ELEMENTS FOR LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF SEL



CASEL.ORG

NOVEMBER 2021

Dear Colleagues:

As SEL leaders of some of the largest, most complex school districts nationwide, we are united in our commitment to social and emotional learning (SEL) as an essential part of PreK-12th grade education for our 1.7 million students.

As partners in CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI), we have been on the front lines of a shift in education—one that reimagines how schools and districts can fully support the learning and development of all students so they can thrive.

In our districts, we believe that SEL undergirds this type of education—helping us bolster academic achievement, improve school climate, strengthen relationships, develop equitable practices, improve health and well-being, and ultimately prepare students to achieve their goals, live healthy lives, and contribute to their communities.

For us, SEL has shaped and informed all our district work, from the way we teach students to the way we interact with one another in the central office and engage with families and community partners. While we are each at different moments in our SEL journey, we see the power of SEL each day. It shows up in the ways our students use their voice to improve their schools and communities. It lives in the moments of critical thinking and collaboration during an academic lesson. And it grows with every new connection and caring relationship that we build each day throughout our districts.

We have been fortunate that CASEL and a collective of generous funders have partnered with us in this work over the past decade. Through this collaboration, we have built a powerful community of SEL champions who understand the challenges and complexities of education systems but never waver in our commitment to SEL.

We ask you to join us in this commitment—to make SEL an integral part of education to support the strengths, needs, and priorities of your communities. Paying it forward, we stand ready to help our peers as they take on the day-to-day realities of effective SEL implementation to achieve the promise of an excellent and equitable education for all students.

Signed by the CDI partner district teams led by:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ten years ago, CASEL launched the Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) to study whether it was possible to implement social and emotional learning (SEL) systemically in large, urban districts across the United States. Systemic SEL implementation is more pervasive and complex than the introduction of a single lesson or class period. It permeates all aspects of the district from classroom instruction and school climate to staffing, professional learning, district policies, family engagement, and more.

Not only did districts demonstrate that it was possible to implement SEL systemically, but every district has deepened and expanded SEL implementation since joining the CDI. How does a district equip itself to sustain its commitment to SEL over the long term, even as the people and contexts within the district change?

To examine this question, we spoke with SEL leaders and superintendents in each district and drew from our own experiences of partnering with them. We also reviewed implementation data and available outcome data.

In this report, we've summarized six elements for sustaining SEL:



1. Leaders model, cultivate, and elevate a shared vision for SEL. Superintendents and other top district leaders play an essential role in setting the tone and priority for SEL, and creating structures that drive long-term actions.



2. Core district priorities connect SEL to all departments and individuals so everyone is invested. As a foundation and catalyst for shared goals across the district, SEL implementation and outcomes reach all departments and roles.



3. Schools have resources and pathways to guide SEL implementation, as well as room to innovate and customize SEL for their communities. Districts offer guidance and support to promote high-quality implementation, while also offering flexibility for schools to determine how best to serve their communities' unique needs.



4. SEL informs and shapes adult learning and staff culture and climate. Offering all staff opportunities to learn about and experience SEL fosters personal growth, professional skills, and supportive relationships in the work environment.



5. Students, families, and communities are co-creators of the SEL vision, plans, and practices. Meaningful partnerships with these stakeholders create deeper investment and help make SEL implementation relevant and meaningful for everyone.



6. External and internal communities of practice strengthen implementation. Collaboration and co-learning across staff members, schools, departments, and larger networks support innovation, commitment, and deeper expertise.

As we reflect on 10 years of CASEL's CDI, we hope that the stories and insights gained over the last decade will provide guidance and inspiration that help districts everywhere make SEL an integral part of students' education.

CASEL is grateful for the many collaborators that help advance our mission. We would like to acknowledge those that provide critical financial support for CASEL's core initiatives. Thank you to The Allstate Foundation, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, LG Electronics, Mental Health Association of DuPage County Fund of DuPage Foundation, New Profit, NoVo Foundation, Oak Foundation, Pure Edge, Inc., Raikes Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Susan Crown Exchange, W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation, Stuart Foundation, and The Wallace Foundation. The views reflected in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of these organizations.

A LOOK BACK

About the Collaborating Districts Initiative

In 2011, CASEL took an unprecedented step: an initiative to study and scale high-quality, evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) in large, complex schools systems in the country. We began with eight school districts and called this project the **Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI)**, and its goal was to create a comprehensive shift in how entire school districts approach education.

Since its launch, the CDI has expanded to include 20 partner districts across the U.S. The initiative builds on extensive research about the effectiveness of SEL. CASEL was formed in 1994 with the goal of helping to make high-quality, evidence-based SEL an integral part of preschool through high school education. Much of our early work focused on building the evidence base for the field, examining what worked and under what conditions.

By 2010, the evidence was clear: SEL leads to multiple positive benefits for students, adults, and school communities. Students who experienced high-quality SEL programs performed better academically, showed improved classroom behaviors, experienced less emotional distress, and had a more positive outlook about themselves, others, and school. They better understood emotions and perspective-taking, could set goals and solve conflicts, and were making responsible decisions. Additionally, when schools created environments to support social and emotional learning for adults, teachers' efficacy and satisfaction increased, teachers were able to more effectively support SEL competence in their students, staff burnout decreased, and overall school climate improved.

This strong evidence led to heightened demand from practitioners for guidance in implementing effective SEL strategies, programs, practices, and policies that systemically improved education for all students. In response, and with foundational support from NoVo Foundation, the CDI launched in 2011.

We began the CDI aiming to study how SEL implementation would take root. We entered these partnerships optimistically, but we also understood the realities of district challenges. We anticipated that SEL may stall if leadership changed or budgets were cut. Over the last decade, despite fluctuations in funding and significant turnover among superintendents, SEL deepened and expanded in all eight districts.

Additionally, as superintendents moved on, they brought the priority for SEL with them to new districts, and other leaders across the country began to hear about the CDI. Today, there are 20 CDI districts continuing to learn and share about SEL as they serve a combined 1.7 million students. All 20 districts have not only maintained implementation since they joined the CDI, but they have also grown their SEL efforts in schools, central office departments, policies and practices, and districtwide culture.

Over the last decade, the CDI has become a sustained and comprehensive initiative that has made SEL an integral part of education across large, complex school districts. **With their generous partnership, what we've learned has now reached thousands of school districts and millions of students in the U.S. and abroad.**

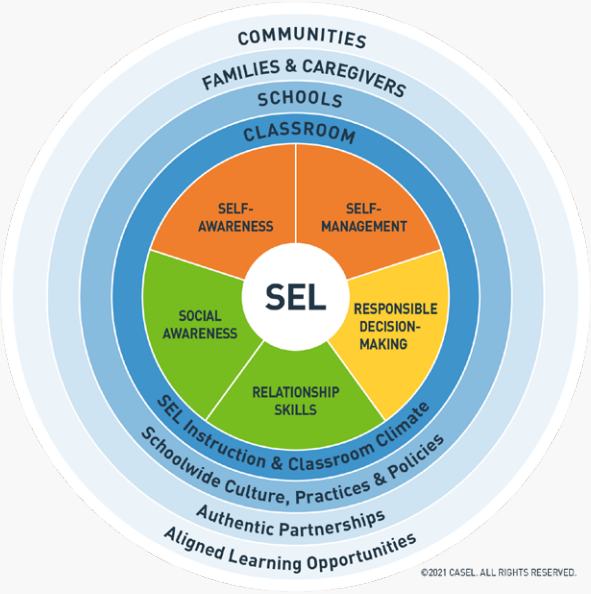


What Is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?

SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

Learn more: https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/

CASEL's Framework for SEL fosters knowledge, skills, and attitudes across five areas of competence ("The CASEL 5") and multiple key settings to establish equitable learning environments that advance students' learning and development.



The **CASEL 5** addresses five broad and interrelated areas of competence that can be taught and applied at various developmental stages from childhood to adulthood and across diverse cultural contexts:

- Self-awareness
- Social awareness
- Responsible decision-making
- Self-management
- Relationship skills

The **Key Settings** emphasize the importance of establishing equitable learning environments and coordinating practices across classrooms, schools, families, and communities. These coordinated efforts help ensure quality implementation of evidence-based programs, integration throughout the school's academic curricula and culture, alignment of schoolwide practices and policies, and ongoing collaboration with families and community organizations.

How Can School Districts Implement SEL?

What we learned from the CDI has informed a theory of action for implementing SEL districtwide. CASEL's District Theory of Action addresses four key elements that are necessary to comprehensively support quality SEL implementation throughout the system:

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

Visit CASEL's District Resource Center (drc.casel.org) to learn more about CASEL's District Theory of Action and access resources and artifacts shared by CDI districts.

Visit CASEL's Guide to Schoolwide SEL (schoolguide.casel.org) to learn more about CASEL's School Theory of Action and access guidance on implementing SEL schoolwide.

Visit CASEL's Guide to SEL Programs (pg.casel.org) for guidance on selecting evidence-based SEL programs aligned with district goals.

WHAT MAKES SEL LAST?

A New Question

At the outset of the Collaborating Districts Initiative, we were hoping to answer a fundamental question: Is it possible to implement SEL systemically to positively impact students across a large urban school district?

The answer was a resounding "yes!" As noted in our preliminary report, Key Implementation Insights from the Collaborating Districts Initiative, a 2016 evaluation by our research partner, The American Institutes for Research, concluded, "The CDI demonstrates that it is possible for large urban school districts to adopt and maintain SEL as an essential element of education, even amid budgetary stress and leadership turnover."

Today, as we look back on our 10 years of partnership with the CDI, we're ready to ask a new question:

What makes SEL last?

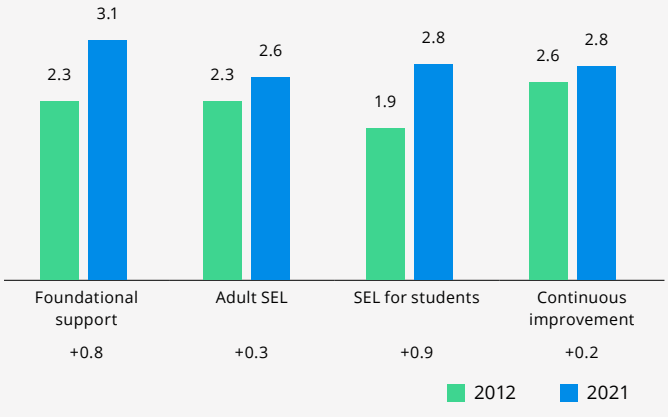
How does a district equip itself to sustain its commitment to SEL over the long term, even as the people and contexts within the district change? By "sustain" we mean that district leaders demonstrate ongoing commitment to SEL through their priorities and budgets, that SEL practices expand and deepen across all layers of the district (e.g., in the central office, schools, classrooms, family partnerships, and community partnerships), and that the district is setting clear goals and measuring the impact of SEL efforts while continuously strengthening systems-level support for SEL (e.g. in hiring practices, professional learning, curriculum, and assessment systems).

