



Sustaining Districtwide Social and Emotional Learning: Lessons from the SEL Financial Sustainability Project

Is it feasible for all students in a school district to experience social and emotional learning as an integral part of their Pre-K to twelfth grade education? The answer is a resounding yes. Several districts within the CASEL/NoVo Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) have shown great promise in implementing and sustaining districtwide systemic and systematic social and emotional learning.

The CDI is one of the most ambitious efforts in the country to create long-term, sustainable educational change. Eight of the nation's 200 largest school districts agreed to work closely with CASEL and NoVo Foundation to develop districtwide social and emotional learning (SEL). Three of the districts began planning and implementing SEL in February 2011. A second cohort of five districts began their work in February 2012. As of April 2015, all eight districts continue to strengthen their implementation, including depth and breadth of student involvement in SEL, and many are demonstrating positive outcomes.¹

Background

In 2012 three of the CDI districts—Austin Independent School District (86,000 students), Chicago Public Schools (400,000 Students), and Washoe County Public Schools (63,000 students)—agreed to take part in a study to identify effective financial strategies to sustain social and emotional learning. The study, funded by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, enabled the SEL leaders in each district and a representative from its fiscal division to attend a meeting in Chicago in December 2012 with CASEL researchers and two professors, Marguerite Roza, associate professor at



Georgetown University and director of the Edunomics Lab, and Olga Acosta Price, associate professor at George Washington University and director of the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools.

In addition to considering the financial challenges facing schools and the implications for districtwide SEL, the meeting focused on a tool for developing and analyzing a district's annual SEL budget, including per-student expenditures. Over a span of six months the three districts developed and submitted four years of projected budgets.

In the following 18 months the districts continued developing multiple strategies for leading and financing SEL. In December 2014 each district submitted a multiyear SEL budget, including projections for the next three years, and each district SEL leader took part in a [structured interview](#) to capture their story and their learnings. In seeking a sustainability model for small and medium sized school districts, a fourth “affiliate” district with 13,500 students also submitted their six-year budget and took part in an interview. This fourth district, Wheaton-Warrenville Community Unit School District in Illinois, began planning SEL implementation in 2010 through a partnership with the Du Page County Regional Office of Education, CASEL, and NoVo Foundation. Based upon the submitted budgets, the interviews, and other source documents, CASEL developed individual case studies highlighting the four districts’ implementation strategy, budgeting strategy, and plans for sustaining SEL across each district.

The following pages examine challenges to the sustainability of districtwide SEL and strategies for overcoming those challenges identified by the four study districts. Several of the strategies are informed by the work in the other five CASEL collaborating districts.

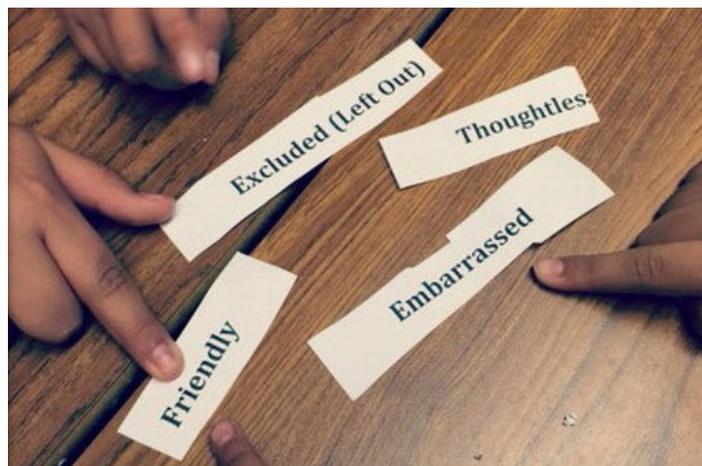
What are the Challenges to Sustaining Districtwide SEL?

Lack of adequate and stable funding, frequent leadership changes, and political and policy fluctuations are key problems to overcome in planning for social and emotional learning to become “part of the fabric” of teaching, learning, and school climate and culture across a school district.

Educating teachers and school leaders about SEL and building their expertise is highly resource-intensive. Providing training, coaching, and supervision to develop the expertise to change classroom practice is both technically demanding and expensive. Without adequate and stable funding, a district will not be able to sustain a team of high-quality, well-trained employees to guide and provide professional development, coaching, and support to principals and teachers. Although it takes years to develop this expertise in a district, a single decision not to fund a particular activity or strategy can set an initiative back by years or kill it. Even if funding is replaced, the damage from this common occurrence can be irreparable.

