

Culturally Responsive Social-Emotional Competency Development

In communities throughout Massachusetts, teachers and administrators strive to systematically strengthen the social-emotional competencies of students, for many reasons including improving students' academic performance; ability to manage stress and depression; and attitudes about themselves, others, and school.¹ Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has the capacity to help strengthen skills that can help students learn how to thrive; how to more deeply contribute to an increasingly interconnected, diverse global community; and how to work with others to transform systemic inequities.



As defined by the Collaborative for Social, Emotional and Academic Learning (CASEL), *SEL refers to a process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.*

*SEL advances educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation. SEL can help address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities.*² Note that there are a [range of other definitions](#) related to strengthening social and Emotional competencies that are also viable.

While the state ranks highly on numerous educational measures, there can be no excellence without equity, as illustrated in the report [#1 for Some](#).³ Over the past 25 years, the proportion of students of color in Massachusetts nearly doubled, from approximately 21-40 percent; while the proportion of white students decreased by nearly 20 percentage points, from approximately 79 to 60 percent.⁴ As the racial/ethnic and cultural backgrounds of our students continue to become ever more diverse, many of our educators are actively building a practice of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) and finding ways to make individual improvements as well as systemically strengthen educational equity experiences.⁵ Our education system is steeped in norms, traditions, and a lens that too often does not reflect and celebrate diversity. All students, families, and communities deserve access to schools that are inclusive, responsive, reflective, and affirming of all cultural backgrounds and identities.

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) recognizes that SEL instruction must be culturally responsive and sustaining, and grounded in equity and racial equity goals, to help all students have meaningful engagement in and access to high-quality SEL. As part of this work, all educators

¹ (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011) with additional information on <https://casel.org/impact/>.

² The CASEL definition of SEL is commonly used by the Department. CASEL has also defined five core competencies for SEL represented in the circle on this page.

³ The Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership (2018). [#1 for Some: Opportunity and Achievement in Massachusetts](#).

⁴ DESE profiles reports - [Enrollment By Race/Gender Report \(District\)](#), comparing 2019-2020 to 1994-1995 public school grades PK-12 enrollment data.

⁵ Some examples include efforts related to the [Educational Equity Professional Learning Network \(PLN\)](#).

must respect, value, and leverage students' identities, backgrounds, and cultures throughout the teaching and learning experience. As districts and schools continue to develop students' and adults social-emotional competencies, we collectively seek to ensure equity and success for ALL students.



This document defines access to SEL, culturally proficient SEL, and culturally responsive and sustaining SEL as follows:

- *Access to SEL* refers to the imperative that **all students** have opportunities for SEL experiences and skill development as a part of a tiered system of supports;
- *Culturally proficient SEL* refers to the creation of learning experiences that are **bias-free** and **respectful** of students' diverse backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges; and
- *Culturally responsive and sustaining SEL* refers to practices that **actively draw upon** (responsive) and **explicitly support** (sustaining) students' diverse backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges as a strategy to **deepen learning**. These practices must be interwoven with efforts that seek to address systemic inequities and advance equity goals, including racial equity goals and more.

Each of these terms will be discussed in greater depth throughout the document. Each builds upon the other, with the ultimate goal being to provide opportunities for ALL students to strengthen their own social-emotional competencies in culturally responsive and sustaining learning environments, with adults who are working together to continually deepen their own skills and understanding.

This document addresses the critical intersection of SEL and CRT, and complements numerous other Department resources such as the guidance on [Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Schools and Classrooms](#) and the [Text Inventory](#). It draws on input from the voices of a diverse group of Massachusetts educators and administrators, along with those of parents and nationally recognized scholars in SEL, and was crafted with the following goals in mind:

- **For districts and administrators:**
 - Emphasize the importance of engaging in ongoing professional learning (at both administrator and all staff levels) that supports implementation of culturally responsive social-emotional competency development.
 - Provide tools, structure, and support for reflection about current practice – to examine the extent to which SEL is culturally responsive and sustaining.
 - Share resources and strategies for increasing the linkage between SEL and CRT.
- **For teachers:**
 - Make explicit connections between SEL and CRT.
 - Foster reflection about current practice, and provide tools for enacting culturally responsive and sustaining SEL in schools and classrooms in districts across the Commonwealth.

