

## AISD SEL 2.0 STRATEGIC PLAN 2017 - 2020

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### I. BACKGROUND/INTRODUCTION

Austin Independent School District's (AISD) vision is to reinvent the urban school experience. Because of the size and diversity of the district, which serves 83,000 students in grades PreK-12 across 130 different campuses, AISD's innovations are closely watched across the country. AISD has emerged as a national leader of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), committed to integrating SEL into the school experience of all its students. The district's mission is to ensure that all students have access to quality education that enables them to achieve their potential and fully participate, now and in the future, in the social, economic, and educational opportunities of Texas and the nation. To that end, AISD has come to recognize that vibrant relationships are as critical to successful students and schools as excellent content and instruction, and the research bears this out.

In the last decade, an increasing volume of educational research has shown that **success in higher education, the labor force, and other aspects of life depends not only on what young people know but also on their abilities to identify and regulate their emotions, to establish relationships that enable them to engage effectively with others, and to plan and prioritize in ways that support the completion of complex projects and tasks.** Schools have a key role to play in cultivating students' non-academic skills and mindsets ultimately optimizing their learning and life experience.

As early as 2011, AISD was among the first districts to embrace the emerging brain science and the principles of SEL, and charted a course for incrementally infusing explicit SEL instruction into the practice of all 130 of its campuses. The district partnered with CASEL (The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning), a thought leader in Social and Emotional Learning, as one of the original five districts in the Collaborating Districts Initiative to launch its first phase of work. Today, although the level of implementation varies across the 130 schools, tens of thousands of students have engaged in and benefitted from SEL.

How has the work to advance Social and Emotional Learning in AISD been accomplished? The district established a Department of Social and Emotional Learning, which over five years has grown from 4 to 19 employees, and now includes more than a dozen SEL and Parent Support Specialists. These highly trained specialists, work closely with teachers, counselors and school leaders, as well as families throughout the district. They have a regular presence on all campuses and are responsible for guiding the adoption of SEL – identifying and supporting the implementation of explicit SEL curricula and integrating the principles of SEL into

core academic instruction. They accomplish this by working with administrators and designated campus level facilitators to offer professional development, observe classrooms, and support the development of campus level plans designed to achieve sustainable integration.

In addition, the department has dedicated researchers to study the impact of SEL. These researchers have captured early evidence of the positive correlation between high-quality SEL implementation, improved school culture, and increased academic proficiency. Last but not least, in 2016 the district established a new role, Executive Director of Academics and Social and Emotional Learning, which formalized the district's commitment to braiding SEL into its core instructional strategy. Across AISD, SEL is increasingly becoming less a matter of "what we do" and more a matter of "who we are."

Thanks to strong leadership and the continued commitment of its SEL funders, AISD is now poised to push the work forward and integrate SEL even more deeply into district practice.

## **II. PREPARING FOR SEL 2.0**

During the 2016-2017 academic year, AISD, along with SEL lead donors, sponsored a fellowship for 14 district leaders from a wide variety of roles to engage in an intensive learning experience that combined extensive reading assignments and day-long seminars. Fellows had numerous opportunities to engage directly with some of the nation's leading experts in neuroscience, child and youth development, and program design. From the onset, the fellows understood their charge: to bring their unique, functional expertise and insights from the fellowship to help define the future of SEL within the district.

This strategic plan (SEL 2.0), which was developed over a period of many months, combines the learnings of the fellows with the knowledge and understanding gleaned from the district's five years' of SEL implementation. It captures the input of many stakeholders, including SEL department leaders, SEL specialists, students and their guardians, teachers, principals, funders, educational researchers and consultants. In addition to providing a snapshot of what we know about SEL and AISD today (Situation Analysis), the strategic plan presents newly adopted vision and mission statements and a set of core beliefs. It also proposes a revised SEL framework for the district and lays out priorities to guide the SEL work of the district for the next 3-5 years.

