



SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING THAT LASTS

Planning for Financial Sustainability

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Social and emotional skills are critical to being a good student, citizen, and worker. Many risky behaviors (e.g., drug use, violence, bullying, and dropping out) can be prevented or reduced when multiyear, integrated efforts are used to develop students' social and emotional skills.

With the growth of the SEL field and an increasing body of empirical research, many in education are beginning to understand and value the strong relationship between social emotional learning and academic learning. Research has shown that SEL is associated with significant improvements in student outcomes ([Durlak et al.](#)). In addition, a recent study has identified the economic benefits of SEL. A [study of six prominent SEL interventions](#) found that each shows a positive return on investment with “measurable benefits that exceed costs, often by considerable amounts.” The aggregate result was an average benefit-cost ratio of about 11 to 1 among the six interventions, which means that, on average, for every dollar invested in one of these SEL interventions, there is a return of 11 dollars.

For many school districts the challenge of implementing social and emotional learning is finding the financial resources to pay for it. Declines in education funding have become commonplace in recent years, particularly at the state and local levels. In light of increasing educational costs and the fact that expenses, even with very modest escalators, are projected to outpace revenues (see Figure 1), education leaders have to be both creative and careful as they budget for new initiatives.

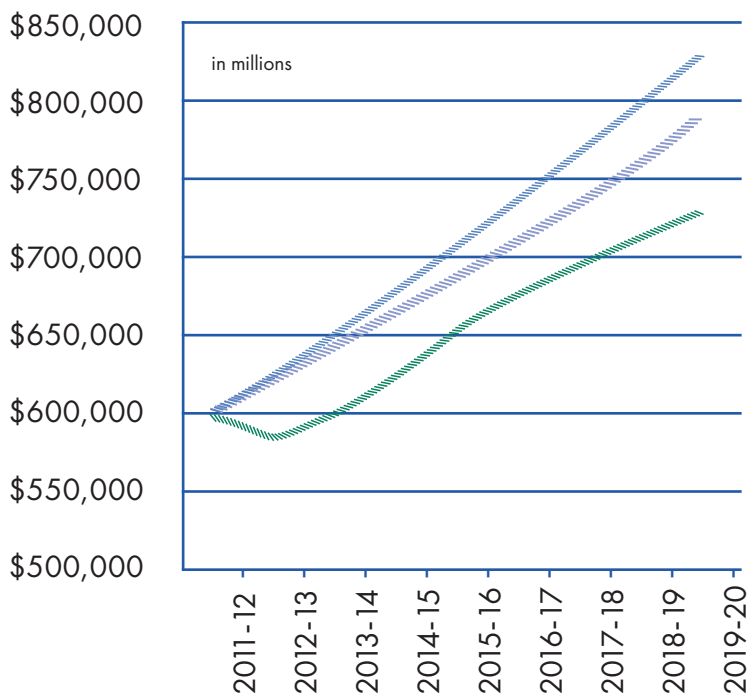
This brief focuses on the importance of planning early and consistently for SEL financial sustainability. It draws on CASEL's work and experience with eight districts around the country that are implementing systemic SEL through the [Collaborating Districts Initiative \(CDI\)](#), led by CASEL and NoVo Foundation. Three of the eight districts—Austin, Chicago, and Washoe County—worked for two years with CASEL on this financial sustainability project. The [SEL financial sustainability website](#) houses the outcomes and lessons learned from the project. It also provides a suite of tools for district and school leaders.

Why focus on SEL financial sustainability?

District leaders adopt large-scale initiatives or reforms to increase student outcomes over time. Whether the initiative or reform focuses on school improvement (e.g., structure or organization), teacher development and training, curriculum and instruction, or direct services to students, the potential for enhancing student success is usually the primary reason for implementation. However, large-scale initiatives take time to achieve student outcomes. Although other important district- or school-level outcomes may be achieved sooner, districtwide initiatives take a minimum of three to seven years to realize demonstrable student results.

Figure 1.

Built-in Cost Escalators Outpace Revenues



As educational costs rise, likely revenues are projected not to keep up, according to the Congressional Budget Office.⁴

The inherent challenge for districts is that even with multiyear grants, external funding will eventually change or end altogether, often before districts can show desired student-level outcomes. As a result, district leaders in the CDI districts, for example, are thinking about ways to maximize external funds in order to keep their SEL programs, initiatives, and staff in place when the NoVo grant ends. Without such funds, SEL programs and staff are vulnerable to cuts unless the district raises new funds, absorbs program expenses into the district's operating budget, and/or reallocates general education funds toward SEL.

School districts across the country are facing huge financial constraints that threaten priorities and reforms as costs continue to grow faster than revenues (as shown in Figure 1). A cycle of declining resources forces district leaders to repeatedly cut the budget, while presenting challenges to adopting and funding major reforms. With public demand for improvement in educational outcomes, district leaders have to be creative in allocating financial and human resources and in implementing new initiatives that are effective and sustainable long-term.

