



Making the Shift to a Systemic Approach to SEL

September 2019

Vol. 6

As more and more school districts across the country prioritize social and emotional learning (SEL), implementation has taken many routes. Increasingly, school districts are shifting how they approach SEL—expanding their efforts beyond a specific program to infusing SEL into everything they do in classrooms, schools, district offices, out-of-school time, and family and community partnerships. This type of systemic implementation of SEL can be a long-term process and requires a close examination of all aspects of a district's work, from planning and budgeting through school climate and instruction.

At CASEL, we have worked in partnership with 21 mostly large districts in our [Collaborating Districts Initiative](#) (CDI) to learn what it takes to implement SEL systemically, effectively, and sustainably. We also have been supporting other districts across the country in this work by conducting SEL Readiness and Engagement Analyses (SELREAs). These needs and resource assessments are designed to help school districts reflect on their current practices and systems and receive guidance on strategies to build on what they are doing to implement SEL systemically.



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Although all districts have unique strengths, assets, and opportunities for growth, we have seen common implementation challenges across these districts as they make the shift toward systemic SEL. This brief examines how districts have addressed these obstacles to bolster implementation and outcomes, drawing on findings and recommendations from the needs and resources analyses and our experience with our district partners (protecting the anonymity of each district). We share these lessons learned on navigating common implementation challenges as a way to support more districts in their move toward systemic SEL:

1. Acknowledge and plan for “initiative fatigue.”
2. Establish a common understanding of SEL as part of a quality education for *all* students.
3. Clarify the connection between academics and SEL efforts.
4. Pay close attention to adult SEL and relationship-building.
5. Create a coherent, phased plan for rolling out SEL implementation to all schools.

Each set of recommendations points to specific guidance and tools in our free, online SEL [District Resource Center](#), which includes guidance and hundreds of tools and resources that have been developed, tested, and refined by the leading districts in the CDI.



1. Acknowledge and plan for “initiative fatigue.”

Implementation challenges

A frequent challenge for district leaders is the perception that SEL is just one more thing being added to an already crowded list of priorities and to-do's. Teachers and principals say they are overwhelmed by their day-to-day responsibilities, dealing with existing district initiatives such as new learning standards and assessments, new literacy and math curricula, new disciplinary policies, and the like. Many feel they can wait out any new mandates or strategic plans, assuming district leadership will soon turn over or another initiative will soon take priority—“this too shall pass.” Related, we have heard educators talk about initiatives that districts have started without the needed resources to support them long term.

Recommendations

It is important to acknowledge that many districts have seen a host of initiatives come and go, and that not all efforts are well-funded, supported, or coordinated. If SEL implementation is not fully integrated with other district priorities, it is easy to see why educators would be wary of another “new initiative.”

Rather than adding another layer of initiatives, systemic SEL means leveraging SEL to align all of your work—from strategy and budgeting to hiring and classroom instruction. In many districts, SEL may represent a holistically different way of educating students.

If your district has rolled out many previous initiatives and programs aimed at student wellness, it is often helpful to honor and reflect on the work that has come before. Begin

the districtwide planning process with a needs and resource assessment to reflect on current work in classrooms, schools, and throughout the district. This will help identify what existing programs and practices should continue and be realigned to your district's vision for SEL, what ineffective or misaligned programs and practices may need to sunset, and what needs are not currently being met. [Read more about planning and assessing needs and resources.](#)

A needs and resource assessment also will help you identify what additional resources are required to sustain your efforts beyond a short-lived initiative. Aligning resources—including funding and staffing—to SEL efforts helps ensure all stakeholders are supported and engaged throughout implementation. This likely will require a continued investment at the school, classroom, and community levels, including ongoing professional learning. Those who will be leading implementation or working closely with students likely will need high-quality coaching, professional learning communities, and technical assistance that provides deep, real-time implementation support.

Aligning resources also may mean revisiting human resource practices and policies to ensure highly qualified, diverse staff to lead and support SEL implementation. These investments will pay off in the long term, as your SEL efforts foster engaging and effective learning environments that help you achieve your district's ultimate goals for students. [Read more about aligning resources to sustain SEL implementation.](#)



Rather than adding another layer of initiatives, systemic SEL means leveraging SEL to align all of your work—from strategy and budgeting to hiring and classroom instruction.

