Social and Emotional Learning: Why Students Need It. What Districts are Doing About It.

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In a classroom in **Anchorage, Alaska**, first- and second-graders brainstorm a list of conflicts – cutting in line, name-calling, swiping someone's milk carton – and discuss strategies for resolving each. In **Sacramento, California**, high school students ask their teacher to convene a "community circle" to discuss and resolve a heated argument unfolding in real time in their classroom. In **Bridgeport, Connecticut**, students in classrooms across the city think of how to help friends who are "in the red" according to the district's ever-present emotions quadrant, color-coded to represent different states of mind. "We could share a toy," one boy offers.

Three different school districts, three different corners of the nation, three different groups of students. But there's one common thread: The students in each school system are developing their "social and emotional learning" skills as part of their district's intentional efforts to teach key competencies and mindsets that research shows are integral to academic success.

Social and emotional learning, or SEL, is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions; set and achieve positive goals; feel and show empathy for others; establish and maintain positive relationships; and make responsible decisions. That definition comes from the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the leading national organization dedicated to advance the science, practice and policy of SEL (see Figure 1). Other organizations, such as Turnaround for Children, define such skills as "building blocks" that help students access, acquire and apply academic content (see Figure 2).

For years, schools have taught SEL skills with varying levels of intentionality. But today, more and more districts are supporting SEL as a focused strategy—not only for improving school climate and student engagement but also for improving student learning.

Across the nation, implementing SEL in classrooms takes different forms: In some school systems, it's a full curriculum with materials and lesson plans. In other places, it's a set of standalone SEL standards and indicators, similar to English or science standards, with schools (and sometimes teachers within those schools) given leeway on how and when they will teach and measure the standards. Still other districts implement SEL through a mix of both approaches, with schools choosing a curriculum or building their own approach to teaching SEL skills that are aligned with their district's broader expectations of SEL. At a policy level, as the CASEL wheel in Figure 1 shows, successful SEL implementation is reflected not only in classroom instruction, but in policies and practices on school climate, culture and partnerships with families.

This publication explores how three diverse school districts are taking their SEL strategy to scale and some of the key administrative, academic, communications and measurement decisions they face along the way. The publication begins with an overview paper that explores six key implementation questions with recommendations based on the districts' approaches, followed by three individual case studies that introduce readers to the challenges and successes each city is experiencing with SEL implementation. Notably, this paper examines the more tactical questions and decisions districts are facing; although the broad, policy-level changes that create a context for implementation are not featured in depth here, they are equally critical for success.

Two of the districts we feature, Anchorage and Sacramento, are part of the Collaborating Districts Initiative, a network of eight districts funded by the New York-based NoVo Foundation that partner with CASEL on systemic SEL implementation (see sidebar). The third district, Bridgeport, is bringing SEL to scale through implementing Yale University's Center on Emotional Intelligence's RULER program, supported by the Tauck Family Foundation and other area funders.

The briefs provide insights, recommendations and glimpses into the ground-level challenges that will resonate with teachers, school and district administrators, policymakers, funders and advocates implementing or hoping to implement SEL.

Figure 1: CASEL's Definition of Systemic Schoolwide Social and Emotional Learning

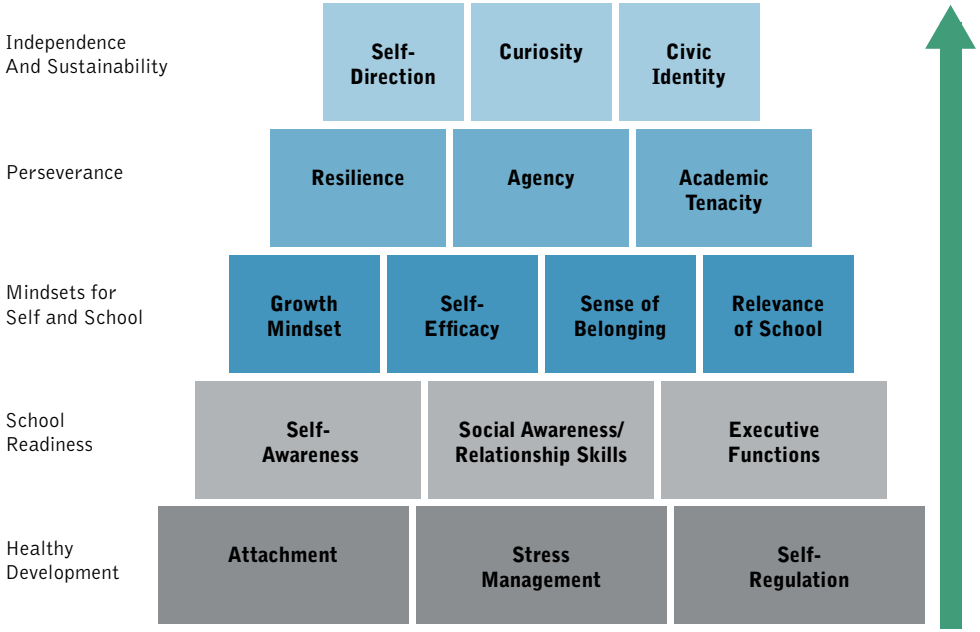

Figure 2: Turnaround for Children's Building Blocks for Learning

CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI)

In 2011, CASEL created a national initiative to develop districts' capacities to plan, implement and monitor SEL as well as to document outcomes and lessons learned to share with other districts. CASEL is partnering with eight large urban school districts and using a theory of action that addresses the essential elements for systemic change. Those districts are Anchorage, Austin, Cleveland, Chicago, Nashville, Oakland, Sacramento and Washoe County, Nevada.

CDI districts are supported by CASEL with strategic planning, technical assistance and tools and regular cross-district collaboration opportunities, as well as grant funding from the NoVo Foundation. CASEL is extending the knowledge and tools gleaned from the CDI to other districts across the country.

What problem are we trying to solve? And why is SEL our solution?

Recommendations

This question is foundational for any district interested in implementing SEL because the answer drives policy decisions, planning, strategy, tactics and especially evaluation. As Michael Graham, Chief Academic Officer for the Anchorage School District put it, the best planning starts with a vision: "Start with, what do we need to do? What are we after? Are we feeling like students are disengaged? Are people reporting learning climates aren't what they want? So what do we want, and what would we like to see our students doing? How would we like to see our kids interacting? And build from there."

For example, Bridgeport Public Schools every day faces overwhelming effects of students' challenging home lives. One out of every three children in Bridgeport lives in poverty, and one in five is chronically absent from school. Without interventions, those conditions make it much more difficult for students to learn. For Bridgeport, SEL was part of the solution: If students were equipped with social-emotional skills to help them navigate often-challenging personal lives, they would be in a better position to learn.

Begin with a broad vision

As your district embarks upon SEL implementation, identify the problem you're trying to solve and how you think SEL will contribute to the solution. Articulating what you want to accomplish with SEL will drive necessary policy decisions about climate, discipline and family engagement as well as the choice of curriculum, how your district measures implementation and how SEL is integrated into other district priorities.

Plan your approach

SEL should be systemic, touching leadership, school culture, student-teacher interactions, family engagement, professional development, communications and operations. Guided by a vision for SEL, districts should decide how SEL will affect system-wide policies and practices and develop an instructional approach. Cross-functional teams can inform and advocate for the policy changes that must happen before SEL touches classrooms. For more information on the types of systemic policy changes required to effectively support SEL implementation in schools, see Oberle et al *Establishing Systemic Social and Emotional Learning in Schools: A Framework for Schoolwide Implementation.*

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QUESTION ONE

How many schools do we start with?

After determining a vision and examining the necessary policy changes, districts usually launch initiatives in one of two ways: starting with a subset of schools, perhaps as a pilot, and adding additional schools over time; or going to scale immediately. The path your district chooses depends on a range of factors such as size, past practice, central- and school-based capacity, the kind of work being undertaken and urgency, to name a few.

The districts we studied took different approaches. With dozens of schools and without a large central office infrastructure to start, both Anchorage and Sacramento rolled out SEL in cohorts of schools one year at a time, with the intention to have all schools implementing SEL within five to seven years. Along the way, each hired central staff, wrote standards, recommended evidence-based curricula, incorporated SEL into districtwide strategic plans and adjusted tactics based on feedback.

By contrast, Bridgeport went to scale immediately in 2015 (following a year of professional learning) by adopting an evidence-based program in all 38 of its schools. The superintendent preferred that path based on her experience with pilots in another district, and because Bridgeport's mobile population made it necessary to ensure that all schools were implementing SEL. Parents and community members have applauded citywide implementation as critical so students and families can experience SEL consistently from school to school. And scale was possible because of Bridgeport's relatively small size.

Either approach can work, and each has pros and cons.

Starting with Pilots

Enabling Conditions

- The bigger the district, the harder it is to implement efforts in all schools, making starting with a smaller number of schools the preferred option.
- Districts with high degrees of autonomy for schools may find working with a smaller group of schools more palatable, especially if those schools volunteer, rather than requiring something in all schools.
- Networking among cohorts builds trust and turns the experience into a learning one.

Challenges

- Even with a smaller number of schools to manage, the district must still build capacity for implementation among teachers and leaders. That requires the central office to make adjustments to inform full implementation and embed the project in routines and processes across the district so it's not seen as a one-off venture.
- Districts must communicate a path forward to full implementation so that the small group of schools working on SEL can understand how their work will inform an end game.
- Districts must decide whether to require certain programs or let schools experiment with a few. In the absence of an evidence-based program, schools at least must have a common language in place (such as SEL standards and indicators) that everyone can understand and apply.

