



BY LORILEI SWANSON, JULIA BEATY, AND LAURANN GALLITTO PATEL

**T**he need for social and emotional learning (SEL) has increased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unprecedented school closings have led to social isolation, illness, and economic hardship — exacerbating anxiety — and reopening plans continue to cause

uncertainty and stress. These factors heighten the urgency to equip educators and school leaders to support the development of student SEL.

SEL experts around the country have responded to the crisis by giving educators and school counselors resources, tool kits, guides, and professional learning to support student

SEL. Federal and state governments have responded by providing COVID-19 relief funding specifically tied to supporting student SEL. But, too often, a key piece is missing: To sufficiently nurture their students' SEL, educators must partner with families.

Parents and guardians are the experts on their children's unique



## Schools and families can work together to build positive and safe school climates and develop effective strategies to reinforce SEL at home and school.

social, emotional, and behavioral development. As their children's first teachers, they have been influencing and developing social and emotional skills since birth. Given the influence of both families and educators, a plan that focuses on one without the other is likely to fall short.

The Carolina Family Engagement Center is positioned to help schools implement SEL strategies in partnership with families and community partners and model effective strategies for other districts and schools, especially during crises like the pandemic. The Carolina Family Engagement Center is one of 12 statewide family engagement centers funded by a five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education under the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Our work is based on over 40 years of research demonstrating that increased levels of family engagement are associated with numerous desired student outcomes, including improvements in student achievement, behavior, attendance, and graduation rates (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). These benefits hold true across all racial, ethnic, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

During the pandemic, we saw the immense capacity that families have to share responsibility with schools in supporting students. As schools

asked parents to instantly become teachers, administrators, attendance monitors, and information technology experts, adding to their typical family and work roles, parents rose to meet the challenge of supporting academic learning. Families are equally capable of collaborating with educators in supporting students' social and emotional development and its connection to academics, but too many schools are missing the opportunity to nurture those partnerships.

In this article, we share what we've learned during the pandemic about how schools and families can work together to build positive and safe school climates that promote learning and growth, develop effective strategies that reinforce SEL across home and school, and provide opportunities for students to practice and apply those strategies in multiple contexts.

### **BUILDING THE FOUNDATION**

The Carolina Family Engagement Center, which is part of the College of Education at the University of South Carolina, engages in professional learning with and provides technical assistance in family engagement to identified districts, schools, families, educators, and communities through five regional family engagement liaisons across South Carolina.

Although the center supports all families, it promotes equity by

focusing on families and students who historically experience disparities in educational opportunities. During the midst of the pandemic, we supported schools in South Carolina via remote work with school partners who were making decisions about virtual, in-person, or hybrid models, as well as about their start date, school calendar, and methods of instruction.

As part of the center's work, we work closely with pre-K-12 schools in seven school districts across South Carolina. The center helps build capacity of families to engage in and support their students' learning and helps build capacity of educators to work collaboratively with families.

We base our work on the Dual Capacity-Building Framework (Mapp & Kuttner, 2019), which explains that school communities are better equipped to collaborate and engage with families when their approaches are relational and trusting, asset-based, collaborative, interactive, linked to learning or development, and culturally responsive and respectful.

Also key to our approach with schools is partnership with state and local organizations, linking school communities with resources to better support the educational needs of students and families.

To equip educators, parents, and administrators with the skills necessary to build SEL at school and at home, we