Sustaining an SEL initiative isn't easy. Districts can leverage many assets to support SEL implementation. They include internal expertise, passionate educators, state resources and standards, federal funding, and family and community partnerships. At the same time, districts are large, complex organizations that face many challenges. With leadership and staff turnover, districts frequently lose the expertise, infrastructure, and key champions that made the initial adoption of SEL possible. Budgeting for SEL can present another challenge, as initiatives compete for limited funds.

To examine this question of sustainability, we went back to our CDI partner districts. We spoke with SEL leaders and superintendents in each district and drew from our own experiences of partnering with them. We also reviewed their annual ratings on the CASEL SEL Implementation Rubric, a tool used to mark progress against implementation goals, and gained insights from reports compiled at the end of each year of their SEL initiatives (10 districts) and at the completion of their three-year intensive coaching engagements with us (13 districts). The CDI partner districts, who are at various stages in tracking and using SEL data, also provided available data about their efforts and outcomes.

Since 2012, district SEL implementation has grown across the four focus areas of CASEL's Theory of Action: Focus Area 1: Build foundational support and plan; Focus Area 2: Strengthen adult SEL competencies and capacity; Focus Area 3: Promote SEL for students; and Focus Area 4: Reflect on data for continuous improvement. As shown in the graph, average district ratings using CASEL's district SEL implementation rubric increased from 2012 to 2021. All district self-reported ratings increased on rubric items based on a scale of 1 (no planning or implementation) to 4 (fully planned and implemented).

Growth in Districtwide SEL Implementation in CDI Districts 2012-2021



Through all these conversations and reports, we saw a common theme: The keys for sustaining SEL lie in **systemic implementation**. From the start of our work with the CDI, we advocated an implementation approach that seeks to integrate SEL into all aspects of district work. In this approach, SEL is far more pervasive and complex than the introduction of a single lesson or class period. Instead, it permeates all the work done in the district. It is incorporated into classroom instruction, school culture and climate, hiring, staff management, professional learning and training, relationship-building with families, discipline, and other efforts.

District partners told us that this systemic approach was the cornerstone of sustainability. In other words, **SEL is woven into the fabric of the school system**. It is grounded in evidence-based programs and practices; tied to key district priorities; modeled by leaders; experienced by adults; integrated with school cultures; co-created with students, families, and communities; and strengthened by internal and external communities of practice.

When integrated this way throughout the district, everyone saw SEL in their own work. This meant a widespread commitment to SEL persists even when leadership changes, budgets fluctuate, and new initiatives are introduced.

The next logical question is:

How does SEL become systemically woven throughout a district?

Building on what we've learned through the CDI, CASEL has offered a theory of action for systemic, districtwide SEL implementation (see p. 6). In reflecting upon how the theory of action came to life in partner districts, we heard repeatedly that it requires continually making space for everyone to contribute. When staff, teachers, students, families, and community members are all invited to participate in the process of planning, implementing, and continuously improving SEL, the work becomes a shared priority, rather than an initiative that comes and goes when leadership changes. Implementation decisions better reflect the strengths and needs of the full district community, and everyone sees the role they can play and how SEL impacts them both personally and professionally. This "co-creation" and co-ownership of SEL strategies helps SEL take hold across the district and persist over the long term.

A Systemic Approach to SEL

A systemic approach to SEL creates equitable learning conditions that actively involve all Pre-K to Grade 12 students in learning and practicing social, emotional, and academic competencies. These conditions require aligned policies, resources, and actions at district and state 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.

Read more.



> **You cannot implement programming without the true implementers at the table. Include the people who are doing the work in the decision-making process [and] ask, "What is it that you need, and how can I support you in doing that work so that we can reach our central goal, which is really to make the system better?"** — *Rose Prejean-Harris, Director of SEL, **Atlanta***

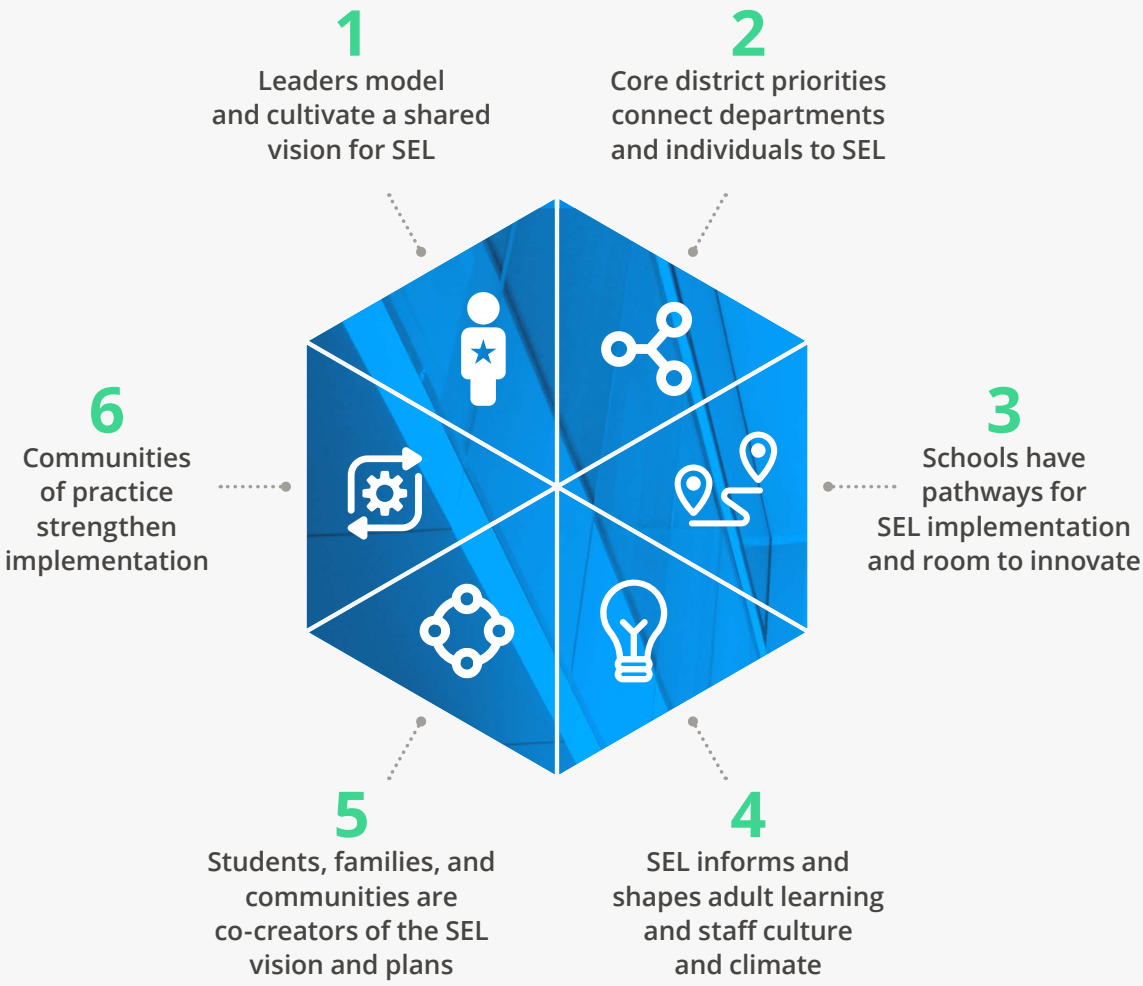
SUSTAINING SEL

WHAT IS IN THIS REPORT?

This report outlines six elements within a district that can help bring all stakeholders to the table to contribute to the long-term sustainability of SEL. Each element is drawn from our experience partnering with the CDI and informed by a review of their implementation reports and relevant research. These elements align with CASEL's District Theory of Action (see p.6), highlighting aspects of SEL implementation that are particularly important to sustainability. We also offer examples from our partners of what these elements look like on the ground and share advice from district leaders based on their journeys.

We are grateful to our CDI partners for generously contributing to our collective learning. While there are no one-size-fits-all answers for districts looking to sustain and deepen their SEL efforts, our hope is that their stories and insights will provide guidance and inspiration that help districts everywhere make SEL an integral part of students' education.

THE SIX ELEMENTS FOR SEL SUSTAINABILITY





ELEMENT

1

Leaders Model, Cultivate, and Elevate a Shared Vision for SEL



ELEMENT 1

Leaders Model, Cultivate, and Elevate a Shared Vision for SEL

While a systemic approach positions SEL as a shared priority among all stakeholders, the district's top leadership sets a tone that shapes how others view SEL. The commitment of superintendents (as well as their cabinet members, assistant superintendents, and heads of departments) is critical to the sustainability of any initiative. Research shows that effective leadership is crucial for prioritizing, incentivizing, generating consensus, and creating conditions for implementation.[1]

How does this factor support sustainability?

- **By modeling SEL**, leaders provide a lived example and set the expectation that SEL will be central to how staff interact with each other and with students.
- **By communicating about SEL**, leaders reinforce that SEL is a high priority and inspire staff, students, families, and others to learn more to help support this focus.
- **By prioritizing SEL in the districtwide vision and strategic plan**, leaders drive action and establish structures to build a long-term foundation for SEL in the district.

Modeling SEL

Leaders play an important role in the long-term adoption of SEL by putting it at the center of how they lead and build relationships with staff, students, families, and community partners. By keeping the five core competencies at the heart of how they interact and collaborate with others, they cultivate a sense of belonging, collective efficacy, and well-being. In modeling SEL, they "lead by example."

We've seen examples of this kind of "modeling from the top" in the CDI districts. For example, in **Minneapolis**, the superintendent and cabinet leaders regularly utilize the SEL 3 Signature Practices to include time for relationship-building and processing within their cabinet meetings.