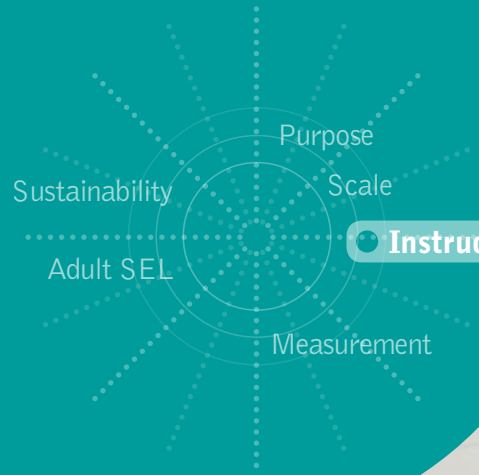
Starting at Scale

Enabling Conditions

- The smaller the district, the easier it is to implement efforts in all schools.
- The more mobile the students, the greater the urgency to have consistency in curricula.
- Starting at scale can enable alignment of school- and district- level instructional and professional development efforts, right from the start.

Challenges

- Scale is tough if the central office does not have capacity to oversee full-scale implementation. If central office capacity is lower, the district must develop coaches and teacher-leaders to make sure implementation is occurring everywhere.
- At scale, there will not be time to experiment with different programs and curricular approaches. The SEL curricula and programs that the district chooses must have a strong evidence base and relevance across grade levels.



QUESTION **TWO**

Should we teach SEL through explicit instruction of SEL skills or through integration into existing content?

The districts we studied generally use two ways of teaching SEL. One is **explicit instruction**, in which teachers teach SEL competencies and skills directly as opposed to embedding them within other content areas. For example, they might use an evidence-based SEL curriculum, scope and sequence, and materials, just as they would with mathematics or science. Examples include Second Step or Connected and Respected. Or they might create standalone lessons aligned with SEL standards and indicators – a unit on conflict resolution, for example, that might involve student role-playing. Either way, the teaching of SEL skills and competencies is explicit, and schools carve out time for it, such as a class period.

The second way is **infusion**, or integrating SEL skills and lessons into existing subjects. An English class, for example, might call out themes of self-awareness or social responsibility through literature. A history class might focus on historical figures who faced life-altering decisions to illustrate a lesson on responsible decision-making. These are natural subject areas for SEL integration, but even in a mathematics class, teachers can build SEL skills: In Bridgeport high schools, teachers use an emotions matrix called the "Mood Meter" as the coordinate plane for a pre-algebra graphing lesson.

Numerous variations exist. A district might infuse a lesson or units from a purchased curriculum into all subjects and classroom practices, much like what Bridgeport does with the RULER program or what Sacramento does with School Connect in high school English and social studies classes. Or it might find that a certain text or lesson in an academic content area has such critical connections to SEL skills that the skills themselves are directly taught alongside the text.

The districts we studied generated lessons learned for both explicit instruction and infusion. **Explicit instruction** more easily lends itself to buying a full curriculum with teacher guides and lesson plans, making it more efficient for districts and schools to evaluate efficacy and provide coaching. Anchorage is heading in this direction by requiring elementary schools to implement one of two SEL curricula; Bridgeport's use of RULER pervades all classrooms. One advantage is that it's easy to answer the question "how do you teach SEL?" But high schools, where teachers are divided into subject areas, are generally less receptive to teaching a standalone non-academic curriculum, fearing it takes time from their content.

With **infusion**, teachers can blend SEL instruction into existing curriculum or content, giving them more flexibility than they would have using a distinct, purchased or in-house developed curriculum requiring explicit instruction. Infusion makes SEL instruction more adaptable, and in some ways, allows teachers more creativity. In Anchorage, for example, an elementary P.E. teacher is able to connect concepts of teamwork from tossing and catching balls back to the district's SEL standard on "interacting well with others." A downside of infusion, however, is that in the absence of such standards or concepts, anything can be connected back to SEL, even if it is not a high-quality lesson or the connection is flimsy.

One finding in the three districts was that explicit instruction tends to be a better fit with K-8 grades, where the direct teaching and building of SEL skills are expected. Infusion tends to resonate more with high schools, where classes are divided into traditional subject areas that have less room for standalone SEL curriculum, and where teachers (and sometimes parents) resist deviations from traditional content. (Districts such as Anchorage and Sacramento often compromise by having advisories or elective periods in high schools for peer mentoring or "peer court" efforts as part of their drive to improve school climate through SEL.) This dichotomy isn't right or wrong, but likely more of an acknowledgment of the traditions and structures of elementary/middle schools and high schools.

Recommendations

Don't choose between explicit instruction and infusion. You need both.

Sustainable implementation should include elements of both explicit instruction and infusion for SEL to take root across grades and content areas. In addition to purchasing evidence-based curriculum, one critical way to enable high-quality SEL instruction is to develop SEL standards and indicators. Teachers need touchstones to guide their instruction, either in the form of curriculum they should follow or standards that they use to design classroom activities. The good news is that there's no need to reinvent the wheel: Groups such as CASEL have evaluated evidence-based SEL programs, created frameworks for defining SEL standards and developed a variety of other tools and approaches for implementing systemic SEL. At least 3 states have K-12 SEL student standards that others can use as a foundation to get started.

Weave SEL into everything the school does.

It's important to remember that adopting an evidence-based curriculum or SEL standards aren't sufficient. The districts we studied carved out time – through lessons, class periods, school climate efforts, and teacher professional development – for collaboration, conflict management and empathy as part of the teacher and student school experience.

Even – and especially – with infusion, all school experiences should provide opportunities for students and teachers to engage in SEL: classroom instruction based on college- and career-ready standards, classroom observations, behavioral interventions delivered by teachers or administrators, even how playgrounds are supervised. Such alignment promotes both sustainability and coherence. Anchorage has documented for teachers and its administrators how its SEL standards link with Common Core State Standards (which Anchorage adopted even though Alaska did not) and with Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching, the teacher observation rubric the district uses.

Whatever a district or school's instructional emphasis – infusion, explicit instruction or ideally, a thoughtful balance of both – quality delivery of that instruction requires that teachers well-versed in the SEL competencies and practices they are using. In fact, CASEL describes "teacher instructional practice" as a third SEL approach, alongside infusion and explicit instruction. For more details on how these districts ensure teachers are prepared to deliver effective SEL instruction, see Section 4: "How do we support our teachers in SEL implementation?"

QUESTION **THREE**

How do we measure the quality of SEL implementation and use the results?

Among the most heated debates about SEL instruction is how and whether to measure student attainment of SEL skills. Many districts use climate surveys, student engagement surveys, teacher-completed assessments, parent satisfaction surveys or other means to measure whether students are meeting SEL standards and inform future instructional practice and communications with school stakeholders – including parents and teachers. In some cases, districts' strategic plans have concrete and measurable goals to improve culture or climate. At the state level, the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act requires state accountability systems to measure an indicator of "school quality," which proposed regulations define as school climate or student engagement (as well as other, more academic measures).

The districts we researched generally did not administer SEL assessments to students as they do in, say, math or English. Instead, they use tools such as staff and student surveys or teacher-rated assessments of students' SEL skills (such as the DESSA-mini, or Devereux Student Strengths Assessment-mini). The districts use most of this data formatively, that is, for review by school teams or to plan professional development, not for high-stakes uses.

That's not to say that the districts ignore the data for bigger-picture use. As part of the CDI, Anchorage and Sacramento use student and teacher surveys of SEL to track implementation. And both of them have district-wide strategic plans with specific, measurable goals about student engagement and climate that survey data will inform. Presumably each city's superintendent

will be held accountable for those larger strategic plan goals and the data behind them. But none of the districts we researched use data for student, teacher or school accountability – for example, as part of educator evaluations or to inform school ratings or school-quality reviews.

In fact, measuring SEL and using the data as a factor in student, educator, school or district accountability systems, such as in educators' personnel evaluations or school ratings that have rewards or consequences, is controversial. SEL advocates say the assessments are imprecise or the data are not nuanced enough to form high-stakes conclusions. Schools and districts also should never draw conclusions from SEL data in isolation of other indicators, such as attendance or grades.

In California, a coalition of nine districts (including Sacramento) called California Office to Reform Education (CORE) is collaborating to address challenges they share, including how to implement a school accountability system that considers SEL skills. For CORE districts, SEL skills represents about 8 percent of the organization's School Quality Improvement Index[1] , which CORE developed through its waiver of No Child Left Behind rules. However, Sacramento is not using the index, preferring its own dashboard that reports data from SEL surveys and discipline.

Bridgeport is working with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and The Consultation Center at Yale School of Medicine (TCC) to both measure whether RULER is being implemented with fidelity in the district *and* to measure progress against indicators aligned to a theory of change developed by the two centers. Their assessment includes student outcome data (grades, attendance, suspensions/expulsions), along with results from an annual School Climate Survey that contains a number of measures related to SEL, and a semi-annual implementation survey. Principals in Bridgeport also say they use interim measures – student disciplinary referrals, course passage and chronic absenteeism – as other markers of how SEL implementation is progressing.

1 The other SEL and climate indicators, each at 8 percent, are: chronic absenteeism, student/staff/parent climate surveys, suspension/expulsion rate and English Language Learner redesignation rate. See http://coredistricts.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/CORE-Data-Collaborative-v3-1-21-16.pdf

Recommendations

Measure what you're trying to change.

