Strengthen Adult Social, Emotional, and Cultural Competence

Successful districtwide SEL implementation is more effective when districts also cultivate adults’ SEL and cultural competencies.

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 adult social, emotional, and cultural competence?

Social and emotional learning is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Cultural competence is the ability to examine the various social and cultural identities of oneself and others, understand and appreciate diversity from a historically grounded and strengths-focused lens, recognize and respond to cultural demands and opportunities, and build relationships across cultural backgrounds.

Cultural competence is closely tied to social and emotional competence. For example, high levels of social awareness involve being able to take the perspective of those of different backgrounds and cultures and to empathize and feel compassion (Jagers, 2018). Socially, emotionally, and culturally competent adults effectively apply skills to interact and build relationships with diverse groups in the workplace, in the community, and in their personal relationships.

A strong approach to strengthening adult SEL and cultural competencies:

- Supports staff in reflecting on their own social and emotional competencies, identities, and biases; and in engaging in practices that affirm and cultivate students’ cultures, values, and identities.
- Provides frequent opportunities for adults to practice, model, and enhance these competencies, including consistent and scaffolded professional learning experiences.
- Embeds practices that support these competencies into district- and school-level staff meetings.
- Weaves these competencies through all resources and tools that guide staff in interactions with students, families, and community members.

Use the Rubric to assess your approach to strengthening adult social, emotional, and cultural competencies.

Why is it important to strengthen adult social, emotional, and cultural competence?

Implementing SEL districtwide requires adults throughout central office, schools, partner organizations, communities, and homes to work collaboratively and effectively to infuse SEL into students’ educational experiences. Through the Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI), CASEL has learned that districts are more effective at this when they also cultivate SEL and cultural competencies in adults.

Studies have found that adults who can recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate their own emotions:

- Are less likely to report burnout (Brackett et al., 2010) and have higher levels of relational trust with their peers at work (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), which lays a foundation for productive collaboration.
• Demonstrate higher levels patience and empathy, encourage healthy communication, and create safe learning environments (Brackett et al., 2008).

• More effectively teach and model social-emotional competence for their students (Brackett et al., 2008).

• Build and maintain stronger relationships with their students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), which leads to improved classroom management (Durlak et al., 2011) and fewer discipline problems (Marzano & Marzano, 2003).

• Positively contribute to the school’s overall climate (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

Cultural competence is critical to creating supportive learning environments that promote all students’ social and emotional learning. When adults engage effectively in culturally competent practices, it helps students feel respected, valued, and part of the school community. Culturally competent staff practices also help provide an educational experience that students see as relevant to their lives and promote academic motivation (Bui & Fagan, 2013), increased interest in the content they’re learning (Martell, 2013), and increased confidence in classroom discussions and test-taking (Hubert, 2014).

Additionally, systemic SEL implementation relies on partnerships between districts, schools, families, and communities. Cultural competence helps adults forge meaningful partnerships when they understand and appreciate diverse cultures, lived experiences, and values.

When should districts develop an approach for strengthening adult social, emotional, and cultural competence?

Districts should begin developing an approach for strengthening adult social, emotional, and cultural competence:

• After establishing foundational support for SEL, including providing professional learning that helps staff and community partners understand what SEL is and why it’s important.

• While developing a professional learning plan and strengthening central office expertise.

• Ideally, before full implementation of any major student-focused SEL initiatives.

Districts will often engage simultaneously in strategies to both strengthen adult competencies and promote SEL for students. Both of these efforts are long-term and ongoing processes that do not need to be “completed” before engaging in other activities.

Who should be involved in an approach to strengthen adult social, emotional, and cultural competence?

As you develop an approach that engages central office staff, school staff, teachers, out-of-school-time providers, parents and caregivers, and community members, you’ll want to involve a range of stakeholders, including:

• SEL team

• Equity team

• Teaching and learning department

• Professional learning department

• Human resources

• Family and/or community engagement departments or leaders

• Other central office departments that support adults in developing related professional skills and mindsets, such as the MTSS department, health department, etc.

• Representatives from teachers unions and other staff unions, schools, community partners, out-of-school time
programs, and parents

- Principals and their supervisors
- Assessment or research team to help understand learning needs and support continuous improvement
- Budget department to help identify funding streams and resources

You may also want to plan how to engage board members and cabinet members to ensure they model and prioritize strengthening adult social, emotional, and cultural competence.