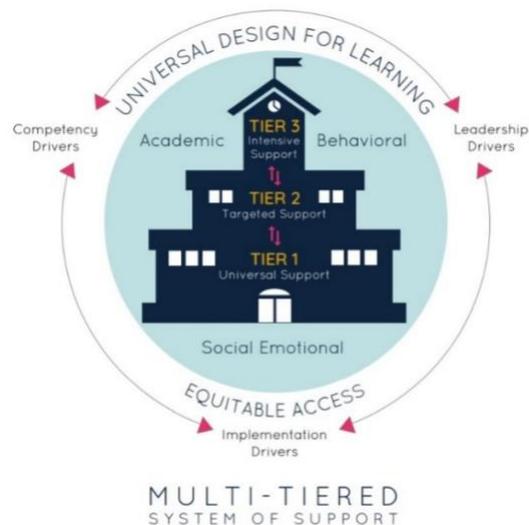
ACCESS TO SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Regardless of zip code, as noted in the state constitution, Massachusetts students deserve school experiences that “*inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings; sincerity, good humor, and all social affections, and generous sentiments.*”⁶ While the needs and approaches of supporting social and emotional outcomes vary, the Department seeks to ensure that all students have access to SEL. We have published [Guidelines on Implementing SEL Curricula, K-12](#) and a [website](#) dedicated to providing information and resources about SEL.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified [four general approaches](#) to SEL instruction:

- **Free-standing SEL lessons** that provide explicit, step-by-step instructions to teach students social and emotional competencies across the five core competencies;
- **General teaching practices** that create classroom and school-wide conditions that facilitate and support social and emotional development in students;
- **Integration** of skill instruction and practices that support SEL within the context of an **academic curriculum**; and
- **Guidance** to administrators and school leaders on how to facilitate SEL as a **school-wide initiative**.

Many Massachusetts schools implement a multi-tiered system of support,⁷ particularly around students’ academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs. The Department also recommends a tiered approach to SEL, where educators provide high quality instruction and general practices that help all students develop the core competencies of SEL (*tier one*); where educators and support staff provide supplemental supports based on individual students’ social and emotional needs and strengths (*tier two*); and where more intensive supports are available when individual student needs are more urgent and/or intensive (*tier three*).



Tier one SEL strategies will generally occur in whole-school, whole-class settings. Tier two and three supports may be provided through targeted group instruction, embedded within a classroom setting, in individualized work with students, in counseling sessions, and/or in other settings as appropriate. This type of system is central to the goal of the Department’s [strategic priority to support social-emotional learning, health, and safety](#): *to promote systems and strategies that foster equitable, culturally-*

⁶ [Massachusetts State Constitution](#), Section V, Chapter II

⁷ [MTSS](#) is a framework designed to meet the needs of all students by ensuring that schools optimize data-driven decision making, progress monitoring, and evidence-based supports and strategies with increasing intensity to sustain student growth. MTSS is not just about tiered interventions, but rather how all the systems in a school or district fit together to ensure a high-quality education for all students.

responsive, safe, positive, healthy, and inclusive learning environments that address students' varied needs and improve educational outcomes for all. Culturally responsive tiered approaches to strengthening social-emotional competencies in adults and students also helps further all four themes in the Commissioner's [Our Way Forward](#) 2019 report to the Board: *Deeper Learning for All; Holistic Support & Enrichment; Innovation & Evidence-Based Practice; and State as a Partner.*

Rethinking Discipline

Rethinking discipline strategies and outcomes is one of many educational areas of focus that may benefit from a culturally responsive and sustaining, tiered approach to SEL. Schools and districts are expected to periodically examine their own discipline-related data⁸ and are encouraged to review their data submitted to the Department through the School Safety and Discipline Report, as well as local data including but not limited to office discipline referrals and detentions; to conduct a root cause analysis, specifically highlighting student subgroups;⁹ and to consider ways that strengthening tiered SEL supports may assist with locally identified challenges and goals.

