From Response to Reopening:

State Efforts to Elevate Social and Emotional Learning During the Pandemic

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Schools have drastically changed the way that staff, students, families, and communities engage with one another due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools quickly moved to distance learning and the ways academic, social, and emotional teaching and learning is delivered in an equitable way. As schools begin planning education for fall, states are in the process of developing guidance and support for districts and schools to navigate students' and adults' academic, social, emotional, and physical health, particularly for those most vulnerable and disenfranchised from the system. Leaders, such as CCSSO, AFT, Chiefs for Change, AEI, NYU, Aspen Institute, and the CDC, have provided guidance about varying decision points that school, district, and state leaders will have to take as they reopen schools. While the plans vary in approach and decision points, one thing is clear: student and adult social and emotional well-being and relationships are central to each decision point. And parents agree. Parents' top concern about school building closures has been the lack of social interactions with peers and with the school.[1] Now is the time to rethink how we keep SEL and relationships front and center, as policymakers begin to help shape and redefine what school looks like to create more equitable learning for students and families.[2] This brief focuses on those SEL-related policy actions, providing concrete recommendations based on state examples about ways to support student and adult social and emotional competencies, which are needed now more than ever as we navigate a global pandemic and social unrest.

As states continue to respond to COVID-19 and tremendous social upheaval—and transition from school building closures to re-imagining a new academic year—now is a collective and powerful opportunity to examine what has been done, elevate examples, and identify recommendations with and for states. The purpose of this brief is to learn from what has been accomplished to inform re-entry plans moving forward.[3] In our analysis of all 50 states' COVID-19 response plans, we found that 38 states make reference to SEL or student well-being. States varied in their approaches to incorporating SEL within their COVID-19 response plans, including providing a clear definition of SEL (and distinguishing it from mental health), and disseminating concrete SEL strategies. As states continue to update and modify their approach as the school year comes to a close, repositioning plans as they move into the summer and next school year, this analysis provides the opportunity for states to leverage learning from other states as they plan.

We also wanted to capture the experiences of states and the types of supports they are providing to districts and schools. We sent surveys to CASEL's 45 state contacts and received responses from 37 states. We found that 25 (67.5%) states mentioned that SEL was one of the top priorities apart from COVID-19, and 31 (83.8%) states said SEL has increased in priority since COVID-19 (with the remaining six saying it has stayed the same). Further, 29 (78.4%) respondents mentioned that district requests for SEL had increased since COVID-19. To support districts and schools, states said they engaged in the following top strategies: addressing mental health needs, including trauma and anxiety (89%); supporting adult SEL and mental health (81%); providing/supporting professional learning of SEL (78%); and engaging SEL strategies within distance learning (73%). As states continue to create the conditions for schools and districts, they identify the following top challenges: more trained staff within districts and schools (51%); more trained staff on SEL within the agency (46%); focus on academics (38%); protecting funds available for SEL (38%); and lack of understanding of how to engage SEL strategies within distance learning (38%). See Appendix A for full results.

Based on our review of states' COVID-19 responses related to SEL, we identified the following six recommendations for states to continue their support of SEL as schools close out this school year, transition to the summer, and prepare for the fall.

1. **Communicate SEL as Important for All Students and Adults.** States recognize the importance of attending to the SEL of all students and adults in their COVID-19 responses, particularly for those who are the most vulnerable and have been disenfranchised. State chiefs, such as those from Illinois and Michigan, have identified the well-being of students and adults as a top priority in their current support. Other states, such as Washington and Florida, have turned to social media to communicate and provide support to educators, students, and families, as a way to ensure we are showing compassion for each other. Ohio has lifted student voice through Twitter and live learning platforms to gain their perspectives on their current experiences and reentry next year. North Carolina's reopening task force identified SEL as a top priority and developed a one-pager that provided an overview of support and resources on their SEL efforts.

2. Define and Coordinate SEL and Mental Health Supports.
States recognize that enhancing SEL and overall well-being is complex work, that students will have varied needs, and that schools won't be able to do this work alone, needing to bring in the entire community. In the COVID-19 response plans, we included those that clearly defined SEL as not only a Tier 1, or universal, strategy for all students and adults, but also as a preventive approach to facilitate positive mental health, recognizing that some may need additional mental health support. States such as Indiana and Wisconsin linked to their SEL competencies within their COVID-19 response plans, defining what students should know and be able to do developmentally. Kansas intentionally connects SEL as a tier one approach through their resource map, which provides a continuum of support for all students to address online relationships, skills for online learning, and responding to stress and crisis. In North Carolina, SEL and mental health supports are viewed as an integrated continuum within an MTSS framework. Through collaboration with Project AWARE sites, North Carolina built a COVID-19 SEL and Crisis Response website. New Jersey, Kentucky, and California provide strategies for students and school communities to deal with loss and grief. Ohio and Oregon provide strategies to support all youth (e.g., special education, LGBTQ, foster home, and homelessness) during this time.

3. Disseminate SEL Practices in the Time of the Pandemic.
States use a variety of tools and resources for educators, families, and students to engage in SEL practices during distance learning, helping students develop the skills they need to thrive in school and life, and manage the stress and impact of the pandemic. States such as Minnesota and Wisconsin leverage the power of previously developed SEL tools and resources.[4] North Carolina is encouraging districts and schools to take a systemic approach to SEL, connecting to other related efforts such as MTSS, whole child, and Career and Technical Education (CTE). New Mexico, in its Remote Learning guidance, ensures that teachers reflect on the cultures and values from the families of the students they serve as they support student social and emotional needs. Colorado, Louisiana, and New Hampshire also provide strategies to promote well-being and to engage in meaningful relationships by building upon activities through remote and in-person learning. The continuous learning plans of West Virginia, Illinois, and Oregon provide strategies for early learning, late elementary, middle school, and high school teachers to engage with their students in developmentally appropriate ways.