Similarly, superintendents demonstrate SEL in how they interact with school leaders and other staff. Jennie Knutson of **Anchorage** notes, "When we have our general leadership meetings with all of our administrators, all our principals, our other administrators throughout the district, our superintendent leads those meetings demonstrating adult SEL skills.... It's not just talking at people and giving directives, it's really [about] integrating people into the work and having that optimistic closure at the end."



1 Durlak, J. A., & DuPre, E. P. (2008). Implementation matters: A review of research on the influence of implementation on program outcomes and the factors affecting implementation. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41:327–350. DOI 10.1007/s10464-008-9165-0.

Communicating About SEL

In addition to modeling SEL, district leaders help cement the long-term commitment to SEL by communicating about it through public addresses, emails, social media, and district newsletters. Research has highlighted that superintendents and other district leaders play a key role in supporting effective strategy implementation via clear communication to school-level staff. Additionally, superintendents are better able to advance priorities by using two-way communications focused on relationship-building rather than issuing top-down directives.[2] This kind of communication "from the top" sends the message that SEL is part of the district culture. For school leaders, teachers, and staff who are often familiar with a stressful test-taking culture, superintendent communications can also offer a sense of reassurance that SEL and relationships are valued by their supervisors.[3] Rather than just another program or agenda item, SEL becomes the way education is done in the district.

Chicago developed a series of videos communicating about SEL and its alignment with other topics and priorities, and the CEO communicated frequently in the media and during public events about the importance of SEL.

Similarly, leaders in **Atlanta** consistently communicated about SEL in a variety of forums, including Twitter, a blog, and national conferences.

Establishing Structures That Sustain SEL

Top district leaders also have the power to ensure that SEL remains at the center of district work by incorporating it in the district's vision and strategic plans. By building SEL into key structures that drive day-to-day functions, leaders ensure that SEL becomes such an integral part of district work that implementation can continue beyond their own tenures. While top leadership sets the tone for SEL, our CDI districts buck a trend in education that says initiatives often leave when leadership turns over.[5] Indeed, we've seen district-level SEL initiatives persist even as our partner districts experienced multiple changes in top leadership.

The Role of Principals in SEL Implementation

> *When the principal is extremely supportive, you see something totally different at that campus. So I really believe that it starts with … the principal. If the principal can lead that work, you're going to see it… throughout their campus. I really believe that that's key.*
>
> — Sandra Montes-Uranga, Director, SEL, **El Paso**

In addition to district leaders, school leaders also play an important role in sustaining SEL, and many CDI districts have prioritized support to principals as core to SEL implementation. For example, Minneapolis Public Schools is partnering with the Wallace Foundation's principal pipeline initiative to support school leaders in developing their own competence to support SEL in service of equity.

A report by the University of Chicago finds that "principals in both lower- and higher-performing schools contribute to student gains mainly through improvements in school climate."[4]

Said study co-author Elaine Allensworth, "A lot of times people think school climate is something you work on and take care of so you can get to the real work of teaching and learning, but what we find is learning is inherently social and emotional. If students don't feel safe and engaged, they aren't learning." The study also suggests that "principal candidates need to be selected and developed with a focus on their role as leader of school climate."



2 Kowalski, T. J. (2005). Evolution of the school superintendent as communicator. *Communication Education*, 54:2, 101-117. DOI: 10.1080/03634520500213322.

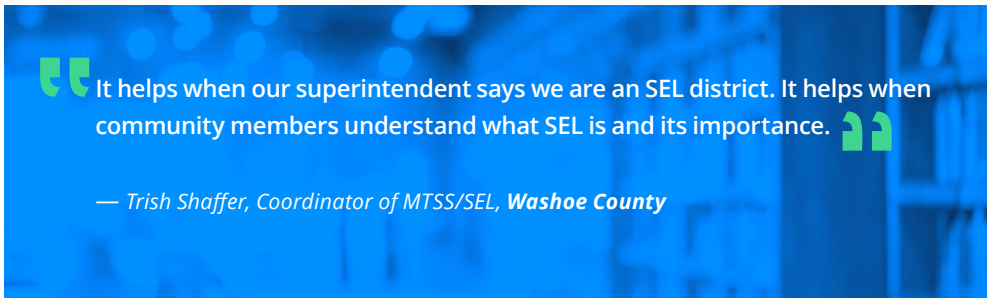
3 Smith, W.C., & Holloway, J. (2020). School testing culture and teacher satisfaction. *Education Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 32, 461-479. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-020-09342-8.

4 Weiner, R. (2018). Why school climate should be every principal's top priority. *Education Week*, July 12, 2018.

5 Sindelar, P. T., Shearer, D. K., Yendol-Hoppey, D., & Liebert, T. W. (2006). The sustainability of inclusive school reform. *Exceptional Children*, 72: 3, 317-331.

By elevating and continuously communicating a districtwide vision around SEL, district leaders spur action that sustains the work over the long term. These observations, drawn from our work with the CDI partner districts, reflect some of the research on implementation of various education initiatives. Research has found that an education leader's personal commitment and connection to the organization's vision helps shape the district's movement toward its goal. [6]

A key condition for improving learning environments and increasing student achievement is having a clear district vision that highlights the connection between the district's core beliefs, key practices, and student achievement.[7] As such, the district leader holds a great deal of power to create a sustainable vision that guides the district's long-term direction for SEL.



Superintendent Insights

From the very beginning of the CDI, we saw superintendent investment in SEL as a critical ingredient for the success of systemic SEL. CASEL regularly convenes CDI superintendents as a way for them to share their leadership strategies and best practices. Superintendents report that connecting with peers has helped them deepen their SEL knowledge and apply SEL practices and policies to their contexts.

Hear from CDI superintendents.

Additional Resources

- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 1: Build Foundational Support and Plan
  - Develop a Shared Vision and Plan for SEL
  - Communicate SEL as a District Priority

- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 2: Strengthen Adult SEL Competencies and Capacity
  - Strengthen Central Office Expertise
  - Strengthen Adult Social, Emotional, and Cultural Competence
  - Promote Trust, Community, and Collective Efficacy Among Staff

- CASEL's Districtwide SEL Essentials for Superintendents.
  A toolkit developed in collaboration with AASA that details 10 high-leverage superintendent actions that promote districtwide SEL movement and systemic, high-quality implementation.

- Create a Shared Vision. This worksheet guides district leaders through the full process of developing a shared vision, from launching a committee to gathering feedback to finalize the vision statement.

- SEL Talking Points for Superintendents. A set of key messages to support district leaders in communicating about the importance of SEL.

6 Yoel, R., & Berkovich, I. (2010). From personal ethos to organizational vision: Narratives of visionary educational leaders. *Journal of Educational Administration,* 48, 451-467.

7 Bottoms, G., & Schmidt-Davis, J. (2010). *The three essentials: Improving schools requires district vision, district and state support, and principal leadership.* Southern Regional Education Board. ERIC No. ED512028.



ELEMENT

2

Core District Priorities Connect SEL to all Departments and Individuals so Everyone Is Invested



ELEMENT 2

Core District Priorities Connect SEL to all Departments and Individuals

Building from a shared vision for SEL, CDI districts have been weaving SEL throughout every department, every school, and every role. They do this by connecting SEL goals with core educational priorities that touch all departments and individuals in the district. Rather than being "just one more thing," SEL is the foundation and catalyst for shared goals across the district.

When this is the case, SEL becomes everyone's work and is a key component in the central work of the district.

This insight is echoed in the research. Efforts to promote SEL are most effective when they are aligned with other district programs and initiatives and when SEL is integrated into the district's core functions.[8]

This focus on integrating SEL with district priorities has been a key component of the work of the CDI districts. For example, all eight of the original CDI districts indicated on a 2019 survey that organizing the district to promote collaboration among school and district leaders around SEL, academics, and equity was a key priority for the year. CASEL conducts annual surveys of district leads in partner districts on SEL implementation progress, key district SEL priorities, programs implemented, and data collected to improve ongoing technical assistance and support.

How does this factor support sustainability?

When SEL is connected to district priorities:

- **It is woven throughout all departments** in the central office and all the schools in the district. SEL both supports and is supported by the work in other departments, so it becomes integral to nearly all district functions.
- **Each individual feels a personal investment.** Each member of the district community sees how SEL supports their work and goals, as well as their relationships and lives.

Two Levels of Investment

Connecting SEL to district priorities drives commitment to and investment in SEL on two levels, the departmental level and the personal level.

At the **departmental level**, SEL acts as a lever to achieve core district goals across the central office. Departments see how SEL both supports and is supported by their work.

At the **individual level**, we see personal connections to SEL. When everyone connects SEL to the goals of their departments and experiences SEL-rich work and learning environments, they can see themselves in the work. They see how SEL will support their work and how it benefits their own relationships, goals, and lives. The result is a personal investment in and commitment to SEL.



8 Kendziora, K., & Yoder, N. (2016). *When districts support and integrate social and emotional learning (SEL): Findings from an ongoing evaluation of districtwide implementation of SEL*. Education Policy Center, American Institutes for Research.

While SEL has a place throughout the central office, the CDI districts have consistently identified three departments that have a particularly rich and powerful relationship with SEL: Academics, Equity, and Research and Evaluation. Here are some of our findings about how these departments engage with SEL.

SEL as a Lever for Academics and Equity

When we first launched the CDI, SEL was often seen as a strand of work separate from the district's core work of academics. The majority of the CDI districts located their SEL work in student support services departments. Over the last decade, however, two major shifts in district priorities have occurred:

- SEL has increasingly been seen as a lever for academic excellence for all students.
- CDI districts have all expanded their focus on SEL as a lever for educational equity.

Currently, 70% of CDI districts house their SEL departments in offices focused on academics or equity. The remainder house SEL departments within offices focused on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, grants, family engagement, and other areas. All of the districts position SEL as a strategy for creating rich learning experiences and equitable learning environments that foster improved academic and developmental outcomes for all students and communities.

While research on the interconnectedness of SEL, academics, and equity is ongoing, some studies indicate that it has benefits for students. For example, studies have found that attending to equity considerations when integrating SEL into discipline practices has positive impacts for adults and students.[9] Similarly, integrating SEL with academics via instructional approaches that focus on collaboration and real-world application, such as project-based learning and service learning, can bolster both academic performance and social and emotional skills.[10, 11]

We've followed these threads in our work with the CDI districts. Working with them, we're continuing to deepen our understanding of how SEL plays an important role in achieving districts' goals around academics and equity. We've seen that SEL can be positioned to:

- Highlight students' strengths and enhance skills, knowledge, and mindsets that help them engage and succeed in academic learning.
- Support educators in developing emotionally safe and stimulating environments and trusting relationships that promote academic growth.
- Foster the capacity to examine and interrupt inequitable practices and policies.
- Create opportunities for students, families, and educators to co-construct more inclusive, student-centered school environments that promote a sense of belonging and connectedness.
- Support educators in strengthening competencies to model SEL and better support students from diverse backgrounds.