Various studies have estimated that the average school district superintendent tenure is between three and six years.^{2,3,4,5} In the CDI, superintendent support, ownership, and leadership have been critical to building and sustaining local funding for social and emotional learning. A superintendent can move the dial through pro-SEL decisions that affect funding or staffing, engage with donors or leaders who have access to funding, or simply use the bully pulpit to establish SEL as a priority for the district. Many superintendents have inspired staff and the community about SEL and have played significant roles in positioning SEL as a major district priority.

By the end of the fourth year of the CDI, all eight collaborating school districts will have had a change in superintendent. Two of the districts are already on their third superintendent since the initiative began. During a superintendent transition SEL is vulnerable. Fortunately, however, most of the new superintendents in the CDI districts have supported continued SEL reforms. In addition to the superintendent, the director, coordinator, or assistant superintendent who is leading the SEL initiative (the “SEL lead”) is key to building and sustaining SEL implementation. Like the superintendents, the SEL leads build relationships and inspire constituents. Their activities are linked to the quality, success, and sustainability of the initiative.



Political and policy fluctuations present another challenge to sustaining SEL. School board changes as a result of elections can affect the direction of the district, its priorities, and funding decisions. In nearly all the CDI districts, policies that restrict professional development have affected the way in which teachers receive SEL training or support. State-level changes to graduation requirements, credentialing, requirements

for instructional minutes, funding, and many other areas affect the strategies districts employ in implementing SEL districtwide.

All of these challenges can create headwinds for teachers, principals, and district leaders as they increase the depth and breadth of SEL in classrooms, in schools, and across the district.

Seven Promising Practices for Sustaining Districtwide SEL

The structured interview for each of the four study districts provided an opportunity for SEL leads to describe the linkages between their implementation plans and their actual and projected budgets. The case studies describe the chronology, strategies, and practices within each district. Below are common practices and examples that have emerged from coding, sorting, and combining shared strategies across these four districts. Many strategies are found in all four districts, while others are in a subset.

1. Sustained Quality Leadership is Vital: Get The Right People on the Right Bus

When starting an SEL initiative, consider who you choose as the SEL lead, where they sit in the organization, and their access to the superintendent and other district leaders. The SEL lead needs to have ability and autonomy to guide a district initiative, gain the respect of district and site administrators, and model social and emotional learning in their leadership and management. If the SEL lead does not sit on the superintendent's cabinet or leadership team, then it is requisite to have the SEL lead's supervisor engaged in the leadership team to advocate for SEL, integrate SEL, and keep the SEL lead informed. The SEL leads in all four study districts are "big picture" strategic thinkers who exemplify SEL in their roles.

The position of the SEL lead must be at a level that enables direct connection and collaboration with academics, curriculum and instruction, professional and leadership development, and accountability. Also, SEL leads are commonly intertwined with Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Response to Intervention (RTI), and Positive Behavior Intervention

and Supports (PBIS). Often they are in charge of these programs under the SEL umbrella. As SEL is integrated with many other departments, districts that are just getting started should consider restructuring or perhaps integrating current departments under SEL.



All four SEL leads have brought together broad, diverse groups of stakeholders on design teams or advisory committees. This has helped to broaden SEL beyond the SEL department, increasing ownership of SEL throughout the district avoiding the perception of SEL as an isolated element in schools, and increasing the odds of SEL sustainability. Other early actions in these districts that expanded initial SEL support throughout the district included rapid deployment of introductory SEL training and engaging a group of early adopters at a deeper level.

2. Begin With Your Vision! Implementation, Budget & Funding Flow From Vision

All four study districts began with their vision for what SEL would look like in classrooms and schools before they put together an implementation plan. Annual budgets for the first two years were developed through iteratively building implementation models with cost in mind. At the same time SEL leads, design teams, and advisory committees held fast to their vision as a guide for implementation planning. Most required development of funding streams that were larger than the initial planned allocation, particularly in years three to five of the SEL initiative.

Several factors contribute to the infusion of additional funding starting around year three. After a couple years of developing the SEL awareness and expertise of district and site employees, as well as parents and students, each district saw a growing constituency for SEL with a desire for deeper professional

development and support. In several districts that did not begin site implementation with evidence-based SEL programs, teachers requested materials to reduce their planning load.

In many cases districts organized implementation around their vision, inspiring constituents who drive SEL and also influencing leaders to take note and increase funding. In Austin some principals who were still one or two years away from implementation asked if they could use their own site funding to purchase adopted evidence-based programs and participate in district SEL professional development. In Chicago the SEL lead felt she had developed the “firepower” to request a significant budget allocation to support hiring 14 new SEL coaches needed to spread SEL to all elementary schools. The approval and the allocation of funding for the network specialists starting in year three is evidence of the growing importance of SEL to district leaders at the highest levels in Chicago.