4. Provide Professional Learning and Support for Adult SEL Competencies, Capacities, and Wellness. States recognize the toll the pandemic has on their own staff, educators, and families, and the new roles adults will need to continue to adopt as we move from school building closures to reentry. In states' COVID-19 response plans, they provide opportunities for adults to continue to develop their own competencies and capacities to implement SEL and engage in self-care and wellness activities. States such as Indiana, Michigan, and Washington leveraged previously developed free SEL online professional learning modules. Nevada is developing a SEAD (Social, Emotional, and Academic Development) Center to provide a free virtual space for educators to access an array of SEL supports. States such as Vermont and Utah provide self-care strategies in their response pages, encouraging educators to take time to tend to their own needs. Delaware has hosted weekly online sessions for educators and families to practice mindfulness-based stress reduction while discussing the benefits of social and emotional learning for building resilience, facilitating engagement, and fostering school achievement. New York provides strategies to work remotely and as a virtual team. Wisconsin offers community of practice calls to support student mental health and social and emotional development during the pandemic. Similarly, Florida is hosting a webinar series to support mental health and well-being through their healthy schools educators network.

5. Leverage Data for Continuous Improvement. States have been collecting or plan to collect data on student, staff, and family experiences of school building closures and their social and emotional needs (e.g., competencies; general feelings and concerns; management of anxieties, grief and loss; and social supports) as they begin to think about reentry. They recognize we cannot only include academic metrics (and potential unintended consequences of focusing only on those measures). We also need to understand the social and emotional needs of students and staff. Massachusetts' remote learning guidance document suggests that schools and districts use data to understand the basic foundational needs (e.g., SEL) of their students and families. North Carolina's Guidance for Remote Learning encourages educators to collect data on student academic, social, and emotional needs in grading policy, and their SEL and Crisis Response website provides guidance on needs assessment and resource mapping. Oklahoma's district and staff readiness assessment begins by asking staff about their feelings about

distance learning and their plans. California supported the development of the <u>Learning from Home Survey</u> to assess students' social and emotional wellness and connectedness to school. Other states consider how SEL fits within current waivers related to accountability. For example, in Kansas' applications to waive attendance requirements and <u>move toward e-learning,</u> districts must submit a continuous learning plan that includes how SEL will be included in their plans.

6. **Encourage Use of Funds.** States are also considering innovative ways to encourage use of federal funding to support student and adult SEL, particularly the CARES funding (see <u>letter</u> from CASEL and Committee for Children on ways to use federal funds to support SEL). For example, Indiana provides a <u>one-pager</u> on CARES funding that demonstrates suggested uses of funds to support SEL, such as support groups for educators, increased student services staff, and professional development for SEL and trauma. Connecticut's Commissioner released a <u>white paper</u> outlining the need to rethink the policies and practices currently in place and their relationship to access and equity, and the need to bolster greater social and emotional support for all students.

These six recommendations point to an overarching need across the nation to rethink schools and SEL supports as we enter a new era of public education and address social, emotional, and academic learning. Oklahoma (in their <u>Return to Learn</u> framework) and Indiana (in their <u>Reentry Guidance and Roadmap for SEL Reentry</u>) explicitly call out SEL as a key component of their return and reentry tools. States are in the process of ensuring that as schools think about their operations, public health, equity concerns, and academic learning, social and emotional development and needs of students and adults are attended to.

Introduction

State education agencies (SEAs) and other state leaders have made swift and decisive shifts in their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. These include their distance learning guidance and continuation plans to meet the physical, academic, and social and emotional needs of staff and students in innovative and equitable ways.[5] Response plans incorporate multiple efforts, including equitable technology access and digital engagement practices, meal provision, assessment, finance, physical safety, diverse student support (e.g., special education, gifted, and English Language Learners), remote teacher professional learning and, of course, academic learning.[6] Some states and organizations are calling for re-entry plans to take even bolder actions.[7] In our view, given the nature of the COVID-19 crisis, social and emotional development, mental health, and wellness are among some of the critical factors states are currently addressing as they plan for reentry.

States that emphasize, prioritize, or otherwise value social and emotional development in their COVID-19 response plans are likely to have greater success than those that do not. We set out to dig deeper into how states are including SEL within their plans, recognizing that this analysis is a snapshot as states are constantly updating their responses based on the best science and needs of their stakeholders.[8] As of early May 2020, we found that plans across 38 states address student well-being, inclusive of SEL and/or mental health to varying degrees. These states explicitly recognize the need for bolstered SEL support in the face of the pandemic and eventual reentry. In this brief, we highlight state examples through recommendations on ways states might continue to create the conditions for districts and schools to support SEL as students maintain learning now, through the summer, and into the next academic year.

> "Every era of equity progress has come on the heels of social upheaval, when people of conscience joined together to rebuff injustice and inequality."
>
> Linda Darling-Hammond
> President and CEO, Learning Policy Institute

Defining SEL

CASEL defines SEL as the processes through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. When we implement evidence-based SEL approaches, we provide all individuals an opportunity to develop the competencies, skills, and attitudes that can help them better monitor and manage their own emotions, form positive relationships, and maintain positive mental health and well-being—learning strategies to navigate the world around them in a healthy way.[9] SEL plays an important role in shaping how we navigate our lives, making it particularly important for individuals to be able to leverage the power of SEL to manage the personal and collective experiences during the pandemic and the social unrest..

During this time of physical distance combined with social unrest due to racial inequities, we are asking students and adults to demonstrate new ways of engaging and interacting. We are asking them to show compassion and empathy for others by staying home so others do not get sick and by understanding others' experience with unjust systems (social awareness); to maintain meaningful relationships with their teachers, families, and peers through Zoom, Google Hangouts, and other video chat and social media outlets; to collectively problem-solve (relationship skills); to make daily choices to stay motivated and engaged with learning and assignments; to decide to be civically engaged (responsible decision-making); to manage their own stressors and anxiety in ways that are new or potentially uncomfortable (self-management); and to reflect on their own emotions, strengths and identities (self-awareness). In other words, we are asking students and adults to further exercise their social and emotional competencies—stretching those that we may never have thought we had or would need to use.

