

Systemic Social and Emotional Learning: A Coordinated Approach to Student Success Across Settings



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This issue brief, created by The Pennsylvania State University, is one of a series of briefs that addresses the future needs and challenges for research, practice, and policy on social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is defined as 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. This is the second series of briefs that address SEL, made possible through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The first set synthesized current SEL research on early support for parent engagement and its effects on child outcomes; SEL in infancy/toddlerhood, the preschool years, the elementary school period, and middle-high school timeframes; and how SEL influences teacher wellbeing, health equity, and school climate. Learn more at prevention.psu.edu/sel.

Executive Summary

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. SEL is an evidence-based educational approach aimed at developing social and emotional competencies (SECs) that students need to succeed in school and life. Decades of research demonstrate that SEL programs enhance SECs and foster prosocial behaviors, improve academic performance, and mitigate emotional distress and problem behavior. **A systemic approach to SEL** emphasizes coordination of SEL programming across settings and over time. Systemic SEL recognizes that a limited impact is possible with stand-alone programming in individual classrooms, and advocates for aligned and coordinated strategies across school, district, and state levels. The significance of systemic SEL lies in its ability to consistently reinforce SECs across multiple settings, preventing disjointed learning experiences. By fostering a shared vision and aligned actions among families, education staff, and communities, systemic SEL creates synergies, reduces fragmentation, and integrates educational practices, promoting the holistic development of academic, social, and emotional skills for all students.

In **practice**, systemic SEL is implemented strategically across in-school and out-of-school settings. Within school buildings, this includes embedding SEL into strategic policies and practices, supporting SEL for adults, embedding SEL into instruction and supports for students, and ensuring continuous improvement of those practices. Districts tailor their SEL work to their context, fostering a shared vision for SEL co-created by diverse stakeholders, and sustaining practices for adults and students over time. Leadership from superintendents, central offices, and school administrators is essential in modeling and supporting SEL. At the district level, this includes ensuring the integration of SEL into district strategy, culture, and practices that ultimately support teaching and learning experiences for students.

In terms of **research**, well-implemented SEL programs can positively impact children's lives. However, less is known about the effectiveness of systemic SEL. Studying systemic SEL, which involves complex systems change, involves substantial time and resource requirements. To date, most research is qualitative. Quantitative research about the *CASEL School Guide* highlights the potential of systemic SEL for improving social, emotional, and academic outcomes. Meta-analytic findings support multi-component programs involving community or family components, yet inconsistent results from these reviews suggest a need for further research to understand their effectiveness fully.

In **conclusion**, while systemic SEL has significant potential to transform education systems, challenges like limited funding, time constraints, and prioritization need to be addressed. Coordinating systemic SEL requires strong leadership, integration, and continuous improvement systems, and a focus on adult SEL. Emphasizing collaboration and advocating for **policy** interventions at the local, state, and federal levels is vital. For example, states and districts should prioritize the future of systemic SEL by including measures related to social and emotional development, such as attendance and discipline rates, in their accountability systems. This will support broader academic and societal goals through equitable resource allocation and the integration of SEL assessments with other data sources that drive decision-making.

Introduction

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is an evidence-based educational approach focused on developing students' social and emotional competencies (SECs) to promote success in school and life.¹ The process of SEL enhances academic learning and empowers students with the intrapersonal and interpersonal knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to navigate daily challenges and lead purposeful and productive lives. Ultimately, SEL aims to produce thriving children and youth who engage positively with their families and peers, and who are proactive members of their communities.

Decades of research in the United States and internationally with students across all grade levels shows that evidence-based SEL programs enhance social and emotional skills, attitudes, prosocial behaviors, and academic performance, in addition to reducing emotional distress and problem behavior.²⁻⁴ Amid increasing social disparities, political discord, and inter-group violence, bolstering SEL for both children and adults is essential to foster supportive learning environments for all students and to cultivate resilience.^{2, 5-7} Therefore, educators, researchers, policymakers, parents, and the public recognize SEL's vital role in promoting student success and well-being, in and beyond school.⁸⁻¹⁰

Traditionally, opportunities for SEL were almost exclusively created in classrooms by teachers delivering explicit lessons as part of a curriculum. It has since evolved into a coordinated, systemic approach conducted across settings and over time.¹ Implementation of stand-alone programs in individual classrooms can generate important impacts for groups of students but may be insufficient for sustained, public health benefits for populations of students across schools and districts.^{11, 12} As such, leaders in the field recommend that SEL efforts be coordinated schoolwide, districtwide, and at state levels from Pre-K to Grade 12.¹³⁻¹⁵

The implementation of evidence-based SEL programs is still one of the most important strategies within a systemic approach, but it should be combined with efforts to (a) integrate SEL into the structures and processes at each level of an educational system; (b) co-create SEL-rich environments where shared practices and relationships promote SEL; (c) align resources and policies at multiple levels of the system; and (d) build school-family-community partnerships to leverage opportunities to foster SEL both in and out of school.

