

# Key Insights from the Collaborating Districts Initiative



A multiyear effort to help school districts integrate social and emotional learning across all aspects of their work

*What have we learned?  
What impact have we seen?  
What's next?*

MARCH 2017

# Contents

PREFACE .....	PAGE 1
CHAPTER 1 .....	PAGE 2
COLLABORATING DISTRICTS INITIATIVE: A LEARNING LAB	
CHAPTER 2 .....	PAGE 6
KEY INSIGHTS	
CHAPTER 3 .....	PAGE 20
IMPACT ON STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS	
CHAPTER 4 .....	PAGE 24
SCALING SEL KNOW-HOW	

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2017)  
*Key Insights from the Collaborating Districts Initiative*. Chicago: Author.

## PREFACE

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was formed in 1994 with the goal of helping to make high-quality, evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) an integral part of preschool through high school education. Over the years and through deep collaborations with multiple organizations and individuals, we have steadily advanced this goal. Our work has focused on three areas: research to build the evidence base; practice to implement, refine, and demonstrate high-quality SEL in school districts, and create scalable tools and resources; and state and federal policy to help create the conditions for success.

Today we are at a tipping point. The evidence is clear that SEL works. Models for implementation exist. Supportive policies are spreading. Most important, students are benefitting. Students with strong social and emotional competence not only do better academically in school, they lead healthier, happier, more fulfilling lives. They better understand themselves, build constructive relationships, are more kind and caring, and make more responsible decisions.

In order to help practitioners bring more of these benefits to more students, in 2010 CASEL, in partnership with NoVo Foundation, launched a large-scale action research project that sought to address the next-generation questions. Can large urban school districts put into place the policies and practices that would promote the social and emotional competencies of all students throughout the district? If so, how? And what outcomes would we see for kids?

The Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) became the learning lab for addressing those questions. We have worked closely with school districts on strategies

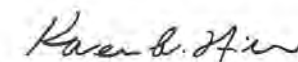
for embedding SEL into all aspects of their work. We spent our first two decades collaborating to establish the evidence base documenting that SEL works for students. Now, through the CDI, we know a lot more about the specifics of *how* to do it. This report describes what districts did, shares what we have learned, and previews how we intend to scale these insights to many more districts.

We are committed to an ongoing process for continuing to increase the knowledge and expertise about how to implement systemic SEL. Through our deep collaboration with the CDI districts, partnerships with researchers, educators, and organizations serving the field, and broader efforts to commission, curate, and distribute resources, CASEL is poised to serve as the know-how lab for the SEL field. Our work combines the *Know* of research with the *How* of practical application, along with advancing policies that create the conditions for SEL to flourish. We will continue collaborating with educators, scholars, and others to share this know-how with those who can put it to immediate use.

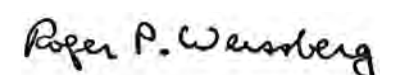
The CDI has been a pivotal step in the evolution and maturation in the field of SEL. We are profoundly thankful for the generosity of NoVo Foundation and several other funders and for the vision and commitment of our district partners. They are helping to transform how student success is defined in American education.

Through our work and the work of many people in the field, we are making a difference. Our goal: by 2025, 50% of districts are systemically integrating high-quality SEL across their schools and classrooms.

## IT'S TIME.



Karen Niemi  
President and CEO



Roger P. Weissberg, PhD  
Chief Knowledge Officer

## CHAPTER 1

# Collaborating Districts Initiative: A Learning Lab

6 YEARS... 10 DISTRICTS... 900,000 STUDENTS

**2011**  
3 DISTRICTS  
171K STUDENTS

ANCHORAGE  
AUSTIN  
CLEVELAND

**TODAY**

10 DISTRICTS  
900K STUDENTS

ANCHORAGE  
ATLANTA  
AUSTIN  
CHICAGO  
CLEVELAND  
EL PASO  
NASHVILLE  
OAKLAND  
SACRAMENTO  
WASHOE COUNTY



Six years ago CASEL took the unprecedented step of launching an effort to study and scale high-quality, evidence-based academic, social, and emotional learning in eight of the largest and most complex school systems in the country: Anchorage, Austin, Chicago, Cleveland, Nashville, Oakland, Sacramento, and Washoe County, Nev. With the recent addition of Atlanta and El Paso, the Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) now includes 10 districts, enrolling 900,000 students a year. It is one of the most comprehensive and ambitious school district improvement initiatives ever.

Educators around the world rely on CASEL resources to support their knowledge and understanding of SEL, which in turn affects millions of additional students. And with the spring 2017 launch of the online District Resource Center, the knowledge gleaned from the CDI will benefit millions more.

The goal of the CDI was to create a comprehensive shift in how superintendents and entire school districts approach education. We knew we had to help redefine quality education (beyond test scores alone), and to prioritize the practices in classrooms, schools, and communities for promoting the social and emotional development of children.

As a result, the CDI is focused on systemic SEL implementation— SEL across all district, school, and classroom activities, increasingly in partnership with parents and communities. SEL as a once-a-week program is not enough to establish sustainable teaching and learning environments where students truly thrive. SEL is sustained and students thrive when it is promoted and reinforced throughout the school day, modeled and taught by teachers, families, and community members – and supported by district policies, practices, and investments.

# Why SEL is Needed

SEL helps all students reach their full potential as caring, contributing, responsible, and knowledgeable friends, family members, coworkers, and citizens.

It helps them build positive skills, such as greater self-awareness and self-management, improved relationship skills, and responsible decision-making in safe and supportive learning environments. These skills and behaviors are important in their own right, but they also benefit students in other ways. For example, a major review of research studies on SEL school programs revealed 11 percentile-point gains in academic performance.<sup>1</sup>

Benefits extend beyond students to the broader society as well. Another study demonstrated statistically significant associations between social-emotional skills in kindergarten and key young adult outcomes in education, employment, criminal activity, substance use, and mental health.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, quality SEL yields an 11:1 return on investment, according to a 2015 Columbia University study.<sup>3</sup> Scholars from the fields of neuroscience, health, employment, psychology, classroom management, learning theory, economics, and youth development also have identified benefits.

