



Selecting Evidence-Based Programs Through Meaningful Partnerships

El Paso Independent School District (Texas)

The **Practices of Promise** series provides snapshots of districts across the country bringing social and emotional learning (SEL) to life in their communities. Each of these real stories offers a glimpse into how one district is navigating a few of the opportunities and challenges that arise as part of their broader efforts to systemically implement SEL. The series expands on each of [CASEL's Indicators of Districtwide SEL](#), the essential components of systemic implementation.



THE OPPORTUNITY

Adopting evidence-based programs help districts translate large-scale SEL planning into effective and consistent practices at the school and classroom levels. But any program runs the risk of becoming an add-on that burdens teachers or feels irrelevant to students and families.

How do you engage staff, families, and communities in selecting evidence-based SEL programs that integrate with existing practices and meet the needs of your school communities?

That's the question that was raised in El Paso Independent School District (EPISD), which serves 50,661 PreK-12th grade students in Texas. Working with CASEL, they sought to adopt evidence-based SEL programs that would be effective and meaningful in classrooms across 81 district campuses. These programs would be used by teachers to teach SEL explicitly and to integrate SEL into the teaching of academic subjects. In this **Practices of Promise**, you'll peek into their process for engaging staff, families, and communities in examining and selecting programs that align with their school communities' needs and districtwide vision.

For comprehensive guidance on adopting and implementing SEL programs, visit [CASEL's District Resource Center](#).



THE STARTING LINE



Two years before EPISD began selecting an evidence-based program, the district had turned to SEL to support their overall student learning goals focused on developing critical creative thinkers, informed problem solvers, effective bilingual communicators, responsible leaders, productive community members, and socially and emotionally intelligent individuals. District leaders wanted the introduction of SEL to build on the previous several years of districtwide PBIS implementation, rather than feel like a separate initiative. They also wanted SEL plans to reflect their strong commitment to family engagement.

In the first two years of SEL implementation, EPISD had:

- Identified SEL as a priority in a new district strategic plan.
- Engaged with CASEL on an SEL Readiness and Engagement Analysis that assessed current district needs and resources for implementation. The partnership continued to develop a systemic approach to SEL through regular on-site visits and expert guidance, as well as connections to the larger collaborative of CASEL district partners.
- Engaged a wide range of stakeholders to lay out a plan for [five years of systemic SEL implementation districtwide](#) that built on their previous professional learning model for implementing PBIS, and included a focus on engaging staff in integrating PBIS and SEL. (For example, as schools continued with common area and classroom expectations developed through PBIS, SEL helped them emphasize community-building.)
- Begun supporting adult SEL, including engaging staff in reflecting on their own competencies; using CASEL's [3 SEL Signature Practices](#) (log-in required to access) to build staff community; and offering professional learning on school climate, self-care, and trauma-informed practices.
- Piloted "Morning Meeting" circles using The Morning Meeting Book from Responsive Classroom.
- Developed SEL standards based on CASEL's five core competencies and aligned with district goals, including identifying personal, cultural, and linguistic assets; embracing perspectives across diverse communities; and making choices that consider the well-being of self and others.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS



What are evidence-based programs and why are they important for SEL implementation?

Adopting an evidence-based program is key to providing consistent, high-quality SEL opportunities for all students. Evidence-based SEL programs are grounded in research and principles of child and adolescent development, and scientifically evaluated and shown to produce positive student and school outcomes. These outcomes may include improvements in students' academic performance, behaviors, identity, agency, and school connectedness, as well as improvements in students' perception of classroom and school climate ([CASEL, 2020](#)). The impact of any evidence-based program is significantly strengthened when districts and schools support high-quality program implementation.

SEL programs may focus on specific instructional practices and classroom climate, embed teaching of social and emotional skills into academic content areas, address schoolwide policies and organizational structures, and/or directly teach SEL skills through free-standing lessons. Effective SEL approaches often incorporate four elements represented by the acronym SAFE ([Durlak et al., 2011](#)):

SEQUENCED

Connected and coordinated activities to foster skills development.

ACTIVE

Employing active forms of learning to help students master new skills and attitudes.

FOCUSED

Dedicated time and attention to developing personal and social skills.

EXPlicit

Targeting specific social and emotional skills.

Think about a time when you were at the starting line with a district effort. How did you ensure it didn't feel like a separate initiative?



