



STATE POLICY BRIGHT SPOTS: SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND EQUITY

States have the power to create conditions that encourage and foster evidence-based, systemic social and emotional learning (SEL) to support equity and excellence in districts, schools, and classrooms. Leveraging aligned resources and evidence-based programs and practices as part of high-quality implementation, [systemic SEL](#) supports the development of social and emotional competencies in all environments where children live and grow. Advancing equity is a key priority for high-quality SEL policies.

As states work toward the goal of implementing [SEL systemically](#), many state education agencies have developed a wide variety of efforts to support SEL across schools, districts, and communities. These efforts provide strong examples to inform the field, including [key policies directly focused on SEL](#) (e.g., competencies and guidance) and [related policies](#) that support social, emotional, and academic learning more broadly (e.g., discipline practices and student and family engagement programs).

This “Bright Spots” brief highlights policy innovations of states moving toward the goal of evidence-based, systemic SEL, showcasing efforts that specifically center equity as examples that can inspire other states.

What is a **Bright Spot?**

A “Bright Spot” is an innovative example of policy designed to support implementation of evidence-based, systemic SEL within the unique context of a state. While all states can learn from these high-quality examples, “Bright Spots” are created and adopted specifically by a state. Therefore, “Bright Spots” are neither recommended actions for every state, nor perfect examples of state SEL policy. “Bright Spots” are presented in the spirit of continuous improvement, in that even the highlighted examples often still have room for improvement. As each state works toward the goal of supporting systemic SEL, **the purpose of “Bright Spots” is to inspire and motivate all states, illuminating their journey.**

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All high-quality, SEL policies are designed to create conditions that advance equity and excellence. In the context of SEL, equity and excellence mean that each and every student—across race, ethnicity, family income levels, learning abilities, geographic locations, home language, immigration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other factors—should have experiences and environments that support healthy social, emotional, and academic development. It is important to note that “[SEL can be a powerful lever](#) for creating caring, just, inclusive, and healthy schools that support all young people in reaching their fullest potential.” Therefore, the examples we identify below are highlighted for the way in which they strive toward equity explicitly. For example, one way of supporting equity explicitly that some states chose to engage is [Transformative SEL](#) (TSEL). TSEL is one specific application of the CASEL framework “[toward the goals of creating equitable settings and systems](#) and promoting justice-oriented school and civic engagement.”

Driven by state context, SEL policies that center equity are conceptualized and implemented differently in every state. Noting this, this Bright Spots brief is enhanced by contextual information on some of states’ “holistic” policies collected from The Education Trust’s recently released tool, [Is Your State Prioritizing Students’ Social, Emotional, and Academic Development \(SEAD\)?](#), which supports this direct SEL policy.

Is Your State Prioritizing Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (SEAD)?

Inspired by the [2020 Social, Emotional, and Academic Development \(SEAD\) Through an Equity Lens report](#), Ed Trust partnered with CASEL to create 50-state scans for five areas of state policy that support the social, emotional, and academic development of students. These scans focus on critical policies for systemically supporting SEL and shape the context for more explicit SEL policy. Ed Trust’s recently published tool, [Is Your State Prioritizing Students’ SEAD?](#), summarizes the findings of these scans for policies including discipline; professional development; rigorous and culturally sustaining curriculum; student, family, and community engagement; and wraparound services. This tool, in addition to Ed Trust’s recently published [50-state educator diversity data and policy tool](#), are valuable resources for understanding the context of each state with the goal of “creating safe, supportive, and inclusive environments that foster positive social, emotional, and academic development for all.”



CALIFORNIA

STATE POLICY BRIGHT SPOTS

California is a member of [CASEL's Collaborating States Initiative \(CSI\)](#) and has taken important actions to advance SEL. In 2017, the California State Department of Education developed the [California SEL Guiding Principles](#). One of the five principles, "Commit to Equity," became especially important in shaping the state's subsequent SEL work. In 2021, as part of the state's mission to advance equity, California adopted [K-Adult Transformative SEL Competencies](#), which specifically align with the Transformative SEL framework and support the identity, agency, and belonging of students and educators. The state has also shared guidance for implementing SEL, including "[Transformative SEL Conditions for Thriving](#)" for classroom, school, district, state, and country leaders, as well as other resources to support high-quality implementation of the TSEL competencies.