In the following sections, we describe a framework for systemic SEL that provides more detailed information on what this approach entails and explains its significance. We then delve into the practical implementation of systemic SEL within schools, share how districts can support that implementation across multiple sites, and illustrate that process with several real-world examples. This is followed by an overview of the latest research on systemic SEL and what is needed to advance the field. Finally, we summarize the most important challenges to systemic SEL and ways that practice and policy can support this important work.

A Framework for Systemic SEL

There are many definitions of the teachable social, emotional, and behavioral competencies that pave the way for healthy child and adolescent development, achievement, and workforce success.^{16–19} As reflected in the center of Figure 1, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) definition of social and emotional competence (SEC) includes the five interconnected domains of: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Evidence-based means grounded in theoretical principles of child and adolescent development and scientifically-proven to produce positive student outcomes in rigorous research studies with designs such as a quasi-experimental or randomized controlled trials that provide causal estimates of the impact of the intervention.

FIGURE 1.

CASEL's Framework for Systemic Social and Emotional Learning



Ecological systems theory acknowledges that learning and development are influenced by experiences across various interrelated environments such as home, school, social networks, extracurricular activities, community programs, and neighborhoods.²⁰ Informed by this model, the rings around the competencies in Figure 1 represent key settings where students live, learn, play, and work, and where SECs can develop. A systemic approach to SEL includes integrating efforts to foster SEL into these places where students and the adults who educate and care for them spend their time.

The relationship between the development of SECs and these settings is bi-directional. For instance, a healthy school climate, established through policies, initiatives, and practices, is essential for the social and emotional growth of students and adults.²¹ Conversely, the SECs of school members influence the overall school atmosphere. Interactions between students and adults (e.g., teachers, school staff, administrators, families, community partners), anchored in SECs and positive social relationships, influence the learning environment over time. These interactions, via instruction, modeling, or reinforcement, permeate various learning spaces. Their impact is heightened when language and practices are consistent across settings—that is, students may practice a problem-solving strategy in their classrooms that may be reiterated in their after-school program and shared with families to use at home.²² Likewise, schools may benefit from learning of the social-emotional support practices used at home or other settings.

Effective Implementation of Systemic SEL

Based on CASEL's [theory of action](#),¹³ specific strategies are essential for developing students' SECs and underpin systemic SEL enhancement across schools, districts, and states. The theory of action (TOA) involves four elements and processes to ensure holistic and high-quality SEL implementation within systems, regardless of where efforts are being focused.

Build Foundational Support and Plan. Ensuring that systemic SEL efforts are integrated, coordinated, and sustainable for the long term requires an infrastructure of policy, financial, and human resources to support implementation, broad stakeholder commitment, and a comprehensive strategic plan that prioritizes SEL. Within a systemic approach, SEL is integrated into the overall vision of a school, district, or state and is an explicit part of the short- and long-term goals as well as how leaders and practitioners alike discuss what matters for young people and adults. School-family-community partnerships help ensure that SEL is a priority and that they support social and emotional development and instruction for students.^{23, 24}

Strengthen Adult SEL Competencies and Capacity. Achieving systemic SEL involves cultivating a community of adults who engage in their own SEL and who model and demonstrate these competencies in their interactions with others. For this approach to truly take root, all stakeholders in a community (e.g., administrators, teachers, counselors, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, etc.) need professional learning to understand what SEL is and how to foster it in students. This attention to adult SEL enhances the quality and impact of SEL implementation, equips school staff to handle challenges like stress and burnout, and leads to a fulfilling teaching and leading experience.²⁵ Success in systemic SEL also requires principals and other educational leaders to hone their own social and emotional skills and actively participate in SEL.²⁶

