

Districts in Action

Build Foundational Support and Plan for SEL

FELLOWS SPOTLIGHT (1 of 4)



So, you want to bring social and emotional learning (SEL) to your district. And you're wondering: Where do I begin? Do I focus on students or adults? Choose SEL curriculum, or strengthen climate and culture? Do I even have the staff and resources to do this?

In this series, we'll help you consider these and other questions by spotlighting the many ways that districts have started or continued their SEL journey through the stories of participants in CASEL's [SEL Fellows Academy](#). Their work is grounded in [CASEL's District Theory of Action](#) for systemic SEL implementation. Resulting from our intensive work with our partner districts in the [Collaborating Districts Initiative](#), the District Theory of Action offers a research-based framework for four focus areas for achieving high-quality, systemic SEL implementation.

Working within this guidance, **each district finds its own path to SEL implementation**—one that reflects its unique history, challenges, and priorities. This series of briefs showcases how different districts—ranging from small rural and suburban districts to large urban and regional districts—have chosen to approach their SEL work. The goal is to offer examples, inspiration, and lessons for districts across the country.

In this brief, you'll learn about the journeys of districts in **Focus Area 1: Building Foundational Support and Plan for SEL.**

CASEL's District Theory of Action



Focus Area 1 Building Foundational Support and Plan

- Develop a Shared Vision and Plan for SEL
- Organize District to Promote Collaboration around SEL, Academics, and Equity
- Communicate SEL as a District Priority
- Align Resources for SEL



Focus Area 2 Strengthen Adult SEL Competencies and Capacity



Focus Area 3 Promote SEL for Students



Focus Area 4 Reflect on Data for Continuous Improvement

What is the SEL Fellows Academy?

The [SEL Fellows Academy](#) is a first-of-its-kind, virtual leadership academy to strengthen SEL practices in a community of peers for a cohort of SEL leaders from rural, suburban, urban, and regional districts. Hosted by CASEL, the academy combines professional learning with a community of practice to advance SEL toward equity and excellence in all schools.

"The value of input and collaboration—that is a key piece of what the Fellows Academy has instilled. You should not be doing this work in isolation ... It's so much more valuable when you have other perspectives, other voices."

—Sara Lein, SEL Fellows Academy Participant

Finding a Focus for Systemic SEL

West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Area Schools, Minnesota

How can you bring together disparate bright spots and promising practices of SEL-related work to create a unified and consistent approach to SEL? That’s the challenge that faced SEL Fellow Sara Lein, director of special services at West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Area Schools in Minnesota. “There were a lot of pockets of really good things, but nothing we could hang our hats on,” she says. Here are some of the ways she approached the work in Focus Area 1 to bring unity to SEL in her district.

Crowdsourcing a Vision

To help encourage buy-in and enthusiasm for SEL, the district hosted a “World Café”-style forum to help identify and articulate the district’s shared goals and values. The forum welcomed 400 participants, both in-person and online, and asked for input on four key questions:

- What do our students need to learn to be ready for the future?
- What do you value most about our schools?
- What are some opportunities we should explore?
- How can you and our community connect to support our schools?



Meet SEL Fellow

Sara Lein

Director of Special Services

Welcome to West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Area Schools

- 5,140 students
- Started the SEL journey in 2019
- SEL Vision: “Nurture. Inspire. Prepare. Together, We Thrive.”

Input & Planning

2019-20 school year

200+ people in person + 200+ people online gathered to provide input in small group discussions

35 individuals—students, parents, school and district staff, and community members met to design the strategic frame work



Challenge: Unifying pockets of SEL work into a systemic approach

“ You can’t do this work in isolation. You need to collaborate, commiserate, and share knowledge with others ...We are all learners. ”

The themes that emerged revealed the district’s chief priorities: interpersonal skills, real-world life skills, well-being, character, critical and creative thinking skills, lifelong learning, one’s own role in community, and self-confidence.