3. Implementation is Everything! Consider Phasing, Depth, Breadth, and Quality

As a matter of basic equity, districtwide SEL must be present at all school sites. Because it is not feasible to implement SEL at all grades and schools simultaneously, district leaders must develop a phased-in implementation. They must ensure the phased-in implementation model doesn’t become simply a pilot in which interested schools volunteer or low-performing schools are required to participate. A multiyear phase-in plan should be made public and the timeline adhered to so that all schools are engaged within a reasonable amount of time, typically two to five years.

When designing a phase-in plan, consider the depth and breadth of implementation over time. In Austin, which used a five-year phase-in approach, schools receive in-depth professional development and on-site coaching, generally starting with the use of an evidence-based SEL program and expanding to include school culture, school climate, and integration. Washoe County started with two years of broad introductory work across the district and worked with a group of pilot schools. They then developed a two-year phase-in, with five cohorts

of schools receiving professional development for school site SEL leadership teams, including provision of an evidence-based SEL program and professional development modules for the leadership team to provide to all staff.

Wheaton-Warrenville took two years to provide 11 professional development modules at all 20 school sites simultaneously. The modules were delivered by the principals in the absence of an evidence-based SEL program.

These implementation structures illustrate how planning budget and time can involve choices between depth and breadth. All four districts integrate SEL into academic instruction, and SEL is integrated into the teaching framework for the Common Core State Standards in the districts located in states that have adopted the Common Core.

Clearly SEL must be a value-add for teachers and principals both to improve their effectiveness and impact student outcomes. The time spent on SEL must be worthwhile to teachers and principals. All four of the study districts focus deeply on integration of SEL into instruction so that it is not seen as an add-on and a burden. To achieve sustainability, all aspects of the implementation must be of high quality. Therefore, it is vital to invest in extensive training, support, and monitoring of SEL specialists and others facilitating SEL professional development and coaching, particularly as they get started.

4. Evidence-Based Programs are an Essential Part of Sustainable SEL

The development of social and emotional competencies in both students and adults is central to effective SEL implementation. Three of the four study districts are using one or more evidence-based programs (EBP) to guide students’ acquisition of social and emotional competencies. The use of an evidenced-based program provides teachers a tested and effective resource to provide SEL and teach and reinforce social and emotional competencies. Throughout the CDI and among the SEL financial sustainability project districts, school sites that do not initially implement an EBP commonly request help from the district with curriculum and instructional

approaches for teaching SEL competences to students. Essentially this is a request for an EBP. One implementation strategy is to seed the district with an introduction to SEL and then introduce and train on the EBP once there is a groundswell of support. An alternative is to follow Austin's model and that of other CDI districts in leading their K-8 school site implementation through immediate usage of an adopted SEL evidence based program. These districts have also demonstrated that teachers increase their SEL understanding and perhaps their personal social and emotional competence through teaching a scripted SEL skills curriculum.

Most middle school usage of EBPs in the study districts has been done in advisory periods. Two of the study districts are implementing a high school evidence-based program. Due to the structure of high schools and the nature of credit attainment and college preparation, districts have been providing introductory training to high school leadership teams and whole staffs, "meeting high schools where they are." Many schools are using the EBP in a freshman seminar course, while some use an advisory, and others use a combination, such as a freshman seminar plus advisory for students in tenth, eleventh, and/or twelfth grade. Freshman seminar varies from an elective course, to a requirement for at-risk students, to a requirement for all students. Most freshman seminars are one semester long, while some are structured like an advisory, which may meet only once or twice per week.

5. Influence Teacher Practice in a Systematic Manner

Although the four districts differ in their approach, all of them have adopted systematic strategies for influencing teacher practice. Basic to each district is professional development. It is provided by district SEL specialists, 5 other district staff, SEL program providers (consultants), other school-site staff through a training-of-trainer model, or a combination of these strategies.

