Plan for Improvement

An established process for SEL continuous improvement promotes high-quality implementation across the district and schools.

Below you’ll find an overview of: WHAT high-quality implementation looks like, WHY it’s important, WHEN to engage in this key activity, and WHO to involve. Also see the PROCESS page for step-by-step guidance on how to engage in the work, and the RESOURCES page for additional tools to support your efforts.

What is SEL continuous improvement?

The entire process of district SEL implementation is driven by continuous improvement. Continuous improvement refers to a cyclical and structured process to set goals, develop plans to achieve them, and use data throughout implementation to learn, address problems, and improve outcomes.

One of the most prominently used continuous improvement frameworks is the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015). The PDSA cycle is made up of four phases: PLAN, DO, STUDY, and ACT. You engage in this cycle throughout SEL implementation as you identify your goals and strategies (PLAN); take action on key activities identified in your plan (DO); compile and reflect on implementation and outcome data throughout the year (STUDY); and make adjustments to your plan based on what you’ve learned (ACT).

Planning for continuous improvement includes the work you’ve done in Focus Area 1, Key Activity: Shared Vision and Plan to develop an action plan based on your current needs, resources, and level of implementation.

A strong plan for continuous improvement also includes:

- Establishing a process for monitoring and reflecting on district- and school-level SEL implementation and progress toward goals.
- Ensuring clear roles, responsibilities, and timelines for the continuous improvement process.
- Committing to reflect on data throughout the year.
- Providing support and tools to help school teams establish their own continuous improvement processes.

Use the Rubric to assess how well you’ve planned for improvement.

Why does my district need to plan for SEL continuous improvement?

District teams face urgent, unpredictable, and often competing demands. Thoughtful planning around SEL can ensure that implementation gains and maintains momentum despite these challenges. A clear plan for continuously improving implementation makes it more likely that work around SEL will sustain and remain appropriately focused.

Districts that neglect continuous improvement activities are unlikely to know when adjustments are needed in their plans until it’s too late to take corrective action. Worse, these districts will be unequipped to respond to questions from stakeholders about progress with implementation or impact. Being able to demonstrate the value of SEL to stakeholders, such as district leadership and staff, students, families, and the district’s school board, is an absolutely essential factor for sustaining commitment and buy-in for SEL.

When should my district plan for SEL continuous improvement?
While you may engage in many different levels of continuous improvement for SEL, districtwide implementation typically follows a year-long continuous improvement cycle in alignment with your district’s annual planning and budgeting timelines. This means that you’d typically develop a year-long district SEL action plan, collect and review data throughout the year, and draw conclusions at the end of the academic year to inform the next year’s plan.

By establishing a timeline at the front-end of the continuous improvement process, the SEL team can estimate how much lead time they’ll need for data collection, compiling data, and reporting results in useful formats for stakeholders.

Although CASEL’s District Resource Center focuses on a yearlong cycle of SEL continuous improvement, districts may engage in many different levels of continuous improvement with different timelines. In addition to a yearlong cycle for your district’s SEL rollout plan, you may also engage in shorter continuous improvement cycles to test out a specific SEL program or initiative, while also building capacity and supporting school teams in their own continuous improvement.

**Who should be involved in planning for continuous improvement?**

The district’s SEL lead and team will play a central role in planning for continuous improvement. It’s helpful to determine who on the team will manage the overall SEL continuous improvement process, and who will oversee data collection and organization.

In addition, consider involving the following stakeholders in planning for continuous improvement:

- Key staff members from departments that lead SEL work across the district
- Members of district Research & Evaluation department (or external evaluator if district chooses to partner with one)
- Other district staff and members of the community whose buy-in is needed
- Stakeholders with decision-making power (for example, a staff member who has decision-making power at the cabinet level, someone who is involved with making important academic decisions, someone who has the authority to authorize professional learning and other expenditures, and/or principal supervisors)