



STATE BRIGHT SPOTS: SEL AND THE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT

SUPPORTING ADULT SEL COMPETENCIES AND CAPACITY BUILDING | BRIEF 3 OF 3

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The [American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 \(ARP\)](#) provided a \$122 billion historic federal investment in K-12 education to help states and districts safely reopen schools and address students' academic, social, and emotional learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Under ARP, states and districts are required to spend 5 percent and 20 percent of funds respectively to address learning loss through evidence-based interventions that respond to the academic, social, and emotional needs of students.

CASEL has recommended [three priority areas](#) for social and emotional learning (SEL) investment that can assist states and districts in optimizing ARP for student success (CASEL, 2021):

1. Promote SEL for students.
2. Align SEL efforts across schools, families, and communities.
3. Support adult SEL competencies and capacity building

This “Bright Spots” brief highlights policy innovations around Priority Area 3—supporting adult SEL competencies and capacity building—through state investments in evidence-based SEL to support academic recovery and social and emotional well-being, the need for which was made abundantly clear by the COVID-19 pandemic. Briefs for [Priority Area 1](#) and [Priority Area 2](#) were published in December 2022 (Godek et al.) and June 2023 (Miller et al.).

THE RESEARCH

Research has shown that “[58 percent] of parents reported that their children’s academic development had been negatively impacted by the pandemic,” while 61 percent of parents reported the same when it came to their child’s social and emotional development ([Hanno et al.](#), 2021). Parent concerns about learning loss were confirmed by recent National Assessment of Educational Progress results, which have shown historic declines in student achievement in reading and math, as well as continued declines in civics and U.S. history ([National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), 2022; 2023).

Additionally, a 2022 report by the [Government Accountability Office](#) found that 1.1 million teachers nationwide reported that they had at least one student who never showed up for class in the 2020–2021 school year. The [U.S. Surgeon General](#) issued an advisory on the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth (2021); for example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported a 51 percent rise in suicide attempts among teen girls ([Yard et al.](#), 2021) and nearly one in three parents reported their children’s mental health was worse than it was before the onset of the pandemic ([Panchal et al.](#), 2021).



According to the [United States Department of Education](#) (ED), an initial review of submitted ARP plans showed that a majority of states described efforts to expand SEL, with funds targeted to support students disproportionately impacted by the pandemic (2021). **Our analysis dives deeper into examples of how states are leveraging ARP funds to improve students' learning and social and emotional well-being by strengthening adult SEL competency and capacity.**

Sections 2001(e)(1) and 2001(f)(1) of [ARP](#) require that states and districts use funds for “activities to address learning loss by supporting the implementation of evidence-based interventions ... and ensure that such interventions respond to students’ academic, social, and emotional needs.” We found through our analysis that states are supporting students’ academic, social and emotional development through adult SEL, which CASEL defines as “Cultivat[ing] a community of adults who engage in their own social and emotional learning, collaborate on strategies for promoting SEL, and model SEL throughout the school” (CASEL, n.d.a). Critically, a growing body of research shows that when educators have strong social and emotional competence, academic, social, and emotional outcomes and well-being for students improve ([Arens & Morin, 2016](#); [Madigan & Kim, 2021](#)).

STATES' ARP INVESTMENTS IN ADULT SEL

Below are highlights from our analysis of state ARP spending plans, with a focus on practices that help adults focus on their own social and emotional competencies, support the well-being for educators, and provide job-embedded professional learning that builds educator capacity to promote SEL and create safe, inclusive learning environments for all students.



The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) is investing ARP funds in Regional Crisis Response and Clinical Support Teams. In addition to providing targeted clinical support for students, families, and schools, the teams also have an educator capacity-building purpose for schools to help staff provide universal supports to their students.

The following are examples of the various topics (all of which are connected to SEL) addressed via professional development provided to local school staff:

1. MSDE continues to support student success socially and emotionally. MSDE will continue to expand community schools and offer professional learning for community school coordinators and staff to provide effective wraparound services that meet the needs of students and the community.
2. MSDE will enhance Tier 1 school-based mental health promotion services and supports to foster positive, social, emotional, and behavioral skills for all students with activities implemented schoolwide and/or at the classroom level, and services are delivered by both school and community-based professionals working within schools (e.g., schoolwide mental health literacy, school climate improvement efforts, restorative practices, classroom-based SEL for students).