<b>FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS FRAMEWORK</b>		
<b>Family-school partnership strategies recommended by CASEL</b>	<b>Guiding questions developed by Swanson &amp; Beaty</b>	<b>Examples from Anderson School District Two and Chester County School District</b>
<b>Use two-way communication with families.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the two-way communication vehicles your school or district has in place to maximize teamwork and minimize misunderstandings as to what SEL is and why it is important to high-quality education?</li> <li>• What opportunities are there to invite families to share their expertise about their children?</li> </ul>	Used a variety of formats for communicating with families, including email, phone calls, text messages, digital platforms, and paper copies of newsletters about SEL to ensure that all families have access to information and feel welcome to participate in SEL opportunities.
<b>Engage families.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What events and activities are planned that give families opportunities to learn more about and engage in SEL?</li> <li>• What initiatives do you have in place that give an open door and welcoming invitation for all families to be involved in SEL?</li> </ul>	Partnered with the National Alliance on Mental Illness to invite families to wear lime green at a football game to build awareness for mental health and facilitated a parent-led suicide prevention awareness event for students and community members.
<b>Increase family involvement in academic, social, and emotional learning.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the initiatives or strategies your school or district uses to help families be more involved in SEL at home?</li> </ul>	Created virtual summer family Olympics packets and gave away resiliency kits with materials and fun activities for families to engage in at home to support their student’s SEL and academic learning at home.
<b>Involve families in decision-making.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the opportunities that your school or district has in place to give all families an opportunity to have a seat at the table when it comes to decision-making about SEL?</li> <li>• Do families participate on SEL teams?</li> </ul>	Invited families to serve on student well-being advisory boards and conduct surveys and virtual town hall meetings to learn from families how to best support students during the pandemic.
<b>Bridge constraints.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the unique measures your school or district has in place to bridge barriers for families, such as language, work schedules, limited access to technology and Internet, transportation, child care, lack of knowledge about opportunities, previous negative school experiences, and perceptions about availability of school staff?</li> </ul>	Offered paper copies of essential information and learning packets delivered by bus drivers along with school lunches during school closings.
<b>Increase capacity of school staff to partner with families.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the professional learning opportunities you have provided school staff to help them gain skills in building meaningful, culturally responsive family-school partnerships to support student learning and development?</li> </ul>	Offered professional learning in adverse childhood experiences, youth mental health first aid, and trauma-informed skills and strategies.

follow three recommendations of the EASEL Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Shafer, 2018).

First, trust is critical to the success of family-school partnerships and SEL. Building trust starts by learning about families, whether through surveys, phone calls, or open houses, to learn

about concerns, unique talents, and likes or dislikes.

Second, schools should invite families to create SEL goals for their children, including specific skills, listen to families’ ideas about ways their children’s SEL skills are benefitting them at school and at home, and provide

information about how SEL practices connect to learning goals for literacy, math, and other core content areas.

Communication is key and can be supported by selecting an internal staff contact focused on SEL and family engagement who can serve as a liaison between educators and families and

<b>FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS FRAMEWORK</b>		
<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Guiding questions developed by Swanson &amp; Beaty</b>	<b>Examples from Anderson School District Two and Chester County School District</b>
<b>Respond to COVID-19 (resource allocation).</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How does the district or school plan to use state and federal funds to support SEL and family engagement in response to the impact of COVID-19 on student mental health and well-being?</li> <li>How does the district or school provide additional supports to students and families to help students recover from losses in both academics and social and emotional well-being?</li> </ul>	School improvement council members shared their COVID-19 experiences about student, family, and teacher well-being after unexpected school closings and substantial changes in school routines and made spending recommendations for available federal funding (i.e. Title I and Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds).
<b>Develop systemic approaches.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the systemic strategies that your school and district are using to ensure that SEL is embedded throughout the school community?</li> </ul>	Assessed, supported, and evaluated student behavior, SEL, and academic interventions throughout the district, as well as embedded throughout instructional guidebooks for teachers, giving teachers strategies necessary to consistently use SEL practices supportive of whole student development.
<b>Expand mental health services.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What strategies and practices are in place to meet the needs of students requiring the highest level of mental health interventions and supports?</li> </ul>	Streamlined referral processes to virtually delivered services; formed active partnerships with local mental health agencies to provide one mental health counselor in every school who offered virtual and in-person counseling services to students and families; and increased access to mental health-supportive resources for students, educators, and staff.
<b>Form partnerships with community members</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What local community resources will you use to strengthen SEL and build connections with all families (e.g. partnerships with nonprofits, businesses, and faith-based institutions)?</li> </ul>	Conducted weekly wellness visits and phone calls by district and school staff at families' homes for students facing barriers to learning such as chronic absenteeism, failing grades, food insecurity, illness, poverty, etc., and linked them to community-based supports through organizational partnerships (i.e. SC Thrive, a nonprofit linking eligible beneficiaries to local, state, and federal supports).
<b>Find a program champion.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who has considerable influence within the school community and capacity to influence staff and schools to support your SEL initiative? Who is key to this effort?</li> </ul>	Identified a well-respected leader in the school community willing to play an instrumental role in promoting SEL and expanding internal capacity to develop a cohesive, comprehensive approach to supporting student SEL and mental well-being. Both Phillips and Pickens are exemplary program champions who partner with other leaders in their district.
<b>Celebrate and recognize success.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the practices you use to recognize and celebrate your achievements in SEL and family-school partnerships?</li> </ul>	Celebrated both small and large achievements in SEL across school communities (e.g. Kid of the Month Award, social media posts, honorariums during school board meetings, and newsletter articles featuring school community wins).

by developing “a ‘notes-back-and-forth’ journal highlighting student successes and SEL skills, giving families [opportunity] to reply with information about SEL in the home” (Albright et

al., 2011, p. 6).

