

District Recommendations for How States Can Support SEL



The purpose of the [Collaborating States Initiative \(CSI\)](#) is to help state education agencies (SEAs) create statewide conditions that facilitate and encourage implementation of evidence-based approaches to social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools and districts. Because each state is unique, state teams must develop their own customized plans for advancing SEL. However, in creating these plans they can draw on a number of strategies for supporting district SEL efforts, preferably strategies that respond to what districts themselves say would best support their work.

The following suggestions were culled from numerous conversations with district leaders, as well as consultations with states. Telephone interviews with districts lasted 30-60 minutes. In total, we spoke with four district superintendents, one assistant superintendent, five directors of SEL (or similar role), two directors of student services, and one chief accountability officer. We also learned from a survey of CSI states and general consultation with CSI state team leads. For each recommendation, we propose action steps that grew out of the above conversations and our own experience. We also include examples from states. These examples are not exhaustive, but represent a variety of strategies.

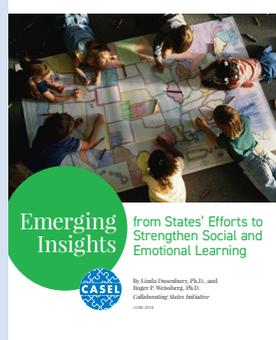
1. Help communicate the importance of SEL.

“Everyone should feel, understand, hear, and know how SEL connects to student success.”
Mai Xi Lee, Director of Social Emotional Learning, Sacramento City Unified School District, California

Although districts need the flexibility to develop their own plans for SEL, states can help by communicating the importance of SEL at the highest levels. When states take a clear stand on the importance of SEL to teaching, learning, culture, and climate, they provide permission and encouragement for districts to invest in the work. Such public support also helps improve alignment by creating a “common language” around SEL. [CASEL's website](#) has useful definitions, examples, and research that can help make the case for SEL. CASEL's [District Resource Center](#) has additional communications guidance and tools developed by 10 leading districts.

HIGH-IMPACT ACTIONS:

- Keep SEL front and center—on state websites, in strategic plans, at cabinet meetings, in job descriptions, and in other public discussions of state priorities. For



A more detailed report, *Emerging Insights from the Collaborating States Initiative*, is available [here](#). It describes the recent progress of states and summarizes eight key lessons from their work.

AUTHORS

Heather Schwartz, M.Ed.
Linda Dusenbury, Ph.D.

example, Kansas Commissioner Randy Watson makes the case for SEL in a [video on his agency's website](#).

- Communicate at the highest levels the role of SEL in improving teachers' practices and students' academic success. For example, Massachusetts is piloting revised model teacher effectiveness rubrics that highlight SEL-related expectations. New York is working with district collaborators to draft subject-area implementation crosswalks for SEL competencies and learning standards.
- Include the state superintendent at SEL functions to send the message that SEL is valuable and valued.
- Make it a clear expectation that SEL is embedded in [district improvement plans](#), as Chicago Public Schools has done.

2. Show the clear alignment among SEL and other priorities, regulations, and requirements.

"We sometimes need help seeing how all of our initiatives are actually connected to SEL. SEL is not one more thing on the plate, it is the plate!"

Gene Olsen, Director of Student Services, Community Consolidated School District 89, Illinois

States can help prevent work silos and initiative fatigue by making connections between SEL and other state and district priorities. SEL can be explicitly linked to many of the strategies that districts and states use to support students, such as equitable practices and strategies to support college and career readiness. District leaders say it is particularly important to align SEL with teaching and learning.

HIGH-IMPACT ACTIONS:

- Make connections between SEL and college and [career readiness](#), as Wisconsin has.
- Show the relationships among equity, cultural competency, and SEL. For example, Massachusetts explicitly calls out [the importance of cultural competency](#) on its SEL webpage. Michigan had its draft SEL competencies reviewed by the Great Lakes Equity Center to ensure that the state's guidance was equitable and culturally competent.
- Make connections between SEL and systems that are already in place such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) or Positive Behavioral Supports and Interventions (PBIS). For example, Kansas has aligned SEL with the Kansas Prevention Statutes, suicide prevention, and bullying legislation. Virginia has aligned SEL to its [Profile of a Graduate](#). Nevada integrated SEL into the state's Read By Grade 3 initiative by equipping the "learning strategists," who act as literacy coaches, with SEL strategies to include in their work with teachers.
- Help make the connection between SEL and the focus of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) [on the whole child](#).
- Show clear connections between SEL and other state regulations and requirements, such as [Erin's Law](#), which has been passed in 31 states.

3. Advance the work by providing frameworks that allow for flexibility.

“Districts benefit when states move away from the ‘one-size-fits all’ model. Districts do appreciate being given a structure, but they also need flexibility within that structure to determine what is best for their students.”

*Denine Goolsby, Executive Director of Humanware [SEL programming],
Cleveland Metropolitan School District, Ohio*

Although many districts look to states for frameworks and guidance about quality SEL, they also will need the flexibility to develop their own plans for SEL within the parameters set by the state. This allows districts to tailor their work to meet the needs of students, families, and other local stakeholders and to align SEL with district programs, resources, and priorities.

HIGH-IMPACT ACTIONS:

- Determine where there are opportunities for flexibility in state SEL competencies and guidance. For example, [Rhode Island](#) has provided overarching competencies based on work that originated in Oakland, Calif., that allow districts to create grade-level developmental benchmarks that reflect their local goals.
- Create frameworks that allow for options and choice. For example, provide a menu of evidence-based programs for districts to choose from. CASEL’s Program Guides for [elementary](#) and [middle/high school](#) provide a research-based review of leading national programs.
- Understand that policies and guidance documents can take various forms to meet context-specific needs. Some states create stand-alone goals or benchmarks. Others emphasize that SEL instruction should be part of academic instruction. By the end of 2017, at least 12 states had articulated SEL competencies through 12th grade. Seventeen states had posted guidance related to SEL.

