



Rhode Island leaders support SEL: Top l., Alice Woods, top r., David Sienko, bottom, Ken Wagner

David Sienko is director of the Office of Student, Community, and Academic Supports in the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE). Alice Woods is an education specialist in the office who leads the state's social and emotional learning (SEL) initiative. Ken Wagner is the state education commissioner. Sienko and Woods wear many hats and are responsible for numerous programs, including federally funded support programs for schools, special education, and health and safety. Their numerous other responsibilities have not diminished their enthusiasm for SEL and their efforts to help it flourish in Rhode

Island. Here they talk about how the SEL movement began in the state, what it has accomplished, and where it's headed.

How did the initiative start?

It began in 2013. Nationally there was an incredibly strong emphasis on academic achievement. But we were hearing from the field repeatedly that academic achievement is only half the equation, that we needed to pay attention to children's social and emotional learning. We started with a conference in August when Linda Lantieri from CASEL presented on the basics of SEL. It was kind of an educational Noah's Ark. We had two local superintendents, two special education directors, two representatives of higher education, two school social workers, two school psychologists—everybody we could think of.

We looked at the CASEL framework and the five SEL competencies, and we asked is this something that would add value to our public school system? The response was overwhelmingly positive. It resulted in the organization of a community of practice that's now grown to nearly 400 members. We also established a core advisory group of about 30 practitioners that meets from time to time when needed.

From the beginning, we weren't dictating the agenda to the schools. It was the schools telling us, "Here's what the state agency can do to help further social and emotional learning." The more we created conditions for social and emotional learning to grow, the bigger the numbers and positive responses got.

What were the next steps?

Two years ago, we applied to participate as one of the states in CASEL's [Collaborating States Initiative](#). When we were chosen, that gave us further impetus

to keep this work going. As a result, we're developing a level of maturity with the content that's really exciting. We've moved from looking at basic SEL programming to how you assess and measure SEL.

What strategies have you used to sustain the momentum?

From that initial conference in 2013, people were asking us to highlight what was already going on in districts. We got information on what people were doing, and we offered descriptions of promising practices both in our community of practice meetings and through our communications media. We based it on the idea that success breeds success.

What exactly is the community of practice?

We have between 350-400 people in the RIDE SEL listserv. When we have a community of practice meeting we announce it to the listserv, and it's for anyone who wants to attend. We typically get about 80-100 people. The meetings happen after school. It's all voluntary, and there's no pay for attending. The people who come really want to be there. We usually have two to three per year, and this is the third year.

How well is SEL being implemented in Rhode Island schools—and how do you know?

We're not formally collecting data. We're finding out more anecdotally. Every school is choosing its own path to address children's SEL needs. Some are purchasing evidence-based curriculum packages. Some are practicing restorative justice and mindfulness. We're saying, "Yes, it all fits into the RIDE framework for SEL. Let's do it and let's share." The more we've done that, the more the momentum has built. People are always eager to get more information about SEL and how others are implementing it. After every meeting we do an evaluation, and it's always "more." They want more training, more information, more of everything.

What's the role of your voluntary SEL standards in sustaining SEL in Rhode Island?

Even when we developed the proposal to CASEL to be one of the CSI states, we were thinking about moving toward voluntary state SEL standards. But we didn't tell the schools we were developing state standards. We asked the schools if state standards would help continue to build the momentum for SEL. It was the schools that said to

**From State Education
Commissioner Ken Wagner**

Social and emotional learning is an increasingly important and in-demand component of education in Rhode Island. Our educators are hungry for these strategies that help support and empower students, which is why we recently adopted statewide standards for social and emotional learning. This isn't about coddling our kids – it's about challenging them, while still caring for them and providing them with the tools they need to manage stress, feel good, and make healthy choices. When students have these skills – when they are immersed in an environment that prioritizes social and emotional learning – they are better equipped to tackle challenges and be active and engaged partners in their education.

us, “Yes, please do this because it will legitimize so much of the work we’re doing to address children’s SEL needs. It will create a place for our work in state policy.”

It started with our 2015 five-year strategic plan, which was based on surveys that included community members and educators across the state. SEL kept coming up as something people wanted. It was included in the strategic plan under global citizenship. Because this intersected with the CSI grant, we were able to use the CSI resources. We followed CASEL’s process, starting with what’s already out there and what’s good practice. We had an internal, cross-departmental stakeholder group, and we reviewed existing SEL standards across the country. We focused on what was happening in the CASEL district in Oakland, California. The Oakland standards spoke a lot to equity and diversity. It was a good match for what was happening here in Rhode Island. We took their SEL standards as a jumping-off point and worked with our stakeholder group internally at RIDE and our statewide committee to come up with our own standards.

And the standards were adopted by your state board of education?

In October 2017, the state Council on Elementary and Secondary Education endorsed the standards. That means the standards were supported versus being adopted, which would mean they would be mandated. Schools can use them in ways that best meet their needs.

How are you spreading the word and providing technical support for the standards?

We’ve been educating groups that we now have endorsed voluntary standards as a state. We give a quick overview of what the standards say, how they may be used, and ways they may be applied. Everyone is curious to know about the standards, and the response has been very positive. At a meeting of school social workers in November 2017, we got a standing ovation. They’d been rooting for years for something like this.

Our next step will be to map the standards to grade-level or grade-span expectations. We’re developing indicators for what that would look like at different age levels. Eventually we’ll develop resources and tools to help people provide instruction in those areas.

And beyond that...?

Our agency is committed to SEL. Our commissioner of education has said that social and emotional learning is part of the academic mission of a school. If we’re just focused on academics and we’re not looking more broadly, we’re going to miss a significant opportunity. He talks about the academic mission of a school including how we prepare kids for college and career, and social and emotional learning is an integral part of that work.

RESOURCES

[Five-year strategic plan](#)—RIDE, 2015

[RIDE SEL standards](#)

[What is Social and Emotional Learning?](#) (RIDE 2-page overview)

[Amy's Story](#) (RIDE success story of a teacher's experience with SEL)

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