



At CASEL's Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Exchange in October 2019, current and former leaders from the original Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) who have been implementing SEL since 2011 shared important lessons learned. While each offered unique insights about how they would do things differently if they started all over, they all had one common lesson: We should have focused more on the adults in the beginning.

Time and again, districts said they mistakenly focused entirely on building the social and emotional competence of students without also considering the SEL needs of adults who are engaging with students every day. In order to create conditions for students to effectively engage in SEL, adults themselves need to feel empowered, supported, and valued. This calls on districts to foster a supportive staff community and promote adults' own SEL. CASEL's District Theory of Action, which is presented on the [District Resource Center](#), identifies four key activities for strengthening adults' SEL competence and capacity:

- **Strengthen central office expertise.** The more that leaders across the central office understand the practices and benefits of SEL, the better able they'll be to promote and sustain systemic SEL implementation districtwide. This ensures that SEL is not siloed into a single department or viewed as a stand-alone initiative, but ingrained into all of the district's work.
- **Provide high-quality professional learning for schools.** Effective professional learning ensures that educators and staff in your district understand what SEL is, how building adult and student SEL competence supports critical long-term outcomes for students, and what strategies they can implement to achieve this goal.

- **Deepen adult social, emotional, and cultural competence.**

Staff not only need opportunities to learn about the research and practices behind SEL, but also to critically reflect on and deepen their own social, emotional, and cultural competencies. This may include examining their own sociocultural identities and biases, strengthening their ability to empathize and take on perspectives of those who are different than them, practicing skills to help build their relationships with students and staff, and assessing how their actions impact equitable outcomes.

- **Build staff trust, community, and collective efficacy.**

Communities of adults who know and trust one another and who are skilled at working together toward shared goals are more successful in implementing, improving, and sustaining SEL. Conversely, when the culture is characterized by mistrust, isolation, and feelings of powerlessness, SEL will at best be implemented in pockets, and most likely will not last beyond a school year or two.

Many districts participating in our CDI have made strengthening adult SEL one of their top priorities. Below, we share some of the work taking place in Oakland, Sacramento City, and Tulsa.



Oakland, California

Oakland Unified School District was an exception to the rule in addressing adult SEL as a priority when it first began focusing on SEL in 2012. “We identified it as a key piece back then,” says Sun-Chul Kim, Coordinator, Office of Social and Emotional Learning. The school district’s diverse and collaborative design team of central office staff, union officials, principals, and classified staff initially stressed the importance of modeling SEL as a team.

Since then, educators have implemented the commitment in multiple ways. The district’s widely used [3 Signature SEL Practices for Adult Learning](#)—a welcoming activity, engaging practices, and an optimistic closing—were first embraced by the superintendent and cabinet leaders and have since “rippled across the system” from the school board to the classroom, and spread to other districts (see a [video describing the practices](#) and the associated [playbook](#)). “These practices are applicable in any adult setting, such as meetings with parents, professional development, or teacher-parent conferences,” says Kim. The district also has [SEL standards](#) not just for students but for adults as well, and the expectations are integrated into all reviews, from central office staff to teachers.

“There’s a parallel between how we set the tone for students and adults,” adds SEL Program Manager Aija Simmons. “If we want to change students’ experiences, then we need to shift organizational practices and culture. When we pay

attention to the conditions for adult learning, we influence the conditions for student learning,” she says. Based on Oakland’s experience, Simmons offers several recommendations to other districts as they work to strengthen adult SEL:

- Avoid making the signature practices and related strategies part of a checklist of activities.
- Provide enough time for educators to reflect on their own experiences and biases (explicit and implicit).
- Treat learning as a collaborative activity.

To help adults see the connections between SEL and academics, Simmons also recommends showing how SEL supports reading, math, and other core subjects. “Such a heavy emphasis on reading and math produces tension about how to maximize classroom time. We are showing teachers that students read better when they are listened to in ways that respect who they are. SEL is not a competing interest,” Simmons says.

