



"We Will Build Together"

Sowing The Seeds of SEL Statewide

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"We Will Build Together": Sowing The Seeds of SEL Statewide

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Funding

This report was funded by the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS). DHCS did not engage in data analysis, writing, or editing of this report. The contents may not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the State of California.

Impact Statement

This article is for educational leaders who are curious about efforts to align and support diverse Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) initiatives across a large geographic region through a shared process of improvement and a shared vision for thriving. First, we describe the historic developments that created opportunities for co-learning and improvement of SEL on a statewide scale. Then, we describe the infrastructure, activities, experiences, and lessons learned from our work in California. We illuminate our "why" as well as some of the complexities and synergies of statewide efforts. Ultimately, CalHOPE Student Support illustrates a regional approach to SEL implementation.

Abstract

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has been lauded as important for student success. However, little guidance is available for how educators, scholars, and policymakers can work together to improve SEL implementation in public schools across the state. Here, we describe CalHOPE Student Support - an effort to "sow the seeds" of SEL across California. Invoking the metaphor of a garden, we first discuss the historic developments in California that readied the ground for such work. Then, we lift up the voices of education leaders who have been catalysts for transforming the landscape. Next, we describe our collective vision for a "thriving garden" - the process and outcomes we aim to achieve. We then explain how we harmonized essential elements (e.g., information, support, and action) into a comprehensive system for statewide SEL implementation. Then, we share information about our garden's yield - our successes and ongoing struggles, through the voices of our collaborators. We end with a synthesis of lessons learned e.g., build capacity for change-making, differentiate support, plan for turnover for use by other educational leaders seeking to advance SEL in their regions.



Keywords: SEL implementation; research-practice partnership; educational leadership

Acknowledgements

CalHOPE Student Support has coordinated efforts across California to advance SEL implementation. We thank all participants, contributors, and champions, with a special acknowledgement of County Office representatives who have expanded their work and impact. The authors would like to acknowledge the entire 2017 SEL State Team, including the generous funding from the CDE Foundation, the S.D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation, and the Stuart Foundation, and the leadership of Jennifer Peck (Partnership of Children and Youth), Brent Malicote (CDE Professional Learning Support Division Director), and Pamela McVeagh-Lally (SEL Consulting Collaborative). Similarly, the authors would like to acknowledge the entire 2020 SEL State Team, led by Michael Funk (Director, Expanded Learning Division, CDE) and Barbara Murchison (Director, Educator Excellence and Equity Division, CDE). The authors would like to thank Sacramento County Superintendent of Schools David W. Gordon, and Deputy Director at the California Department of Health Care Services Autumn Boylan, for their courageous and passionate leadership, as well as Mary Reed, Jason Marsh, Mariah Flynn, Linda Burton, Susan Stone, and Dana Kowalski for their instrumental support to the initial phase of this project. The authors also appreciate the consultation of the Social Development Research Group and the data support provided by the HERE to Promote Student Wellbeing undergraduate students and their YEDI supervisors. A special thanks to our COE Advisory Team (including Meghan Salter, Stephen Hahm, and Christobelle Tan) and journal editors, Vicki Zakrzewski and Lisa Flook, for expert reviews and recommendations for improvement. The CalHOPE Student Support Planning Team has tremendous gratitude for the work of Jim Kooler, a human lever of transformation. Valerie Shapiro would like to acknowledge the W.T. Grant Foundation Scholars Award for supporting her research and career development in thinking about how to promote the use of research evidence to improve the lives of young people.

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Sowing The Seeds of SEL Statewide

What will it take to actually improve conditions for wellbeing in schools? If you are reading this article, you likely dream about school settings as places of connection and thriving for all students, and you likely believe in the benefits of social and emotional learning. At the same time, the systems-level changes that are necessary to actualize your vision may feel daunting - even overwhelming. Where do you begin? We wrote this article for educational leaders who are curious about efforts to align and support diverse SEL initiatives across a large geographic region through a shared process of improvement and a shared vision for thriving.

First, we describe the historic developments that created opportunities for co-learning and improvement on a statewide scale in the United States. Then, we describe the infrastructure, activities, experiences, and lessons learned from the work undertaken on behalf of six million students. In sharing our journey, we strive to illuminate our "why" as well as some of the complexities and synergies of statewide efforts. Ultimately, we hope to contribute to a forward-looking research, practice, and policy agenda for educational leaders seeking to advance a regional ("building-together") approach to social and emotional learning (SEL).



Social and Emotional Learning

Over the past 30 years, SEL has been popularized as "the process through which children and adults understand and apply emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; CASEL, 2019). A synthesis of well-conducted studies revealed that SEL programs (i.e., curriculum or other well-documented strategies) can contribute to improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviors, and academic success among youth (Durlak et al., 2011; Durlak et al., 2022). Consequently, CASEL Program Guides (2003, 2005, 2015)- compendia of exemplary SEL programs for students- were designed to help educational leaders select and adopt SEL programs for implementation. Although these resources are quite useful for facilitating the selection of SEL programs, they do not overcome the lack of inclusion of diverse students in the underlying studies of SEL programs (Authors, year) or themselves include a full spectrum of methods, from the micro (e.g., welcoming rituals) to the macro (non-exclusionary disciplinary practices) for practicing SEL with students. Central to our current focus, these program lists also underemphasize the concentric circles prominent in the CASEL framework, which represent the ecology of child development that spans from classrooms to communities. While the program guides emphasize classroom programs, which may each have some adjacent school-wide strategies, the "person-in-environment" perspective advances the idea that SEL is best practiced within the entire school and community through the broad engagement of adults and a larger system transformation.



Systemic SEL: An Approach to Larger System Transformation

We understand Systemic SEL to be an approach to delivering SEL that engages each layer and component of our complex educational system to support, integrate, and sustain SEL across youth-serving contexts and over time. This approach suggests that educational leaders can achieve the best results from SEL when (1) foundational supports, such as SEL leadership teams, are in place, (2) adults improve their own SEL capacities and competencies, (3) students receive coordinated, high-quality SEL, and (4) feedback systems drive reflection and continuous improvement (Mahoney et al., 2020). Although there has been some investment in learning about and supporting school-wide and district-wide approaches to SEL delivery (e.g., CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative, CASEL's online District Resource Center), and some activities at the state-level (e.g., the adoption of statewide SEL learning standards), there has not yet been guidance in the research literature for educational leaders intending to facilitate state-wide, multi-level, systemic SEL initiatives. This paper seeks to address that gap by sharing our learning from CalHOPE Student Support, an effort by practice and policy leaders in California to advance SEL statewide.

Tilling the Soil in California: The Context for Transformation

Educational leaders in California have been learning and improving their systemic SEL implementation for over a decade. In 2011, the Oakland and Sacramento City Unified School Districts joined the CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative, sharing their goals, struggles, and successes with a nation hungry to learn about how to implement systemic SEL.

