

Districts in Action

Strengthen Adult SEL Competencies and Capacity

FELLOWS SPOTLIGHT (2 OF 4)



So, you want to bring social and emotional learning (SEL) to your district. And you're wondering: Where do I begin? Do I focus on students or adults? Choose SEL curriculum, or strengthen climate and culture? Do I even have the staff and resources to do this?

In this series, we'll help you consider these and other questions by spotlighting the many ways that districts have started or continued their SEL journey through the stories of participants in CASEL's [SEL Fellows Academy](#). Their work is grounded in [CASEL's District Theory of Action](#) for systemic SEL implementation. Resulting from our intensive work with our partner districts in the [Collaborating Districts Initiative](#), the District Theory of Action offers a research-based framework for four focus areas for achieving high-quality, systemic SEL implementation.

Working within this guidance, **each district finds its own path to SEL implementation**—one that reflects its unique history, challenges, and priorities. This series of briefs showcases how different districts—ranging from small rural and suburban districts to large urban and regional districts—have chosen to approach their SEL work. The goal is to offer examples, inspiration, and lessons for districts across the country.

In this brief, you'll learn about the journeys of districts in **Focus Area 2: Strengthen Adult SEL Competencies and Capacity**.

CASEL's District Theory of Action



Focus Area 1 Building Foundational Support and Plan



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



Focus Area 3 Promote SEL for Students



Focus Area 4 Reflect on Data for Continuous Improvement

What is the SEL Fellows Academy?

The [SEL Fellows Academy](#) is a first-of-its-kind, virtual leadership academy to strengthen SEL practices in a community of peers for a cohort of SEL leaders from rural, suburban, urban, and regional districts. Hosted by CASEL, the academy combines professional learning with a community of practice to advance SEL toward equity and excellence in all schools.

"This community brought structure, support, and strategies, but even more impactfully, an opportunity to step back and look at the bigger picture. Collaborating with CASEL staff and others in my Fellows cohort was timed perfectly, given this challenging time. It provided me with a range of lenses with which to see our experience."

—Kris Norelius, SEL Fellows Academy Participant

Healing the Trauma of the Pandemic

Olympia School District, Washington

Starting in 2020, districts across the country have faced new challenges brought on by the COVID pandemic. Trying to teach traumatized students while facing their own stress, fear, and uncertainty, educators were left scrambling and overwhelmed. How could district leaders support teachers so they could support the students? “It was time to think outside the box,” recalls Kris Norelius, SEL program specialist for Olympia School District (OSD).

Supporting Adults to Support Students

“With the groundwork underway and a team in place, Norelius provided teachers and staff with resources about student SEL and remote teaching, but the solution was messy and, ultimately, ineffective. It was hard for counselors, social workers, and teachers to find what they needed. It was equally difficult for Norelius to ensure the resources she offered were high quality.

That’s when she decided to switch her initial focus. “We realized that the first step to helping students was to provide healing and empowerment for our adults,” Norelius recalls. This was especially important as teachers returned to in-person instruction, which meant facing the trauma students had experienced—in terms of devastating losses and the isolation and disconnection of the pandemic—as well as their own trauma, stress, and feelings of burn-out.

“Heal, Empower, and Lead”

Norelius worked with other leaders to design a three-part professional learning series to explore and promote the adults’ SEL skills and competencies. She launched the program with counselors, family liaisons, and district social workers—leaders who could influence and support others. Each session combined interactive experiences and small-group work that allowed participants to apply their learnings to their work and home lives.

- **The first session, “Heal,”** offered a space for staff to pause and reflect on their experience of the pandemic and contemplate the intersection of SEL and social justice. Participants talked about how they had been impacted by trauma and secondary trauma influences them personally and professionally.
- **The second session, “Empower,”** continued the healing and offered an opportunity for participants to explore how they could contribute to build a system that prioritizes culturally responsive SEL, beginning with adults.

Challenge: Addressing trauma through adult SEL professional development

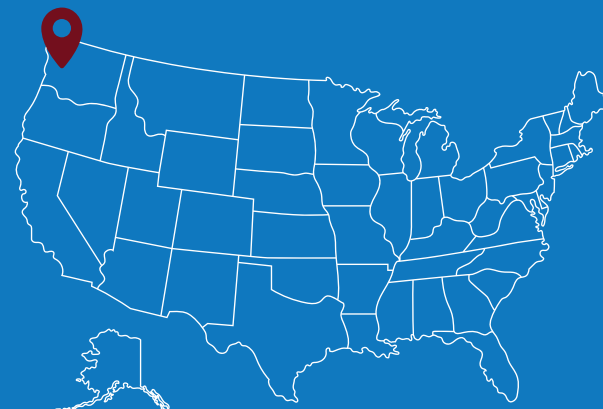
“Stories and useful ideas from peers across the country reminded me that none of us is doing this work alone ... In fact, it can only happen if we move forward thoughtfully and with intention, together.”



Meet SEL Fellow

Kris Norelius

SEL Instructional Coach



Welcome to Olympia School District

10,000 students

“We envision a supportive environment that promotes trust, growth and achievement of the highest standards. We build our capacity for success through leading-edge programs and operations based on continuous improvement. We have 100 percent commitment to quality and excellence in all things.”