## **III. SITUATION ANALYSIS**

There are many factors that have contributed to the successful implementation of SEL in AISD to date. First and foremost among them is the hard work and dedication of capable staff and leadership, the commitment of two different district superintendents, and the support of members of the School Board. Many other

factors have also been important. The phased rollout (by vertical teams) made it possible for schools to learn from one another. The shared framework for Social and Emotional Learning (aka “the CASEL Wheel”) made it possible to express and communicate the meaning of SEL more broadly. The strong network of community organizations ready, willing, and able to embrace the effort is another. The district’s internal research capacity ensured that SEL practices and their impact could be monitored and assessed, and helped build awareness of and appreciation for evidence-based programming. An inherent principle of school autonomy allowed schools to customize SEL implementation to meet a wide range of contexts. And generous funding from philanthropic donors and foundations made all of the above possible. The extraordinary success of the first phase of SEL implementation, thanks to its earliest champions, has created momentum, enthusiasm, and pride that will surely motivate continued commitment to SEL as AISD moves forward.

Of course, implementing SEL district-wide is a complex undertaking. It is not surprising that some efforts to achieve widespread adoption and integration met with challenges. The recognition of these very challenges – some of which are challenges characteristic of public education more broadly – provides insight into opportunities for improvement going forward.

One such challenge is equity. AISD, like other large urban districts, is challenged to address the considerable cultural and economic inequities inherent in the larger community. Broadly speaking, AISD has a lot to boast about – including strong academic performance, higher-than-average high school graduation rates, impressive attendance rates, etc. When the data are disaggregated, however, what emerges is a stark divide between a more affluent white population and a less-affluent population, comprised mostly of students of color. While some might be content to hide behind the veil of averages, AISD has made it a priority to tackle these inequities head on. The leadership and staff are working to create greater equity with regard to student instructional services and student performance. SEL offers substantial promise in that regard. In addition to improved academic performance (demonstrated within AISD and in other studies nationally), SEL implementation has also been shown to improve cultural understanding and responsiveness. Ironically, a closer look at SEL implementation within the district heretofore reveals that SEL has been a lower priority in underperforming schools. Many of these schools serve students of color and students living in poverty. The delayed or limited implementation of SEL in these schools seems to flow from the acute pressure felt by administrators to improve student test scores. Time spent doubling down on test prep for short-term gains often comes at the expense of SEL and its long-term benefits – an impulse that AISD is intent on dispelling. As it further integrates SEL into practice, AISD recognizes the opportunity to create a heightened sensitivity to issues of inequity within the district and to develop the capabilities in its people and systems to better address those issues.

Another (and not unrelated) challenge the district has faced is that of teaching and supporting students facing intense adversity and/or trauma in their personal lives. SEL has a critical role to play for these students, both by building their own internal capacity to recognize, understand, and communicate the stress they are feeling, and, also, by equipping adults with the tools and knowledge to tune to a student's duress and pursue appropriate interventions. Providers of counseling and mental health support for students report that strong SEL implementation in a school has made their work much easier because of the positive (de-stressing) impact SEL has on the school culture and climate and because of the awareness, skills, and common language it instills, raising the floor for appropriate interventions.

There have been other systemic and/or cultural challenges. For example, the district's ambitious commitment to innovation and improvement produces many competing initiatives that, in combination, overwhelm teachers and campuses already suffering from "initiative fatigue." This begs for SEL to shift from being an add-on initiative (from something taught each Tuesday at 3pm), to being completely integrated into core instructional practice (all day, across all subject areas).

Stakeholders also cited the absence of clear expectations and consistent means of accountability surrounding SEL implementation. They report that school leaders are not all "on the same page." Nor has the district consistently engaged students' families and communities in the SEL work – and they represent a huge untapped resource. Another constraint is that the level of adult "readiness" to implement SEL is highly variable and the limited time for training and practice demands job-embedded professional development as well as the incorporation of SEL principles into the district's Human Resources (recruiting, hiring, and onboarding) practices.

