Districts in Action

LEARNING TOGETHER
CASEL
SEL
FELLOWS ACADEMY
INAUGURAL ALLSTATE FOUNDATION COHORT

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 4: Reflect on Data for Continuous Improvement.**

CASEL's District Theory of Action

Focus Area 1
Building Foundational Support and Plan

Focus Area 2
Strengthen Adult SEL Competencies and Capacity

Focus Area 3
Promote SEL for Students

Focus Area 4
Reflect on Data for Continuous Improvement

- Reflect on Progress Toward Annual SEL Goals
- Make Improvements to the Action Plan

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.

"My Fellows experience has given me the confidence to ask the right questions … Before I think I was doing a ton of work, but maybe wasn't always asking the right questions of the right people."

—Melissa Bostwick, SEL Fellows Academy Participant

Putting the "Continuous" in Continuous Improvement

San Diego County Office of Education, California

Meet SEL Fellow

Melissa Spadin
Director, System of Supports

When should a district start thinking about the continuous improvement process? At the very start of SEL implementation, when planning is just underway. Best practice is to start from a place of curiosity: What is already in place to support SEL, what is working well, what are our gaps—and move forward with planning for implementation from this continuous improvement lens. This may be a surprise for many educators, who think of continuous improvement as something you pay attention to at the end of an implementation cycle, as a means of reflecting on what worked and what could be improved retroactively. But as SEL Fellow Melissa Spadin knows, a learning orientation is an important jumping off point for planning and implementing an SEL initiative and a continuous part of the process as the district moves forward.
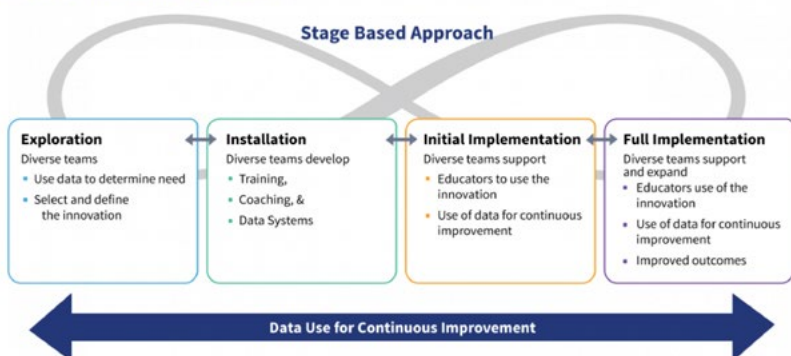
Where Are You Now? Where Do you Want to Be?

"In education, we tend to jump in without doing the groundwork," says Spadin. As director of system of supports in San Diego County Office of Education in California, she's provided guidance to more than 40 districts and many charter schools for developing a systemic approach to SEL implementation.

Thinking back to the start of her work, she recalls, "People had lots of 'things'—curriculum, practices, assessments—but no systemic approach to SEL." Her response was to provide guidance on developing a systemic implementation plan—not a "plan in the abstract," as she says, but a process and a toolkit with embedded resources. "The idea was that districts will have a tool they can start using immediately, in plain language, so there's no barrier to entry for users."

Welcome to San Diego County Office of Education

- **502,785 students**
- **Started the SEL journey in 2019**
- **The county includes 42 districts and more than 100 charter schools**

As an experienced data storyteller, Spadin was careful to include assessment, metrics, and goals into that robust planning process. "Formative assessment is a cycle," she explains. "It starts with where are you going, where are you now, and how are you going to close the gap. It's hard to set that goal without that baseline data."

"We want to avoid 'autopsy' data," she says. "That's like a post-mortem. It's too late to do anything about it" because we are looking back at what we did previously. Instead, she advises, it's important to consistently check in periodically throughout the implementation cycle (i.e., during the school year!) to collect data to figure out if the efforts are improving the health of the system, or look at data that's already been collected.

NIRN Implementation Stages

Key to the Learning Process...