SEL and a Mental Health Continuum

States, districts, and schools are looking to support the mental health and well-being of their young people and at times can use the terms SEL and mental health interchangeably, although they are distinct.[10] Mental health supports fall on a continuum of care, or a tiered system of evidence-based supports, ranging from universal strategies that promote strengths and prevent risks (Tier 1), to targeted or early interventions for students who have been or might be exposed to risk factors (Tier 2), and finally to intensive treatment and intervention supports (Tier 3). Where does SEL fit in this continuum of practices, particularly as students and adults may experience the pandemic

as a traumatic event? Ideally, SEL programming and practices should be provided and aligned across all three service tiers because promoting the social and emotional competencies of all children and youth in developmentally and culturally appropriate ways can be beneficial.

It is critically important to position evidence-based SEL programming and practices as a universal, Tier 1 support because of how it can help to cultivate positive development, resiliency, and well-being, with long-lasting outcomes for all young people.[11] SEL is an indispensable part of promoting mental health and wellness. It helps to support young people in developing protective factors, such as social connectedness, problem-solving skills, and healthy communication, in addition to helping to cultivate skills to identify and regulate emotions and employ coping skills in stressful situations.[12] These are all important considerations in helping to protect against mental health risk factors that could develop into serious conditions needing higher care. Clearly, it is beneficial to enhance these competencies and provide these supports to children who are in need of early intervention or treatment services.

We also know that the pandemic has caused isolation, economic hardship, and stress, creating a heightened risk for young people and adults to experience trauma.[13] Although a traumatic experience, or set of experiences, is not necessarily associated with mental health problems, the impact of trauma can hinder academic success and lead to social, emotional, and behavioral challenges.[14] Schools and school systems must be proactive in addressing trauma. SEL can be a part of a trauma-informed learning environment because of how it can be used to foster self-regulation, coping skills, and other protective factors that can mitigate the adverse effects of trauma.[15] When these practices are put into place for all students, their strengths can be promoted, and there is more opportunity to mitigate the development of mental and behavioral health problems.

Recommendations to Move SEL from Response to COVID-19 to Reopening

To understand how SEAs are promoting SEL during the transition of school building closures and as they begin to think about reentry, our team reviewed state COVID-19 response pages and resources. As we considered states' responses to COVID-19, we examined how states used language that prioritized SEL (i.e., by explicitly calling out SEL or social and emotional well-being and distinguishing it from mental health) and how plans or guidance included promising SEL strategies (i.e., concrete strategies or recommendations to support SEL). At the time of our review of all 50 states in early May 2020, we found that 38 states included SEL in their COVID-19 response. Recognizing that states are continually updating and modifying their responses, we found that states varied in how they included SEL, either through continuation or distance learning plans, guidance, or posted resources.

We also wanted to know the experiences of states and the types of supports they provide to districts during this time. Therefore, we sent surveys to CASEL's 45 state contacts and received responses from 37 states. We found that 25 (67.5%) states mentioned that SEL was one of the top priorities apart from COVID-19, and 31 (83.8%) states rated that SEL has increased in priority since COVID-19 (with the remaining six saying it has stayed the same). Further, 29 (78.4%) respondents mentioned that districts increased their requests for SEL since COVID-19. To support districts and schools, states said they engaged in the following top strategies: addressing mental health needs, including trauma and anxiety (89%); supporting adult SEL and mental health (81%); providing/supporting professional learning of SEL (78%); and engaging SEL strategies within distance learning (73%). As states continue to create the conditions for schools and districts, they identify the following top challenges: more trained staff within districts and schools (51%); more trained staff on SEL within the agency (46%); focus on academics (38%); protecting funds available for SEL (38%); and a lack of understanding of how to engage SEL strategies within distance learning (38%). See Appendix A for full results.

Based on our review of state COVID-19 responses related to SEL, we identified six concrete recommendations for how states can leverage their COVID-19 responses as states begin to prepare for reentry. The recommendations are discussed below.

1. Communicate SEL as Important for All Students and Adults

The importance of SEL right now and in the future is a key message that districts and schools need to hear. Given the diverse demands that will be placed on districts and schools and the need to come together as a community and heal from a pandemic and social unrest, districts and schools will need direction from the SEA about what leaders see as top priorities for educators. It will be particularly important, as states consider

how to address what some educators have described as "the COVID-19 slide," that they communicate SEL as a key component for all students to fully engage in academic learning, and to know SEL is not considered something separate, but rather a key ingredient to reengage in learning. States have developed multiple strategies to communicate the importance of SEL as districts and schools address the needs of their students, staff, and families.

> "With our Curriculum and Instruction office, we streamlined the sharing of best practice for SEL across departments to disseminate to districts. It is exciting to see C&I putting SEL strategies by grade level and content area into their reentry guidance!"
>
> SEL lead, Oklahoma Department of Education

State chiefs communicate the importance of SEL. Educators and families know something is important when state chiefs communicate about it. State Superintendent Dr. Carmen Ayala of Illinois offered a "dear colleague" letter that not only identifies the importance of students' social and emotional health, but also welcomes and invites new opportunities for instruction and creativity with compassion. A survey is embedded seeking feedback and ideas from students (first), families, and educators. In North Carolina, Eric Davis, chairman of the State Board of Education issued a statement that specifically acknowledges educators and their support of social and emotional well-being, as well as the importance of maintaining critical connections with students, particularly for students who are most vulnerable.

States use social media to provide continued support to educators, families, and students across their states. Social media provide a great opportunity to provide one-way and even two-way communication between the state and educators, families, and students. The Maine State Commissioner of Education, Pender Makin, used social media to post a message to remind Maine educators, students, and families about the value of relationships and self-care, empathy, and inclusivity. Washington uses a dedicated YouTube Channel, organized by topic areas, that includes encouraging messages of connectivity and support for educators. California uses Facebook Live sessions and Twitter to engage educators, parents and guardians, and students in conversations about social and mental health support and self-care for caregivers, among a host of other topics. Ohio has elevated student voice through Twitter and live learning platforms to gain their perspectives on their current experiences and reentry next year.