As part of its participation in CASEL’s Equity Work Group, district educators are also addressing the prevalence of deficit thinking—the idea that we need to ‘fix kids,’” Kim says. “Equity is at the heart of our community schools work and SEL work,” he adds. “We’re asking teachers to listen more closely to students in ways that support their independent thinking, instead of focusing on right versus wrong,” Simmons says.

Insights from Greater Good Science Center

The [Greater Good Science Center \(GGSC\)](#) at UC Berkeley studies the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of well-being, which includes SEL. Nurturing adults’ well-being is a priority.

Greater Good’s recent Summer Institute for Educators focused on adult SEL and well-being. “Educators recognize that if they’re not well, their students aren’t well. There’s a lot of research showing that teacher burnout and student stress levels are correlated,” says Amy Eva, associate education director. “Educators want support with stress and burnout, especially in the current environment, with mass shootings, ICE raids, and children separated from their parents. They’re asking, ‘How do we stay healthy as adults so we can be there for our students? For some students, the only safe space is with us.’”

She says participants spent a lot of time on mindfulness, self-compassion, and managing emotions. “We looked at the challenge of ‘empathic distress,’ and how to take on the struggles of those around us without getting caught up in our own stress.”



Sacramento, California

Sacramento City Unified School District has been working on strengthening adults' SEL knowledge and skills as part of the district's focus on equity, access, and social justice. "We try to embed core competencies as norms for engagement in all of our meetings and learning sessions," says Mai Xi Lee, who directs the district's SEL work. "We want all adults in the district to show up ready to engage in productive work, build community, understand their connections to others, and model good SEL throughout the day," she says.

With support from Pure Edge, Inc., the district has been focused on staff mindfulness and self-care. For example, an SEL Leadership Summit this summer provided school and district leaders with the SEL wellness strategies essential for taking care of themselves as well as those under their care. All site principals, assistant principals, site instructional coordinators, directors, area instructional assistant superintendents, assistant superintendents, cabinet chiefs, and the superintendent spent one day learning how to "Breathe. Move. Rest." and a second day learning how to cultivate belonging at their school communities.

The support is especially important, given the rising tensions caused by ongoing budget cuts, layoffs, and a stressful teachers strike last spring. "These challenges impact relationships. We wanted to give leaders a chance to pause and recalibrate and attend to their own needs—and then to the needs of their school community," Lee says.

Equity has become an increasing focus of these conversations, especially given that Sacramento has the most disproportionate rate of African-American suspensions in the state, Lee adds. "We're asking principals to lead uncomfortable conversations, deal with implicit biases, and help change mindsets and heartsets."

To that end, the SEL team has focused on using SEL as a lever for improving equity. They have developed a set of cards (see

below) to help adults reflect on their mindsets, practices, and ways that they're integrating SEL and equity into academics. They're also working with four other district departments to develop adult competencies for addressing implicit biases and culture competencies.



They've been able to engage in these difficult conversations because the district has spent years creating a staff climate that supports adult SEL. Like Oakland, district staff make extensive use of the 3 Signature SEL Practices to create a sense of community, with an explicit focus on connecting the conversations to the district's wheel of SEL competencies. They begin meetings by asking attendees to focus intentionally on how their work will positively strengthen students' social and emotional development. In addition, a Brain Architecture Game helps staff understand how trauma impacts their brains—and their students.

"We're using SEL to help us have uncomfortable adult conversations about equity, access, and social justice," Lee says. "Those are adult issues that impact our kids."



Tulsa, Oklahoma

For Tulsa Public Schools, district leaders believe that building a strong adult culture is the prerequisite for building a strong learning culture for students. Their starting point is building everyone's sense of belonging—among principals, teachers, and students. For the adults, it means that they are respected and listened to. For students, it means that teachers care about them.