- **The third and final session, “Lead,”** moved deeper into how participants could be leaders in their particular roles. Each session included a morning of interactive experiences and an afternoon of small-group work around applying the morning’s learnings within the context of their specific school or work setting. “We wanted to distribute the wealth in leading,” Norelius says.

The district anticipates continuing this series into following years and facilitating similar professional learning sessions with other stakeholders around the district. For Norelius, the experience has illuminated the need for a solid foundation in adult SEL that allows staff to truly experience what they want to promote for students. “That was one of my many ‘ahas,’” she says.

Caring for the Adults Who Care for the Students

Buffalo Public Schools, NY

The pandemic also spurred thinking and innovation around adult SEL in Buffalo Public Schools (BPS) in New York. For Director of Social Emotional and Wellness Mai Nguyen, it wasn't surprising that educators would need support. "As educators, we want to take care of others," she says. "If we can't take of ourselves and we can't take care of the adults who take care of students, there are going to be issues." Her effort to provide this support was two-pronged: Her team provided a place for adults to come together for support, and built a progressive, data-based professional learning track on adult SEL.

"You Can't Pour From an Empty Cup"

Early on in the pandemic, Nguyen and her team wanted to attend to the adults' own sense of support, connectedness, and well-being. Guided by the motto "You can't pour from an empty cup," they created the Collective Care Café, a virtual platform where all staff could come together to pause, connect, and recharge. Restorative practices trainers served as the facilitators, offering activities such as circles and open forums. Each café session followed CASEL's [SEL 3 Signature Practices](#), including a welcoming inclusion activity, engaging practices, and an optimistic closure activity. Classroom teachers were also encouraged to adapt activities from the Collective Care Café for their students—a visible "ripple effect" of SEL making waves in classrooms across the district.



SEL 101: Building the Foundation

With the success of the Collective Care Café sessions, Nguyen wanted to deepen SEL knowledge and practices to support teachers in not only their own self-care but in their ability to guide students through pandemic.



Meet SEL Fellow

Mai Nguyen

Director of Social Emotional and Wellness



Welcome to Buffalo Public Schools

- 31,749 students

- Started SEL journey in 2020

"In all we do, the BPS learning community strives to live these core values. We are... welcoming, empowering, equity-focused, innovative, and results-driven. The BPS vision is that all are welcomed to the Buffalo Public Schools where excellence is our primary expectation, with no excuses, aligning to our mission of putting children and families first to ensure high academic achievement for all."

She started with an "SEL 101" training, which offered opportunities for teachers to check in on their own well-being while also building their knowledge of [CASEL's framework and 5 SEL competencies](#). Participants reflected on their own SEL skills and competencies using CASEL's personal SEL self-reflection activity, which they discussed in small groups. The training also offered a jigsaw activity around the CASEL 5, explored strategies for prioritizing relationships, and rolled out SEL lessons to be used in the classroom. The district also offered the training to other district employees, including security officers, teacher aides/assistants, parent engagement liaisons, school nurses, community-based organizations, parents organizations, and central office staff.

Challenge: Providing professional learning where adults can practice SEL skills and competencies

“ I think of SEL like throwing that pebble into the water and having those ripple effects. That’s the beauty of it. We might not see our success right away. Who knows the impact that you may have? ”

Using Data to Dig Deeper

Since the district used an electronic version of the self-reflection, Nguyen was able to collect data about where staff wanted a “deeper dive” into SEL. She used this data to plan the next round of training—a sort of “SEL 102” that was centered on empathy. Grounded in Brené Brown’s definition of empathy, the session focused on not simply being in the same situation as someone else but, rather, being able to recognize that person’s feelings and share that space with them.

This approach resonated with teachers. As Nguyen recounts, “We sometimes get pushback from those who point out that teachers aren’t counselors or psychologists. We stress that we’re not asking them to do that.” Instead, she explains, she aims to equip adults to be authentic and create a space where students feel connected—a place where they can build relationships.

“We do that,” she says, “through strengthening and creating opportunities to practice those SEL skills and competencies.” After all, she notes, you can’t expect teachers and other adults to offer promote and model behaviors they haven’t themselves practiced. Only after they have “filled their cups” can they do the same for students.

Training Objectives

Participants will...

- Identify resources and put into application strategies to promote their own personal health and integrate social emotional learning into practice
- Define the 5 social emotional competencies
- Navigate the Social Emotional and COVID Health First Weeks of School Lesson Plans and supplemental supports

Strategy: Prioritize Relationships



- Connect before you direct
 - People don't learn from people they don't like
- Building relationships builds trust; building trust builds safety
- Build community
 - Not just the relationship between you and the student!
 - Circles, restorative practices, morning meetings

Urban and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center



Restorative Circle Prompts

- Grades 11-12 SEL Resources and Lessons
- Pre K to 1 SEL Resources and Lessons
- Grades 9- 10 SEL Resources and Lessons
- Grades 2-3 SEL Resources and Lessons
- Grades 7-8 SEL Resources and Lessons
- Grades 4 - 6 SEL Resources and Lessons

Social Emotional and Wellness First Weeks of School Lessons

“SEL 101” Training

Developing Anti-Racist Leaders Through Adult SEL

Des Moines Public Schools, Iowa

How can you equip adults to step outside of their own identity to support students from diverse backgrounds? That's the question that faced Des Moines Public Schools (DMPS) in Iowa, where a 95-percent white teacher population serves a student body that is 60 percent Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). For SEL Fellow and DMPS SEL Coordinator Dau Jok, the answer was [Transformative SEL](#) (TSEL), a specific form of SEL that concentrates on transforming inequitable systems and promoting justice-oriented civic engagement. And that meant starting with adults.