States use their websites and guidance documents to communicate SEL strategies. States have increasingly developed web pages and other forms of guidance on how to implement high-quality SEL (30 states to date[16]) and are leveraging those in their COVID-19 response. The Massachusetts Commissioner Jeff Riley created three principles in the state's distance learning plan: promote the safety and well-being of students, families, and staff (including social-emotional and mental health needs); prioritize equity considerations; and maintain connection between staff, students, and families. Michigan prioritized SEL as a key component in the state COVID-19 website, which provides an extensive series of resources and strategies to support student and adult social and emotional development and mental health. North Carolina developed a one-pager that provides an overview of support and resources for the state's SEL efforts. Virginia published Virginia Learns Anywhere, a report from their continuity task force that also prioritizes and discusses the importance of supporting the social and emotional needs of students first and foremost, and provides strategies that educators and families can use, recognizing that now is the time to create equitable opportunities for all students to receive the supports they need. Maryland Together is Maryland's recovery plan, based on research and the collective wisdom of educational leaders from across the state, with mental and emotional well-being included in the six research categories spotlighted by the plan and communicated to organize the work moving forward.

2. Define and Coordinate SEL and Mental Health Supports

States, districts, schools, and national organizations have elevated the overall well-being of students and adults, including physical health, mental health, social and emotional development, and academic learning, identifying supports for those who are struggling the most and navigating current social unrest. While all are interrelated and important for the overall success of students and adults, it is important for state leaders to ensure support exists for each component. In their COVID-19 responses, some states have made concerted efforts to clearly define SEL as a Tier 1 approach aligned within a system of support that promotes mental health and well-being. As states consider defining and distinguishing SEL and mental health supports, it will be important for states to work with multiple agencies and stakeholders, bringing in community support so the most vulnerable students have the academic, social, emotional,

physical health, and mental health support they need as we return to school with potential ongoing distance learning and intermittent closures.[17]

> "We have been providing 'mental wellness' briefs for specific populations (i.e. early learners, English Language Learners, parents) that include SEL resources. We share SEL, mental wellness, and other resources with our Specialized Instructional Support Personnel school partners in a monthly newsletter."
>
> SEL lead, Virginia Department of Education

States define what they mean by social and emotional learning through SEL standards or competencies. Currently, 18 states have SEL standards and/or competencies defining what students should know and be able to do from prekindergarten through Grade 12 (sometimes adulthood).[18] For example, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin elevated their SEL competencies (or career-ready skills for PA) to help educators and families know what skills, by grade band, they could help students develop during distance learning.

States provide resources that help coordinate ongoing universal SEL programming with mental health supports. States recognize the need to help all students and adults develop social and emotional competencies in safe and supportive learning environments, including others who will need more intensive support. On its Mental Health, SEL, Trauma & Safety Online Training Materials page, Wisconsin provides resources and strategies that relate to each component of student wellness, implying the distinct yet interrelated aspects of student wellness supports. Similarly, Arizona organizes a resource bank that differentiates between SEL and mental health information, reinforcing the interconnection of both for student well-being. In North Carolina, SEL and mental health supports are viewed as an integrated continuum within an MTSS framework. Through collaboration with Project AWARE sites, North Carolina built a COVID-19 SEL and Crisis Response website. Washington's Continuous Learning Plan includes an SEL section that provides general SEL practices, offers strategies to connect with students in need of bolstered support—including resources for when a crisis arises—and promotes counseling services and trauma supports for educators. As key members of the continuous learning taskforce, the Kansas MTSS team created a Social Emotional and Behavioral Recommendations for Continuous

Learning document that provides a resource map to address online relationships, skills for online learning (which includes free online SEL lessons), and responding to stress and crisis. North Carolina is encouraging districts and schools to take a systemic approach to SEL, connecting to other related efforts, such as MTSS, whole child, and CTE.

States provide concrete strategies for how to support students in more immediate need. State plans often include guidance about the role of mental health supports that students will need to process the current, future, and inequitable effects of the pandemic. Each approach acknowledges the importance of schools partnering and working more closely with mental and behavioral health centers, recognizing that schools cannot do this work alone. West Virginia's Remote Learning Framework for COVID-19 includes a counseling subsection that details how counselors will continue to provide social and emotional support and prioritize social and emotional lessons. Kentucky's school counseling response provides strategies for students to deal with loss and grief and offers resources for virtual school counseling. New Jersey provides a hotline that individuals can use if they have a mental health concern or if a student is in crisis. Similarly, Delaware is offering SEL-specific resources with programming links and collaborating with community partners to provide a mental health support hotline for youth in crisis. All districts pivoted to offer virtual student supports with some even creating online clinics, peer support platforms, and regular chats for parent support and engagement. New Mexico created an app that allows students to connect to a mental health professional if they are in need. As North Dakota plans for reentry, they created Smart Restart Guidance with questions for school and district leaders to consider when implementing systemic SEL, including how they will coordinate with community mental and behavioral health centers.

3. Disseminate SEL Practices in the Time of the Pandemic

Ensuring that students feel safe, connected, and inspired through learning has always been a key component of student success. Now, providing students and adults opportunities to effectively cope and manage the impact of the pandemic, as well as having discussions about the inequities, is particularly important. States, in partnership with educators and stakeholders, have increasingly supported SEL practices and approaches.[19] While states are encouraging continued use of those strategies in their COVID-19 response plans (e.g. Minnesota and Wisconsin), some have gone beyond upholding prior SEL practices to recommend approaches in the context of the

pandemic, providing strategies for other states to use now and in their reentry plans. Iowa is providing schools with resources like the Return-to-Learn Social-Emotional-Behavioral Health Resources so that schools have tools for connecting with staff, students, and their families to support social, emotional, and behavioral health. As states identify SEL practices in the time of the pandemic, it continues to be important for them to bring in families, students, and educators to keep pace with needs and those practices that are working for different groups of students, as there is not one singular approach to support student or adult social and emotional development, particularly in the current environment.

