

# Social Emotional Learning District Implementation and Professional Development Guidance

## Table of Contents

Social Emotional Learning District Implementation and Professional Development Guidance .....	1
Purpose of Social Emotional Learning Implementation Guidance.....	3
Creating SEL Leadership Teams.....	3
Assessing District Needs and Capacity .....	4
Why Conduct an SEL Needs Assessment? .....	5
Readiness Assessments .....	5
Capacity Assessments.....	5
Create a Vision for SEL.....	6
What is a Shared Vision for SEL? .....	7
Why Does my District Need a Shared Vision? .....	7
When Should my District Develop a Shared Vision for SEL? .....	7
Who Develops the Vision?.....	8
SEL Implementation Plan.....	8
SEL Professional Development .....	8
Why Does my District Need to Offer Comprehensive SEL Professional Development? .....	9
When Should my District Provide Comprehensive SEL Professional Development?.....	9
Who is the Audience for Social and Emotional Learning Professional Development? .....	9
Develop District Expertise .....	10
What Does it Mean to Build District SEL Expertise?.....	10

Why is it Important to Build SEL Expertise in District Leaders? ..... 11

Who Delivers Social and Emotional Learning Professional Development? ..... 11

High-Quality SEL Professional Development..... 12

Additional SEL Professional Development Support..... 13

SEL Communication Planning ..... 14

    Why Does my District Need to Develop a Communication Plan? ..... 14

    When Should my District Develop a Communication Plan? ..... 15

    Who to Include When Developing Your Communication Plan?..... 15

Adopting SEL Learning Goals ..... 15

    Why Does my District Need SEL Learning Goals?..... 15

    SEL Competencies..... 16

    Explicit Instruction ..... 16

    Embedded Instruction ..... 18

    Teacher Pedagogy ..... 19

    Schoolwide Support..... 19

Resource Alignment ..... 20

    Integration ..... 20

    Why Does my District Need to Integrate Social and Emotional Learning with District Priorities? ..... 21

Continuous Improvement ..... 21

    What are SEL Goals and Metrics?..... 22

    Why Does My District Need to Develop SEL Goals and Metrics?..... 22

    Why Does my District Need to Use Data to Drive Implementation? ..... 22

    When Should my District Consult Data as a Part of Driving Implementation? ..... 23

Reference List ..... 23

## Purpose of Social Emotional Learning Implementation Guidance

The purpose of this Social Emotional Learning (SEL) guidance is to provide school districts with a framework for integrating SEL into schools, so that students will learn, practice and model essential personal life skills that will contribute to their academic, vocational and personal success.

Social emotional learning (SEL) is considered a universal approach to prevent and reduce bullying and improve school climate. In other words, SEL is for *all* students and *all* staff because everyone has social and emotional needs, concerns, and skills. SEL is a process of developing student and adult social and emotional competencies. There are multiple ways to develop and nurture students' social and emotional skills and competencies, ranging from general pedagogical practices, to classroom interventions, to whole school approaches. In order to have an impact on student success, schools need to implement the SEL approach with fidelity and intentionality.

This SEL school district implementation guidance is aligned with and supportive of Minnesota's Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), the Minnesota Academic Standards, and College and Career Readiness. This guide will take you through the SEL implementation process from the foundational work to assess capacity and develop plans for implementation to detailed guidance on implementation and assessment. School districts and schools using this guide will all be at different points in the SEL implementation process. While the guide's sections are organized sequentially, district teams are encouraged to skip back or move forward to the sections most relevant to where they are in the process or based on issues they may need to address.

The Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) District Resource Center offers resources to help district leadership teams determine where they are in the process of developing and implementing a plan for SEL. Use CASEL's [Priority Setting Questionnaire](#) to guide you through an assessment of your district's current implementation status to help identify the highest priority areas to focus on for future improvement.

## Creating SEL Leadership Teams

SEL is a process, not a program. Because of this, it is important to infuse SEL into the way that districts and schools carry out their mission. SEL thrives only when there is a commitment to it throughout the district. Successful districtwide SEL requires the input and work of many committed people. Engaging school staff on a SEL district leadership team distributes ownership for the initiative and ensures that knowledge of the SEL and commitment to implementing SEL districtwide does not reside with any one person.

The district leadership team should be comprised of key stakeholders. When considering which members of the school community are essential to implementing SEL as part of the district leadership team, include teachers, families, student support personnel, support staff as well as community members and after-school partners. This interdisciplinary group will provide shared leadership for the initiative and assist district leaders in planning for the implementation of districtwide SEL, coordinating it and communicating about it.

Appointing or hiring a district SEL coordinator is also important. The district SEL coordinator ensures that SEL district and school building leadership teams are meeting and monitoring all the moving parts of SEL implementation plan. The SEL district coordinator ensures that:

- Individual schools receive the support they need to implement SEL.
- Notes from both the district leadership team and the school leadership team are taken, shared with others on the teams and posted online. This ensures the implementation process is transparent and keeps stakeholders informed.
- Teachers, district and school support personnel receive professional development training and coaching.
- SEL plans are being implemented as written.
- Communication with the school community is occurring.
- Continuous improvement activities are completed.

In a small district, the SEL coordinator may be one person, but in larger school districts, several SEL coordinators divided in school buildings across the district are needed to provide more support.

In addition to the district leadership team, it is best practice to establish school building leadership teams with one person serving as the school building's team leader. The school building team leader also serves on the district leadership team to facilitate good coordination between district administrators and each school. The school team leader keeps the school on track with SEL implementation. The SEL school team leader could be a lead teacher, social worker or support staff.

The district leadership team is responsible for supporting school leadership teams' implementation of SEL. The district team revises policies if necessary, completes assessments, creates an infrastructure that allows SEL implementation to occur, secures appropriate resources for full implementation, and communicates with the school board and the public about outcomes.

