

AN INITIAL GUIDE TO

# LEVERAGING THE POWER OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

→ AS YOU PREPARE TO  
REOPEN AND RENEW  
YOUR SCHOOL COMMUNITY



“

IT IS POSSIBLE TO PREPARE  
FOR THE FUTURE WITHOUT  
KNOWING WHAT IT WILL BE.  
THE PRIMARY WAY TO PREPARE  
FOR THE UNKNOWN IS TO  
ATTEND TO THE QUALITY OF  
OUR RELATIONSHIPS, TO HOW  
WELL WE KNOW AND TRUST  
ONE ANOTHER.

”

MARGARET WHEATLEY | 2004

## INTRODUCTION

While much uncertainty surrounds how and when school will reopen, we know that social and emotional learning (SEL) will be critical to re-engaging students, supporting adults, rebuilding relationships, and creating a foundation for academic learning. This unprecedented shift to a new type of learning experience may have a lasting and profound impact on young people's academic, social, emotional, and life outcomes. School leaders will need to bring together administrators, teachers, school staff, families, youth, and community partners to co-create supportive learning environments where all students and adults can enhance their social and emotional competencies, feel a sense of belonging, heal, and thrive.

### About This Initial Guide

In this guide, CASEL shares a framework with actionable recommendations to help school leadership teams plan for the SEL needs of all students and adults during the upcoming transition into summer and the beginning of the new school year. While this guidance is written for school leadership teams, [states](#) and [districts](#) will play critical roles in ensuring schools have the resources, support, and guidance needed to carry out these actions.

This guide positions SEL as a critical underpinning to the success of overall transition planning, recognizing school leaders have multiple other considerations for reopening schools, including academics, operations, access to technology, and physical health.

**CASEL is also working with many collaborators to produce comprehensive guidance, scheduled for release in late June, with additional recommendations, resources, and tools to help school leaders support and sustain SEL throughout and beyond the pandemic.**



Educators in this moment of transition have an opportunity to reflect, innovate, and build on evidence-based practices in schools across the country. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored SEL as an essential part of high-quality education—highlighting our relationships, resiliency, and collective problem-solving as fundamental to teaching and learning. While nearly everyone has faced disruption, we must acknowledge the complex, varying ways individuals have experienced these months. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated [existing inequities](#) in education and emphasized the need for learning environments that welcome and support all students, including those who were not equitably served before COVID-19. In the process of reopening schools, SEL provides an opportunity to elevate student voice and agency, support educator SEL and well-being, deepen partnerships with families, broaden our definition of what learning is and where it takes place, and contribute to more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

[CASEL defines SEL](#) as the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. [Decades of research, practice, and policy](#) have demonstrated the effectiveness of SEL in supporting students' academic and long-term success. By systemically integrating SEL across classrooms, schools, homes, and communities, adults and students work together to develop and apply five core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making. These competencies are needed generally throughout our lives and particularly in this moment to manage our own stressors, anxieties, and joy; understand how the pandemic is influencing others (often in inequitable ways); and build relationships and make decisions that best support our communities.

We recognize that schools are at different stages within their SEL journey. Whether just beginning or deepening systemic SEL implementation, schools can build on their existing strengths to develop a transition plan that supports SEL for students and adults. The guidance below is organized around four critical actions, which are adapted from what [we have learned](#) about systemic SEL in collaboration with researchers and practitioners:

- 1** Take time to build partnerships, deepen your understanding, and plan for SEL.
- 2** Design opportunities for adults to connect, heal, and cultivate their own SEL competencies and capacities.
- 3** Create emotionally and physically safe, supportive, and engaging learning environments that promote all students' social and emotional development.
- 4** Use data as an opportunity to deepen relationships and continuously improve support for students, families, and staff.



## 1

## Take time to build partnerships, deepen your understanding, and plan for SEL.

Schools will face many challenges—from how to manage logistical and technological obstacles to how to accelerate [academic learning](#). To tackle these important issues, schools will need to simultaneously tend to the social and emotional needs of both children and adults. By prioritizing SEL and the needs and concerns of all students and families, leaders can begin to cultivate the healing, empathy, resiliency, and collective resolve needed to navigate the transition ahead and more effectively continue the work of teaching and learning.