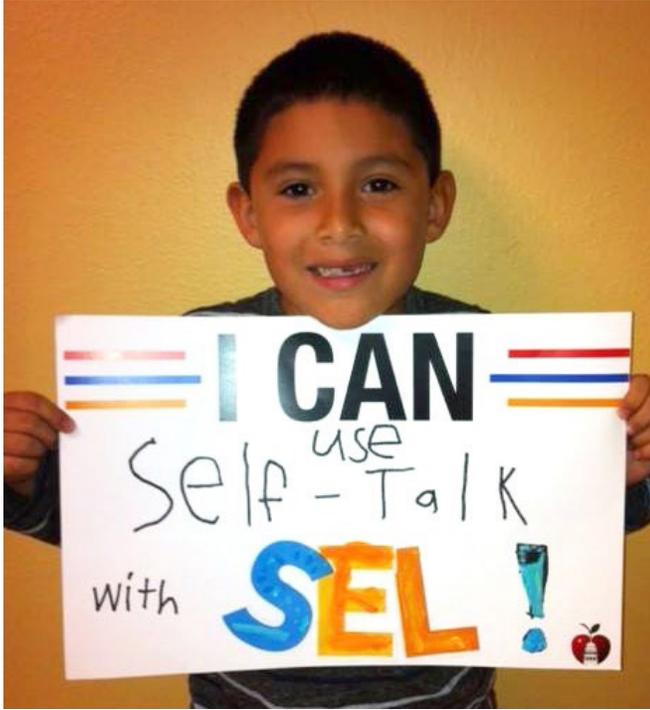
Three of the four study districts have SEL specialists, sometimes called "coaches," who lead much of the professional development. Districts have also hired experienced educators as well as practitioners with experience with children and youth and social and

emotional programming or mental health. These districts invested early in developing the SEL and adult learning expertise of the SEL specialists. As the smallest study district, Wheaton-Warrenville does not have an SEL specialist position but rather a committee that designed 11 SEL learning modules and provided professional development to principals, who then facilitated the modules with their staff over a two-year period. All four districts received support from CASEL consultants in building the SEL and facilitation skills of SEL specialists and others who design and facilitate professional development. CASEL uses a gradual release model, building district capacity to lead high quality SEL professional development on their own.

The districts that are utilizing an evidence-based SEL program have integrated EBP professional development with academic integration as well as with culture and climate professional development. All have contracted with EBP providers to provide professional development. Due to cost factors and the importance of building internal capacity and expertise, all three of these districts have been working with providers to move a greater amount of professional development "in house," with a goal of maintaining implementation with a high degree of fidelity.

Sustaining SEL will require sustained investment in professional development to deepen practice and support educators continuing in the system, along with the need for professional development for newly hired staff. After providing initial professional development for staff at all schools, several districts are changing or planning to change their primary SEL specialist focus from facilitating professional development to coaching and supporting SEL implementation at school sites. One study district is providing SEL training to all new teachers, and there has been initial discussion in all the study districts about incorporating SEL into teacher hiring and induction. Well-designed and expertly facilitated professional development motivates participants to apply their learning and to seek further development of their skills. It also builds a knowledgeable and loyal constituency for SEL. Districts should consider integrating SEL into all professional development. School districts that have a professional development department, should collaborate with that department in the design and facilitation of SEL professional

development, as have all four of the study districts. Washoe has developed several structures and strategies for integrating SEL into all professional development, including a monthly “Saturday Café” conference that attracts hundreds of teachers to integrated workshops on a single topic.



beginning of implementation, Austin and Washoe are able to utilize data to continuously improve.

- Implementing a plan: Chicago has positioned SEL specialists in each of the 14 elementary school networks. These specialists promote and integrate SEL with the leadership in each network as well as organizing and delivering professional development and support to school sites. The 20 school principals in Wheaton-Warrenville are also the leaders of SEL at their school. Through administrator meetings and retreats, the principals take part in SEL professional development and then lead SEL implementation at their sites.
- **Assess:** Washoe engages elementary, middle, and high school students in focus groups and uses this information to refine strategies for assessing student SEL competence. In Austin each principal, often with the site SEL leadership team, meets with their SEL specialist/coach twice each year to review their progress on a rubric and develop goals and a plan for the coming year. Wheaton-Warrenville surveys principals and teachers about SEL annually, and the SEL committee has used this data to drive both the content and format of SEL professional development at schools.

6. Plan, Implement, Assess, Communicate, & Demonstrate: SEL Works!

Even though these districts have been building districtwide SEL for the past three to four years, over the next decade each will face many challenges to sustaining SEL. These districts have demonstrated the need to continually plan for sustainability. Here are some examples of how they have planned ahead and built on successes to increase the odds of long-term SEL sustainability:

- **Making a plan:** From the start, Austin and Washoe collaborated with district research/evaluation/assessment/accountability leaders to develop measures, tools, and systems for assessing school site implementation and outcomes. Austin developed a tool for schools and the district to annually measure the depth of SEL at their site. Washoe includes measures of student SEL competence on their annual student climate survey. Through these actions at the



- **Communicate:** In Austin, K-8 schools and classrooms that are implementing SEL have posters with the five SEL competencies as well as calming-down strategies. Austin and Washoe have dynamic SEL websites, and Austin maintains an SEL Facebook page and uses social media,

including Twitter and Pinterest, to promote SEL. Austin has developed an SEL brand with a logo and a color scheme, along with key SEL messages. Most of the study districts post videos and publish an SEL newsletter, promoting staff, community, and even donor SEL expertise and engagement. These communication efforts help to create a common SEL language and serve to promote SEL to stakeholders.

