



THE PLAYBOOK TO LEVERAGE THE POWER OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Collaborating States Initiative

In the [CASEL Collaborating States Initiative \(CSI\)](#), we have observed that state policymakers who have created foundational policies to advance social and emotional learning (SEL) often become interested, as a next step, in creating a statewide community of practice (CoP) to engage districts and schools around a shared vision to promote implementation of SEL. This playbook was developed in collaboration with state policy teams participating in the CSI over the past five years. It includes lessons learned from CSI CoPs that have advanced SEL at the state level (with 42 states), integrating SEL into MTSS (9 states), and integrating SEL into career and workforce development (12 states). In addition, this playbook is informed by the work of [CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative \(CDI\)](#) which has worked with 20 partnering districts over the past 10 years.

The playbook is designed specifically to support state teams as they work to build and sustain an effective within-state CoP centered on SEL. While the specific content focus of CoPs may vary (e.g., SEL implementation, SEL and equity, integrating SEL with career and workforce development, promoting alignment and coherence of SEL within MTSS), this playbook offers simple, user-friendly guidance that identifies key principles, processes, tools, and resources which can be utilized to organize, launch, and implement a statewide CoP designed to promote SEL.

What is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. 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.

SEL advances educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation.

Research shows that SEL helps promote student achievement and success, and [systemic SEL](#) helps create conditions in schools and districts where SEL is optimized for all students, across all settings. CoPs are helpful in cultivating a community of educators who engage in their own social and emotional learning, collaborate on strategies for promoting SEL, and model SEL throughout school and community systems to support systemic SEL.

What is a Community of Practice?

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people who share a passion about and interact regularly to encourage information and knowledge sharing. CoPs educate by sharing information and best practices, provide support through building relationships and collaboration to start and sustain learning, and encourage peer to peer learning. CoPs organized around high-quality SEL also promote culturally responsive practice and equity through a framework that leads to effective, sustainable, systemic change. CoPs focused on SEL have the potential to connect and develop a shared understanding and consistent messaging around what SEL is and why it is important for students and adults.

CoPs can have many different purposes. Here we highlight high-quality CoPs that develop and disseminate best practices, guidelines, and strategies to support SEL and equity. **A key principle of all CSI CoPs is the importance of always organizing activities to intentionally elevate high-quality examples of best practices.**

This playbook highlights the processes we developed in our CoPs, including our most recent CoP designed to support integration of SEL into [career and workforce development](#). However, the principles and processes are likely to apply to whatever type of CoP to advance SEL.

Key Principles of a High-Quality Community of Practice

Effective CoPs:

- Are organized around a shared purpose and goal.
- Reflect the diversity of the community, are inclusive, and promote equity where everyone has a voice, is listened to, and can contribute in meaningful ways to the practice.
- Intentionally set clear and explicit learning goals and objectives and shared expectations of how the CoP will function.
- Consistently elevate and shine a light on strong, high-quality examples and bright spots that are based on evidence and research.
- Build upon the tenets of adult learning and support the opportunity it provides for peer-to-peer learning (see [Peer Learning Groups and the Adult Learner](#)) to encourage asking questions, learning, and sharing of expertise.
- Reflect an understanding of how participants' knowledge and practice inform commitment to action.
- Optimize engaging learning activities (see resource section).
- Include continuous improvement at every step and ongoing evaluation.

Role of a Community of Practice Leader

The role of the leader is critical in establishing a healthy and successful CoP. Convening a CoP with a focus on integrating SEL into existing systems can be led by a state education agency (SEA), local education agency (LEA), an outside agency or organization, or a regional, county, or area comprehensive center. In each of these scenarios, the leader is a facilitator for the process who provides thought leadership and helps validate innovations and best practices, while promoting alignment and coherence. The leader also works to continually identify emerging patterns in activities and knowledge base that may impact the CoP.

The most successful CoPs are those that have dedicated leadership for content and operations. For example, one leader may be responsible for content management and meeting facilitation while another may be responsible for coordination of logistics and technology. The leaders help to act as a focal point for the CoP, ensuring relevance and building capability. Leaders build relationships among team members, possess a deep understanding and knowledge of the content, cultivate and sustain the CoP, develop the process for engagement, and summarize and communicate CoP activity.

Six Steps for Building a High-Quality Community of Practice

Communities of practice offer a robust strategy for adult learning around a shared context, in this case a shared vision for SEL. The following are recommended steps for leading a high-quality CoP based on the model the CSI has developed for all our CoPs. The steps, aligned with the [SEA Theory of Action](#), can be applied to whatever type of CoP is developed to advance SEL.