SEL also helps avoid or reduce negative outcomes for kids. For example, more than 40% of teens are “chronically disengaged.”<sup>4</sup> In the past year, one in 13 students has been in at least one fight, one in six has carried a weapon, and one in 10 has had sex with more than four people.<sup>5</sup> Teen depression has increased five-fold since the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> Half of college students report feeling “overwhelmed.”<sup>7</sup> SEL helps students overcome challenges such as these and gives students the opportunity to succeed in school and in life.

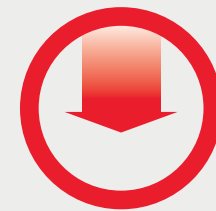
## SEL'S BENEFITS

A 2011 META-ANALYSIS FOUND THAT SEL...



### RAISES STUDENT PERFORMANCE

- Higher academic achievement
- Better social-emotional skills
- Improved attitudes about self, others, and school
- Positive classroom behavior



### REDUCES RISK FOR FAILURE

- Fewer conduct problems
- Less emotional distress

Child Development, January/February 2011

<sup>1</sup> Child Development, January/February 2011

<sup>2</sup> Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/American Journal of Public Health

<sup>3</sup> Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education, Teachers College, Columbia University

<sup>4</sup> University of Michigan, Personality and Social Psychology Review

<sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<sup>6</sup> Birth Cohort Differences in Self-Esteem, 1988–2008: A cross-temporal

<sup>7</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



## CHAPTER 2

# Key Insights

Since 2011 we have been working with our partner districts in an intensive ongoing cycle of implementation, refinement, evaluation, and documentation to deepen our understanding of how to embed SEL into their work. We are working closely with superintendents, district SEL leaders, research and evaluation teams, principals, teachers, parents, and community members to support and promote systemic SEL. We are providing hands-on, practical consulting and support. And we are connecting districts virtually and in-person with each other, in small peer-to-peer learning groups, and in large cross-district meetings, so that they can learn and benefit from each other's experiences.

We promised no quick fixes, but rather sustained commitment, access to the smartest leaders, high-quality research, and a passion for evidence and results. Our initial research questions asked what does systemic SEL mean? What does it look like in practice, and how is it achieved? This chapter highlights seven key insights drawn from our experience.



1. Systemic SEL is possible even with leadership changes and relatively small budgets.
2. SEL ideally is integrated into every aspect of the *district's* work, from the strategic plan and budgets to human resources and operations.
3. SEL ideally is integrated into every aspect of the *school*, from classroom instruction to school climate and culture to community-family partnerships.
4. Successful implementation can follow multiple pathways, based on each district's unique needs and strengths. Regardless of the approach, the engagement and commitment of both school and district leadership is essential.
5. Adult SEL matters, too.
6. Data for continuous improvement are essential.
7. Districts benefit from collaborating with each other.

### INSIGHT 1

## Systemic SEL is possible.

IMPLEMENTATION WORKS EVEN WITH LEADERSHIP CHANGES AND RELATIVELY SMALL BUDGETS.

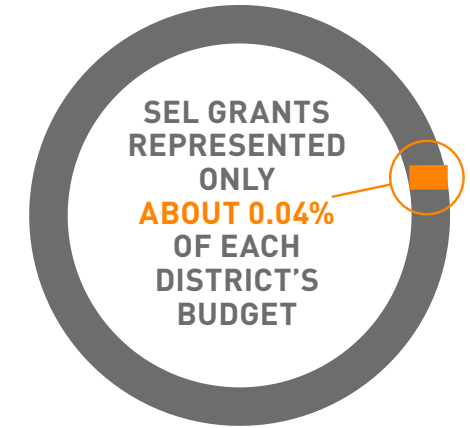
The CDI began with strong leadership from the top. Superintendents and their districts committed to an ambitious agenda of change: systemic implementation of SEL across all district, school, and classroom activities and in partnership with parents and communities. This was not SEL as a once-a-week program but instead a paradigm shift where district leaders committed to:

- Cultivate commitment and organizational support for SEL.
- Assess SEL resources and needs.
- Support classroom, school, and community SEL programming.
- Establish systems for continuous improvement.

Significantly, unlike many major district efforts, districts received minimal financial incentives to undertake these sweeping reforms. Each of the first eight districts received annual grants of \$250,000 for up to six years. That represents less than 0.04% of the average CDI district's annual budget for all expenses (excluding Chicago's budget, which is larger than the other seven CDI district budgets combined). The districts supplemented NoVo Foundation grants with their own investments.

**“The CDI demonstrates that it is possible for large urban school districts to adopt and maintain SEL as an essential element of education, even amid budgetary stress and leadership turnover.”**

American Institutes for Research



None of the districts has the same superintendent as when the CDI began. Indeed, **Chicago Public Schools** has had four superintendents since 2010, yet SEL is still growing throughout the district, supported by 25 dedicated staff in the Office of Social and Emotional Learning.

Despite this turnover, after five years of independently evaluating the CDI, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) concluded: “Our findings suggest that districts participating in the CDI have sustained, deepened, and broadened their commitment to SEL and developed capacities to support its implementation. Participation in the CDI and in district-initiated activities has enhanced the readiness of the districts and their schools to implement and sustain SEL. More staff and stakeholders know about it and want it, and SEL has been embedded as a pillar in strategic plans. Furthermore, districts are increasingly aligning SEL with other districtwide activities.”

Districts were able to withstand leadership turnover and budget cuts, especially when they had broad stakeholder commitment to SEL, when they focused on deepening the SEL expertise of central office staff, effectively integrated SEL across district departments and initiatives, and began to see evidence of improvements in climate and attendance, and reductions in suspensions.

To learn more, visit CASEL's District Resource Center [drc.casel.org](http://drc.casel.org)



### VISION

Develop a district wide vision and long term plan

INSIGHT 2

# SEL is ideally integrated throughout the *district*.

WHEN IMPLEMENTED WELL, SEL IS EMBEDDED INTO EVERY ASPECT OF THE DISTRICT'S WORK, FROM THE STRATEGIC PLAN AND BUDGETS TO HUMAN RESOURCES AND OPERATIONS.