Three additional contextual challenges have been identified. One is the sheer complexity of and pace of adopting meaningful change in a large and diverse system. The most disciplined and systematic efforts are often messy in implementation. At the onset, implementation was flexible and often opportunistic in nature; the next stage will be more systematic. Another factor that cannot be overlooked is the shrinking budget of the district due to political factors as well as population and funding trends. From one year to the next, the district is being asked to do more with less. In the early years, in many pockets of the district a shared understanding about what Social and Emotional Learning is (and isn't) and its value to students, teachers, campuses, the district (including the Central Office), and the community was lacking. The expansion of SEL, particularly in the context of financial constraints, requires that the full scope and potential of SEL is understood – broadly and deeply. Finally, it has been challenging to integrate Social and Emotional Learning not only into classrooms but also into the practice of other teams and divisions (i.e., Curriculum Development, Cultural Proficiency and Inclusiveness, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, Creative Learning Initiative, and Coordinated School Health). With each passing year, these and other divisions have been part of the journey and it is clear that such efforts would benefit from still further expansion.

#### **IV. AISD’S EVOLVING SEL FRAMEWORK**

The effort to develop the plan for SEL 2.0 included extensive analysis of the conceptual model (aka “The CASEL Wheel”), which has served as an anchoring framework in AISD since 2011. The strengths of the original model are numerous. First, the framework’s visual simplicity became familiar and was recognized by stakeholders across district, and, thanks to CASEL’s efforts, has earned national brand recognition. Also, it articulates a set of universal competencies deeply grounded in research, while providing sufficient room for interpretation by and adaptation to local contexts.

Still, based on new research as well as insights gleaned from applying the framework over the course of five years, a few opportunities for evolving the framework have emerged. First among these is the recognition that context (or environment) factors greatly in the capacity of any human to develop and/or activate core social and emotional competencies. Under intense stress, for example, we are all less likely to respond to even a benign stimulus in a completely thoughtful, sensitive, or reasoned way. Second is the awareness that the inclusion of an equity lens, which was lacking, is foundational. Third is the significance of Executive Function (defined as a set of mental skills - such as planning, managing time, and controlling your attention - that help you get things done), which was absent from the original model. Finally, the original model did not go far enough in representing the interconnectedness of the social and emotional competencies nor did it acknowledge their developmental nature. The evolved model (or SEL 2.0 Wheel), provided in Appendix A, captures these critical insights and offers more explicit definitions of terms to guide the work of the district going forward.

#### **V. THE VISION FOR SEL 2.0**

Given the challenge and opportunity of organizing such a large and diverse population more tightly around a shared vision for SEL, much of the planning work for SEL 2.0 was devoted to clarifying what we mean when we speak of SEL within AISD, why we think it is important, and what beliefs underpin our commitment to the work. The following statements emerged from dozens of hours with hundreds of different stakeholders, and capture where AISD stands today:

##### **WHY SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING MATTERS**

The evolving field of neuroscience continues to affirm essential links between social and emotional learning (SEL), academic performance, and healthy student development. Because teaching and learning is a highly dynamic, demanding, and social process, students need safe, inclusive, culturally responsive, academically engaging, and equitable learning environments where they can develop greater self-awareness, engage productively with others, and acquire lifelong self-management skills to face new challenges.

## **PURPOSE/MISSION**

The purpose of Social and Emotional Learning in AISD is to enable students to develop in safe, inclusive, culturally responsive, academically engaging, and equitable learning environments that cultivate:

- self-awareness and self-management
- social awareness and relationship skills
- planning, evaluating, and decision-making skills

## **CORE BELIEFS**

- Academic learning is inextricably linked with social and emotional learning.
- As students grow and develop, they are profoundly shaped by their environments, including the school environment.
- A sense of physical and emotional safety and a sense of belonging combine to form an essential foundation for teaching and learning.
- As students develop SEL skills, their ability to connect meaningfully with individuals of diverse perspectives, cultures, languages, histories, identities, and abilities increases, ultimately yielding healthier, more equitable, and better performing schools and communities.
- Social and emotional learning is dynamic and developmental. The nature and magnitude of students' needs vary across their school years.
- Students learn, in great part, from observing others, it is essential that adults understand, practice, model, and apply social and emotional skills in order to support the development of these competencies in students.

## **VISION**

All AISD students will internalize and demonstrate the social and emotional competencies and mindsets they need to thrive in school and in life.

