Key Takeaways from the Live Q&A Chat for Educators

Educators nationwide are welcoming students and adults back to school, in whatever form that may take, to reunite, renew, and thrive. On August 25, CASEL collaborated with more than 30 leaders to host a discussion forum about restarting the school year with social and emotional learning (SEL). The forum was anchored in guidance from the Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: SEL Roadmap for Reopening School (released July 2020).

Below are some key questions and responses from the discussion, organized by break-out room.

ROOM 1: TAKE TIME TO CULTIVATE AND DEEPEN RELATIONSHIPS, BUILD PARTNERSHIPS, AND PLAN FOR SEL.

This school year will be characterized by a complex mix of emotions, logistical challenges, constant change, inspired activism, and economic uncertainty. By prioritizing relationships and planning for SEL, you can establish a stronger foundation for the challenging work ahead.

Guest Panelists: Pat Conner, CASEL; Sabrina Winkleman, Minnesota Department of Education; Dr. Ralph Simpson, Clayton Public Schools; Dr. Gloria Duncan, Clayton Public Schools; Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom, Forum for Youth Investment; Dr. Kathleen Airhart, Council of Chief State School Officers; Kaylan Connally, Council of Chief State School Officers

Q: How are you building relationships and strengthening connectedness this school year?

Panelists shared... If we as leaders, teachers, service workers, and support departments do not first examine ourselves and make the necessary commitment to building relationships, dealing with our self-awareness, social awareness, our decision-making process, and our implicit biases and make changes in our own thinking, we will be unable to model those behaviors for students. As we self-assess our perceptions and limitations, we can develop a growth mindset and sense of empathy for others. It is only then that we will be able to impact our students’ decision-making and thought process and make a difference in the way we collaborate among ourselves as adults, as well as with our children.

As for our students, they are making these major transitions, and school-based educators can best serve them by reminding them of the competencies they have for relationship-building, stress management, and problem-solving and asking them who is supporting them during the transition. One important way to do this is to create a consistent advisory structure. This can help the educators become more attuned and responsive to the needs of individuals. The other tool that helps ensure all students are known well is Equal Opportunity School's "Student Insight Cards": Students fill out a survey, and the data populates
a living "card" about them that teachers can use to pay attention to assets, challenges, connections, needs, and more.

Q: How will we ensure clear, consistent, and culturally responsive communications, and how can SEL be central to trauma-informed work?

Panelists shared... One of the hardest things to explain to our children is differences. We need to use cultural practices that are age-appropriate. We need to discuss the things we have in common. It is an ongoing process, and the hope is that the discussions will also take place at home. We must remember that learning happens in communities as well as in schools. Think about how and how much the "school community" actually reflects and connects to the community in which the school sits, and how you can build stronger connections. Meet with parents to help explain the issues that will come up during those talks. It takes constant repetition to bring about change. Clayton Public Schools shared how trauma-informed care is a big piece of their SEL work. Instructors in the district receive ongoing training from a licensed psychologist to help them detect signs of trauma in students, and student engagement specialists make home visits if needed. The district also offers daily activities designed to address trauma-informed care.

Q: How do you effectively deal with the mindset of ‘this is just one more thing on my plate’?

Panelists shared... If SEL is embedded and integrated into all aspects of school life, it is the way you do business every day. Our jobs are not just to convey content. Social, emotional, and cognitive competencies are needed to make meaning out of content. It’s important especially this year to constantly remind all adults that learning is social and emotional. If students don’t feel socially connected and emotionally safe, they shut down. This happens in person, and it will certainly happen online and in hybrid learning environments. Once students feel they are in a safe, supportive learning space, learning accelerates. If you’re not checking for and acknowledging SEL competencies, you’re not optimizing content learning. That said, doing this does take time, training, and tools. Educators need administrator support and flexibility.

ROOM 2: DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADULTS TO CONNECT, HEAL, & BUILD CAPACITY TO SUPPORT STUDENTS

Educators shoulder significant responsibility in helping young people understand, process, and heal from these momentous events. But in order to effectively support students, adults will need to feel connected, supported, valued, and capable of taking on the challenges ahead.