> "Indiana has created comprehensive resources to meet student and family needs. We created a database of resources, provided continuous learning plans that include SEL, instituted one-hour professional development webinars, and created a Science of Happiness course for secondary students. It has been wonderful to see our SEL team come together to support students and families during this time!"
>
> SEL lead, Indiana Department of Education

States provide general practices that address student social and emotional development and promote relationships. Students need the opportunities to develop and apply their social and emotional competencies in multiple contexts and contents (including civic engagement and public health). This need makes it important to engage in practices that promote SEL throughout the day (virtually and in-person) and create policy mechanisms (e.g., looping, small mentored groups) that keep relationships central.[20] North Carolina is encouraging districts and schools to take a systemic approach to SEL, connecting to other related efforts, such as MTSS, whole child, and CTE. Both the Colorado Student and Staff Wellness resources and Minnesota's School Climate During Distance Learning page offer strategies to connect and promote relationships virtually, support social and emotional needs, and create a sense of belonging. Ohio provides examples of activities for aiding in students' need for closure on relationships and traditions, such as classroom parties and award ceremonies that allow for reflection on the past year and farewells with friends,

teachers and staff. Ohio also offers a document for families listing strategies to support their child's social, emotional, and behavioral health, such as setting expectations, encouraging expressive activities, and focusing on the positive, among others. New Mexico and Oregon anchor their remote learning in understanding the social and emotional needs of students through an equity lens, ensuring that teachers reflect on the cultures and values of the families of the students they serve. The New Hampshire Remote Support document offers links and suggestions for student engagement that are relevant to adolescence and incorporate popular culture and learning. Kentucky has established a guide for student and staff wellness as schools reopen, with the goal of all students feeling supported and having a sense of hope and renewal.

States connect SEL to academics. Research findings have demonstrated the link between academic, social, and emotional learning, making it important to incorporate SEL practices within academic instruction.[21] Kansas' Continuous Learning Task Force Guidance connects SEL as a key component for a student's school day. It provides "daily learning time" suggestions and includes SEL as a fundamental component for all grade bands at the end of each daily learning time. It also suggests practices like "voice and choice" to further support student social and emotional development, as well as recommendations for focusing on SEL across the various content areas.

States provide explicit SEL practices to help all students thrive in school and life, in addition to managing the stress and trauma of the pandemic. Individuals do not learn social and emotional skills in isolation. They need opportunities to learn and apply social and emotional skills, particularly those skills needed to navigate their experiences with the pandemic and engage civically in a way that is meaningful to them.[22] Indiana's Continuous Learning Guidance includes SEL throughout. Specifically, their guidelines include social and emotional competencies that students need to manage during the pandemic, suggestions to continue to use SEL curriculum and cross-curricular integration, and the state's SEL lesson plans to facilitate development of seven SEL competencies. As North Dakota plans for reentry, the state created Smart Restart Guidance, which provides specific questions for district and school leaders to consider when selecting an SEL curriculum, embedding the curriculum within academics, and creating a positive learning environment.

States provide supports for SEL by grade band. Students and adults develop their social and emotional competencies over time,[23] making it important for states to provide developmental activities for students. West Virginia's Remote Learning Framework for COVID-19 provides recommendations for educators to engage with students by grade band (early learning, late elementary, middle school, and high school). In each grade band, the state identifies developmentally appropriate social and emotional strategies. Illinois' Remote Learning Recommendations includes a section dedicated to SEL and relationships that identifies developmentally appropriate strategies (i.e., by grade band). Oklahoma spotlights strategies in their distance learning plan addressing typical reactions students may have toward the pandemic by grade level.

States provide concrete SEL recommendations for diverse student learners (e.g., ELL, gifted, and special education). States have made concerted efforts to provide support for all students during school building closures. West Virginia and Illinois offer recommendations for how to support students in special education. West Virginia's Remote Learning Framework for COVID-19 provides social and emotional considerations for special education students and strategies to address their social and emotional skills in the context of COVID-19 challenges. Illinois' Remote Learning Recommendations make explicit recommendations to integrate SEL activities for students with IEPs. Maryland highlights the need for social and emotional well-being, as well as the voice of the family in the decision-making and learning process, with details on considerations for students with special needs. Social and emotional support for gifted learners is a special consideration in Minnesota, where resources point to the need for emotional support for children who have rapid processing cycles, often associated with the need for self-management.

4. Provide Professional Learning and Support for Adult SEL Competencies, Capacities, and Wellness

States have recognized that the pandemic and tremendous social upheaval have influenced not only students but adults—administrators, teachers, support staff, out of school time providers, and families—who are impacted by school building closures, the move to distance learning, and concerns about public health and injustices. To be effective supports, adults need time and space to process their own emotions, monitor their classrooms and personal relationships, and create opportunities to engage more fully with their students' families and their joint efforts to support student development. To do this, states are providing resources and support for educators to continue to engage in professional learning related to SEL and offering insights for educators' own well-being.

States offer opportunities for professional learning. In the past few years, states have increased the number of free online professional learning opportunities for teachers to engage in SEL, and are also encouraging educators to benefit from these professional learning experiences during the COVID-19 crisis. These modules often focus on building adults' capacities to support student SEL, as well as offer opportunities to reflect and build their own social and emotional competencies. For example, the Michigan COVID-19 response page recommends educators complete the state's accessible online modules focused on introduction to SEL, systemic SEL, and connecting SEL and trauma. These modules and others are freely accessible through the Michigan CARES website. Washington's Continuous Learning Plan provides guidance to administrators as they develop professional learning plans for educators. Although not in Washington's plan, administrators can then encourage educators to take the free online modules to develop strategies to support student social and emotional development. Nevada is offering three modes of adult SEL professional learning: (1) a-synchronous SEL modules, (2) virtual team coaching, and (3) the new SEAD center, a free virtual space for educators to access an array of SEL supports (e.g., coaching, advising, resources, guest speakers, COP, action planning, implementation assistance, etc.) from June 1 to December 31, 2020. Through its statewide leaders network, Florida is facilitating a weekly Healthy Schools in Action...Continuing the Conversation webinar series hosted by the Comprehensive Health Education team. Indiana offers a COVID resource database sortable by topic and grade level, including a segment devoted specifically to SEL, enhanced and expanded through a series of videos and self-paced learning tools.