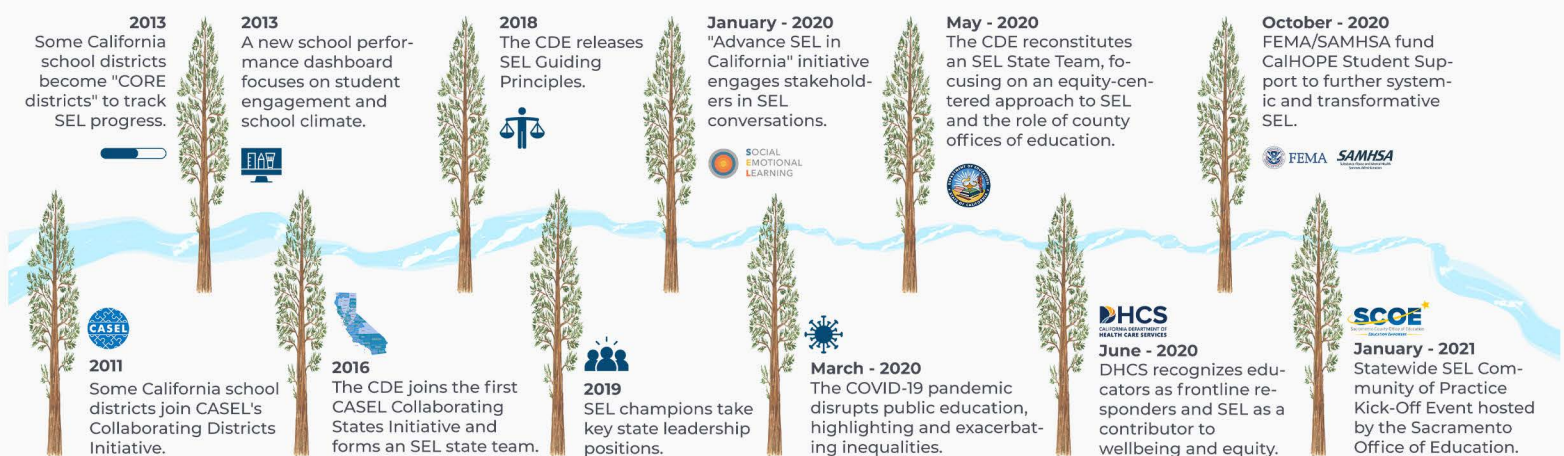
Tilling the Soil in California Cont.

In 2013, eight California school districts, using cross-district collaboration as an approach to improvement, together received a waiver to the federal No Child Left Behind Act, enabling these "CORE districts" (Knudson et al., 2015) to pursue and acknowledge their annual progress through indicators of SEL. At the same time, a new Local Control Funding Formula led to the creation of a state school performance dashboard that required all schools to assess and address student engagement and school climate in public Local Control and Accountability Plans (Johnson & Tanner, 2018). We describe these policy evolutions and demonstration projects as "tilling the soil" for a statewide approach to systemic SEL.

A well-tilled soil facilitates germination - the process of something budding into existence. Accordingly, in 2016, the California Department of Education (CDE) participated in the first CASEL Collaborating States Initiative cohort, a professional learning community of 8 state education agencies working to create the conditions for high-quality, systemic SEL implementation across their respective states. With additional foundation funding, the CDE created a Social and Emotional Learning State Team comprised of representatives from 28 California education entities including school districts, county offices of education, labor unions, colleges and universities, and non-profit organizations ranging from those who grant or administer funds (e.g., First 5 California) to those that advocate for specific voices (e.g., California Parent Teacher Association) or values (e.g., Californians for Justice). With the two years of funding, this workgroup crafted consensus SEL Guiding Principles ([see Appendix A](#)) that were distributed as a resource that Local Education Agencies (LEAs; e.g. districts) could use in their local SEL implementation.

In January 2019, several people took key state level leadership positions, championing SEL implementation in K-12 education. Governor Newsom was elected on a platform to address inequities in the public education system, and First Partner Siebel Newsom dedicated her office to advancing whole child development. Tony Thurmond became the first Afro-Latino person and first social worker to serve as the California State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Linda Darling-Hammond, a national expert in the science of learning and development, and strong SEL advocate, became president of the State Board of Education. "Advance SEL in California" was launched in January 2020 to engage stakeholders in conversations around barriers, needs, and goals related to SEL implementation in schools. The group heard from nearly 800 educators, community partners, youth, and families, generating recommendations for educational leaders, including: (1) make SEL the cornerstone of California's education system; (2) align SEL efforts at and between the state-, county-, and district levels; (3) emphasize SEL supports for adult capacity building; and (4) invite, listen, and lift up less powerful voices to co-design solutions for schools (Education First, 2020, p. 15).

Figure 1: Timeline of California Efforts to Till the Soil for a Statewide Approach to Systemic SEL.



An Unprecedented Societal Storm: Historic Events of 2020

In the spring of 2020, the emergence of the novel coronavirus upended the education system in California and around the world, causing a disruption to the routines and relationships of all young people, and exacerbating and amplifying systemic inequalities (Tan et al., 2022). Though California's shelter-in-place order was decidedly important for reducing COVID-19 case numbers and deaths (Friedson et al., 2021), the ruptures in daily life, coupled with the experiences of trauma, grief, and loss, impacted California's youth in myriad ways. Isolation from peers, community members, and health and human services to slow viral transition, also removed support, structure, scaffolds, and safety nets from many young people (Zhu et al., 2021). The shift to virtual or remote instruction may have contributed to academic disengagement (Jones et al., 2021), "unfinished learning" (Dom et al., 2021), and learning lags (Pier et al., 2021).

At the same time, we also saw increasing confrontation with the history of race and racism in the United States (Hammonds, 2021), propelled forward by well-documented instances of police brutality within the Black community (Thomas et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021) and increasing incidents of hate crimes against the Asian American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander communities (Shimkhada & Ponce, 2022). The combination of all these conditions yielded what the Little Hoover Commission coined a "perfect storm of stress, anxiety, and trauma, exacerbating a preexisting crisis in children's mental health" (p. 3). California youth reported increases in anxiety and depression that would require "time, support, and investment" (Little Hoover Commission, 2021 p. 3) to address. This societal storm was unprecedented in our collective experience, yet the earlier groundwork provided a foundation for moving forward together.

The CDE revived and reconstituted a virtual Social and Emotional Learning State Team in May 2020, now with representation from 48 organizations, to make actionable recommendations to address the emergent context. The team, and subsequently, the CDE, elevated an equity-centered approach to SEL-transformative social and emotional learning (tSEL)¹-which critically examines root causes of inequity, empowers youth, and co-constructs learning conditions that promote equity and inclusion (Jagers et al., 2021; Jagers et al., 2019). One accomplishment of the team was the creation of resources that distilled the social and emotional competencies (i.e., dispositions and skills that emerge through processes of human development) and conditions (i.e., features of the social environment that support growth and thriving) that are required for successful leading, teaching, and learning. Drawing on these ideas, the team curated resources to promote the competencies and conditions for thriving in California schools.

¹ Consistent with CASEL, we use the acronym tSEL, and acknowledge that in some settings, particularly across the state of California, the acronym T-SEL may be used as well.



Along with these resources, they issued recommendations to the State Superintendent of Public Instruction that included: (1) championing transformative SEL as a tool for equity, and (2) building the capacity of the County Offices of Education (COEs) to support SEL implementation by (a) designating one or two COEs as content leads, and (b) securing and sustaining funding for statewide and county-wide communities of practice.

In June 2020, the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) invited the Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) to partner in their application to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for pandemic disaster response dollars. This opportunity came through an understanding that educators were frontline responders to the still unfolding crisis, and needed support, within their roles, in order to navigate the profound threats to student and educator wellbeing. In this work,

SEL was positioned as a complement to (but not a replacement for) student mental health services. It was envisioned as an educational framework that could acknowledge the current social and emotional strains on leading, teaching, and learning, and bring educational leaders into connection, capacity-building, and collaboration as they navigated the storm. In October 2020, CalHOPE Student Support was allocated 6 million dollars in funding, originating from FEMA and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and distributed through the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA), that solidified a partnership between the health and education sectors in response to the pandemic-accelerated needs of people in schools, and thus furthering the vision for systemic and transformative SEL across California.