Members of the school leadership teams work together to ensure the SEL plan is being implemented with fidelity. The school leadership teams monitor SEL implementation, provide training and coaching and evaluate implementation progress. Create school leadership teams with representation from throughout the school, including teachers from various grade levels, administrators, support staff, and parents and students.

## **Assessing District Needs and Capacity**

Early in your district's planning process, it is important to assess what SEL resources are already in place and what resources are needed. Conducting an SEL resources and needs assessment gives you a "snapshot" of your district's SEL-related programming, resources, and needs, including:

- Existing programs and practices that your district can build upon.
- Gaps where new programs, practices, or policies may be needed.
- Resources that may enable your district to maximize the impact of SEL.

The information you uncover will help your district develop an implementation plan to achieve its SEL vision and measure the SEL implementation's impact.

## Why Conduct an SEL Needs Assessment?

An SEL needs assessment is a powerful tool that identifies what's already working well in your district and what still needs to be done to achieve your goals for SEL implementation. Completing a comprehensive SEL needs assessment is no small task, but it's worth the effort. Doing it at the start of SEL implementation can help your district reduce or eliminate inefficiencies and identify where to begin with SEL implementation. Consider conducting the needs assessment after introducing SEL to key stakeholders and presenting a vision statement to them in an effort to generate high interest and secure buy-in.

## Readiness Assessments

Readiness assessments help district and school teams have intentional conversations about the readiness of individuals and schools to undertake a specific initiative. Readiness refers to whether an organization is both willing and able to start an initiative,<sup>1</sup> according to the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In other words, readiness is a measure of the degree to which individuals within an organization are motivated to take on a new initiative and the organization has the capacity to take on a new initiative. When conducting a readiness assessment, it is important to consider a review of current resources, priorities, and professional development offerings. This will help you understand the following:

- Content knowledge of SEL across stakeholder groups.
- Existing professional development offerings related to SEL.
- Staffing structures to support SEL implementation and professional learning.
- Structures for professional collaboration to ensure SEL professional development is job-embedded.

It is helpful to speak with community members, families, and students about current practices and interests to ensure their voices are included in the readiness assessment.

## Capacity Assessments

Before fully embarking on the SEL implementation, it is important to assess school and district capacity to take on an SEL initiative. Ideally, the district leadership team and the school SEL teams work together to accomplish capacity assessments. There are the various levels of capacity assessments you can consider using to understand current practices, including at the district, school and classroom level.

### *Districtwide Assessments*

Districtwide assessment findings provide information regarding resources, priorities and systems that support SEL. CASEL experts have identified 10 components they believe are necessary for a successful SEL initiative. To

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<sup>1</sup> <https://aspe.hhs.gov/PLf-report/willing-able-ready-basics-and-policy-implications-readiness-key-component-implementation-evidence-based-interventions>

help you reflect on your district's progress with those 10 components, [use this rubric developed by CASEL](#). It offers a framework for looking at the district's SEL activities, practices, and processes.

School districts may choose to capture findings of their assessment in a report to keep stakeholders, funders and the community informed. For example, Sacramento City Unified School District conducted a [districtwide assessment of their SEL professional learning](#) to understand existing resources and supports.

### *Schoolwide Assessments*

Schoolwide assessment results provide information regarding schoolwide structures that support SEL. The [CASEL Practice Rubric helps](#) district leaders and school site leaders understand where current SEL initiatives fit into broader schoolwide change and how to take SEL to the next level. It outlines the school SEL implementation process in four phases—readiness, planning, implementation and sustainability. If this assessment shows that the school is not ready for SEL implementation, do not move forward. Instead, identify the steps the school needs to take to be ready. Steps to reach readiness may include providing professional development and ongoing work by the district leadership team to build buy-in and to consider other strategies.

The University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development has also developed a resource that provides strategies and resources for implementing SEL. It includes a readiness inventory on pages 7-9 that schools can use to assess staffing, environment, experiences and data related to SEL. The resource is designed for youth program leaders but can also be applied to K-12 settings. Read U of M's ["SEL in Practice: A Toolkit Of Practical Strategies and Resources."](#)

### *Classroom Assessments*

Classroom assessments provide information regarding specific teacher practices that promote SEL. The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at the American Institute for Research has developed a [self-assessment for educators](#) that addresses 10 instructional strategies that support the development of SEL competence in students. This assessment asks educators to reflect on the degree to which they implement the various instructional strategies and to reflect on the degree to which they themselves have competence in CASEL's five SEL competencies, which is also how [the SEL work group aligned our learning goals](#). The paper assessment also provides an opportunity for you to reflect on the assessment's findings. Use the ["Self-Assessing Social and Emotional Instruction and Competencies: A Tool for Teachers."](#)

## **Create a Vision for SEL**

Consider what your district or school stands for—reflect on the mission, what defines the district or school and what's the motto? Some districts and schools emphasize responsibility, pride, integrity and respect. What are the ways that your school district communicates and lives its vision? When done with fidelity, the motto becomes more than words on the wall or website, it becomes the way the school district community lives together. Articulating a schoolwide focal point that is aligned with student learning and with social emotional competencies is essential to implementing a successful SEL program. The absence of a clear vision, shared by all, results in confusion which impedes success. When done right, a shared vision and set of core beliefs enhances school culture and can lead to a positive overall school climate and general success. In the book "Leadership for

Social Justice and Democracy in Our Schools," Marvin W. Berkowitz writes that successful schools focus on the following core set of beliefs and actions<sup>2</sup>:

- The best way to make a more just and caring world is to make more just and caring people.
- Schools shouldn't be limited to academics; they must also encompass the moral and civic development of students.
- School leaders must understand, prioritize, and have the leadership skills to nurture social and emotional learning in their schools.
- Schools must promote healthy relationships among all school community members, help adults be role models for students, and let students and faculty be partners in the school.