Large-scale initiatives are often funded, completely or in part, by external grants from a single private donor or public source. External funding provides an initial influx of money that districts use to hire new staff or reassign current staff, provide new or expanded programs and services, or provide technical assistance supports or training to staff. Although grants and donations often have a positive impact on the district's work, they are available for a limited number of years. This scenario applies to the CDI districts implementing districtwide social and emotional learning. Although each CDI district received a grant from NoVo Foundation to help launch its SEL initiative, CASEL learned that district leaders, and especially the SEL directors, began thinking about affordability and sustainability very early. We also learned through individual case studies that the impact of such external funding, like the NoVo Foundation grant, varies across districts based on the amount of funding over time, the district's operating budget, and its SEL department budget.

Some may see declining budgets as a reason not to implement social and emotional learning because of concerns about funding and how reallocation of district funds for SEL might affect other district priorities. All CDI districts faced significant budget cuts as they began their SEL initiatives. Although each received a grant to plan and implement districtwide SEL, the local investment in SEL varied greatly. For example, the \$250,000 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) receives from NoVo Foundation is approximately 5% of their annual SEL budget and less than .0001% percent of the district's operating budget of \$5.76 billion for the 2014-15 school year. The CPS case study revealed that the district leadership's commitment to SEL is reflected in the growth of the district's SEL staff and budget over and above the NoVo grant.

CASEL conducted case studies of Austin, Chicago, Washoe County, and Wheaton/Warrenville (a CASEL affiliated district) to learn more about their implementation of social and emotional learning,

including the district's SEL implementation strategies, organization and staffing for SEL, derivation of the SEL budget, and use of grant and district funds for SEL. The case studies consisted of interviews with the districts' SEL directors, analysis of the districts' SEL budgets, and review of SEL implementation documents and related materials. All four districts have different SEL implementation strategies and allocations of funds based on their respective priorities and SEL goals. Common among the four districts, however, is an effective plan for sustaining SEL long-term.

Planning for long-term SEL financial sustainability

Every strategic option for planning and implementing SEL will have different implications for the resources required. Determining the short- and long-term costs associated with each strategy facilitates decision-making related to the most cost-effective and sustainable investment for the district. Below are several approaches to consider. In planning for SEL implementation in your district, consider how many are part of your desired strategy.⁵

1. Consider the Resource Context.

As you plan your new SEL initiative, begin by considering what kinds of resources are or will be available and how the initiative will compete with existing priorities/initiatives already underway. The following questions can guide this discussion:

- Are you implementing other priorities simultaneously that might compete with SEL or that you can use in a productive way? Examples include professional development efforts, new curricula, and hiring priorities.
- Are dedicated funding sources available for SEL? How long will those sources be available? How are you using them now?
- To what extent are you already advancing SEL in your district? If so, how and by whom?
- Is there a comparable effort that you can replace with SEL? Does implementing SEL eliminate the need for something else?
- What are the major barriers to adopting SEL programs and practices? For example, are teachers experiencing initiative fatigue from being bombarded by a continuous flow of unrelated and perhaps competing new programs or requirements?

2. Be explicit about the desired outcomes and targets of your SEL initiative.

Financial sustainability requires you to quantify SEL delivery strategies and metrics to measure the effects. Outcomes can range from improved attendance and behavior, to number of students, schools, and/or teachers engaged, to changes in school culture and climate, as well as students' SEL competencies and skills. Once you have developed detailed descriptions of delivery strategies, you can focus on decreasing costs and/or increasing the quality of outcomes.

3. Compare strategies to find one or more that fit both your goals and cost constraints.

Some strategies will fit your goals and cost constraints better than others. The following questions, in the context of your district's SEL goals, may help guide your reflection and decision-making:

- What's more important: breadth or depth of SEL implementation?
- Are some components more vulnerable to cuts or attrition? For example, what happens when trained and experienced staff leaves?
- Can you allocate resources to reproduce long-term professional development at lower cost?
- Are there one-time investments that present an opportunity for greater financial sustainability over the long term?
- How will a particular strategy be impacted if funding is cut or leadership changes?

Planning for SEL financial sustainability is akin to planning to sustain any other large education reform initiative. CASEL wants district leaders to know that strategies exist for implementing and financially sustaining systemic social and emotional learning. CASEL's case studies of four districts reveal how each leadership team owns its district's SEL implementation from the allocation and use of district funds to hiring and investing in dedicated district SEL staff. All the districts started with an SEL vision and goals that drive their financial decisions and their implementation strategy. The tools and resources on the [CASEL SEL Financial Sustainability website](#) will help you get started or move to the next level on your SEL journey.

The [CASEL SEL Financial Sustainability Planning Tool](#), a key component of the CASEL SEL Financial Sustainability website, provides in-depth guidance, templates, and strategies for planning your districtwide SEL implementation.



Resources

1. Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., & K.B. Schellinger. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82, 405-432.
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3. Ibid.
4. Rosa, M., Simburg, S. (2013), *Designing the delivery model for a reform priority*, PowerPoint Presentation
5. Rosa, M. (2013). *Advancing the financial sustainability of an initiative*. Unpublished paper.