SEL TRENDS

Using Data for Improvement

June 2019 Vol. 5

To ensure that social and emotional learning (SEL) is effective and sustainable, districts need robust systems of continuous improvement. This is a repeating process through which they use data to reflect on the success of implementation and progress toward outcomes, and adjust their plans in response.

In a culture of continuous improvement, all data, including what may have been perceived as a failure to achieve a goal, can be framed as an opportunity for learning and growth. This change in perspective can empower both staff and students to try new things and dramatically increase their opportunities for learning, improvement, and innovation.

School districts in Austin and El Paso, Texas; Nashville, Tennessee; and Washoe County, Nevada, are doing just that—helping each other and their peers in the Collaborating Districts Initiative use data to improve implementation of their SEL strategies. Working closely with SEL teams, district researchers are looking at fidelity of implementation, student and staff outcomes (including the impact of professional development), and the connections between the two.

Common trends include increased cooperation between research/evaluation and SEL offices, greater attention to the process of implementation, and an ongoing evolution in the types of measurement tools districts are using.

Austin, Texas

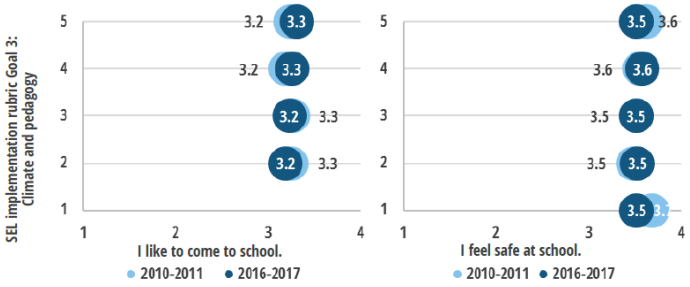
Implementation matters. The buzz phrase is common, but as it relates to social and emotional learning, Austin Independent School District has the data to back it up.

For the past several years, the district's department of research and evaluation has been conducting detailed reviews of how well schools are carrying out their SEL plans. Of all the SEL-related information evaluators collect—notably student, staff, and parent surveys—Lindsay Lamb, former program evaluation coordinator who is now at the Charles A. Dana Center in Austin, finds the implementation analyses the most useful.

> Fidelity of implementation is more strongly related to outcomes than longevity.

The implementation rubric contains 18 domains considered integral to SEL implementation, such as the frequency of principal communication about SEL, the quality of strategic planning in principal/SEL specialist meetings, and consistent time in the school schedule allotted for all students to receive explicit SEL instruction.

Figure 4.
Elementary schools where SEL strategies were integrated into school climate and pedagogy had students with higher ratings of "I like to come to school" and "I feel safe at school" in 2016–2017 than did schools with less integrated SEL, regardless of years in SEL.



Source. 2010–2011 to 2016–2017 school-level Student Climate Survey ratings and 2016–2017 school-level SEL implementation ratings
Note. Survey ratings ranged from 1 = *never* to 4 = *a lot of the time.* $\beta = .03$, $p < .05$; $\beta = .03$, $p < .05$

Corresponding to national evidence, schools that score higher on implementation tend to have more positive results in terms of student achievement, attendance, and behavior—regardless of the length of time the school has been implementing SEL. Indeed, fidelity trumps longevity. "The degree to which schools implemented SEL with fidelity, rather than their longevity in SEL, was more strongly related to program outcomes," the district found.

In addition to measuring implementation, Austin conducts annual climate surveys. The student surveys look at behavioral environment, adult fairness and respect, teacher expectations, student engagement, and academic self-confidence. The staff surveys measure collegial leadership, facilities and resources, general climate, community support, academic press, district vision, school leadership, and professional development.

Results from all data sources are communicated directly with schools and through multiple research reports and briefs. An online, interactive dashboard provides school staff with a wealth of data that they can disaggregate by race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and other variables. "It's empowering to see SEL facilitators and SEL specialists use the data to guide their work," Lamb says.

Working with Lamb and the district's SEL specialists, schools use the information to refine their improvement goals and strengthen their strategies. The data also are now part of the superintendent's scorecard, "not as a 'gotcha'," Lamb says, but to help reinforce the centrality of SEL to the district's overall strategy. While she believes schools should be accountable, she worries that SEL scores could become too high-stakes. "SEL needs to be done *with* you, not *to* you," she says.