When schools take up multiple initiatives at the same time, teachers often experience frustration and fragmentation. It is important to align programs with your school's vision and overall goals. For effective implementation, SEL should be the thread that connects all other programs. Assess how well-coordinated your school's SEL programs are—are they aligned with the vision?

There are many resources to help district leaders and school teams articulate a vision for how they will support SEL. To assist with this process, it can be helpful to compare what you're doing with CASEL's scope and sequence chart of [SEL activities across grade levels](#) and comprehensive district frameworks that have resulted from such an assessment process (e.g., [Anchorage School District](#)) in orienting one's efforts.

## **What is a Shared Vision for SEL?**

Develop a vision statement to describe what the district wants to accomplish. This statement serves as an inspirational call to action and provides a foundation for SEL planning and implementation. The vision statement emphasizes the importance of developing students' social and emotional competencies in achieving the district's overall mission. Ideally you should strive to articulate the priority for SEL in your district's overall vision. Alternatively, you may decide to create a separate vision specifically for SEL.

## **Why Does my District Need a Shared Vision?**

An inspiring vision statement can help key stakeholders understand the depth of your commitment to SEL and how SEL connects to every aspect of the district's work. This commitment can elicit support for and involvement in achieving the district's vision for SEL. The vision statement also becomes the basis for your district's plan, allocation of resources, and continuous improvement of SEL implementation.

## **When Should my District Develop a Shared Vision for SEL?**

Your district may want to develop a vision for SEL after introducing SEL to key stakeholders, including the superintendent, district leaders, board members, principals, families, community members, and out-of-school-time intermediaries and providers. It is important to have the shared vision in place before developing a plan,

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<sup>2</sup> Berkowitz, M.W. (2011). "Leading schools of character." In A.M. Blankstein & P.D. Houston (Eds.), *Leadership for social justice and democracy in our schools*, pp. 93-121. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

adopting your locally-developed SEL curriculum, or engaging in significant or multisite implementation. The development of a vision allows you to communicate your intent for selecting SEL as the district's comprehensive bullying prevention before districtwide implementation begins.

### **Who Develops the Vision?**

Ideally, the district SEL leadership team assembles a group of key stakeholders, including senior leadership, school board members, students, families, and community members to develop the SEL vision statement.

## **SEL Implementation Plan**

A plan lays the foundation for implementing SEL districtwide. It communicates to the school community that your district's leadership is committed to implementing SEL and has a blueprint to ensure success. The plan guides and keeps the district and individual schools on track to achieve the SEL vision and district mission. A good plan outlines how SEL will be implemented, how it will be communicated, and how the SEL initiative will be evaluated. Your plan should outline how you will achieve your district's vision for SEL over the next three to five years. An effective plan includes information about professional development, implementation, communication, and evaluation. It also includes tasks, timelines, important milestones, and a division of responsibilities and resources needed for implementation. Together the shared vision and the plan will help your district communicate the benefits of SEL and how you intend to grow SEL in your district.

## **SEL Professional Development**

When you think of professional development related to SEL, you may focus on the instruction teachers receive about how to use SEL practices in the classroom. In fact, a comprehensive SEL professional development program is much more. A comprehensive approach provides varying levels of professional development for different audiences. Professional development can be done through conferences, workshops, webinars and online courses as well as through professional learning communities and coaching support.

After completing the readiness assessment, the district leadership team can begin to articulate learning goals for the district's future SEL professional development. Focusing on the areas of strength identified in the readiness assessment and building upon these strengths will help the district capitalize on existing momentum to further implement SEL. In addition, identifying where there are gaps in SEL knowledge and expertise will highlight where to make additional efforts to build interest in SEL implementation. As a district clarifies its professional development learning goals, the district should consider goals for different stakeholder groups such as classroom teachers, school support staff, school deans, etc. It is important to consider the professional development needs of staff who work with students across different grade levels. Most foundational concepts of SEL are applicable to all school-based stakeholders regardless of whether they are serving in an elementary, middle or high school. However, it is important to consider the developmental level of the students the educator is working with to ensure content is appropriate.

## **Why Does my District Need to Offer Comprehensive SEL Professional Development?**

Professional development is critical to successful implementation of districtwide SEL. Through effective professional development sessions, you can ensure that educators and staff understand what SEL is and how building SEL competence in both adults and students can lead to student success in academics and life. Through professional development, educators and staff can learn strategies they can use to work toward those important student outcomes. By including professional development opportunities for a wide variety of staff, you foster widespread understanding and support of your SEL initiative and further empower people to support it.

## **When Should my District Provide Comprehensive SEL Professional Development?**

As a first step, consider developing a comprehensive plan for professional development that includes an introduction to SEL and activities that build awareness about the benefits of SEL practices. Once your district has laid that foundation, offer continuing SEL professional development opportunities and coaching for some individuals to ensure that SEL remains central to both district operations and classroom practice.

The district SEL leader, members of the SEL leadership team, and your district's professional development department (if applicable) are critical to the delivery of SEL professional development and the learning of educators and staff. Curriculum and instruction staff are important partners to include in professional development since they can inform and help integrate SEL into academic practice. It's also important to partner with human resources staff, so they can help coordinate SEL professional development for new staff.

Finally, you may want to work with external consultants, such as evidence-based SEL providers to assist with the design and delivery of SEL professional development sessions.