Stage Based Approach

Exploration	Installation	Initial Implementation	Full Implementation
Diverse teams	Diverse teams develop	Diverse teams support	Diverse teams support and expand
• Use data to determine need	• Training,	• Educators to use the innovation	• Educators use of the innovation
• Select and define the innovation	• Coaching, &	• Use of data for continuous improvement	• Use of data for continuous improvement
	• Data Systems		• Improved outcomes

Data Use for Continuous Improvement

Challenge: Support districts in incorporating assessment, metrics, and goals in their SEL implementation plan

People need to feel safe and not just physically safe, but psychologically safe. That's why the SEL work is so important ... SEL needs to be a focus, adults and kids who don't feel safe can't learn.

Telling the Story With Data

To guide teams through this process, Spadin and her team help coordinate the initial data pull that will inform preliminary planning conversations. Using data in this way helps ensure the process is grounded in a continuous improvement and assessment approach. Since many of the districts and schools in San Diego County housed SEL within the Climate Department, Spadin and her team are working to develop a climate data profile for each district they support. These climate profiles will encompass data in a wide range of domains, including discipline and order, facilities, parent involvement, relationships, respect for diversity, school engagement, Tier l supports, and student voice.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

refers to a deliberate and structured process to identify and address problems of practice in order to improve outcomes.

School Climate Domains, Subdomains, and Data Sources for Measures on School Climate Data Profile

Domain	Subdomain	Data Source/Questions	Data
Discipline & Order	Classroom order	California Healthy Kids Survey – School climate module	
	Disciplinary harshness (low)	California Healthy Kids Survey – School climate module	
	Fairness	California Healthy Kids Survey – School climate module	
	Rule clarity	California Healthy Kids Survey – School climate module	
	Suspension/Expulsion rate	California Department of Education data	

The assessments they use are based in qualitative data—focus groups and empathy interviews—as well as analyses of quantitative data that allow district leaders to get a better handle on what's happening in the district as well as how to respond to those outcomes.

Since these will be the data that districts (and the region) hope to address and improve through robust SEL efforts, looking at these data is a critical first step. For example, Spadin describes how data collection and analysis can provide a foundation for planning improvements in discipline. Looking at the discipline data, schools and districts can try to find patterns to better understand what's happening. Are referrals largely coming from one teacher? Is there a part of the student population that is disproportionately referred?

In this way, Spadin says, the data is foundational, but you also have to plan how you're going to use it. "Data doesn't tell the story, you do," she says. In this way, data can be a starting point for inquiring about the broader narrative about what is leading to these perceptions or outcomes. "… Without the data, there's not a lot of information to share."

"Don't Be Afraid of Your Data Folks"

"There's this perception around data folks that we think we know everything," says Spadin. "But we don't know the content." That is, the "data folks" don't always have insight into the full story behind the numbers, which can support a better understanding of what's truly happening or what needs still exist. She argues that a strong partnership with the data team is critical to SEL work, for the data folk as much as for other teams. "We want to do the things that matter," she says, "and we don't know what those are until we work closely with our experts in our system"—the educators in the districts.

"Everyone was tentative about going to the data team," she recalls. So often, data folks are seen as part of oversight and compliance rather than as partners in the continuous improvement process. Spadin's team worked hard to reframe how research is viewed, using their own social-emotional skills to create that relationship. Once they forged that understanding, everything changed in their work with the district teams. "Juices are flowing, everybody's learning, everybody's thinking," says Spadin, "but it took that first step of making the connection."

Survey Says: Partnering With Stakeholders Is Transformational

Alpine School District, Utah

A critical element of systemic SEL is engaging with student, staff, community, and family stakeholders at all levels. But what does that engagement entail? In this story, one SEL Fellow learned how co-creating a student survey with a broad array of stakeholders not only yielded valuable data, it also helped build bridges between schools and families.