The results also shape the detailed evaluation work plans the research office develops each year. A recent plan, for example, examined questions such as: Which SEL coaching strategies were most effective? What was the relationship between school-level SEL implementation and campus achievement, student climate, and other measures? How can we develop ways to review practices of SEL parent specialists and professional development offerings? This year, the focus is on the alignment of SEL and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) strategies.

For districts just getting started on evaluating SEL, Lamb says it is critical that researchers and SEL teams build strong, trusting relationships. They need to be responsive to the practical questions that practitioners ask. "And show them something they hadn't been thinking about," she adds.

El Paso, Texas

For the El Paso Independent School District, SEL is "the glue that holds everything together," says Sandra Montes-Uranga, director for social-emotional learning. "We had to battle the perception that SEL is something separate."

> Reinforcing the importance of showing principals that SEL is not "one more thing."

It appears that the school district is succeeding. Ray Lozano, executive director of student and family empowerment, says his biggest a-ha to date has been the "overwhelmingly positive" response by teachers, especially at secondary schools where student focus groups have been conducted. "They always thought they were connecting with their students, and the SEL data has been eye-opening. They're thanking us for sharing the information and are taking a more intentional approach to connecting with their students."

The district has phased in implementation gradually, starting with a handful of schools that volunteered three years ago.

In the 2018-19 school year, 55 of the district's 92 schools are implementing SEL, with 78 expected to be on board next year.

El Paso's approach to collecting data has evolved. Administrators started by looking at discipline and attendance data. To get a more complete picture, they have added a number of additional tools such as school climate surveys; a staff implementation survey; learning walks, during which SEL coordinators and others observe schools and classrooms; and focus groups with students, teachers, and principals. The input is having an impact. For instance, the district plans to include dedicated time for explicit SEL instruction at the

Table 2.1: School Climate Survey Responses: Cohort 1 Elementary[4]

Question	16-17 (Yr. 1)	17-18 (Yr. 2)
I learn to respect others at my school.	90.3%	93.5%
I feel safe at my school.	78.6%	82.8%
I feel my teachers believe in me.	92.4%	88.3%
I see that teachers get along with each other.	93.0%	92.9%

Table 3.1: School Climate Survey Responses: Cohort 2 Elementary[7]

Question	16-17	17-18 (Yr. 1)
I learn to respect others at my school.	91.5%	95.5%
I feel safe at my school.	84.5%	86.8%
I feel my teachers believe in me.	88.3%	91.0%
I see that teachers get along with each other.	92.3%	94.2%

elementary and middle school levels based on focus group feedback. In addition, when secondary students noted a lack of connection to teachers, the district boosted its adult SEL support. "We know that kids will work for teachers when there's a connection," says Lozano.

After two years of implementation, the data show mixed results on the initial implementation measures. Campuses implementing SEL have shown significant gains in school climate and staff support for SEL, but there are fewer gains in attendance, and mixed outcomes on disciplinary referrals. A major takeaway, Lozano says, has been the need to more clearly spell out expectations at the front end and provide more tangible resources such as curriculum and evidence-based programs. "Our work was too abstract in the beginning. We're now providing schools with more structure and resources, which has accelerated the onboarding process," he says.

The key to implementing these more structured approaches is getting principals' buy-in, showing them that SEL is "not just one more thing," but a driver for improving performance across the board, from teacher well-being to student academics. For El Paso, the first step is training them on a systemic approach, using CASEL's Guide to Schoolwide SEL, a robust and free online portfolio of guidance, tools, and templates.

Montes-Uranga adds that El Paso is focusing on training school teams—counselors, instructional coaches, teachers, and administrators. "We have teams from every campus. It's important that we have teachers at every grade level who are knowledgeable so they can support their colleagues," she says.