Promote SEL for Students. Promoting students' SEL begins by working with staff, families, communities, and students themselves to create shared standards, guidance, or portraits of what students should know and be able to do as part of their social and emotional development.²⁷ Instructional practices and curriculum content should then be aligned to these shared goals. Evidence-based programs (EBPs) are reliable ways to foster staff skills in order to encourage SEL-rich environments and students' personal and social skills. The collaborative [selection of evidence-based programs](#) by schools, districts, SEL teams, students, and community stakeholders is key, and there are resources available for assistance with this process.^{28, 29} Success with EBPs depends on high-quality implementation with fidelity.³⁰ While cultural or contextual adaptations to programs are encouraged, maintaining their core components is essential for positive outcomes. Further, student opportunities for SEL can be deepened with norms, routines, and procedures that are grounded in SEL, and the integration of SEL into intentional supportive climate building, school organizational structures, policies (e.g., discipline), and processes (e.g., approaches to attendance, discipline, and student supports systems).

Reflect on Data for Continuous Improvement. Ideally, continuous improvement should be embedded in all three of the above elements of systemic work. Regularly gathering, disaggregating, and using data aligned to the goals set out in the SEL planning stage is critical for decision-making. This reflection may include a review of policies, practices, and guidance at a state or district level. At the school level, CASEL offers several ways to [track progress](#) via reflection rubrics, observational walk-throughs, data reflection [protocols with students](#), and surveys of community partners, families, and staff. Further, outcome data such as school climate surveys, grades, graduation rates, staff retention, discipline or attendance data, or social and emotional competency assessments can support continuous improvement of SEL implementation. Implementing districtwide continuous improvement systems to assess students' SECs is also important and there are resources providing guidance for how to conduct these assessments.^{31, 32}

For a deeper dive into statewide practices that create the conditions for districts and schools to pursue systemic SEL, see Dermody and Dusenbury³³ and Conner et al.³⁴

Why is Systemic SEL Important?

A systemic approach to SEL is crucial to reinforce SECs across various settings and avoid disjointed learning experiences. For example, a district or school may begin by bringing together families, staff, and community members to develop a vision for what academic and social and emotional skills they hope their graduates will possess. They may then look at their curriculum, policies, and climate efforts that support the relationships and learning that will lead to those skills and work together to develop a shared language and action plan to support that development over time in all the spaces in which young people learn and grow. In this way, implementing a systemic SEL approach creates synergies, reduces fragmentation of students' learning experiences, and integrates educational practices.

Systemic SEL also emphasizes the development of students' social and emotional skills, in context, over time. This emphasis recognizes that as students mature, their ability to integrate thoughts, feelings, and actions evolves, enhancing their communication, thinking, and social

skills across settings.²⁹ Therefore, it is imperative that SEL programs be developmentally-appropriate and reflect shifting needs, abilities, and contexts from preschool through high school and beyond.³⁵ This developmental approach not only fosters individual growth but also equips students to positively influence wider settings, such as home, school, work, community, and peer groups, as they grow.

In addition, systemic SEL has the potential to contribute to educational equity since it shifts the focus from individual student growth to an organizing framework that prioritizes high-quality, inclusive, and culturally responsive learning environments and experiences for all students. Systemic SEL strives to equip individuals with skills that foster inclusivity such as self and other awareness, communication, compassion, and collaborative problem-solving. It allows adults and students to actively engage in developing their social and emotional skills, emphasizing the importance of relationships and positive learning conditions to promote student voice, belonging, and agency. By sharing power across all adults and students, particularly those who previously may have been marginalized, systemic SEL both contributes to and depends upon equitable learning environments where all feel valued and affirmed.^{6, 36} To this end, recognizing that students require access to varying supports to reach their full potential is fundamental.³⁷ Historically, these issues have disproportionately affected certain groups, notably students of color. A systemic approach creates a framework for schools to challenge systemic privilege and bias in their SEL and other schoolwide practices.^{6, 36}

Finally, in addition to being a coordinated approach across different settings, systemic SEL is comprehensive since it is designed to impact all students. SEL is an important “universal” component of a public health approach to education since SECs promote positive outcomes for all students.¹¹ SECs are also protective factors that prevent problems by buffering the effects of risk factors experienced by some students more than others.⁵ Students who have faced higher levels of adversity or with mental health concerns may need more intensive support. Systemic SEL aims to build culturally responsive and trauma-informed learning environments that bolster resilience and cultivate well-being.^{1, 7} In addition, SEL is an important component of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) for students.³⁷ MTSS is a commonly used framework designed to identify students’ academic and behavioral strengths and challenges and provide both universal and targeted support. The foundation that SEL provides has the potential to reduce the need for these more intensive services or enhance their effectiveness. MTSS may also provide economic benefits by fostering the efficient use of resources and reducing societal costs.³⁸

The intended result of these changes in conditions, structures, and practices is a shift in the experience of school for young people. See Figure 2 for 10 key indicators one might note in a school that prioritizes this systemic approach to SEL.