At the same time, SEL itself is strengthened when academic and equity considerations are central to implementation. We're continuing to learn all the ways that context shapes students' learning and development. This effort requires that we attend to the inequities deeply ingrained in many of the policies, practices, and structures that shape education.

> **"The biggest facilitators of our work have actually been the people doing the work. They recognize that SEL is important, that it needed to be systemic, that we had to work collaboratively across departments from the very top. From our school board, to our superintendent, to our senior leadership team, to all of our hiring and human resources, to our principals, our teachers, our counselors, and then our kids, they recognize its importance."**
> *— Rose Prejean-Harris, Director of SEL,* ***Atlanta***

9 Gregory, A., & Fergus, E. (2017). Social and emotional learning and equity in school discipline. *The Future of Children*, 27:1, 117-136.

10 Baines, A. M., De Vivo, K., Warner, N., DeBarger, A., Udall, D., Zuckerbrod, N., & Felsen, K. (2021). *Why social and emotional learning is essential to project-based learning*. Lucas Education Research.

11 Celio, C. I., Durlak, J., & Dymnicki, A. (2011). A meta-analysis of the impact of service-learning on students. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 34:2, 164–181.

Many of our districts have been pioneers in connecting SEL with equity and academics.

Here are some examples of their innovative work to braid together SEL, equity, and academics.

Scan the QR code to watch the video

Guilford County has worked with CASEL to identify an evidence-based program, Facing History and Ourselves, to integrate equity, SEL, and academics in social studies. They are now working with their Research and Evaluation Department to design a process for understanding the impact of that work on individual student development and sense of belonging and engagement.

Sacramento engaged a cohort of teachers in designing curriculum that weaves SEL competencies into academics. Through this effort, they developed a learning practice that applied a culturally responsive lens, aligned by grade level and language development. They also developed an online resource to support this distribution and teacher training, with the goal of cultivating a group of teachers to facilitate future learning with peers.

Denver has situated SEL as Transformational Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning (TSEAL) work within the Culturally Sustaining Curriculum and Instruction Department, braiding together culturally responsive education and SEL with an explicit focus on supporting the awareness of self, relationships, and systems that support liberation for students through climate and culture, instruction, and community partnerships within each school. They have adopted a universal curriculum, which they are rolling out to 50 schools in the 2021-2022 school year. Their TSEAL effort comprises seven components: Shared Leadership, Climate and Culture, Explict SEAL Instruction, Academic Integration, Continuous Improvement, Adult SEAL, Culturally Responsive Education (CRE) Mindsets, and Partnership.

Nashville supports all teachers to integrate SEL "I can" statements across grade levels, focusing on three core questions to design instruction: "How do we get all learners to do the heavy lifting and thinking first? How do we have all learners regularly reflect on SEL and academic skills? And then, how do we have all learners' voices exceed teacher talk?"

Anchorage intentionally incorporated their state's culturally responsive instructional standards into their district SEL standards, and the district team focused on coaching for that integrated approach.

In **Boston**, the district SEL and Instruction team engaged in the process of developing a BPS SEL definition and SEL standards and competencies in 2017. These were updated in 2019 to reflect a Transformative SEL approach, an equity-based approach to deepen the social, emotional, and cultural competence of adults and students that is aligned with Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining Practices (CLSP). A cross-division SEL steering committee, including offices such as Opportunity Gap and Health and Wellness, has begun work toward creating a district vision and implementation plan for SEL aligned with CLSP.

Warren (Ohio) offers an annual two-day district administrator retreat, which includes the cabinet and all principals and assistant principals. The retreat focuses on building awareness of personal and schoolwide values and beliefs and connecting these values and beliefs to SEL and equitable learning spaces.

> **It was only when we were put under the academic department, and we started working with our ELA team, math team, and science team to see where SEL could be embedded into our curriculum and instructional practices that our teachers and leaders started to see where SEL fits in teaching and learning. That's when the impact, importance, relevance, and foundational value of SEL across the district, the school campus, and the classroom became clear.** — *Mai Xi Lee, Director, Social Emotional Learning,* ***Sacramento***

Our learnings from the CDI partnerships and other research informed our 2020 update to the CASEL framework to place more emphasis on both the competencies and the contexts that support equitable practices and academic excellence. The updated definition also highlights the importance of culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate approaches to SEL.

Research and Evaluation

To ensure that SEL, equity, and academic efforts translate into intended outcomes for students, CASEL's district partnerships have long included a focus on using data to drive continuous improvement. At the beginning of the CDI, however, Research and Evaluation (R&E) teams were often brought in after implementation had begun to support SEL teams on data collection and analysis.

But over the last 10 years, we've learned that a close partnership between the SEL and R&E teams from the beginning can mutually inform, support, and reinforce each other's work. The SEL team benefits from the support and guidance of the R&E team in building continuous improvement into SEL planning, design, and implementation, while the SEL team helps the R&E team incorporate SEL throughout all data collection and analysis to create a fuller picture of progress toward districtwide goals.

Building on research that stressed the importance of data-driven decision-making and instruction, many of our district partners bring together SEL and R&E teams at the beginning of the work to ensure they have effective structures, baseline data, clear objectives and planning in place as a foundation for identifying and tracking SEL growth over time.[12] Throughout implementation, this partnership helps document success and challenges, and works together to reflect on progress and identify needed improvements. The collaboration also helps illuminate broader connections between SEL data and data related to academics and equity, helping to deepen the integration of these efforts.

Here are some examples of this work from the CDI districts:

In **Minneapolis**, a dedicated data scientist from the district R&E department supports continuous improvement for the SEL team by reviewing school-level improvement report data to identify trends in their SEL goals, data being collected, and progress toward those goals.

SEL Outcomes in CDI Districts

SEL teams work with Research & Evaluation teams to document and share SEL outcomes, which helps sustain implementation as stakeholders understand the impact of the work. Available data submitted to CASEL by CDI districts in 2021 showed documented improvements in school climate and behavior. For example:

- **ANCHORAGE** reported an overall improvement in school climate, as measured by student responses on the annual climate and connectedness survey. The most recent survey (2021), shows that from 2018 to 2021, student perceptions of school safety increased by four percentage points (from 68% to 72%) and student perceptions of caring others increased by two percentage points (from 63% to 65%).
- **WASHOE** reported an overall improvement in school climate, as measured by student responses on the annual climate survey. The most recent survey data (2021) show that from 2020 to 2021, the percentage of students who feel safe at school increased by nine percentage points (from 80% to 89%).
- **CLEVELAND** reported an overall improvement in discipline responses. The district's suspension rate declined 26% from school year 2018-2019 to 2019-2020.



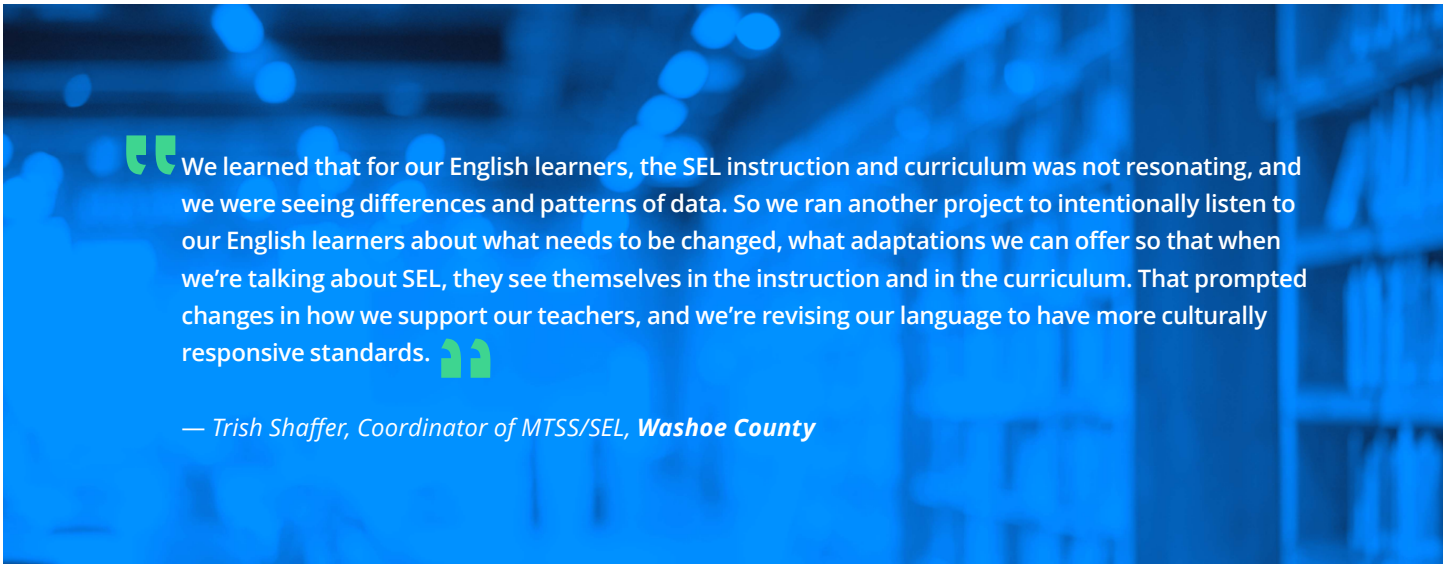
12 Snipes, J., Doolittle, F., & Herlihy, C. (2002). *Foundations for success: Case studies of how urban school systems improve student achievement.* MDRC for the Council of Great City Schools.

By looking across schools, the data scientist has been gathering learnings that can help the SEL team to better understand the impact of its work and refine its supports for schools.

Minneapolis is also creating and refining continuous improvement tools like the SEL Quick Check, an SEL assessment tool piloted in a few schools to measure teacher and student social and emotional competencies. The aligned training focuses heavily on teachers examining their own identity, biases, and beliefs, and connects closely to the district's equity work. Additionally, Minneapolis is partnering with CASEL through the Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE) network to measure adult perceptions of climate in schools using Cultivate, a tool developed by Project for Education Research That Scales (PERTS).