Systemic SEL is not a siloed approach or stand-alone program, but a new way of doing business. At the district level, we have worked closely with superintendents, district SEL leaders, school boards, curriculum and instruction departments, research and evaluation teams, and others in multiple ways to help districts adopt systemic strategies that embed SEL into every aspect of school life.

Districts are building SEL into their strategic plans and budgets. They are reorganizing leadership structures so that SEL is not a separate priority but is integrated into core functions such as academics, professional development, and equity. They are integrating SEL into the development and implementation of districtwide policies on hiring and discipline. They are systematically collecting and analyzing data for continuous improvement (more in Insight 6). And they are regularly communicating with and engaging multiple stakeholders.

“For us, it’s not about one more thing we have to budget for. SEL is in the blood of what we do in the district. It’s not just an off-the-shelf program. It’s really about what we do every day for kids.”

**Traci Davis**, Superintendent of Schools,  
Washoe County School District

For example, **Oakland Unified School District’s** commitment to social and emotional learning is evident across the system—including the district’s vision and strategic plan, SEL board policy, SEL standards, classroom curricula, restorative justice practices, and professional learning. The district’s new performance frameworks for teachers, principals, schools, and the superintendent are all based on the district’s SEL standards, as is professional learning for all principals and assistant principals. Oakland is also beginning to use SEL school-quality indicators to help schools align and prioritize resources and goals for student success.

In **Chicago** SEL is integrated into the district’s overall strategic plan. The district also has established a districtwide code of conduct and climate standards. A progressive discipline policy limits the use of exclusionary discipline practices and encourages all schools to respond to misbehavior using supportive, restorative discipline practices to promote social and emotional development. SEL is part of professional development for core academic content in areas such as math and literacy. SEL is integrated into the district’s Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), which provides differentiated support for students.

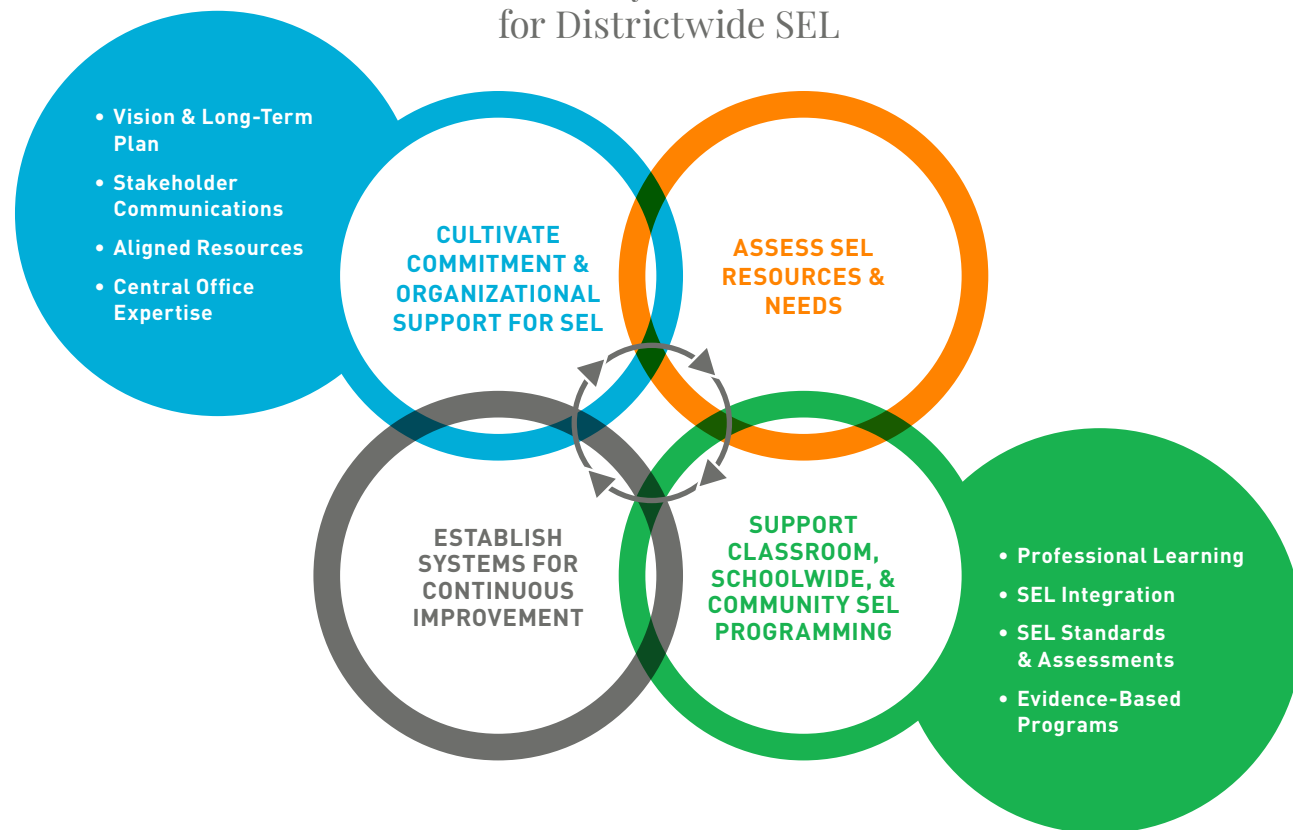
**Anchorage School District** has embedded SEL instructional strategies into leadership meetings, professional development sessions, and curriculum. It is creating a MTSS approach that integrates SEL curriculum and strategies with

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). A district SEL leadership team of 30 leaders from the classroom to the superintendent guides this work.

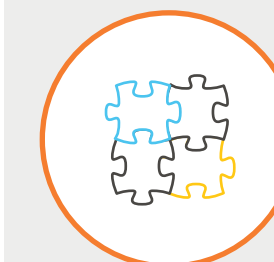
In **Sacramento City Unified School District**, over 50 schools have adopted evidence-based curriculum and are explicitly teaching SEL lessons across all grade levels. Leadership teams from all K-12 schools were trained on SEL core competencies, restorative practices, and equity. Equity coaches regularly work with schools to support their SEL/Equity leadership teams, facilitate professional growth opportunities for staff, model lessons, and support individual teachers. In year five an interdepartmental professional learning community was created to develop expertise and deepen collaboration among central office staff.