"We're trying to figure it out, to define what 'belonging' is," says Stephanie Andrews, Director of Student Engagement. "We want to know what it looks like, what it sounds like. Parents send kids to school to become academically prepared. We also need to make sure that they understand that belonging and social and emotional skills are not something separate—not the word of the day or a 20-minute lesson, but central."

To strengthen adults' SEL knowledge and skills, the district has several initiatives underway. Throughout the school year, all school leaders—including principals, assistant principals, and instructional leadership teams—are participating in districtwide sessions to better understand their own self-identities and how to become more transformational in their leadership, not just transactional or reactive. This means deliberately pushing school leaders to go deeper than usual in this work. "We want them to really understand their own values, identities, and levels of emotional intelligence. They need to internalize this work before passing it on to teachers," Andrews says.

In addition, teams of district leaders, school leaders, and teacher mentors also are piloting Vision Walks in about 10 schools, observing the extent to which teachers are creating SEL-friendly classroom cultures that support students. (See sidebar.) The teams are using this year to develop norms and strengthen the tools. Plus, in response to union feedback, the district created a "teacher care line" to provide online support to novice and veteran teachers alike on issues ranging from insurance coverage to discipline challenges. Twice yearly Panorama surveys will help assess the extent to which school leaders feel more supported by district staff and teachers feel more supported by school leaders.



The work is even deeper in the five schools participating in the [Wallace Foundation's Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning initiative](#). Teams of school and out-of-school time partners are working with the National Equity Project on using SEL strategies to address implicit biases, power, systemic oppression, and related equity issues. In addition, these schools are building on existing efforts to integrate SEL into the classroom and the school, including the use of RULER curriculum, which provides explicit SEL instruction for both adults and students. School teams of administrators and staff are examining everything from providing more fresh fruit and salad bars in the cafeteria to strengthening the supports school leaders and teachers need to nurture healing-centered classrooms—all in service of creating a greater sense of belonging.

"Teachers and principals are human. This is really hard work." Yet Andrews is hopeful. "All of us feel so supported in this work. We're no longer isolated. Everyone owns this SEL priority. If we get this right, it will make a big difference," she says.

RESOURCES

CASEL

- Adult SEL is one of the four main sections in the [District Resource Center](#), with extensive practical guidance and multiple curated resources from CASEL, school districts, and other partners that address four key activities: strengthening central office expertise; providing high-quality professional learning for schools; deepening adult social, emotional, and cultural competence; and building staff trust, community, and collective efficacy. A separate section discusses the connections between [SEL and equity](#).
- CASEL's [Guide to Schoolwide SEL](#) also includes guidance and multiple tools for schools and out-of-school time partnerships.

Oakland

- [National Equity Project's SEL Pitfalls & Recommendations](#)
- [The Future of Healing: Shifting From Trauma-Informed Care to Healing-Centered Engagement](#). A useful lens for examining trauma-informed care. It serves as an example of how good intentions can help perpetuate current inequitable practices, something that SEL is not immune to, when we are not ourselves culturally grounded and aware of our biases, assumptions, and the pervasiveness of deficit thinking.

- Dena Simmons articles:

- [Without Context, SEL Can Backfire](#)
- [How to Be an Antiracist Educator](#)

Sacramento

- [Art of SEL Reflections with an Equity Lens](#). A series of flash cards to promote reflective conversations.
- [Principal Powerpoint](#). Presentation used to guide mindfulness workshops.
- [SEL Leadership Summit](#). Detailed presentation (162 slides) that guided the two-day training for district and school leaders, focused on “creating a culture of care.”
- [3 Signature Practices](#). Slides used to train educators on the district's 3 signature SEL practices.
- [Brain Architecture Game](#). Presentation used to explain how trauma impacts the brain.
- [Restorative Practices—Equity](#). Presentation on how restorative practices can be used as a lever to advance equity.

Tulsa

- [Tulsa Way for Teaching and Learning](#). The district's SEL playbook.