Districts should have a clear plan to measure SEL implementation that aligns with district goals – whether they address climate and culture, student demonstration of SEL skills, student achievement, safety or other areas – but the key is to make sure you're measuring the right indicators. CASEL's web site has resources to help districts consider how to measure their SEL work.

Consider high stakes as high risk.

Data about SEL from climate surveys or student demonstration of SEL skills can and should be used for program evaluation, school-level planning and formative classroom uses. Whether that data should inform school accountability and educator evaluations is riskier. As the case studies illustrate, our research raises cautions for including SEL in school accountability and educator evaluation, especially if rewards or consequences are involved.

How do we support our teachers in SEL implementation?

Recommendation

Start SEL with the adults. All the adults.

Before districts implement SEL for students, it's good practice to take at least a year to develop teachers' SEL content but also the SEL skills and values they are expected to display. It's not easy to take a close look at peer interactions and engage in an honest discussion about whether school staff are demonstrating the kinds of behavior they want their own students to show. But if students expect teachers to model behavior, there's no better place to start.

The districts we profiled indicated that teaching adults how to model SEL standards they hope their students will exhibit – as part of their professional development on SEL curriculum or instruction – is foundational. This approach makes it unique from other kinds of professional development. In reading, for example, teachers learn content and discuss the best ways to deliver that content in engaging and meaningful ways. But there's little questioning of their fundamental reading skills. With good SEL professional development, by contrast, teachers must learn the content and turn the mirror to themselves and ask whether *they* are exhibiting the SEL skills expected of their students – such as empathy, kindness, self-awareness – both in their classroom and with their colleagues.

This is one reason Bridgeport spent a year teaching administrators and school and district implementation teams its SEL curriculum before students ever saw it. In some schools, disagreements among teachers often feature language similar to what their students use about how they prefer to be treated and what mood they're in. In Anchorage, a grant is funding the training of staff from external partners on SEL skills for adults, linked to what the district is teaching its students. The goal is to improve the SEL skills of the adults in after-school programs and other youth-facing organizations before they work with students.

Why does it matter? Starting with the adults helps teachers and school leaders model the behavior and self-reflection they want to see in students. "The loudest curriculum in the classroom is the teacher," noted one external partner of the Anchorage School District. Developing SEL skills in adults improves professional interactions inside the school and prepares teachers to help students develop their own SEL skills.

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How do we sustain SEL efforts?

Three factors seemed to influence the sustainability of the districts' SEL work: stable funding, supportive leadership, and alignment with other district practices. These are among the hallmarks of sustainability that CASEL has found in its own research, which they have used to develop a sustainability planning toolkit.

All three districts started with grants and used the funds to build central-office support and/or invest in coaches for schools and their teams. As they continue with implementation, they remain reliant on grant funds, but some have shifted to more stable funding sources as well: Sacramento and Anchorage both use general fund dollars to support the central-office infrastructure necessary to implement SEL. In Sacramento, Superintendent Jose Banda is considering dedicating a portion of revenues raised from a $75 million parcel tax levy on the November ballot to the district's SEL work.

Sustained commitment by leaders is also important for successful implementation. The single most common thread in the districts we examined was the vigorous and visible support of their superintendents for SEL work. "Everyone knows it's something I'm committed to. It's never, 'And now I'm going to turn it over to someone else on my staff to talk about it,'" noted Ed Graff, the former superintendent of the Anchorage School District who is now leading Minneapolis

Public Schools. And the leaders' commitment extends to the schools; all districts require school-level SEL teams, usually with the participation of the principal or assistant principal. Leaders often can identify and articulate the changes at the policy level, beyond classroom practice, that SEL should influence.

Each district also is attempting to embed SEL in other district routines, processes and initiatives. Bridgeport has invested time and resources to work with nonprofit advocates to train cohorts of parents in the same SEL curriculum that their children are experiencing, to the applause of parents who say they feel better equipped to help their children if they are upset or angry. Sacramento and Bridgeport also have sponsored SEL trainings through their Parent Resource Center. SEL coaches and leadership in Anchorage and Sacramento lead trainings on embedding SEL skills in instruction with their directors of mathematics, English and other colleagues who lead subject-matter academic departments.

With support inside and outside of each district, SEL implementation has a stronger chance to be sustained and supported through changes in district leadership or downturns in finances.

Recommendation

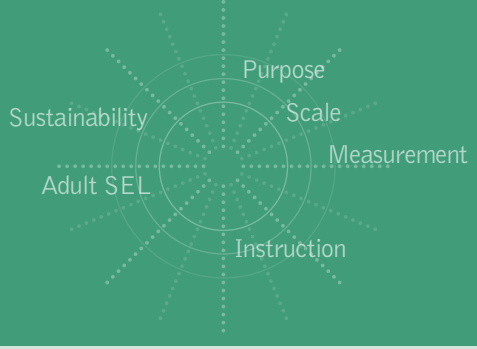
Think funding and beyond when it comes to sustainability.

To build in SEL sustainability from the start, begin planning for long-range SEL implementation before grant or pilot funds expire. Invest resources in school leadership teams and community coalitions, both of which can execute and support SEL implementation beyond the central office. Publish crosswalks between SEL standards, academic standards and your district's classroom observation tool to show how SEL isn't a standalone initiative. Consider holding trainings for parents who can ensure more grass-roots buy-in.

Conclusion

SEL implementation in districts can take many paths, influenced by a number of internal and external forces. This overview outlines the basic questions many districts might ask as they launch or continue implementation of SEL in their communities, offering recommendations based on lessons from three districts. The district case studies explore these lessons and many others in greater depth.

Anchorage School District



Anchorage School District: The Basics

Anchorage is Alaska's largest and the nation's 97th largest school district, encompassing nearly 2,000 square miles.

95 Schools

61	Elementary Schools
10	Middle Schools
8	High Schools
10	Charter Schools
11	Alternative Schools

Total is > 95 because some programs are co-located

2,902 Teachers and 48,447 Students

41.7%	free and reduced lunch
43%	White
6%	Black
11%	Hispanic
16%	Asian or Pacific Islander
9%	Alaska Native or American Indian
15%	Two or more races
11.9%	English Language Learner
7.2%	Students with Disabilities

SEL Implementation

Program(s) in Use in the District*:

- Connected and Respected (K-5)
- Kelso's Choice (K-5)
- Sunburst (Elementary)
- Great Body Shop (K-8)
- Aggressors, Victims and Bystanders (6-8)
- Adventure Education – PACE (Peer Academic Career Excellence), Peer Leadership, Adventure P.E. 101
- IMPACT (9-12)

Number of schools currently working towards SEL model school status: 38

Year SEL implementation started: 2006**

*Beginning in 2016-17, ASD elementary schools will be required to adopt one school-wide explicit instruction program—either Connected and Respected or Second Step.

**Year the standards were adopted

Sources: Anchorage School District; National Council on Teacher Quality

Background

The History

Like the state's frontier traditions, the roots of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) run deep in Anchorage, Alaska. The district's and community's commitment to SEL in Anchorage is more than 25 years old, and has remained steady through leadership changes, budget fluctuations and other challenges.

Since 1990, Anchorage has made a core focus of improving the social and emotional skills of its more than 48,000 students through a variety of grant- and district-funded initiatives. In the '90s, Anchorage's district staff, educators and community youth-serving organizations coalesced around a "strengths-based" approach to behavior management (inspired by the Search Institute's Framework for Developmental Assets[1]). By the mid-2000s, the commitment to this forerunner to SEL remained, but the fidelity to and impact of the model varied across schools – so the districts began a process to develop a formal set of SEL benchmarks.

The result: In 2006, Anchorage became one of the first districts in the nation to develop and adopt a set of K-12 SEL standards for both students and teachers. The 15 SEL standards are organized by four core competencies of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social management, all of which are aligned with evidence-based curricula.[2] These pioneering efforts caught the attention of national SEL leaders, and in 2011, ASD joined the NoVo Foundation's and Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning's (CASEL)[3] Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI), a national initiative that supports eight large urban school districts in promoting SEL for all students.

The Model

Now, SEL in ASD is moving towards greater integration with academics and teaching models. Currently, SEL implementation supports Destination 2020, the district-wide, comprehensive plan to improve student achievement[4], and the standards are aligned with the Danielson Framework for Teaching. ASD's former Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Diane Hoffbauer explains, "When our district adopted the Danielson framework, it provided a framework for discussions about student engagement and understanding your community. All of that is SEL, but now it has been hung in an instructional framework. SEL isn't a frosting, it's your healthy muffin. It now resides cleanly in the instructional beliefs system." Another new feature of this longstanding commitment to SEL is scale. Thirty eight of ASD's 95 schools are currently implementing SEL in their classrooms, and the district is working toward full district-wide implementation by 2021.

The Players

Anchorage's SEL team of five individuals is part of the Professional Learning Department, led by an Executive Director, Jennie Knutson. In recent years, the Professional Learning Department – and with it, Social Emotional Learning – has shifted from under ASD's Curriculum and Instruction department to a direct report to the Chief Academic Officer. Knutson notes that this move has been an important one for relative prioritization of SEL: "You have seat at table with all of the other executive directors, so you can advocate for [Social Emotional Learning], and see how it [aligns and fits in] with all other initiatives. It's a huge difference to be right under the CAO; we hit every department, work with every department... every department in academic services is implementing SEL in its professional learning."