California also adopted holistic policies that support SEL and equity. Some notable highlights include:

- **Rigorous and Culturally Sustaining Curriculum:** California offers strong [guidance](#) for creating inclusive environments, including how to adopt curricula for core subjects that integrate culturally sustaining learning. California also has strong data on access to advanced coursework, reporting [student enrollment and success with disaggregated data](#) at the state level. California offers guidance for [culturally sustaining curriculum](#).
- **Professional Development:** California provides [guidance](#) and [funding](#) to districts for professional development on how to equitably support students' social and emotional growth. The state requires that skills that promote and support the integration of asset-based social and emotional and academic development are [taught in teacher prep programs](#) and that [teachers receive training in child development](#) as part of teacher licensure renewal.
- **Student, Family, and Community Engagement:** California prioritizes family and community engagement as a [statewide goal](#) and provides detailed guidance for schools and districts to support it. The state shares [disaggregated data](#) about student, family, and community engagement within a climate survey at the school and district level. Moreover, a high school student sits as a voting member on the [state board of education](#).
- **Discipline:** California reports disaggregated discipline data that can also be cross-tabulated at the district and school levels on a [user-friendly dashboard on the state's website](#).
- **Wraparound Services:** California [prioritizes](#) Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), especially for Title I schools, in the state's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan, and [provides guidance](#) for districts and schools to develop and fund these efforts. California also [requires](#) local education agencies (LEAs) to conduct needs and strengths assessments, to monitor implementation of MTSS, and to regularly report outcome/fidelity data. Furthermore, California has strong policies to ensure students' needs are met through inclusive and supportive schools, such as with [reimbursement for all Medicaid-enrolled students](#), a [strong anti-bullying law](#) that names groups most often marginalized, and support for transgender/nonbinary students in athletics and all school spaces.



[Delaware](#) is a member of [CASEL's CSI](#) and has developed foundational and innovative methods for advancing SEL. In 2018, [Rodel](#), an education advocacy partner of the state, did a landscape scan of policies and practices underway in Delaware and centered equity in the report. This report, [A Broader Vision of Student Success: Insights and Opportunities for Social and Emotional Learning in Delaware](#), provided an important foundation, which the Department of Education has used to guide their SEL efforts.

In 2020, the Delaware Department of Education adopted the [K-Adult SEL Competencies](#) guide, which details and elaborates upon the state's SEL competencies. The guide emphasizes culturally responsive teaching practices and discusses how SEL can help adults examine their own biases and improve how they interact with students.

The guide also states that SEL helps students gain “an awareness of and respect for human dignity, including culture and differences.”

Moreover, the Delaware [Strategy for Social, Emotional and Behavioral Wellbeing](#) focuses on ensuring equity within the state's Whole Child Community of Practice and culturally responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). The Delaware team has aligned the K-12 SEL competency guidance with their preschool SEL standards, crosswalked the SEL competencies with the academic content standards, and curated a resource library to support implementation all while centering equity.

Delaware is a member of the CSI Community of Practice that works to advance equity in its integrated SEL work with Career and Workforce Development. For example, the Delaware team created a crosswalk between [SEL and Delaware Employability Skills](#) and shares [many additional resources](#) to unite SEL with Career and Workforce Development.

To support direct SEL policy centering equity, Delaware adopted holistic policies that support SEL and equity. Some notable highlights include:

- **Rigorous and Culturally Sustaining Curriculum:** Delaware has [issued goals](#) and [guidance](#) for schools to expand enrollment in advanced coursework equitably.



DELAWARE (CONTINUED)

STATE POLICY BRIGHT SPOTS

- **Professional Development:** Delaware has a [state goal](#) for supporting adult SEL and adult mindsets to enrich student well-being. The state provides [guidance](#) on professional development for supporting students' social and emotional development equitably. Moreover, Delaware is using American Rescue Plan (ARP) dollars to support training on culturally responsive education mentoring programs for youth in the foster care system, year-round, out-of-school time programs with community-based organizations, and more.
- **Student, Family, and Community Engagement:** Delaware provides guidance that explicitly [links family and community engagement to student learning](#). Moreover, the state ensures student voice is included in state-level policy decisions by having a non-voting student representative on the [state board of education](#).
- **Discipline:** Delaware prioritizes healing centered-practices and parameters for [the use of restraint](#) to prevent its misuse, such as by requiring less restrictive interventions be used first, requiring the person using restraint to be trained in de-escalation, and restricting its use to only when a student poses imminent danger of physical injury to themselves or another person. Delaware has also banned corporal punishment in schools and has [a team](#) that provides technical assistance for positive discipline practices.
- **Wraparound Services:** Delaware is using federal COVID recovery funding to support students' social, emotional, and academic development through MTSS. The state also used [Opportunity Funding](#) to support English Language Learners and students from low-income backgrounds. Delaware requires schools to conduct [strengths-based needs assessments](#) at the student and school level. Notably, the state has passed legislation to meet the American School Counselor Association's recommended [student-to-school-counselor ratio](#) by passing legislation to require one school counselor per 250 students and providing funding to phase in the requirement for K-5 over the next few years.