FIGURE 2.

Key Ingredients of Systemic Schoolwide SEL





Best Practices for Systemic SEL

This section looks at SEL in action, demonstrating how [districts](#) can effectively integrate and prioritize SEL practices across schools and communities to support the indicators listed above and, ultimately, positive student outcomes. It also provides real-world examples of systemic SEL.

In a school or district that is implementing a systemic approach to SEL, knowing where to begin is dependent on context and opportunity. Districts may initiate with a few pilot schools or start with a comprehensive strategic planning process and board policy.³⁹ Ideally, leaders engage a diverse group of stakeholders (staff, families, community partners, students) to create a shared vision for SEL. This vision establishes a community-wide commitment to SEL. This vision can then be communicated in ongoing ways, building awareness of the importance of SEL for the well-being and academic success of all students and making the priority for both time and resources for SEL clear to all members of a community.⁴⁰ SEL implementation planning should be tailored to the specific needs and goals of each community, incorporating clear and measurable goals of success over time. At the building level, school leaders often establish teams to drive SEL implementation at schoolwide, classroom, and community levels. At the district level, some superintendents establish a department of SEL to oversee this work.

Districtwide Support for Systemic SEL

CASEL has partnered with school districts for over a decade on defining, bringing to life, and refining these [systemic implementation models](#). This work began with the Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI), a partnership with multiple school districts committed to implementing and studying SEL systemic implementation over time. In its report issued on the 10-year anniversary of the CDI partnership, CASEL⁴⁰ noted some key insights based on feedback from district leaders that have helped districts to sustain SEL implementation. We expand upon

them here:

- Superintendents and central office leaders must model, cultivate, and elevate a shared vision for SEL, helping to ensure that all district departments experience an SEL-rich culture and climate themselves and understand SEL as a priority and feel that they have “permission” to prioritize SEL implementation.
- District leaders can provide avenues for students, families, and communities to bring vast knowledge and experiences and should be co-creators of the SEL vision, plans, and practices.
- Departmental leaders must be able to see themselves in the work of SEL, connecting it explicitly to core district strategy as well as each department’s and individual’s goals. From the math department to the nutrition department, all should recognize how SEL impacts their own staff and supports young people’s success. In this way, SEL is not seen as a stand-alone initiative but rather the connective tissue between supportive climate building and academic and behavioral thriving for all. Embedding SEL in both policy and practice helps to mitigate disruption from leadership changes, ensuring it is part of the fabric of how a district or school operates.
- To bring SEL to life, central offices can provide schools with curricular and coaching resources and guidance as well as autonomy to innovate and customize SEL for their communities.
- Principals and other district leaders can prioritize the funding, time, and space for communities of practice both within and across schools and communities to strengthen implementation. Partnerships with local capacity-building organizations and academic partners can likewise help to refine that implementation over time.
- District leaders can offer professional learning for educators⁴¹ to properly administer and interpret assessments when launching comprehensive evaluations of student competencies.

Examples of SEL in Action

The adoption of systemic SEL is reshaping educational environments. Initiatives such as those detailed in Appendix A (Chicago Public Schools) and Appendix B (Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative) showcase the significant impact on enhancing student experiences and achieving positive institutional outcomes. Both of these examples highlight the engagement of individuals across the educational ecosystem (central office leaders, community educators, staff, students and families) and speak to the layering of approaches to

SEL over time, grounded in the co-creation of a vision for SEL specific to a given context.