With these priorities in mind, Lein’s team developed a vision for the district’s work—**Nurture. Inspire. Prepare. Together, We Thrive.** That gave them the foundation to build a broader framework for supporting three key areas: **relationships, equity, and achievement.**

Collaborative Leadership

This framework offered a way to ensure SEL wasn’t isolated and build shared ownership of SEL priorities early on. Lein and other district leaders banded together as a cross-disciplinary team to head up work in each of the three framework goals. As the resident SEL expert, Lein heads up the SEL strand of the work, while the assistant superintendent drives the work in equity and the director of curriculum leads college- and career-readiness. The team is rounded out by the the superintendent, for a total of four leaders working collaboratively—the self-titled “Quartet.” Through their efforts, the Quartet ensures an aligned, integrated approach to student support in all the three key areas.

For Lein, the thread woven throughout their work is the willingness to listen to multiple voices. “Be curious; be a question-asker,” she advises. “Figure out what the needs are. Take the time to get input and community interaction. Getting student and staff voice is critical.”

SCHOOL DISTRICT 197

Nurture. Inspire. Prepare. Together, We Thrive.

School District 197 is committed to caring relationships, equitable practices, and high achievement for all.

GOALS

- All students are academically and socially ready for school.
- All 3rd graders can read at grade level.
- All racial and economic achievement gaps are closed.
- All students graduate from high school.
- All students are ready for career and college.

WE BELIEVE...

RELATIONSHIPS

- People thrive when they feel connected, trusted, and affirmed.
- Communication and collaboration strengthen school, family, and community relationships.

EQUITY

- Our diversity makes us stronger.
- Seeking to understand each other strengthens the individual and community.
- We are all accountable for removing barriers and creating equitable systems.

ACHIEVEMENT

- High expectations and personalized support are critical for student success.
- Innovative environments promote curiosity, creativity, and courageous action.
- Everyone has the ability to continually grow.

1

Establish a district-wide system of social-emotional learning and support

2

Build equitable systems and support throughout the district

3

Increase E-12 opportunities for career exploration and preparation

Collaborating on a Vision

Greece Central School District, New York

With its five-year strategic plan just finishing up, Greece Central School District (GCSD) in New York was ready to think about how it would sustain its SEL work and take it to the next level. Charged with this leading this effort, SEL Fellow David Blahowicz sought to build a team of SEL champions by strengthening their commitment to and knowledge of SEL, then leveraging that team to develop a guiding vision for the work going forward.

SEL Champions, Assemble!

As a first step, Blahowicz assembled a new team to serve as his SEL champions: The Climate and Culture Committee. To ensure a representative mix of teachers and leaders, he developed [an application process](#) that allowed him to assess each applicant both terms of their interests and background as well as the mix of voices he was drawing upon.

Before launching the work to develop the district’s SEL vision—one important strand of the committee’s work—Blahowicz wanted to “level-set” to ensure that all members had foundational knowledge of SEL as well as opportunities to experience it for themselves. He set the tone by embedding the [3 SEL Signature Practices](#) into all committee meetings, opening with a welcoming inclusion activity, offering engaging activities, and wrapping up each gathering with an optimistic closure to reflect on the work done and look ahead.

He also provided activities designed to engage participants directly in SEL and to build comradery across the team, including a [Paseo](#) or “identity circle,” which he first experienced in an SEL Fellows workshop. In this activity, committee members shared aspects of their personal identities and delved into their self-conception, biases, and cultural backgrounds.

Alongside these experiential forays into SEL, the team also built their knowledge of the field, diving into [CASEL’s 5 SEL competencies](#) and cross-walking it with New York State’s [Culturally Responsive Sustaining Framework](#). By aligning these frameworks, the committee developed a guiding theory of action for what teachers, staff, and the committee itself must do to impact students.