Building a Survey

When SEL Fellow Melissa Bostwick joined Alpine School District (ASD), the district was just a few years into their SEL journey. They realized they needed a team—and a team leader—to ensure they were supporting the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions they wanted students to acquire academically and socially. And they knew SEL was an important piece of that work.

Bostwick, who was hired as K-12 director of social and emotional well-being, quickly realized that data collection and analysis would play a key role in guiding the team's strategic shifts. As a way to broaden stakeholders' understanding of the benefits of SEL and broaden commitment across the district, she worked with her team to create a student perception survey. She and her team looked at more than 50 similar surveys and contacted CASEL partner district Washoe County School District in Nevada, which had developed its own survey. They also consulted with a local university to gain they insights to create their own research tool.

Bostwick recalls: "People asked me, 'Why not just buy a survey?'" While there are many high-quality, validated tools available, Bostwick felt strongly that the district needed to be very specific about measuring elements that directly related to their SEL efforts and goals. She was committed to creating something, based on research from the field broadly and expert guidance that would meet her schools' particular needs and measure the framework that the district had invested significant time and energy in creating.
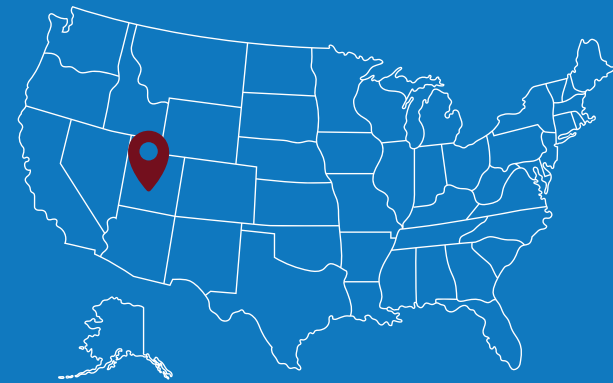
They worked hard to incorporate internal stakeholders in the process, too, working with student focus groups to review and

Meet SEL Fellow

Melissa Bostwick
K-12 Director of Social and Emotional Well-Being

Welcome to Alpine School District

- **81,285 students**
- **SEL journey started in 2019**

revise items on the survey to ensure they were effective and reflected the needs and interests of the district. It's one thing to write the questions and see how students respond, but involving young people in the process of creating survey items opens up a conversation. Asking students: "What do you think this question means?" Or "What were you thinking about when you read and answered this question" helps well-intentioned adults better understand student mindsets and collect more meaningful data in the long run.

Challenge: Developing a stakeholder survey that garners a response

> *Continuous improvement and data collection allows us to make strategic shifts in our practice to help students gain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Without it, we are allocating resources in areas we think will have impact, but we don't know if they have impact without data sources and time to reflect on what that data is telling us.*

Unexpected Challenges

With this survey draft tool in hand, Bostwick and her team put it to use, piloting it with students at all grade levels. That's when they ran into challenges and their learning accelerated.

In retrospect, Bostwick identified the missing piece: For all the work and commitment they had poured into developing their survey, they didn't partner with the family and community stakeholders who needed to have more input. When they went to launch the surveys, they experienced pushback from family groups and other important community-based stakeholders who were questioning what they were doing and how they were doing it.

But Bostick wasn't ready to give up. Behind their concerned pushback was a misunderstanding about the district's SEL effort more broadly, and this presented an opportunity to bring those folks in as partners, starting by opening a conversation about the "why" behind SEL in the district. "I knew that this project needed to keep going because I had a conviction that collecting the right data would empower us as adults to make the right strategic moves to do this work with the most impact by using our resources in the best way. And we can't do that without data."

Building Bridges to Build a New Survey

Returning to the project, she revised her approach, creating a plan to partner with family and community partners whose voices were not heard during the development of the original survey. While this slowed down the overall process—after all, they thought they were ready to administer the survey—this re-energized efforts around a more robust co-creation process with a broader stakeholder group including parents and community members who lacked a deep understanding of SEL.