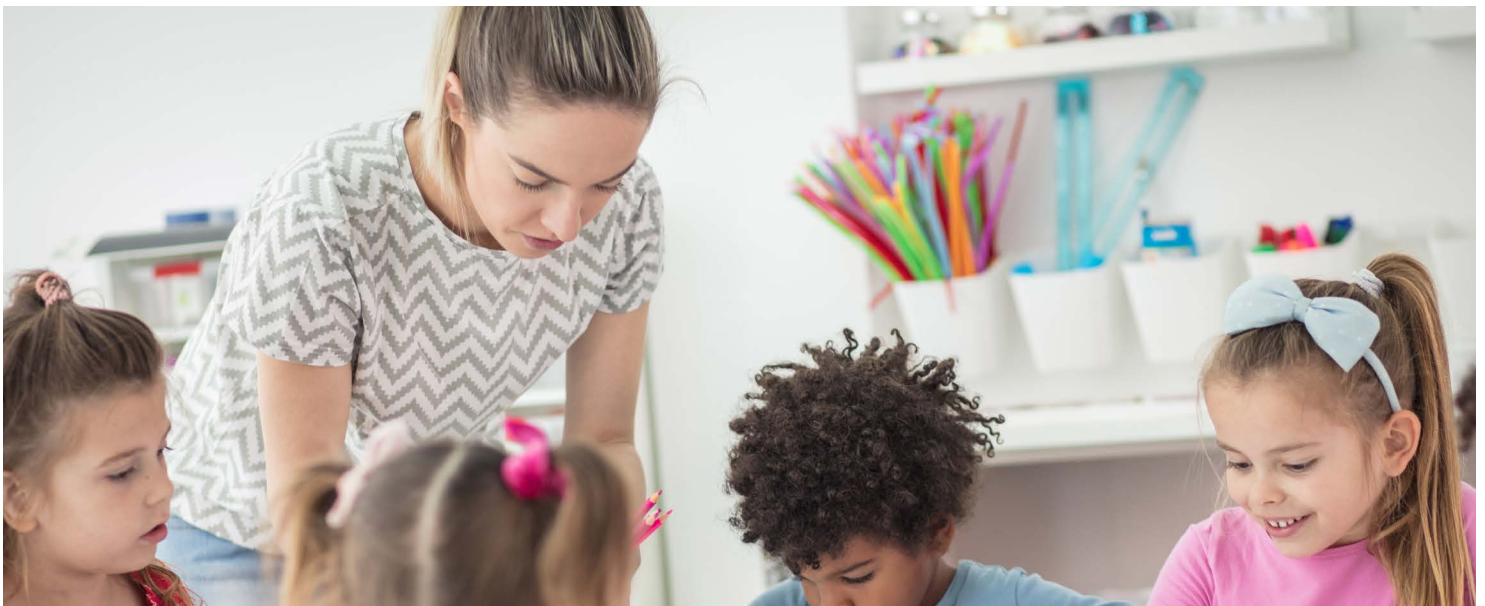
Research on Systemic SEL

While research over the past 25 years indicates that well-implemented, evidence-based SEL programs can lead to significant, enduring improvements in a child's life, very little is known about the effectiveness of systemic SEL. Conducting research on this approach is challenging because systems change is complex and takes time and resources. Based on the school improvement literature, it is likely to take several years before substantial effects from such efforts can be documented.⁴² This in no way diminishes its potential for significant impact and rather than discouraging work in this area, we hope that this motivates research and practice partnerships to act.

Summary of Relevant Research

Much of the existing research on systemic SEL is qualitative in nature.^{19, 39, 40} There is some quantitative research examining the role of systemic SEL in enhancing student outcomes and studies quantifying the effects of SEL programs that involve the coordination of cross-setting efforts.

For instance, Li et al.⁴² evaluated the effectiveness of the [CASEL School Guide](#),⁴³ a process and implementation guide to support all the aspects of the schoolwide elements of the systemic SEL theory of action described above, on the social, emotional, and academic development of elementary students. Conducted over two years in 28 urban elementary schools, this randomized trial aimed to determine if adding the School Guide with coaching support as an implementation support strategy would enhance SEL program implementation by educators and improve student outcomes compared to schools using a standard support model. Teachers in grades K–3 in all 28 schools delivered the PATHS® Curriculum.⁴⁴ The implementation of the



School Guide was assessed to show high feasibility in urban schools.¹⁹ Schools with weaker SEL leadership at the baseline benefited most from the School Guide process, and students in these schools were rated by teachers as demonstrating significantly improved student social-emotional competence and attentional skills, and fewer aggressive behaviors over time.⁴² The study underscores the importance of administrative leadership in fostering SEL outcomes.