Big Ideas from Anchorage

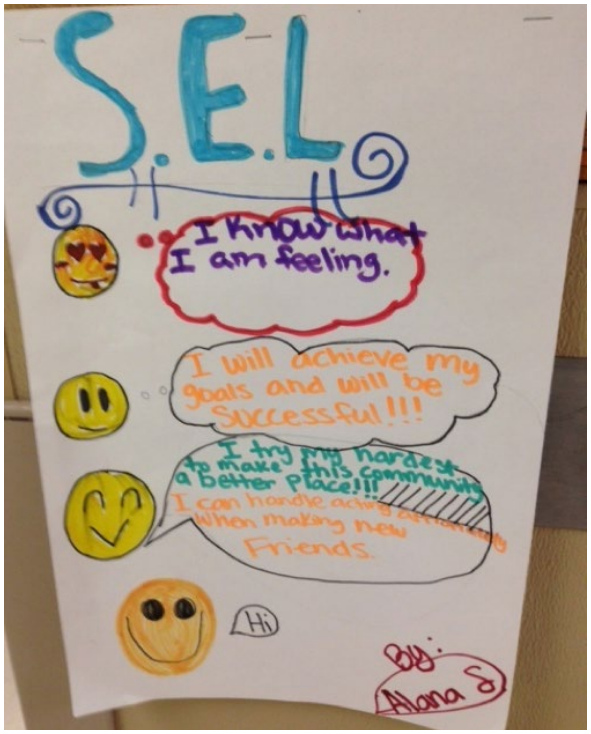
Scale

From Flexibility for Schools to Structured Support

In those early days of SEL in the 1990s and into the 2000s, the district gave schools full autonomy to determine which programs and curricula to implement. The legacy of that flexibility is that, across the district, elementary schools are currently using dozens of explicit instruction programs[5] and high schools often develop their own SEL curricular materials.

With such a wide variety of programs, lessons and materials in place, the district's SEL Leadership Team—a group of district administrators, principals and teachers who provide SEL training to teachers throughout ASD—and the Professional Learning department have found it difficult to offer adequate support, and ensure programs are effective and being implemented with fidelity. The variety also meant that, while good programs abounded, there was a lack of common identity for SEL efforts. One elementary school principal reflects that, during his career in ASD high schools, "There was a powerful program I was a part of. Even at that time when I was seeing all this around me, and the intentionality of people coming together, I really didn't have the full comprehension [that it was connected to an organized SEL framework]. It wasn't until I went to the elementary level that I started to hear more about SEL, and I thought, this is what I saw back at the high school."

As ASD seeks to take SEL instruction to district-wide scale in the next three years, Professional Learning leaders made a big, strategic choice to streamline programs. ASD will now offer elementary schools just two evidence-based programs to choose from: Connected and Respected or Second Step. By limiting the options, central office staff and the SEL Leadership Team are confident they can provide deeper and more consistent professional development and resources. This shift is also part of a district-wide five-year plan to align SEL curricular materials and instruction with ASD's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and behavioral interventions. The plan will roll out in three phases, with elementary schools beginning in 2016-17. Next year, ASD will convene planning teams to map out the approach for implementation in middle and high schools.



A student poster illustrates Standard 1A, Self-Awareness ("Student demonstrates awareness of his/her emotions") of the ASD K-12 SEL Standards.

For a district where "a thousand (curricular) flowers have bloomed" since the 1990s, this shift is a big change. But for ASD, as SEL grows up, giving schools more limited choice is essential to quality at scale, to consistent implementation and to most effective use of limited resources to ensure quality support. As Professional Learning Executive Director Knutson explains, "the vision, the idea is that it's valuable for a district to say this is the one, or this is the two [programs]... those are what districts will support with PD and materials." She advises her peer administrators that, "What districts have to figure out is, what they can support? Most of districts don't have large SEL teams to go out and provide that support" to dozens of different programs.

Sustainability

Communicating SEL in Ideas and Practice: The School Leadership Link

While Anchorage district staff have regular professional development and conversations about SEL, they've at times been challenged to communicate the definition and value of SEL to key internal stakeholders. The district has identified school leadership as an important

source – and sometimes missing link – in this kind of communication, and its experiences suggest that a differentiated message at the elementary and secondary levels is necessary.

Findings from a 2015 communications audit showed a lack of consistent messaging about SEL to and from teachers. As a result, some teachers are using SEL-related materials and activities without labeling them as such, creating confusion among parents about what SEL "looks like" and why it is an important part of their child's studies. The district sees principals as the primary means to communicate a standard message and set of expectations about SEL and its role in academics, and aims to improve this link. As Anchorage's Chief Communications Officer Heidi Embley notes, "We need to figure out where that breakdown occurs. Does it happen between the district and principals? Are principals filtering information for their staff? Are they not understanding it properly, or just not interested?"

Part of the ASD's emphasis on principals is based on success stories within the district. One elementary principal describes her role in ensuring both rigor and consistency of message regarding SEL: "We do an SEL activity in each of our staff meetings. And we start each of our Academic Parent Teacher Team meetings with a lesson. We share different things they can do with their children at home and link it to the SEL lessons we are teaching in school. I want to make sure that I'm always giving them current information—we're not sitting in a circle singing Kumbaya, holding hands." Her experience also illustrates that SEL messaging and practice in her school leadership are connected: explaining, "I need to practice what I preach." She reviews teachers' lesson plans and observes them in the classroom to help ensure their understanding of SEL; requires her staff to teach one lesson from Connected and Respected, an evidence-based SEL program for grades K-5, each day for the first two weeks of school, and one per week for the rest of the school year; and also makes a point of consistently communicating SEL lessons and activities to both staff and families. Her focus on SEL has had a big impact on students, staff and families. The number of students receiving behavioral referrals has dropped from 88 percent in 2009-10, her first year at the school, to 32 percent in 2013-14. During the same period, staff turnover has decreased, and parent attendance at family events has increased.

At the high school level, the challenge for principals may not be a lack of understanding, but rather a lack of desire to label programs or courses as SEL. Despite the district's long history of success implementing SEL, a stigma around the term still exists among some community members and secondary school staff. Says Chief Communications Officer Embley,

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: ROLE-ALIKE ADVICE

DATA AND ASSESSMENT LEADERS

The ASD continues to push its district departments, schools and educators to assess SEL efforts and the impacts they have on student performance. The tools – an SEL staff survey, a new student survey, the DESSA-mini student assessment, a partnership with AIR in evaluating data – are all critical. But Carey Gray, ASD Program Evaluation Coordinator, reflects that the human element of data and assessment matters, too.

She provides this advice to her counterparts working in data and assessment: "I'm an advocate of actual student voice. Quantitative data is really important, but the voices—be it testimonials or focus groups—speak to it better in a way."

And she emphasizes the importance of user-friendly data, noting that after the district staff improved the "dense reports" of an annual staff climate survey to a more accessible dashboard for principals with resources attached, response rates doubled. "[The survey] was this thing they did every year, but it didn't mean anything. Helping people understand 'why we should care' and 'here's how to use it'... it has blossomed."

"Several years ago SEL was described by a local talk -radio host as 'fluff' and 'glitter,' and that stuck for a very long time: 'Why do you have to be teaching fluffy stuff when you should be improving your math and reading?" So both the school district and building leaders have pivoted, shifting the conversation among high school parents, teachers and business partners away from SEL and toward "employability skills," such as problem-solving, goal-setting and good customer communication skills.

For example, one high school principal describes how she connects SEL to the workforce with her staff: "There was some resistance to SEL when I first came to South, because it wasn't part of the school culture. We talk about SEL as employability skills.... It works better for our school when it's about everybody's [readiness]." In particular, this focus has guided the principal and her teachers in establishing a student-run peer mentorship class, where sophomore, junior and senior peer mentors are individually assigned a group of freshman students as mentees for the year. The peer mentors themselves make clear connections between the program and "life readiness." An incoming junior at South High School says of her time serving as a peer mentor, "Peer mentorship definitely gives you a level of confidence, responsibility, people skills and social skills...those are really key things just going through life and being successful." (To hear about the experiences of additional peer mentors, please click here). SEL, in the form of peer mentorship, has had a significant impact on student achievement and climate:

When the principal began in 2010, 30 percent of the school's freshmen had two or more failing grades at the end of their first semester, and staff noticed that freshmen were less likely than upperclassmen to engage in school assemblies, athletics and afterschool clubs. Now, the failure rate has dropped to 3 percent, and 80 to 90 percent of the school's 1500 students are involved in extracurricular activities. The principal says, "We have seen a lot of barriers break down, not only through peer mentorship but overall improved school climate. Academics and high expectations are still a big focus for us, but athletics and academics used to be the only thing we recognized. Now we're doing a lot of things to recognize kids in different ways."

These experiences demonstrate the critical role for school principals in setting the tone and expectations for SEL in the building, as well as the need for a more tailored message for stakeholders at the elementary and high school level.

Adult SEL

Prioritizing Adult SEL Learning in Resources and Practice

In general, ASD's SEL story is one of resourcefulness: Over two decades, district leaders and committed educators have sought grant funding – particularly during lean budget years – to continue to support their efforts in schools and at the district level. In particular, though, ASD has been especially strategic in finding and stretching funding streams for adult SEL. They've sought and earned grants to foster the development of SEL skills and competencies in adults, an approach that has, in turn, enabled the district to improve school climate and SEL instruction to students.