MASSACHUSETTS

STATE POLICY BRIGHT SPOTS

[Massachusetts](#) is a member of [CASEL's CSI](#) and has created guidance and many resources to support implementation of SEL in schools. Importantly, the state has a [Culturally Responsive Social-Emotional Competency Development](#) guidance document based on the implementation of equity-focused SEL. The document guides teachers and leaders to focus on supporting (1) access to SEL for all students, (2) culturally proficient SEL, and (3) culturally responsive and sustaining SEL. The guide includes an “SEL Reflection Guide” for teachers and leaders to improve their own practice and equips them with multiple other resources to support equity through SEL.

To support this direct SEL policy centering equity, Massachusetts also provides holistic policies that support SEL and equity. Some notable highlights include:

- **Rigorous and Culturally Sustaining Curriculum:** Massachusetts reports advanced course [completion](#) data that can be disaggregated on its website. Massachusetts also provides [guidance](#) for schools and districts to adopt culturally sustaining curricula.
- **Professional Development:** Massachusetts has a [state goal for supporting adult SEL](#) and adult mindsets to enrich student well-being. Massachusetts requires that teachers demonstrate [a mastery](#) of equitable [practices](#) for licensure renewal.
- **Student, Family, and Community Engagement:** Massachusetts has a [statewide office for engagement](#), has created a [student advisory council](#), and intentionally includes a parent on the [state board of education](#). The state also offers comprehensive training and professional development to inform educators about engagement. In addition, Massachusetts includes engagement in [teacher evaluation rubrics](#).
- **Discipline:** Massachusetts has a [statewide goal](#) for decreasing use of exclusionary discipline and reducing disparities in discipline. The state bans corporal punishment and has strong policy around [restraint](#) to prevent its harm and misuse. Moreover, Massachusetts provides [resources and professional development](#) on restorative justice and positive discipline practices for educators and leaders.
- **Wraparound Services:** Massachusetts has a [Governor's Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet](#) to coordinate interagency services for children and youth, with a clear initiative of advancing race equity. The state offers [guidance](#) for developing and funding evidence-based MTSS. In addition, the state has a [comprehensive anti-bullying policy](#) that explicitly names groups of students most likely to be bullied and harassed and has a policy supporting transgender K-12 students in participating in athletics and all school spaces. Massachusetts also has strong policies and guidance for providing health and housing [supports](#).



[New York](#) is a member of [CASEL's CSI](#) and continues to strengthen the SEL efforts in the state. In 2018, [New York released the state's K-12 competencies](#), which are supported by the 2019 [Social Emotional Learning: A Guide To Systemic Whole School Implementation](#) document. This state guidance document discusses how SEL is key to the state's work to advance educational equity. Moreover, the guide frames SEL within the state's culturally responsive and sustaining practices. In 2021, the state published the [Culturally Responsive Sustaining-Education Framework](#), a multi-year efforts that situates social and emotional programs as key for creating a "welcoming and affirming environment."

To support this direct SEL policy centering equity, New York also provides holistic policies that support SEL and equity. Some notable highlights include:

- **Rigorous and Culturally Sustaining Curriculum:** New York has clear [goals](#), guidance, funding, and professional development related to supporting culturally sustaining education. The state provides [guidance and funding](#) for schools and districts to adopt curricula for core subjects that integrate culturally sustaining learning and leverage students' contexts. The state publicly reports [data](#) on advanced coursework enrollment and success that can be disaggregated by various student demographics. The state also provides technical support/professional development to support districts in training on culturally sustaining curricula.
- **Professional Development:** New York has a [state goal](#) for supporting adult SEL and adult mindsets to enrich student well-being. New York [requires](#) that preparation programs teach a combination of skills and knowledge to equitably integrate and support students' social, emotional, and academic development.
- **Student, Family, and Community Engagement:** New York provides some [guidance](#) on how to successfully engage students, families, and communities.
- **Discipline:** New York has a [statewide goal](#) for decreasing use of exclusionary discipline and reducing disparities in discipline. New York provides links to guidance and [resources](#) on positive discipline practices.
- **Wraparound Services:** New York has a [Council on Children and Families](#) to coordinate interagency services for children and youth. In addition, the state prioritizes [data collection and reporting](#) (e.g., student-level and school-level needs assessments and evaluation of fidelity of implementation). Additionally, the state explicitly names groups of students most likely to be bullied and harassed and has a [policy](#) supporting transgender K-12 students in participating in athletics and all school spaces.