Inequities in statewide disciplinary data are disturbing and since 2016 the Department has engaged with the field to support local efforts through a professional learning network. As an example of inequities in statewide disciplinary trends, African American/Black students, Hispanic/Latino students, and students with disabilities with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) continue to be suspended at rates significantly greater than their peers. For instance, the 2018-2019 student discipline¹⁰ rates for African American/Black students (8.3 percent) and for Hispanic/Latino students (6.6 percent), were nearly 2.7 and 2.2 times, respectively, of that of White students (3.1 percent). Furthermore, the rate for students with IEP's (7.8 percent) was more than 1.8 times that of all students (4.2 percent).¹¹ These rates are alarming, and further training and opportunities for ongoing coaching and learning for staff and administrators can play a key role in helping strengthen social-emotional competencies for both adults and students, and in helping uncover and address root causes of such practices and disparities. Examples of professional learning topics for staff in this realm include self-reflection on bias and on choices related to ways to interact and communicate with students (and families and colleagues), anti-racist strategies, additional or alternative approaches to deepening relationships, and setting and supporting inclusive and culturally responsive and sustaining shared behavioral expectations for both students and adults. Furthermore, there is evidence that when implemented well, multi-tiered systems of support have been shown to reduce office discipline referral (ODR) rates. School personnel frequently use ODR rates to evaluate student behavior and the behavioral climate of schools. ODRs are associated with problematic behaviors and can be predictive of student aggression, drug use, defiance, behavior disorders, and juvenile delinquency.^{12,13}

Curriculum Frameworks Guiding Principles

Massachusetts [curriculum frameworks](#) provide teachers, students, and families with clear and shared expectations for what all students should know and be able to do at the end of each year; they formalize the expectation that all students in the Commonwealth have access to the same academic content

⁸ [Student Discipline Regulations, 603 CMR 53.14 \(2\)](#)

⁹ [Supporting School-Level Root Cause Analyses of Disproportionate Discipline Outcomes](#)

¹⁰ See [Student Discipline Data Report](#) for details.

¹¹ [Statewide Student Discipline Report](#) 2018-2019 data, 11.21.2019.

¹² Bui, X., Quirk, C., Almazan, S., & Valenti, M. (2010). [Positive behavioral interventions and supports research and practice. Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education](#), 1-13.

¹³ Simonsen, B., Eber, L., Black, A. C., Sugai, G., Lewandowski, H., Sims, B., & Myers, D. (2012). [Illinois statewide positive behavioral interventions and supports: Evolution and impact on student outcomes across years](#). *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 14(1), 5-16.

standards, regardless of their zip code, background, or abilities. The Department integrated SEL core competencies as guiding principles in revisions to the ELA/Literacy, Mathematics, History and Social Science, and Arts Curriculum Frameworks, and intends to continue this practice in additional revisions to other subject areas, to clarify and support the expectation that all students deserve access to SEL.

Examples of Additional SEL and Equity Related Resources:

- From the Department: [SEL Guiding Principle for Mathematics](#), [SEL Guiding Principle for ELA/Literacy](#), and more can be found on the [SEL webpage](#).
- From CASEL: [SEL as a Lever for Equity](#), [District Resource Center](#), [Schoolwide Guide](#), and [Resource Library](#)
- [Oakland Unified School District, CA](#) “[Three Signature SEL Practices](#)” and [CASEL playbook](#) that supports the 3 practices: 1) Welcoming Ritual - Activities for Inclusion, 2) Sense-Making and “Brain Breaks”, and 3) Optimistic Closure - Reflections & Looking Forward
- From the National Equity Project: [Social Emotional Learning & Equity - Pitfalls & Recommendations](#)

