

ALIGNED IN ANCHORAGE

FRAMEWORK EMBEDS SEL THROUGHOUT ALASKA DISTRICT

After three decades, SEL is now embedded throughout the Anchorage School District — and not just in pockets of excellence. The backbone of this work is an SEL framework and a five-year plan for implementing it. But the overarching keys to the district's success are adaptability and vision.

BY JAN DAVIS

The Anchorage (Alaska) School District has been committed to social and emotional learning (SEL) for the last 30 years. Throughout this time, we have made progress and gone through many changes. Although we had been implementing SEL programs since 1988 and were the first district in the country to adopt SEL standards in 2006, a major turning point in our SEL

work came around 2014.

Our district had pockets of excellence but lacked an embedded, systematic SEL approach that reached all students effectively. We realized that our SEL efforts needed to become consistent across the district and we needed to focus on a key lever to realize that vision: professional learning for all teachers.

Thanks to the support of district leadership and our partnership with the Collaborative for Academic, Social,

and Emotional Learning (CASEL), today we are able to design powerful professional learning that ensures students are engaged in SEL programs with fidelity, even as we grapple with decreasing resources.

HOW DO WE APPROACH SEL?

The Anchorage School District achieves SEL in three ways:

- **Climate:** Creating a safe and respectful learning environment,



which is well-managed, supportive, and engaging with active participation.

- **Direct instruction:** Using a variety of programs to deliberately teach the SEL skills students need to be successful learners.
- **Infusion:** Integrating SEL skills throughout the day and in all curriculum areas through modeling of instructional practices that promote SEL skill practice and maximize learning. The district embraced this approach

to SEL in 2012 to move our work forward and address new challenges. The district was forced to cut its budget due to economic hardship within the state of Alaska, and we were also approaching the end of a grant from the NoVo Foundation that provided key support for our SEL work.

It was apparent that we needed to change how we build districtwide capacity for SEL. We had to work smarter, not harder, to make the SEL work become sustainable.

At this time, our SEL leadership group expanded to include not only upper district leadership but principals and teachers from elementary, middle, and high school divisions; leaders from multiple academic departments; the president of the teachers union; and the entire district SEL team, including the director, SEL/professional development specialists, and a grant manager.

Tasked with getting districtwide buy-in, building districtwide capacity, and increasing efficiency, this team incorporated the three-component approach to SEL described above. The overarching strategy was to integrate a framework that included three types of SEL initiatives happening in our schools: multitiered systems of support, positive behavioral interventions and supports, and SEL curricula (such as Second Step and Lion's Quest).

THE VITAL ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

All three components of the district's SEL approach rely on supporting teachers to understand SEL and build

CASEL'S COLLABORATING DISTRICTS INITIATIVE

In 2011, CASEL launched the Collaborating Districts Initiative to study and scale a systemic approach to implementing high-quality, evidence-based academic, social, and emotional learning in large, urban school districts. The original cohort of districts included some of the most complex school systems in the country. As of 2018, the initiative has expanded to 21 partner districts, serving more than 1.7 million students a year.

Partner districts receive consulting and support for a systemic approach to SEL implementation. SEL becomes a way of doing the work, embedded in everything from district strategic plans and budgets to hiring decisions, school climate initiatives, and classroom instruction. School leaders create safe and supportive learning environments.

To support their work, partner districts also engage regularly with each other in a learning community to share implementation strategies, successes, and challenges, and they explore critical questions around SEL implementation such as assessment, equity, adult SEL, and academic integration.

Districts are seeing results. Teachers create classrooms where students are engaged, respected, and empowered — and where they succeed academically. Academic achievement, graduation rates, and attendance are up, suspensions and disciplinary incidents are down, and staff and students are more positive.

Key lessons, strategies, and resources from the initiative are available at <https://casel.org/resources>.