## **VI. SEL 2.0 PRIORITIES**

In addition to clarifying its vision for SEL, AISD has used the last 12 months to identify five priorities to guide the district's SEL work and activities in the next 3-5 years. These priorities affirm the district's original SEL goals while also capturing an evolution in thinking about how best to achieve SEL integration across the district. As one stakeholder put it: "Our next phase of work is about evolution and not revolution." It is a manifestation of the leaderships' commitment and ambition – conveying that the district is not narrowly focused on teaching students about SEL as it has in the past, but also walking the walk as a learning organization itself.

The five priorities for 2017-2020 follow.

### **Priority #1: Align the District Culture**

Strengthen AISD's culture by embracing the principles of Social and Emotional Learning district-wide -- from the boardroom to the classroom and into the community.

This priority is the broadest of all; it essentially encompasses and extends beyond each of the priorities that follow. Although SEL has been introduced to all campuses, the nature and extent of its adoption/implementation has been quite variable. SEL 2.0 will emphasize deeper and more consistent levels of adoption. This will entail a) consistent adherence to and communication of the revised SEL framework and standards; b) formally embedding SEL into the district-wide academic plan; and c) a thorough plan for implementation that extends beyond the SEL Department and enlists all departments and entities. Illustrative initiatives include: the application of SEL core values to the district's disciplinary policies and practices (such as the Student Code of Conduct); integration of SEL's core values into the methods and materials of the Human Resources department; more expansive engagement of families and community partners; and the establishment of SEL student leadership programs.

### **Priority #2: Invest in Adult Development**

Develop the social and emotional knowledge and competencies of all district staff to create the environments that optimize teaching and learning.

AISD's initial roll-out of SEL was focused almost exclusively on instilling social and emotional skills and mindsets in students. In retrospect, it is apparent that more could have been done to prepare the adults to teach, model, and creatively apply SEL. Recognizing that students learn at least as much from what they observe as they do from what they are explicitly taught, the readiness of teachers and leaders in the district to both understand and teach SEL even as they model the SEL competencies continues to be mission-critical.

### **Priority #3: Advance Equity District-wide**

Leverage the implementation of Social and Emotional Learning to advance AISD's commitment to cultural proficiency, inclusiveness, and equity.

Given the growing evidence that students' Social and Emotional Learning supports academic success as well as success in other aspects of life, a commitment to SEL for all AISD students will strengthen the district's capacity to address issues of inequity within the system. The conceptual framework itself calls attention to these issues as it emphasizes that safe, inclusive, culturally responsive, academically engaging, and equitable learning environments are foundational to SEL. And the implementation of SEL will expand to include the principles of Culturally Responsive Instruction into the core pedagogy. Although SEL develops capabilities in people and systems to address inequity, it is not, in and of itself, a total solution. This priority represents the commitment to integrate SEL more consistently throughout the district as one aspect of the district's larger plan for Cultural Proficiency and Inclusiveness and equity.

**Priority #4: Establish A Model Comprehensive System of Student Support**

Develop an innovative integrated system of social, emotional, and mental health support for students that includes and extends beyond SEL.

AISD sees SEL as foundational to every child's educational experience and healthy development, and, also, recognizes that some students will require additional or supplemental support to help them manage intense, personal adversity or mental health challenges through a trust-based and trauma-informed lens. Therefore, it is a priority to establish a continuum (or web) of high-quality student care - with SEL as its universal component - that can appropriately identify and serve students in need/crisis, ultimately making it possible for these students to re-engage in learning.

**Priority #5: Step More Fully into the Role of National SEL Leader**

Contribute to the national evidence base for Social and Emotional Learning, and continue to advance AISD as a national leader of this work.

Nationwide, the importance of Social and Emotional Learning is more widely recognized with every passing year. The body of research in support of SEL is growing and educators are eager to share practices as the appetite for adoption expands. Since AISD is already well ahead of the curve, the district has the chance, perhaps even the obligation, to participate in the national dialogue about this emerging field and to help shape practice. Areas of particular interest include strengthening a district's capacity to assess the impact of school culture and climate on students' academic performance and general wellbeing and developing much greater capacity to measure students' SEL skill development over time. Successful efforts by AISD to sponsor and/or collaborate with others on research to advance the SEL agenda nationally and share its experiences regarding best practices are likely not only to gain the respect of potential new funders, researchers, staff, and families, but also to improve the experience and life outcomes of young people around country.