## **Who is the Audience for Social and Emotional Learning Professional Development?**

It is imperative that all staff in a school district understand SEL, its interconnectedness with teaching and learning, and their role in supporting SEL. To support districtwide implementation of SEL, begin by providing SEL professional development to district staff, which may include the superintendent, instructional leaders or coaches, principal supervisors and human resources staff, etc., according to CASEL. It is important that district leaders develop SEL expertise and competence. People who have SEL expertise possess a strong knowledge base of SEL research, theory and implementation methods. SEL competence refers to the ability to apply one's own social emotional skills—such as self-management—in life and at work. When your district leaders understand the practices and benefits of SEL, they are better able to promote and sustain SEL districtwide, according to CASEL. When district leaders master and model SEL competencies, they are better able to create a positive working environment throughout the district—an environment where staff use effective communication skills, listen to the perspectives of diverse groups of stakeholders, interact with the community in a way that demonstrates cultural competence, and reflect on the impact decisions have on themselves and others.

## Develop District Expertise

SEL isn't just for the classroom. To support comprehensive SEL implementation in districts and schools, it's important for district leaders to develop a thorough knowledge of SEL. That means cultivating both the SEL expertise and the competence of those who work in district offices.

To have *SEL expertise*, one must have a strong knowledge base of SEL research, theory, and implementation methods. It will be important for district leaders to develop a good understanding of the studies about SEL and the strategies for promoting SEL districtwide.

To have *SEL competence*, one must be able to effectively use SEL practices in life and on the job. District leaders who have mastered the competencies of self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness and responsible decision-making model these behaviors to support the adoption of SEL in schools and create a positive working environment throughout the district.

SEL expertise allows district leaders to:

- Communicate the importance of SEL to staff, funders, students, families, and community members.
- Increase capacity for SEL-informed decision-making.
- Plan strategically for integrating SEL into the district budget and to identify new opportunities for SEL integration and resource alignment.
- Design and implement hiring practices that reflect the desire to hire people with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints.
- Use professional development to enhance SEL implementation including areas such as cultural competence.

SEL competence allows district leaders to:

- Create a professional environment where positive relationships take root and flourish.
- Interact with staff using effective listening and communication skills.
- Get perspectives from diverse groups of stakeholders and factor those viewpoints into key decisions.
- Reflect on their role in the district and analyze the impact of their decisions on themselves, others, students, and the district as a whole.
- Manage their own stress related to their complex professional role and guide other staff to practice self-care as well.
- Interact with staff and the school community in a way that demonstrates cultural competence.

## What Does it Mean to Build District SEL Expertise?

When you build SEL expertise, you ensure that district leaders develop a strong knowledge base in SEL research, theory, and implementation methods. This means they understand:

- The five CASEL core competencies that provide the framework for SEL—self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness, responsible decision-making.
- What research has shown about how SEL benefits students.
- Approaches that can be used to foster social and emotional development in districts, schools, communities, and the home.

- How to identify opportunities for integrating SEL districtwide.

## **Why is it Important to Build SEL Expertise in District Leaders?**

The more district leaders understand the practices and benefits of SEL, the better able they'll be to promote and sustain SEL districtwide. District leaders who possess a solid knowledge base in SEL can more effectively advocate and budget for SEL in the district and in the classroom as well as identify specific opportunities within their departments for integrating SEL. They are equipped to develop and communicate an inspiring vision about the many benefits of SEL.

Ideally, building SEL expertise is one of the first steps for districtwide adoption of SEL. This approach enables district leadership team members to identify areas where they want to enhance their knowledge, so they are well-equipped to support SEL policy and implementation. Once core leaders have gained enough knowledge to make a true commitment to SEL, the district can begin introducing SEL principles and practices to larger groups of district stakeholders.

In addition to district staff, it's important that staff at all levels of a school community receive some degree of SEL professional development, according to CASEL. The extent of the training will vary based on staff member roles. CASEL recommends SEL professional development for the following:

- Principals and other school-level administrators
- Teachers and classroom support staff
- Department leaders
- Deans/disciplinarians
- Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS), restorative practices, and behavior coaches
- School counselors
- Social workers
- Front office staff
- Cafeteria workers
- Safety officers
- Bus drivers
- Recess supervisors

When staff receive their training, it's important to simultaneously provide SEL professional development to school board members, parents, community partners—including out-of-school-time providers—law enforcement officers and other stakeholders.

## **Who Delivers Social and Emotional Learning Professional Development?**

Consider your district's internal capacity and expertise when determining who will deliver SEL professional development. A readiness assessment may find that the district has internal SEL subject matter experts—people who have significant SEL expertise and competence. A district may consider hiring SEL district leads or coordinators to support and oversee this work. If your district does not have the internal capacity to deliver SEL professional development, consider consulting or contracting with an external provider.

## High-Quality SEL Professional Development

The guidance that follows is intended to reflect a comprehensive system of SEL professional development that includes traditional workshops, coaching and observation, professional learning communities, data driven instruction, study groups, etc. As a district begins designing and implementing SEL professional development, it should consider the following:

- Effective SEL professional development is directly linked to practice. It should be directly applied to educators' practice and provide tangible tools or frameworks for educators to employ in their respective roles as teachers, administrators, counselors, etc.
- It is important to differentiate SEL professional development for all stakeholders who have various knowledge sets across a district. A district likely employs educators who have been integrating SEL into their practice for years and others who are new to the concept. SEL professional development meets learners where they are based on their current knowledge and practice levels. It is important to consider each audience member and where they are in their development. Flexibility and being responsive to the different levels of experience and readiness are key to successful professional development.
- It is important to tie SEL professional development content to evidence-based practices and curricular concepts that research shows impacts student outcomes.
- Clear participant learning goals are a hallmark of effective SEL professional development. This helps participants connect new learning to everyday practice.
- Delivering SEL professional development in a sequenced set of sessions that builds off the previous sessions is critical. Making sure these trainings are connected to and aligned with professional learning communities, ongoing supports and job-embedded coaching strengthens the impact of the professional development sessions. To best deliver content, use existing structures that support professional growth such as common planning time or teacher observations.
- Successful SEL professional development aligns with and is embedded into existing initiatives and structural systems. SEL training demonstrates the connection between SEL and academics and other strategic priorities.
- It is critical to tie SEL professional development to equity work in the district. Effective SEL professional development focuses on strategies to support the needs of all learners with special attention to those needing greatest support. It deliberately models ways for educators to strengthen their social and emotional competencies and provides them with practice examples/scenarios that they can easily apply to "real-life" scenarios with students. The Great Lakes Equity Center (GLEC) provided guidance on culturally responsive SEL implementation. To ensure effective SEL implementation, GLEC staff say that it is important for schools and districts to review its guidance before implementing districtwide SEL.
- Effective SEL professional development builds educators' capacity to integrate culturally responsive teaching practices into their classrooms and SEL instruction. SEL is inherently tied to identity, sense of self and the ways in which individuals interact with their environment. Appreciating the unique lens that each student and educator brings into the classroom is a critical component of SEL professional development. There are additional resources and tools to support culturally responsive SEL in the SEL Resource List.

CASEL has developed a set of [12 thoughts on SEL professional learning facilitation](#). This guidance provides strategies for professional development facilitators to consider to best support the unique needs of adult

learners of SEL. The guidance discusses intentional professional development planning and facilitation preparation, strategies that support participant reflection, ideas for adult groupings, and thoughts on pacing and differentiation. This resource may be particularly helpful as a district begins to think about developing facilitators' guides for SEL professional development.

## **Additional SEL Professional Development Support**

SEL professional development involves both formal workshops and embedded opportunities for professional collaboration and learning. SEL can also be embedded within typical professional development or staff meetings and other meetings as well. Formal workshops that offer direct instruction for educators are beneficial for: communicating curricular objectives, elements, and design; sharing research and promoting available resources. However, to ensure that the SEL initiative is fully integrated throughout the district and that educators have opportunities to become familiar with the content, it is important to have a number of ongoing professional supports in place. Consider the following supports as opportunities to enhance any formal SEL professional development offered.

### *Professional Learning Communities*

Professional learning communities (PLCs) refer to groups of educators at all experience levels who meet regularly to discuss teacher practice in an effort to make adjustments and enhancements to support and improve student learning. PLCs analyze student work, examine classroom practices, learn new instructional strategies and discuss how these concepts play out in classrooms. Many schools already have such teams in place such as course teams, practitioner teams or grade-level teams. Authentic and effective PLCs employ certain characteristics and practices. For example, a high degree of trust should be in place for authentic dialogue to take place. Learn more about PLCs in [Microsoft's educator toolkit, which provides](#) information about PLCs, including guidance on assessing, initiating and strengthening PLCs. It may also be helpful to review the [School Reform Initiative's](#) resources and protocols to consider in the cultivation of PLCs in a school or district. PLCs can focus on the implementation strategies and supports for student and adult SEL.

### *Job-Embedded Coaching*

Job-embedded coaching refers to opportunities for experienced teachers to support their peers by observing classroom instruction and providing feedback to their colleagues in a safe, non-evaluative way. Job-embedded coaching occurs in classrooms during the day and connects directly to the actual work of teaching and learning. The observer's immediate feedback aims to improve instruction by helping teachers connect new skills to practice. Ongoing consistent job-embedded coaching helps educators embrace new concepts and incorporate them into their practice. The American Institutes of Research (AIR) developed a free [SEL coaching tool](#) to support coaches and administrators as they observe practices that support the development of social and emotional skills in classrooms, and hold critical conversations about difficult issues and use SEL language to make those conversations more constructive.

## SEL Communication Planning

Developing an SEL communication plan will help you identify the actions you will want to take to: get the word out about SEL, build enthusiasm and support for your SEL initiative and keep key stakeholders informed about it and your achievements with SEL implementation. As you create the communication plan, answer four key questions:

- Who do you want to reach? (Your audience)
- What do you want to achieve? (The goal)
- What do you want to say? (The message)
- How will you send your message? (The medium)

Your answers to those questions will guide the messages you create, the audiences you identify for the messages and how you will deliver the messages. You can communicate information about your SEL initiative in various ways using different messages targeting different audiences. Ways to communicate can include developing:

- Materials for key stakeholders to launch the SEL initiative. For example, review [Cleveland's Districtwide SEL Launch PowerPoint](#).
- A presentation that gives an overview of SEL and the latest SEL research. For example, review [CASEL's SEL Definition and Research PowerPoint presentation](#).
- A website to introduce parents to SEL. For example, review the [Anchorage: Parents and SEL webpage](#).
- A research brief for funders such as [Austin's SEL Research Brief with District Plan Summary](#).
- Press releases and placing stories in local newspapers. For example, read [Washoe County's "Impact of SEL of Graduation Rates."](#)
- A website with general overview of SEL and district-specific information about SEL standards, metrics, and data. Review [Washoe County School District SEL Data Information site](#).

### Why Does my District Need to Develop a Communication Plan?

Clear, ongoing communication to all stakeholders is a key strategy to successfully implement SEL. By getting the message out to key audiences such as district leaders, funders, staff and teachers, students, families, and community members, you'll be able to:

- Help these stakeholders understand what SEL is.
- Increase awareness of the research and findings about the benefits of SEL.
- Promote SEL in classrooms and schools.
- Make the case for investing in SEL.

Sustained communication about your district's implementation of SEL can help you:

- Influence district leaders to promote and support systemic adoption of SEL principles and practices.
- Engage teachers and staff to rally behind SEL initiatives and strive to incorporate SEL practices schoolwide.

- Build enthusiasm in district students and families, and encourage them to adopt SEL practices in the home and community.
- Convince funders to dedicate financial support to SEL implementation.

