

Districts in Action

Promote SEL for Students

FELLOWS SPOTLIGHT (3 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 3: Promote SEL for Students**.

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

- Adopt and Implement PreK-12 SEL Standards or Guidelines
- Adopt and Implement Evidence-based Programs and Practices
- Develop and Strengthen Family and Community Partnerships
- Integrate SEL with Academics, Discipline, and Student Supports



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.

"In the SEL Fellows Academy, you will meet people you will be connected with forever, just because of the work we've done.."

— Rachele Finck, SEL Fellows Academy Participant

Starting SEL From the Ground Up

Encinitas Union School District, California

In many districts, SEL implementation is a top-down effort. District leadership embarks upon an SEL initiative, which is then developed, led, and supported by the central office, with schools carrying out implementation activities. But what if a district doesn't have the capacity in the central office to lead this work? Or what if one school wants SEL for its students and staff, but the need hasn't yet been prioritized at the district level? One school in Encinitas Union School District (EUSD) in California confronted this situation head on and built what eventually became a districtwide approach from the ground up.

Starting at the Grassroots

Unlike many SEL Fellows districts, the SEL effort in EUSD didn't originate with top district leadership. Instead, the call for SEL came from families in one school, Park Dale Lane Elementary, where the parents and caregivers of students in special education were asking for framework for inclusion.

Working locally, they went to SEL Fellow Sarah Wood for support. As both a teacher in the school and the parent of children who had attended Park Dale Lane for years, she was known and trusted by families, and she had a strong tie with parents and caregivers. Soon, it was clear that the vast majority of the families in the school, reaching far beyond families with students in special education programs, wanted SEL for their children. "It grew really fast," Wood recalls, "because obviously it's not just that small population that needs SEL."

Wood responded by giving a foundational presentation about prioritizing SEL for the entire student population, sharing the what, why and how of SEL. It was so convincing that one parent volunteered to provide funding to cover the cost of supplies and other needs. "It was just a small idea, and we decided to give it ago," Wood says. She collected promising activities and practices into a classroom initiative that could be introduced during instruction to promote students' familiarity with and practice around SEL competencies.

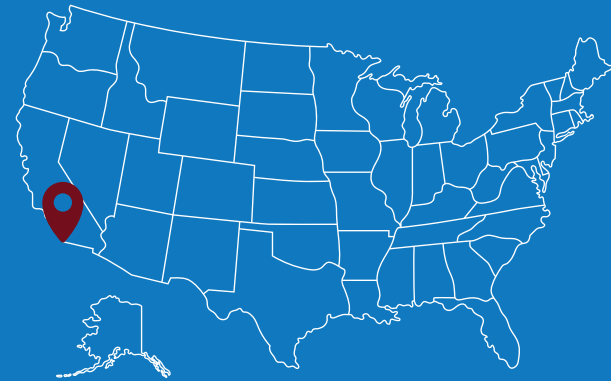
While Wood started with just her own school—where she knew the population well—district leadership soon recognized how this grassroots effort was something that could benefit all schools. Within six months, Wood's initiative was piloted at another school; within a year and a half, it was in all district schools. Lessons learned from each campus rollout helped inform future efforts and create organic buy-in among school staff.



Meet SEL Fellow

Sarah Wood

SEL/T.R.A.C. Teacher



Welcome to Encinitas Union School District

- 5,341 students
- Started the SEL journey in 2017
- SEL/T.R.A.C. Mission Statement: To provide universal social-emotional instruction to the entire student population. Students will gain skills to boost their self-awareness, increase their self-esteem and self-regulation, improve their social skills, encourage empathy, and learn to seek internal motivation for their personal and academic success.

Part of the district expansion included designating an SEL teacher at each school to lead the activities and practices in each classroom, for a total of nine teachers across the district, led by Wood at the district level. These SEL teachers went into each class to lead the program, with the classroom teacher present to ensure a deeper understanding of how SEL can be woven into all instruction. As the creator of the SEL program, Wood teaches SEL in Park Dale Lane, and also serves as team leader for the SEL teachers across the district to help lead and understand the impact of this SEL work.

Challenge: Creating a new SEL initiative from the school-level up

“ We need to make sure we remember that SEL is a growing field. We’re experts, but experts continue to learn and grow. There’s always more to learn, and there are a lot of experts to learn from. ”

Keeping Students on T.R.A.C.

Wood and her team called their initiative T.R.A.C., an acronym for team-building, regulation, awareness, and community. They’ve strived to ensure it is fluid and dynamic so that it can be tailored to each school’s unique needs. This approach also reflects CASEL’s guidance on leveraging the SAFE model, as effective SEL approaches often incorporate the four elements:

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.