Insights from the Gardeners: The Voices of Educational Leaders

Despite the pace of disaster relief, it was critical to start with listening and learning from County Office of Education (COE) representatives who are charged with providing implementation support for the delivery of instruction and educational services, including Social and Emotional Learning, within their regions. To understand the pressing problems of practice, UC Berkeley designed an online survey in early 2021 for California COE representatives (N=116 from 50 counties) to describe (1) the current struggles and successes of SEL in their regions, and (2) their goals for SEL in their regions. A data support team at UC Berkeley conducted a qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) by coding survey responses to consensus and then generating themes. Researchers identified some commonly reported struggles, including, (1) overwhelming and competing demands, (2) limited teacher preparation to deliver SEL, (3) purported (mis)understandings of SEL as an "add-on" rather than "means-to", and (4) the lack of coordination and systemic approach to SEL implementation. Yet, at this historic moment, there were also some recurrent successes reported, including, (1) an emerging recognition that SEL is needed, (2) an acceleration in the offering and uptake of professional learning for SEL, and (3) the expansion of mental health partners in schools. These struggles and opportunities were reflected in inspiring and ambitious goals, including, (1) helping children bounce back from disaster and improve their wellbeing, engagement, and performance, (2) building adult awareness, knowledge, and skills for SEL implementation, and (3) providing supports to adults in the form of training and forums for collaboration.

Long-Standing and Recent Struggles

Overwhelming and competing demands: COEs observe and experience fatigue and a lack of time

- “It is difficult to promote SEL with a lot of what is going on right now amidst the pandemic. It feels more reactive than proactive considering the current circumstances”
- “It has been difficult to get everyone on board. There are so many things to do and many of our educators are tired and mentally exhausted from COVID-19. Although they understand that SEL is important, they have a difficult time seeing it as working hand-in-hand with their instruction...time has also been a struggle...”
- “At this time, a lot of individuals are dealing with compassion fatigue with the challenges of the pandemic so at times the work towards MTSS efforts have been put on pause. With the lack of substitutes, and the degree of stress educators are experiencing, it is a challenge to get adults to attend SEL PD.”
- “Especially this year, while the need for SEL has never been greater, finding time in compacted Distance Learning and Blended Learning schedules”

Limited teacher preparation: COEs observe many teachers who feel uninterested or unprepared to deliver SEL.

- “Some teachers feel uncomfortable teaching students SEL skills and need support”
- “Teachers are overwhelmed and don't always see the benefit to their classroom. Our teachers, some not all, are mean...they want to teach kids who ‘want to be there’ and don't really support struggling students”
- “Most teachers understand the importance, yet no systems-type Professional Learning has occurred”
- “Some teachers still feel it is all the “touchy-lovey” stuff and don't realize it's about relationship building to promote trust.”
- “Many teachers will not take the time to use SEL because it cuts into their academic time. Or they do not feel comfortable asking their students how they feel. One teacher told me that he absolutely hates SEL but does it because his district requires it.”
- “Classroom Teachers do not always feel equipped to support students who are experiencing trauma/in crisis (“I'm not a psychologist”)...Hard to know what aspects of SEL have been translated to evidence-based classroom practice”

Purported (mis)understandings of SEL as an “add-on” rather than “means-to”: COEs observe an understanding of SEL as another program, curriculum, or area of speciality instruction to fit on the plate, rather than an embedded, systemic approach to teaching and learning.

- “I think there is a lack of consistency and SEL is often equated to simply implementing a curriculum (Second Step, Zones, etc.)”
- “There is a lack of a consistent message and training for all staff members, so SEL feels like “another thing” they have to do rather than essential to their own well-being and the well-being of their students and families”
- “Helping leaders understand that SEL is not a program to buy... Building a common language between classroom GenEd. teachers, SpEd teachers, counselors, admin, and families to talk about mental, social, and emotional health”

Long-Standing and Recent Struggles

- “There is not a general understanding of what SEL is. Most districts went straight to buying a SEL curriculum and therefore believe they have SEL in place. There is a lack of understanding about the systems work that needs to take place in order to have SEL firmly integrated in the school setting. Many adults see SEL as a program and not a system, which causes many unanswered questions and inconsistencies when trying to implement best practices.”
- “District seeing the difference between teaching SEL explicitly and integrating SEL throughout the day in their curriculum and interactions with others.”
“Helping all staff people at a school site to see they have a part to play in SEL instruction and culture, not just the counselors.”

Lack of coordination: COEs report that there isn’t a unifying vision or goals or leadership structure for systemic SEL implementation.

- “The fact that social-emotional learning is not systemically addressed in our schools means that it often gets pushed to the back burner because more focus is placed on statewide content standards and state testing.”
- “While there have been a number of SEL trainings and COPs, there does not seem to be a systematic implementation effort to support SEL across CA. CASEL has great resources, and a number of highly skilled and highly motivated teachers and principals have utilized these resources, but implementation is not measured across the system which causes problems with engaging in continuous improvement and implementation.”
- “Other than [School District], there have been no systemic efforts to implement SEL in school districts in the county (as far as I know by June 2020). By systemic I mean that it is a priority to change the system by integrating SEL into the vision, mission, and instructional practices at all levels. Leaders assigning priority to SEL have mainly been expressed as an intent although i think the awareness of its importance is growing, especially since the pandemic”
- “A general lack of consistency and urgency regarding the importance of SEL. ... These concepts need to be more systemic and taught to new teachers within residency programs as essential. It has to be district wide or site wide for us to have lasting changes/shifts.”
- “Everybody is doing their own thing. Even in some of our districts, there is no cohesive roll out or implementation of SEL. Many of our schools are on their own to find resources and implement those resources”
- “Having a cohesive countywide plan. Everyone has their own program and a single direction would be very helpful.”

Emerging Successes

An emerging recognition that SEL is needed: COEs notice a recent acceptance and elevation of SEL

- “Recognition of the need for SEL has grown to the point that there is great interest and momentum around the work.”
- “There is an openness to SEL by staff and parents. There is also a greater awareness of the topic and willingness to embrace the changes it brings by most.”
- “We see the staff seeing how SEL is essential for students' overall wellbeing and success in academics.”
- “Every school is talking about SEL, something that was not true a few years ago...Districts are talking and planning ways to bring SEL into the classroom and to parents.”
- “There is a renewed belief in our county that SEL is not a nice to have but a MUST have in our schools.”
- “Our biggest current success to that LEAs are beginning to prioritize SEL”
- “I have seen the focus on SEL grow over the last three years as evidenced by the number of COEs and districts that currently have some form of a workgroup of COP operating within the region”

An acceleration in the offering and uptake of professional learning for SEL: COEs offer training and resources

- “A big success we have had is with staff education. Staff has been open to implementing SEL into their daily classroom routines.”
- “We are currently implementing Adult SEL sessions focusing on wellness for our teachers and paying them to attend.”
- “We have developed a series of trainings designed to support schools in their implementation of SEL including Adult SEL, SEL 101, and will be providing a workshop for schools to guide them in completing the CASEL Guide to School Wide SEL Rubric this Spring.”
- “Our county office has created an SEL committee which is made up of members from various units and they are committed to providing professional development and resources around Transformative SEL and collecting countywide SEL data so that we are able to see our strength with regard to SEL and the areas for more growth.”
- “We have a county team that has been trained in SEL that is supporting districts as needed both in adult and student SEL training”

The expansion of mental health partners in schools: COEs notice an expansion of mental health professionals (e.g., counselors, social workers) in schools.

- “We have counselors and materials available to help students.”
- “We have mental health professionals in many districts across our county.”
- “We employ a full time District Counselor... The counselor provides universal SEL opportunities for all our students, with targeted and intensive supports for those who need it.”
- “Counselors at every school”

Emerging Successes

- “We have increased our mental health supports in schools.”
- “We opened a Wellness Center with 1 PPS counselor and 1 Social worker along with several interns. They support our most vulnerable students in a collaborative effort.”
- “We were awarded the LCSSP Grant which allowed us to reduce the cost and provide counselors (in a consortium model) from school who are otherwise unable to afford them. We have added 3 counselors in the last 6 months.”

Long-term Goals

Promote student-level success: COEs are motivated to help children bounce back from disaster, and improve wellbeing, engagement, and performance

- “I want kids to come away with skills to calm themselves down, feel good about themselves, have positive self-talk and ability to take on new challenges”
- “Less disciplinary issues.”
- “Academic Engagement in our students from our county increases.”
- “Classroom practices that build student and adult resilience”
- “To have students knowledgeable in the topic and know how to engage in self-care, etc.”
- “Establish measures and tools to assess growth and success down to the individual student level.”
- “I would like for all of our students to be able to have a toolbox full of strategies that they can pull from to help themselves through any situation throughout their lives.”