Guest Panelists: Justina Schlund, CASEL; Dr. Gracie Branch, NAESP; Amy Nicholson, Turnaround for Children; Kathleen Osta, National Equity Project; Hugh Vasquez, National Equity Project

Q: Our school wants to require staff to include SEL as a goal in teacher professional development plans. Where should we start?

Panelists shared... A place to start is always with relationships and connection. Encourage staff to think about what they will most need to be able to show up for their students and write a goal around that. Explore the 6 “C” goals that include collaboration and critical thinking. Distribute all six goals and engage them in picking one that speaks to them the most. It’s also critical to ensure that whatever tool teachers choose is meaningful to them and integrated into how they are organizing teaching and learning with
their students. As a school, try to co-construct instructional and content priorities where teachers have some say in what gets prioritized. After providing some choice and reassurance, remind them about how the brain functions, because without creating opportunities to reduce stress, neither adult staff nor young people will be able to engage in learning.

Q: I am concerned about teachers’ state of mind and being so overwhelmed that they have a hard time building relationships with students. How do you help staff manage this stress so it doesn’t flow over to their teaching?

Panelists shared… Help teachers and staff understand why SEL begins with adults. We know that relationships and connection can buffer against stress and adversity, but if we don't start to understand why it matters, we can often find reasons to deprioritize this work. Create a culture of self-care by working with staff as part of team meetings or professional learning to identify what they need to be able to tune into their own stress and manage that stress. It is also an opportunity to practice depth over breadth and expand what "counts" as meaningful learning and success.

Build in regular opportunities for self-reflection—through dyads or journaling with prompts that support educators to reflect on how they respond to stress, what impact the pandemics are having on them and their families, or what they draw on for strength. Then offer regular opportunities to share reflections with colleagues to build a caring community. Do regular emotional check-ins with staff so it becomes part of the culture and norm to be able to express when they're feeling stressed and find support. Try informal chats with teachers, and in turn they can use the same protocol with students:

- Initiate – Open the conversation as you would start any informal discussion with that person.
- Open – Start with a question that invites your conversation partner to share as much or as little as they are comfortable sharing. Be more specific than “how are you?”
- Personalize – Let them know that your first priority is knowing about them as a person by bringing it up on the front end of your conversation.
- Close – End on an optimistic, forward-thinking note.

Q: How can a district/school help parents with their social and emotional well-being to be able to help the students through this challenging time?

Panelists shared… Parents are feeling tremendous stress, and they have legitimate concerns about their kids. Help them expand their mental models about the purpose of school to include building community, emotional wellness, resistance to oppression, critical consciousness, etc. We can acknowledge and affirm what they are experiencing and respond with empathy. It’ll also likely be necessary to build new partnerships with community-based organizations to provide more wrap-around supports. Parents are suddenly thrust into homeschooling with no preparation. Communicate with them, and listen with empathy. The more information you have, the better you will be able to help them. Ask what kind of support they need and what their biggest barriers to engagement are. Offer your knowledge about what we think needs to happen for their child in order to learn and develop.

ROOM 3: CREATE SAFE, SUPPORTIVE, & EQUITABLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS THAT PROMOTE ALL STUDENTS’ SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The shifts in these last months have heightened our understanding of how students’ social and emotional competencies support their learning and development. Students are best able to develop and apply these competencies when caring adults work together to create equitable learning environments
where all students feel like they belong and have consistent opportunities to learn about, reflect on, and practice SEL, explore their identities, and express their voice and agency.

**Guest Panelists:** Dr. Deidre Farmbry, CASEL; Johanna Leslie, Transforming Ed; Dr. Amanda Fitzgerald, ASCA; Joel Scott, M.S.Ed., Turnaround for Children; Dr. Kevin Tan, School Social Work Association of America

**Q: What are your recommendations for developing safe, equitable learning environments in virtual classrooms?**

Panelists shared... Build in activities that promote relationships, such as daily check-in questions with students that are not related to the academic content. This will help students not feel pressured or required to just jump into learning. They can be themselves and share out, which can help put anxiety at ease, and makes the transition into academics much easier for the teacher. Small simple actions can go a long way. Help build the support system around the students by linking the student with teachers or other trusted adults in the school, or help to broaden the students' network and connections with others in the building.