STEP
1



Define purpose and objectives

An important first step in leading a high-quality CoP is to identify clear purpose and objectives. A CoP with SEL at its center should clearly express social and emotional development as integral to education and as an essential lever for equity, academic success, democratic outcomes, and other key priorities of CoP members. Beginning with a clear definition of SEL and a purpose for convening the community provides a common language that can create lasting systemic change.

The purpose should inform districts and schools about the objectives for the CoP, why it is important to participate, and how the project will provide the opportunity to learn from their peers, receive direct support to continue the work in their individual context, and access relevant tools and resources to develop policies and practices to integrate equity-focused, evidence-based, systemic SEL.

The objectives would define high-impact strategies that lead to short- and long-term outcomes for student success as well as supporting other key priorities (e.g., career and workforce development and civic engagement).

TOOL
1



Define the Purpose and Objectives for the Community of Practice [\(View here\)](#)

Outlines a four step process for connecting with stakeholders to shape a statement of purpose and key outcomes to serve as the anchor of the community's learning and collaboration.

EXAMPLES

- [Massachusetts Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems: 2021-2022 Collaborative Improvement & Innovation Network \(CoIIN\)](#)
- [State Systems for Developing an Evidence Base Community of Practice](#)

Example of a state vision and goal for SEL and Workforce Development
"Empowering every student to achieve purpose, place, and plans for the future."

STEP
2



Determine scope and sequence, logistics, and resources

Every CoP should have a clear plan in place before the project begins that determines what knowledge, activities, resources, and tools are to be shared while also recognizing the organic nature of a CoP. A plan for convenings that includes meeting topics, logistics, design, staffing, and potential costs should be outlined.

Key questions to consider when designing the CoP:

- What are the key ideas, concepts, and topics that will be discussed?
- What types of activities will be utilized to guide the work? Examples include needs and resource assessment, priority objectives, high-impact strategies, action steps, logic model, theory of change, and implementation checklist.
- What resources will be shared and how will members share relevant and timely resources and gain access to them?
- What is the sequence for activities, and in what sequence will resources be shared?
- How often will the CoP meet? For how long? Will the convenings be virtual, in-person, or a combination of both?
- What are the potential costs to both the organizer of the CoP and the members?
- What is the follow-up procedure after each meeting? What post-meeting information will be shared?

TOOL
2



Determine the Scope and Sequence, Logistics, and Resources Needed [\(View here\)](#)

Includes an organizer to prepare a high-level plan for CoP convenings and an example outline from a current CoP.

EXAMPLES

[Community of Practice on Effective Multi-Tiered System of Supports for Whole Child Development](#)—This nine-state CoP was guided by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and CASEL. Take a look at a high-level summary of their convenings and explore the toolkit based on their work which includes templates for states and districts to get started.

STEP
3



Recruit community of practice members

Once the purpose and objectives for the CoP have been identified, the process for selecting districts and schools to participate should be defined. CoP leaders may choose to invite districts or schools to participate. They may also construct an application process to select districts and schools. Either way, potential participants need to have an incentive to participate and should be able to see that the investment of their time and effort will result in improved short- and long-term outcomes for students.

When inviting districts and schools, the invitation should describe the structure of the CoP to include the purpose and objectives, commitment from district and school leadership, roles and responsibilities of the team lead and other members, proposed activities, time commitment, and the number and recommended composition of team members.

An application process would not only include the information outlined in the invitation but also include requests for districts and schools to identify their internal team and collaborators, provide an in-depth description of their current SEL policies and practices, sources of data, examples of current work, likely goals for their district and school, and how they will know they are successful. Applications would be reviewed by CoP leaders who will select districts and schools based on the information provided and whether there is support from leadership and sufficient capacity to carry out the work.

The success of each team is dependent on the ability of districts and schools to recruit a diverse team of inter- and intra-departmental stakeholders that represent other key educational priorities (e.g., mental health, career and workforce development, and civic engagement) and who share a common vision of student success. When a diverse group of stakeholders is brought to the team, organizational silos are addressed, bringing alignment and coherence to the project. Examples of team composition, depending on the specific CoP, include district leaders, building administrators, teachers, CTE coordinators, school counselors, support staff, students, out of school providers, business partners, families, and community members.

