

Social and Emotional Learning in State Strategic Plans

EXAMPLES AND OPPORTUNITIES



Findings from CASEL's Strategic Plan Search

INTRODUCTION

This brief reviews goals and priorities for social and emotional learning (SEL) as reflected in state strategic plans for education. In addition, it identifies state examples of goals and objectives that are likely to advance SEL in education.

Most often created by the state board of education or the state education agency, strategic plans identify aspirational goals, achievable objectives, and practical strategies. They provide a framework for making decisions about the allocation of resources.

The strategic planning process itself often involves extensive stakeholder engagement, which provides educational leaders with the opportunity to **build foundational support for SEL** (among both the public and the educational community). Because strategic planning is an essential process for organizing and preparing to advance any organization's mission, strategic planning in education can establish student social and emotional development as a clear priority of the state, as well as communicate a clear vision for SEL to all stakeholders. Moreover, details from state strategic plans provide important information that can help state education leaders and their teams identify key opportunities for advancing student social and emotional development in the context of each particular state.

Methods

To begin this research, CASEL's [Collaborating States Initiative \(CSI\)](#) identified all publicly available state strategic plans for education (n=44) for the 50 states, five U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia. Some states do not have publicly available education strategic plans (n=2), while others use alternative guiding documentation for strategic planning (e.g., ESSA plans, vision statements, etc. (n=8). Where a state did not have an education strategic plan available online (n=2) we sent a request to obtain the document. For states that use alternative guiding documentation rather than a strategic plan (n=8), we reviewed the alternative documentation. Further, although we used the most recent, publicly available strategic planning documents, we are aware that some states are currently developing new strategic plans. This brief represents a snapshot of the policies and plans at the time we completed the research in July 2018.

In total, we were able to locate and review strategic plans for education (or similar documents) for 48 states, five U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia.

The Case for Social and Emotional Learning

[Social and emotional learning \(SEL\)](#) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Research clearly demonstrates the powerful benefits of approaches designed to promote SEL, not only for enhancing the academic and personal growth of individual students, but also for improving how schools and districts function. For example, in addition to enhancing [academic or personal growth](#) for students, systemic, evidence-based SEL approaches have been shown to improve [school climate](#), enhance [teacher effectiveness](#), and strengthen relationships with [families](#) and communities. The purpose of this brief is to explicitly identify where and how state strategic plans for education intersect with SEL.

AUTHORS

Caitlin M. Dermody

Linda Dusenbury, Ph.D.

Roger P. Weissberg, Ph.D.

KEY FINDINGS

Based on our in-depth review, we found that **15 states, three territories, and the District of Columbia** explicitly mention “social and emotional learning (SEL)” in their education strategic plans. See Table 1.

Table 1. States and territories with explicit mention of SEL in their State Strategic Plans for Education

1. [Arkansas](#)
2. [California](#)
3. [Connecticut](#)
4. [Hawaii](#)
5. [Illinois](#)
6. [Kansas](#)
7. [Maryland](#)
8. [Massachusetts](#)
9. [Nevada](#)
10. [New Hampshire](#)
11. [New York](#)
12. [Ohio](#)
13. [Rhode Island](#)
14. [South Carolina](#)
15. [Wisconsin](#)
16. [District of Columbia](#)
17. [Guam](#)
18. [Puerto Rico](#)
19. [US Virgin Islands](#)

About the Collaborating States Initiative

In 2016, CASEL launched the [Collaborating States Initiative](#) (CSI) to help state education agencies create statewide conditions that will encourage and equip educators at the district level to promote integrated, equity-focused, academic, social, and emotional learning (SEL).

CASEL initially planned to work with five states. In the past two years, the CSI team and its partners have worked with 25, which collectively serve about 11,500 school districts, 58,000 schools, and 30 million students. The initiative is nonpartisan—with blue states, red states, and purple states working together and learning from one another. Leaders in these states all share CASEL’s commitment to help ensure that preschool to high school students are fully prepared—academically, socially, and emotionally—to succeed in school, at work, and in life.

States are asked to develop customized SEL plans and activities based on each state’s unique context. Some states are developing guidelines or professional learning to support student SEL. Others are articulating competencies/standards for student SEL. Some are strategically integrating SEL into existing programs and priorities, including academics. Still others are using a combination of these strategies. All are committed to creating statewide conditions where educators are effectively equipped and encouraged to support their students’ social and emotional development.

CASEL’s roles are to:

- Share research findings, information about best practices, and tools such as guidance on how to integrate SEL into English Language Arts, mathematics, and social studies.
- Facilitate connections and sharing of examples and resources across states.
- Provide technical assistance to states that request it.
- Document how states, districts, and schools are implementing these policies and practices.
- Share the findings to help other states that are on a similar journey.