CULTURALLY PROFICIENT SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Approximately 9 percent of educators in Massachusetts are people of color, while students of color make up nearly 40 percent of the student body.¹⁴ Given that our teaching profession does not always reflect the same demographics as our students, it is critical that all educators demonstrate skill in teaching students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, and in building a learning environment that supports all students to be successful.¹⁵ As such, cultural proficiency is paramount, and is therefore an area of focus for the Department, educator preparation programs, and districts alike. The Department has established the following indicators regarding cultural proficiency in the Massachusetts Standards for Effective Practice shown in the [Educator Effectiveness Model Rubrics](#):

- Indicator II-C. **Cultural Proficiency:** Actively creates and maintains an environment in which students’ diverse backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges are respected.
- Indicator II-B. **Learning Environment:** Creates and maintains a safe and collaborative learning environment that motivates students to take academic risks, challenge themselves, and claim ownership of their learning.

“Many SEL programs bill themselves as being racially and culturally neutral. The reality is they aren’t. Teachers need to understand how SEL is situated in racial politics. We still have racial stratification. Society still marginalizes students of color, English learners, and low-income students.”

-- [Zaretta Hammond](#), Author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*

Culturally proficient learning experiences can provide students with *mirrors* to reflect on their own culture and identity as well as *sliding glass doors* (or windows) that enable students through understanding or imagination to better grasp the cultures and identities of others.¹⁶ For example, when

¹⁴ 2018 [Massachusetts State Equity Plan](#)

¹⁵ This is in addition to essential efforts needed to diversify the workforce. See this Department’ [guidebook](#) for examples of efforts underway in districts across the state.

¹⁶ Style, Emily (1988). Curriculum As Window and Mirror. Oak Knoll School’s “Listening for All Voices.” and National Seed Project, and Sims Bishop, Rudine. The Ohio State University. “[Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors](#)” originally appearing in Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom. Vo. 6. No. 3. Summer 1990.

building students’ self-awareness skills, culturally proficient SEL instruction respects and honors students’ individual and family/community identities and backgrounds and also supports students to consider how their identities and backgrounds are perceived by others and how they perceive others’ identities and backgrounds. In a culturally proficient SEL lesson, self-awareness and social awareness are often tightly linked.

In recent years, the Department has worked with districts to administer a “[Views of Climate and Learning](#)” (VOCAL) survey with students in grades 4, 5, 8, and 10. The data below comes from the responses of 10th graders to two of the questions in that survey and is an example of how VOCAL information can help support schools and districts in reflecting on school climate and culture.

Cultural Proficiency in the Massachusetts School Climate Survey, 2019¹⁷					
Percent 10th Grade Students Who Indicated <i>Mostly or Always True</i>, by Race/Ethnicity					
<i>Think of the last 30 days in school</i>	African American/ Black	Asian	Hispanic/ Latino	White	Other
Adults working at this school treat all students respectfully, regardless of a student's race, culture, family income, religion, sex, or sexual orientation.	81%	94%	86%	91%	86%
Adults at our school are respectful of student ideas even if the ideas expressed are different from their own.	76%	87%	81%	78%	77%

Representing and respecting students’ ideas, cultures and identities through SEL practices can affect school climate and safety in tangible ways. As noted in the Principles for Ensuring Safe and Supportive Learning Environments for LGBTQ Students,¹⁸ research shows that inclusion of LGBTQ topics in curricula corresponds to all students reporting that they feel safer in school, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Whether through an analysis of VOCAL data or through locally developed instruments, attention to students’ perceptions of school climate can lead to improved outcomes for all students.

Moreover, it is essential for schools and educators to assume the stance of learners and individually and collectively encourage, prompt, and listen to the voices of both students and their families about lived experiences and educational goals, and about what is working and not to support goals, interests, and needs. These voices can powerfully inform adult reflection and ways to adjust practices that better create and support equitable learning spaces for students.