For example, in 2009, the district was a sub-recipient of a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAHMSA) "Strategic Prevention Framework Partnerships for Success State and Tribal Initiative" grant. The $350,000, three year grant enabled ASD to partner with the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), the social service agency for Native Alaskan individuals in Anchorage, to deliver professional development to more than 2,000 educators to improve relations between teachers and students through the grant-funded Second Order Change project. Results from post-training surveys measuring changes in interpersonal skills among teachers and staff show mindfulness significantly improved as a result of participating in the project, and distance with students significantly decreased.[6] SAHMSA redoubled its support with a second grant in 2015, which ASD and CITC will use to expand the professional learning to a new cohort.

As Michael Kerosky, a former ASD staff member and current project manager at CITC says, "You can talk to kids all you want about SEL, but if teachers don't model the skills or have them, then it is useless. The loudest curriculum in the

classroom is the teacher." These efforts also reach beyond teachers to bring "adult SEL" to other, critical stakeholders in the community. For example, another partner in the grant is the Anchorage Youth Development Coalition (AYDC), a collaborative of more than 60 youth-serving organizations and individuals in Anchorage; AYDC has recruited 10 individuals from various youth-serving agencies to serve as a cadre and receive leading-edge youth development training. This cohort will then serve as trainers for ongoing cadres of youth-serving workers in their agencies.

As noted previously, the relationship between SEL and PD is also embedded structurally in the district through the decision to house SEL staff and implementation resources within its Professional Learning department. SEL shows up in ASD's hiring practices, too, at both the district and school level: ASD's former superintendent Ed Graff explains, "In every interview I have, I ask candidates to tell me what they know about SEL. In addition to direct questions, I listen to them describe their philosophy and approach to working with students. Those are all related to SEL." A high school principal adds, "I pose SEL questions in the interview process no matter what position, from clerical to assistant principals. Philosophically, as new people come in, they're in line with our beliefs."

Through both structure, practice and resource allocation, ASD has emphasized adult training and adult SEL skills, an approach that is paying off as the "needle moves" on school climate indicators in particular.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: ROLE-ALIKE ADVICE

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Anchorage's long history with SEL started – and continues – with partnerships; school-community collaboration on the assets that students have and those they need, as well as deep discussions on what the community could provide and where schools should step up. This experience demonstrates that, even as the field shifts toward greater integration of SEL and academics, the role for Student Support Services professionals will remain critical.

These administrative staff often will best know the landscape of social service providers and youth development organizations in the community. Anchorage's Coordinator of Related Services, Paula Patterson, advises her counterparts to: "Look at your needs and what the data is telling you, and use that as a guide. There is a lot of support around SEL. Look at who is doing this and reach out. Pick up the phone and go visit people who are passionate about the work."

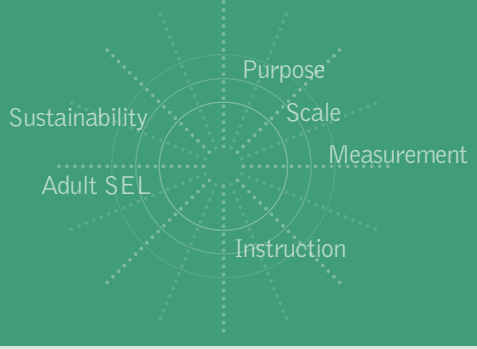
From afterschool providers to social service agencies to tribal councils, there are many people in Anchorage "who are passionate about the work." Deliberate engagement from Student Support Services has enabled these partners' critical role in sustaining and improving SEL in the district over many years, and can in other districts, as well.

Conclusion

For many leaders and stakeholders in the Anchorage School District, "SEL is just the way we do business." Chief Communications Officer Embley explains, "Our philosophy is SEL is what we do. It's not just a lesson that is part of the day but is integrated into everything we do for students and staff as well." As an elementary principal describes, "[SEL] is just the core system of beliefs that I always have worked from as a teacher and an administrator. These are all skills that make an organization healthy. It just is a natural part of leading."

As Anchorage enters the next chapter of SEL implementation, namely greater consistency of programs and district-wide scale, it will build on previous accomplishments, strong leadership and the support of its community to ensure that all students are equipped with the social and emotional skills required for success in college and careers.

Bridgeport Public Schools



Bridgeport Public Schools: The Basics

Bridgeport is an urban, high-poverty and midsized school district in Connecticut's largest city.

38 Schools

30	Elementary Schools (prekindergarten to 6th or pre-K to 8th)
6	High Schools
2	Alternative Schools

1,348 Teachers and 20,753 Students

99%	free and reduced lunch
10%	White
38%	Black
49%	Hispanic
13%	Asian
13%	English Language Learners
15%	Students with IEPs

SEL Implementation:

Program(s) in Use in the District:

- RULER (formally K-8, with materials and training available for high school)

Number of Schools Currently Implementing:
38 – at scale

Year SEL Implementation Started:
Planning began in 2013-14; training in 2014-15; full roll-out in 2015-16

Background

The History

Bridgeport, Connecticut and its public schools are used to making headlines: for violence and corruption,[7] for chronic underfunding[8] and – since 2012 – for political fireworks on its School Board involving state dissolution and a court decision to reinstate the democratically-elected, if dysfunctional, public body.[9] Student achievement has reflected this turmoil: As of 2014-15, half of the district schools were in turnaround or focus school status under Connecticut's (pre-ESSA) accountability system.[10]

But in recent years, even amid dire financial and political circumstances, Bridgeport Public Schools has begun to post some encouraging news about school climate and culture. The Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition, which has reported on suspensions for six years, noted precipitous drops in in-school (50%) and out-of-school (55%) suspensions over a two-year period from 2012-13 to 2014-15. Formerly, two in ten BPS students had been suspended out-of-school; now, the numbers are one in ten.[11] School-based arrests declined from 185 in 2012-13 to 46 in 2014-15, and the three-year chronic absenteeism trend is down from nearly half to about a quarter of students in high schools.[12] The district has implemented national best practices on school climate, like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, and in January 2014, hired Fran Rabinowitz, a longtime Connecticut state and district administrator, as interim superintendent. From her previous position, leading the Hamden Public Schools, Rabinowitz brought with her a deep belief in the transformative promise of Social and Emotional Learning for adults and students.

The Model

In Bridgeport, SEL is essentially one program: All schools, from pre-K to high school, are implementing elements of RULER (Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing and Regulating emotions), a program from the Yale Center on Emotional Intelligence (CEI). RULER is an evidence-based program that the Yale CEI has worked with Bridgeport to adapt and implement through a train-the-trainer model. The major components of RULER – referenced throughout this case study – include:

- The Charter, a document created collaboratively by members of the community, outlining how they aspire to treat each other. Throughout BPS, educators and administrators give examples of different kinds of Charters, including those created by/for faculty teams, classrooms and even families.
- The Mood Meter, a visual tool with yellow, red, blue and green quadrants that represents different clusters of emotions, helps children learn to identify and label emotions.
- The Meta-Moment, a guided step-back where students and teachers pause from their interactions in order to reflect before acting.
- The Blueprint, a conflict mediation tool that helps children and adults consider a disagreement from the other person's perspective, as well as their own.[13]

The Players

As discussed throughout this case study, Interim Superintendent Fran Rabinowitz has been critical to effective SEL implementation, as both catalyst and continued leader. Principals, supported by a trained SEL leadership team composed of their teachers and support staff, are expected to lead implementation at the building level. BPS also has two dedicated, part-time SEL staff members: These retired Bridgeport principals, Helen Moran and Alana Callahan, both coach and support school administrators and school leadership teams, and lead an SEL Task Force of community stakeholders. The Yale CEI continues to play an important role in implementation: A Yale team member works regularly with the district SEL co-facilitators to improve their own skills and knowledge with the RULER program. Additionally, the Yale Consultation Center at the School of Medicine is an evaluation partner, tracking implementation of the program.

Big Ideas from Bridgeport

Instruction

SEL and Literacy: The Language Link

The relationship between SEL and academics is a core issue for the field; SEL skills such as self-regulation and self-efficacy often support academics by preparing students' receptivity to academic learning, for example.[14] A number of Bridgeport educators, especially in the early grades, and administrators believe in an even tighter link: that SEL instruction can support language acquisition, and that the RULER program's emphasis on vocabulary, in particular, supports literacy skill-building.

At the Skane School, a pre-K program in Bridgeport, early education and special education teachers see clear connections between SEL instruction and literacy and verbal skills for English Language Arts content in later grades. As one Skane School teacher describes, in the early grades, "we explore language through play – learning how words feel on their tongues and feel to say, so language acquisition is really related to feeling." She adds that her students also connect their new emotional vocabulary to classroom texts and literature: "We come across words through stories – [the SEL instruction is] really substantiated by the texts that we are using with the students, [asking students] how characters are feeling and why." At Skane, where

A "Mood Meter" outside of a classroom at the PreK-6th grade Hallen School shows the range of students' emotional vocabulary.

the population is split roughly in half between students with special needs and those without, SEL has particular resonance with instruction for students with limited language and verbal skills. Skane's classrooms show a spectrum of support and scaffolding as very young learners are encouraged alternately to articulate or identify through gestures the words that best match their emotional state – and the strategies that will help them process those emotions.