"It's one thing to have stakeholders involved," Bostwick says, "It's another thing to strategically involve different groups for different purposes so we're co-creating and not just getting feedback." Done well, Bostwick realized this step could help those family and community voices, those who appeared to be opposed to SEL, become the strongest allies and partners in this effort longer term.

Bostwick and her team focused on three things to get their project back on track. First, they re-articulated the vision for the survey, which meant re-evaluating their purpose, their language, and clearly communicating that vision to their stakeholders and board.

Next, they created a committee with the board to facilitate continuous conversations about the process. Her goal was to help them understand the 'why' of the survey as well as being part of the feedback loop.

Finally, they went back to the schools and stakeholders involved, including parent groups. For ASD, which comprises 12 municipalities, that means connecting with members from 12 PTA groups, 12 community councils—and more—as part of the effort to reach out both on the district level and the community level.

This "engagement tour" was a huge undertaking that took months, but the effort was worth it. The team heard directly from parents all over the district and started to build necessary trust and understanding. The result was approval to Beta test the survey at multiple schools at all grade levels, universally and with an opt-out choice. The team also developed a communications plan to ensure schools could engage with families and answer questions about the survey. All told, in five schools that participated in the pilot, there was a grand total of 20 to 30 opt-outs—an enormous success.

"What it told us was not just that parents were fine with it, but that we did it the right way so that parents felt safe with it … The whole purpose is for parents to feel like we are working with them in helping their students gain all of these pieces—skills, knowledge, and disposition," Bostwick says. Sharing the vision broadly—with young people, staff, and the family and community partners—helped establish a broad tent of support, not just for the survey administration, but even more importantly, for the SEL efforts that will follow comprehensive data review and planning.

Lifting Up Voices Through a Portrait of a Graduate

School District of Manatee County, Florida

When asked to think about data, many will think about stats and percentages: graduation rates, results of a student survey, discipline statistics. But data also includes the qualitative experience of stakeholders. How are we hearing directly from young people about their school experiences? What do students like best about their schools? What needs improvement? In this spotlight, one SEL Fellow describes how she created a Portrait of a Graduate to help make qualitative data concrete and actionable and to give voice to the perceptions, interests, and priorities of invested parties in her district.

"She Made Me Feel Like I Was Somebody"

When SEL Fellow Larissa Bennett joined the School District of Manatee County in Florida as the school climate coordinator, the district was still very new to SEL as a focus. There were pocketed efforts of SEL within various schools or classrooms, but nothing that was systemic, that was organized at the district level, or that was tracked from a data perspective.

Bennett found a path for the work during a principals' meeting in which the leaders asked students and families about their experiences with the schools. The conversation was meant to be about academic rigor—a key focus of the district—but the participants ultimately all prioritized sharing about their nonacademic experiences.

One high school student recalled a powerful and supportive relationship with one teacher. The student had struggled for years, but that teacher kept with her. "She made me feel like I was somebody," the student said, recalling how that support enabled her to start applying herself in school. Parents offered similar perspectives, describing how their children enjoyed coming to school because of their positive interactions with teachers and students.

"Here were these people in front of all these administrators, students, and parents and alumni saying 'This is what I got out of our school district,'" Bennett says, noting that they emphasized social and emotional experiences that the school fostered. It seemed to be a lightbulb moment for the district leaders that deepening commitment to SEL—what is truly behind those stories the family partners and students chose to tell—is a critical part of creating positive experiences and, ultimately, accelerates learning.

Meet SEL Fellow

Larissa Bennett
School Climate Coordinator

Welcome to School District of Manatee County

- **49,181 students**
- **Early on in the SEL journey**
- **District vision: Intentionally Empowering the Whole Child**

Challenge: Find a way to make qualitative data concrete

> *There are people out there that want this work. I want to be able to lift their voices.*

"It really solidified for me that there are people in this district who want this [SEL] work," Bennett recalls. "I have to be able to lift their voices." And further, Bennett needed to help clarify for district leaders that while some of these efforts may not directly focus on academic rigor initially, prioritizing relationships, climate, and culture can be a necessary prerequisite for students to be ready and open for meaningful learning.