In **Washoe County**, this kind of collaboration was critical as the SEL team ramped up their efforts to measure SEL. As a result of this support, the SEL team was able to include their data on the district's online data dashboard. This has proved a valuable tool to raise the visibility of SEL and increase understanding of the work throughout the district.

Austin began collaborating with the department of Research and Evaluation early on. A research partner helped design a logic model and worked with the SEL team to develop an implementation rubric for campuses. By measuring both outputs (e.g., academic performance, attendance, discipline and school climate) and inputs using the implementation rubric (e.g., how often SEL was explicitly taught, family engagement in SEL), the district was able to show that higher levels of campus implementation fidelity led to positive results.



> **We learned that for our English learners, the SEL instruction and curriculum was not resonating, and we were seeing differences and patterns of data. So we ran another project to intentionally listen to our English learners about what needs to be changed, what adaptations we can offer so that when we're talking about SEL, they see themselves in the instruction and in the curriculum. That prompted changes in how we support our teachers, and we're revising our language to have more culturally responsive standards.**
>
> *— Trish Shaffer, Coordinator of MTSS/SEL,* ***Washoe County***

Additional Resources

- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 1: Build Foundational Support and Plan
  - Develop a Shared Vision and Plan for SEL
  - Organize District to Promote Collaboration around SEL, Academics, and Equity
- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 2: Strengthen Adult SEL Competencies and Capacity
  - Strengthen Central Office Expertise
  - Strengthen Adult Social, Emotional, and Cultural Competence
  - Promote Trust, Community, and Collective Efficacy Among Staff
- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 3: Promote SEL for Students
  - Integrate SEL With Academics, Discipline, and Student Supports
- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 4: Reflect on Data for Continuous Improvement
  - Plan for Improvement
  - Document Implementation and Outcomes
  - Reflect on Progress Toward Annual SEL Goals
  - Make Improvements to the Action Plan
- Create a Stakeholder Map to Support a Strategic Plan for SEL. This tool helps identify key stakeholders and determine how best to bring in their voice and support in the process of strategic planning and continuous improvement for districtwide SEL implementation.
- Organize District to Promote Collaboration Around SEL, Academics, and Equity. CASEL's District Resource Center shares an overview, process, and tools to align district efforts around SEL, academics, and equity.
  - SEL Trends: Reorganizing District Central Offices. Profiles of how CASEL partner districts have shifted their organizational structure to better integrate SEL with academic priorities.
  - Advancing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as a Lever for Equity and Excellence. This report summarizes five emerging insights based on the efforts of school districts in CASEL's Equity Work Group (EWG).

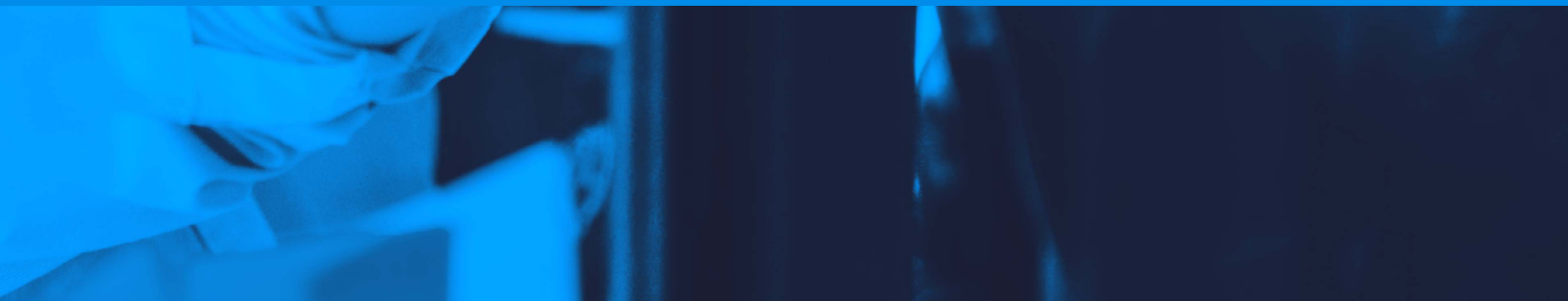




ELEMENT

3

Schools Have Resources and Pathways to Guide SEL Implementation, as Well as Room to Innovate and Customize SEL for Their Communities



ELEMENT 3

Schools Have Pathways for SEL Implementation and Room to Innovate

While the impetus for districtwide SEL implementation may come from central office, schools are critical to translating the shared vision for SEL into sustained practice. Research has shown that school leaders and teachers overwhelmingly support SEL.[13,14] Added to that, they understand the local priorities and have on-the-ground experience of what students in their communities need and want. This makes them critical "deliverers" of SEL.

And yet, when it comes to implementing SEL, many school leaders and staff feel they don't know where to start. A study on educational reforms implemented across large urban districts found that a consistent challenge was a lack of coherence in the initiatives and programs across schools.[16] Successful districts encouraged schools to follow a districtwide implementation plan, offered professional learning and implementation support, and centralized curricular options. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to SEL implementation, and CASEL recommends schools begin systemic implementation by working with families and communities to define a shared vision and priorities. Adopting an evidence-based SEL program is also a central part of implementation to ensure all students have consistent, effective opportunities to learn and practice social and emotional learning.

To ensure SEL instruction is developmentally appropriate and coherent across elementary, middle, and high schools, districts should also create alignment of school programs and practices to state standards, graduate profiles, or other district benchmarks around what students should know and be able to do. On the other hand, research has shown that principals are better able to implement and sustain district priorities and policies when they feel a district policy aligns with their school's values and priorities and they have flexibility in shaping how that priority plays out in their school.[17] SEL likely won't last if it's a top-down, compliance-driven initiative.

CDI districts work to strike a delicate balance—providing guidance, resources, and accountability for SEL implementation while creating space for schools to inform districtwide offerings and decide how best to shape implementation to meet their community's unique needs. The majority of district provide intensive coaching for schools to implement SEL, according to their end-of-year reports and reports at the end of our three-year engagements with CDI districts.

Districts' implementation plans also created space for schools to work with their families and communities to set goals and plans that meet their unique needs and strengths (See Element 5). By listening to schools and providing clear guidance with multiple paths to SEL implementation, districts can acknowledge and honor the unique needs and strengths of each school community, while relying on each school to know how to negotiate and serve those needs.

> **"We very much pride ourselves on not having a one-size-fits-all approach, which means that we have to really understand our schools. Really know who our students and our other stakeholders are, like our teachers, and our families, and administrators."**
>
> *— Hellen Antonopoulos, Executive Director, Office of Social and Emotional Learning,* ***Chicago***

13 Atwell, M. N., & Bridgeland, J., with Civic and Hart Research Associates. (2019). *Ready to lead: A 2019 update of principals' perspectives on how social and emotional learning can prepare children and transform schools.* Chicago: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

14 Atwell, M. N., Bridgeland, J. M., & Manspile, E. P., with Civic and Hart Research Associates. (2021). *Ready to engage: perspectives of teachers and parents on social and emotional learning and service-learning in america's public schools.* Chicago: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

15 Mahoney, J. L., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2018). An update on social and emotional learning outcome research. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 100:4, 18-23.

16 Snipes, J., Doolittle, F., & Herlihy, C. (2002). *Foundations for success: Case studies of how urban school systems improve student achievement.* MDRF for the Council of Great City Schools.

17 Louis, K.S., & Robinson, V. (2012) External mandates and instructional leadership: Principals as mediating agents. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 50:5, 629-665.

How does this factor support sustainability?

- **Schools bring deep expertise** about the strengths, needs, and identities of their students, and so are well-positioned to translate district resources and priorities into relevant, meaningful SEL practices.
- **Schools can partner with families and communities** to co-create a tailored approach to SEL, deepen relationships with these important partners, and forge a shared commitment to SEL.

Partnering With Schools to Shape SEL Implementation

A common strategy for partnering with schools was to roll out SEL in phases by developing cohorts based on school-level interest in SEL implementation, available SEL infrastructure, or other criteria. These cohorts offered an opportunity to strategically partner with schools at the start of SEL implementation and use their input to inform the districtwide approach. Implementation through subsequent cohorts provided a way to build on what was learned from earlier adopters. Cohorts also provided opportunities to develop school-level SEL leaders who championed the work and oversaw implementation.

For example, **Austin** developed a five-year plan to ensure that evidence-based program implementation was phased in with tailored professional learning and coaching connected to the district strategy. They invited campuses to select their own SEL goals for implementation, identify SEL leads and steering committees, document their plans and progress, and celebrate their results and learnings at a summer convening. This program started with 20 schools and currently has over 65 district schools participating.

Flexibility and Participation in Decision-Making

We also observed the importance of balancing this support with options to allow for some decision-making at the school level, particularly in districts where there was an existing culture of school autonomy. Leaders in several districts responded to this tension by developing a focused menu of evidence-based programs and SEL professional learning that district-level coaches could support based on the vision and goals of each school.

In **Minneapolis**, the district developed an SEL implementation toolkit modeled after the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, which offered a structured process for SEL implementation tailored to each school's vision, goals, and existing strategies. In Year 2, the district provided a three-year implementation plan to guide schools in making decisions that aligned school priorities with district priorities.

Dallas created a similar guide, along with a "roadmap" for campuses, guiding them to set goals in different aspects of SEL implementation and then supporting them in that work.

Scan the QR code to watch the video

> We've really had to broaden our own minds about what is this that we're trying to do, and do we mandate certain things or do we allow the schools to look at their own data and their own school population and their own school community and figure out what SEL needs to look like for them? What are those processes that they need to engage in? And then how can we support that?
>
> — *Caroline Chase, SEL Assistant Director (retired),* ***Austin***

Tracking SEL Implementation Progress Across Schools

Many districts used climate and staff surveys to collect and respond to data on school-level uptake of SEL implementation. For example:

Baltimore found that 61% of school staff felt their school had effectively implemented SEL programming, according to 2018-2019 survey data.

Guilford reported that 74% of staff frequently integrate SEL into their academic lessons and 86% of classroom teachers reported frequently using culturally responsive teaching practices (always or most of the time), according to the 2021 CASEL staff implementation survey.

Washoe documented a four-percentage point increase in staff that follow an established written SEL curriculum in all grade levels at the school, between 2019 and 2020. A majority of staff (87%) also reported that adults in their school model social and emotional competence in their interactions with each other, according to district climate data reports.