One practice you might want to try is a 2x10 if you can fit it into your schedule. You essentially spend two minutes per day for 10 days in a row with a student for some one-on-one time. They talk, you listen, no agenda. It's a light lift towards strong trust. Specifically via virtual work, we've seen many people use a Google form (or another quick digital tool) to do a check-in or a ticket out. This can have one to three quick questions gauging how students are doing and if they would like an opportunity to talk to someone. If you are feeling rushed, this might be (a) a good way for students to know you want to hear them and (b) a way for you to hook them up with support if they need it.

Staff training and professional development is also key to share strategies on addressing equity (e.g., How do we talk with students about the issues that are currently going on? What do we look out for?). And, of course, there is the important role of engaging the parents as well.

**Q: How do I use SEL to better support and enhance the well-being of our students who are going through a lot in our world and their homes, and are also victims of systemic racism?**

Panelists shared... While there’s no replacement for training, consider using this trauma-informed toolkit as a starting point for you and your team. Empower students by helping them process and talk about their experiences in a culturally responsive way, and give them platforms to express themselves and explore their identity. Think about using book clubs, art, journaling, poetry, and drama as ways for students to express themselves and celebrate cultural nuances. We can help create a community where they feel safe and supported. Ways to do this include establishing an advisory, crew, or homeroom and supporting students in co-developing a “classroom charter” of norms to encourage their agency while nurturing a safe and supportive virtual environment. A relationship mapping strategy can also offer an opportunity for staff to engage with students who may be at risk of disengaging, and can highlight opportunities to support distance learning.

**Q: How do we assess a student's emotional safety in their homes? It may be difficult for them to be "present" for learning because they are in an environment that may not be supportive.**

Panelists shared... This is tough. You may not be able to assess just by the camera view and you may not get any verbal cues either. SEL activities asking students to process their experiences with the pandemic might help, as well as ways for them to submit digital information saying they need to talk to a trusted adult or need help, etc.
One option is sending students a survey that asks about how distance learning is going for them. There's lots of options, including this one from Panorama. You can also administer something you create using a free platform like Google Forms. As always, surveys and other data collection efforts are just one tool in your toolbox, especially if these types of questions run the risk of raising students' stress levels. They should be used in tandem with other resources, and it's important that your school or district has a plan for providing resources if a student needs additional support. Similarly, various family-school relationships surveys can be helpful, though the same caveats apply.

**Q: What can you use for a baseline on SEL programs to see if students are making progress?**

**Panelists shared...** Surveys can be used if they are formative and helpful to understand how young people and their families are doing. Look at the learning environment, how relationships are going, and how things are being implemented as opposed to focusing on skills and growth. Asynchronous check-ins between school staff and students/families (including phone calls, texts, WhatsApp, etc.) are an important way to establish a baseline. True family and community partnerships go beyond a standardized SEL curriculum and focus on relationship-building.

**ROOM 4: USE DATA AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE POWER, DEEPEN RELATIONSHIPS, AND CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVE SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS, FAMILIES, AND STAFF**

As we approach a school year that demands innovation and responsiveness, a commitment to continuous improvement will help ensure that existing and new strategies translate into optimal and equitable outcomes. The process of continuous improvement will involve partnering with the broader school community to collectively examine and address students’ and adults’ ongoing needs and strengths. Collect, reflect on, and share both quantitative and qualitative data that elevate the feedback and experiences of students, families, community members, and staff.

**Guest Panelists:** Dr. Duncan Meyers, CASEL; Dr. Rafiqah Mustafaa, CASEL; Dr. Christine Pitts, NWEA; Dr. Dave Paunesku, PERTS; Dr. Clark McKown, xSEL Labs

**Q: What are best practices to get students to respond productively to survey data (especially open-ended questions)?**

**Panelists shared...** Make sure the students know why you’re surveying them and how the data will be used. If they're invested in the purpose of the assessment (and know they won't be judged or penalized), they might be more inclined to respond fully and frankly. If it is formative data, show students it has an impact, either on instruction or the way you interact with them. Focus on content that is relevant to them. Students will watch carefully to see if you do anything with their survey input, so follow through and do something constructive with their responses. Otherwise, they'll be de-motivated the next time. We often forget to close the loop after collecting data, which might lead to missed opportunities to bring cohesion into our assessments, teaching, and learning systems.