Another example of research on a systemic approach to SEL was the four-year evaluation of the CDI that assessed the outcomes of schoolwide and districtwide systemic SEL conducted in 8 large school districts across the United States.⁴⁵ This study analyzed both the district activities and the student outcomes related to the implementation. Findings indicated significant positive changes across the four-year timespan in school climate, and academic and behavioral outcomes among students. However, improvements were not consistently observed across all students or in all districts and were variable across outcomes.⁴⁵ Even though the study gathered extensive documentation of schoolwide and districtwide systemic SEL efforts, there were no analyses linking these components to student outcomes, a necessary step to discern mechanisms of change driving these outcomes.

Finally, two meta-analyses found evidence supporting multi-component programs (i.e., school-based SEL programming that includes family or community components). Goldberg et al.'s⁴⁶ meta-analysis of whole-school SEL interventions that included 496,299 students aged 4–16 found that interventions with a community component had significantly greater effects on students' social and emotional adjustment than those without a community component. Examples of community components include additional support to at-risk students provided by community specialists and involvement of community members in school-based programming.

Similarly, Luo et al.'s⁴⁷ meta-analysis of preschool classroom SEL interventions that included 10,646 participants (mean age 4.30) found interventions with a family component had statistically larger effects on children's challenging behaviors and social competence than those without a family component.⁴⁸ However, some outcomes in these meta-analyses did not favor multi-component programs, and some meta-analyses did not find any evidence that multi-component programs are more beneficial than school-based SEL programs alone.³ The inconsistency in these meta-analytic results is yet to be understood so additional research is needed.

It is important to note that while multi-component programs illustrate the concept of coordinating the delivery of SEL across settings, they do not necessarily reflect systemic SEL in its most comprehensive sense. Inherent in the concept of systemic SEL is the use of strategies (i.e., programming, policies, or procedures) on a scale that impacts a large portion of the population in an educational setting.

Suggestions for Future Research

Guidance for systemic SEL is ahead of evidence-based research in supporting its implementation. Measurement tools for program implementation and effectiveness exist but are lacking clear benchmarks for implementation fidelity. More research is needed at the school and district levels to assess the impact of systemic SEL, including longitudinal research to assess the role of each of the components discussed above. Research is needed to understand how systems-level factors such as the organizational structure of the schools, principal and district leadership, and district and state policies influence and enhance school climates that support social and emotional development. Additionally, it is crucial to examine how federal and state policies can improve or hinder efforts to promote systemic SEL implementation at local levels. As many school districts now collect data on student SECs and school climate (assessed by teachers and students), some of this research might utilize existing, archival data that can be linked to student outcomes, teacher retention, and other relevant impacts.

Understanding if and how systemic SEL supports educational equity is also a crucial area for additional research. Practitioners must collaborate with researchers to define and measure equitable learning conditions, identify and measure teaching practices and educational policies leading to more equitable learning conditions, and evaluate if student academic, social, and emotional outcomes have been impacted by these equitable practices and policies in ways that support all students in reaching their full potential. Studies on systemic SEL should be conducted in different settings among diverse social groups, examining longitudinal effects, including dosage and quality of implementation, to thoroughly understand SEL effects and inform the design and modification of SEL programming aimed at supporting educational equity. This includes rigorously evaluating the added value of approaches such as transformative SEL⁴⁹ designed to facilitate educational equity. More research on the contributions of school-family-community partnerships is also needed.⁵⁰



Aligning systemic SEL with frameworks like MTSS is likely to promote well-being and school success and prevent mental health disorders.⁵¹ However, as a universal strategy, SEL interventions may lack the necessary differentiation for youth with greater behavioral health needs.⁷ For example, universal (or Tier 1) supports may look like intentional strategies to build classroom climate and explicit lessons to learn about and practice SEL skills. For those students identified as needing more support, small-group or individual interventions may also support holistic growth across the academic and social and emotional (i.e., Tier 2 and 3 interventions). While systemic integration of SEL and MTSS happens in practice, more rigorous research is essential to demonstrate the added value of such integration.