Build adult awareness, knowledge, and skills for SEL implementation: COEs want to build awareness, knowledge, and skills for SEL delivery.

- “I would like all districts in our county to have a common understanding of what SEL is”
- “Start to get some common understandings and strategies”
- “build the department's internal capacity to do this very important work in more meaningful ways”
- “That adults develop the skills, processes and tools to embed it for themselves and others.”
- “build the grassroots movement of deeper study and integrating practices into the classroom.”
- “Goal: to make SEL part of mainstream education with a common vocabulary and skills/strategies for adults and students to use in their daily lives.”
- “helping educators to grow in their knowledge and understanding so they can have a greater impact on their peers, students, families and community partners.”

Long-term Goals

- "I want a common language for all school in our district, I want a coordinated and unified effort to acknowledge the importance of SEL"

Provide supports to adults in the form of training and forums for collaboration: COEs want to provide training and forums for collaboration.

- "[Offer] extensive professional development for staff, students and families to share what SEL is as well as ways to achieve these discrete skills, establish positive climates, and support students, staff & families."

- "Provide explicit training in the CASEL five core competencies with a TSEL lens."

- "To provide training for teachers so that all students in [the] County are afforded classrooms where they feel safe, "seen and heard", have are given tools and resources to interact in a positive and productive manner with their peers, friends, teachers and families."

- "Small groups that build SEL skills."

- "Develop forum (time, place, form etc.) through which to provide staff introduction, experiences, and practices related to SEL. Through these regular practices, engage staff to improve commitment, vision, and motivation to implement and support SEL through structured program and daily practices, routines, language."

- "Scheduling a CoP experience that will help districts examine SEL in their system"

CalHOPE Student Support

Informed by insights from these educational leaders, CalHOPE Student Support became a multi-stakeholder, partnered initiative - between sectors, across regions, and between system levels, intended to help California educators in the unprecedented task of bringing children back into and improving the normative routines of learning and development by strengthening capacity for SEL implementation statewide. The CalHOPE Student Support planning team included member from two COEs and a research university, partnered with 55 additional county offices of education (COEs). Together, they collaborated with 27,000 administrators and 30,000 pupil services personnel, supporting over 300,000 teachers, serving over six million school students in public schools statewide. In fact, over 80% of the project funding was distributed across the state for local use. The planning team and COEs worked to augment COE capacity to support SEL implementation in each region, to in turn help districts and schools augment their capacity to deliver SEL interventions, tailored to their local communities (see Figure 2). By "building the capacity of the capacity-builders" the planning team intended to equip all of the metaphorical "gardeners" across the state with what they needed to sow the seeds of SEL, while simultaneously recognizing that a healthy plant is one that adapts well to its niche, and the varied situations in which it finds itself.

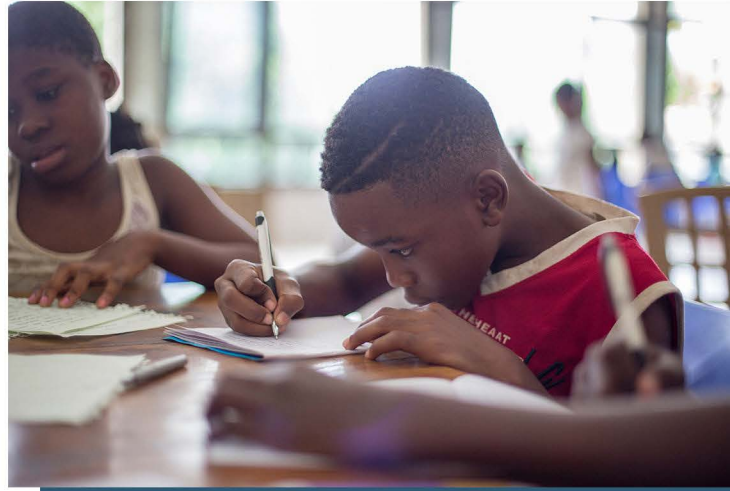
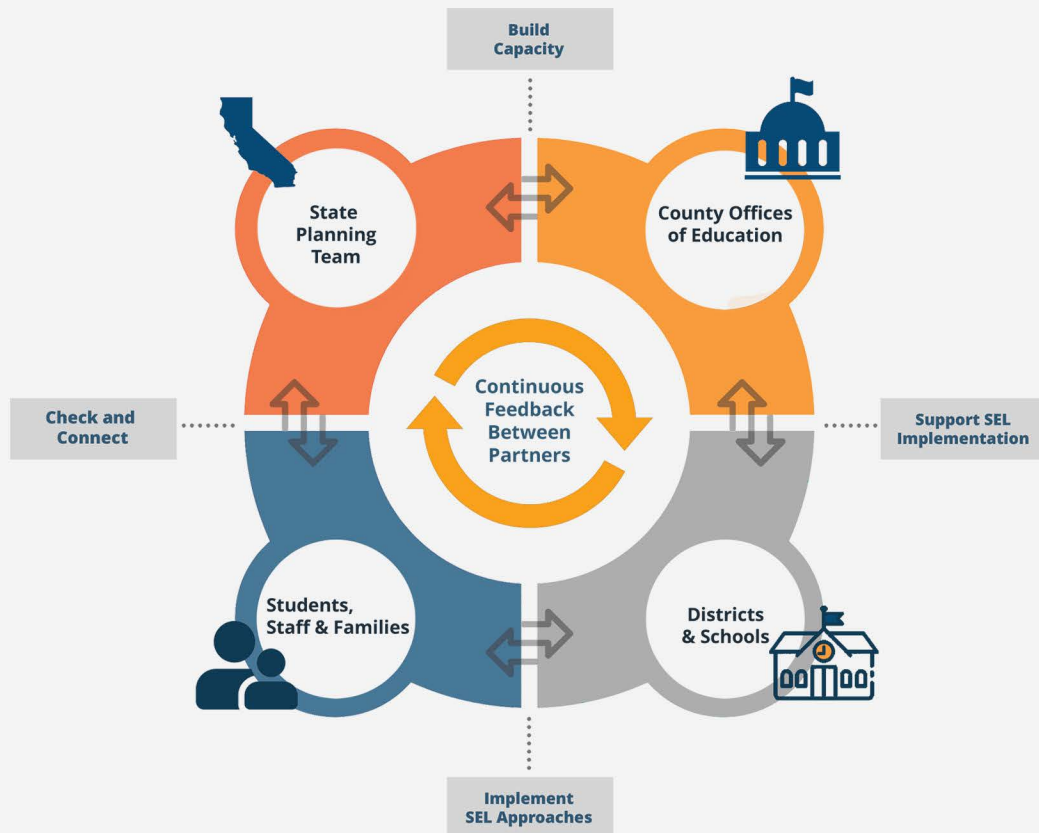