While all of the CASEL 5 SEL competencies represent the core content and focus of the lessons, schools may decide to spend more time on some activities within each area, depending on the students’ particular needs. For example, while all schools start the year with a unit on self-awareness, some schools may spend more time on naming feelings, if that’s what students need or what the school is prioritizing.

For Wood, this flexibility stems back to the initiative’s origins. “Stakeholder voice is still very much incorporated into what we teach. It’s not just one box where we’re offering a certain lesson for every grade every year. We’re listening to what’s needed from our community.”

When asked what advice she would give to a small district or a single school on how to get the work forward or move it forward, Wood suggests taking chances and be willing to experiment. “Come up with some ideas you think will work, then sit back and imagine if that will work. There are a lot of great ideas out there, so make sure what you’re going to do is going to meet the needs of your staff and community.”



TRAC Program



Integrating SEL for More Supportive Discipline Approaches

Charlottesville City Schools, Virginia

How can a district ensure that its approach to discipline supports the whole child, addresses root causes of behavior, and builds prosocial skills? That was the question that faced SEL Fellow Patrick Farrell, intervention and support supervisor for Charlottesville City Schools (CCS) in Virginia. He saw the shortcomings in his district's approach to behavioral issues—a system that disproportionately impacted students and failed to build a more proactive approach to discipline. His solution: incorporate SEL into a broader approach to discipline to help ensure that the fundamentals of strong community, adult mindset, and restorative and productive response to behavior were all in place.

Rethinking Discipline

"We'd always used restorative practices, but it was very 'transactional,'" Farrell says of the discipline system in CCS. "We'd bring in a mediator and sometimes have a restorative conference, but then we'd send those kids back to the same classroom that ran on a punitive discipline system."

He realized they needed to deepen their practices to establish a truly restorative approach to both student skills and competencies as well as adult competencies and—perhaps more importantly—adult mindset. "It's that mindset—the idea that we're all connected, that there's mutual concern—that will impact how we implement our system of discipline." Viewed this way, SEL could potentially have the biggest impact in terms of creating a more restorative and equitable discipline system.

Equipping the Adults

The district already had in place explicit adult SEL professional learning. It had also partnered with Eastern Mennonite University, in Harrisonburg, Va., for support in restorative justice in education. The goal was to not only get training in restorative practices, but also to address the necessary mindset. By focusing on the mindset and purpose behind restorative work, they hoped to see positive ripple effects in classroom interactions, leading to a full approach

Challenge: Integrating SEL into the discipline process

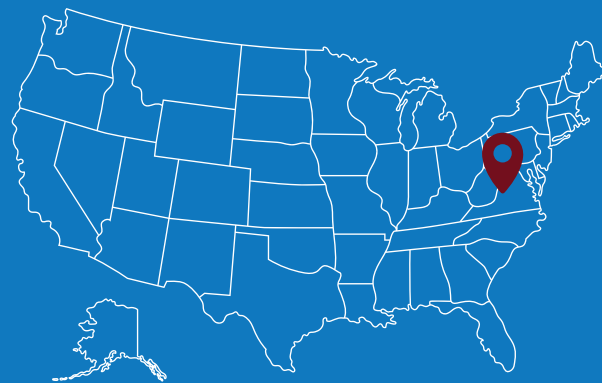
“ *If you have a [restorative] process but the wrong mindset, it can be just as punitive. What are the foundational pieces that are linked with SEL competencies that help give students the opportunity to apply the skills they've learned to repair harm and move toward creating culture and addressing social justice?* **”**



Meet SEL Fellow

Patrick Farrell

Intervention and Support Supervisor



Welcome to Charlottesville City Schools

- 4,300 students
- SEL journey started around 20 years ago
- SEL Vision: Grounding SEL in the Tier 1 Mental Wellness domain of our multi-tiered systems of support framework.

across all tiers, rather than restorative discipline just being a stand-alone effort for incidents that escalated with individual students.

The university created a six-hour asynchronous course on the foundations of restorative justice in education all staff in the district, coupled with live workshops throughout the school year to see the model in action and explore how to apply what they had learned to real-life situations.

Creating a Path for Disciplinary Decisions

With this foundation in place, Farrell started to build a system to guide educators across the district in how to incorporate SEL into their restorative discipline approach. Ultimately, this would create an integrated approach that placed restorative practices as part of a broader effort to cultivate SEL through all interactions. The guidance took the form of a decision-making rubric that educators could use when facing a behavioral issue, with the goal of offering criteria and pathways for how to respond to such issues.