Meet SEL Fellow

David Blahowicz

Special Education Teacher, Interventionist, and Teacher Leader

Welcome to Greece Central School District

- 11,000 students
- “We envision an inclusive school community that empowers all stakeholders to take risks as agents of change who will develop self-awareness, empathy, resiliency, and healthy relationships while embracing diversity”

Challenge: Developing a team and creating a vision

“It’s great to have access to resources, but it is also so important to learn and grow as a human being. The focus needs to be on the individual—on personal and professional growth.”

Developing the Vision

At the same time, Blahowicz took the committee through collaborative activities designed to help them develop their [SEL vision](#):

“My Hopes”: “My hope is _____ because _____.” Participants were encouraged to fill in the blanks to explore and share their hopes for themselves, students, families, staff, and the district as a whole. The goal: to unearth the many, varied reasons they had come to the work. Blahowicz put their key words and phrases on posters, and participants took a “gallery walk,” circling and starring phrases that resonated. The words that got the most “likes” revealed the district’s true values, which would help drive the vision statement.



My Hopes

The New York Times Story: Team members were told, “Imagine a copy of The New York Times featuring a story about GCSD’s achievements in SEL implementation. What would make up the story?” Then they were asked to plan out all the elements: the cover story, the sidebars, the quotes, the feature articles, and the photo. By “writing the story,” the team had a chance to flesh out their vision: who would be involved, what the key tasks were, who it would impact, what the ideal outcome would be.

Through these activities, the committee members shared their “why” for the work as a way to generate an SEL vision that reflects the needs and wishes of the district.

Blahowicz emphasizes the importance of orchestrating this kind of collaboration. “You need to ask, ‘How do you set up those systems and structures to bring together all the voices?’” he says.



The New York Times story

Spreading the Word About SEL

Broward County Public Schools, Florida

Marketing doesn't seem like a term that would come up in a district SEL initiative, but SEL Fellow Daniel Shapiro of Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) in Florida has made it his mission to get the word out. With seven years of SEL implementation under its belts, BCPS has a firm foundation in place. A robust team of SEL staff, under Shapiro's leadership, has brought SEL into all aspects of the district's work. Now the district is ready for its next challenge: communicating out about the "what," "why," and "how" of their SEL efforts in a persuasive and accessible way.

Start With Listening

The effort started with listening. Shapiro and his team sought ways to connect with the community, ask for their perspectives, and gather their input about what their needs are.

They've undertaken this part of the process a variety of ways, starting with an SEL strategic planning committee made up of district and school leaders (principals, assistant principals, teachers), with participation by students. The SEL team shares information, resources, and research about SEL with these stakeholders, but also ask a few key questions:

- What is SEL to you?
- What does SEL look like in your classroom, school, office, or other workplace?

By beginning with questions and listening, the team ensured that they were not simply imposing their beliefs or dictating best practices. Instead, their goal was to gain insight into what these various stakeholders wanted for students and how they saw SEL as supporting the district's top priorities.



Meet SEL Fellow

Daniel Shapiro

Supervisor of Social and Emotional Learning

Welcome to Broward County Public Schools

- 260,100 students
- SEL work began in 2015-2016
- The District's vision is to provide students with the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) skills to thrive academically, become responsible citizens in society, to contribute value to themselves as well as their families and communities, and to enjoy productive and satisfying lives.

Challenge: Communicating to all stakeholders about the SEL work

“How do you show up every day, be kind to the person in front of you, help move the work forward, maintain relationships and communication, continue to identify the needs and make sure there are plans in place to meet those needs? It’s the work of a lifetime. I’m so glad to be in the center of it.”

A Multi-Pronged Approach to Communications

Working with this input, the team then put a plan in place to create a variety of communications resources:

One-page flyer for schools, families, and guardians

This one-pager communicates what the SEL team does, including the district’s SEL vision, its SEL priorities, the benefits of SEL, and how BCPS is supporting SEL. It can be placed in the front office or shared at community events as a reference for school staff, families, and community members.