TOOL
3



Develop an Invitation/Application for the Community of Practice [\(View here\)](#)

A template letter of invitation, with examples pulled from an application for a recent CoP about SEL and MTSS frameworks.

EXAMPLES

- [SEL/MTSS Community of Practice Application](#)
- [Wisconsin Department of Instruction SEL and Equity CoP](#)

STEP
4



Design agendas for community of practice convenings

Key questions to consider when designing agendas:

- How will we strengthen relationships and networks of support among CoP members?
- How will we ensure there is a level of safety and trust that allows for deep listening and meaningful conversations?
- What should CoP members be able to explain or do because of their participation in this convening?
- How could CoP members share a [problem of practice](#) and receive feedback from others?
- How will CoP members build on each other's ideas and collaborate during this session?
- How will we center equity of voice, both among members and as we consider our stakeholders who are not present?
- What voices and examples do we need to elevate?
- What opportunities will participants have to reflect on current practice and apply what they have learned?
- What do we need to learn from CoP members on this topic?
- How will we know the convening was successful in meeting objectives?

TOOL
4



Design the Agenda for the Convening ([View here](#))

Four strategies for infusing SEL into the meeting agenda and recommendations for how to allocate time.

EXAMPLES

- [Agenda featuring subject matter experts and spotlighting a CoP member's work](#)
- [Agenda focused on group collaboration and discussion](#)

STEP
5



Implement a continuous improvement process

As SEAs and LEAs execute their plans, continuous improvement is critically important to thoughtfully reflect and improve CoP implementation efforts. CoP leadership will want to collect two kinds of data at regularly scheduled intervals: (1) feedback from members and (2) progress toward the CoP's objectives. This data will be used to monitor the CoP process and inform continuous improvement efforts. Key evaluation results should be shared with stakeholders to determine next steps to strengthen and refine the CoP process.

Feedback is an important tool in aligning expectations and informing decisions for next steps in the CoP. It is important to collect good high-quality feedback from members to identify what is working well and what needs to be changed to better meet the needs of the CoP members. Methods to collect feedback include surveys, check-ins, reflections, and success stories.

Creating the most comprehensive picture of progress toward meeting CoP objectives requires that objectives be clearly defined from the beginning and that multiple types of data from multiple sources are collected. CoP members should regularly check in on progress and review data to see whether they are on track to accomplish their objectives or if they need to adjust.

When structuring conversations about data, SEAs and LEAs should establish norms that promote a safe environment for reflecting on data and recommend a structured protocol to help guide the process, ensuring multiple voices are brought into the conversation.

TOOL
5



Reflect on Data for Continuous Improvement ([View here](#))

Guidance for determining what data you'll need to review progress and what questions to include in a member feedback survey, and a simple data reflection protocol to determine how to adjust to ensure CoP objectives are met.

RESOURCES

- [CSI SEA Theory of Action](#)
- [Sample Survey: CoP Member Post-Session Feedback](#)
- [CASEL District Resource Center: Reflect on Data for Continuous Improvement](#)
- [Establish Norms for Data-Informed Conversations](#)

STEP 6



Communicate key learnings

A communication plan to share key learnings garnered from the CoP is important to elevate high-quality examples and promote a common language around the shared SEL vision and goal for student success. Key learnings include successes, progress in meeting district and school goals and objectives, high-impact strategies, short- and long-term outcomes for student success, data collected, and potential challenges. These key learnings would be shared with key stakeholders, use a variety of distribution channels, and be routine and bidirectional.

TOOL 6



Communicate Key Learnings from the Community of Practice [\(View here\)](#)

Template for thinking ahead about the audience, purpose, key messages, and mode of communication needed, with seven examples of ways CoPs might choose to communicate about key learnings.

EXAMPLES

- [CASEL CSI Emerging Insights](#)
- [Development Framework for the Integration of SEL and Career and Workforce Development](#)

Summary

The CSI has found that CoPs are a powerful and effective way to organize and inspire adult learners to advance SEL and to promote effective implementation of systemic SEL. The playbook is designed specifically to support state teams as they work to build and sustain an effective within-state CoP centered on SEL. While the specific content focus of CoPs may vary this playbook offers guidance that identifies key principles, processes, tools, and resources that can be utilized to organize, launch, and implement a statewide CoP designed to promote SEL.

For additional information or support on how to implement an effective CoP, please reach out to CASEL Collaborating States Initiative (CSI).



Thank you to the Learning Policy Institute
for their generous support of this work.