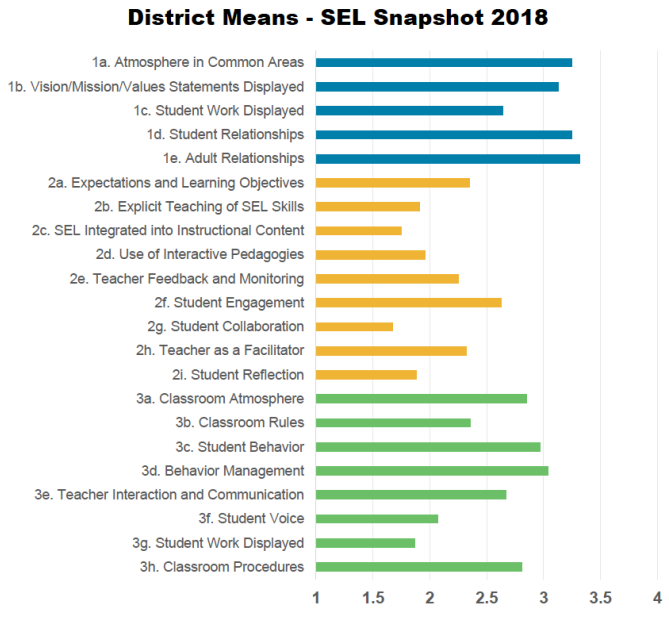
Nashville, Tennessee

Collecting and using SEL data is part of a major cultural shift to more data-based decision-making in Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS), according to Krista Davis, a program evaluation analyst in the district's office of Research, Assessment, and Evaluation.

The district has a lot of data to work with:

- Data from formative school observations using the MNPS SEL School Walkthrough Rubric, in which the SEL team conducts an in-depth look at SEL implementation in all classrooms in schools that request support (more than 50 conducted in 2018-19). The SEL team then uses this formative data to drive improvement conversations and plan personalized professional development opportunities with school leaders and staff.
- Data from the annual SEL district snapshot using the MNPS SEL School Walkthrough Rubric for observations in a stratified random sample of schools, which is more of an annual look at districtwide SEL implementation each year. About 20-30 percent of classrooms in 32 schools were observed this year.
- School Climate Survey data collected from students and staff in all schools during the fall, with some schools volunteering to follow up in the spring. Results are used to drive school improvement plans and help schools know where to focus their school climate efforts based on student and teacher perspectives.
- Neighborhood and Well-Being Survey collected from students in all schools, which is part of a broader, citywide push connecting SEL to related outcomes, such as juvenile justice and neighborhood vitality. This survey also asks students to report on their own SEL competencies.

Davis' team helps with the walkthroughs, trains observers to ensure consistent ratings, analyzes the data, and shares outcomes, among other responsibilities. Not surprisingly, one trend is that SEL is stronger in elementary schools. That has prompted the district to beef up professional development in middle and high schools by encouraging more explicit skills training. Another district priority, again based on the data, is



to strengthen support for integrating SEL with academics (see SEL Trends, Integrating with Academics).

Davis says more sophisticated analyses with data from the annual SEL district snapshot found strong correlations between SEL and student behavior in school. Some of the SEL rubric components most linked to behavior were *Classroom Procedures*, *Classroom Atmosphere*, and *Student Relationships*. Additionally, though there appeared to be no significant connection with static academic achievement, they did see strong relationships between SEL and academic growth. The SEL rubric components with the highest correlations to academic growth were *Student Engagement*, *Classroom Rules*, and *Explicit Teaching of SEL*.

The research team is intentionally elevating the voices of students in data conversations this year because student voice continues to be an area warranting attention. For example, high school students discussed SEL and school climate data at a recent meeting with all school administrators and district supervisors. "The suggestions were very well-received [by school principals] and the students felt their voices were heard," Davis says. Leaders in one of the district's four quadrants now want to replicate the exercise with teachers.

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Davis says key challenges include maintaining a common language and understanding about SEL, dealing with competing priorities (for example, SEL is one of four types of walkthroughs schools may undergo), and helping practitioners understand what SEL and an MTSS look like in practice.

She says a key to the district's work has been close collaboration between the SEL and research offices, with intentional efforts to act on each other's advice. "Listen to others," she urges. "Frame the data as a tool for support, helping all educators grow together toward a common goal." And to the extent possible, customize the support to schools and help them connect the dots among multiple strands of work. "If a school is struggling with student engagement and literacy, for instance, help them collaborate to improve both. That means lots of training to help educators see these things are inherently connected," she says.

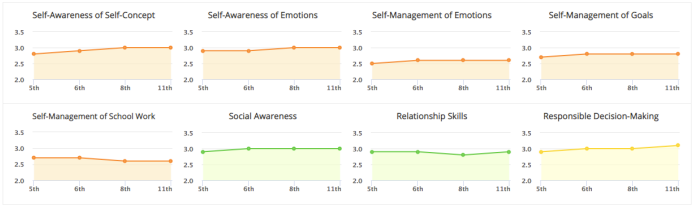
Washoe County, Nevada

The key for the 64,000-student Washoe County School District in Northern Nevada is to ensure that all the improvement data it collects are actionable. "The analyses help us bridge the research and practice gap," says Laura Davidson, director of research and evaluation.