- **Communicate widely and consistently that SEL is foundational to the holistic success of your school community.** If needed, build your own [foundational understanding of SEL](#) research and practices. Use newsletters, social media, and meetings with staff, families, students, and community partners to share how social and emotional competencies and supportive environments can support children and adults through this transition and the new ways of learning that may occur in schools.
- **Elevate the voices and perspectives of students, families, educators, and other adults to develop responsive transition plans.** Use formal and informal ways to identify their hopes and concerns about transition while communicating the school's desire to incorporate their perspectives into decision-making. For example, provide individual outreach when possible, call or [survey students](#) and families, or hold focus groups with staff and key community partners. When reaching out to families and students, use home languages and inclusive strategies for those who have limited access to technology. Also consider alternative ways to reach all families, such as through churches, social service agencies, neighborhood groups, social media, and other community connections.

### Put it Into Practice

#### Learn From Families, Students, and Community Partners

The sample questions below can be used as a starting point for phone/video conferences or written surveys that engage stakeholders in sharing their perspectives.

- What has your experience been like since school has been closed?
- What is on your mind as you think about next school year? What are your biggest hopes or worries?
- What has our school done well during the past months, and what could we have done better?
- How might you like to contribute as we prepare to transition to a new school year?
- What will help you learn this upcoming year?
- What can we do to make school feel even more like a community that cares for you?

- **Examine where SEL efforts have been impactful and where more support is needed.** Review whether the strategies taken during school closures to promote SEL have been effective in supporting and engaging students. Find out which students and families have received individual outreach from staff, who has engaged in distance learning, and what barriers have prevented others from engaging. Identify which staff have felt comfortable with SEL distance learning strategies and those who may require additional support. Also pay attention to individual needs that will impact the ability to return to school. Have staff, students, or their families experienced a loss of a loved one, housing or employment instability, or other circumstances that may require support? It may be helpful to connect with local service agencies and community partners to help identify these needs and provide additional support.



- **Build a broad coalition to integrate SEL and academic supports into transition plans, and create and maintain a caring, safe, and supportive environment for all students and adults.** You may want to form a transition team with representation from administration, teachers and support staff, families, students, and community partners. This plan should be based on needs identified by members of the school community and build on the school's current strengths, such as existing SEL programs and positive relationships between staff and students. Also include strategies for continually partnering with families and re-engaging the most vulnerable students.

## Put it Into Practice

### Embedding SEL Throughout Your Transition Plan

Use this quick checklist to think through practical ways your school can integrate SEL into transition plans. The rest of this brief provides additional guidance for the strategies listed below.

- Two-Way Communication:** Are we staying in close contact with school staff, students, families, and community partners—both to [share new information](#) and address concerns, and to receive ongoing input and feedback into transition plans?
- Staff Community-Building:** Have we set aside time for staff to reconnect, process their emotions and experiences, reflect on what they have learned and [how they are applying social and emotional competencies](#), and collaborate on ways to support students' SEL throughout in-person or distance learning?
- Staff Professional Learning:** Have we prepared professional learning that staff will need to promote students' SEL, build strong relationships and create supportive learning environments in person and during distance learning, and support students who may be [grieving](#) or have experienced [trauma](#)?
- Supportive Learning Environment:** Have we planned that all classes (whether in-person or distance learning ) will devote time to [building community](#), reflecting on experiences, and listening to students' ideas and concerns?
- Promoting Student Social and Emotional Competencies:** Have we identified ways that all teachers help students enhance and practice competencies through distance learning and in-person settings, either through existing programs, regular class meetings, group and individual check-ins, or instructional practices that allow for reflection, discussion, and collaboration?
- Student Support:** Do we have plans in place and have we partnered with families and community agencies to proactively identify, provide, and monitor additional supports to students who are struggling socially, emotionally, behaviorally, or academically?



## Design opportunities for adults to connect, heal, and cultivate their own SEL competencies and capacities.

Transition plans need to attune to the social and emotional needs of all the adults responsible for supporting students' learning and development. The stress and well-being of [teachers](#), [principals](#), and [staff](#) are not new concerns, but the disruptions caused by COVID-19 have added to educators' anxiety, worry, and stress. In a [survey](#) by CASEL and the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence in late March, thousands of teachers described their most frequent emotions during COVID-19 as anxious, fearful, worried, overwhelmed, and sad. They cited the stress of adapting to virtual classrooms and working from home while caring for their loved ones. By creating time, space, and [working conditions](#) that help adults feel connected, empowered, supported, and valued, school leaders can help cultivate adults' SEL and overall well-being.