To complement the in-district work, CASEL is partnering with The Wallace Foundation to help districts align their SEL work with out-of-school-time efforts.

## Theory of Action for Districtwide SEL



To learn more, visit CASEL’s District Resource Center [drc.casel.org](http://drc.casel.org)



**INTEGRATION**  
Integrate SEL with district initiatives

### INSIGHT 3

## SEL ideally is integrated throughout the *school*.

**WHEN IMPLEMENTED WELL, SEL IS EMBEDDED INTO EVERY ASPECT OF THE SCHOOL, FROM CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION TO SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE TO PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE COMMUNITY AND FAMILIES.**

Systemic SEL is a new way of doing business at the school level as well. District leaders have worked closely with principals, teachers, parent leaders, community partners, and others in multiple ways to help schools adopt systemic strategies that embed SEL into every aspect of school life.

In *classrooms* implementing well, SEL is promoted through explicit instruction, often using an evidence-based program identified in CASEL's program reviews. It is integrated across classroom instruction and academic curriculum, from the math class organized around cooperative learning to the social studies class that routinely helps students learn empathy by trying out different perspectives to understand their world.

In *schools* implementing well, there is a culture and climate that supports learning, respect, and caring relationships throughout the school day. Adults are regularly modeling SEL behavior in classrooms and hallways, and on playgrounds. SEL shapes how principals run their staff meetings, how teachers handle their classrooms, how custodians and cafeteria workers know and are known by students, how safety officers interact with students, and how receptionists welcome visitors.

In **Washoe County School District**, staff members at each school attend a three-day training focused on culture and climate, evidence-based programs, student voice, and the integration of SEL into math, English, history, and other classes. Teachers use SEL strategies to engage students in learning core academic content. Students demonstrate listening skills, empathy, and other SEL competencies as they work in pairs, in small groups, and as a whole class.

**Sacramento** has developed Common Core State Standards curriculum maps for English Language Arts and math, explicitly identifying related SEL skills such as being able to collaborate, persevere in solving difficult problems, develop viable arguments, and critique the reasoning of others. SEL skills also are embedded in the district's college and career readiness graduate profile, which will serve as a guide for students' successful matriculation.

*Family and community partnerships* extend and deepen the work occurring in schools. **Austin Independent School District's** citywide Ready by 21 Youth Services Mapping program helps students and families locate services and supports that address academic enrichment and support, as well as social, emotional, and behavioral health. The district has also provided training in SEL to multiple out-of-school providers. And a local philanthropic matching program has raised \$2.4 million in three years.

**Sacramento** has integrated SEL into its nationally recognized Parent Teacher Home Visit Project, the districtwide Parent Information Exchange, parent training modules, and its Family Night Toolkit on Math, which now includes information on growth mindset. **Metro Nashville Public Schools** has developed a concise, developmentally appropriate set of SEL standards ("I Can" statements) for all grades K-12, which are linked to the state's academic standards for each grade level and major subject area (ELA, math, etc). **Washoe County** has offered more than 80 Parent University SEL courses, including College and Career Success and Building Resiliency in Children.

**"In order to help our students learn, we have to build relationships with our students. That's what they say to us."**

**Antwan Wilson,**  
former superintendent of Oakland Unified School District,  
currently chancellor of Washington, DC Public Schools

**"We changed from everything being punitive to making everything a teaching moment: What did you do? Why did you do it? Do you know it was wrong? What could you do differently? The staff was on board. There was a lot of buy-in."**

**Janet McDowell,**  
Principal, Wade Park Elementary School,  
Cleveland Metropolitan School District

### STUDENT AND TEACHER VOICE

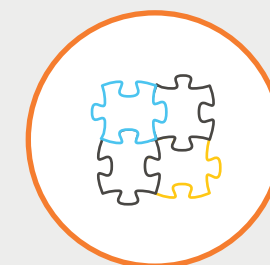
A supportive climate and culture results when there are opportunities for multiple voices to be heard. In **Cleveland Metropolitan School District**, for example, about 450 high school students meet quarterly to review their individual school's Conditions for Learning data, participate in activities with their peers, and provide feedback directly to the CEO about proposed district improvements. In **Chicago** students sat on the committee that rewrote the district's discipline policy and created supports for school staff members. They helped create a video to teach all stakeholders about the important shift to a restorative practices approach.



**"I don't know that there are any kids out there, in any school district, that don't have some needs for SEL support."**

**José Banda,**  
Superintendent, Sacramento City Unified  
School District

To learn more, visit CASEL's District Resource Center  
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### INTEGRATION

Integrate SEL  
with district initiatives

#### INSIGHT 4

## Successful implementation can follow multiple pathways.

EACH DISTRICT HAS UNIQUE NEEDS AND STRENGTHS, BUT REGARDLESS OF THE APPROACH, DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IS KEY.



Districts have chosen a variety of approaches for rolling out their SEL implementation to schools. There is no single path to successful implementation. Some built from the classroom up, using SEL programming as an anchor. Others built from the central office down, focused on strategy and organization. Some start with clusters of K-12 schools (high school and “feeder” middle and elementary schools). Others roll out districtwide at specific grade levels.

For example, **Austin** started with two feeder patterns of elementary, middle, and high schools, then added three more the following year, then two more each year until all schools in the district were implementing SEL. On the other hand, **Cleveland** implemented the PATHS program districtwide, starting with all K-2 grades one year and grades 3-5 during the following year. Second Step was introduced in grade 6 in 2015. It was enhanced with the inclusion of grades 7-8 in 2016.

Regardless of the pathway, implementation needs to get down to the school level where the students are — and where relationships are formed, curriculum is taught, and partnerships with families and community happen. And the principal’s understanding of and commitment to SEL are critical to leading these efforts. To ensure effective implementation at the school level, **Washoe County** uses school-based SEL teams comprising at least one administrator and four to six site-based staff including teachers, counselors, and speech pathologists. In addition, 21 teacher leaders receive additional professional development and then train their school colleagues and parents. **Austin** uses a coaching and strategic planning model, with each SEL specialist responsible for up to 12 schools.