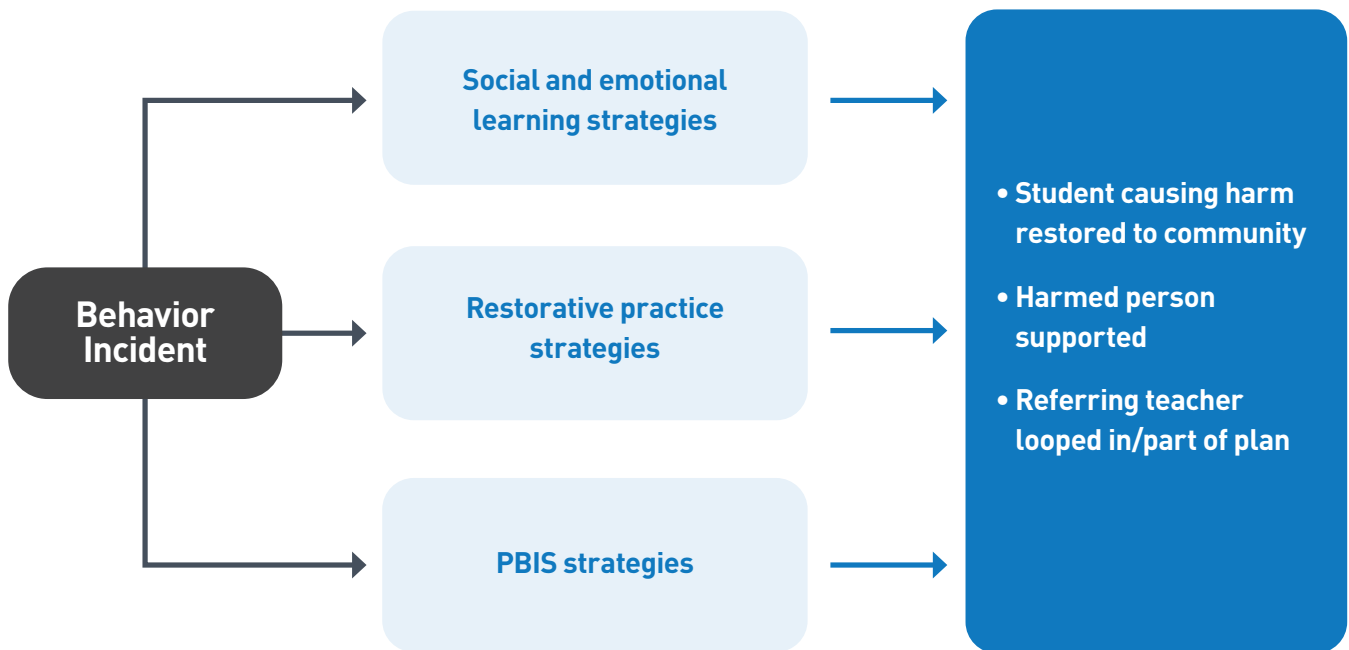
As shown in the diagram, the rubric starts with an assessment of the incident:

Seriousness	Type	Nature of the harm
Can it be managed in the classroom, or does it require an office referral?	Is it a peer-to-peer or student-teacher interaction?	e.g., physical aggression and threats to harm, property destruction, etc.

If the incident can be addressed within the classroom environment, the teacher employs restorative practices such as classroom circles. The goal is to ensure the person harmed by the behavior is supported and the student who presented the issue is restored to the classroom community. It is also critical that the community's own health and well-being are restored and strengthened in the process.

If the incident is more serious and requires an office referral, the administrator has several options, driven by the type of incident and student choice about the right path. As a final outcome, the student who caused the harm is restored to the community and the person who was harmed receives support. The teacher who made the initial referral about the incident is looped into the outcome and included as part of the plan to return that student to the classroom community.

The work to launch this new approach is still in progress, with plans in place to present it to the district and provide training in using the rubric on an opt-in basis. With this, Farrel hopes to foster a new mindset about discipline in CCS, one encapsulated in a favorite quote of his by Dr. Ross Greene: "Children will do well if they can ... If they can't, we adults need to figure out what's getting in the way, so we can help."



“Children will do well if they can... If they can't, we adults need to figure out what's getting in the way, so we can help. — Dr. Ross Greene, *The Explosive Child*”

Support for All Students Through MTSS

Taylor Independent School District, Texas

At the start of the 2021-2022 school year, SEL “was in its infancy for us,” says SEL Fellow Rachelle Finck, director of SEL, guidance, and counseling for Taylor Independent School District (TISD) in Texas. But with the district’s goal of “empowering the whole child,” plus the challenges posed by the pandemic and other upheavals, the need for student support had only intensified. The answer, she believed, was to develop a framework for multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) that integrated SEL as a Tier 1 support, so that every child in the district would get the attention and support they needed.