## **When Should my District Develop a Communication Plan?**

Develop the communication plan early in the planning for SEL implementation to help produce support and buy-in from internal stakeholders such as staff, teachers, and after-school providers. Early on, you'll also want to consider when and how to communicate with parents, family members, and the community about what SEL is and how they can support and benefit from SEL practices. To do this, you may wish to develop your communication plan while also working on your SEL implementation plan. Once you've launched SEL in your district, it's important to maintain communication with stakeholders throughout the school year and update your communication plan as needed.

## **Who to Include When Developing Your Communication Plan?**

Your district SEL leader can work with the district leadership team to consider who and what needs to be included when developing the communication plan. We recommend working with the district's communications staff for their expertise. When implementing your communication plan, you may want to involve a range of other communications professionals to help craft district messaging. Often, existing staff fill these roles, but depending on your district's resources, you may want to bring in additional staff or temporary assistance, or outsource to a communication firm.

## **Adopting SEL Learning Goals**

In developing this guidance, the work group selected the CASEL framework of five SEL competencies which are important for students to possess: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. For each of the five SEL competencies, we set learning goals for social and emotional learning.

Similar to academic standards for mathematics, science, or language arts, the learning goals for social and emotional learning serve as a district's "blueprint" for instruction in SEL. They identify specific goals and set measurable grade band benchmarks that articulate what students should know and be able to do related to SEL.

The learning goals can guide school districts as they select evidence-based programs and the creation of professional development related to SEL. SEL learning goals differ from academic standards in that they do not imply assessment measures or suggest accountability. While there are no state standards for SEL, some school districts or schools in the state may voluntarily create their own local SEL standards.

## **Why Does my District Need SEL Learning Goals?**

When clear SEL learning goals are in place, they provide explicit objectives for student learning, so that district leaders, staff, and parents can be intentional about creating conditions that foster SEL. These goals help establish a common language and realistic expectations, since SEL may be new to many district staff, students,

and parents. Adopting SEL learning goals sends the message that SEL is a district priority and merits instructional focus.

Achieving schoolwide SEL implementation happens through some combination of direct instruction (evidence-based curriculum), embedded instruction (teachable moments, decision-making as part of civics) and schoolwide guidance. Some social emotional competencies overlap with academic standards and can easily be met through embedded instruction.

## **SEL Competencies**

The School Safety Technical Assistance Council work group developed a set of SEL competencies, learning goals, grade banded benchmarks, and connections to related academic standards, based on the five CASEL core competencies. The benchmarks also include one or more sample classroom activities that teachers can use to build skills in the students. The sample activities are suggestions—not meant to be complete lessons—that can be used to teach the benchmarks. Where gaps in learning goals related to social and emotional learning exist, consider integrating language from the SEL competencies into lesson plans and learning targets developed at the local level. Students are intended to reach mastery in each indicator by the end of the grade range, however, teachers may want to revisit the earlier skills periodically.

As with academic skills, students need opportunities to learn, develop, and apply their social and emotional competencies. Students can develop social and emotional competencies through multiple avenues including<sup>3</sup> explicit instruction, embedded instruction, teacher pedagogy and schoolwide support.

## **Explicit Instruction**

Explicit instruction programs directly teach SEL skills through free-standing lessons. Lessons often focus on skills that can be broadly applied to a variety of situations, such as making friends, working cooperatively with others, coping with stress, making decisions about potentially risky behaviors, and resolving interpersonal conflicts.

Classroom teachers can develop students' social and emotional competencies by directly teaching the skills, using engaging curriculum materials, and implementing specific instructional and classroom management practices. It's critical that the SEL programs you implement are evidence-based, which means they have a strong research base with proven outcomes. Many evidence-based programs are intended to be a universal approach delivered to all students. Evidence-based programs are also one of the key approaches to promoting SEL in schools.

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<sup>3</sup> Dusenbury, L., Calin, S., Domitrovich, C., & Weissberg, R. (2015). What does evidence-based instruction in social and emotional learning actually look like in practice? Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Retrieved from <http://www.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CASELBrief-WhatDoesSELLookLikeinPractice-11-1-15.pdf>

### *Why Does my District Need Evidence-Based Programs?*

According to a landmark study in 2011<sup>4</sup>, evidence-based SEL programs produce:

- Better student academic performance—achievement scores for students who received SEL instruction averaged 11 percentile points higher than for students who did not receive SEL instruction.
- Improved attitudes and behaviors in students—students have greater motivation to learn and a deeper commitment to school. Students also increased the length of time they devoted to schoolwork, and had better classroom behavior.
- Fewer negative behaviors in students—there was a decrease of incidents of noncompliance, aggression, disruptive class behavior, delinquent acts, and disciplinary referrals.
- Reduced emotional distress—there were fewer reports of student depression, anxiety, stress, and social withdrawal.

There are economic benefits related to SEL, according to the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education’s 2015 article “The Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning.” Schools see an 11 to 1 return on investment among six evidence-based SEL interventions that were studied. This means, that on average, for every \$1 invested in SEL programming, there is a return of \$11.

### *When Should my District Implement Evidence-Based Programs to Build SEL Competence Skills?*

Ideally, evidence-based programs should be implemented after a district has developed a big-picture plan for the systemic integration of SEL. Wait to implement evidence-based programs until after you have:

- Developed stakeholder buy-in through an SEL vision and plan.
- Completed a needs assessment.
- Aligned staff and financial resources to support SEL.
- Adopted SEL learning goals with which to align program selection.