Examples of Additional SEL and Equity Related Resources:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emerging Insights on Advancing SEL as a Lever for Equity and Excellence. Learnings from school districts working to leverage SEL in service of equity. (CASEL, 2020) • Strategies to Eliminate Equity Gaps in Educator Access (MA DESE) • Is Social-Emotional Learning Really Going to Work for Students of Color? (Education Week, Teacher, June 2, 2017)

¹⁷ n=53,274 10th graders. Massachusetts Views of Climate and Learning (VOCAL) Student Survey, 2019 [STATE REPORT](#).

¹⁸ [Principles](#) approved by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, March 24, 2015.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE & SUSTAINING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is built on a foundation of culturally proficient practice. It depends on approaching culture and identity as assets. Lessons are culturally respectful and bias-free, and they also leverage culture to improve and deepen learning. *“Educators can... use culture to build trust and relationships with students as well as develop the cognitive scaffolding that builds on the broader knowledge students already have so that they can become competent, independent learners.”*¹⁹

What is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

Cultural responsiveness is an approach to viewing culture and identity as assets, including students' race, ethnicity, or linguistic assets, among other characteristics.²⁰ *Culturally responsive teaching (CRT), as defined by Geneva Gay, is “the use of students’ cultural knowledge, experience, and perspectives in instruction to increase relevance and efficacy of student learning.”*²¹

In culturally responsive and sustaining SEL instruction, educators build upon culturally proficient practices by affirming and supporting cultural identities, and intentionally learning about and integrating knowledge of students' culture and identities into SEL instructional practice to build students' SEL skills. For example, to help support students' self- and social awareness competencies, educators can continually provide a wide range of literature and source material choices that are reflective of diverse authors and cultural experiences, and they can engage students in meaningful conversations about those perspectives in ways that are affirming of and build upon students' cultural identities, experiences, and more. Furthermore, schools can ensure that images and artwork in the school and curricular materials reflect the multiple identities of the students and their families (e.g., racial/ethnic, cultural, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, etc.), and they can engage students, families, and community members in ongoing discussions that inform these selections. To help support self-management competencies, educators can engage students in practicing strategies for setting and achieving self-selected goals; for navigating through, coping with, and addressing stressful situations; and for self-advocacy efforts. And to help strengthen relationship skills and responsible decision making, educators and administrators can actively engage students and families as partners in co-creating shared behavioral expectations and agreements for both students and adults, in ways that support individuals as well as the collective wellbeing of all in the community.

It is important for all of us in education to embrace asset-based practices with students from all cultural backgrounds and identities, and make an explicit commitment to sustaining the cultural identity of all students, families, and communities. The Department strongly encourages all educators to intentionally strive for culturally responsive and sustaining SEL to be foundational in their instructional practice.

Professional Learning

This country has a long and devastating history, perpetual struggle, and continued experience with institutional racism against Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC), and this is compounded by additional forms of oppression and inequity (often intersecting) based on ethnicity, national origin,

¹⁹ Zaretta Hammond, in [What the Experts are Saying](#). CASEL. May 2017.

²⁰ MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, [Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Schools and Classrooms](#)

²¹ Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.

religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, and more. In order to work towards disrupting inequities and building equitable schools and educational institutions, it is imperative for all working in education to proactively engage in professional development, reflective practices, and collaborative learning around issues of equity, including racial equity; culturally responsive and sustaining practices; and SEL.

Strengthening students' and adults' social-emotional competencies can provide an opportunity to acknowledge and buffer trauma experienced by multiple forms of oppression and systemic inequities; develop a sense of positive self-worth and social awareness in connection to race, color, sex, gender identity, religion, national origin, and sexual orientation; and contribute towards dismantling systemic racism and other forms of inequity. With this in mind, educators can continually learn about goals, interests, and experiences of students and their families, and support the development of social-emotional competencies, including sharing examples and illustrations that are congruent with the social and cultural experiences of their students. In addition to contributing to academic success, SEL can also support the development of students' sense of autonomy, agency, and social justice. As CASEL notes, [Transformative SEL](#) can be a process whereby young people and adults build strong, respectful, and lasting relationships that facilitate co-learning to critically examine root causes of inequity, and to develop collaborative solutions that lead to personal, community and societal well-being.