STUDENT	AWARENESS	MANAGEMENT
SELF	I AM ... knowledgeable	I CAN ... capable
SOCIAL	I CARE ... caring	I WILL ... responsible

ADULT	AWARENESS	MANAGEMENT
SELF	I SEE YOU ... knowledgeable	I BELIEVE IN YOU ... capable
SOCIAL	I CARE ABOUT YOU ... caring	I SUPPORT YOU ... responsible

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT K-12 SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) STANDARDS	
<p>SELF-AWARENESS</p> <p>1A. Student demonstrates awareness of his/her emotions. <i>"I am able to identify and communicate how I am feeling."</i></p> <p>1B. Student demonstrates awareness of his/her personal traits. <i>"I am aware of what I like and dislike as well as my strengths and challenges."</i></p> <p>1C. Student demonstrates awareness of his/her external supports. <i>"I am aware of where I can find help and support."</i></p> <p>1D. Student has a sense of personal responsibility. <i>"I am aware of my responsibilities at school."</i></p>	<p>SELF-MANAGEMENT</p> <p>2A. Student demonstrates ability to manage emotions constructively. <i>"I can appropriately handle my feelings."</i></p> <p>2B. Student demonstrates honesty and integrity. <i>"I can act in an honest manner."</i></p> <p>2C. Student uses effective decision-making skills. <i>"I can make appropriate decisions."</i></p> <p>2D. Student demonstrates ability to set and achieve goals. <i>"I can set and achieve goals that will make me more successful."</i></p>
<p>SOCIAL AWARENESS</p> <p>3A. Student demonstrates awareness of other people's emotions and perspectives. <i>"I care about the feelings and opinions of others."</i></p> <p>3B. Student demonstrates consideration for others and a desire to positively contribute to the community. <i>"I care about others and do my part to make my school community better."</i></p> <p>3C. Student demonstrates an awareness of cultural issues and a respect for human dignity and differences. <i>"I care about and respect the individual differences of others."</i></p> <p>3D. Student can read social cues. <i>"I care about how I read others and how they read me."</i></p>	<p>SOCIAL MANAGEMENT</p> <p>4A. Student uses positive communication and social skills to interact effectively with others. <i>"I will interact appropriately with others."</i></p> <p>4B. Student develops constructive relationships. <i>"I will work on having positive relationships."</i></p> <p>4C. Student demonstrates the ability to prevent and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways. <i>"I will learn to handle conflicts in constructive ways."</i></p>

Source: Anchorage School District.

the skills to embody it, teach it, and integrate it throughout their teaching.

The foundation for this capacity building is the ASD K-12 Social & Emotional Learning Standards, a set of 15 standards outlining the skills students and adults need to be successful at home, at school, in the workplace, and in life. (See table above.) With those standards in place, we can tailor SEL support to teachers' needs while ensuring consistency across the district.

At the core of our professional

learning are SEL specialists, who are former teachers and experts in both SEL practices and professional learning methods. Their responsibilities include working with district staff to build capacity for SEL; working with principals and teachers; supporting staff; troubleshooting issues with implementing the framework; and collaborating with CASEL and other districts.

Because the SEL specialists are housed in the professional learning department, they have helped infuse SEL

throughout the district's professional learning, including a template that guides the planning for professional learning activities. When we began developing and using the framework, the district employed seven SEL specialists to get the work going. Over time, that number has decreased out of financial necessity.

The specialists have proven helpful for differentiating the support we provide to teachers across the district. When we began implementing the framework, schools were in different

starting places. Some had already implemented fully certain components but not others, while some were new to all components.

Each school chose which component it would focus on in the first year and the order in which the three components would be implemented over time. Once those decisions were in place, the SEL department put together a learning plan for the next three years.

Scheduling the first-year professional learning involved striking a delicate balance. With only two SEL specialists, we couldn't schedule all the activities to be overlapping or back-to-back, but we had to ensure that the professional learning occurred before the start of the school year.

With careful planning, the majority of the professional learning activities took place before the start of school and ended before the end of the first quarter.

Fortunately, because some of the SEL programs had been implemented in the district for many years, we had a cadre of teachers willing to assist with the professional learning — a bonus not just for our short-term goals but for long-term sustainability.