3. MSDE will continue to scale the [Maryland School Mental Health Response Program](#) and strategic partnerships to support districts in addressing student and family mental health needs by enriching the work of site-based student support services personnel through enhanced training and consultancies on mental health promotion and services (e.g., risk assessment, crisis stabilization, safe and supportive schools, linkages and triage, brief interventions).
4. MSDE will continue to utilize results from the [Maryland School Survey](#) to spotlight connections between student and educator perceptions of their schools, school achievement, and other outcomes while driving school-level practices for improvement of student outcomes.



In 2022, **the Missouri Department of Education** awarded [\\$6.6 million of ARP funds](#) to the [Center for Excellence in Child Well-Being](#) to create a statewide program designed to coach childcare professionals on their support of children’s social and emotional development. The center has since received an [additional \\$6.5 million](#) to continue its work—which helps grow daycare and preschool employees’ ability to support students’ ability to manage their emotions and build relationship skills—through July 2024.

The three-hour training topics cover a range of SEL topics, including the use of SEL curriculums, managing adult emotions, approaches to discipline, and the use of preventive screening tools to go along with prior offerings, such as developmental milestones and developmental and social and emotional screening tools. This project is one aspect of an effort to increase awareness and support for SEL in early childhood education across the state.



Nevada has built on a \$63 million ESSER II [investment in the Trauma Informed and Restorative Practices](#) grant program [with nearly \\$2.7 million](#) of ARP/ESSER III funds to “allow for districts and charter academies to provide training to district/school leadership teams and/or staff” and to “develop and/or implement policies and/or procedures on Trauma Informed schools and/or restorative practices to improve current systems.” Professional development and “train the trainer” models for trauma informed practices and restorative practices are also among the grant’s allowable activities.



Nevada's **Washoe County School District (WCSD)** is using the Trauma Informed and Restorative Practices grant to implement restorative practices districtwide with training and implementation support and coaching. WCSD implements restorative practices through the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework, with 80 percent of the learning and implementation centering on universal community-building practices. This work has been co-led by the district's departments of MTSS/Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Equity and Diversity.

WCSD has implemented a "train the trainer" model, inviting schools to identify six staff (including at least one administrator) to be deeply trained and responsible for staff training and implementation at their respective school sites. To accomplish training for its more than 100 schools, WCSD contracted with the [International Institute of Restorative Practices \(IIRP\)](#) to provide two-day trainings in restorative practices to all members of the school team and restorative conferencing to administrators. After the initial training with IIRP, school teams continued participating in a monthly community of practice to better understand strategies and practices for whole-school implementation.

Once schools have implemented for at least one school year, staff also have the option to participate in a self-paced book study regarding student-led restorative practices based on the book, [Peacekeepers: An Implementation Manual for Empowering Youth Using Restorative Practices](#). The module is self-paced, and staff meet with the MTSS department for support and professional development.

Finally, to further sustainability efforts, 30 staff from school sites and central office will become certified IIRP trainers to support ongoing implementation.



New Jersey is investing [\\$135.1 million in the Accelerated Learning Coaching and Educator Support Grant](#), a formula grant for districts to provide "evidence-based professional learning and coaching opportunities to a variety of school staff, including educators and key support staff ... on topics tailored to the unique academic as well as social, emotional, and mental health needs of their students." This aligns closely with the state's [Learning Acceleration Guide](#), which emphasizes the importance of the social and emotional well-being of students, families, and educators and the critical role of professional learning. In practice, grant funds are being used to build adult capacity in the following ways:

1. Providing conditions for teaching and learning that will foster the social and emotional well-being of students, families, and educators;
2. Developing positive school climates that promote the social and emotional well-being of students using universal Tier 1 supports, strategies, and interventions;



3. Integrating SEL in classroom, schools, and communities;
4. Implementing culturally responsive teaching practices that acknowledge and affirm students' cultural identities and expand educators' understanding of the relationship between students' cultural backgrounds and their academic, social, and emotional needs.