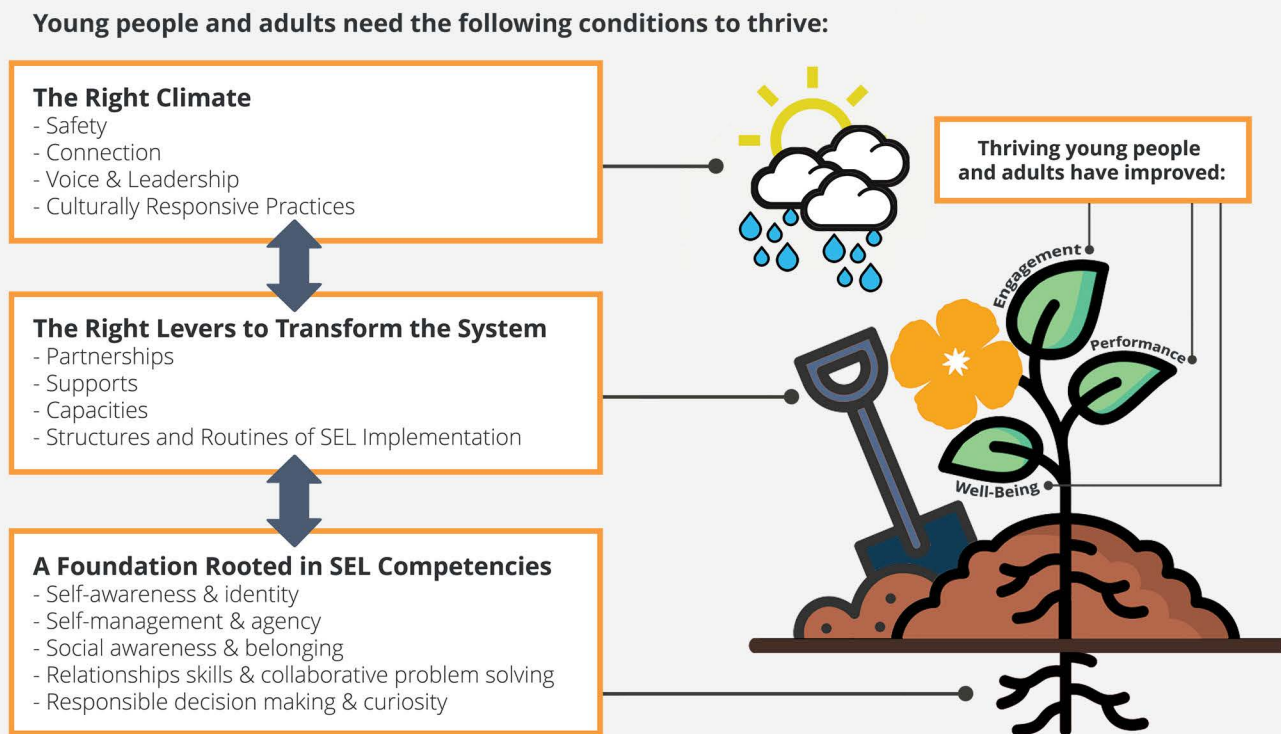
Figure 2 - Education Sector Partnerships for SEL Implementation



Envisioning a Thriving Garden

Although a garden is typically a planful land use, we recognize that it is not a uniform land use; gardens exist in many forms, intersecting what is natural with what is desired in any given location. CalHOPE Student Support generated a shared vision for a thriving garden that celebrates the diversity of California's counties, their varied landscapes, and differing contextual goals, while aligning on a statewide process for improving SEL implementation. As a statewide planning team working on CalHOPE Student Support, we have leveraged the garden metaphor to think together about what it means to cultivate learning spaces where students thrive socially, emotionally, and academically. Our theory of change, depicted here as the Garden Model for Shifting SEL Statewide (Figure 3), serves as both the conceptual underpinning of our work together and a guide for the practices we carry out.

Figure 3 - The Garden Model for Shifting Social and Emotional Learning Statewide



When taking a birds' eye view of our garden, it is important to realize there is no singular or particular seed that we attempt to disseminate. The "what" (e.g., principles, practices, procedures, programs, policies; Brown et al., 2017) of SEL is understood to be a local choice. Yet, the growth process is seen to have commonalities that are best advanced collectively. The seeds -whatever seeds are well suited for the environment- are intended to produce thriving people in schools; In other words, the "outcomes" are students and staff who are all engaged, performing, and well. This is symbolized in the foreground of Figure 2 (as California's state flower, the poppy).

Envisioning a Thriving Garden Cont.

We acknowledge, however, that if we exclusively focus on individuals, we ignore the conditions required for thriving. Conditions are the circumstances affecting the way in which people learn, teach, and lead. We look to cultivate optimal conditions by improving (1) competencies, (2) climate, and (3) levers for transformation. SEL competencies are dispositions and skills that emerge through processes of human development. Broadly, we seek to advance the five competencies that have been popularized by CASEL (the 'CASEL 5,' i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making), as well as the five focal constructs recently highlighted within these competencies (i.e., identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem solving, curiosity; see Jagers et al., 2021; CASEL, 2022). These competencies are envisioned, at the individual and collective level, as "roots" that can keep a plant healthy, even as conditions vary. For example, a strong sense of belonging, coupled with increased social awareness, could keep a person- or community- firmly engaged and supported during moments of immense turmoil. A root system is also something that can travel with a plant across environments, generalize across settings, and promote adaptability in the face of change. Although competencies are not conceptualized within other SEL initiatives as a collective condition, our multi-level initiative recognizes that one person's competencies ultimately become another person's conditions. For example, a site principal's curiosity can invite, constrain, or otherwise shape the expressions of agency among school staff. Which naturally leads to the second condition we cultivate - a positive climate, or the persistent patterns of school life that convey care and respect, creating norms and expectations that transcend daily experiences. Within the realm of climate, we highlight experiences of safety and connection, opportunities for voice and leadership, and culturally and linguistically responsive environments. We see these elements as both influencing and being influenced by other features shaping the garden.

Alongside competencies and climate, CalHOPE Student Support has focused on key levers of transformation. This is where educational leaders work hard every day, with partners, to cultivate improvement towards SEL goals. The first lever is partnerships. In CalHOPE, our deeply relational, co-learning approach relies heavily on developing trusting, equity-pursuing, and mutually-beneficial partnerships across sectors and regions, between levels and divisions of the education system, with families, and allied to students. Across the state, CO Es and LEAs have taken up the work of partnering with intentionality and dedication. For example, one LEA shared in a "community spotlight" that they engage in "community walks," where school staff visit important community spaces, cultural centers, and connect directly with the community. Another COE shared in a "community spotlight" that they partner with youth development organizations to facilitate SEL implementation in and across the county. These high-quality partnerships generate the conditions for engagement with the second lever: supports. Supports include funding, resources, training, coaching, and feedback systems. For example, a COE shared that they hosted several Adult SEL study groups for county educators, involving a shared book, an app for improving emotional intelligence, and ten facilitated check-ins.

Another COE shared that they provided funding and technical assistance to LEAs to "pulse" students (i.e., collect and summarize responses to very brief survey probes) and help adults make meaning and take action based on the student data. The presence of these supports build the third lever: capacity. Capacities are the beliefs, knowledge, skills, and sense of efficacy that are required to do something differently. These partnerships, supports, and capacities are envisioned to enable the routines and structures needed for systemic SEL implementation (e.g., SEL leadership team, shared vision, needs assessments, plans and goals, communication, instruction or programs, continuum of supports, data based reflection and improvement). The routines and structures of systemic SEL can exist at all levels of the K-12 education system and in the greater community. Within CalHOPE, each county, district, and school decides where to target their SEL improvement efforts, and uses the levers to cultivate growth. An aligned and comprehensive feedback system, using the Berkeley Assessment of Social and Emotional Learning (BASEL; Shapiro et al., 2022), functions as a "smart sensor" in the garden, intended to help facilitate needs assessment, prioritization, planning, and monitoring progress.

Sunlight, Water, Air, and Energy:

Harmonizing essential elements into a System of Support

In pursuing these goals, we considered the roles of "essential elements" - which in themselves represent complex systems: the distillation system (metaphorically, sunlight), the implementation system (metaphorically, water), and the delivery system (metaphorically, glucose), each described below (Wandersman, 2008)⁴. The CalHOPE distillation system ("sunlight") converts scientific discoveries (like those presented in scholarly journals) into strategies that could be applied directly to educator practice. The scientific synthesizing and translating process results in tools, training, technical assistance, and feedback loops that facilitate the delivery of evidence-informed SEL (Wandersman et al., 2012). The CalHOPE distillation system was initially led by UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center (GGSC), whose mission is to share science-based insights for a meaningful life. The GGSC's Greater Good in Education (GGIE) team, in partnership with field experts, created six learning modules for facilitators to use in the professional learning opportunities they hosted. These modules included information on the science of SEL and strategies for 1) supporting educators' social and emotional well-being, 2) cultivating safety and belonging in classrooms and schools, 3) addressing trauma, 4) understanding racial equity, 5) integrating SEL into the academic curriculum, and 5) bolstering family and community engagement. GGIE also made their Basics of SEL self-paced mini-course available to all of California's educators. Through these resources, GGIE shined light on promising research-based ideas to improve SEL practice.