The professional learning varied based on the programs schools were implementing, but all included ongoing support throughout the year. Outside consultants with special expertise facilitated some of the programs, while the district's SEL specialists led others in a train-the-trainer approach so that school-based personnel (including principals) could lead the efforts at their own schools.

We also offered dedicated sessions for teachers and other certified staff new to their schools. Professional learning activities were never one-shot workshops, and we encouraged participants to form learning communities with colleagues in the district.

COLLABORATING DISTRICTS INITIATIVE

As we began to envision the systemic framework and a plan for implementing, we began our collaboration with CASEL, leaders in the field of SEL. In 2011, CASEL began the Collaborating Districts Initiative, an effort to build capacity for SEL at the district level.

Anchorage was one of the original three members of the community of practice, along with Austin Independent School District in Texas and Cleveland Metropolitan School District in Ohio. The initiative later added seven more districts.

Through this collaborative, we not only learned from CASEL's expertise and resources, but also from other districts engaged in making SEL systemic. Through a Collaborating Districts Initiative grant, 10 members of the Anchorage SEL leadership team (district senior staff, principals, classroom teachers, and SEL staff) visited Chicago Public Schools to learn how the district integrated SEL into its multitiered systems of support framework, how students accessed the supports, and how the district structured professional learning.

On the last day of the trip, our team worked on applying what we had learned to the needs of our district. This extra day devoted to reflecting and group work was important. We began to take ownership of the vision for our own district and left Chicago with a draft framework ready to be vetted by the entire SEL leadership team.

KEY STRATEGIES AND LESSONS

The following conditions have made our progress possible:

Leadership and vision for SEL: In the beginning, it was important to get buy-in not only from teachers and site administrators but at all levels of district

leadership. In 2011, the district formed an SEL executive committee whose focus was to build SEL capacity within the district office and foster SEL champions.

The committee included the SEL coordinator, Title VI director, elementary, middle, and high school executive directors, and assistant superintendents. In 2014, once this group got people on board, it was time to make the effort districtwide and build the capacity of teachers and other staff to do SEL.

Focusing our SEL programming and supporting its implementation:

For many years, schools had flexibility to select curricula. But with a variety of SEL curricula, programs, lessons, and materials in the district, it was difficult to provide resources and effective professional learning along with the support needed to ensure fidelity — and it would only become more so with fewer SEL specialists.

By limiting the number of SEL curricula used in the district, our two SEL specialists could support teachers to implement the programs effectively even with limited resources. For elementary, we selected two programs from which schools could choose. For middle school, the district required one program. For high school, the SEL team made a decision that a direct-instruction SEL curriculum would not be taught. Instead, we would use a crosswalk between the skills embedded in the district's SEL standards and employability standards with implementation supported by the SEL specialists.

Taking time to plan and build:

Because the decision to limit curriculum choices amounted to a big change, we dedicated a year to planning. During this time, the specialists met with elementary principals monthly to help them feel

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comfortable and buy in to the programs.

We gave schools three years to implement the multitiered systems of support, positive behavioral interventions and supports, and SEL programs, and they could choose which to start with. The SEL specialists provided intensive support in the beginning stages.

During the first school year of implementation, all elementary teachers engaged in professional learning on the programs they were implementing. Each school also had an SEL site-based specialist, an existing staff member who received a salary addendum to participate in monthly meetings with district SEL staff and support colleagues in implementing SEL.

Planning for sustainability and

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flexibility in the face of change:

The success of the last two years of implementation has not only provided the needed professional learning to school staff, but also has built capacity within schools to lead and support SEL programs and efforts going forward.

This will be important in the 2018-19 school year as the SEL team undergoes change. SEL is now part of the teaching and learning department, and we are moving from having two SEL specialists to one coordinator of social and emotional learning and behavior support.

After three decades, SEL is now

embedded throughout the district and not just in pockets of excellence. The backbone of this work is the framework and the five-year plan for implementing it. But the overarching keys to the success we have seen are adaptability and vision.

We never forget why we are doing this work. We know that SEL helps leaders, teachers, and students thrive, and SEL becomes a habit of practice when the entire community remembers that we use our SEL skills all day long, not just for a 30-minute block once a week.

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