There may be circumstances in which a district decides to implement evidence-based programs before completing planning for districtwide implementation. These circumstances include:

- Having some evidence-based SEL programs already in place. If individual schools or classrooms are already implementing evidence-based programs, an expansion can provide a convenient way to introduce principals and teachers to SEL.
- Needing to build knowledge of SEL and enthusiasm for SEL before pushing for districtwide implementation. An evidence-based practice already being used by other districts may offer a low-risk point of entry to SEL. It can help generate interest, which can be valuable when you begin to plan more districtwide implementation of SEL.
- A short-term window of opportunity to get funding. If you’re concerned funding may not be available after planning, you may want to consider immediate implementation of evidence-based practices.

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<sup>4</sup> Durlak J., Weissberg R., Dymnicki A., Taylor R., Schellinger K. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Dev.* 82.

When reviewing and selecting programs, you will want to involve the people who will be using or supervising the SEL programs. This typically includes district administrators, teachers, school counselors and support staff and out-of-school time staff or providers. In addition, you can use the program selection process to engage other key stakeholders whose support you need, including:

- Your district’s curriculum committee which can support the integration of your SEL program with other core curricula.
- Your district’s professional development staff if they will be charged with creating initial professional development focused on the SEL program and its key practices.
- Other key stakeholders such as out-of-school-time staff, community members, parents and students themselves.

### *Guidelines for Selecting Evidence-Based SEL Programs*

When school and district implementation teams oversee the careful selection and effective implementation of evidence-based SEL programs, the children they serve benefit socially, emotionally and academically. Next we share principles, information and guidelines that teams can use to adopt the best programs for their context.

Three key principles support the effective selection, implementation, impact, and sustainability of evidence-based SEL programs:

1. School and district leadership teams—rather than an individual—should engage diverse stakeholders in the program adoption process;
2. Implementing evidence-based SEL programs within systemic, ongoing district and school planning, programming, and evaluation leads to better practices and more positive outcomes for students;
3. When making decisions about which programs to implement, it is critical to consider local contextual factors such as student characteristics and SEL programs already in place and gather additional information.

There are many programs that teach social and emotional learning skills in an explicit manner. [CASEL has published a guide](#) to help districts identify a program that will work for them. It provides a framework for evaluating the quality of social and emotional programs, shares best-practice guidelines on selecting and implementing SEL programs for preschool and elementary schools as well as secondary and middle schools.

### **Embedded Instruction**

Embedded instruction programs embed the teaching of social and emotional skills in a particular academic content area. After reviewing the foundational concepts of SEL with staff, it is important to provide professional development on how SEL lives in the core curriculum and can be taught explicitly in various content areas. Some evidence-based SEL curricula may have been previously developed or purchased by the district. Teacher groups and school staff may develop SEL curricula which provides strategies for effectively integrating SEL into academic instruction, so that teachers can create optimal conditions for student social and emotional development throughout the school day. Next, we provide guidance on professional development designed to help educators integrate explicit SEL instruction into the classroom.

When planning SEL professional development regarding the launch and implementation of a specific curriculum, it is important to:

- Share the school improvement rationale and objectives for the chosen curriculum with staff. Outline how the curriculum aligns with the findings of the district or school needs assessment, relevant data sets and how the chosen curriculum connects to district foundational concepts around culturally-relevant and trauma-informed practices. Prior to implementation, we highly recommend that all leaders of SEL curricular initiatives construct sound statements about why the curriculum is being launched.
- Detail the continuous development plan for curricular implementation during the curriculum's launch. Doing this demonstrates that the curriculum is a long-term investment and will be supported by the district and school administration.
- Provide opportunities to address concerns and misconceptions about implementing the curriculum.

## Teacher Pedagogy

Teacher training programs typically focus on specific instructional practices, pedagogies, and/or classroom management techniques that create a positive classroom climate. These teaching practices are designed to actively engage students in learning while also supporting students' social and emotional development.

It is important to provide professional development to instructional staff on incorporating instructional strategies that promote SEL. This enables SEL to seamlessly be integrated into instruction. Here we provide guidance on professional development for various instructional strategies that can be embedded in instruction across academic departments and grade levels. The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at the American Institutes for Research has pulled together a list of [10 instructional practices](#) that support students in learning, applying and developing SEL skills.

Providing professional development on these instructional practices and subsequent dialogue among educators is important to support educators in adopting. Many of these practices may already be occurring in classrooms. However, educators may not think of the practices as directly linked to SEL. In addition, support staff who are not providing direct instruction in the classroom may incorporate some of these practices into their work.

## Schoolwide Support

Schoolwide support programs approach social and emotional development through the significant reordering of policies and organizational structures throughout the school. Examples of organizational structures that could be reordered include leadership teams, advisory periods and class schedules. Organizational approaches are equivalent to school reform models and often require strong commitment and a high level of initial and ongoing professional development to be implemented with quality.

## *Integration with Other Schoolwide, District Efforts*

Another approach to integrating SEL is by developing a positive learning environment and creating the best conditions for learning.<sup>5</sup> Students in a healthy, safe, supportive, and challenging environment have greater capacity to focus on academic content and are more likely to engage in school. To create environments that support SEL:

- Develop a discipline policy that supports inclusionary practices such as restorative practices and encourages students to regulate their own behavior;
- Ensure that each student has an adult to whom they can turn for assistance and guidance;
- Engage students to be active members of the school community with a voice of their own;
- Set high behavioral and academic expectations for all students, taking into account student differences and baseline social and emotional and academic competencies;
- Support adult social and emotional competencies, as well as relationship building among staff members; and
- Use behavior management and disciplinary practices, such as restorative practices, which support student inclusion rather than exclusionary disciplinary practices.

Focusing on SEL may actually be an antidote to fragmentation. Some districts have used SEL as a framework to organize and consolidate many related, but previously disconnected efforts, such as efforts around student engagement, discipline, and service learning. When adults bring an SEL “lens” to all school activities—modeling SEL to establish a learning culture and climate of connection and safety—they enable students to experience the relevance of SEL lessons in many aspects of their lives.