- Allow space for connection, listening, and healing among all leaders and staff in the school building.** This may include carving out time during existing virtual or in-person meetings for staff to process and share their [feelings](#), engage in [community-building activities](#), reflect on how they can use their own [social and emotional competencies](#) to support one another and their students, and create individual plans for ongoing [self-care](#).
- Capture this moment to identify new opportunities.** Engage staff in reflecting on what they've learned from the past few months and [how this experience will shape the coming years](#). Provide time for staff to discuss with one another: How have disruptions to class and school revealed strengths in ourselves and students? What are some new ways to facilitate learning? Where may there be disengagement and inequity? How can we better partner with families? Offer ongoing opportunities for staff to collaborate on ideas for how to use this learning to inform a collective path forward.
- Provide professional learning to build educators' capacity to support students' SEL.** This includes professional learning that helps staff build relationships and integrate SEL into in-person and distance learning, create equitable learning environments, identify signs of trauma and mental health concerns, and support grieving students. Free online offerings may provide a starting point over the summer that connects to a longer-term professional learning plan during the school year.
- Maximize staff members' abilities to connect with students, families, and community partners.** For example, consider how staff or community partners can coordinate to check in regularly with a small groups of students and families; how counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and nurses can connect with students and families before schools reopen and during blended or distance learning; and how school staff can better align with community partners in supporting adults and students.
- Ensure access to mental health and trauma supports for adults.** Some adults in the building may be struggling with mental health issues, trauma, [secondary traumatic stress](#), or "[compassion fatigue](#)." Look for [signs](#) that adults might need more support and [identify available resources](#). You can use the [SAMHSA mental health services locator](#) to search for resources in your community.



## Related Resources

### Free Online Professional Learning for Educators

#### Self-care and resiliency

- [CASEL Cares Webinar: Strategies for Being Your Best 'SEL'f](#)
- [CASEL Cares Webinar: How Mindfulness Can Help](#)

#### Educator strategies that promote students' SEL and supportive learning environments

- [Creating Opportunities Through Relationships](#)
- [Sanford Inspire Online Learning Portal on SEL and Engaging Instruction](#)
- [Friday Institute's Social and Emotional Learning for Educators](#)
- [Teaching Complex Current Events and Supporting Student Well-being \(Facing History and Ourselves\)](#)
- [National Equity Project's Recorded Webinars on Equity in the Classroom, Implicit Bias, and Structuralized Racism](#)
- [Incorporating SEL into Classroom Instruction \(Tennessee Department of Education\)](#)
- [Social and Emotional Learning in Washington State Schools: Building Foundations and Strategies Module](#)

#### Supporting students with grief and trauma

- [Supporting Grieving Students \(National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement\)](#)
- [Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools \(National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments\)](#)



## Create emotionally and physically safe, supportive, and engaging learning environments that promote all students' social and emotional development.

A large body of research demonstrates the effectiveness of evidence-based SEL programs and practices to support [students' academic and long-term success](#). The disruption during the pandemic has further highlighted the importance of social and emotional competencies to help students cope with challenges, manage stress, practice empathy, create social bonds across distance, make healthy decisions, take collective action, and [manage loss and grief](#). These situations elevate the role of supportive adults and family-school partnerships in creating conditions that help students develop their academic, social, and emotional competencies to navigate daily interactions and challenges, including modified schedules and new learning experiences.

### Put it Into Practice

#### Addressing Students' Developmental Needs During Transition

Students go through many transitions from early childhood to young adulthood, such as the annual return from [summer break](#) or the transition from [middle to high school](#). What happens during these transitions, and the degree to which students' [developmental needs](#) are met, influence their social and emotional competencies and long-term success. To help students with the important transition into this coming school year, identify ways to meet their developmental needs. For example:

- **In early childhood programs:** Provide young children with simple strategies for exploring, [discussing](#), and regulating their emotions. [Read alouds](#) offer an easy way to prompt conversations about how big changes make them feel.
- **In elementary school:** Support students in developing relationship-building and conflict-resolution skills by helping them co-create [shared agreements](#) for their new class or distance learning environment.
- **In middle school:** Offer [adolescents](#) an opportunity to reconnect and create a sense of closure from the previous school year, such as by writing letters to their former classmates or teachers, or discussing with peers how the last few months will impact their perspectives as they enter a new grade.
- **In high school:** Provide older students with a way to reflect on and [document their experience](#) and what they've learned about themselves during the pandemic, either through [journal writing](#), artwork, music, or other creative outlets.

For more practices, review the [SEL Providers Council](#) website.

- **Intentionally build structures that promote supportive adult-student relationships and a sense of belonging.**

Ensure every student has at least [one caring adult](#) at the school who checks in regularly with them and whom they can reach out to. Also examine daily schedules or class assignments to create greater opportunities for meaningful teacher-student relationships. Examples include minimizing the number of transitions between teachers and classrooms (e.g., through team teaching in elementary/middle schools or block scheduling high schools), creating or extending time in homeroom or advisory classes, and “looping” students with the same teachers and peers from the previous year. If distance learning continues, identify routines to maintain or deepen connections virtually or over the phone, such as through smaller group meetings or individual check-ins. Recognizing that new structures will most likely be in place, create consistent routines and procedures that allow for flexibility as much as possible. Predictable structures promote a sense of safety that helps students, especially those who have experienced trauma or struggle behaviorally, regulate emotions and take on new challenges and developmental tasks.