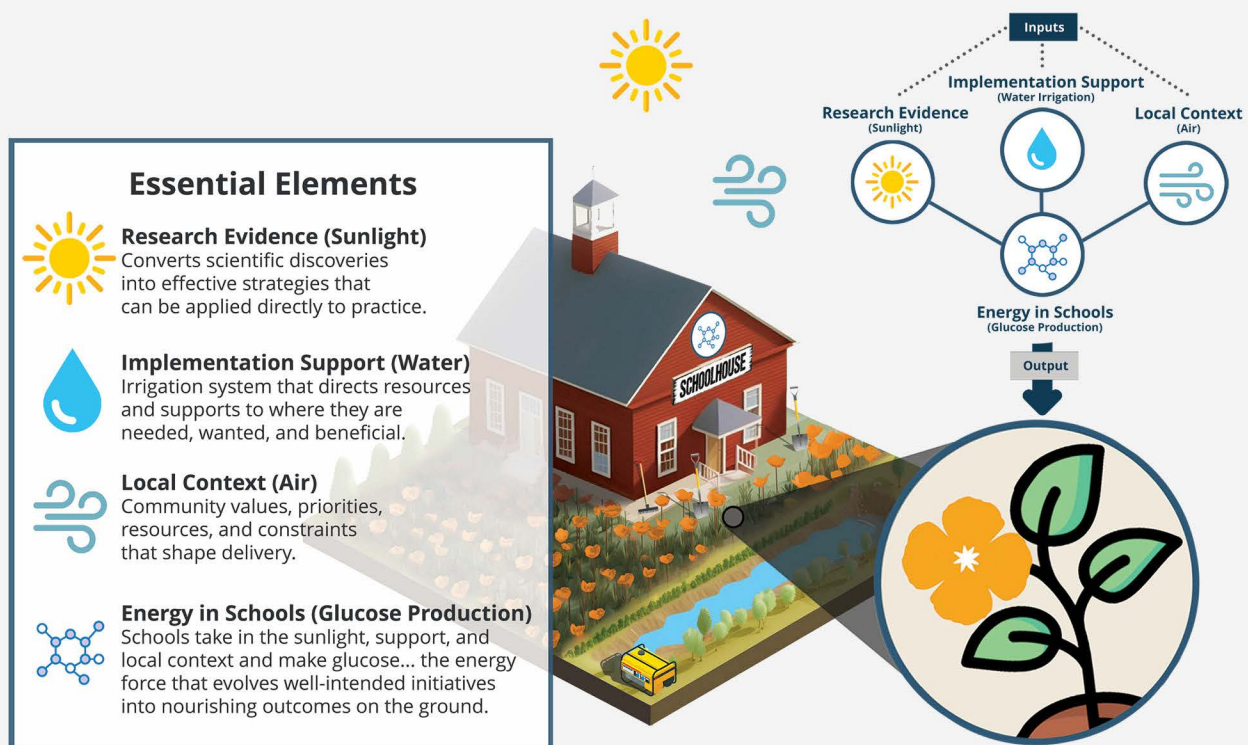
The CalHOPE implementation support system ("water") expanded the capacity of COEs to support SEL implementation. Although the state typically establishes educational policy, regulations, and funding in California, 1,000+ locally controlled school districts are responsible for the delivery of instruction. Sitting adjacent to these functions, 58 County Offices of Education (COEs) provide regional implementation support to the districts and schools. In CalHOPE Student Support, COEs can be reliable conduits of information and facilitators of practice improvement. District interaction with COEs is voluntary in California, and partnerships need to be forged. When optimized, COEs play an essential irrigation role, building metaphorical "tubes and pumps" to direct resources and supports to where they are most needed, wanted, and beneficial.

The cornerstone of the CalHOPE effort to augment COE capacity ("build capacity of the capacity builders") are monthly statewide SEL Community of Practice (CP) meetings, in which COE representatives learn with and from each other on topics related to SEL implementation. The CP meetings regularly feature time to connect, reflect, discuss, and spotlight, with the intention to (1) support a network of COEs to consider ideas, swap resources, and build collective capacity, (2) build a shared understanding of SEL and implementation among COEs, (3) model structures and turn key activities that COEs could use in the regional SEL CP meetings that they facilitate between statewide CP meetings, and (4) motivate COE effort through successful examples of SEL implementation in educational environments. Between monthly statewide CP meetings, weekly drop-in office hours were also held for technical assistance. Office hours tended to be with smaller groups of people statewide CP meetings, weekly drop-in office hours were also held for technical assistance. Office hours tended to be with smaller groups of people - and more free-flowing. COE representatives asked and answered questions related to the day to day activities of supporting implementation. This built an irrigation system connecting all regions of California to a reservoir of SEL implementation support.

The CalHOPE *delivery system* ("glucose") carries out the activities necessary to deliver high quality SEL. In California, the responsibilities of the delivery system are most frequently carried out by *Local Education Agencies* (LEAs)-public authorities that administratively control local public elementary and secondary schools - most often school districts and independent charter schools. The local districts and schools are directly responsible for a student's growth. Metaphorically, schools take in the aforementioned sunlight (i.e., information), water (i.e., implementation support), and local air (i.e., community values, resources, and constraints) to make glucose - the energy force that evolves a well-intended initiative into robust implementation and nourishing outcomes on the ground. Glucose, whether naturally occurring or created, represents the significant, intentional efforts that occur every day - even under suboptimal conditions (e.g., shade, drought, smog)- exemplified by the principal who clears staff meeting time to make space for SEL, the parent who generously brings their cultural wealth into school buildings, the teacher who revisits lesson plans to ensure SEL integration into academics, the co-worker who knows your fight song and will sing it with you, and the counselor who looks upstream from their overwhelming caseload to work on school-wide approaches that promote wellbeing. These essential elements exist separately and together. Placed in a delicate, interactive balance, they can be aligned and optimized for garden growth.

The original CalHOPE Student Support project was renewed in August 2021 for a second allocation of six million dollars in federal funding. By this time, nearly 6,000 educational leaders across the state had participated in a CalHOPE Student Support statewide or regional SEL CP meeting, with website visits to the Greater Good in Education collection of evidence-informed SEL practices increasing in California by 110%, relative to other highly populated states (e.g., 55% in IL, 35% in NY, 29% in TX), and the United States overall (36%). CalHOPE Student Support success was subsequently recognized with a \$45 million investment by the state, through the California Department of Health Care Services, that would enable the partnered work between healthcare and education to continue and deepen through June 2024.

Figure 4 - Harmonizing "Essential Elements" into a System of Support for Continuous Improvement



In the summer of 2022, 18 months after the launch of CalHOPE Student Support, we administered another survey to COE representatives across the state (N= 113 from 56 counties). COE representatives again answered: 1) What successes are you having with Social and Emotional Learning? 2) What struggles are you having with Social and Emotional Learning? Following the same qualitative process as described above, the researchers noted that COE representatives reported successes in their regions that included, (1) understanding the importance of SEL, but now also having resources for large-scale SEL implementation, (2) observing strong collaborative communities with increased engagement in professional learning, and (3) practice moving beyond an exclusive focus on the implementation of student-level programs, to transforming structures and routines that include all members of the school community. New and ongoing struggles, included (1) concerns about mistrust across the political spectrum, (2) initiative fatigue in response to pandemic accelerated needs, and (3) concerns about maintaining progress.