Massachusetts has established [standards for High Quality Professional Development](#) (HQPD). It is important that professional development for CRT and SEL focus on both building technical skills (learning and abilities related to specific tasks) and doing more adaptive work (that can require the skill and will to adjust to different situations and contexts with real time learning, strategizing, shifting, and evolving). In addition, adult professional learning experiences must themselves be culturally responsive and grounded in strong SEL practice aligned with current adult learning principles in order to be effective. For an example of how to design job-embedded professional development, see the [Guidebook for Inclusive Practice Job-Embedded PD Planning Guide](#).

Examples of Additional SEL and Equity Related Resources:

- [Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Schools and Classrooms](#) (MA DESE, 2019)
- [Text Inventory Handbook](#) (MA DESE, 2019)
- [Multi-tiered Systems of Support \(MTSS\) Academies](#) with areas of focus including Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leadership Practices

Reflection Guide:

As Massachusetts strives for excellence and equity for students from all backgrounds and identities, the Department seeks to develop a common language for SEL that is accessible, and culturally proficient, responsive, and sustaining. In support of this, the reflection guide on the following pages is offered as a way to help educator teams reflect on and self-assess their SEL practice through the lens of culturally proficiency, responsive, and sustaining teaching. It is intended to start or deepen the conversation around high-quality SEL instruction and to prompt best thinking and collaboration. Educators are strongly encouraged to consistently engage with students and families as well as colleagues, and to partake in opportunities for professional development and self-reflection, in ways that lead to insights and ideas about what experiences and practices are helpful and harmful, in order to help create learning experiences that benefit and support all students.

Social and Emotional Learning & Culturally Responsive Teaching Reflection Guide

Educator teams can use this tool to discuss and self-assess their practices in developing students' Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) skills through the lens of cultural proficiency and culturally responsive teaching (CRT). This tool aligns well to the Massachusetts Standards for Effective Practice shown in the [Educator Effectiveness Model Rubrics](#), and may be used in setting professional practice goals or identifying strategies for growth. Most specifically, the following indicators may be most relevant:

For teachers:

- Indicator II-B. **Learning Environment:** Creates and maintains a safe and collaborative learning environment that motivates students to take academic risks, challenge themselves, and claim ownership of their learning.
- Indicator II-C. **Cultural Proficiency:** Actively creates and maintains an environment in which students' diverse backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges are respected.

For administrators:

- Indicator II-A. **Environment:** Develops and executes effective plans, procedures, routines, and operational systems to address a full range of safety, health, and emotional and social needs of students.
- Indicator IV-B. **Cultural Proficiency:** Ensures that policies and practices enable staff members and students to interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment in which students' backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges are respected.

Additionally, Indicators II-B and III-C of the [Specialized Instructional Support Personnel \(SISP\) rubric](#) provide helpful alignment to cultural proficiency and SEL.

The tool below is designed to crosswalk the five competencies of SEL instruction (*self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making*) alongside the continuum of culturally responsive and sustaining SEL (*access, proficiency, responsiveness, sustaining*). After assessing basic access to SEL, the guide asks educators to reflect on specific examples or evidence of culturally proficient or responsive SEL practice relative to their: 1) learning environment, 2) instructional materials, and 3) instructional practice. Completing the tool will drive conversation about the extent to which efforts in each of these areas can be deepened for the benefit of our students.



As a reminder, in this document:

- *Access to SEL* refers to the imperative that **all students** have opportunities for SEL experiences and skill development as a part of a tiered system of supports;
- *Culturally proficient SEL* refers to the creation of learning experiences that are **bias-free** and **respectful** of students' diverse backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges; and
- *Culturally responsive and sustaining SEL* refers to practices that **actively draw upon** (responsive) and **explicitly support** (sustaining) students' diverse backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges as a strategy to **deepen learning**. These practices must be interwoven with efforts that seek to address systemic inequities and advance equity goals, including racial equity goals and more.