- **Weave in opportunities for students to practice and reflect upon social and emotional competencies throughout the day.** Identify developmentally appropriate [SEL competencies and standards](#), which may be available through your state or district, that students and adults can work on together to support the transition, such as stress-management, communication and listening skills, collaboration, and help-providing and help-seeking behaviors. Continue any existing [evidence-based SEL programs](#) or identify simple strategies that educators can use right away, such as “[SEL Kernels](#),” classroom community meetings, or small mentoring groups that can be used in person, during blended and distance learning, and at home to help develop those competencies. [Academic instruction](#) can provide additional opportunities to practice SEL through reflection, interaction, cross-age peer tutoring, leading discussions, brain breaks, and other [intentional practices](#). Also consider creative ways to promote the SEL benefits of less-structured social times, such as recess and lunch, even when some levels of physical distancing may be necessary.
- **Engage students in developmentally appropriate [conversations](#) and [lessons](#) to discuss past, current, and future impacts of the pandemic on themselves, their families, their communities, and the broader world.** This can include distinguishing facts from misinformation, as well as opportunities for students to suggest strategies for their school or community to prevent the future spread of disease and address other needs in their community. [Support teachers](#) in facilitating conversations and lessons to discuss the [impact](#), [history](#), and [ways to respond](#) to biased or stigmatizing comments and behaviors related to the disease.
- **Collaborate with families and community partners to align on strategies for supporting students’ SEL at home and during extended learning.** Invite family members to join the school SEL team, help identify SEL [programs and practices](#) that can be used in classrooms or at home, participate in school or classroom SEL activities, and share information about what kinds of supports their students need. Also work to align SEL efforts with key community partners that provide opportunities for students to build caring adult relationships and engage in activities that motivate them, such as [out-of school time programs](#), [sports](#), and other [extracurricular activities](#).
- **Identify support for students who are struggling.** While not all students have the same experiences, some students may have experienced grief, anxiety, or [trauma](#) that may shape how they engage academically, socially, emotionally, or behaviorally. [Support your staff](#) in proactively identifying and meeting the needs of students who may be struggling. Work with family and community partners to create a comprehensive plan, which may include providing [additional mental health](#) and [trauma](#) supports, or connections to food, shelter, technology, transportation, or other resources. Monitor the response to ensure needs are met.



## 4

## Use data as an opportunity to deepen relationships and continuously improve support for students, families, and staff.

During this time of rapid innovation and quick action, an ongoing continuous improvement process will help ensure that efforts meet the needs of all students, including those from historically marginalized groups. This includes collecting and reflecting on data that elevates the perspectives of students and families, identifying and addressing inequities and challenges, and building upon successes to continuously improve the support to students, families, and staff.

- **Engage staff, students, and families in sharing ongoing feedback and partnering on continuous improvement.** This may take the form of [existing](#) or [new school climate surveys](#), focus groups, phone calls, or other creative strategies. Consider what form of collecting feedback will be most inclusive of all families and students, and whether families and students can help design survey questions or lead focus groups. Feedback questions may include asking about the level of social and emotional support students receive from teachers, staff, or peers; support that staff receive from leadership; student, staff and family needs during distance or blended learning; student and staff emotions throughout the school/work day; and how well staff are communicating with families. After gathering feedback data, continue the conversation through individual or small-group interviews to help contextualize responses and better interpret results. Consider sharing this data with staff, students, and families and involving them in data reflection and problem-solving.
- **Support educators in reflecting on data around their own instructional practices and classroom climate, especially when trying out new strategies or modes of teaching.** This summer and fall, teachers will continue to take on new technologies, adjust to shifting work environments, address student concerns, and much more. They will need supportive leaders who create a culture of continuous improvement. Help teachers collect feedback from students and reflect on their own practices by providing non-evaluative coaching and concrete [strategies for improvement](#).

### Put it Into Practice

#### [Teacher Self-Assessment: SEL Through Distance Learning](#)

Use the checklist below to help teachers self-assess strengths and areas to develop as they promote SEL through distance learning and at-home assignments.