WASHINGTON

STATE POLICY BRIGHT SPOTS

[Washington](#) is a member of [CASEL's CSI](#) and has made durable commitments to SEL in the state. In 2020, Washington released [K-12 SEL Standards, Benchmarks, and Indicators](#). The accompanying [SEL Implementation Guide](#) features the following guiding principles: equity, cultural responsiveness, universal design, and trauma-informed practice. Moreover, the state has published a free [SEL Online Module](#) on Integrating SEL into Culturally Responsive Classrooms and publicized a brief prepared by Education Northwest on the [connections of SEL and equity](#). Importantly, the state also has passed [legislation](#) supporting that SEL advances equitable, social, and emotional environments for all students.

To support this direct SEL policy centering equity, Washington also provides holistic policies that support SEL and equity. Some notable highlights include:

- **Rigorous and Culturally Sustaining Curriculum:** Washington requires [automatic enrollment](#) in advanced coursework in high school.
- **Professional Development:** Washington requires that [preparation programs teach some skills and knowledge](#) to equitably integrate and support students' social, emotional, and academic development.
- **Student, Family, and Community Engagement:** Washington offers [guidance](#) that links family and community engagement to student learning. Washington has a [student representative on the state board of education](#) and requires [student, family, and community engagement in teacher standards](#).
- **Discipline:** Washington [prohibits zero-tolerance policies](#) for grades K-4 and has passed the [CROWN Act](#) (which prevents discrimination based on hair). The state has [sufficient parameters](#) around the use of restraint to prevent its harm and misuse and has banned corporal punishment. In addition, Washington requires districts to [consider alternative forms of discipline](#) before excluding a student.
- **Wraparound Services:** Washington provides guidance for districts and schools to develop and [fund evidence-based multi-tiered or integrated systems of support](#). Moreover, the state requires that districts use student data to [continuously improve](#) the implementation of these systems. Further, the state requires districts [to conduct student- and system-level needs and strengths assessments](#). Additionally, the state explicitly names groups of students most likely to be bullied and harassed, and [has a policy supporting transgender K-12 students in participating in athletics and all school spaces](#).



[Wisconsin](#) is a member of [CASEL's CSI](#), and has always been a leader in centering equity in its SEL work. In 2018, Wisconsin hosted a State Superintendent's Equity Stakeholder Council, which examined SEL through an equity lens. This convening resulted in the report [State Superintendent's Equity Stakeholder Council Advancing Equity Through Social Emotional Learning](#). Today, Wisconsin prioritizes equity in all its SEL work.

As "Commit to Equity" is the state's first Guiding Principle, Wisconsin acknowledges "That SEL can be a powerful tool to disrupt inequities; helping to ensure that all students graduate college and career ready."

To support this direct SEL policy centering equity, Wisconsin also provides holistic policies that support SEL and equity. Some notable highlights include:

- **Rigorous and Culturally Sustaining Curriculum:** Wisconsin provides support to districts on [helping teachers implement culturally sustaining curricula](#). In addition, the state has [strong data](#) on advanced coursework and enrollment success disaggregated by student demographics on its website.
- **Professional Development:** Wisconsin offers technical assistance and [professional development](#) on supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development.
- **Student, Family, and Community Engagement:** Wisconsin has [staff to support student, family, and community engagement](#) and has a [parent advisory council](#) to ensure student voice is included in state-level decisions. Moreover, the state provides guidance that supports [leveraging family and community organizations](#) engagement to accelerate learning.
- **Discipline:** Wisconsin has sufficient parameters around the [use of restraint](#) to prevent its harm and misuse and has banned corporal punishment.
- **Wraparound Services:** Wisconsin has a specific goal for supporting multi-tiered goals in its [strategic plan](#) and supports this goal through funding and guidance to schools. Wisconsin provides [guidance](#) for districts and schools to develop and fund evidence-based multi-tiered or integrated systems of support. Moreover, the state [requires that districts use student data](#) to continuously improve the implementation of these systems. Further, the state requires districts to conduct student- and system-level needs and strengths assessments.

CONCLUSION



Education policies play an important role in creating conditions to foster evidence-based, systemic SEL to support equity and excellence in districts, schools, and classrooms. High-quality educational approaches to foster social and emotional development are evidence-based, systemic, and free-standing, meaning they provide step-by-step instructions to teach students. By definition, high-quality SEL policies promote equity and excellence. SEL is strengths-based and universal, designed to optimize social and emotional development of each and every student. SEL policies centering equity are critically important in prioritizing strategies specifically designed to support social and emotional development of all students. As demonstrated above, states are beginning to show progress leveraging SEL to specifically advance equity into their policies.

SEL policies exist in a broader landscape of educational policies that should all be mutually reinforcing and aligned. **States have a long way to go to implement SEL systemically, but the examples above represent important innovations that may be helpful as examples to other states.**