## **Resource Alignment**

Upon completing the readiness assessment and determining learning goals for future SEL professional learning, it may be helpful for a district to consider how their SEL vision will support, inform and complement other district initiatives. While SEL is foundational to teaching and learning, it also connects to nearly every other district/school initiative, including but not limited to family engagement, bullying prevention, school climate, MTSS, restorative practices, PBIS and college and career readiness. A district may want to connect SEL professional development to these initiatives and integrate SEL language and concepts into existing professional development offerings focused on these topics and initiatives.

## **Integration**

All too often, SEL is thought of as a set of classroom practices. But for SEL to be effective and sustainable, it must be integrated throughout the district. Integration means that your district includes SEL in planning and training for all district priorities and projects, even if they don’t seem to directly relate to SEL. The goal is systemic SEL

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<sup>5</sup> Osher, D., & Kendziora, K. (2010). Building conditions for learning and healthy adolescent development: Strategic approaches. In B. Doll, W. Pfohl, & J. Koon (Eds.), *Handbook of youth prevention science* (pp. 121–140). New York, NY: Routledge.

integration—that is, you want to integrate SEL fully throughout all district departments so that it becomes part of “the way things are done.”

Through SEL integration, you ensure that SEL influences a wide range of areas throughout the district, including:

- Instructional practices and curriculum.
- Culture and climate.
- Student discipline.
- Systems of support.
- Family engagement.
- Out-of-school time.
- Athletics.
- Board practices.
- College and career readiness.
- Assessment.
- Human resources.
- Professional learning.

## **Why Does my District Need to Integrate Social and Emotional Learning with District Priorities?**

When you integrate SEL into district operations, you communicate the importance of SEL and demonstrate how it supports district priorities and functions. Your goal is to integrate SEL into your district’s overall strategic goals and planning. Ultimately this will help you ensure the long-term sustainability of SEL practices in your district. When SEL is an integrated part of how your district operates, it’s more likely to weather changes in staffing, budget, and planning.

## **Continuous Improvement**

To ensure that SEL is effective and sustainable, it is important that your district develop a system for continuous improvement. This is a repetitive process through which you use data to evaluate the success of implementation and progress toward outcomes.

In a culture of continuous improvement, all data, including what may have been perceived as a failure to achieve a goal, can be framed as an opportunity for learning and growth. This change in perspective can empower both staff and students to try new things and dramatically increase their opportunities for learning, improvement, and innovation.

Next, we explore the two key components of continuous improvement:

- **Defining SEL goals and metrics:** Before you can assess your progress, you need to determine what you want to measure and how you want to measure it.
- **Using data to drive implementation:** Throughout the school year, you’ll collect data about SEL implementation and the impact of SEL practices, and use that information to determine where to improve processes.

## What are SEL Goals and Metrics?

We strongly recommend that your district create goals and metrics when developing plans that describe the changes you want to see as a result of SEL implementation.

- Goals describe what you wish to accomplish, both short- and long-term, with sustained SEL implementation. SEL goals refer to process measures such as training evaluations and curriculum decisions made by the district leadership team.
- Metrics describe the data points that will measure progress toward those goals. SEL metrics refer to student outcome data and may include information from student surveys, climate assessments, attendance records, behavior and academic data, and other relevant data sets.

Additional information and guidance on developing and evaluating goals and metrics can be found in the SEL Assessment Guidance section.

## Why Does My District Need to Develop SEL Goals and Metrics?

Establishing clear goals and metrics communicates what your district intends to accomplish by investing in SEL. Developing goals and metrics is also crucial to the continuous improvement of your SEL implementation. Only by outlining what you want to achieve and measuring your progress will you be able to make informed decisions about the effectiveness of a given strategy and if you need to adjust your approach to SEL implementation. Your district may want to define SEL goals and metrics after completing your needs and resources assessment, but before selecting evidence-based programs and beginning implementation.

Who needs to be involved in developing goals and metrics?

- The SEL lead and district implementation team.
- Research and evaluation team.
- External evaluation consultants (optional).
- School leadership.

As part of continuous improvement, you need to determine whether SEL is being implemented according to the district's plan and whether you're achieving the desired outcomes. Your district's SEL goals and metrics serve as the foundation for driving implementation.

## Why Does my District Need to Use Data to Drive Implementation?

CASEL's systemic work with districts has shown that using data as part of continuous improvement is critical for achieving the desired goals and outcomes of SEL. Reviewing SEL progress allows your district to answer the following questions:

- How well have our strategies been implemented?
- How have our metrics changed?
- Are we achieving our goals for SEL?

By regularly monitoring progress toward the district's goals, your district implementation team will be able to test strategies, identify the ones that work best, and, if needed, correct course along the way. Taking these steps toward successful implementation will help ensure the long-term sustainability of systemic SEL.

## **When Should my District Consult Data as a Part of Driving Implementation?**

Once implementation is underway, we recommend that district and school leadership teams consult data to review progress regularly throughout the school year. Reflect on implementation progress frequently—weekly or monthly, depending on the metric—to understand general trends. It's helpful to complete a comprehensive review when strategic and budget planning typically occurs. That way, resources can be allocated based on growth opportunities outlined in the implementation rubric or in other implementation or outcome metrics. Your SEL lead should facilitate the review of data on the success of systemic SEL in your district.

People who can assist with continuous improvement may include:

- Staff responsible for executing implementation strategies.
- Staff responsible for assessing implementation and outcomes.
- Members of the district's research or evaluation team (Assessment or Accountability departments).
- Members of the district leadership team, or someone influential to leadership. Involving leadership ensures that implementation changes can be done in a reasonable time frame, provides a big picture perspective on the direction of the district, and reduces the likelihood that other priorities will conflict with implementation.

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