“SEL is the way we go about our business. Relationships matter most. I see the whole world through the lens of SEL.”

**Brian Singleton,**  
Principal, Begich Middle School,  
Anchorage School District

“The way we’ve implemented SEL, instruction happens every single day in the classroom, not something we do separate and apart.”

**Paul Cruz,**  
Superintendent, Austin Independent School District

#### BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

Needs assessments help districts identify and build on strengths. Surveys and focus groups, for example, helped **Washoe County** discover the central role of counselors. The district then developed more inclusive training for teachers, principals, and others. In **Austin** a survey of SEL liaisons, principals, and coaches helped identify the quality of school implementation. The district used that information to help scale up best practices. To focus on school leadership, the district’s new planning team now includes three principals and the chief of schools, who supervises principals.



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**ALIGN  
RESOURCES**  
Align financial and  
human resources



## INSIGHT 5

# Adult SEL matters, too.

**RELATIONSHIPS ARE CENTRAL, AND ADULTS NEED THE EXPERTISE TO TEACH AND MODEL APPROPRIATE LESSONS AND BEHAVIORS IN EVERY INTERACTION.**

Social and emotional competence among staff improves teaching and leadership by strengthening relationships, creating safer learning environments, reducing staff burnout, and building trust among colleagues. It also helps those working directly with children to teach, model, and reinforce SEL competencies in their academic and interpersonal interactions with students.

Educators who model SEL have clear expectations and guidelines, including setting appropriate consequences, according to Nick Yoder of the American Institutes for Research. They find ways to stay calm when angry. They avoid mocking or embarrassing their students. They give students choices and respect their wishes. They ask questions that help students solve problems on their own. They are culturally aware and competent.

Yet too few teachers have been formally trained in their teacher preparation programs on SEL. A recent University of British Columbia/CASEL report found the overwhelming majority of teacher preparation programs do not have courses that help educators teach core SEL skills to students.<sup>8</sup> Penn State University's Mark Greenberg observed in a recent report: "If a teacher is unable to manage their stress adequately, their instruction will suffer, which then impacts student well-being and achievement. In contrast, teachers with better emotion regulation are likely to reinforce positive student behavior and support students in managing their own negative emotions."<sup>9</sup>

**Anchorage** discovered after two years of implementing student-centered reforms it needed to pause to focus more on staff training. "We can't expect teachers to model what we don't give them a chance to practice themselves," says Jan Davis,

SEL Professional Learning Specialist. Moreover, the Anchorage team is exploring how developing adults' social and emotional competencies may bolster their capacity to appropriately use culturally responsive teaching practices, which ultimately will ensure that all students are supported in reaching their full potential.

Adult awareness, modeling, and integration of social-emotional competencies in their teaching practices has long been a priority for **Chicago Public Schools**. All introductory SEL workshops ask leaders to identify and reflect on their own SEL competencies, prioritize areas where they would like to grow, and plan how to engage colleagues in an ongoing process of building these skills throughout their departments, regions, or schools. Efforts such as these helped the district to identify a link between adult decision-making and a historical overuse of suspensions.

To reinforce the importance of adult SEL, some districts are explicitly embedding SEL into their staff performance frameworks. **Oakland**, for example, created performance frameworks for adults and elementary students based on its SEL standards. SEL factors into the evaluation process for all classroom teachers, PreK-12. The OUSD Leadership Growth and Development System guides the professional development and evaluation of all principals throughout the district. The superintendent holds herself accountable to the school board for specific SEL goals and objectives included in her work plan.

**"We ask educators what's that one skill you want students to have to be successful? It's the social-emotional skills they want students to have."**

**Kyla Krengel,**  
Director, SEL, Metro Nashville Public Schools

**"You walk around the school now and you can tell there are relationships that exist between teachers and teachers, between teachers and students, and students with one another. What that allows for is a culture of calm."**

**Jessica,**  
Chicago Public Schools, ninth-grade student



To learn more, visit CASEL's District Resource Center  
[drc.casel.org](https://drc.casel.org)



**BUILD  
EXPERTISE**

Develop central office SEL  
expertise and competence

<sup>8</sup> The University of British Columbia Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education

<sup>9</sup> Penn State University/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

## INSIGHT 6

# Data for continuous improvement are essential.

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION THAT ARE FOCUSED ON IMPROVEMENT ACCELERATE AND RAISE THE QUALITY OF THE ROLLOUT.

Having research and evaluation teams involved in SEL work from the start yields several benefits. They help clarify goals and desired outcomes. They ensure that progress toward these outcomes is regularly measured, analyzed, and shared through data dashboards, reports, and similar management tools for continuous improvement.

In addition, clear metrics help keep everyone on the same page. Regular visibility helps ensure that everyone knows the work is important. Most important, armed with data, districts can make more informed decisions about necessary changes in strategies and programming.

For example, **Austin** raised local funds to help create a two-person SEL research team, which produced regular leadership reports on implementation and progress. One report measured the impact of a specific curriculum on absentee rates, disciplinary incidents, grades, and standardized test scores. Another compared the impact of program longevity to the effectiveness of implementation, with mixed results. These reports have helped the district create buy-in, communicate about the importance of SEL, and raise additional funds to support the work.

**Cleveland's** long-term research project with AIR produces invaluable insights into SEL attitudes and school climate and culture through its Conditions for Learning surveys of students, staff, and parents, given two times a year. District administrators and school staff regularly analyze the information and use it to provide practical advice on topics such as encouraging civility and enhancing the school culture.

Acting on the data is key. After finding staff survey participation had dropped sharply, **Anchorage** worked with CASEL to use the data to inform priorities for programming and training. Once they saw how the survey research helped principals guide their work, teacher participation on the surveys soared — from a low of 30% to 79%.

In **Washoe County** SEL staff works closely with the accountability department to help ensure a steady stream of insightful analyses. Using the results of a sophisticated 17-question survey, for example, they made the case that students with higher SEL skills did better on virtually every other outcome measure (test scores, GPAs, attendance, etc.). And they targeted staff development to address issues where students reported feeling the weakest, such as the ability to express feelings.

