

EQUITY-ORIENTED SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING: A CONVERSATION WITH SCHOOL LEADERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

The social and political upheaval of the past two years has elevated the importance of addressing social and emotional learning (SEL) in our schools and classrooms (Walker, 2020). Furthermore, the persistent calls for a transformation of our education systems that yields improved equity demands that our discourse about SEL is equity-oriented—not as an afterthought or “add-on” to existing models and frameworks but rather as a complete reimagination. Against this backdrop, in late July of 2021, Catalyst.Ed convened 25 educational leaders and service providers from our network with deep expertise in SEL and/or family engagement to engage in a two-day sprint. This brief summarizes the insights surfaced during this sprint.

WHETHER SCHOOLS ADDRESS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IS AN EQUITY ISSUE

- Research indicates that when implemented effectively, high-quality, evidence-based SEL programs have positive impacts on children’s social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes as well as teacher practices and the culture and climate of schools” (Ramirez et al., 2021, p. 2).
- Neuroscience research tells us that when students are too stressed, they cannot learn. We also know that strong relationships and supportive school programs can help buffer the effects of stress. Children need to feel safe (physically and emotionally) and feel a sense of connection to peers and caring adults in order to access learning” (Woolf, 2021, Point 2).

Five Barriers to Prioritizing Social and Emotional Learning

- District and school leaders do not prioritize social and emotional learning because of the perception that they don't have the time or resources to address it.
- Social and emotional learning is pitted against rather than seen as integral to academic success, further exacerbating the first point.
- Social and emotional learning is complex and perceived as hard to measure. Current accountability models and metrics often do not include social and emotional learning, so it is not enacted as a priority despite evidence that there are growing calls from administrators, educators, and students alike to prioritize SEL.

 [Listen to one district leader discuss this tension!](#)

- Adults do not have consistent support and professional learning opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills to address their own, let alone students', social and emotional needs and often personalize students' behaviors
- Adults in schools are processing and navigating their own trauma, exhaustion, and wellness which may interrupt their desire and ability to prioritize SEL.








Practices to Prioritize Social and Emotional Learning

For District and School Leaders

- Co-construct concrete goals and measures for SEL with a diverse and representative group of members from the school community—especially students and families. [Watch how one district leader builds capacity for collective action](#)
- Commit real resources, including time, to address SEL. This may require the redistribution of resources. For example, reallocate funding from reactive, punitive models of behavior management to hiring counselors and psychologists as a proactive approach to cultivating capacity to address the social and emotional needs of adults and young people in our school systems. Additionally, bolster universal SEL supports and support teachers to integrate SEL and restorative practices into their daily practice. [Hear how one district leader is doing it!](#)
- Participate in coaching, training and learning experiences to build your own knowledge and capacity related to SEL.

- Normalize and model SEL by attending to social and emotional wellness for yourself and your staff.
- Create a comprehensive plan to provide SEL training and support to all adults in the school system/building. Consider integrating it as part of your School Improvement Plan. This will help ensure implementation is consistent across the school or district, and thus, support strong buy-in and success of SEL initiatives. Emerging research suggests that consistency in implementation is critical to SEL success (see below).


District and School Leader Toolbox:

-  [Prioritize SEL in the transition to in-person learning Toolkit](#)
-  [Guide to Schoolwide SEL: Create A Plan](#)
-  [The Daily SEL Leader](#)
-  [EdWell: Wellness platform for educators, by educators](#)
-  [Guide to Schoolwide SEL: Strengthen Adult SEL](#)
-  [Social and Emotional Learning: Best Practices and Barriers to Successful Implementation](#)
-  [Year Two of Harmony SEL Demonstrates Increased Implementation and Improved Student Outcomes](#)

For Classroom Educators

- Advocate for and ask your school and district leadership to prioritize SEL.
- Build team-level communities of practice and resource libraries to support your own learning—regardless of what district and building leaders are doing.
- Engage in peer-to-peer observations and feedback loops to open up your practice and develop shared knowledge about how SEL is playing out in your classrooms.
- Co-construct goals for social and emotional learning in your classroom with your students.
- Normalize SEL by modeling attention to social and emotional wellness for yourself and your students.

Classroom Educator Toolbox:

-  [The Missing Piece: A National Teacher Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Empower Children and Transform Schools](#)

- 🔊 [Getting to Know How Students Are Feeling And Functioning](#) (The 180 Podcast: P.S. 340)
- 📖 [Building Social Emotional Competencies Through Integrated Student Supports](#) (brief)
- 📖 [Remaking Middle School Learning Series](#)
- ⚙️ [Guide to Schoolwide SEL: A Supportive Classroom Environment](#)
- ⚙️ [Turnaround for Children Toolbox](#)
- ⚙️ [EdWell: Wellness platform for educators, by educators](#)

HOW SCHOOLS ADDRESS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IS AN EQUITY ISSUE

- 💬 We define equitable SEL as an approach to SEL that incorporates the cultural knowledge, experiences, and assets of students from diverse families and communities, and acknowledges and addresses the social injustices, inequalities, prejudices, and exclusions that students face” (Ramirez, 2021 p. 5).




The leaders who participated in the July 2021 action sprints spent a good deal of time discussing the barriers to equity-oriented SEL they experienced and witnessed. Direct excerpts from their discourse are below.

- 💬 SEL resources and supports are often designed by well-intentioned researchers/scholars who don't fully understand K-12 environments, especially for marginalized students of color. Therefore, it's not very applicable and relevant for them and for adults who serve them.”
- 💬 Self expression of BIPOC [students] is often seen as lesser, intimidating and often SEL is used to teach students to assimilate vs self actualize.”
- 💬 In order to effectively teach SEL you also have to shift school culture from an adult/teacher centered culture to a student led and student agency based culture.”
- 💬 Families are, in fact, doing the “SEL” work (daily) with their young people but it doesn't align with the way it's intellectualized or talked about in education.”