CASEL Resources to Support District and School Communities of Practice for SEL Implementation

CASEL CSI State Resource Center

The State Resource Center can help state education agencies create and promote state-level SEL policies and practices.

CASEL District Resource Center

The District Resource Center helps school districts make social and emotional learning (SEL) an integral part of every student's education. Find research, knowledge, and resources curated from school systems across the U.S. to support high-quality, systemic implementation of SEL.

CASEL's Guide to Schoolwide SEL

The purpose of the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL is to provide research-informed, field-tested guidance and tools that support schools in coordinating and building upon evidence-based SEL practices and programs to achieve systemic implementation. The CASEL School Guide is grounded in nearly 25 years of research and is composed of learnings from dozens of practitioners and content area experts in the fields of SEL and education.

CASEL's Guide to SEL Programs

The CASEL's Guide to SEL Programs is designed to help educators and school administrators select an evidence-based SEL program that best meets the needs of their community.

SEL Assessment Guide

The Assessment Guide provides several resources for leaders and implementation teams in PreK-12th grade settings who are making decisions about selecting and using measures of student SEL. This includes guidance on how to select an assessment and use student SEL competency data, a catalog from which to select assessments equipped with filters and bookmarking, and real-world accounts of how practitioners are using these data. Upcoming features include a platform to nominate measures for inclusion and a user forum for practitioners to ask questions and share their experiences.

When Districts Support and Integrate Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL is an essential element of education. This study documents how districts are beginning to embed and integrate SEL into their policies and practices. Based on findings from this study and others, even modest investments in SEL can pay off for individuals, schools, and society.

References

AgriFutures Australia. (2016) Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems. Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, Australia: AgriFutures. Retrieved from <https://extensionaus.com.au/extension-practice/communities-of-practice-and-social-learning-systems/>

American Institutes for Research. (2017). Communities of Practice: Connecting, Collaborating, Learning. Arlington, Va., AIR. Retrieved from <https://www.air.org/resource/communities-practice-connecting-collaborating-learning>

Arundel, K. (2022). Decade of Data Highlights SEL Best Practices From 20 Districts. Washington, DC: K-12 Dive. Retrieved from <https://www.k12dive.com/news/how-large-school-districts-have-expanded-sustained-sel-practices/616811/>

Buckner, T. (2020). Building a Community of Practice in 5 Steps. Opensource.com. Retrieved from <https://opensource.com/open-organization/20/2/building-community-practice-5-steps>

Communities Reinvented. (2021). Roles in a Community of Practice. World Bank Group. Retrieved from <https://collaboration.worldbank.org/content/sites/collaboration-for-development/en/groups/communities4Dev/blogs.html?filter=userIdentifier%20eq%20communities4dev@gmail.com&filter=isDraft%20ne%20true>

Darling-Hammond, L., Hyster, M.E., Sheffield, R., & Gardner, M. (2018). How California Districts Can Support Best Practices in Effective Teacher Professional Development. Stanford, CA: Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/california-school-districts-professional-development-factsheet>

Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education, PennState. What Does a Community Engagement Facilitator Do? Retrieved from <https://aese.psu.edu/research/centers/cecd/engagement-toolbox/>

Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium (ERLC). (2016). What is a Community of Practice? Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, ERLC. Retrieved from <http://www.communityofpractice.ca/background/what-is-a-community-of-practice/>

Laurel, D. Peer Learning Groups and the Adult Learner. Peer Learning Institute. Madison, WI. Retrieved from <https://peerlearninginstitute.com/pli-blog-peer-learning-groups-and-the-adult-learner/>

Lupton, C., Webne-Behrman, H., Hunt Johnson, J., Merrill, M., & Schneider, T. Communities of Practice Guide. Community of Practice Network. Retrieved from <https://www.talent.wisc.edu/home/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=B6rgxakCMtI%3D&portalid=0>

Miller, R. (2006) Building a Successful Community of Practice. Flintshire, Wales: Miller-Klein Associates, Ltd. <http://miller-klein.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Communities-of-Practice-Notes.pdf>

National Implementation Research Network. SISEP Active Implementation Hub. Chapel Hill, NC: NIRN. Retrieved from <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/modules-and-lessons>

Wenger-Trayner, E. & B. (2015). Introduction to Communities of Practice. BE Blog at <https://wenger-trayner.com/>. Retrieved from <https://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/>

Wenger-Trayner, E. & B. FAQs about CoPs. BE Blog at <https://wenger-trayner.com/>. Retrieved from <https://wenger-trayner.com/faqs/>