Four-page resource for SEL liaisons

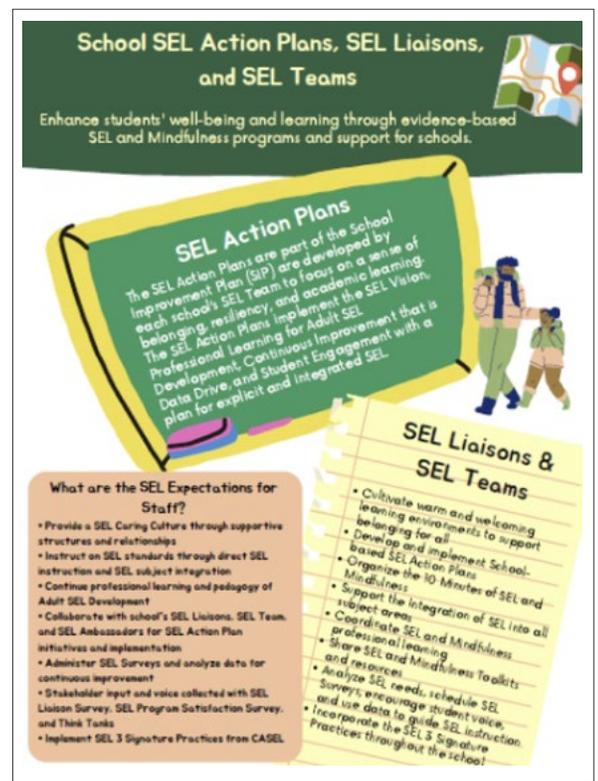
This more in-depth resource supports SEL liaisons working in the schools by providing a step-by-step guide and action plan for bringing SEL directly to students. The school liaisons are staff who work in the schools to provide a bridge from theory into action for students, family, and staff.

The team also created a digital binder to gather all SEL resources in one place, and makes regular updates to the district’s SEL webpage and Canvas sites. His team also produces a “SELebrating Success” newsletter, which celebrates the work and provides information, resources, and tips to help support SEL throughout the district.

For Shapiro, communication is critical to the long-term success and sustainability of BCSD’s SEL initiative. “At some point I’ll be passing this along to someone else,” he says. “I want to build something that’s organized and informed by real needs of kids, families, staff. We’re putting real care into this, making sure it’s connecting with our district stakeholders. It’s a precious opportunity.”



One-page flyer



Four-page resource



Key Takeaways

Getting input and working collaboratively with a wide range of stakeholders—district and school leaders, staff, teachers, families, community partners—is an important first step in creating an SEL initiative that answers the unique needs of your district.

Be sure to address the ‘why’ of the work and communicate that to everyone in the district. What do you want to achieve through SEL? Connecting SEL to district priorities and education goals helps build commitment.

Even while planning SEL implementation, it’s important to incorporate SEL into the process. If the adults who are part of the planning or steering committee have a chance to experience SEL firsthand, they’ll be better equipped to support creating those experiences for students.



Reflection Questions

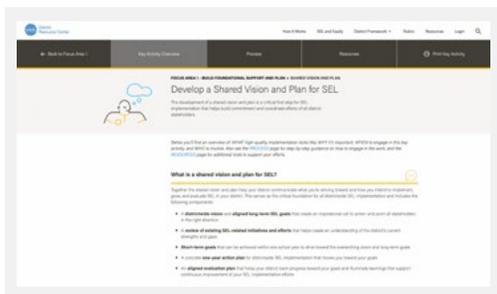
Where is your district in the SEL journey? What efforts has your district made toward creating a foundation for SEL implementation?

What is the next step for your district? Do you want to build on areas of success or bright spots, or address areas you haven’t considered yet?

What are your district’s priorities and goals for students? How could SEL help support work toward those goals?



Resources



[Develop a Shared Vision and Plan for SEL](#)



[Communicate SEL as a District Priority](#)

Why SEL?

[Research has shown](#) the gains of SEL include improved social-emotional skills and attitudes, increased attendance, positive classroom behavior, better and more supportive relationships between students and adults, increased academic achievement, and higher graduation rates.