ROUNDING THE CURVE



In year three of SEL implementation, the district focused on selecting evidence-based programs to support explicit instruction of SEL across all 53 elementary and 16 middle schools. In 2020-2021, they turned their attention to selecting programs for the 12 high schools.

The EPISD team outlined two major criteria for their selection. First, they wanted high-quality, evidence-based programs proven effective with similar student populations. Programs needed to be culturally relevant, available in both Spanish and English, and include family engagement. Nearly 84 percent of students in the district identify as Hispanic/Latinx, and 9 percent are learning English as a second language. El Paso's school communities are also influenced by a large population of military personnel.

Second, programs needed to be easy to integrate into classrooms without feeling like a separate initiative. EPISD has a strong commitment to an [Active Learning Framework](#) for instruction, so programs needed to align with the focus on engaging small-group and project-based instruction.

EPISD's approach to selecting a program also needed to build off the previous years' SEL planning that had been extensive and incorporated this large field of stakeholders. To select a program that met the needs of all students, staff, families, and community partners, the El Paso team knew they'd need to again include all these perspectives in the decision-making process.



Identifying likely candidates

To tackle the criteria, the SEL team and CASEL talked through the features needed for an evidence-based program to be successful in EPISD elementary schools. The team used the [CASEL Program Guide](#) and feedback from other CASEL partner districts to select six high-quality programs they thought might align with the district's culture and academic priorities.

To narrow down that list, the SEL team completed the [CASEL Tool: Selecting an Evidence-Based Program](#) using information from the Program Guide and the program websites. This provided a framework for comparing specific elements of the programs that would influence on-the-ground implementation, such as length of lessons, professional learning requirements, and fidelity monitoring. The team also reviewed whether program curricula aligned with the district's SEL standards and considered how the programs developed competencies across the PreK-12th grade developmental trajectory. Using this process, the team identified three potential programs.

The Need: Program for 53 elementary, 16 middle schools, 12 high schools

CRITERIA

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1. High-quality evidence-based programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Proven effective ✓ Culturally relevant ✓ Available in Spanish and English | <p>2. Easy to integrate into classrooms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Align to Active Learning Framework ✓ Small-group instruction ✓ Opportunities for project-based learning |
|--|---|

APPROACH

Discussed features of successful program for elementary schools

RESOURCES USED

CASEL Program Guide
Feedback from other districts

→ 6 POTENTIAL PROGRAMS

APPROACH


- Compared programs:
- Lesson length
 - Professional learning
 - Fidelity monitoring
 - Alignment to district SEL standards

RESOURCES USED

- Selecting an Evidence-based Program
- Websites of potential programs
- El Paso SEL Standards


→ 3 POTENTIAL PROGRAMS

APPROACH

-  Assembled advisory group:
- SEL team staff
 - Other central office department staff
 - Counselors
 - Principals
 - Teachers
 - Parents
 - Community members

Advisory group heard program presentations, rated programs, and reached consensus.

RESOURCES USED

-  Evidence-Based Program Selection rubric
- Effectiveness
 - Support for family engagement in home languages
 - Diverse cultural representations
 - Implementation support

→ 1 PROGRAM FOR ELEMENTARY AND 1 PROGRAM FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL



Engaging staff, families, and community members

Once the team created this short list, they wanted to gain a more complete understanding of each program and bring in a wider range of perspectives. This would help ensure that selections integrated with the larger vision and needs of the district as outlined in their earlier SEL planning.

To do this, the team assembled an advisory group to hear presentations from representatives of the three identified programs. This group was invited based on recommendations from staff members on the SEL team, with the goal of including those who would help the team think critically and speak to the usefulness and fit for a curriculum resource with the district's goals and needs.

Following the presentations, smaller groups each met with an SEL team member to discuss what they had heard. The team developed a [form](#) focused on elements of the program that were most important to them: effectiveness, support for family engagement in home languages, diverse cultural representations, and implementation support. Group members rated each program so that the SEL team could review feedback anonymously while looking for consensus. Next, the entire group discussed the programs that had the most support and reached consensus on Harmony for elementary schools and Second Step for middle schools¹.

Advisory Group

Members:

SEL team staff, other central office department staff, counselors, principals, teachers, parents, and community members.