- **Demonstrate:** Austin has published some initial studies of student outcomes on their district website. Chicago and Austin have hosted many visitors (including community members, donors, and other school districts) to see SEL in action in their schools. Due to their positions within the Collaborating District Initiative and the leadership role they have played in this sustainability study, these districts are looking at cost-effective ways to share their strategies with others. Three of these districts are developing SEL demonstration schools to identify sites to visit to see SEL in action on a consistent basis.

7. Develop Policies that Drive SEL Sustainability

One way to increase the likelihood of sustaining SEL is to codify it in policy. What does it mean to be a school or a district that has social and emotional learning? What is required of schools, teachers, principals, superintendents, and boards? The four study districts have spent just three or four years creating their plans and implementing districtwide SEL, and they are still learning. However they have taken steps to define what SEL looks like in their district, enumerate requirements, and chart a path so that SEL will continue regardless of who is on the school board and who is serving as the superintendent.

From the moment they decided to implement systemic and systematic SEL, Washoe has integrated SEL throughout their five-year strategic plan and kept it updated. Two of the districts have developed their own SEL standards, while the two Illinois districts have been using the [Illinois Social and Emotional Learning Standards](#), established by the Illinois State Board of Education. You can review the [CASEL State Scan Scorecard](#) to see whether your state has SEL standards.⁶

All four study districts have revised their teacher performance review/evaluation methods and forms during the last few years. There is a strong connection between SEL and many aspects of instructional methodology, classroom climate/culture, student behavior, and other areas in all of these systems. Although none of the study districts has included SEL by name in a performance review/evaluation system, the correlations between SEL and the performance reviews provide a potential path forward for mandating SEL as a part of teaching and learning. Some of the other CDI districts have included SEL in teacher performance reviews.

Austin is planning to develop a board SEL policy in the coming year, once all schools have begun implementing. The Oakland Unified School District adopted a [District Board Policy on SEL](#) in 2013 during that district's second year of SEL implementation.⁷ The policy states that SEL standards will guide district work and connects SEL to the strategic plan and several district goals, programs, and outcomes, including Common Core State Standards and improved student attendance. The policy also requires the superintendent to report to the board on progress in SEL implementation.

Systemic and systematic social and emotional learning across a school district is a new phenomenon. Austin, Chicago, Washoe, and Wheaton-Warrenville are among a growing number of medium and large school districts that are taking action to make SEL an integral part of the education of all students. Taking stock of their pioneering work provides us with promising practices to consider. It is now up to these districts and the many others that are starting on their SEL journey to build upon this work, add to the knowledge base, and sustain SEL to make a difference for all students and adults.



Resources

1. Osher, D., Friedman, L., Kendziora, K. (2015) CASEL/NoVo Collaborating Districts Initiative: 2014 Cross-District Outcome Evaluation Report. American Institutes for Research
2. Council of Great City Schools. (2010). "Urban School Superintendents: Characteristics, Tenure, and Salary." Available at http://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/4/Supt_Survey2010.pdf
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4. Yee, G. & Cuban, L. (1996). When is tenure long enough? A historical analysis of superintendent turnover and tenure in three urban school districts. Educational Administration Quarterly December, 32(1), 615-641.
5. Pascopella, A. (2011). Superintendent staying power. District Administration. Available at <http://www.districtadministration.com/article/superintendent-staying-power>
6. <http://www.casel.org/state-standards-for-social-and-emotional-learning/>
7. <http://www.ousd.k12.ca.us/cms/lib07/CA01001176/Centricity/Domain/143/SEL%20Board%20Policy%20BP%205031.pdf>

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1. The second, fourth, and fifth photos were taken in Austin Independent School District (AISD) and were previously posted on the AISD SEL Facebook Page. Used with Permission.
2. The second photo is of Principal, Marcus Garvey Elementary School in Chicago Public Schools. Taken by Rob Schamberg. Used with Permission.

The SEL Financial Sustainability Project was conducted by the Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The purposes of the funded project, Identifying Effective Financial Strategies to Sustain Social and Emotional Learning, were to document different districts' approaches to sustaining social and emotional learning (SEL) and to create financial models (scenarios) and planning tools that districts can use to determine how to sustain SEL long-term.