Finally, schools should create a resource center for families, considering not only physically accessible resources, but also digital ones for remote learners

who may have limited in-person contact with school facility-based resources, as well as for families who have barriers to visiting the school building. To ensure equitable access for all families,

educators should offer any printed or digital materials in a language-accessible format and arrange interpretive services to support meetings with families.

## STRATEGIES AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

To help schools apply these principles to their family engagement work, we developed a series of guiding questions, drawing on six key strategies identified by CASEL (2019) for implementing SEL through a family-school partnerships framework. (See table on p. 48.) These questions are intended to help school partners evaluate how they implement equitable strategies and think about ways to strengthen their efforts.

We piloted these questions by interviewing two SEL leaders, Teresa Phillips in Anderson School District Two and Will Pickens in Chester County School District, two South Carolina school districts leading the way in SEL.

Phillips is a licensed, master's-level social worker and the mental health services and Project AWARE coordinator with the Anderson district, which received a five-year federal grant funded by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to increase awareness, identification, and supports to students facing social, emotional, and mental health issues.

Pickens is the chief administrative services officer in Chester County, a rural school district using multiple approaches to support student SEL and holistic well-being. These interviews suggest that using the guiding questions helps schools ensure that they are reaching all families in an equitable manner by evaluating their strengths and gaps in implementing effective strategies.

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

The challenges of COVID-19 spurred us to create six additional strategies and guiding questions to use with our school partners. (See table on

p. 49.) During the pandemic, widespread isolation and disconnection have put students', families', and educators' emotional well-being at risk. It is crucial for educators to engage in responsive listening about evolving needs amid the changing landscape of learning formats, with remote, hybrid, and in-person learning occurring simultaneously, sequentially, and cyclically depending on the school district.

Based on the interviews with the two school district leaders described previously and on regional family engagement liaisons' experiences in school communities, we identified six strategies and guiding questions to help schools create responsive, systemic approaches to mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on their communities.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EQUITY

The questions and strategies we have developed are based on our belief that it is imperative to use an equity lens when implementing SEL within a family-school partnerships framework. The challenges we have collectively faced over the past year, including the pandemic and heightened awareness of racial injustice, have only underscored the importance of equity and the strides we need to make.

This requires we stop telling students how to behave and instead focus on providing them with opportunities to reflect on their behavior and build self-regulation in positive and supportive environments (Education Trust, 2020). It requires moving beyond simply providing students with access to adequate mental health support and instead creating learning spaces where students feel emotionally and physically safe.

Finally, and most importantly, it involves going beyond teaching students how to empathize and respect diverse cultures and moves toward building empathy and cultural competence in the adults who care for them.

## REFERENCES

**Albright, M.I., Weissberg, R.P.,**

**& Dusenbury, L.A. (2011).** *School-family partnership strategies to enhance children's social, emotional, and academic growth.* National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, Education Development Center Inc.

**Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2019).** *Strategies for establishing school-family partnerships in support of SEL.* [schoolguide.casel.org/resource/strategies-for-establishing-school-family-partnerships-in-support-of-sel/](https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/strategies-for-establishing-school-family-partnerships-in-support-of-sel/)

**Cotton, K. & Wiklund, R.K. (1989).** *Parent involvement in education.* Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. [educationnorthwest.org/resources/parent-involvement-education](https://educationnorthwest.org/resources/parent-involvement-education)

**The Education Trust. (2020, August).** *Social, emotional, and academic development through an equity lens.* [edtrust.org/social-emotional-and-academic-development-through-an-equity-lens/](https://edtrust.org/social-emotional-and-academic-development-through-an-equity-lens/)

**Henderson, A.T. & Mapp, K.L. (2002).** *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement.* SEDL.

**Mapp, K.L. & Kuttner, P.J. (2019).** *The dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships (Version 2).* [www.dualcapacity.org/](https://www.dualcapacity.org/)

**Schafer, L. (2018).** Family engagement and SEL. *Usable Knowledge.* [www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/18/07/family-engagement-and-sel](https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/18/07/family-engagement-and-sel)

**Lorlei Swanson (swansol@mailbox.sc.edu) is the upstate regional family engagement liaison, Julia Beaty (beaty2@mailbox.sc.edu) is the upper central regional family engagement liaison, and Laurann Gallitto Patel (gallittl@mailbox.sc.edu) is the midlands regional family engagement liaison at the Carolina Family Engagement Center. ■**