##### For All Ages

- I am reaching out to students individually and communicating that I value their contributions.
- I follow up with students on topics that are important to them to show them they are known and cared for.
- I facilitate virtual class meetings, collaborative classroom websites or forums, or other community-building activities to cultivate a culture of personal connection and belonging.
- Learning activities and projects link to students' lived experiences, frames of reference, and issues that are important to them.
- Learning activities activate students' self- and social awareness by asking them to identify feelings, reflect on their experiences, and talk through topics with family members or peers.
- Learning activities affirm students' diverse identities and cultures, and students have opportunities to share and learn about each other's lives.

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### Especially for Upper Elementary and Secondary Students

- I coordinate learning activities in which students are able to engage in small-group discussions, cooperate, and problem-solve with peers.
- Assignments include open-ended questions to surface student thinking and probe students to elaborate on their responses.
- After completing a project, students reflect on what made their work successful or challenging and make a plan for improvement.
- I regularly request and receive feedback from students about how distance learning is going and how it could be improved.

- **Collect and act on data around students who are disengaged or chronically absent.** One of the most critical tasks during the transition to the new school year will be supporting every student, particularly those whose needs were not fully met before COVID-19. For students who have not regularly attended classes, develop a plan that addresses the root causes of their absences and leverages family and community partners to double-down on individual outreach and relationship-building. This may include revising existing policies and practices that may have inequitable or detrimental impact on students, such as punitive or exclusionary discipline practices that can contribute to [student disengagement](#) or [retraumatize students](#).

## Put it Into Practice

### Examining Transition Data With an Equity Lens

Regularly review data on progress with an eye toward how decisions during the transition impact equity and outcomes. You may want to review data such as:

- Student, family, and staff interviews or surveys (their responses as well as data on who hasn't responded)
- Outreach to families—who has and hasn't been successfully contacted by school staff, who has and hasn't accessed available supports such as meal assistance, technology distribution, etc.
- Student attendance, participation, and completion with at-home learning

Also disaggregate these data by subgroups, such as by race, socioeconomic status, language learner, immigration status, LGBTQ identity, or any other subgroups.

Use a [data reflection protocol](#) or consider the following questions as your team learns from this data:

- What do you see in the data, including any differences/disparities between groups, that may indicate inequities in school transition processes and supports?
- What additional information could help you interpret this data? Consider whose voices and experiences are not represented and any biases or blind spots that might exist as you interpret the data. Often, gaining additional student perspectives can help make sense of the data.
- What does the data suggest about how well social and emotional supports are meeting the needs of all students, families, and staff during this transition?
- How can we make changes or innovate to better meet needs, ensure equitable resources and support, and monitor the impact of the transition on student outcomes?



## CONCLUSION

The coming months will mark continued transitions for everyone in school communities as they prepare for an academic year that offers new types of relationships, learning, and operations. The transition may bring excitement, anxiety, concern, and other complex emotions as students wonder what the return to classrooms will look like, anticipate reconnecting with peers and teachers, and look forward to engaging in person in supportive learning environments. This moment will also call upon educators to intentionally and relentlessly foster [emotional and physical](#) safety and a sense of belonging throughout their school community.

High-quality SEL implementation provides students and adults an opportunity to continue cultivating critical skills—such as empathy and compassion, self-regulation, stress management, communication, collaboration—that they will need not only to manage their experiences during the pandemic, but also to be caring, contributing members of their communities. SEL can also help educators reflect on how this experience has shaped our understanding of what and how we teach in schools, as well as the conditions that fully and equitably support student learning.

With the possibility of intermittent closures or other changes in the coming years, the adjustment back to school is most likely a long-term process that will require a sustained approach for ensuring that all students, families, and staff have the relationships, resources, and support they need to thrive. We encourage school leaders, with the support of states and districts, to plan for immediate needs while also beginning to consider how to sustain the focus on SEL over the long-term.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CASEL is grateful for the insights and thought partnership from the following organizations, which are also collaborating on an accompanying resource with additional recommendations, resources, and tools to help school leaders support and sustain SEL throughout and beyond the pandemic:

AASA - the School Superintendents Association, American Institutes of Research, American School Counselors Association, Arlington Public Schools, Building Equitable Learning Environments Network, Carnegie Corporation of New York, CASEL Board Program Committee, [CASEL Collaborating Districts Initiative](#), [CASEL Collaborating States Initiative](#), Chiefs for Change, Council of Chief State School Officers, Forum For Youth Investment, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Learning Policy Institute, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of School Psychologists, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Equity Project, National School Boards Association, Northwest Evaluation Association, PERTS, Raikes Foundation, Transforming Education, Trauma Learning Policy Institute, Turnaround for Children, University of California - Los Angeles, University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, The Wallace Foundation, and X-SEL Labs