4. Learn from, and take advantage of, good work already happening in districts.

“There is an opportunity to leverage the districts that are already doing SEL. It would be powerful to have a model that uses the work from a successful district to help other districts.”

Meria Carstarphen, Superintendent, Atlanta Public Schools, Georgia

When states adopt and adapt work from districts, they benefit from the time and effort already invested in SEL. Some districts have been implementing SEL for many years—often with CASEL’s support through our Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI)—and have generated high-quality products, including tools, guidance, and fleshed-out competencies. Furthermore, districts’ implementation of SEL may help reveal important contextual factors and provide examples that are meaningful to key stakeholders. Take advantage of CASEL’s [District Resource Center](#), an online portfolio of advice, tools, and resources from 10 leading districts that have been systematically implementing SEL for several years.

HIGH-IMPACT ACTIONS:

- Review existing competencies or standards, as well as guidance documents, to support student social and emotional development. For example, [Nevada](#) adopted competencies from Washoe County to support state-level work.
- Look at the work districts are already doing related to SEL and determine how this fits within state SEL frameworks. For example, the Connecticut team is working closely with districts to revise and expand their widely used school climate standards to infuse SEL competencies.
- Include districts in the creation of SEL frameworks and products. For example, North Dakota held an SEL summit where educational leaders came together to develop SEL goals for K-12 North Dakota students after evaluating established, free-standing SEL standards and developmental benchmarks from across the country. California recently released guiding principles created with a group of key stakeholders, including county education agencies and districts. The Tennessee SEA worked with Nashville educators to develop high-quality videos for professional development.

5. Use districts’ requests for support of SEL to drive the state’s work.

“Districts are critical partners in the work of SEL, because we are the ones on the ground. Professional development happens within the context of the community, but states can provide guidance and resources.”

***Kyla Krengel**, Director of Social Emotional Learning, Metro Nashville Public Schools, Tennessee*

Many districts request training to enhance their SEL approaches. Their requests reflect context-specific needs that can help states determine priorities. States do not necessarily need to conduct the professional development themselves. Indeed, it may make sense to rely on expert practitioners for this. However, states can develop curricula and help coordinate and support [professional learning](#).

HIGH-IMPACT ACTIONS:

- Determine professional learning needs at the district level. For example, New York found ways to help teachers get continuing education credits for SEL work, including through Washington state’s online SEL modules, which are widely used in many states.
- Coordinate resources and learning opportunities to meet context-specific needs. For example, Minnesota has used requests related to [equity](#) and culturally responsive practices to drive the work.
- Allow district guidelines and approaches to inform professional learning. For example, Washington is aligning professional learning related to SEL with the state’s Early Learning Guidelines.

6. Facilitate bi-directional communication.

“States and districts can learn a lot from one another, but both have to come to the table with the right mindset: this is a learning time. We aren’t coming in with one initiative to solve everything. This has to be based on honest sharing.”

Paul Cruz, Superintendent, Austin Independent School District, Texas

District teams have a lot to contribute and, understandably, they want to inform guidance, not merely receive it. When states take steps to facilitate bi-directional communication, it sends a clear message to districts that their expertise and experience are valued. Opportunities for bi-directional communication can take many forms and are always best conducted in a spirit of inquiry.

HIGH-IMPACT ACTIONS:

- Visit districts that are engaging in SEL work and build in time to sit down with leadership teams. For example, the Ohio team visited Cleveland and spent the day observing their Humanware (SEL) work.
- Include district SEL administrators, practitioners, and community representatives on state working groups. For example, Rhode Island created an SEL advisory committee that meets regularly. Participants include teachers, superintendents, principals, social workers, parents, and higher education leaders. Washington’s group includes similar sectors, along with leaders from commissions representing Asian, African-American, Hispanic, and Native American communities.
- Use surveys and listening tours to explore the views of key stakeholders about how to support SEL. For example, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Iowa used educator surveys to help develop their SEL plans. New Jersey facilitated focus groups with administrators, teachers, and school counselors to get feedback on its online SEL module.

7. Help connect districts.

“Every time I send a notice about a community of practice meeting, the response is amazingly positive. Meetings fill up quickly. I am always looking to link people to opportunities and other districts that could be helpful.”

Alice Woods, Education Specialist, Office of Student, Community, & Academic Supports

Rhode Island Department of Elementary & Secondary Education

States are in a unique position to support and strengthen cross-district connections. Many districts welcome opportunities to connect with one another to expand their understanding of SEL implementation, meet colleagues working on similar activities and innovative approaches, and collaborate to solve context-specific challenges. These connections also help to provide a vision and create buy-in for SEL from districts at the beginning stages of the work.

HIGH-IMPACT ACTIONS:

- Help coordinate opportunities for cross-district learning. Consider creating a district professional learning community. For example, Rhode Island currently facilitates an SEL community of practice that brings districts together and focuses on SEL

successes and best-practices. Wisconsin is developing a regional professional learning model.

- Provide or build a common language and/ or indicators related to SEL to create cohesion among districts. For example, Washington State convened a [Social Emotional Learning Indicators Workgroup](#) that included district-level teachers, parents, and administrators, along with state-level representatives.
- Provide resources (including web platforms and funding) to make these learning experiences accessible to all.