Five Barriers to Equity-Oriented SEL

- Many SEL models, frameworks and practices have been developed by researchers and practitioners with dominant cultural identities (i.e., people who are White and middle-class), and thus, prioritize those identities.
- Adults implementing SEL in schools often do not have shared lived experiences or cultural identities with the students and families they serve, exacerbating the prioritization of dominant cultural norms regarding behavior expectations and emotional regulation, and contributing to the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of student behaviors.
- Adults bring explicit and implicit biases and deficit mindsets about students and families into schools and classrooms. Children’s behaviors may be criminalized and pathologized when viewed through those biased and deficit lenses, especially when those children come from historically marginalized and excluded communities.
- Students’ voices, needs, preferences, and desires are not centered in SEL. They do not hold real power, agency, or influence in decision making regarding their desires, interests, and goals in SEL.
- Families are not authentically and meaningfully empowered to be involved as partners in their children’s education. There are still baked-in power dynamics with a deferral to administrators and educators as “experts.”

Resource Spotlight:

-  [Centering Equity in Social Emotional Learning Tool](#)
-  [Equity in Social Emotional Learning Programs: A Content Analysis of Equitable Practices in PreK-5 SEL Programs](#) (article)
-  [Transformative SEL](#) (article)

Principles for Equity-Oriented SEL

- **Shift to asset-based models of SEL that affirm students' identities:** Learn and use asset-based pedagogies, like culturally relevant, responsive and sustaining pedagogies (CRSP), in your SEL practices (Gay, 2002; Howard 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, & 2009; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). Asset-based pedagogies center the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of students as strengths and “conduits for teaching” (Gay, 2002, p. 106) and seek to “sustain linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 85).

 [Why Trouble SEL? The Need for Cultural Relevance in SEL](#)

 [Leading Equity Podcast](#)

 [Ready for Rigor Framework](#)

- **Cultivate critical consciousness:** Paulo Freire (1968/1970) first coined the idea of critical consciousness in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Rooted in Freire’s work, researchers Sharon Radd and Bruce Kramer (2016) define it as, “the willingness and ability to see how power and privilege are at work to systematically advantage some while simultaneously disadvantaging others” (p. 584). Educators who are serious about centering equity in their praxis must cultivate critical consciousness to become aware of and interrupt oppressive hierarchies as well as their own automatic thoughts and feelings about students, families and communities.

 [Is This How Discrimination Ends?](#) (article)

 [Leadership Practices for Transformative Change Towards Equity](#) (newsletter)

- **Acknowledge and disrupt adultism:** Engage in learning experiences related to understanding how adultism plays out in schools and classrooms and how to create authentic student empowerment. Revisit decision-making ‘rights’ and practice ways to more explicitly challenge power hierarchies that are often baked into how decisions are made.

 [Youth participation: Adultism, human rights and professional youth work](#) (article)

 [Ladder of Children’s Participation](#)

 [Pathways to Participation](#)

- **Support authentic family engagement:** Educators should invest time and resources to empower students' families to be authentically involved partners in their children's education. We asked action sprint participants to define "family engagement." The following two excerpts capture the breadth of the responses and offer more context about how this group of experts thinks about family engagement as central to equity-oriented SEL:
 - Watch how three of these leaders approach Authentic Family Engagement! [Ownership and Sharing Power](#), [Cultivating Deep Relationships with Families](#), [Focusing on Adult Wellbeing](#)
 - Parent Organizing Groups: [Community Organizing and Family Issues](#), [Our Voice Nuestra Voz](#), [Black Organizing Project](#), [Learning Heroes](#)

The insights summarized here are certainly not comprehensive, nor exhaustive, but they are a starting place and the conversation will continue. If you are interested in joining the SEL collective mailing list, please sign up [here](#).

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APPENDIX

Compendium of Tools and Resources

Video Vignettes

- [Watch how one district leader builds capacity for collective action!](#)
- [Hear how one district leader is doing it!](#)
- [Ownership and Sharing Power](#)
- [Cultivating Deep Relationships with Families](#)
- [Focusing on Adult Wellbeing](#)

Podcasts

- [Getting to Know How Students Are Feeling And Functioning](#) (The 180 Podcast: P.S. 340)
- [Leading Equity Podcast](#)

Readings

- [The Daily SEL Leader](#) (book)
- [Social and Emotional Learning: Best Practices and Barriers to Successful Implementation](#) (brief)
- [Year Two of Harmony SEL Demonstrates Increased Implementation and Improved Student Outcomes](#) (brief)
- [The Missing Piece: A National Teacher Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Empower Children and Transform Schools](#) (brief)
- [Remaking Middle School Learning Series](#) (article series)
- [Building Social Emotional Competencies Through Integrated Student Supports](#) (brief)
- [Equity in Social Emotional Learning Programs: A Content Analysis of Equitable Practices in PreK-5 SEL Programs](#) (article)
- [Transformative SEL](#) (article)
- [Why Trouble SEL? The Need for Cultural Relevance in SEL](#) (paper)

- [Is This How Discrimination Ends?](#) (article)
- [Leadership Practices for Transformative Change Towards Equity](#) (newsletter)
- [Youth participation: Adulthood, human rights and professional youth work](#) (article)

Tools, Guides and Frameworks to Use

- [Prioritize SEL in the transition to in-person learning Toolkit](#)
- [Guide to Schoolwide SEL: Create A Plan](#)
- [EdWell: Wellness platform for educators, by educators](#)
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