Lessons Learned: Reflections from some gardeners

In sowing the seeds of SEL, we aspire to create a garden that is both a place of collaborative cultivation and of quiet reflection. Given these dual aims, we reflect, here, on the earliest phases of CalHOPE Student Support to explicate lessons learned by the CalHOPE planning team. We present key considerations and concrete questions to "dig into" for other educational leaders looking to grow and sustain a large scale, multi-level, implementation of systemic SEL.

Lesson 1: Build capacity for SEL, but also build capacity for change-making

When building capacity for statewide SEL, the planning team, and subsequently the participating COE representatives, put considerable effort into aligning on the "why"-- the rationale for implementing SEL at every level (e.g., statewide, countywide, schoolwide, etc.). Clarity on our motivations was very important for multi-stakeholder engagement in a voluntary initiative, and the strong vision and values alignment brought much needed coherence to guide such a large-scale undertaking. After motivation, the core of our early SEL capacity building was promoting a shared understanding of SEL, sometimes referred to as the "what". This was essential for the alignment of our communications.

Yet, building SEL capacity was ultimately insufficient to truly advance our goals for systemic SEL implementation statewide. Beyond building SEL specific capacity, we realized we needed a second focus on building general capacity for change-making. To this end, in October 2021, The Center for Implementation (TCI), became part of the distillation system (e.g., translating research from the field of implementation science into resources for implementation practice) and the implementation support system (e.g., providing training and technical assistance to the state team and county office representatives to help identify, plan, and enact strategies to achieve desired benefits in a sustainable and equitable way - honoring the experiences, strengths, and concerns of the different people involved at various system levels). Therefore, CalHOPE Student Support has benefited from the synthesis and translation of scientific knowledge, becoming implementation supports, on both SEL and on implementation (i.e., the process of putting a decision or plan into effect) in order to advance our goals for SEL implementation.

Guiding Questions for Education Leaders to Consider:

- What is our why?
- What partners and supports do we need to build capacity for SEL implementation?

Lesson 2: Meet people where they are and differentiate support accordingly

The counties, districts, and schools participating in CalHOPE Student Support varied considerably in their pre-existing capacity and structures for SEL implementation. It was vital to meet people-COEs, districts, schools, staff, and students-wherever they were starting from.

Reported Successes

Understanding the importance of SEL, but now also having resources for large-scale SEL implementation: COEs see movement beyond understanding the importance of SEL to large scale implementation and practice.

- “SEL is a priority for all our districts. This is a success because I rarely need to “sell” the idea that SEL is important. Most constituents understand and feel the urgency for building a robust tier 1 of SEL instruction and support for both adults and students. This opens doors for conversations and exploring innovative ideas for system wide SEL implementation.”
- “Implementation in schools and awareness of staff both personally and for students.”
- “Making people aware of the importance of SEL in schools and sharing strategies that can be implemented everyday in classrooms.”
- “teachers are beginning to see that social and emotional learning is taking place all day long - it is not tied to a program for set minutes.”
- “Many schools and districts in our county are eager to learn more about SEL and ways to support SEL implementation at their sites.”
- “Schools and districts are more aware of the importance of Social Emotional Learning and the resources that are available to them, including the Greater Good Science Center and CASEL five competencies. This has been possible due to our county/regional SEL COP.”

Moving from participation to broader and deeper engagement in professional learning: COEs report strong collaborative communities with increased engagement and attendance

- “We recently maxed out with 60 participants at an SEL training the first weekday of summer vacation.”
- “our SEL COP has provided a voice for community agencies which many did not know existed.”
- “Our county SEL CoP has grown into a very supportive and collaborative community.”
- “Our community of practice meetings/ PD are highly attended and we base our topics on county need from our participants.”
- “Last year we had almost every district and charter school attend our SEL CoP.”
- “Taking what we have learned and providing community of practice opportunities for our districts. We have had a consistent participation and great collaboration.”
- “We have created and maintained a SEL COE Leadership team which meets 2-3 times a year to set goals and metrics for SEL within [the] County. We also created and maintained an SEL Community of Practice that was facilitated by an interdisciplinary team. The CoP focused on topics chosen by the attendees and met 6 times during the 21/22 school year. This CoP will continue with some adjustments in the 22/23 school year.”
- “We have been running our SEL COP with great participation and feedback.”
- “Many schools, districts, and adults have engaged in this work including joining our countywide CoP”

Reported Successes

Expanding the focus beyond student-level programs to transforming structures and routines that include all members of the school community: COEs report shifts in SEL practice, moving beyond a singular student-level focus to incorporate structures for all members of the school community

- “Starting with the adults first.”
- “Within our organization, we have a strong focus on integrating SEL and wellness for adults allowing us to support schools and districts. It has led us to pursue trust building, develop better tools for equity and put people first. Districts across our county are all committed to strengthening social emotional wellness for staff, students and families (as evidenced by plans)”
- “Many schools, districts, and adults have engaged in this work ... participating in professional learning (such as 1,2,3 Wellness and others), and engaging in work with students and schools related to SEL. Additionally, we have been incorporating the three signature practices into our meetings as well.”
- “We provided a week-long, county-wide “Adult SEL” conference that focused upon the well-being of adults.”
- “Developing collaborative partnerships with content specialists and student support services staff to create integrated approaches to providing academic, social emotional/mental, and behavioral support”
- “Supporting school sites to gather SEL data (Kelvin or Panorama) from families, staff, and students to better understand strengths, needs, and areas for growth”

Reported Barriers

Concerns about change: COEs grapple with mistrust across the political spectrum

- “[a] struggle was bringing the indigenous community on board in a meaningful way”
- “Despite the big uptake of SEL at the start of the pandemic there is now some chatter from LEAs about challenges emerging at school board meetings where SEL (and ethnic studies) is being conflated with CRT, etc.”
- “We held a Community of Practice focused on LGBTQ+ best practices to create inclusive environments. We had a struggle to recruit teachers to join the CoP”
- “One struggle is the political milieu in [the county] where SEL and CRT are concerned.”
- “There have also been critics who relate it to CRT. There have been public requests for records to see if we are pushing a “left-wing agenda.”
- “Also, SEL is at risk in our district of becoming politically hot. Not everyone is on board with it so the teachers tolerate the PD out of politeness and compliance, but don't deeply engage with it.”
- “Some of the struggles with SEL are similar to those of Health Education. Parents and communities get “scared” because some of the subject matter involves sensitive content -- drugs, sexuality, diversity and inclusion.”

Reported Barriers

Initiative fatigue: COEs notice and experience “initiative fatigue” with a variety of short-term and under-coordinated solutions to pandemic accelerated needs

- “These past two years have been very difficult for school communities. Many schools are struggling to get back to their baseline and are having to provide more ongoing support for their students and families.”
- “The teachers are overwhelmed and burnt out. They do not have time for more resources”
- “It is very hard to get this organized with many staff overwhelmed with the academic and emotional needs of students after the pandemic.”
- “Time is always a factor with many different initiatives on the plate for site leaders.”
- “Time is the main challenge - sites are experiencing initiative fatigue and are spread thin in multiple directions instead of looking at how to streamline and incorporate best practices. Some do not have capacity or have certain educators who are involved in competing programs.”
- “Because of competing initiatives, our schools and district struggle with time, commitment, and fidelity of school-wide and district implementations.”
- “Most districts have not had the time or bandwidth”

Concerns about sustainability: COEs wonder how they will maintain progress

- “Sustaining the vision of a system-wide SEL effort when personnel changes occur.”
- “The biggest struggle has been being able to take a deeper dive with SEL that is long-term and sustaining.”
- “Sustained, systemic and integrated implementation. I still hear “let’s just buy a curriculum”
- “Most schools are implementing curriculum but it is not sticking”
- “Keeping the enthusiasm alive that this work needs to continue.”
- “Due to the wonderful amount of funding for SEL and mental health, many districts who are receiving funds have a stack of deliverables including data reporting, narrative plans and outcome reports, and budget responsibilities detailing the spending of funds. This takes a toll on administrative resources and can be difficult to sustain.”
- “There is also concern that with time SEL will lose its importance to sites, instead of being a part of daily life, it’s been embraced as part of COVID trauma response. How do we continue to keep SEL at the forefront of the work we do?”
- “We have had some difficulty sustaining the attendance at the SEL CoP, especially during that last few months of the school year.”