2. Establish a common understanding of SEL as part of a quality education for *all* students.

Implementation challenges

Although there is broad support for providing students a more well-rounded education, district and school stakeholders often have many different definitions and understandings of SEL and who it serves. In particular, some educators consider SEL as solely an intervention for students identified as needing Tier 2 and 3 supports and/or those with behavior or mental health issues. This can lead to a perception that SEL is mainly the responsibility of social workers or counselors. Similarly, SEL also can be conflated with other efforts aimed at student behaviors or mental health issues, trauma-informed practices, or PBIS. This can often contribute to a sense of confusion, with stakeholders unsure of their roles and how they should be supporting SEL.

Recommendations

While SEL can reduce risky behaviors and improve mental health, systemic SEL goes beyond an intervention for one or two groups of students to a universal approach that supports *all* aspects of education.

To create a shared understanding of SEL, you will want to establish a clear vision that defines SEL as integral to all students' education. This might mean refining an existing vision or developing a new one that clarifies how SEL supports student success, including both academic and behavioral growth. Your vision should address questions such as: What academic, social, and emotional competencies should all students have to reach their full potential as caring, contributing, responsible, and knowledgeable friends, family members, coworkers, and citizens? What do we want all schools in our district to feel like, sound like, and look like? How should all students be supported academically, socially, and emotionally? [Read more about establishing a shared vision for SEL.](#)

To ensure this vision continues to foster a common understanding of SEL as important for all students, you also will need comprehensive, ongoing, and scaffolded professional learning that reaches all levels of staff in the central office and schools. We recommend that districts consider providing foundational professional learning on what SEL is and why it is important to all district and school leaders and staff, and as part of onboarding new staff. Beyond the introduction to SEL, your professional learning plan also should consider how to provide ongoing support to help staff understand their role in integrating SEL into their area of work and speak clearly about the value of SEL for all students. Read more about [strengthening central office expertise](#) and [implementing an SEL professional learning program for schools](#). You can also find a [sample SEL 101 presentation here](#).

SEL is for *all* students, not just those identified as needing Tier 2 and 3 supports and/or those with behavior or mental health issues.



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3. Clarify the connection between academics and SEL efforts.

Implementation challenges

SEL competencies are often differentiated as “soft skills” and mainly the responsibility of counselors and other student support staff, not classroom teachers. SEL is frequently seen as only a standalone program, something that is taught during student advisory periods and not integrated beyond that class period. The disconnect also may be exacerbated by how the district structures central office, with SEL staff housed in a department that handles specialized student services and/or special education. In other cases, teachers and school staff may understand the connections, but need more support to actually integrate SEL into their daily instruction.

A number of steps can help break down siloes and foster meaningful and regular collaboration on issues related to academics and SEL.

Recommendations

Meaningful and regular collaboration among school and district leaders around SEL and academics helps ensure goals and strategies are aligned. This type of collaboration often requires thoughtfully designed structures that prevent or break down silos between district departments and ensure local school leaders are partnering with central office in planning and setting priorities. This might include:

- Designing district organizational charts to bridge connected workstreams, such as housing the SEL team in the Teaching and Learning department;
- Developing and monitoring a strategic plan that aligns SEL and academic efforts;
- Aligning district frameworks around SEL and academics, integrating SEL into existing professional learning on academic content areas, and providing ongoing support to teachers about how to use instructional practices that promote SEL and deepen learning;
- Setting up regular cross-departmental meetings between district leaders in SEL and academics to share best practices and progress toward goals, collaboratively plan, and reflect on collaboration; and
- Planning regular SEL updates to the superintendent's cabinet as part of academic progress monitoring and providing a process for the cabinet to provide feedback on key SEL-related decisions.

[Read more about organizing the district for collaboration.](#)

It also may be helpful to adopt pre-K through 12th-grade SEL standards, goals, or guidelines to establish a common understanding of what SEL looks like at all grade levels. Adopting these kinds of learning standards also sends the message that SEL is a district priority and expectation for all students, similar to mathematics, science, or language arts. [Read more about adopting and implementing SEL standards.](#)

A growing number of [states](#) have developed and shared voluntary SEL standards, so you may not need to start from scratch.