The Start of the SEL Journey—and a Detour

Finck had started with “big plans”—a full implementation of SEL that would kick off with educating central office staff about SEL and providing teachers with an SEL instructional playbook as “a chance to dip their toe into what purposeful, intentional planning around SEL could look like.”

But as the pandemic and other challenges mounted, it was clear she needed to take a step back and create a more structured approach to SEL across the district. She wanted a systemic way to ensure SEL was built into everything they did, and that every child, regardless of their performance and circumstances, got the support they needed. “I wanted to walk into every school and discover that kids know they can go to at least one trusted adult when they need support,” she says.

Building an MTSS Framework With SEL

For Finck, the solution was to develop an MTSS framework that really embedded SEL as the Tier 1 impetus for everything else, ensuring that SEL was part of every student’s classroom experience at the foundational level. This framework, she believed, would ensure that everyone understood the role they had to play in supporting students.

Within this integrated vision, SEL would be infused and interwoven with all the district’s various supports—from how they how greet parents, to trauma-informed practices for students with the greatest need, to what explicit instruction is supposed to look like in the classroom. “All components come together like a plate of spaghetti,” Finck says. “I can pull each one out, but they’re still all very interconnected.”



Meet SEL Fellow

Rachelle Finck

Director of SEL, Guidance, and Counseling



Welcome to Taylor Independent School District

- 3,000 students
- Started SEL journey in 2021
- District vision: Intentionally Empowering the Whole Child

Challenge: Providing a systemic framework to ensure all students get support.

“It’s okay to start very small and watch it grow. The smallest idea can lead to really big things. If you try to do it all it will feel really overwhelming.”

How Can You Tell it's Working?

With a plan to introduce the new framework in the 2022-2023 school year, Finck has begun to plan ahead for continuous improvement. How to do the kind of assessment she needed hit her like a bolt from out of the blue: "I don't know why I never thought of this before! Why wouldn't we just ask the students?"

In the coming school year, she will hold quarterly student advisory meetings with five to ten students to ask, "What works for you? What are you dealing with? What makes your life great at school? What doesn't?" Student advisors will be chosen at random. "I kind of want The Breakfast Club at the table," she says. What she does not want are just the high achievers or the kids who are struggling.

Ultimately, her goal is to reach the kids who haven't been reached. "It's like in academics: We do a lot to enrich education for the high achievers and offer interventions for those who aren't," she says. "But what about the kids who are 'just okay'? Is okay really okay?"

When asked where she'd like to see this work go, she says: "A year from now, my biggest hope is that if I were to ask any kid if they were seen or heard on campus, the answer would be a resounding yes. And for every educator as well."

WHY FOCUS ON SEL AS A TIER 1 SUPPORT?

"When you take a proactive approach with SEL as Tier 1, you create support before issues begin—before you have to intervene."

For Finck, this is crucial, as it helps ensure students are cultivating the necessary skills to contribute to a positive classroom community in the near term and that they have the resources and opportunities to grow as unique, skillful individuals before they become adults.

Universal SEL also ensures that all students get the support they need. "It's easy to focus on the 'high flyers' and the students who have special needs." The kids "in the middle" can be missed. A systemic approach to SEL—viewed as a universal, Tier 1 approach—means the kids who are perceived as 'fine' don't get lost in the shuffle because every single student experience is part of our integrated approach to SEL at the classroom and schoolwide levels.





Key Takeaways

- There is no single path to how to start bringing SEL to students, as there are many ways to teach and reinforce the skills that underlie the core SEL competencies. The key is to keep the local context and needs in mind, shape your approach to those needs, use data to inform your practice, and don't be afraid to try things out.

- Consider creatively modifying the SEL 3 Signature Practices to better address the climate and culture of your community. Enlist students, teachers, and families in designing practices to add to the [SEL 3 Signature Practices Playbook](#).

- Look for ways to integrate SEL into broader systems. Ideally, everyone on a school campus has a role to play and sees promoting SEL for students as a core part of their role as educators and role models.

- Engage a wide range of stakeholders—including families, students and community partners—to garner enthusiasm and shared ownership of your SEL initiative. That will support sustainability and create SEL champions who will drive the work forward.



Reflection Questions

What SEL support for students does your district or school currently offer? How can you build on those assets?

How can you tap the voices of educators, staff, families, students, and community members to ensure everyone has a voice in how SEL is integrated into the classroom and the school?

What are the gaps or areas of growth in your district or school? How might SEL help expand what you offer to students?



Resources



[Promote SEL for Students](#)



[Develop and Strengthen Family and Community Partnerships](#)



[Integrate SEL with Academics, Discipline, and Student Supports](#)

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.