We needed to seek understanding about the varied starting points, and to honor local contexts and lived experiences when charting a path forward. For example, our rural COEs serve communities that may have limited access to infrastructure or resources (e.g. essential services, jobs, cultural or human capital, etc.), and have different considerations for building scalable solutions than our urban centers. Yet, perhaps relatedly, our rural COEs had different pulls toward partnerships, and were some of the earliest adopters of those levers for change. It is important to explore strengths and opportunities, as well as needs, when designing for change.

Different COEs, districts, and schools, also had different goals and priorities, and different potentials for the pace of change. We were pushed to be realistic about the feasible pace of change. More fundamentally, we realized we should not aspire to all arrive simultaneously at a common destination, but rather to all engage in the pursuit of improvement together. Increasingly, in response to feedback we received, we have allocated time in our monthly CPs for COE representatives to "choose your own adventure," where representatives self-select into networking spaces based on their needs, to allow for more differentiated, tailored support. Importantly, we also learned that educators have a predisposition to rely heavily on education strategies in the change process. In other words, we try to solve most implementation objectives with professional development. While teaching (e.g., expanding knowledge and awareness) is the tool we are most familiar with as educators, we realized we need to meet people where they are, hear what they actually need, and provide more diverse, responsive, and adaptive supports to continuously improve SEL implementation.

Guiding Questions for Education Leaders to Consider:

- Where are our starting points?
- What are realistic and feasible goals?
- What tailored implementation supports do we need?

Lesson 3: Build relationships and navigate turnover

To act at the pace of disaster response, the work had to come together quickly. Making fast-paced collaborative decisions within and between bureaucratic institutions, while navigating uncertainty and shifting priorities, made trust and reliance on each other a necessity. We learned it is important to give people time to explore and learn- even amidst immense stress and uncertainty- and to build relationships needed for sustained engagement and successful implementation. We did this deliberately, by establishing regular opportunities for educators within the project to network, connect, collaborate, reflect on challenges and successes, and build authentic community. For example, at every statewide Community of Practice meeting, there is standing time to be with each other, through connection questions, get-to-know-you activities, dialogue, and discussion. Additionally, weekly office hours allow for more informal connections, resource-sharing, and relationship building opportunities. At times, however, we forgot to pause to do similar work among the planning team. When possible, we began gathering in-person, twice each year, to break bread together embracing a fuller version of our humanity. When we did, the investment of time to foster relationships always paid off. Indeed, relationships are at the root of every activity, resource, and outcome connected to this project.

Since there has been turnover among those participating in the project, building relationships on an ongoing basis has meant relying on people who have been involved since its inception, and ensuring onramps and scaffolds for those who are newly contributing. Although "churn" is typically described as an impediment to implementation and improvement (Forman et al., 2009), in our multi-level, statewide initiative, we were also able to see talented teachers become coaches, SEL coordinators promoted to administrators, and personnel move between districts. From this vantage point, we saw opportunities to take the work in different directions, expand and deepen, and to cross pollinate ideas and strategies. Churn was yet another way to sow the seeds! During a winter virus surge, we also witnessed county office employees become, or we ourselves became, temporary substitute classroom

teachers- offering perspective and support that enabled stronger empathic connections and a sense that we are all in this together.

Guiding Questions for Education Leaders to Consider:

- How are we showing up with and for each other?
- How does our garden rejuvenate and how does it fit in the broader landscape?

Lesson 4: Embed SEL approaches within SEL implementation

Social emotional learning is not transactional work, and the way we show up to engage in the work of building systems for SEL implementation should reflect that. The process of embedding authentic SEL processes into the work of SEL implementation is not linear nor ad hoc; it is deeply integrated and threaded throughout the acts and experience of change making. In our earliest days, we started with digging into foundational knowledge such as the why of SEL, how people learn, the role of emotions and the importance of adult protective relationships to create the conditions for social, emotional, and academic learning. While doing so, we made intentional efforts to explicitly integrate the three SEL signature practices (i.e., welcoming activity, engaging strategies, optimistic closure; CASEL, 2019) into each CP meeting, and designed activities to cultivate SEL competencies such as curiosity, collaborative problem solving, and agency. We need to continuously build the climate in which we want to situate and do our work, where we invite our diverse identities, and nurture a sense of belonging. Our "come as you are" community norms guide our compassionate collective stance toward each other. We recognize that each of us, in our pursuit of change, relies on our social and emotional competencies and a positive climate in order to engage, perform, and be well. If we wish to inspire and support a thriving garden, we recognize the imperative to cultivate these conditions for our gardeners - the change makers, as well as through and in our acts of gardening.

Guiding Questions for Education Leaders to Consider:

- What do educational leaders need to fully engage, perform, and be well?
- How can we infuse SEL processes into the work of SEL implementation?

Lesson 5: Emphasize Equity

Centering equity in SEL work is essential and consequential to actualizing the full promise of transformative practice. Given the unique needs of individual, diverse communities, dynamic cultural contexts, and shifting landscapes in California, it's critical that SEL and equity be braided together to support school communities. In building capacity for SEL leadership and implementation, incorporating an equity lens was key to ensuring that all voices are engaged. And intentional equity-design centers those who are farthest away from access and power. What this looks like in practice is a regular place holder that elevates equity considerations and serves as a reminder that SEL and equity are not siloed efforts. For example, every one of our statewide CPs now starts with the following equity pulse check, which we share here for others to engage with as well.

Guiding Questions for Education Leaders to Consider:

- Have we considered people's needs, and are we meeting them where they are? (e.g., is the SEL approach the right one? Are they ready? Are we adapting to meet their needs?)
- Have we considered who is included, who is not included, and why?
- Have we considered whether people are involved the way they want to be involved, and how they benefit from involvement?
- Have we considered the values, beliefs, and biases people bring to the table?
- Have we considered trust, power, and what shapes these dynamics (e.g., history, society, policy, etc.)?
- Have we considered whether you are "implementing with" or "intervening on"?
- Have we considered who is making decisions, and who benefits and who loses when decisions are being made?

Conclusion

We have learned so much from our collective efforts to advance SEL statewide in California. From years of groundwork, and under the most unexpected confluence of societal conditions, we together grew a beautiful, imperfect, diverse, and fast sprouting garden. We harmonized essential elements across our systems for knowledge mobilization, implementation support, and delivery, and focused on four key levers of transformation (i.e., partnerships, supports, capacities, and the routines and structures of systemic implementation) between and within each level of our education system. It is clear that we have had significant successes, due in no small part to the effort of gardeners across the system. Specifically, SEL representatives from County Offices of Education report our successes to include (1) understanding the importance of SEL and having resources for large-scale SEL implementation, (2) observing strong collaborative communities with increased engagement in professional learning, and (3) moving beyond an exclusive focus on the implementation of student-level programs, to transforming structures and routines that include all members of the school community. As we continue to progress CalHOPE Student Support, we also recognize we have much work left to do, including (1) forging trust across the political spectrum, (2) aligning allied initiatives, and (3) building infrastructure for sustained progress. As we "sow the seeds" of SEL across California - toward a collective vision for an education system that creates the conditions for thriving - we have benefited from the insights of education leaders who have been catalysts for transforming the landscape. In turn, we hope educational leaders reading this find our lessons learned helpful in their work to advance SEL in their regions.



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