**Q: How can educators use data processes and continuous improvement to share power and include families and community members in decision-making?**

**Panelists shared...** Gathering the assessment data gets you to the starting line, but using the data wisely and well is the biggest part of the race. Be clear about what you are assessing and the decisions you'll make with the assessment data. Then, there needs to be a process for reviewing, interpreting, and
making decisions with the data. Districts that have established strong processes for reviewing academic
data can assimilate SEL data into existing processes.

One approach is intentionally seeking stakeholders' input on their goals for the school year. What do
students and families hope the return to school process will look like? What do they hope will be
happening three months from now? Use that input to shape practices and inform data collection along
the way. Moving into next year, we must maintain integrity to our pre-pandemic strategic plans, which
means collecting data that aligns with those goals. In the context of COVID, we should be lengthening
the runway and connecting with community-based orgs who are embedded in our schools already.
Consider how practices like home visits can round out data collection.

Q: How can we use data to create supportive learning environments and promote social,
emotional, and academic learning for all students?

Panelists shared... Students are > 30% more likely to earn As and Bs when they experience a teacher as
caring, see assignments as meaningful, and see the feedback they receive as constructive. We know
from research that teachers can use a variety of strategies to create these conditions, but there’s a lot of
variability in what works where. That means it’s iteration and local data are essential.

At PERTS, we recommend that teachers collect ongoing feedback from their students (using very brief
surveys and follow-up conversations) about how they experience key learning conditions. We also
encourage teachers to come together as a team to review their data and share insights about what’s
working for them. Often, the best insights for what works in your school will come from a different
teacher in the same building—and from having follow-up conversations with students about their
survey results. One of the big challenges during the pandemic and online learning is the question of
when and how to assess. On the one hand, folks want to wait until we’re back together. On the other
hand, student social and emotional wellness and relationships with teachers are more important than
ever, so it is important to get a handle on where students are starting. Some CASEL partner
districts use the SEL 3 Signature Practices to plan ways to integrate welcoming activities, engaging instruction, and
optimistic closures.

Q: How can we collect data in ways that are timely, transparent, and non-intrusive and
illuminate disparate experiences?

Panelists shared... Data don’t care what we do with them. It’s when we look at them, start to make
interpretations, and make decisions based on what the data say that the potential for good or ill really
declares itself. Focus on making data collection relational (as much as possible). When data are too far
removed from their uses, things get sticky and disjointed. It is helpful when the intent and spirit of
collecting the data is shared with me from the beginning (e.g., is it informing the strategic plan, is it
informing resources at your kids' school). It’s so important to keep central the purpose for which data
are being collected—and to make sure that the right people get access to them in a timely way.

There are lots of survey and exit ticket tools that provide transparent, timely, and non-intrusive data.
That’s mostly a matter of keeping surveys or exit tickets brief and using a technology that makes the
results accessible quickly (and keeps them confidential so students are comfortable being honest).
However, to illuminate disparities, it’s important to:

- Disaggregate data by race, gender, or other factors that map to opportunity in your context.
- Ask students about aspects of their experiences that are more likely to be disparate across lines
  of opportunity. For example, do students feel like their culture and community are affirmed in
class? Do they feel like they are treated with respect by teachers?
ROOM 5: COLLABORATE WITH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS TO ALIGN STRATEGIES

This is a time to empower educators, families, and community partners to work together to strengthen connections in support of all student’s growth and development. The pandemic and mobilization against systemic racism have elevated that social, emotional, and academic learning, and development occurs across multiple contexts—school buildings, homes, peer groups, afterschool and summer programs, libraries, parks, recreation centers, online—and across communities.