This thinking about language acquisition, SEL and special populations is evident among district administrators, as well. For many Bridgeport Public Schools students, emotional and behavioral problems and learning disabilities are intertwined, so SEL instruction presents a compelling strategy to support student learning. As the district Director of Speech, Language and Hearing Teresa Cherry-Cruz explains, "When we look at students who are language-impaired, how do we help them develop the SEL vocabulary alongside academic vocabulary? Words create your worlds and your habits – think how much more powerful our students who struggle with language would be if they had the words for their emotions." One principal at a PreK-8 school puts an even finer point on the power of language in serving high-need student populations: "Before, everything was 'I am mad,' but now [students] have the vocabulary to come into the classroom and share how they are feeling about the fact that they had to sit for an hour on the bus and haven't had breakfast yet."

Emphasizing language acquisition and vocabulary in SEL instruction lays the groundwork for more sophisticated integration of SEL content into the ELA curriculum in later grades. Bridgeport's Director of Literacy Melissa Jenkins describes how she works with teachers to "infuse elements of RULER/SEL into literacy performance tasks [related to analyzing the work of] Maya Angelou and Sandra Cisneros." Teachers should both utilize these SEL-infused performance tasks and to do explicit instruction on RULER and SEL, and they are supported by both literacy coaches and SEL facilitators to do so.

These examples all point to how SEL instruction supports ELA instruction in Bridgeport. Just as the Common Core – with its emphasis on academic vocabulary – has brought attention to the critical role vocabulary plays in content mastery,[15] SEL is helping Bridgeport teachers reaffirm the relationship between vocabulary and emotional regulation. As one pre-K-8 teacher reflects, other educators should "know that [social emotional skills] really can be taught, and you can help kids to learn emotional vocabulary. If you give kids the language, they will use it."

● Adult SEL

Adult SEL and Tough Conversations

Among the defining characteristics of Bridgeport's roll-out of SEL is that the district started with the adults first. Nearly every teacher and administrator mentioned the importance of rolling out the ideas and tools of RULER to adults first. Alana Callahan, one of the SEL Co-Facilitators explains, "We spent one whole year just on adult development, so by the time we brought it into the schools, there was a lot of buy-in for how these concepts could create a professional culture." "I think that one of the reasons why this is working so well," offered one preK-8 teacher, is that "staff members can recognize themselves in [the RULER tools and strategies]." Beyond just the power of buy-in, Bridgeport's experience of "starting with the grown-ups" also underscores the potential for adult SEL to facilitate and improve the kinds of tough conversations required to change the culture and outcomes of low-performing, urban systems.

Teacher feedback and evaluation are obvious examples of difficult conversations, and Terry Carroll, the Assistant Superintendent for Teaching, Learning and Staff Development in Bridgeport, observes that adult SEL has helped educators and administrators throughout the district depersonalize and give and receive more effective feedback: "The culture in education is that people don't always know how to take feedback well – there's too much personalization – so having this language to give constructive feedback is important." One of the RULER tools – the Charter – came up often as educators and administrators reflect on creating school culture among adults. As one pre-K-8 principal notes, "I'm always referring back to, and starting the faculty meeting with, the staff Charter. Even if you're having a tough conversation with the teacher – say there's a conflict between two teachers – you're referring back to the Charter, and saying, "You guys agreed that this is how you want to feel and treat each other."

Even in some of the direst circumstances, including threats of school closures due to budget cuts and turn-around restructuring, Bridgeport's educators and administrators cite how their own improved awareness of emotional regulation helps them lead their teams or students through difficulty. A pre-K and Kindergarten principal explains, "I reflect a lot faster now, and can think about how to 'get out of here' emotionally," whereas bad administrative news used to lead her to spiral. One of the less positive accounts

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: ROLE-ALIKE ADVICE

SUPERINTENDENT

Fran Rabinowitz, Interim Superintendent of BPS, is widely credited by her colleagues, teachers and community members as the driving force behind SEL in the district. She advises her peers that, for effective implementation, a superintendent has to lead, own and believe in SEL and communicate accountability through her/his interest and prioritization: "You have to make [SEL implementation] a priority and you have to lead the process – it's not something that you can turn over to the social work department. If you want it to become part of the fabric of the process, it has to be led by the superintendent. If you don't think you can give [SEL implementation] your full commitment, put it off until you can."

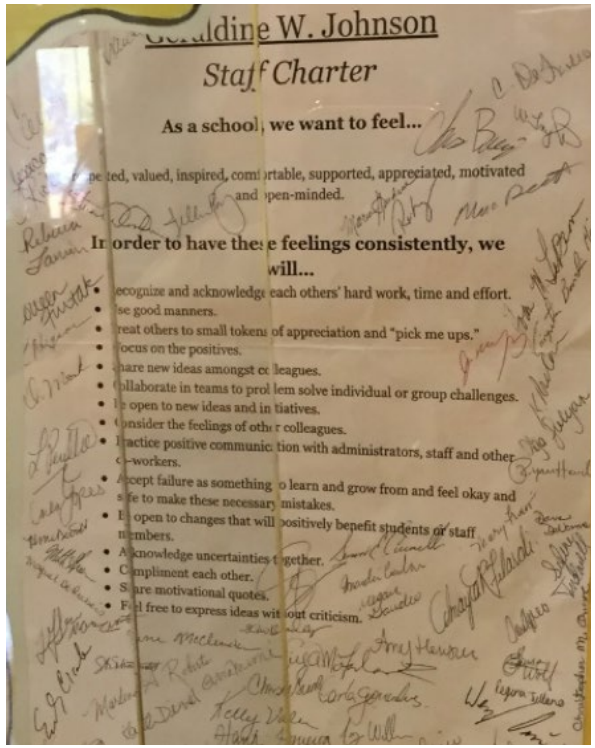
In a struggling, under-resourced district like Bridgeport, "one of the challenges [for Superintendents seeking to implement SEL] is that "there are no dollars 'somewhere.'" Rabinowitz has spent a lot of time working with local funders, but SEL has meant real resource trade-offs for her: "I have had to let other things go that I might like to have done – conferences, speakers, etc. – to ensure [SEL] is implemented fully." In other words, SEL comes at an opportunity cost, especially in underfunded districts; that, too, requires commitment and decision-making from the top.

of RULER implementation illustrates this point, as well: A pre-K-8 teacher shares that, "We lost some staff buy-in to RULER when we found out that we were going to be a turnaround school. I think our staff forgot to acknowledge their own feelings." Asked to speculate about what might have been different if her school had been doing RULER for a few years at the time of the turnaround news, the teacher responded, "I do think it would have made a difference. We would have had more practice with and experience identifying and labeling, being about to authentically share with students, 'I'm in the Blue [on the Mood Meter] today because I got stressful news,' instead of snapping at students."

Sustainability

Starting at the Top: Leadership, Ownership and Modeling

Effective school reforms almost always require strong district leadership, but Bridgeport Public Schools' experience with SEL implementation illustrates the impact of the superintendent in striking ways. District leaders cite how Fran Rabinowitz literally made SEL her top priority as she assumed leadership: "It's clear that [successful implementation] started with her vision, and her making it the first of the theories of action in the district improvement plan,[16]" explains one of the district's SEL Co-Facilitators, Helen Moran. Rabinowitz also prioritized SEL in spending the scarce resource of staff time, including a leadership retreat with two days of RULER training for district staff



The staff Charter at Johnson School (preK-8). Reflecting the commitment to "adult modeling," the Charter is on display in the building's front hallway.

and four professional coaching sessions for the principals, as well as three coaching sessions for the school-based SEL teams of every school in the district, of every school in the district. District staff describe her as "the source of energy" and "the center of gravity" for SEL and RULER implementation. They note how, through modeling, she sets the priority informally as well as formally. "She starts all of our meetings checking in on the Mood Meter and cites often to the district Charter," explains SEL Co-Facilitator Moran. And Assistant Superintendent for Teaching, Learning and Staff Development Terry Carroll notes, "she asks questions and pays attention [about how implementation is going], so there's really heightened attention."

Bridgeport leaders also connect the Interim Superintendent's strong leadership to the district's ability to implement RULER at scale. Assistant Superintendent Carroll points out that "Bridgeport isn't typically a district that can do "whole district anything" because the resources don't go far enough. There's a challenge of chasing grants that undermines stability of initiatives at the district level – a school will get its own grant – coupled with a very high student mobility rate (some schools have up to 50% mobility rate). But the way she has done the whole district, and the deliberate – not rushed – roll out, it's really building, in a developmental way. That has really been key." Her leadership was also instrumental in securing the financial support from a group of local funders, led by the Tauck Family Foundation, which enabled this district-wide push.

District-level leadership created the impetus for SEL in Bridgeport, and school-level leadership is the critical conduit for the theory of action. Consequently, the training and support provided directly to principals for implementation of RULER is married to clear expectations about how SEL will feature in school improvement planning. "The principal supervisors work very closely with principals on their school improvement plans," reports Assistant Superintendent Carroll. "Part of what their work has been is to make sure that they are using the

tools to reinforce the alignment of [goals and activities], especially with new principals, which includes a real focus on SEL and RULER."