Painting the Portrait

For Bennett, quantitative measures such as surveys were not capturing the type of feedback and input she heard at that leadership meeting where students and family partners spoke about what was most important to them. She wanted a way to capture what she was hearing—all that qualitative data about what the district was doing well—and amplify those voices. She decided the best way to do this was to paint a picture: a "Portrait of a Graduate."

Instead of citing statistics and percentages, this portrait would provide a snapshot—a vision—of what a graduate would "look like"—the skills, mindsets, and competencies they would bring with them in their life after graduation. The process of creating this portrait would require intentional, deep conversations with key stakeholders to develop a collective illustration, which would serve as a meaningful way to elevate voices of stakeholders outside of district leadership.

Bennett and her team created a five-step process for developing the Portrait of a Graduate:

Plan: Communicate the purpose and urgency of creating the portrait and identify a team of staff, students, parents, community representatives, and business owners to participate.

Activate: Gather the team for planning sessions and meet with the district leadership team to bring the work together.

Create: Solidify the core principles identified by the team and design the visual to represent the work of the team.

Adopt: Present the final framework to the school board and work with district departments to define and align their work.

Adapt: Create a design team from each district department to identify strategies for implementation.

The result is a portrait that captures the key capacities that reflect the hopes and goals that stakeholders have for graduates:

The portrait of the graduate identified seven key priorities for the district, surfaced from themes all stakeholders spoke about:

- Adaptability
- Collaboration
- Integrity
- Problem-Solving
- Communication
- Empathy
- Learner's Mindset

What became clear, throughout the conversations and discovery process, was how embedded social-emotional competencies and SEL work, more broadly, must be to make meaningful gains in these areas. Listening deeply to key stakeholders, through an organized, robust process, opened doors to understanding how the broader district community wanted to see in their SEL work and in their school experiences more broadly.

What Bennett's work on the Portrait of the Graduate shows is that there are creative ways to capture data and reflect it back that add depth to our understanding of student experiences beyond simply asking young people to complete a one-time, multiple-choice survey or examining graduation, academic, or disciplinary data.

As an added benefit, finding new ways to learn about how the district was doing turned up unexpected answers that helped honor stakeholder voice and produce systems that are responsive these voices. This approach to building stakeholder input epitomizes SEL in action—leveraging our social-emotional competencies to reach a place of understanding, build trusting relationships that promote authentic sharing, and creating deeper belonging to our school communities.

As Bennett said of the students and families from that early principals' meeting: "They lifted up those things that we don't really put a lot of focus and attention on. But every single student deserves those."

the Portrait of a Graduate

🔑 Key Takeaways

Data, metrics, and continuous improvement have a role at all stages of the implementation cycle—not just at the end. Collecting data and deeper insights regularly about how our work is taking shape is the only way to have real-time information about the health of your system.

Data isn't just numbers. Focus groups, listening tours, and open-ended questionnaires offer valuable sources of qualitative data that can enrich our holistic understanding of SEL efforts.

Just like any other part of SEL implementation, continuous improvement is most successful when it is founded upon deep engagement with stakeholders. Feedback is good; co-creation and communication about goals, measures, and analysis are even better.

❓ Reflection Questions

What kinds of data are available in your district? What can it tell you about climate, culture, and other nonacademic aspects of students' experiences in the schools?

What outcomes do you want for students? How do you know that the broad range of stakeholders in your district want the same things? How can you find out?

What bridges do you have in your district between those responsible for data or research in the central office and other teams across the district and in schools? How can you encourage connections across these individuals?

⚙️ Resources

[Reflect on Data for Continuous Improvement](#)

[Reflect on Progress Toward Annual SEL Goals](#)

[Make Improvements to the Action Plan](#)

[Battelle for Kids Portrait of a Graduate](#)

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.