**Guest Panelists:** Sherrie Raven, CASEL; Rebecca Bauer, National PTA; Ingrid Colon, UnidosUS; Anna Maier, Learning Policy Institute; Jessy Newman, American Institutes for Research; Jose Rodriguez, UnidosUS

**Q: What are strategies for engagement with families dealing with the current challenges?**

**Panelists shared...** It’s important to affirm parents/families for all that they are doing. It’s a tough and challenging time. Including family (and student voice) in multidisciplinary teams leads to more engagement in the process. It’s also important to engage with the PTA about SEL to help make sure parents are a part of these important conversations. Let them know you hear them and understand their struggles. Don’t forget about making that personal connection in supporting them! Consider creating a checklist for parents about optimal learning for the student. Do they have a dedicated space? Is it clean and organized? Do they have their materials? This is a great way to increase engagement because parents can easily use it.

Out-of-school time providers are also finding new and innovative ways (webinar example) to support young people and their families. Many are partnering with districts to provide in-person support to small cohorts of students on school campuses and even community properties (like local parks and rec facilities). This is especially important now that out-of-school time is all the time for most cities and states. Out-of-school time programs are staying open for more hours and providing opportunities to do remote learning on-site in smaller groups. Some PTAs are also offering extracurricular activities virtually to host virtual yoga sessions, cooking classes, etc.

**Q: What are some things that teachers have done remotely to connect with parents as a welcome for them and students?**

**Panelists shared...** Many districts have focused on providing staff with trauma-informed (or healing-centered) skills and are reaching out to families one-on-one to ask how the summer has been.

Our school is doing a virtual meet-and-greet for each class via Zoom. Some teachers share resources with families about creating positive conditions for learning at home. There are some wonderful ideas about virtual open houses, teacher intro videos, etc.

It’s super important to find a way to make personal contact with each family (whether a call, a text, a WhatsApp message, etc.) and to let them know how to be in touch asynchronously while school is happening virtually. Starting with a phone call is powerful. Keeping an open dialogue where parents (and students) can share about their experiences and needs is so important. It takes time to build these relationships, but it’s crucial. Plus, if done well, you can model effective communication skills and focus on relationship-building, trust, and collaboration.
Q: What recommendation do you have for community organizations (churches/neighborhood groups) that want to be in partnership with schools to support students and staff?

Panelists shared... This is a great opportunity for them to get connected to the PTA/PTO. They may be able to collaborate with parent leaders to offer programming or support existing initiatives. It could be great to also connect them with educators who might want to collaborate with them. Chatting with a school administrator about how they might be able to help the school community would be effective too. For example, perhaps these organizations could offer mentorship for students or other activities. Lastly, even if there isn't an official PTA, if there are any parents that are particularly active or enthusiastic about engaging in school life, it would be great to involve them! Creating a Facebook page with parents is a great way to stay connected with them. Once they've joined, you will be able to use the Create a Room feature to invite parents for meetings without having to use an email address or number.

ROOM 6: ELEVATE YOUTH VOICE AND PERSPECTIVES

Partner with students to understand how they experience school and how that can inform plans to improve learning and engagement. In developmentally appropriate and authentic ways, examine data, identify strengths and issues, and develop plans together to achieve individual and schoolwide goals.

Guest Panelists: Karen VanAusdal, CASEL; Chris Chatmon, Kingmakers of Oakland; Nancy Duchesneau, Education Trust; Sean Flanagan, Center for Promise at America’s Promise Alliance

Q: How are you seeing ways to elevate youth voices in your contexts?

Panelists shared... Kingmakers operates from the frame of “Healing the Fish, While Treating the Toxic Ecosystem.” We accelerate academic outcomes for Black boys from PreK through 12th grade while addressing the systems, structures, conditions, and culture that perpetuate white supremacy and the differentiated racialized outcomes that show up as the school to prison pipeline. Public schools struggled to engage Black youth when they were at school. COVID only accelerated the disconnect and lack of engagement between schools and the Black community. We initiated a street team of youth and started hosting Instagram live conversations with youth.

Education Trust has been lifting student voice in our work because their experiences count above all. Our new report, Social, Emotional, and Academic Development Through an Equity Lens, features voices from students of color (as well as families of color) with regard to how they experience social-emotional well-being, and how schools can support their development. Our recent discipline guide features the students from Oakland, CA, and Chicago, IL, about how they've experienced the good and the bad of discipline policies, and bolsters our district and state-level action list for creating more equitable learning environments.