Going forward, CASEL seeks to advance implementation across our partner states, deepen understanding of how they can best support districts, and strengthen communication to all 50 states.

The initiative is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Pure Edge, Inc. The views expressed in this brief do not necessarily reflect the views of the organizations.

Some states mentioning SEL in their strategic plans also have developed policies or guidance for SEL. See Table 2. For example, **12** of the states that explicitly mention SEL in their strategic plans have articulated competencies/standards or guidance for SEL. The remaining three states that mention SEL do not currently have policies or guidance in place that explicitly connects to SEL, although mention of SEL suggests a growing interest in intentionally supporting SEL at the state level.

Table 2. States and territories that include SEL in their strategic plans *also* have policies or guidance for SEL

States that have articulated SEL K-12 competencies or provided guidance for SEL	States and territories without current SEL K-12 competencies or guidance for SEL
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. California – guidance 2. Connecticut – PreK-3 competencies & guidance 3. Illinois – PreK-12 aligned competencies & guidance 4. Kansas – PreK-12 competencies & guidance 5. Maryland – PreK-2 aligned competencies 6. Massachusetts – PreK-K competencies & guidance 7. Nevada – PreK-12 competencies 8. New Hampshire – PreK competencies & guidance 9. New York – PreK-12 competencies & guidance 10. Ohio – PreK-3 aligned competencies & guidance 11. Rhode Island – PreK-12 competencies & guidance 12. Wisconsin – PreK-adulthood aligned competencies & guidance 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Arkansas 2. Hawaii 3. South Carolina 4. District of Columbia 5. Guam 6. Puerto Rico 7. US Virgin Islands

In addition to explicitly mentioning SEL in their education strategic plans, many states use SEL as an opportunity to advance and accomplish multiple goals. See Table 3. Specifically, at least **eight of these states, two territories, and the District of Columbia** connect SEL to the achievement of one or more goals related to college and career readiness, school climate, professional development, community and family engagement, and/or equity and inclusion.

Table 3. States and territories aligning SEL to related goals

States and territories that use SEL to achieve multiple goals in their strategic plans	College and Career Readiness	School Climate	Professional Development	Community and Family Engagement	Equity and Inclusion
Arkansas	✓		✓	✓	
Hawaii	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Illinois		✓	✓	✓	✓
Massachusetts		✓		✓	
Nevada		✓	✓	✓	
New York		✓	✓	✓	✓
Ohio	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rhode Island	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
District of Columbia	✓	✓			
Puerto Rico		✓			
Guam					✓

Examples

- The [District of Columbia Public Schools Plan](#) connects SEL to the importance of college and career readiness with the goal to “Provide rigorous, joyful, and inclusive academic and social emotional learning experiences to ensure all students are college and career ready.”
- The [Illinois State Board of Education's Comprehensive Plan for Elementary and Secondary Education](#) supports school climate with SEL, explicitly mentioning SEL under its goal that “Every school offers a safe and healthy learning environment for all students.”
- The [Arkansas Department of Education Strategic Plan](#) integrates SEL with the goal of “professional learning on the development of personal competencies,” so that “students will develop and apply personal competencies that promote learning and success in life.”
- Ohio's five-year strategic plan, [Each Child, Our Future, Ohio's Strategic Plan for Education: Built by Ohioans for Ohioans](#), recognizes SEL as equal to other aspects of student learning including foundational knowledge and skills. The plan connects SEL to community and family engagement with the “whole child approach” to “work together with parents, caregivers and community partners to help schools meet the needs of the whole child.”

- The [New York ESSA Plan](#) supports equity and inclusion through SEL, with the goal that “The Department will also promote the understanding of diverse cultural characteristics, positive disciplinary practices, improving school climate, and providing students with social-emotional support.”

For some states, SEL is the foundation of their strategic plans. Notably, the [Rhode Island Board of Education Strategic Plan for Public Education](#) not only offers “Social Emotional Learning and Wellness” as a key component of its priority to educate “globally competent graduates” but also views two of the critical outcomes of SEL as improved college and career readiness for graduates and stronger cultural inclusion throughout schools. In addition, the state strategic plan commits to improve school climate and enhance professional development. Rhode Island’s recently adopted K-12 SEL competencies reflect and support the state’s commitment to SEL in its strategic plan.