> "In an effort to support social emotional learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the New York State Education Department is working with stakeholders in every corner of the state to offer professional learning opportunities aimed at increasing regional capacity for SEL initiatives. As we look ahead to what the reopening of schools will entail,

> the Office of Student Support Services is supporting the efforts of the Board of Regents and Department's reopening task force to assist with integrating SEL as a critical priority in this endeavor. The task force will gather input from district superintendents, local superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, and stakeholders from a cross section of disciplines to ensure the health, safety, and educational needs of our children are being considered as reopening plans are developed."
>
> SEL lead, New York State Department of Education

Although not necessarily a part of a COVID-19 response, New Jersey is poised to release a series of modules on each of the five core SEL competencies, and Tennessee has free online modules related to teaching practices that promote social, emotional, and academic development.

States promote educators' own well-being. Adult SEL and the well-being of staff is top-of-mind for many states that want to ensure that all adults who work with students are provided the technical, as well as emotional support they need to be successful. States are providing multiple tools and resources for adults to attune to their own social and emotional competencies and to engage in self-care strategies. Vermont published Educator Resilience: Tips on Self-Care in the Time of COVID-19, which includes emotional support guidance for both teachers and administrators. Rhode Island notes the importance of taking care of ourselves during this time and links to a recommended video on educator self-care, while Utah provides strategies on self-care in both English and Spanish. As part of their COVID-19 response webpage, New York includes strategies for adult self-care, but also ways to work remotely and as a team during this pandemic, guiding adults to collaborate, demonstrate teamwork, and utilize vital social and emotional competencies. Wisconsin offers community of practice calls to support student mental health and social and emotional development during the pandemic.

5. Leverage Data for Continuous Improvement

During this time of rapid innovation and quick action, an ongoing continuous improvement process will help ensure that SEL efforts meet the needs of all students, including those from historically marginalized groups. This includes collecting and reflecting on data that elevates the perspectives of students and families, understanding student social and emotional competencies and needs, identifying and addressing inequities and challenges, and building upon successes to continuously improve support to students, families, and staff. As states consider new and innovative approaches to assessment and accountability, they will want to help ease the anxiety and stress that can come with high-stakes assessments.[24] They may also consider adding COVID-19-specific questions or other feedback loops to climate surveys and other questionnaires to capture and inform policymakers in ongoing improvement cycles.[25] Finally, they will want to consider innovative ways to more intentionally assess student social and emotional competencies, SEL practices, and school climate for continuous improvement.[26]

> "We have seen an increase in the focus on adult SEL and caring for our staff so they in turn can effectively meet the needs of students and families. This has primarily occurred through virtual professional learning, sharing resources, supporting districts with selecting tools for measuring SEL and behavior in order to effectively align resources and supports."
>
> SEL lead, Nebraska Department of Education

States can encourage the use of data to better understand the experiences of students and adults. For SEL data, we believe it is critical to define student assets, strengths, and overall viewpoints. In the current crisis, states are collecting data on student, staff, and family perspectives and needs. California supported the development of the Learning from Home Survey to assess students' social and emotional wellness and connectedness to school. The survey is free for the entire nation. Colorado conducted a school district needs inventory and found that one of the top concerns for districts was providing emotional support for students. Louisiana's survey findings from 192 school systems illuminate the significant challenges that remain in ensuring equitable education for all students, now and in the future, and New Jersey's survey found the need for more social interaction and concerns about inequities in learning experiences, in addition to positive things that have

occurred across the state. Oklahoma, Florida, and New York City have developed surveys about perceptions of safety, quality of education, and response, and Tennessee collected information to prioritize funding and resources from the CARES Act based on constituent concerns. North Carolina's SEL and Crisis Response website provides guidance on needs assessment and resource mapping as a core component of using data to support SEL efforts.

States can leverage grading and accountability data.
States can encourage collecting data on the social and emotional needs of students and staff through formal and informal data collection processes.[27] For example, North Carolina in their Guidance for Remote Learning encourages educators across grade spans (elementary school, middle school, and high school) to identify student social and emotional strengths and needs, along with their academic skills. As states consider collecting and using accountability data, it will be critical to consider the influence of those measures currently on students' and staff members' emotional state and how to use those data to promote health and growth.

States can leverage waivers and flexibility to be more inclusive of SEL in school improvement processes. States should consider the influence of multiple policies on student and adult well-being. For example, accountability measures that place pressure on schools in need of improvement may have the opposite effect. States can provide waivers and flexibility to ensure that the focus is on healing and well-being as the first step toward rebuilding and renewing school culture. In Kansas' applications to waive attendance requirements for the remainder of 2020 and move toward e-learning, districts must submit a continuous learning plan that includes how SEL will be included. As Kansas prepares for the next school year and the potential of use of e-learning throughout the year (so as not to have to waive instructional hours), the Commissioner decided that the best instructional method would be a competency-based model organized by grade bands. The model includes both academic content and social and emotional competencies. The New York Board of Regents issued emergency regulations that waive any new schools from additional school improvement designations, stating the pandemic requires creativity and flexibility to ease the burden on educators.

6. Encourage Use of Funds

One way of understanding the value of SEL to states is through an analysis of how they encourage the use of funds to distribute support and resources. As state leaders are providing broader flexibility in how districts will reopen,[28] states are suggesting that districts use financial resources to support SEL through SEL professional learning, SEL programs and practices, and access to meaningful relationships, as well as addressing the inequities revealed by the digital divide. As states act upon the availability of waivers and collection of data (through formal and informal means), they need to consider several key decision points. When states encourage use of funds, they should be aware of existing inequities and ensure necessary resources are provided so that students can apply their own lived experiences, culture, and contexts, strengthening the skills and competencies they need to thrive in school, work, and life.