CONTINUING FORWARD



In fall 2020, during the pandemic, EPISD did another round of program selection to select a high school program. The same process was used, although the advisory group met virtually for presentations and discussion. The advisory group for this selection was made up of people recommended by each high school principal with their SEL steering committee. Their final selection is pending the School Board's approval.

To support implementation, EPISD built SEL programming into school schedules at all levels across both virtual and in-person learning. In elementary schools, students engage daily in SEL-focused morning meetings and weekly in the program lessons. In middle schools, SEL program instruction is built into weekly advisory time. At the high school level, all students have time for SEL programming on Wednesday mornings.

From the beginning of their districtwide SEL implementation, the El Paso SEL team had partnered closely with staff from Research and Evaluation team. Working together, they developed a logic model for their full SEL plan, which helped guide their decisions around evidence-based programs. This also helped them plan for continued efforts to improve program implementation.

As schools become more familiar with the new programs, the district SEL team is focused on improving consistent implementation, particularly in the high schools. They're also focused on continuing to improve alignment across grade levels and ensuring that the pacing and messaging is meeting the needs of students and families.

¹ CASEL advises districts and schools to select evidence-based programs based on the specific priorities and needs in their communities. The CASEL Program Guides can help districts and schools identify well-designed, evidence-based SEL programs aligned with their priorities.

APPLYING THIS STORY TO YOUR JOURNEY



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When considering SEL programs, be clear about how the program will support your district’s overall vision/goals and align with existing priorities and initiatives.
- Start with information about which programs are evidence-based and found to be effective with similar populations of students. [CASEL’s Program Guide](#) provides this information and is helpful as part of the initial effort.
- Consider how well programs would support and reflect the strengths, cultural backgrounds, and interests of your community.
- Prioritize elements of the program that will help it translate into effective implementation—for example, consider lesson length, professional learning requirements, and the cost to fully support teachers throughout implementation.
- Including the perspectives of teachers, school leaders, families, and community members helps ensure that selected programs are supported throughout the district and meet the needs of school communities.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR SEL TEAMS

- What impact do you think EPISD’s stakeholder engagement during program selection will have on implementation, and what other voices could have been important? Who in your communities have traditionally been included/not included in these types of decisions, and whose voices need to be elevated when selecting an SEL program?
- How can EPISD continue ensuring SEL implementation is supported and responsive to student, staff, family, and community needs?
- How did EPISD align their selection of SEL programs with district goals, standards, and priorities to ensure that an SEL program was not seen as an “add-on”? How will you align SEL programming to your district’s existing work and overall vision/goals?
- What additional strategies might help EPISD align SEL programs across grade levels? What additional strategies will be helpful in your context?
- When selecting programs, how will you plan to support consistent and high-quality implementation, including through professional learning? How will you assess whether programs are effective?



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[CASEL’s District Resource Center](#) Follow a districtwide process for supporting SEL implementation across all schools and access a library of SEL resources and artifacts from leading districts. Find step-by-step guidance on adopting evidence-based programs and practices.

[CASEL Program Guides](#) Review the quality of SEL programs using a systematic framework for identifying and rating well-designed, evidence-based SEL programs, and use best-practice guidelines to guide selection and implementation.

[CASEL Tool: Selecting an Evidence-Based Program](#) Use these guiding questions to determine whether an evidence-based program meets the needs of your students, families, teachers, school, and district.

[SEL: Why Students Need It. What Districts are Doing About It](#) Read more about the decisions made in school districts in Anchorage, Alaska; Sacramento, California; and Bridgeport, Connecticut, as they selected an evidence-based SEL approach, developed a plan to support and sustain implementation in schools, and measured the results.

[What Does Evidence-Based Instruction in Social and Emotional Learning Actually Look Like in Practice?](#) Learn what school staff actually do in the classroom and school to help students achieve the goals laid out in SEL standards, including four approaches that can be used together to foster SEL within positive classroom conditions and school climates.

Districtwide Indicators of SEL Implementation

High-quality SEL implementation can take three to five years to fully scale across a district. The indicators provide evidence of high-quality implementation throughout the process. Learn more <https://drc.casel.org/what-is-sel/indicators-of-districtwide-sel/>



Shared ownership



Systems & structures



Sustained commitment



Staff SEL



Explicit SEL programs



Instruction & climate



Youth voice



Family partnerships



Community partnerships



Continuous improvement