Additional Resources

- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 1: Build Foundational Support and Plan
  - Align Resources for SEL
- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 2: Strengthen Adult SEL Competencies and Capacity
  - Design and Implement an SEL Professional Learning Program for Schools
- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 3: Promote SEL for Students
  – Adopt and Implement Prek-12 SEL Standards or Guidelines
  – Adopt and Implement Evidence-Based Programs and Practices
- CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL: Create a Plan. CASEL's guide for schools emphasizes choice and customization while offering a structured template for planning SEL implementation.
- 10 Indicators of Schoolwide SEL. This one-page summary describes what you should expect to see in a school that has fully integrated SEL into all practices and settings.
- CASEL Schoolwide SEL Walkthrough Protocol. Aligned with the 10 indicators, this observation protocol can be used to highlight strong SEL implementation and continuously improve.
- CASEL Staff, Family, and Community Partner Survey on SEL Implementation. This tool is designed to support SEL teams in collecting data on staff, family, and community partner perceptions of SEL implementation.



ELEMENT

4

SEL Informs and Shapes Adult Learning and Staff Culture and Climate



ELEMENT 4

SEL Informs and Shapes Adult Learning and Staff Culture and Climate

Looking back on the 10 years of the CDI, we asked our partner districts, "If you could start your work all over, what would you do differently in your implementation of SEL?"

Again and again, they told us they would have prioritized adult SEL sooner. Why? Because these districts recognized that by experiencing SEL, adults became stronger and more effective practitioners, advocates, and models of SEL.

In a 2019 survey, five of the eight original CDI district selected "strengthening staff social, emotional, and cultural competence" as an SEL implementation priority for the year. They address this priority, in part, through foundational and technical professional learning focused on how to implement specific programs and practices for teaching and promoting SEL with students. Increasingly, districts have also focused on offering adults the opportunity to experience SEL firsthand. Staff strengthen their own social and emotional competencies and reflect on how it fosters personal growth, relationships, and the creation of a working and learning environment where everyone thrives. Relatedly, adult SEL efforts can help support staff well-being and mental health (see sidebar).

The research shows that when teachers tend to their own SEL, it decreases stress levels and increase job satisfaction, which helps them foster warm relationships and better outcomes for students.[18] Adults' personal experience of SEL becomes a powerful catalyst, promoting student and staff well-being, and deepening SEL as an integral part of all district work.

How does this factor support sustainability?

- **When adults learn about SEL and stregnthen their own SEL**, they recognize how it provides the conditions for the kinds of relationships, self-awareness, and engagement that support growth and development for all.
- **When SEL is interwoven into all adult interactions,** it becomes part of the larger culture of the district rather than an initiative relying on a single leader.
- **When adults strengthen their social and emotional competence,** they feel a deeper sense of community, develop more positive relationships with students, model social and emotional competence, and feel greater job satisfaction and less burnout.

SEL and Staff Well-Being

Research has shown that efforts that support staff wellness produce greater job satisfaction and a host of positive physical and mental health outcomes.[19] The CDI districts have leveraged adult SEL to support staff wellness.

For example, in **Tulsa**, SEL is central to the district's overall strategy for wellness, which became even more important after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The district developed a Wellness Playbook to anchor SEL as a district priority.

In **Baltimore**, the district Wholeness (SEL) team provided space for principals to have their own restorative circles with one another during the particularly challenging previous school year.

> **"It was very important for all of us to take our own journey first, before we could actually be models of what this work should look like. Our teachers need to engage with their own journey in order to really be models for their students and be fully able to teach directly, explicitly teach SEL to the students."**
>
> *— Caroline Chase, SEL Assistant Director (retired),* ***Austin***



Scan the QR code to watch the video

18 Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2017) Social and emotional learning and teachers. *The Future of Children*, 27:1, 137-155.

Focusing on Adult SEL in a District

Many CDI districts have focused on developing professional learning, hiring, and onboarding processes that ensure staff model and practice their own SEL. In 2020, four of our eight original CDI districts selected "designing and implementing an effective SEL professional learning program for school staff" as a key priority.

In accordance with research on professional learning and teacher change, many of our partner districts found that it was essential to start with foundational learning on what is SEL and why it's important, and then follow up with ongoing professional learning to expand and deepen opportunities for adults to learn about specific practices and programs for promoting student SEL while reflecting on and learning about their own social and emotional competencies.[20]

They also ensured that adult SEL professional learning was offered to all staff, not merely those who work directly with students or in the classroom. By offering professional learning for all adults, from the central office to the paraprofessional staff to the bus drivers and security officers in schools, they ensured everyone has a consistent understanding of how they play a role in promoting SEL and experience firsthand how to practice their own SEL.

For example, in **Oakland**, the district wanted a comprehensive yet simple and accessible way for all adults to see and experience the importance of SEL. Working with CASEL, they developed and piloted the SEL 3 Signature Practices, which involved embedding welcoming inclusion activities, engaging strategies, and optimistic closures into central office rituals, staff meetings, and lesson plans alike. Building on Oakland's success with these practices, **Washoe, Boston, Palm Beach County, Tulsa**, and others have adopted them to catalyze systemic SEL implementation.

In **Cleveland**, the district expanded SEL professional learning to include everyone in the school, from custodians to secretaries to food service workers to the principal. Similarly, **Sacramento** offers a range of SEL professional learning to all central office staff, families, and community members.

Guilford County began their SEL work by creating a districtwide SEL advisory team with representatives from nearly all central office departments that experienced, built capacity, and informed the overall SEL approach for the district. Beyond the initial foundational professional learning, several districts survey staff to identify ongoing learning needs around SEL, and many offer workshops tailored to the needs of particular roles or populations. **Sacramento** provided professional learning designed for school staff based on schools' identified needs, while **Minneapolis** focused on supporting principal supervisors to build their own internal team practices for SEL and as an explicit part of their support for principals.

Some districts also offer expanded, extended training sessions for those who want licensing and certification. In **Chicago**, teachers and related services providers can earn continuing education credits by participating in in-depth training via the district's Learning Hub, while **Washoe** has developed a 16-hour SEL course for Alternative Route to Licensure candidates and **Anchorage** has developed partnerships with universities that integrate SEL learning.

> **"Adults have to have context to be able to carry out that work at the school level, at the classroom level, [and] build awareness with parents and community. And so right away that became the priority for us. We just figured we've got to take care of the adults. We've got to have context for the adults."**
>
> *— Ray Lozano, Executive Director, Student and Family Empowerment,* ***El Paso***

19 Lever., N., Mathis, E., & Mayworm, A. (2017). School mental health is not just for students: Why teacher and school staff wellness matters. *Report on Emotional and Behavioral Disorders in Youth*, 17:1, 6-12. Health Research Alliance author manuscript, downloadable at https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6350815/#.

20 Guskey, T. R. (2002). Professional development and teacher change. In: *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, Vol. 8, No. 3/4.

Additional Resources:

- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 2: Strengthen Adult SEL Competencies and Capacity
  - Strengthen Central Office Expertise
  - Design and Implement an SEL Professional Learning Program for Schools
  - Strengthen Adult Social, Emotional, and Cultural Competence
  - Promote Trust, Community, and Collective Efficacy Among Staff
- SEL 101 Sample Introductory Presentation. This presentation can be adapted and used to introduce SEL to staff, families, and community partners.
- Reflecting on Personal SEL Skills. CASEL's guide for schools identifies personal reflection as a good starting point for engaging staff in adult SEL and provides a reflection tool.





ELEMENT

5

Students, Families, and Communities Are Co-Creators of the SEL Vision, Plans, and Practices



ELEMENT 5

Students, Families, and Communities Are Co-Creators of the SEL Vision

As we've seen with district and school staff, those who are invited to experience and shape SEL implementation help integrate it throughout the system. For SEL to truly take hold, it requires bringing to the table those who are often impacted by district decisions but not always included in decision-making.

Students, families, and community partners are essential to shaping an SEL initiative that reflects the strengths, needs, culture, and priorities of the district community. While many of our original partner districts began SEL as a staff-driven initiative, they quickly learned the importance of including all stakeholders from the beginning of implementation. In the years since the start of the CDI, districts have increasingly prioritized partnering with students, families, and communities to shape the vision for SEL and inform implementation and continuous improvement.

These partnerships with students, families, and communities have helped districts ensure that SEL is meaningful and relevant for everyone. Furthermore, their participation helps fuel a deeper investment in and sense of ownership of the effort—contributing to the long-term sustainability of SEL.

Scan the QR code to watch the video

How does this factor support sustainability?

When districts and schools engage students, families, and communities in co-creating SEL initiatives, they:

- **Ensure that SEL reflects the needs, strengths, cultures, and priorities** that are most important and relevant to that community.
- **Help build investment in and ownership** of SEL over the long term.

Students

For many CDI districts, elevating student voice has become a central aspect of SEL implementation. Rather than view students as passive recipients of SEL, districts have positioned students as critical partners in determining what education looks and feels like in their schools.

Students offer an important perspective on education and their own development—priorities and needs that adults may not be aware of. By partnering with students and creating space for their voices, districts use their input to continuously improve learning experiences for students. Research has shown that student survey data on their experiences with SEL implementation provides key insights for educators to understand what practices to strengthen to better support students.[21] Studies also find that students' self-efficacy and engagement increases when they are engaged in participatory action research projects to inform educational improvement in their school.[22]

> "It brings me such joy, walking into schools and hearing students talk about SEL, hearing families talk about SEL, and hearing families say that they need and want more SEL for their kids."
>
> *— Kyla Krengel, Director, Social and Emotional Learning,* ***Nashville***

21 Ward-Roncalli, S. (2021). *Using student voice to identify promising practices in social emotional learning.* CGU Theses & Dissertations, 231. https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu_etd/231. doi: 10.5642/cguetd/231.

22 Halliday, A. J., Kern, M. L., Garrett, D. K., & Turnbull, D. A. (2019). The student voice in well-being: A case study of participatory action research in positive education. *Educational Action Research*, 27:2, 17323-196. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2018.1436079

District efforts to elevate student voice are also an important way of providing meaningful opportunities to practice SEL. When students express their voice and perspectives, they practice self-awareness, social awareness, communication skills, and other critical social and emotional competencies. At the same time, SEL helps them strengthen their ability to effectively communicate, raise issues, and propose solutions.

Cleveland formed a student advisory committee assembled from representatives from each high school in the district. This body gives voice to school improvement strategies and student needs. They meet quarterly with the district CEO, the Humanware staff, and various members of the district leadership.