States leveraging funds from the CARES Act. Multiple states have highlighted the allowable use of resources for mental health and social and emotional support within the CARES Act, which includes the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund ($13.5 billion for states and districts), and the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEERF). The FAQs for the GEERF specifically identify social-emotional support as an allowable cost.

States can use ESSER funds flexibly (including allowable uses under title funds in ESSA). Colorado, Michigan, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, among others, are providing guidance to districts about allowable uses of funds. To support these efforts, CASEL and Committee for Children developed a summary of existing ESSA programs that can be used to support social and emotional competency development, such as in Title I, Parts A and C; Title II, Part A; and Title IV, Parts A and B. To further illustrate the use of CARES funding, Indiana's State Superintendent issued a memo to encourage districts to observe the flexible use of federal funds, including support for SEL. Indiana also provides a one-pager that demonstrates suggested uses of funds to support SEL, such as support groups for educators, increased student services staff, and professional development for SEL and trauma. Tennessee specifically encourages positive and supportive relationships with and for migratory students and their families through an FAQ on Title I, Part C resources, as well as FAQs concerning resources related to supportive relationships for children experiencing homelessness.

GEERF is extremely flexible and can be combined with other program funds. Alaska's Commissioner produced a memo to superintendents that draws attention to the fact that the GEERF and ESSER can explicitly be used for social and emotional support. These states and others are acknowledging this is an unprecedented time to demonstrate a commitment to what stakeholders are declaring they need: SEL support and the grace to recover. Accessing the flexibilities afforded to states right now, bold steps are being taken to maximize these resources in direct response to the needs of our youth.

States explicitly connect funding and resources to equity and SEL. States are encouraging federal funding to promote equitable access to learning and supporting those students who have typically been disenfranchised. Connecticut's Commissioner of Education released a white paper outlining the alignment between access and advocacy in the new era, with a particular emphasis on utilizing resources for the support of SEL and equity. The statement declares, "Stimulus funding is available to reimburse for equitable distribution of learning materials, tutorial services to combat learning loss, professional learning and support for educators whose jobs changed overnight, and social emotional supports for students who are collectively experiencing daily trauma." Illinois issued a guidance letter to district superintendents to maximize flexibility among these federal funds to "...include mental health services and supports, summer and extended learning opportunities, technology, meals, and activities to address the needs of students of color, low-income students, homeless students, or youth in care who have been affected by COVID-19."

Moving Toward Reopening

As a nation, we are experiencing a deep need to feel connected with one another. As schools, restaurants, faith-based organizations, and community gatherings have been paused, and as we slowly reopen, we all have been and will continue to be challenged to manage ourselves in new contexts, build relationships in new ways of interacting and being, and make good decisions about our own and others' physical and mental health—making systemic SEL at the state, district, and school levels more important now than ever. And states agree. We found 38 states that note the urgency of attuning to the social and emotional needs of students and adults as school building closures occurred, preparing for transitions in the summer and into the new academic school year—centering on healing, empathy and compassion, and collective resolve.

We know that states, districts, and schools need additional support and guidance on how to extend and enhance student and social and emotional development in the new ways of learning and interacting.[29] Through the CASEL Collaborating States Initiative, a community of practice of states focused on SEL policy, we learned the power of states learning and sharing together. In our analysis of state responses to COVID-19, we found that states are communicating in innovative ways to support SEL, defining SEL within a system of tiered supports, providing strategies to support SEL in virtual learning environments, encouraging adults to take care of themselves, using data, and leveraging funding and other policy mechanisms to ensure students and adults get the support they need.

As states consider the different models and structures for reopening schools[30]—including planning for potential disruptions in the near- and long-terms—relationships, well-being, and holistic development should be central in the decision-making process, using data, including student, family, and staff perspectives, to continuously improve upon what states are doing. We are committed to providing guidance and support to all 50 states and territories that want to enhance the social, emotional, and academic learning of all students in their districts and schools.

Appendix A—Survey Findings

CASEL sent surveys to our 45 states contacts. The goal of the survey was to better understand SEL as a priority within their state—from their perspective—and the strategies they are using to support districts and schools. States typically have multiple team members as part of their SEL initiative within the state department of education, and at times, are led by regional offices. We sent the state survey to the designated state leads for each state, and, in some states, to multiple leads. We received responses from 37 states, and we present the analysis below.

Figure 1. Survey respondents' SEL roles

The majority of state respondents were SEL leads or team members at the SEA. One participant helped to lead the SEL work across the state but was not with the state department.

Figure 2. Understanding the importance of SEL in respondents' state agency prior to COVID-19

The majority of states (67%) rated SEL as the top or one of the top priorities of the SEA prior to COVID-19, whereas 33% of states rated SEL as only a somewhat or a low priority.
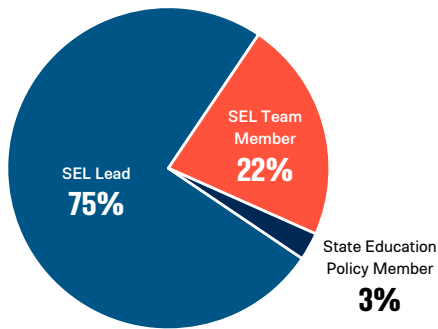

Figure 3. Understanding the importance of SEL in respondents' state agency as a response to COVID-19

The majority of states (84%) responded that SEL increased in importance at the state agency as a response to COVID-19, with only 16% noting it stayed the same (none reported a decrease in priority).