For example, at the start of the school year, her office compiles and helps school teams work through a Data Book, which includes multiple indicators on SEL, climate, behavior and achievement. "We help them look for their data stories," Davidson says, drawing on information collected from annual student, (grades 5-9 and 11), staff, and parent climate surveys.

Top priorities have included tracking:

- The fidelity of SEL implementation, which has improved dramatically, with roughly 82% of staff (from 43% in 2013) now reporting their school follows an established written SEL curriculum, Davidson says;
- Students' SEL competencies, especially how they relate to important indicators like school climate, behavior, attendance, and academic outcomes; and



- Students' responses to which SEL competencies they find the most and least challenging (being polite to adults is the easiest, actions such as sharing feelings with others and sitting with newcomers at lunch are among the hardest).

Working closely with MTSS/SEL Coordinator Trish Shaffer and her coaches, the data team helps schools adjust their professional development to strengthen lesson plans and strategies for addressing ongoing challenges. A robust, online, and open data dashboard provides staff, families, and students with access to schoolwide and districtwide data, which helps inform conversations about improvement priorities.

Students as young as 3rd grade actively participate in using data as well, an approach that has earned Washoe County extensive national recognition (see the November 2018

SEL Trends—Empowering Student Voice). During a recent Student Voice Data Summit (the fifth such event the district has hosted), 150 students, staff, and community members explored gender and cultural differences in how they self-assess their SEL competence.

Middle and high school girls, for instance, consistently rate themselves lower than boys on several SEL skills, especially those having to do with managing and being aware of their emotions (e.g., "staying calm when I feel stressed" or "knowing the emotions I feel"); students and adults speculate that girls might be more self-critical because they have been socialized to express their emotions more freely than boys and because there are different expectations about how and when it's okay for boys and girls to express their emotions.

A current innovation grant from Education First Consulting/NoVo Foundation is helping the district explore whether cultural differences also help explain differences in how white females and Hispanic males respond to certain SEL questions, especially those related to emotional self-awareness and self-management (Crowder et al., 2019). At the Data Summit, some students from different cultural backgrounds described differences in how men and women in their families and friend groups expressed and even talked about emotions, conversations that will be explored further through the Education/First/NoVo student voice project this year.

Davidson and Ben Hayes, chief accountability officer, say the data have been particularly useful in helping identify students who may be academically at risk. They are currently studying whether strong SEL competencies help explain why some students "beat the odds" in terms of attendance, suspensions, ELA and math scores, GPA, and graduation. "There is a relationship between having strong social and emotional skills and academic outcomes. It's important to understand SEL's role in promoting resiliency," says Davidson.

> The key: Make sure data are actionable and relevant.

She and Hayes urge other districts to share data with students. ("Sometimes student surveys can be easy to dismiss as not trustworthy. But hearing students talk about the data patterns in their own words can be really compelling for educators," Davidson says.) Perhaps most important, make sure the data are relevant and actionable. "Focus on a couple of pieces of data and use them in training. The data is only useful when it's visible. Staff need to know the data are being used," Davidson says.

RESOURCES

CASEL

- District SEL implementation rubric
- School SEL implementation rubric
- District Resource Center's Focus Area 4
- School Guide's Focus Area 4
- Guide to Schoolwide SEL. Search "staff survey."
- Guide to Schoolwide SEL. Search "school walkthrough."

Austin

- District and campus surveys
- Austin's Evaluation Plan, 2016-17
- Research brief on student outcomes
- 37-page report on program implementation
- Analysis of impact of Facing History curriculum
- Staff perceptions on SEL implementation

El Paso

- Report on Year 1 implementation
- Evaluation report, 2017-18

Nashville

- MNPS SEL Walkthrough Rubric
- SEL Snapshot data, January-February 2018
- Analysis of the correlations between the SEL rubric data and school behavior data
- School climate data analysis

Washoe County

- Student Voice website
- Data Summit website
- Research brief on WCSD's Social and Emotional Assessment for Students
- Website on WCSD's Social and Emotional Assessment