In **Nashville** the research and development department has contributed significantly to the school and classroom observational tools now being used in 28 schools to establish a baseline for an annual mid-year assessment of school climate and practice. The district also has used the tool to assess strengths and needs in roughly 50 other schools and to customize professional development accordingly.



To learn more, visit CASEL's District Resource Center  
[drc.casel.org](https://drc.casel.org)



CONTINUOUS  
IMPROVEMENT

Establish systems for  
continuous improvement

INSIGHT 7

# Districts benefit from collaborating with each other.

FROM THE START AND IN KEEPING WITH CASEL'S RESEARCH ROOTS, THE CDI WAS — AND IS — A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING LAB.

The CDI offers an opportunity for many of the country's leading educators to intensively create and explore which approaches work best, then share that know-how with each other and the world.

To accelerate learning among CDI districts, we created multiple peer learning communities, which foster long-term commitment and sustainability through regular opportunities to learn from each other.

For example, the annual **Cross-Districts Learning Event** convenes educators and others from CDI districts to explore implementation topics such as mindsets, academic integration, adult SEL, financial sustainability, and assessment. More topic-specific work groups have emerged from these large sessions, such as our Equity Work Group, Research and Evaluation Professional Learning Community, and Professional Learning Series.

Through a series of **in-person meetings, webinars, and one-on-one phone calls**, these groups are learning from their peers about successes, challenges, and innovations. A few districts have

adapted the proactive social media communications and engagement strategies used by Austin and Atlanta, for example. Washoe County has benefitted from Chicago's approach to adult SEL. Other districts have learned from Washoe's innovative use of data and student voice to support climate and culture, using their student data summits.

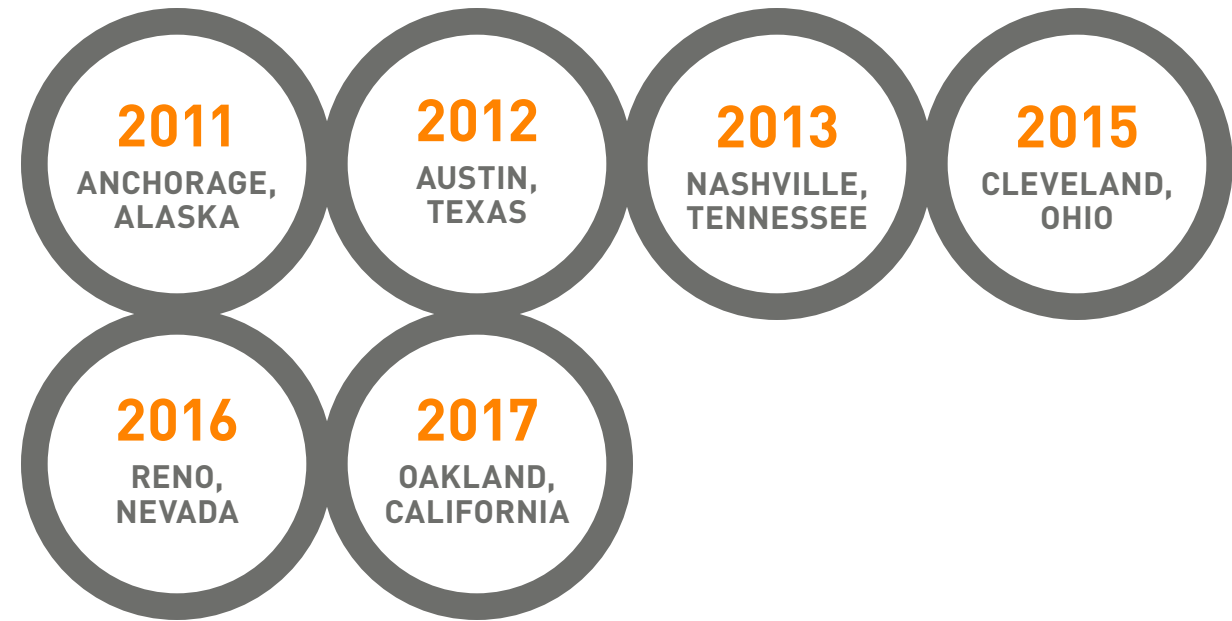
The **CDI superintendents** connect regularly through in-person opportunities, webinars, and one-on-one conversations, exploring a wide range of issues including stakeholder communication, budgeting, data use, and strategies for crisis intervention.

**Cross-district site visits** occur regularly. For example, Anchorage visited Chicago to learn more about its MTSS implementation model and see SEL leadership teams and integrated instruction at schools. The Cleveland team members learned different strategies for implementing the Closing the Achievement Gap initiative from their visit to Oakland. Washoe and Oakland learned about Anchorage's multiyear strategic plan for SEL implementation and saw SEL-academic integration in practice.

## ATLANTA AND EL PASO BENEFIT

Two of the newest members of the CDI are benefitting from the work of the first eight districts. Both **Atlanta Public Schools** and **El Paso Independent School District** heeded the recommendation to focus on adult SEL early. Atlanta is also focusing on parent engagement and will adapt resources from the CDI in its efforts. **El Paso** has made use of **Sacramento's** approach to teaching a growth mindset. And other CDI districts have used El Paso's "hidden backpack" activity, a facilitation approach designed to build empathy for the unseen daily burdens that affect students' and adults' ability to focus on their work.

## CROSS-DISTRICTS LEARNING EVENTS

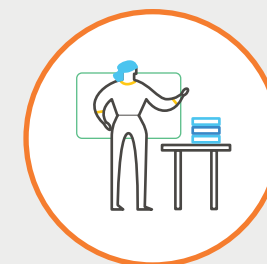


### PARTICIPANTS SAY...

“I have a deeper appreciation for why we need to include adults in the SEL learning process and why districts elect to work with adult SEL first, as a foundation for districtwide implementation. GREAT!!”

“I can't wait to bring this back to our new teacher program as well.”