Shifting the Focus to “Adults First”

SEL implementation in DMPS started with providing an SEL curriculum for students, along with an asynchronous SEL virtual learning course for adults. But they soon found that approach was a miss: It didn't help the district pursue its commitment to equity.

To forge a new path, they hired SEL Coordinator Dau Jok. He brought a new idea: To reach students, they first had to attend to the adults. “Working with adults—prioritizing adult SEL—is still student-centered,” Jok says. “If you care enough about students, you will make sure you can account for the well-being of the adults that control their time and space and what they do.”

Developing Leads Committed to Equity

Jok developed a new SEL professional learning for adults, but one that focused on more than just the fundamentals. His goal was to influence leaders to remake the district's culture so that it would meet the needs of all students. “You must have courageous leaders who are challenging systems that are toxic, who are challenging systems that are not serving everyone,” he says. “If the leaders are not emotionally intelligent, and we ask them to do things with kids, that's going to lead to more disengagement, especially for young black boys and brown boys.” He broadens the definition of “leader” as anyone who emerges or chooses to emerge as a leader, including SEL champions, who lead through influence rather than through titles or hierarchies.



Meet SEL Fellow

Dau Jok

SEL Coordinator



Welcome to Des Moines Public Schools






- **31,000 students**
- **Started SEL journey in 2020**
- **Vision: To become the model for urban educational equity and excellence in America.**
 - **Students:** Students achieve academic and life goals, develop healthy and positive relationships, and acquire skills to be responsible citizens.
 - **Staff:** DMPS cultivates safe, equitable, and thriving work environment to enhance individual and organizational health, well-being, and goals.
 - **Community:** DMPS uses social and emotional learning (SEL) to advance school-family-community partnerships through trust, collaborative relationships, and meaningful conversations.

Challenge: Creating professional learning to develop antiracist leaders

“ *This is a process. It’s a journey. Everyone needs to start somewhere. We will judge emotions, or misjudge, or overjudge. The challenge is not repeating those mistakes.* ”

The professional learning includes modules on leadership, emotion science, equity, Transformative SEL, and a reading group on the book [Ratchetdemic: Reimagining Academic Success](#), by Christopher Emdin. In these modules, Jok expects participants to go beyond the surface level and deeply explore identity, biases, and cultural background. This often requires some discomfort. Says Jok: “If we are asking you to model it, you can’t just know what it is. You have to experience it.”

As Jok says, it’s only by stepping back and addressing adult needs that the district moved forward. “We have to look at SEL as a systemic challenge. We have to ask ourselves: What will enable us to set the conditions needed to meet equitable outcomes for students, to be student-centered, to support the well-being and needs of our adults?”

	Module I: Leadership (3-hours)	90-minute learning experience Reading Homework: Leadership statement, identity statement, and leadership philosophy
	Module II: Emotion Science (3 hours)	Two 60-minute learning experiences Readings Processing and operationalizing
	Module III: Equity (4-hours)	Readings 90-minute learning Homework Coffee Chat with community member
	Module IV: Transformative SEL (3-hours)	90-minute learning experience 60-minute learning experience 30-minute circles
	Module V: Ratchetdemic (3-hours)	Group work 90-minute comprehensive session Resources

Jok’s training modules



Key Takeaways

While it can be tempting to only prioritize student SEL, attending to adult SEL is a critical first step. Adults must experience SEL firsthand and build their own social-emotional competencies before they can teach and model them for students.

SEL implementation offers an opportunity to share leadership across the district with all adults. Consider how staff throughout the central office and in schools can take ownership for impacting and deepening SEL implementation.

Educators experience not only their own trauma but that of the students they work with. Adult SEL offers a powerful way to support teachers and other staff during stressful times.



Reflection Questions

What opportunities does your district or school have to support adult SEL? Professional learning sessions? Staff meetings? Shared check-in spaces?

How have you seen adult SEL contributing to the promotion of student SEL in your school or district?

How can schools and district leaders promote adult SEL in their day-to-day interactions with staff, families, and community partners?



Resources



[District Guidance: Design and Implement an SEL Professional Learning Program for Schools](#)



[District Guidance: Strengthen Adult Social, Emotional, and Cultural Competence](#)



[School Guidance: Strengthen Adult SEL](#)

Why SEL?

[Research has shown](#) the gains of SEL include improved social-emotional skills and attitudes, increased attendance, positive classroom behavior, better and more supportive relationships between students and adults, increased academic achievement, and higher graduation rates.