This formal and informal prioritization of SEL has made a strong impression on principals, who report ownership of and commitment to modeling RULER implementation in their buildings. In a representative comment, one K-8 principal explains, "[My role as a principal] is as a facilitator. Every year we have something different: It starts with a bang, with fanfare, but come March, we don't even know it exists. What's different with RULER is that administrators got trained first: We saw the positive and what it could do. I chart myself [on the Mood Meter] every day on the morning announcements." Principals also explain how the emphasis on adult SEL has given them the language and tools to empower their staff, as well as communicate expectations. "[Through the SEL training], teachers could tell us what they wanted to feel from their administration – to feel respected – and so we could build their understanding of why [the RULER values of respect] were important to kids: You're the administrator of your classroom," remarked one high school principal.

Taken together, the experience of district senior staff and principals – along with reflections from teachers themselves – suggest just how influential the leadership-level commitment to SEL has been in ensuring enthusiasm for to-date-successful implementation.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: ROLE-ALIKE ADVICE

FUNDER

Mirellise Vazquez, Executive Director of the Tauck Family Foundation, has organized and led a philanthropic partnership of local funders to support BPS' implementation of SEL.

She notes that 80-85% of SEL implementation in BPS is privately funded, advising other funders interested in supporting SEL implementation that, "financially, the model is more resource-intensive upfront." And to sustain SEL efforts beyond initial infusion of funds, she suggests that "sustainability is why the leadership's buy-in to train-the-trainer model are so important. Adult SEL is a good model to develop the buy-in to keep SEL efforts strong and high-impact in the out years after the initial philanthropic investment."

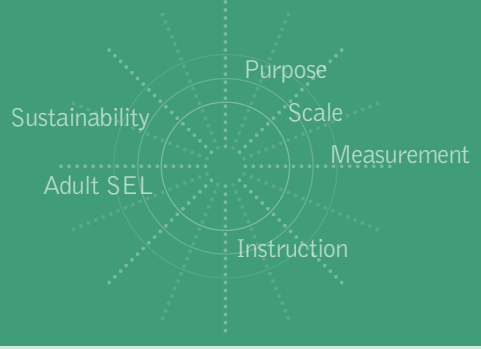
Vazquez explains that this kind of support requires funders to stretch and take risks, as well: "This is hard for philanthropy. We've said, this is the outlier in our portfolio (regarding our social investing model), and we're holding Bridgeport to their own definition of success and outcomes." Tauck monitors its investment in BPS and SEL, but in the absence of its usual grantee performance metrics, this monitoring requires care and commitment: Foundation staff meet quarterly with the Yale Center on Emotional Intelligence and School of Medicine researchers involved in RULER implementation to review tracking and interim measures like logs and visit notes, as well as progress toward meeting agreed-upon goals and milestones. Tauck also looks to measures like climate surveys, and proxies like suspension measures and chronic absenteeism, to ensure that its investment in SEL is yielding results.

Conclusion

Bridgeport educators and administrators, community stakeholders and parents all make an impassioned case for the special importance of SEL in a district and city riven by political conflict, funding crises and urban poverty. As one high school teacher framed her advice to peers in similarly challenged schools: "Don't have that stereotype of the urban high schooler in your mind: Oh, that boy is so tough, he's not going to want to talk about his feelings. That boy who is so tough is exactly who wants to talk about his feelings."

The leadership of Bridgeport Public Schools (from the Superintendent through the SEL co-facilitators and school principals), working with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, have created not just an opportunity to "talk about feelings" in this challenged school district: They have established a structured system, at scale, for educators to make connections between emotions, literacy and language acquisition. They also have created a set of tools and skills among adults that are enabling more productive interactions – and potentially, improving perseverance – in an environment with no shortage of difficult challenges ahead.

Sacramento City Unified School District



Sacramento City Unified School District: The Basics

Sacramento is the 10th-largest school district in California and one of the oldest in the American West, dating back to 1854.

76 Schools

52	Elementary Schools (prekindergarten to 5th or pre-K to 8th)
6	Middle Schools
12	High Schools
4	Multiple-Grade Schools
2	Adult Schools

4,213 Employees and 43,175 Students

68%	free and reduced lunch
19%	White
18%	Black
37%	Hispanic
17%	Asian
5%	Multi-Racial
38%	English Language Learners
13%	Students with IEPs

SEL Implementation:

Programs in Use in the District

Multiple, but two suggested by district:

- Second Step (K-8)
- School Connect (9-12)

Number of Schools Currently Implementing: 48

Year SEL Implementation Started: 2012

Background

The History

The 18 ninth-graders in Tom Quayle's integrated mathematics class at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento are sitting at their desks, eyes closed, facing forward. Gentle flute music plays in the background. Their teacher is speaking, but not about the geometry lesson. "As we begin, close your eyes and take a deep breath in through your nose and out through your mouth. In your mind, count slowly to four. Count to eight."

In working on "mindfulness" – focusing one's awareness on the present moment as a way of achieving calmness, often through meditation – these students are experiencing Sacramento City Unified School District's movement toward infusing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in its 76 schools with the intent of improving school climate, student engagement and ultimately student success. Across Sacramento, SEL looks different from school to school, with some using an evidence-based curriculum such as Second Step, others focusing on adult behavior, and some, like Burbank, trying a number of different approaches: mindfulness, "peer courts" for non-serious student infractions and the School Connect curriculum to improve school climate and student-teacher interactions.

After starting with just four schools in 2012, Sacramento expanded SEL in reaction to an immediate crisis: the closing of eight schools due to budget cuts. Fearing a tough and emotional year, the district worked with teachers and staff on SEL skills at the 16 schools that would receive those students, plus other schools that were interested. SEL has taken off since then, with additional cohorts of schools undergoing training in the CASEL Program Guides and adopting that curriculum every year. Sacramento also created an SEL office with a director and coaches, began integrating SEL into the city's academic agenda, and used SEL as the foundation for a larger effort to improve school climate by emphasizing positive behavior supports and student agency in problem-solving.

The Program

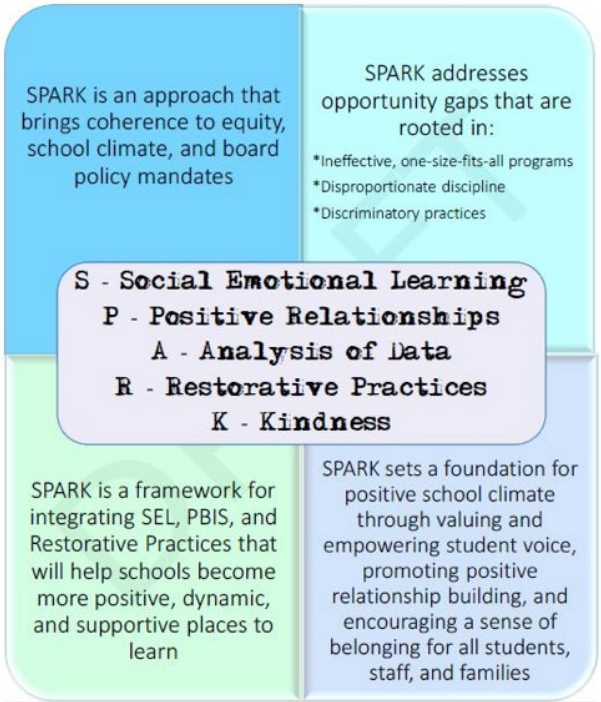
In 2012, Sacramento joined the NoVo Foundation and CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI), a national initiative of eight large urban school districts aimed at supporting districts' capacities to promote SEL for all students. Today, 48 schools in Sacramento are working on SEL implementation at varying levels, with the ability to choose their curriculum and overall approach. The district suggested Second Step for K-8 schools and School Connect for high schools, but schools are supplementing those with additional options, reports the district's Director of Social-Emotional Learning. In addition, many schools not in the cohort of SEL implementers are working on SEL practices, anti-bullying measures or other approaches aimed at improving school climate. By 2018, the remaining 28 schools in the district will be trained on CASEL's SEL framework and school guide.

The Players

Superintendent Jose Banda has ensured that SEL competencies are woven into the city's "Graduate Profile," which is a list of the skills that students in Sacramento are expected to have at key grade levels, and that the district's five-year strategic plan has a goal to develop "safe, emotionally healthy and engaged students." "When we look at how we fully prepare students to be successful, our mantra is college, career and life," Banda said. "A big part of that is the academic piece. But how do we prepare them to have the social skills to be successful?"

Director of Social-Emotional Learning Mai Xi Lee, a former high school administrator, oversees the system-wide implementation of SEL, including professional learning for each cohort of the SEL-implementing schools. She is the primary liaison to the district's academics office.

Along with six equity coaches, the Director is part of a new Office of Equity, which Sacramento created to bring coherence to various district professional development initiatives and practices across SEL, restorative justice and positive behavior interventions. The Office of Equity's collective efforts across these different areas are called SPARK (see summary below), an integrated approach to building positive school culture and climate. SPARK is a framework designed to sustain these priorities – through district dollars, rather than as one-off programs – and ensure that they are infused coherently throughout schools district-wide.



Big Ideas from Sacramento

Scale

Striving for Coherence

A big challenge for Sacramento is framing SEL in a way that is easy to grasp, aligned with overall school climate work and perceived as a natural part of how the district educates children, instead of an add-on. Sacramento is taking several steps to achieve this coherence, although leaders say they have more work to do. The SEL team turned the five core SEL competencies that CASEL identifies – self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making[17] – into a Sacramento-specific slogan called the ABCs of SEL: "We Are, We Belong, We Can." ("We Are," for example, includes self-management and self-awareness. "We Belong" encompasses social awareness and relationship skills. "We Can" includes responsible decision-making and an additional competency, growth mindset.) The slogan is intended to define Sacramento's SEL work in a short and memorable way.

