SEL TRENDS

Reorganizing District Central Offices

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Welcome to SEL TRENDS, our series of briefs spotlighting emerging trends in the field of social and emotional learning (SEL). These perspectives are based on our extensive ongoing work with school district partners, notably through our **Collaborating Districts Initiative.** These districts are on the cutting edge of implementing SEL systemically and districtwide. Their work can be an example for other school systems that share the goal of providing all students a well-rounded education that integrates social, emotional, and academic learning.



A growing number of school districts have reorganized their central offices to reflect the need to integrate social and emotional learning (SEL) with academics, broadly defined to include professional learning and teaching and learning. As their work has evolved over the past several years, they have recognized this integration will help them implement SEL more effectively—and ultimately yield maximum benefits for schools and students.

Seven of the 10 school systems in our Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) now house their SEL staff in departments responsible for teaching and learning. One other (Nashville) has been discussing such a move. And those responsible for SEL and academics in Chicago and Washoe County are working more closely together, even if they haven't changed their organization charts (see box).

Where SEL Is Housed

Academics	Teaching and Learning	Professional Learning	Curriculum and Instruction	Academics and School Leadership	College and Career Success	Student Services
✓ Oakland	✓ Atlanta	✓ Anchorage	✓ Cleveland	✓ El Paso	✓ Chicago	✓ Nashville
✓ Sacramento City	✓ Austin					✓ Washoe

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

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The Context

More and more school districts are prioritizing SEL in a systemic way. They're thinking beyond classroom curriculum and climate strategies. They're considering how SEL is implemented throughout the district—how they communicate, how they explicitly teach SEL, how they integrate SEL into academics, and how they promote SEL throughout the school day and beyond.

As evidence mounts of the impact of SEL on students' well-being (including academic success), more school district strategic plans are identifying SEL as a core priority. Districts are embedding this work throughout the students' experience, from their bus ride to school through their time in the classroom, at lunch, on the playground, in after-school programming, at home, and in the community.

Districts are also hiring staff dedicated to SEL. This includes assistant superintendents of SEL and wellness. SEL directors. SEL research and evaluation specialists, and SEL coaches.

Hiring these specialized staff members presents new challenges for districts:

- How do they fit into the overall organizational structure?
- To whom do they report?
- How do they interact with schools?

Historically, SEL was often considered part of student support services. Counselors and social workers were the experts on SEL, which was generally considered a support for students who were at risk or demonstrating difficulty. Today, with growing recognition that SEL benefits *all* students — socially, emotionally, and academically — experienced districts are modifying their approach to staffing. In 2011, when we launched the CDI, most districts located their SEL work in student support services departments. Now, those departments are more than likely to be housed in offices leading academics. Not surprisingly, state education agencies participating in our Collaborating States Initiative are also grappling with these organizational issues.

Cleveland's Approach

In the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, SEL has been located under the chief academic officer from the initiative's start in 2007. "My predecessor, Eric Gordon [now the superintendent], thought that if teachers didn't know how to promote SEL, they wouldn't be able to teach kids. It had to be connected to instruction," says current CAO Michelle Pierre-Farid.

Her department is responsible for curriculum and instruction, professional development, family and community engagement, leadership development, and data/accountability, among others. This organizational structure helps ensure that SEL is front row center in all the work.

Much of the day-to-day SEL support is provided through five "Humanware partners" who work through a principals' supervisors network to support 10-15 schools each. The SEL office also has two people responsible for rapid-response crises and one for mental health. And it works closely with about 30 deans of engagement located in schools and focused intensively on providing SEL support, including helping educators implement the PATHS program, which is used throughout the district.

"It's really hard to be a child in the world today. If there's a gunshot incident, how do you not shut down? If someone makes fun of your outfit, how will you handle it?" asks Pierre-Farid. "These are skills that all people need."

The district is constantly looking for ways to improve. For instance, in response to concerns about low staff morale, this year every professional development session opens and closes with an SEL-related activity. All monthly principals' meetings begin with a team-building exercise. These are part of the district's ongoing commitment to continuous improvement and responding to the needs of the field.

Austin's Approach

Two years ago Austin Independent School District moved its SEL staff into a new Academics and SEL office within the Department of Teaching and Learning. "SEL was on all 130 of our campuses, but with lots of variability. When it's part of the district's larger goal, it becomes a lot more than a Thursday lesson for 30 minutes," says SEL lead Lisa Goodnow, discussing how SEL has become even more central to the district's work.

Her office has multiple responsibilities in addition to SEL: all core content, advanced courses such as Advanced Placement, physical education/health, fine arts, student services (including student discipline), and the district's cross-cutting Whole Child Initiative. In leading the academic and SEL teams, she is part of the superintendent's cabinet.

Nurturing adult SEL is a growing priority. Starting with the leadership team, Goodnow says the district intends to scale best practices into every classroom in three to four years. For example, three signature practices now drive every meeting: a welcoming ritual, engaging content that promotes SEL, and an optimistic close. "It seems very simplistic, but it's powerful," Goodnow says.

The district is focused on the 6 Cs: cultural proficiency, collaboration, connections, creativity, critical thinking, and curiosity. It is giving students more voice and choice, including helping to shape grading policies and formative assessments.

Baltimore's Approach

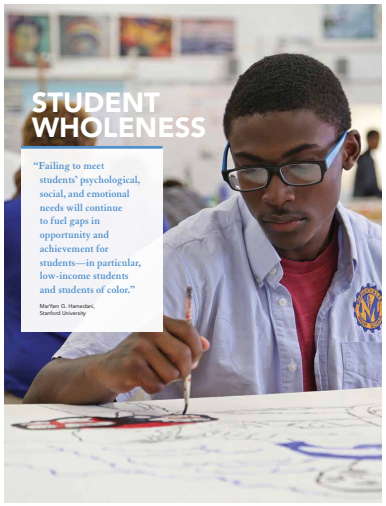
Baltimore City Public Schools is just starting to focus on SEL as a major districtwide priority under a broader "whole child" umbrella. The work will be led by the SEL, Climate, and Wellness team, situated within the Office of Whole Child Services and Support under the chief academic officer. "We see SEL, as well as student wholeness, as cross-cutting and foundational to our work across the system," says Sarah Warren, who leads the Baltimore team.

She says the district is integrating SEL into its collective learning process, making explicit connections between SEL and academic content training and coaching.

Student wholeness is one of the district's three priorities in its new strategic plan, along with literacy and leadership.

"Research bears out what common sense tells us," the plan states. "When students feel safe and supported, are interested in what they are learning and find it purposeful, when their curiosity is engaged and they are motivated, achievement improves. Successful schools provide opportunities for students to explore their interests, with enriching activities both in and out of the classroom. They also create positive cultures where students have the confidence to explore those opportunities."

Specific priorities for the 2017-18 school year include expanding efforts to promote restorative practices. Schools will also adopt the CASEL framework, which focuses on the core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.



Want to learn more?

CASEL's District Resource Center offers extensive guidance and resources to help districts implement changes such as these. The Expertise and Integration modules are especially relevant. They are available at drc.casel.org.