Dallas has convened student leaders from middle and high schools for youth leadership summits centered on SEL and equity that then impact district strategy.

Research on Student Voice and Agency

Research demonstrates that students who engage with student groups that provide opportunities to demonstrate stronger agency experience a deeper sense of belonging, and develop more profound competencies.[23]

Further, student voice actually benefits the district as well by informing and improving the implementation of SEL. As one study showed, schools that involve student voice in the process of data analysis improve teacher classroom practices.[24] The same study indicates that increasing student voice improves students' social and emotional skills, as "participating in reform efforts increases students' agency, self-worth, respect, and sense of membership in the school."

Denver is finalizing an SEL-focused youth guide to help ensure that youth voice is centered in processes and decision-making across K-12.

In its effort to integrate student voice into instructional settings, **Sacramento** has launched a project focused on the arts in which students reflect on their experience, key competencies, and relational skills through artistic expression.

Other districts have used surveys to elicit student voice on a wide range of topics important to the district. **Anchorage** used this method to inform school-level visions for SEL, while **Austin** administers a climate survey to students as well as families and staff. After the results are collected, Austin also engages students and their families in the school improvement process. Similarly, **Minneapolis** offers a participatory evaluation program that focuses on students and families as leaders of the inquiry into addressing district issues.

An important step has been to create the groundwork needed so that adults in the district understand the importance of student voice and create space for it. In many instances, this requires some reframing for adults and a reconsideration of "how things are done."

Washoe County offers an example of how to do such prep work. In 2015, they convened a district-level committee to plan their student voice initiative, which took capacity-building for adults as an important aspect of the work. As program evaluator Jennifer Harris said, the goal of student voice is "not only to listen and 'take' from students, but to build the capacity of adults to hear, act upon, and follow through on student voice." The district has also adopted a board policy to ensure consistent integration of student voice into school and district practice.

> **When the pandemic hit, we thought, 'What are we going to do to help kids?' … And I said 'Wait. We're making these decisions, but we haven't heard the voice of the kids. Can we pull the kids into the table?' From that, we organized groups of kids from all of the high schools to come together in discussion groups. And from that, we came up with a plan.**
>
> *— Rose Prejean-Harris, Director of SEL,* ***Atlanta***

23 Mitra, D.A. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing "student voice" in schools lead to gains in youth development? *Teachers College Record*, 106: 4, 651–688.

24 Mitra, D.A. (2008) Amplifying student voice. *Educational Leadership*, 66:3, 20-25.

Families

As students' first teachers, families have always been essential to SEL. As CDI districts have deepened these partnerships over the years, they've found new opportunities for bringing families to the table and bridging SEL practices across schools and homes.

Researchers have found that parent learning and engagement is strengthened when educators approach parent education collaboratively and allow parents to lead in their learning, rather than the school or district owning the entire process.[25] The importance of partnering with families about SEL is also illustrated in research that finds that some evidence-based programs that include a family engagement component have a positive impact on students' SEL.[26]

One example of how to engage families in decisions around SEL implementation occurred in **El Paso**, where the district invited families (along with staff, students, and community members) to be part of a district advisory group. Leveraging families' perspectives about what they felt students need, as well as their insights into what would resonate best with the various aspects of students' cultural and ethnic identities, the district was better equipped to select a program that was relevant and impactful for students.

To connect to families, district SEL teams have sometimes partnered with the family engagement office not only to share SEL resources but to integrate SEL practices into family outreach strategies. For example, **El Paso** has built a family engagement team that has embedded SEL practice into their training with parent engagement liaisons. As a result, these liaisons go the extra mile to introduce families to SEL by posting SEL messages to families and coordinating SEL and art classes for students and caregivers. The liaisons have also added resources and videos about self-care to be accessed by the families they serve.

Several CDI districts, including **Chicago** and **Dallas**, have used CASEL's SEL Discussion Series for Parents and Caregivers to support families in experiencing and contributing to SEL strategies.

Family Engagement in Pandemic Times

The 2020-2021 school year provided an opportunity to deepen partnerships with families as they have had a front-row seat to the learning of their young people. In 2020, **Nashville's** family engagement team became part of the SEL department, offering regular "mini-professional learning" sessions via Facebook Live and tip sheets for caregivers to support SEL at home, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching thousands of families per week. The team has also created supports for virtual home visits for teachers and virtual parent-teacher conferences.

> **"There was a time when our future in the district was uncertain because of budget cuts. It was the families and community partners who came forth and strongly advocated for SEL to continue to be a part of Sac City and to be part of the learning journey in the culture and climate journey.... At some points in your journey, they are going to show up in really wonderful ways for you. And I think that reciprocal relationship is really important."**
>
> — *Mai Xi Lee, Director, Social Emotional Learning,* ***Sacramento***



25 Ishimaru, A. M. (2017). From family engagement to equitable collaboration. *Educational Policy*, https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904817691841.

26 Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82, 405-432.

Finally, districts have found that engaging collaboratively with families helps forge partnerships to advocate for support and funding for SEL. When families see the relevance of SEL to what they want for their students, and when they are part of the district decision-making process, district-family partnerships become an important way to sustain SEL.

PSELI Districts

Boston, Mass.
Dallas, Texas
Denver, Colo.
Palm Beach County, Fla.
Tacoma, Wash.
Tulsa, Okla.

Communities

In addition to school staff and families, community partners are some of the biggest champions of SEL in districts. These partners may include out-of-school time providers, youth development organizations, community sports and arts programs, mental and behavioral health providers, and other organizations. Because these organizations often have established relationships with students and are already incorporating SEL as part of their focus on young people's well-being, they are important partners for embedding and sustaining SEL systemically throughout the district community.

Districts have increasingly seen community partners as experts in engaging and connecting with youth, and there is growing appreciation for evidence-based SEL strategies in community organizations. Studies show that in other educational initiative areas, collaborating with local partners (e.g., community organizations, government, businesses) can support systemic implementation.[27] Researchers have also found that afterschool SEL programs that used evidence-based practices resulted in students having on average an increase of 8 percentiles on standardized test scores, demonstrating an increase in 11 percentiles in positive social behavior, and reducing problematic behavior by 12 percentiles.[28]

Since 2016, our CDI has had a deeper focus on aligning district and community partnerships around SEL implementation through the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI), a six-year project supported by the Wallace Foundation and undertaken in collaboration with the RAND Corporation. Through PSELI, we are exploring whether and how students will benefit if adults in schools and out-of-school time (OST) programs work together to align and improve experiences and climate to foster SEL. Early findings suggest that key strategies for engaging with community partners are focusing on adult SEL, including aligned culture/climate practices, and setting aside time for explicit SEL instruction that is reinforced in both settings.

As part of PSELI, the **School District of Palm Beach County** (SDPBC) has partnered with Prime Time PBC to integrate SEL practices across in-school and out-of-school time through practices such as aligned SEL morning/afternoon meetings for all students. Further, SEL leaders participate in the Birth to 22 Initiative, a comprehensive countywide team to support young people in the community.

Prime Time Palm Beach County has monitored social and emotional skills for more than 600 youth attending various out-of-school time programming during 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. Using the Staff Rating of Youth Behavior (SRYB), a Weikart Center validated tool, they documented modest gains in youth social and emotional skills. This was especially true of youth attending PSELI programs. In fact, there was a statistically significant difference in social and emotional skills between students who attended PSELI programs and those who did not when rated in fall 2019, spring 2020, fall 2020, and spring 2021.

Denver, another PSELI district, has designed a walk-through tool to support the continuous improvement of aligned best practices across classrooms and OST spaces, focusing on SEL, academics, equity, and culturally responsive practices. The Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning (SEAL) teams, which include district/city central offices and school-level staff, conduct joint walkthroughs using this tool at least three times per year.

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27 Freeman, R., Miller, D., & Newcomer, L. (2015). Integration of academic and behavioral MTSS at the district level using implementation science. *Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal*, 13:1, 59-72.

28 Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2013) Afterschool programs that follow evidence-based practices to promote social and emotional development are effective. In: *Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success.* Washington, D.C.: Collaborative Communications Group.

In addition to OST providers, districts have also forged partnerships with a wider group of community stakeholders to enhance the relevance and impact of SEL.

For example, the **Nashville** SEL department hosts an annual conference that attracts leaders and staff from community youth programs as well as educators from the district and elsewhere. The conference gives Nashville educators and community providers the opportunity to more deeply align SEL language and practices to better support students.

As a central piece of their SEL strategy, the Office of SEL in **Chicago** has worked with sister agencies, such as the department of public health or family support services and other local partners, to provide holistic supports to students in restorative practices and mental health within a Multi-Tiered System of Support framework.

In **Baltimore**, community partners have helped to shape a districtwide restorative practices strategy as well as opportunities to engage in SEL-centered curricular experiences tied to the city itself through middle and high school social studies.

Some districts have charged departments within the central office to help generate this engagement. One example is **Sacramento**, where the Family and Community Engagement (FACE) team focuses on working with community partners to co-develop and co-facilitate SEL-based learning modules.

Additional Resources

- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 1: Build Foundational Support and Plan
  - Develop a Shared Vision and Plan for SEL
- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 3: Promote SEL for Students
  - Develop and Strengthen Family and Community Partnerships
- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 4: Reflect on Data for Continuous Improvement
  - Plan for Improvement
  - Document Implementation and Outcomes
  - Reflect on Progress Toward Annual SEL Goals
  - Make Improvements to the Action Plan
- CASEL Practices of Promise: The Key to Making Improvements: Ask the Students. This snapshot shares how Washoe County School District maintained a focus on student voice during distance learning.
- Coordinating SEL Work With Community Partners. This tool supports a school team in developing an inventory of partnerships, finding opportunities to deepen SEL alignment and practice, and planning for collaborative communication and continuous improvement.
- Early Lessons From Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning. This report shares findings from the six-year Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI) on ways for students to experience SEL and supportive relationships in both in-school and in out-of-school time programs. Also watch the related webinar.



ELEMENT

6

External and Internal Communities of Practice Strengthen Implementation



ELEMENT 6

External and Internal Communities of Practice Strengthen Implementation

SEL initiatives often begin with much excitement and energy—but how do districts fortify and sustain implementation long-term and navigate challenges and problems of practice they encounter?

In our work with the CDI districts, we saw the importance of support that connects a single team, school, or district to a broader learning community. A variety of partnerships and communities of practice—both within and across districts—helped ensure schools and districts had others to learn from and problem-solve with. These communities not only helped to sustain the work through leadership or other changes. They also sustained and nurtured the individuals who were responsible for leading SEL implementation.