4. Pay close attention to adult SEL and relationship-building.

Implementation challenges

A major lesson from the initial eight districts in the CDI was the need to prioritize adults' social and emotional learning. For the most part, adult SEL was “the missing piece” of the first few years of these districts' implementation efforts. Other districts are experiencing similar adult issues that impact how students experience SEL, including low staff morale, tense relationships between schools and central office, or school staff who do not feel a sense of community among their peers.

Recommendations

Because students are the main reason districts undertake any effort, it is often tempting to develop plans or initiatives without considering what adults need in order to feel supported, connected, and successful. Systemic SEL, however, requires that everyone models and practices SEL and works effectively together to support students.

A good starting point for cultivating adult SEL is self-reflection. When staff reflect on their own social and emotional competencies, they personalize SEL, gain a

deeper understanding of the lifelong process for developing competencies, and gain insights into their own strengths and areas for improvement. This process of self-reflection builds staff self-awareness and allows them to assess their own strengths and limitations, explore personal and sociocultural identities, and examine how their thoughts, feelings, and actions are interconnected. CASEL's [Personal Assessment and Reflection tool](#) and [Guiding Questions for Educators: Promoting Equity Using SEL](#) can help.

In addition to promoting self-reflection on staff's individual social and emotional competencies, it is also important to set

up structures that intentionally cultivate a supportive and productive staff *community*. As a starting point, it helps to establish norms or shared agreements between district staff to guide respectful interactions, effective collaboration, and an inclusive district culture. You also will want to provide regular opportunities for staff to build a sense of community, share ideas, and collaborate. This might include dedicated time for staff to come together to share about their lives and formative experiences, and to plan around shared goals. To continuously improve staff climate, you will want to make sure to regularly collect and review data on the staff perceptions of their work environment. [Read more on building staff trust and culture.](#)

5. Create a coherent, phased plan for rolling out SEL implementation to all schools.

Implementation challenges

In larger or decentralized districts, it often can be difficult to ensure SEL implementation reaches all students and staff across all schools. Even smaller districts often face challenges in creating consistency in communications, expectations, and practices across schools. In districts where school leadership teams have high levels of autonomy over practices and programs, central office teams also may find it tough to guide schools in implementing different programs with fidelity or create opportunities for schools to learn from one another.

Recommendations

To create coherence in SEL implementation across schools, you will need a thoughtful rollout plan that considers both local strengths and needs, as well as your districtwide shared vision for SEL. SEL rollout is a long-term process that can often take three to five years to scale across a large district.

You likely will want to use a phased approach to rolling out SEL to all schools. Depending on their needs and sizes, districts have chosen a variety of approaches. Some start with clusters of K-12 schools (high school and "feeder" middle and elementary schools), while others roll out districtwide at specific grade levels.

As with any new initiative, it is often a good idea to begin with schools that are most eager and ready to implement SEL. This might include schools that are already implementing some level of SEL programming or practices, or those that are interested in pioneering the district's SEL efforts. As you work to scale up implementation, create consistent communication across all schools, reinforcing the shared vision and the ultimate goals of SEL efforts. This might include supporting all schools in following districtwide SEL standards or learning goals, but continuing to offer flexibility on the specific approaches or programs they use to support those goals. Here are a few examples of how districts have rolled out SEL to schools: [Austin ISD's Strategic Plan for SEL](#) and



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SEL rollout is a long-term process that can often take three to five years to scale across a large district, often by phasing it into selected schools or grade levels.

[Rollout Timeline](#); [Washoe County 3 Year Implementation Plan – Elementary](#); Metropolitan Nashville Public School's [Three-Year Strategic Plan for High Schools](#).

A commitment to continuous improvement also will help ensure a coherent rollout of SEL implementation. You will want to establish a regular process for monitoring and

reflecting on district- and school-level SEL implementation and progress toward goals. It also is important to provide support and tools to help school teams establish their own continuous improvement processes as they work toward SEL goals. Read more about [practicing SEL continuous improvement](#).

Challenges such as these are common. The good news is that a growing number of districts and schools are systematically solving them and learning as they go. CASEL's [District Resource Center](#) and [Guide to Schoolwide SEL](#) share their insights, guidance, and many of their practical implementation tools. Our [SEL Trends](#) briefs share specific examples of these districts' work. As the field continues to evolve, we will continue to share what we are learning.