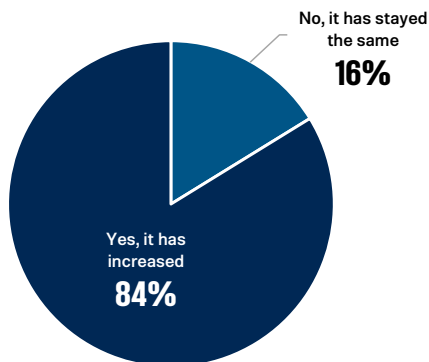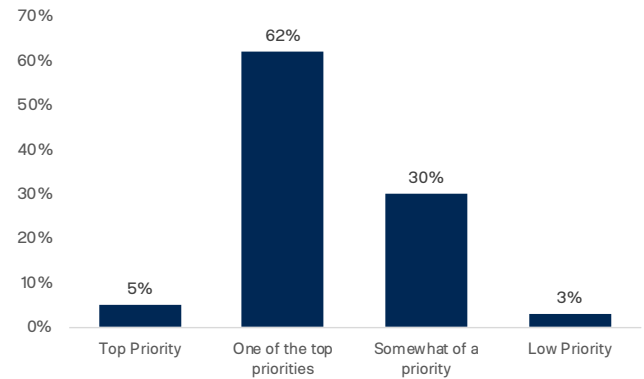### Figure 4. Changes in district-based SEL requests since COVID-19

The majority of states (78% of 36 for this item) reported that district requests increased since COVID-19, whereas 22% stayed the same (no reports of a decrease in requests).
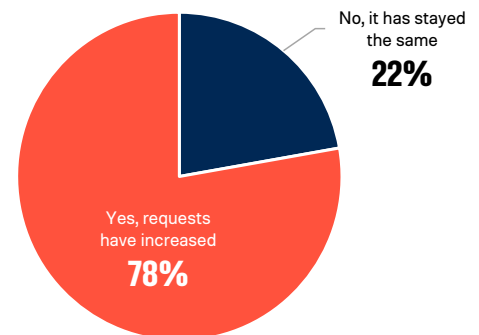
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Figure 5. Respondents' top priorities to support district and school SEL efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic

Respondents were able to choose from 13 response options about the ways in which they are supporting schools and districts (they could select all that applied). Top priorities included addressing mental health needs, engaging in SEL strategies during distance learning, supporting adult SEL, and providing professional learning.
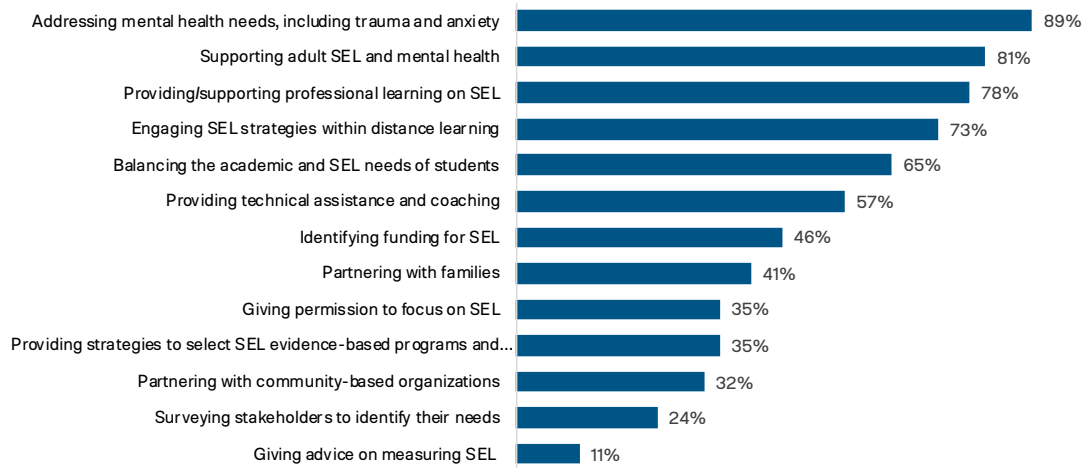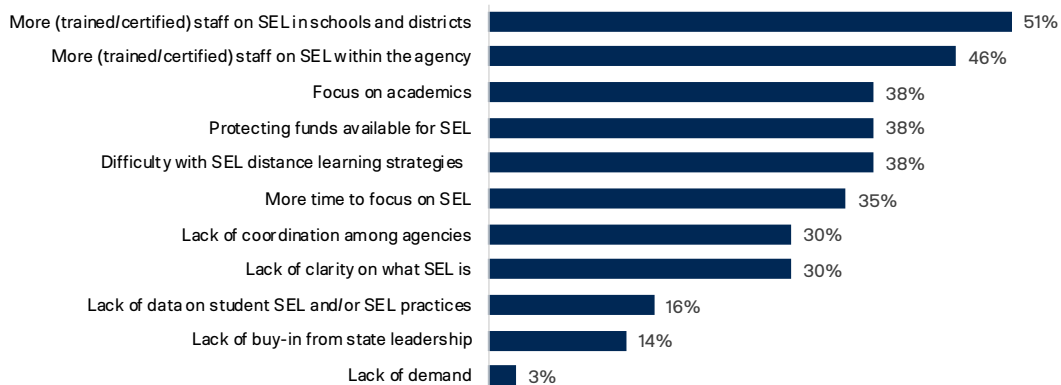
Addressing mental health needs, including trauma and anxiety	89%
Supporting adult SEL and mental health	81%
Providing/supporting professional learning on SEL	78%
Engaging SEL strategies within distance learning	73%
Balancing the academic and SEL needs of students	65%
Providing technical assistance and coaching	57%
Identifying funding for SEL	46%
Partnering with families	41%
Giving permission to focus on SEL	35%
Providing strategies to select SEL evidence-based programs and...	35%
Partnering with community-based organizations	32%
Surveying stakeholders to identify their needs	24%
Giving advice on measuring SEL	11%

Figure 6. Respondents' top challenges in making SEL a priority during the COVID-19 pandemic

Respondents were able to choose from 11 response options on top challenges in making SEL a priority (they could select all that applied). Top challenges included more staff or trained staff at the school, district, and agency level; lack of understanding of SEL in distance learning; focus on academics; and protecting funding available for SEL.

More (trained/certified) staff on SEL in schools and districts	51%
More (trained/certified) staff on SEL within the agency	46%
Focus on academics	38%
Protecting funds available for SEL	38%
Difficulty with SEL distance learning strategies	38%
More time to focus on SEL	35%
Lack of coordination among agencies	30%
Lack of clarity on what SEL is	30%
Lack of data on student SEL and/or SEL practices	16%
Lack of buy-in from state leadership	14%
Lack of demand	3%

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