All school districts in New Jersey were allocated funds from the Accelerated Learning Coaching and Educator Support Grant using a weighted enrollment allocation formula that assigns additional weight to lower grade bands, limited English proficient students, and students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch to address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on different student populations. The New Jersey Department of Education plans to continue supporting school districts to utilize this funding source before the project period ends on September 30, 2024.



In June 2021, **the Pennsylvania General Assembly** passed [Act 24](#) into law, which required that school districts use 10 percent of their ESSER set-aside for learning loss to support “professional development and technical assistance to educators and school staff to address the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students.” This resulted in a [\\$24.9 million allocation](#) across the state to strengthen educators' SEL capacity. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has also set out to [evaluate the impact](#) of such an approach by collecting data through staff feedback surveys in response to professional learning activities, school climate surveys, and teacher observations.

Upon receiving ARP funding, PDE rolled out the [Roadmap to Accelerated Learning Through an Integrated System of Support](#), wherein student and staff wellness remained a cornerstone to all four components (Focus on High-Quality Academics, Foster Supportive Learning Environments, Establish Healthy System Conditions, and Design a System of Scaffolded Supports). With a focus on continuous improvement, PDE also developed [ARP ESSER Guidance on Social and Emotional Learning](#) to assist the field in using funds in a sustainable and impactful manner.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

We are encouraged by states using ARP funds to invest in SEL to improve student learning, including through a focus on adults. Research indicates:



“SEL has a powerful combination of evidence and support. These findings come from multiple fields and sources and include analyses of hundreds of studies that show SEL leads to beneficial outcomes related to social and emotional skills; attitudes about self, school, and civic engagement; social behaviors; conduct problems; emotional distress; and academic performance (CASEL, n.d.b).”

Additionally, research demonstrates the benefits of adult SEL. Educators with strong social and emotional competence report higher levels of job satisfaction and less burnout (Brackett et al., 2010). Focusing on SEL can help educators build and maintain stronger relationships with students and manage classrooms (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), and teachers who teach SEL to students report feeling more effective at their jobs and lower levels of job-related anxiety (Greenberg et al., 2016).

Finally, cost-benefit research shows that for every dollar spent on the evidence-based SEL programs examined, there was an \$11 return on investment (Belfield et al., 2015).

SETTING AN EXAMPLE

As states and districts continue using funds to align SEL efforts across schools, families, and communities to address pandemic recovery and learning, we recommend they look to the states and the district listed above and focus their ongoing ARP investments on the following:

- Offering training and professional learning opportunities on SEL and topics connected to it (e.g., MTSS, preventative screening tools, restorative practices, trauma-informed practices) (Maryland, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Washoe County).
- Providing ongoing coaching and technical assistance to district leaders and educators to help improve their support of students' social and emotional development (Missouri, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Washoe County).
- Creating conditions and developing school climates that emphasize educator social and emotional competence and well-being alongside that of students (Missouri, New Jersey, Pennsylvania).
- Maximizing impact by allowing space for educators to learn from one another through “train the trainer” models and communities of practice (Nevada, Washoe County).
- Implementing data practices to evaluate the impact of adult SEL practices (Maryland, Pennsylvania).
- Supporting districts to develop policies and procedures that strengthen the systemic implementation of SEL (Nevada).

Finally, CASEL offers actions that [states](#) can take to promote systemic SEL and provides extensive free resources to support [district](#) and [school](#) implementation of systemic SEL and [evidence-based programming](#). Among these are CASEL's [district](#) and [school](#) webpages on strengthening adult SEL.

Decades of research confirms that SEL supports academic achievement and student wellness. These innovative uses of ARP funds by states and a district, which focus on centering adult SEL and capacity, will not only help demonstrate the need for ongoing investment by the federal government, but also provide critical supports to students nationwide to recover from the well-documented impacts on student learning from the COVID-19 pandemic.



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