Finally, it is important to continue to examine systemic approaches to cultivating educators' SECs, how these competencies influence educator implementation of SEL, and how they impact educator well-being and student outcomes. Conceptual models regarding the importance of educator SEC exist^{52, 53} and the evidence base for the effectiveness of interventions that build educators' capacities in this domain is expanding rapidly.⁵⁴ Despite this progress, unanswered questions persist regarding the impact of pre-service educator SEL on program implementation, teaching practices, and the culture and climate necessary for promoting positive student outcomes. Technology-based SEL approaches offer scaled information and professional training to educators, but their effectiveness remains largely unexplored.⁵⁵ As technology and AI expand in education, assessing the efficacy of these approaches and their role alongside in-person practices in promoting SEL for students and adults is essential.

Challenges and Future Directions

This brief presents a systemic approach to SEL, emphasizing coordination and collaboration across classrooms, schools, families, and communities. Despite significant strides in the past two decades, many students still lack consistent, high-quality SEL opportunities. Systemic SEL is not a silver bullet, but for educational leaders at the school and district levels it has the potential to catalyze transformative educational experiences for young people and adults. This requires a multi-year commitment of resources, time, and strategic planning and prioritization. Leaders must address the challenges of insufficient funding, time and prioritization for SEL professional learning, and a lack of foundational infrastructure at both school and district levels to bolster these endeavors. A truly systemic approach also requires leaders to adopt a fundamental shift in mindset that embraces the interrelated nature of academic and social and emotional growth and prioritizes them in tandem, not in competition, with one another.

Central to these challenges is the issue of coordination. An aligned vision of SEL, encapsulating definitions, goals, policies, practices, messaging, short- and long-term goals and measurement, is complicated but essential. At present, schools often offer a myriad of individual approaches to SEL, often siloed and uncoordinated, risking the dilution of services. The integration of these multifaceted approaches needs a cohesive vision that ensures sustainability, minimizes fragmentation, and maximizes impact. Such an integration process is no small feat; when practices and programs scale up and as leadership transitions occur at multiple levels of a system, there is an inherent risk of inconsistent or poor implementation, leading to reduced efficacy. Desig-



nated leadership for SEL at all levels of the system, embedding SEL into policy and practices, and integration of SEL into supports for teachers, principals, and other leaders can help to support a more coherent and sustained approach. Further, consistent continuous improvement systems with clear SEL goals that are rigorously assessed, monitored, and evaluated are indispensable to ensuring the quality of SEL practice.⁵⁶ Moreover, leaders can support evidence-based SEL programs by focusing on conditions that emphasize equity, culturally-responsive practices, and community involvement.²⁶

Adult SEL stands out as a particularly vital piece of the puzzle. Focusing on educators' own SEL can represent a departure from traditional pedagogical practices, which might meet resistance. However, SEL's integration into principal and teacher professional learning is pivotal.⁵⁷⁻⁶⁰ This work emphasizes the importance of both pre-service and in-service educator training for teacher and administrator retention and satisfaction.

In the midst of politically divisive times, fostering empathy, respect, and open communication through SEL is more important than ever. Collaboration among schools, families, and communities to promote SEL can serve as a powerful tool to bridge divides and create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all. To do so, it will be important to integrate SEL into state and national strategies on par with those supporting student academic performance.^{25, 61}

Policy interventions at state and federal levels are essential for guiding systemic SEL. This includes a focus on states and districts leveraging federal investments from the American Rescue Plan Act and flexibility in the Every Student Succeeds Act to support systemic SEL programming, implementation supports, standards for SEL competencies from preschool to adulthood, and the promotion of SEL assessment use to monitor the quality of adoption of SEL practices as approaches move to scale.³³ It is vital for states and districts to use federal funding available through Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act along with state funding streams to provide equitable resources for SEL professional learning. Additionally, states and districts should integrate SEL data into practices that align SEL with broader academic and societal goals. For example, states and districts can include measures related to social and emotional development, such as attendance and discipline rates, into their accountability systems.

Conclusion

To further the science and practice of systemic SEL, researchers, educators, and policymakers must work collaboratively across settings and over time to design and test comprehensive SEL implementation models. We hope that the systemic framework and related content described in this brief provide guidance and support for the work needed to enhance the opportunities for all children and youth to develop the skills and relationships they need to thrive.

Authors' Note: The first author of this issue brief wishes to state that the views expressed in this paper are his alone and do not necessarily represent the views, positions, strategies, or opinions of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America.

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APPENDIX A.

Main Components of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS)' Approach to District-wide Systemic SEL

Foundational Framework: Grounded in a "[healing-centered](#)" approach to a multi-tiered system of supports.