SEL is featured throughout [Each Child, Our Future, Ohio’s Strategic Plan](#), as one of the state’s “four learning domains.” In the plan, the state describes SEL as an active method for improving school climate and teacher instruction. In addition, SEL supports Ohio’s core principle of equity, so that “each child is mastering knowledge and skills essential for future success.” The Ohio Strategic Plan not only views SEL as a catalyst for achieving multiple goals but also commits to making SEL an explicit part of the state’s education system. Ohio sets a goal to develop K-12 SEL competencies with the help of “educators, employers and experts.” Currently, Ohio has PreK-3 social and emotional standards, but the current development of K-12 social and emotional standards underscores its ongoing commitment to SEL.

It is important to note that not all states that commit to SEL in their strategic plans have developed SEL K-12 competencies. For example, although Hawaii does not currently have K-12 SEL competencies/standards, SEL is an integral component of the [Hawaii State Department of Education and Board of Education Strategic Plan’s](#) goals. The mission states, “We serve our community by developing the academic achievement, character, and social-emotional well-being of our students to the fullest potential.” The plan outlines the importance of community and family engagement to support students’ well-being, striving for “partnerships with families, community organizations, and government agencies.” In addition, the state emphasizes the importance of SEL for cultural awareness, as well as for improving college and career readiness, school climate, and professional development. Enriched by Hawaii’s existing commitment to SEL, developing K-12 SEL competencies would further support the multiple goals outlined in its strategic plan.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

State strategic plans offer a window into the key education priorities for each state.

This [table](#) provides an overview of all jurisdictions' strategic plans, with links and opportunities for connecting SEL to other priorities such as college and career readiness and equity and inclusion.

This [file](#) provides a summary of each state's education strategic plan, focusing on opportunities for connecting with SEL.

The table shows that many states and territories have identified goals relating to college and career readiness (n=48), school climate (n=34), professional development (n=48), community and family engagement (n=34), and equity/inclusion (n=28). Although **11** states and territories explicitly connect one or more of these goals to SEL, not all of them do—at least not yet.

State strategic plans for education are crucial for understanding the unique priorities and goals for student learning in each state. We found:

- SEL is reflected in many state strategic plans to advance and accomplish the common goals of education.
- Some states are explicitly using SEL as an opportunity to advance and accomplish multiple goals in their strategic plans.
- Aligning SEL to a state strategic plan can be helpful to create buy-in among state officials.

States have told us that much of their increased interest in SEL has been catalyzed by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which encouraged states to look at different indicators of student achievement beyond reading and math test scores. Our April 2017 [brief](#) profiled early examples of how states were using ESSA to advance SEL. Our June 2018 [brief](#), published with the Learning Policy Institute, offers advice on appropriate ways states can measure SEL and implementation.

State strategic plans for education offer an opportunity to identify SEL as a state priority. Currently 15 states, the District of Columbia, and three U.S. territories explicitly mention SEL in their state education plans. Further, SEL is *foundational* to the strategic plans of Rhode Island, Ohio, and Hawaii. The CSI's goal is that over the next five years we will see at least 25 states connecting to SEL in their strategic plans, and SEL will be foundational in at least six states' plans.

Steps States Can Take

The strategic planning process provides educational leaders an important opportunity to build foundational support for SEL and identify future priorities. Ideally states will “operationalize” the broad aspirational goals for SEL into a small number of powerful strategies and specific and measurable objectives that are likely to move the educational system forward with or without substantial new funding. For example:

- If you have not done so already, adopt SEL competencies/standards that describe what students at various levels should know and be able to do.
- Elevate districts' SEL work and work closely with districts to build relationships and address common challenges. One approach would be to identify and publish a guide on SEL evidence-based practices, creating a benchmark for local school districts to implement effectively, using new or existing SEL programs. States also could develop a community of practice series for principals to share these practices or pilot evidence-based practices in a few districts for two years, with plans to scale in subsequent years.
- Align SEL with other key initiatives across the state, such as mental health, PBIS, trauma-informed practices, multitier systems of support, and nonexclusionary discipline/restorative justice systems.
- Use the strategic planning process to build foundational support (or build on existing foundational support) and create a clear vision for SEL.
- Engage a wide range of stakeholders in the work, including some with deep expertise in SEL and others who serve in advocacy or parent/family roles.
- Use the state's strategic planning process as a model for district strategic planning by providing concrete examples of SEL items in surveys and focus groups.

Our *Spotlight* series of briefs provides examples of state leadership in all of these areas.

- [*Innovation in Action: How States and School Districts are Collaborating to Support Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning*](#)
- [*Deeper Insights: How Six States Are Collaborating with Local and Regional Educators to Implement Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning*](#)

In addition, our expanded [web resources](#) offer practical, curated tools for developing a vision, creating a strategic plan, and communicating about the work, among other topics.

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