To learn more, visit CASEL's District Resource Center [drc.casel.org](http://drc.casel.org)



## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Design and implement effective professional development programs

## CHAPTER 3

# Impact on students and schools

To assess the impact of the CDI's efforts, CASEL entered into an ongoing data collection and evaluation partnership with the districts and American Institutes for Research (AIR). Data were collected to measure the implementation and resulting outcomes.

While the availability of data varied by district, qualitative and quantitative outcomes are promising.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:  
EVEN VERY MODEST INVESTMENTS IN  
SEL CAN PAY OFF FOR INDIVIDUALS,  
SCHOOLS, AND SOCIETY.**

**“I have seen high schools and middle schools really change the narrative on suspensions and expulsions. If we’re keeping students in schools and teaching them how to deal with things instead of just getting them out the door, we are making huge gains.”**

**Alan Mather,**  
Chief Officer, Office of College and Career Success,  
Chicago Public Schools

### ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IMPROVED

The three districts that use the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Austin, Chicago, and Cleveland) all improved their reading and math scores during the CDI implementation years.

In Anchorage, Austin, Chicago, Cleveland, Oakland, and Nashville, GPAs were higher at the end of the 2015 school year than before the CDI started. The improvements were particularly noticeable in Chicago, going from an average of 2.19 in the three years before the CDI to 2.65 in 2015, an increase of nearly 21%.

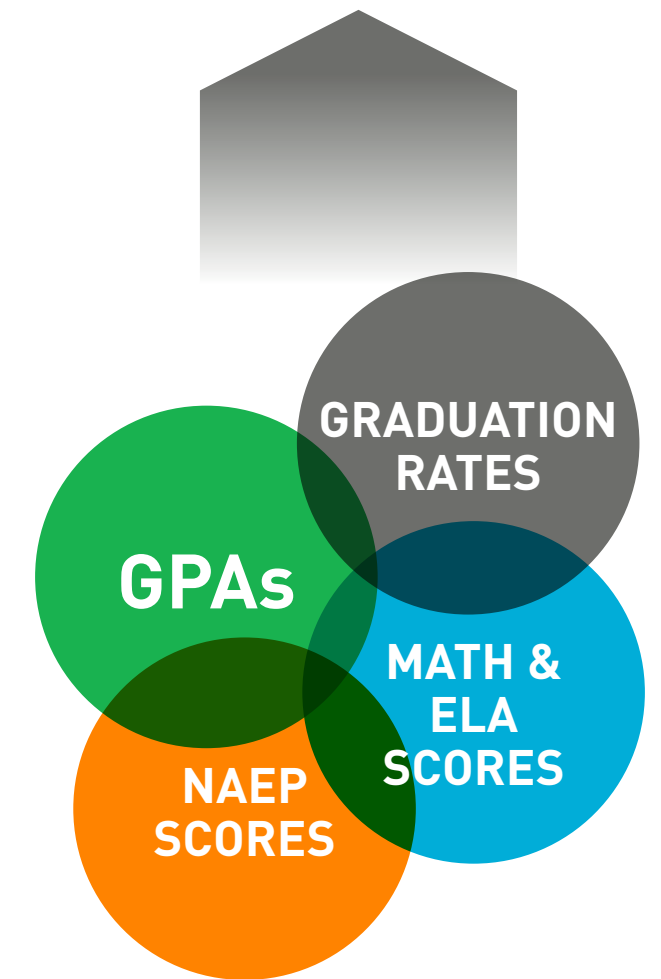
Nashville, the only district that used the same standardized tests across CDI years, showed improvements in both ELA and math achievement.

All districts with relevant data showed gains in ELA and math in at least one grade band (elementary, middle, high). Chicago's graduation rate increased 15% during the CDI years.

### STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND BEHAVIOR IMPROVED

Attendance improved in four of six districts that collected this data. Chicago improved overall attendance by eight percentage points from before the CDI started through 2015. Anchorage (elementary, middle) and Nashville (middle, high) showed gains at two of three levels.

Suspensions declined in all five of the districts that collected this data. For example, suspensions in Chicago declined 65 percent in two years. This translates to 44,000 fewer students being suspended from school in one recent year alone. In Sacramento suspension rates declined in the five years of systemic SEL implementation: 24% districtwide and 43% in high schools.



## STUDENT SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE IMPROVED

Districts also reported that students' social and emotional competence improved, based on student and teacher surveys. In both Chicago and Nashville, elementary school students improved in all five social and emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. In Austin, where only middle and high school data was collected, students at both levels also significantly improved in all five competencies. Middle and high school students in Cleveland also experienced growth, particularly in the areas of self-awareness and self-management. Sacramento (elementary only) and Anchorage (elementary, middle, and high school) collected an average measure of students' overall social and emotional competence. For Sacramento, elementary students experienced significant

gains in overall competence since the start of the CDI. Anchorage students experienced significant growth in overall competence even before the start of the CDI and maintained the same positive trajectory during the CDI years.

## SCHOOL CLIMATE IMPROVED

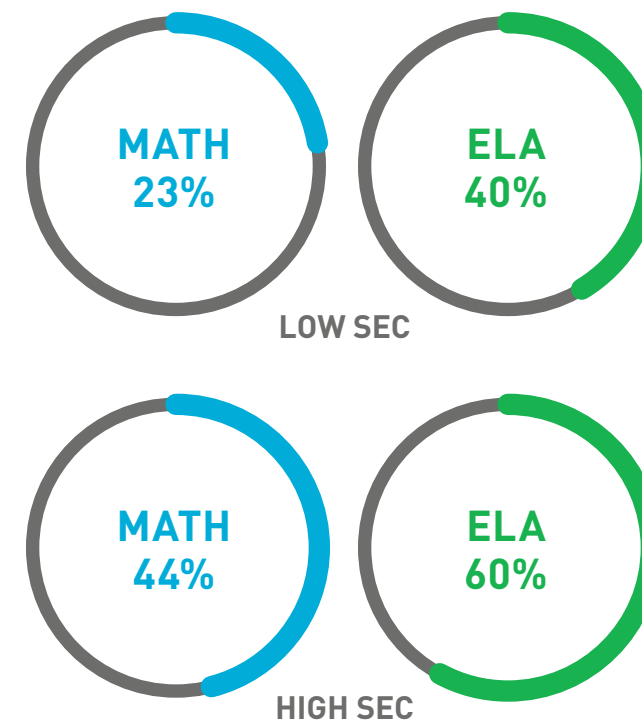
Climate, as measured by district surveys in Chicago and Cleveland, improved during the CDI years. In Anchorage climate began an upward trajectory before the CDI and sustained that same significant and positive growth during the CDI years.