District-wide Infrastructure:

[Office of Social and Emotional Learning](#) overseeing:

- Creation and support for SEL-focused school climate standards.
- Supportive discipline policy and restorative practice coaching and resources.
- Integration of SEL into principal and teacher supports, academic curriculum, pedagogy, and professional learning.

Network SEL Support: Each geographic/focus area within CPS has its own "Network SEL Specialist" who:

- Supports SEL implementation at individual school sites, providing coaching and professional learning (see below).
- Partners with other content area and districtwide specialists/coaches to integrate an SEL focus.

School-Level Coaching and Technical Assistance focused on:

- Implementation of an evidence-based SEL curriculum.
- Integration of SEL content and pedagogical practices into daily teaching.
- Resources dedicated to adult SEL including an adult SEL dialogue series.
- Culture/climate teams driving schoolwide SEL climate efforts.
- Behavioral health teams for aligned student interventions.
- Restorative practices coaching and resources available.
- Student voice committees to integrate student perspectives into schoolwide decisions.

Continuous Improvement Systems:

Schools have access to and utilize school leadership teams to reflect holistically on school and student outcomes using:

- School climate survey data.
- Data on student SEL experiences and skills inventories.
- Administrative data (attendance, grades, discipline).

Impactful Outcomes:

Students report feeling safer and more connected.

- 17% reduction in out-of-school suspensions.
- 35% decrease in school arrests.⁶²

APPENDIX B.

Systemic SEL through In-School and Out-of-School Partnerships

- **Initiative Origins:** In 2016, The Wallace Foundation launched the six-year Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI) to explore the benefits of aligning SEL practices between schools and out-of-school time (OST) programs.
- **Communities Involved:** Boston, Dallas, Denver, Palm Beach County, Tacoma, and Tulsa.
- **Evaluation:** The RAND Corporation is conducting a comprehensive evaluation.
- **Findings:** Students' SEL experience is enhanced when schools and districts seamlessly integrate SEL practices and language across in-school and out-of-school settings.^{23, 63}
- **Highlight - Dallas Independent School District (ISD):**
 - Pilot schools, supported by the district, created an aligned scope and sequence of SEL skills for both in-school and out-of-school time.
 - Development of short SEL rituals based on the [CASEL SEL 3 Signature practices](#) and shared SEL language through joint professional learning for both sets of staff.
 - **Outcomes:** Despite challenges that included different staff schedules and the pandemic, observational studies indicate that alignment efforts have resulted in positive shifts in attendance and school climate.⁶⁴

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About The Pennsylvania State University

Founded in 1855, The Pennsylvania State University is a renowned public research university that educates students from around the world and collaborates with partners to share valuable knowledge that improves the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities. For more information, visit www.psu.edu.

About the Future Directions in Social and Emotional Learning and Education, a Penn State project funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

In 2016, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center embarked on a journey to examine research that supports the importance of social and emotional learning. As a result, current research was synthesized for 10 key SEL topics and issue briefs were released to inform educators, leadership and policymakers.

The briefs review evidence-based practices in infancy, the preschool years, and in the elementary, middle and high school contexts, as well as briefs on school climate, teacher stress, parent involvement, the role of peer relations, equity, and the economic benefits of social and emotional learning investments. A summary brief was also produced.

In 2019, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center decided to continue this valuable work and look to the future direction of social and emotional learning. Briefs have been prepared with a focus on “what’s next” in terms of innovative strategies with potential to address the critical remaining challenges and opportunities for the sustainable scaling of SEL in families, schools and communities.

The issue briefs, several of which also have resource pages to provide additional information and context, and other project information may be found on the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center site at <http://www.prevention.psu.edu/sel>.

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Karen Van Ausdal currently serves as the Vice President of Practice for CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. In that capacity, she oversees multiple initiatives to support and scale SEL work in school districts and collaborators across the United States and internationally. Prior to that role, she served as the Executive Director for the Office of Social and Emotional Learning for Chicago Public Schools where she worked for ten years. Karen started her career as an elementary school teacher in the Washington, DC, area and was an SEL program designer and implementer in the Boston Public Schools. Karen has spent her career supporting young people and the creation of equitable learning environments. She earned a B.A. from Brown University, an M.Ed. in Human Development from Harvard University, and an M.Sc. in Social Policy from the London School of Economics. At home, she also works on nourishing the SEL skills of her two school-age children.

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