At America’s Promise Alliance, our research centers around a range of topics related to positive youth development, education, and well-being. Throughout our work, we try to ground our research in youth perspectives, relying heavily on youth-centered qualitative research that uses group interviews, individual interviews, etc. Our recent report, All of Who I Am, is a great example. We also recently conducted a nationally representative survey of high school youth that suggests that students are experiencing a collective trauma, and that they and their families would benefit from immediate and ongoing support.
Q: Equity most often focuses on race, but in what ways are you working to address other inequities, like sexual orientation and gender identity?

Panelists shared... You cannot talk about equity in this country without talking about race. It is through a Eurocentric/hegemonic and paternal orientation and education that cultivates and perpetuates toxic masculinity, misogyny, and gender discrimination. We work with our youth around creating safe space regardless of how they see themselves so they can get the support, guidance, and education that engages, encourages, and empowers them.

We must curate safe space for our youth to understand, embrace and celebrate their feminine and masculine energies. It’s really about creating safe space for youth and adults for them to be exactly who they are, and for us to create the conditions to support one another in our individual and collective journey. Race is often the focal point because it’s so central to the fabric of our history and our existing policies. It’s most critical to think, however, about the intersectionality of race with other inequities, like those you raise, as well as others like disability and financial stability. We have to advocate from the outside in, so we need to think about those with the most obstacles, which absolutely requires thinking more broadly, bringing in voices from students of color with disabilities, who are queer or transgender, and who may come from low-income households. It means that when we talk about student or family voice, we’re really talking about a broad and varied set of voices.

We’re trying hard to think about equity from a youth-centered place, which requires understanding—just as you say—the multiple intersecting identities that shape a young person’s experiences and specifically, the various layers of how those identities are treated, marginalized, privileged, etc., within systems of power in our communities and what those identities mean for each unique young person individually.

Q: How do we create a space where youth feel they can be their authentic selves?

Panelists shared... At America’s Promise Alliance, we recently put out a youth engagement guide that followed from our research on All of Who I Am. It contains actionable strategies that educators, program providers, coaches, mentors, and other youth-supporting adults can use to authentically listen to and engage with young people about how they experience social, emotional, and cognitive development. The guide features 10 steps for meaningful and mutually beneficial engagement. I would also suggest taking a look at the Center for Teen Empowerment—a Boston-based non-profit that has inspired many of the relationship-building techniques we used in our research methodologies to create trust, space, and a youth-led space for open discussion.

We've seen schools hosting town halls, morning meetings, sharing principal videos, re-creating school opening rituals virtually, and other strategies. Set up one-on-ones with all of your students. Establish digital story nights, where families read to families or alumni from your school read to younger students. We all need counselors right now: children and adults. The SEL Roadmap also has some tools you can use for short check-in conversations with students, survey tools, ways to allow for students to exercise voice and choice in instruction.

Q: Is there a way to turn a curriculum into a student-centered curriculum that focuses on the whole child, the home, emotional, spiritual, and the community without judgement?

Panelists shared... This is such an important question. First, we need to do the hard work of addressing adult bias and how that influences teaching and learning before working on changing a curriculum. With that done, students, and especially students of color, can be involved in what the curriculum should entail. This could mean ensuring the curriculum is addressing the social and racial injustices students see, providing youth participatory action opportunities, and ensuring there is a diverse and non-
stereotypical representation of students in the curricula. All of these things have tremendous impacts on the development of students.

It's so critical to make sure SEL programs are not merely dictating to students how to behave or think, but are truly providing students with space to grapple with their emotions, the conflicts in their lives, the social and racial injustices they see, and that these programs truly provide holistic support for students. Think about giving students opportunities similar to talking circles or restorative circles to really think about how they conceptualize these social and emotional skills in their lives, how they already are showing competence in those skills, where they would like to improve, etc.

Consider what it might look like to incorporate your students into the decision-making process around assessment. Allowing students to share in the power of evaluation/grading can be a powerful way to drive youth-engagement.

Original date of online summit: Tuesday, August 25, 2020 • 4:30-5:30 pm ET
https://casel.org/reopening-with-sel/