In the only district in which elementary school climate data was available for analysis (Chicago), students reported significant improvements on the "supportive environment" scale compared to the start of the CDI in 2010–2011.

Districts use a variety of surveys to measure student and staff attitudes. This is an excerpt from Washoe County.

		VERY EASY	EASY	HARD	VERY HARD
<b>SELF-AWARENESS</b>	<b>EMOTIONAL KNOWLEDGE:</b> Knowing when my feelings are making it hard for me to focus	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	<b>SELF-CONCEPT:</b> Knowing what my strengths are	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>SELF-MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>SCHOOLWORK:</b> Doing my school work even when i don't feel like it	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	<b>EMOTIONAL REGULATION:</b> Getting through something even when I feel frustrated	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	<b>GOAL MANAGEMENT:</b> Finishing tasks even if they are hard for me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>SOCIAL AWARENESS</b>	<b>SOCIAL AWARENESS:</b> Learning from people with different opinions than me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>RELATIONSHIP SKILLS</b>	<b>RELATIONSHIP SKILLS:</b> Getting along with my classmates	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING</b>	<b>RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING:</b> Thinking about what might happen before making a decision	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2014–2015  
Math and English Language Arts (ELA) Proficiency Rates among Students with Low vs. High Social and Emotional Competencies



## THE POSITIVE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

In collaboration with CASEL, **Washoe County** documented that students with higher SEL competencies perform better on multiple measures: higher academic achievement, attendance, GPAs, and graduation rates, and fewer suspensions. For example, students with high social and emotional competence had a math proficiency rate that was 21 percentage points higher than their counterparts with low social and emotional competence. Also, students with higher competence were 20 percentage points higher for English/Language Arts (ELA). Findings from the Washoe/CASEL partnership research team also showed that having high social and emotional competence might have buffered students from the negative impact of factors (e.g., suspensions, transiency, weak attendance) that often place them in a "high-risk" academic status.



## CHAPTER 4

# Scaling SEL know-how

Demand for SEL is at an all-time high. Teachers recognize the importance of it. Employers are requiring it. Parents value it. Communities are being transformed by it. And, most important, millions of students already are benefitting from it.

Based on the practical knowledge gleaned through the CDI and from the field at large, we have extensive knowledge about how to implement high-quality, evidence-based SEL. With our district and philanthropic partners, we at CASEL are uniquely poised to scale this know-how to many more districts nationally.

### OUR GOALS:

**BY THE END OF 2017 ALL EDUCATORS IN THE COUNTRY WILL HAVE EASY ACCESS TO HUNDREDS OF PRACTICAL TOOLS THAT HAVE BEEN FIELD TESTED BY SOME OF THE LEADING DISTRICTS IN THE U.S.**

**BY 2025 50% OF U.S. SCHOOL DISTRICTS WILL BE SYSTEMICALLY INTEGRATING HIGH-QUALITY SEL ACROSS THEIR SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS.**



### DEEPENING SEL KNOW-HOW

With an ongoing commitment to deepening the field's expertise in the practical application of SEL, we plan to expand and formalize how we collect, document, analyze, and translate practices and strategies. We will continue to partner intensively with CDI districts, and deepen and extend partnerships in the broad field to improve implementation and student outcomes while increasing understanding of systemic SEL, piloting new innovations, and refining best practices. *We will answer questions such as:*

- What instructional practices maximize learning, engagement, and achievement?
- How can SEL help promote equity in the school and classroom?
- How can after-school programs reinforce what's happening in school?
- How can schools engage families and community partners in promoting SEL?
- How can schools best use data to improve SEL competencies and school climate?
- How can districts allocate resources most effectively?

We will amplify the case for systemic SEL with even more meaningful, compelling data, and cases – drawn from the CDI districts and from other districts and schools across the country.

### SHARING WHAT WE KNOW

Our goal is to make knowledge usable. We will translate the knowledge and experiences from the CDI districts and others into actionable and innovative tools. We will offer support in using those tools to reach the maximum number of educators, scholars, policymakers, families, and community partners, all while maintaining a commitment to learning and continuously improving our tools, approaches, and models for implementation. *For example:*

- The District Resource Center, which launched with nearly 500 practical, evidence-based, annotated tools from the CDI districts.
- New online resources for schools and states addressing key implementation issues.
- Virtual and online training and support for using the guides, coupled with data collection to track usage and impact.

We will execute new, creative strategies for gathering input and insights from the field, building communities of learners, and packaging and disseminating knowledge. *For example:*

- An interactive, online platform for districts to access tools and resources and track district needs, requests, and knowledge gaps.
- Virtual communities connecting district personnel serving in similar roles.
- In-person working groups to answer questions on specific topics such as SEL and equity, assessments, teacher practices, climate, and culture.

Together, these strategies mark a significant and necessary evolution in our work—one that is focused on deepening and advancing SEL implementation knowledge and making that knowledge usable by any district nationwide.

**The beneficiaries: America's schoolchildren.**

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is the world's leading organization advancing one of the most important fields in education in decades: the practice of promoting integrated academic, social, and emotional learning for all children. The nonprofit, founded in 1994, provides a combination of research, practice, and policy to support high-quality social and emotional learning in districts and schools nationwide.

Thank you to CASEL's many critical collaborators — *our partner educators, researchers, policymakers, civic leaders, program providers, funders, and others* — for contributing to and supporting efforts to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning an integral part of education, preschool through high school.



**COLLABORATIVE FOR ACADEMIC, SOCIAL, AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING**  
815 W VAN BUREN STREET, SUITE 210, CHICAGO IL 60607 | 312.226.3770 | CASEL.ORG