Still, the autonomy the city gives its schools for SEL can complicate its efforts to form a coherent message. For example, SEL looks different from classroom to classroom, or school to school. In some schools, it might be the aforementioned mindfulness exercises, which the teacher created based on his own research and reflection, but which are not yet intentionally linked to the city's SEL standards. Down the hall, an English or social studies teacher might be teaching a lesson using School Connect, the district-suggested curriculum for high schools. District leaders are comfortable with supporting diverse forms of SEL implementation as long as they reach the same end goal. Indeed, that's part of the drive toward the SPARK framework, which is meant to integrate SEL, positive behavior supports and restorative justice and show that there are multiple, interconnected paths to improving school climate.

One way Sacramento has strived for coherence with SEL is to describe it as part of the system's overall work on "the whole child," which includes implementation of the Common Core State Standards. District and school administrators consistently talk about SEL as part of a well-rounded education. They reinforce the notion that SEL is part of what teachers already do – to avoid the "initiative fatigue" that can hinder a new approach and also because teachers are introducing more interactivity and deeper conversations in their classrooms through Common Core. "The concepts of helping kids work better collaboratively, helping kids build positive relationships that are productive – those aren't new concepts," says the district's Chief Communications Officer Gabe Ross. "What's new is being explicit and a system-wide approach that is equitable no matter where you go to school. We tried to link it with the Common Core, because the Common Core is all about working collaboratively and critical thinking."

This message seems to resonate with parents. "[SEL] prepares them for the working world. If they don't learn how to communicate at a young age, they are not going to be prepared for the working world," one parent of three noted in an interview.

Measurement

Threading the Needle of Measurement and Accountability

In the last few months, and particularly with the passage of the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (which requires states to include measures of school quality beyond academics in school and district accountability systems[18]), measuring the impact of SEL has drawn scrutiny from researchers and policymakers. Leading proponents of SEL such as Angela Duckworth and David Yeager have written about their concerns with using SEL indicators in school accountability systems or teacher evaluations because of possible bias or reliability problems with SEL measurements.[19]

Sacramento is a microcosm of that debate. Director of SEL Mai Xi Lee encourages schools to use hard data and surveys to inform their programming, staffing and supports for students. Interim discipline measures (referrals, suspension rates) help schools evaluate whether they are making early impacts on climate and serve as rough proxies for student engagement. To assess the ultimate outcome of whether students are growing their SEL skills and competencies, Sacramento will include staff and student SEL survey results on a new data dashboard for the public, along with test scores and other indicators.

But Director of SEL Lee is more skeptical about using SEL data for high-stakes purposes, such as educator evaluation or as one data point used to rank schools in an accountability system. She noted that it can have unintentional consequences: A school that has concentrated on improving climate may have more self-aware students who are more observant of their school culture and would rate their school lower than they would have if they hadn't built the skills to recognize a negative school atmosphere.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: ROLE-ALIKE ADVICE

PARENTS

Parents in Sacramento see SEL much as their children and teachers do: a way to help control and navigate emotions, build confidence, and gain skills that they will use throughout life.

During a focus group, eight parents of Sacramento students shared their perceptions of the district's work on SEL. Some had heard about curricula the district uses, but they primarily saw the bigger picture. One grandfather noted: "It's adapting with their peers, mingling with their peers, getting along with other students … it's been implemented in the classroom just like English or anything else."

He continued: "Kids seem not so stressed when they come home. They seem more like they're emotionally adapted with everything going on around them, like problems with other kids. It's gotten better in the last year."

Another mother noted that her son was teased for wearing a brace on his leg, and she was pleased that he was able to open up to his teacher about his feelings: "He was crying on Friday, and she was able to get him to open up and talk about what the problem was. For him to have enough trust to open up to her was good … It comes back to caring teachers, caring staff that take time to listen to kids. Kids will open up to you if you make yourself approachable."

Parents overwhelmingly agreed that schools should teach SEL skills and that it can't be left up to parents: "It's beneficial for everyone," one parent said. "It helps on all levels – it helps them deal with daily life, daily problems, how to cope with life in general and not shut down and close up. Some kids get withdrawn and embarrassed at certain things that they shouldn't be embarrassed about."

Instinctively, Sacramento teachers and leaders agree with research showing that SEL positively affects not only student behavior and school climate, but also academic achievement.[20] But while there is a range of data available, the district is still in the early stages of identifying the right data points to actually measure the link between SEL and academic achievement. Schools use a number of SEL and academic strategies or programs simultaneously, so it's difficult to tease out the effect of just SEL. "You would hope that SEL would contribute to your graduation rate," one high school principal reflects. "Is it that? Or is it the reduction in the number of freshmen course failures? I'm excited about this, but I am purposely forcing myself to be skeptical."

Teachers and administrators see the value in hard numbers, but they also rely on what they pick up in and around their school hallways. In some schools, the focus on SEL has driven visible changes – and while they're easy to dismiss as anecdotal, they are hard to ignore. As one Burbank High School senior said in a focus group, "It's definitely gotten better since we were freshmen. It used to be, 'Don't go to Burbank. That's Blood Bank.' Freshman year, we had a lot of fights. And now you can totally see the change."

Instruction

Infusing SEL into the Academic Agenda

Sacramento's approach of giving schools flexibility on implementing SEL means that to achieve SEL at scale and with quality, it must ensure deep infusion with its academic agenda, specifically the Common Core State Standards. According to Chief Academic Officer Iris Taylor, the district has put in some structures to infuse its SEL work into its overall teaching and learning plan:

- SEL competencies are integrated within English language arts curriculum maps. For example, each year begins with a "launch unit" that covers rituals and routines for the school year, but it is grounded within a text, a writing assignment or peer-to-peer discussions about content. The unit stresses respectful discourse and engagement. A less-explicit curriculum map for mathematics exists, and science and social studies are next.
- The Office of Equity works with Academics to link specific SEL instructional practices to efforts to improve academic discourse and assign high-quality instructional tasks, which are key shifts in the Common Core. For example, conversations about academic content can start with goal-setting or a list of shared agreements. Tools like integration planning templates help teachers develop their practice.
- The SEL team has joined academic team meetings to discuss, for example, how to develop a growth mindset in mathematics.
- Elementary report cards reflect some SEL competencies, such as making responsible decisions and solving problems with self-control and self-awareness.

The SEL team has created a set of SEL standards and indicators and is working on exemplar lesson plans to help serve as a guide for teachers and schools on how to infuse SEL with academics. But structural issues of size, lack of time for professional development (Sacramento teachers get 18 hours for common planning time during the entire school year) and follow-up support remain difficult. "Integration is a

challenge but definitely the direction we know we're heading in and where we need to go," CAO Iris Taylor reports. "You need to build some background knowledge and understanding of what these competencies are, and you need to have time and space dedicated to that."

Teachers and leaders say that they constantly try to strike a balance between explicit instruction of SEL, even if they're not using a curriculum, and infusion into daily content. "On integration, I need to be more diligent about figuring out how we're connecting the things that all these classrooms are teaching," one teacher-coordinator said. "There's a challenge to full integration. Theoretically, integration should be going more smoothly. Anecdotally, I don't really see that. Often, what I see is that teachers do the lesson and walk away. That's our fight right now." Sometimes, infusion starts with something much more basic, as a high school assistant principal suggested: "The lessons on SEL give you a focus. But you have to spend as much time on expressing your belief in SEL. To me, creating a welcoming classroom environment is critical."

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: ROLE-ALIKE ADVICE

CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER

The focus on academic integration is an important element of SEL in Sacramento: Seeking integration with and alignment to the Common Core State Standards is helpful not only for combating the "one more thing" perception among educators, but also for ensuring that SEL supports, rather than detracts from, rigorous instruction.

Sacramento's CAO, Iris Taylor, has been an important player in this alignment and offers the following advice for her academic counterparts, relevant to those implementing both the Common Core and other high-quality college and career-ready standards. "If people were to ask me about the integration of SEL and Common Core, I'd say pick some aspect of Common Core and some aspect of SEL, not the whole kit and caboodle, and help people make sense of the connectivity between those things. If people can learn how to do that with those two small things, then do the next two things. We tend to want to bite it all off at once and push it and inhale it all."

Conclusion

Fifteen years ago, Sacramento City Unified School District offered the Second Step SEL curriculum for elementary schools. The effort fizzled out because there was no follow-up support or training, the Director of SEL recalled. But with growing central-office capacity, schools that are joining SEL cohorts every year and flexibility at the building level, Sacramento is heading toward implementation of SEL at scale. The district now commits $1.5 million of its own resources annually to climate (including SEL, Restorative Practices, Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support and Equity) and likely will increase that as all schools join, while using grant funds as part of its growth strategy.

In focus groups, Sacramento teachers and leaders point to SEL as something they know is a citywide endeavor. Both parents and students share stories of improved climate in their schools and recognize that SEL competencies are skills for life, not an add-on. As the district continues its SEL work, leaders plan to focus on helping schools infuse SEL practices into instructional content, so the two are seamless.

Teachers are eager to see more of that. "Having taught math for 13 years to high school students, it's a math confidence issue that they have," reports Tom Quayle, the teacher who created the mindfulness exercises. "I've taken classes that have been over my head and experienced it myself, where you shut down and can't learn. So trying to get them to see that their minds are capable of so much more, and that they can get this and break down those barriers, is the main reason I do it."

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