Research has found that when support for SEL implementation extends beyond a single community, efforts are more likely to be sustained. Internal partnerships—such as communities of practices among school leaders, teachers, or central office staff—can similarly support and continuously improve SEL implementation over many years.[29]

How does this factor support sustainability?

Forging internal and external partnerships sustains SEL by:

- **Cultivating relationships** among those who might otherwise feel alone in the work, which helps foster innovation, collaboration, and continued motivation.
- **Nurturing both individual and collective growth,** which benefits the ability to deepen SEL implementation.
- **Fostering a sense of accountability** as colleagues continue learning and checking in with one another.

This type of support cultivates relationships among individuals who might otherwise feel alone in the work, and between schools and districts who saw connections in implementation opportunities and challenges across different teams and communities. The collaboration and co-learning from these partnerships and experiences also helped foster innovation, collaboration, and continued motivation.

Just as compellingly, these partnerships nurture both individual and collective growth as staff, schools, and districts continue to deepen their expertise with and practice of SEL. The result is that these communities of practice contribute to the long-term sustainability and continuous improvement of SEL initiatives. In fact, prior research has found that learning networks are key for educators to learn and problem-solve together as they implement and sustain education initiatives like SEL.[30]

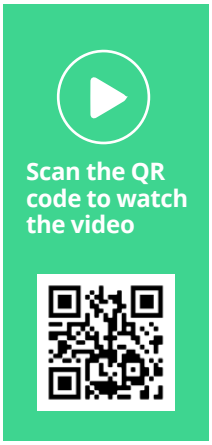
> **[For SEL] to permeate the culture and climate of the school, you need leadership buy-in. And that comes from being able to spend time with principals as a group, to let them have time to experience SEL processes together, to be able to brainstorm together different ideas that they have about campus work, because once an adult experiences those things, they get excited about it themselves, and they're eager to share with students.**
>
> *— Caroline Chase, SEL Assistant Director (retired),* ***Austin***

29 Elias, Maurice. (2010). Sustainability of Social-Emotional Learning and related programs: Lessons from a field study. *The International Journal of Emotional Education*, 2:1, 17-33.

30 Jones, S. M., & Bouffard, S. M. (2012). Social and emotional learning in schools: From programs to strategies. *Social Policy Report*, 26:4.

The Power of Belonging to a Network

Within the district, creating cohorts of schools to collaborate on systemic implementation of SEL allows practice to take root more deeply. And across the CDI districts, early SEL school leaders have become mentors and exemplars for later cohorts of schools. Districts have also created SEL learning communities for leaders that allow them to build their own personal and departmental SEL practices. These communities affirm the work that schools are doing and foster a sense of belonging and an identity around being an "SEL leader." Regularly checking in with this network also creates mutual accountability around SEL implementation.



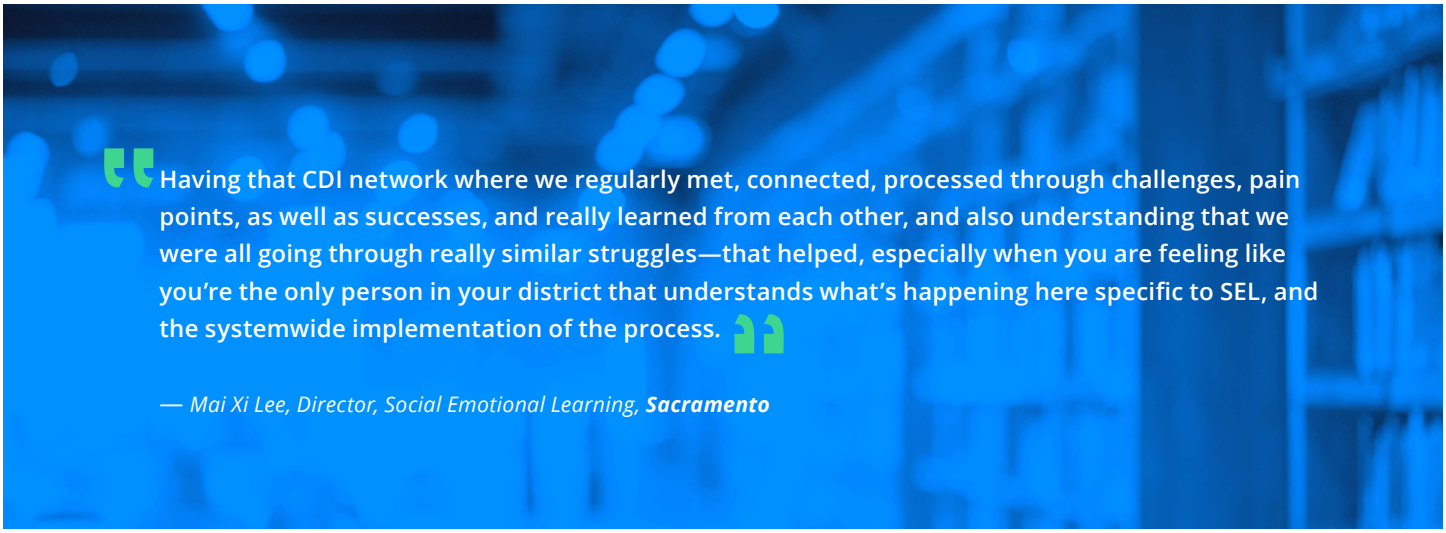
For many of our partner districts, participating in the CDI was a powerful experience in building knowledge, expertise, enthusiasm, and the relationships necessary to sustain leadership for SEL. For **El Paso**, learning from early CDI members, for example, that other districts prioritized adult SEL as a foundation for promoting SEL for students helped the district plan their own SEL priorities.

The **Palm Beach** SEL team similarly saw their participation in the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI) as a driving force behind their collaboration with out-of-school time provider PrimeTime PBC and the Office of Extended Learning. Because of this cross-organization work, SEL practices have been integrated across all participating groups.

The **DuPage** Regional Office of Education has created a robust learning community for more than 20 districts committed to systemic SEL implementation. They have met quarterly for over 10 years to collectively grow their SEL practice, collaborating on strategies around shared inquiry processes, SEL measurement, and integration of SEL with academics and equity. The learning communities, recently renamed SEL Network Meetings, also include SEL leaders from DuPage and surrounding counties.

The partner districts also benefited from cross-district and cross-state connections, as experienced by **Washoe County**. When drafting SEL standards, the district's SEL team looked at examples from **Anchorage** and the state of Illinois and were then able to partner with the state of Nevada to co-create statewide standards based on their own. The team also found that the districts within the CDI became a go-to support for SEL implementation, saying the CDI SEL leads "became life-long friends and colleagues."

In 2020, 95% of CDI team members reported benefits from their experiences connecting with other CDI districts via professional learning.



Co-constructing Knowledge

Our CDI partners also found that these partnerships provided a valuable opportunity not just to learn but to co-construct their knowledge about SEL implementation, which led not only to a deepening understanding of best practices but also to innovation. Districts that joined the partnership in later years were also able to accelerate their implementation timeline by building on strategies and insights from those that joined earlier.

In particular, CDI districts found that participating in professional learning convenings supported greater understanding of SEL and provided the foundation for their district's plan and path forward. Over time, as districts learned independently and together, they benefited from being in conversation with CASEL and each other as the work evolved.

The learning has been a two-way street. The districts have contributed to CASEL's knowledge, while CASEL has contributed tools and scholarship that guides implementation. Districts are testing how SEL implementation can support core priorities, including academic instruction, college and career success, civic engagement, and their overall focus on educational equity and excellence. CASEL continues to learn from observing and participating in these efforts, and shares these learnings through CASEL guidance, professional learning, tools, and resources that support districts and schools beyond the CDI.

Additional Resources

- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 2: Strengthen Adult SEL Competencies and Capacity
  - Strengthen Central Office Expertise
  - Design and Implement an SEL Professional Learning Program for Schools
  - Strengthen Adult Social, Emotional, and Cultural Competence
  - Promote Trust, Community, and Collective Efficacy Among Staff
- CASEL's District Theory of Action: Focus Area 4: Reflect on Data for Continuous Improvement
  - Plan for Improvement
  - Document Implementation and Outcomes
  - Reflect on Progress Toward Annual SEL Goals
  - Make Improvements to the Action Plan
- Learning Forward's Learning Community standard. Read how to set up professional learning communities to promote continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and alignment of individual, team, school, and school system goals.
- Past Cross-Districts Learning Events. See how CASEL convenes leaders from the field to share knowledge and advance SEL. This page summarizes past events and key takeaways.
- Teacher Small Group Discussion Guide. This tool provides readings, individual and group reflection questions, and activities for small groups to discuss and support each other to implement practices that strengthen learning environments.

> **"Participating districts [in the CDI] share their learning with each other, without pretending that implementation moves forward exactly as planned. A powerful aspect of the initiative is that it does not privilege knowledge learned from research over knowledge learned from practice, as both are used to shape the implementation of SEL in the schools and the district."**
>
> *— Janice Jackson, former CEO, **Chicago**, in Social and Emotional Learning in Schools From Programs to Strategies*

LOOKING FORWARD



As we enter our second decade, the Collaborating Districts Initiative is no longer a test of whether it's possible to implement SEL districtwide as an essential part of all students' education. **Today, we can state unequivocally that not only is systemic SEL implementation possible, but we have watched it deepen and grow within and across districts over the past decade.** Today, CDI districts are bringing on new cohorts of schools focused on SEL, expanding SEL professional learning to reach staff in many different roles such as security officers and bus drivers, and embedding SEL throughout district policies and hiring practices.

As districts continue to weave SEL throughout all that they do to support students' success and well-being, they're bringing together young people, families, community partners, educators, leaders, and all district staff. They're rallying around shared visions, integrating SEL into core district priorities, and continuously improving their SEL efforts so that all students thrive.

We have many questions left to answer:

What is the long-term impact of various SEL strategies on different groups of students and in different districts and schools?

How can SEL help create deeper connections across schools, families, and community partners?

What are the specific practices and policies that can best promote SEL toward optimal and equitable outcomes?

These, and many other questions, will drive our continued learning over the next decade of the CDI. As pioneers in sustained, districtwide SEL implementation, our partners will continue to lead the way. At CASEL, we will continue to learn with them, support them, and share our insights with the broader community of SEL champions across the world.