



**LANL  
FOUNDATION**  
*Investing in Learning  
& Human Potential*

SEL  
RESEARCH  
REPORT

**2022** September

INTEGRATING

# Social Emotional Learning

IN NORTHERN NEW MEXICO'S SCHOOLS

The Los Alamos National Laboratory Foundation's mission is to support public education, learning, and community development in a region that includes 18 tribal nations and seven counties: Los Alamos, Mora, Rio Arriba, San Miguel, Sandoval, Santa Fe, and Taos. LANLF is committed to the improvement of learning opportunities and support structures that foster whole child development and community thriving.

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## introduction & background



As we settle into the 21st Century, wellbeing is increasingly becoming the central focus for families, educators, and communities as we individually and collectively navigate uncertain and disruptive times. The science and practices behind integrating SEL into the fabric of 21st Century education point to important shifts in understanding how people learn and develop and have important implications for education.<sup>1</sup> Our social, emotional, cognitive, cultural, and linguistic development are bound together and unfold based on the experiences we have access to in schools, communities, and homes—including being well-known and cared for across contexts. Access to SEL is not only essential for babies, children, and youth, it is imperative for the adults who care for and educate them.<sup>2</sup>

*A consensus study from the National Academies of Sciences concluded that effective instruction depends on understanding this complex interplay among students' prior knowledge, experiences, motivations, interests, language, and cognitive skills and the cultural, social, cognitive, and emotional characteristics of the learning environment (National Academies, 2018). When challenging work is coupled with high expectations and high levels of support, and when students are actively working and cognitively, socially, and emotionally engaged, this produces greater motivation, stronger identity development, and deeper learning. (Immordino-Yang, Darling-Hammond, and Krone, 2019).*

Nationwide, efforts to effectively implement SEL at the district, school, and classroom levels have dramatically increased in the last two decades. In New Mexico, the task is large for educators across the sector to integrate SEL into their practice and to support the wellbeing of students, teachers, and administrators while systematically implementing best practices that are culturally and linguistically sustaining to New Mexico's children and their families. As the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) recognizes, “the promise of a great public education is built upon a foundation of healthy, safe, supportive, and joyful schools, students, and families.”<sup>3</sup>



# introduction

Research over the past decade has shown that access to comprehensive SEL can make a positive difference in young people's lives and that development of social and emotional competencies occurs throughout the lifespan.<sup>4</sup> We have also learned that social, emotional, and cognitive competencies can be explicitly taught. In one large scale study, students who participated in evidence based SEL programs showed significantly more positive outcomes in six domains when compared to students without access to explicit SEL. Students with SEL access showed improved outcomes in **1** | social and emotional skills, **2** | attitudes toward self and others, **3** | positive social behavior, **4** | behavior challenges, **5** | emotional distress, and **6** | academic performance including an 11 to 13 percentage-point gain in achievement.<sup>5</sup>

Other studies affirm that access to effective SEL programming led to decreases in behavior challenges, emotional distress, and substance abuse.<sup>6</sup> Research has also established an association between social emotional competence and post-school success, including increased rates of graduation and full-time employment by the age of 25.<sup>7</sup> These findings were consistent across elementary, middle, and high school, and across suburban, rural, and urban school settings. SEL is most effective when social, emotional, and academic development are systematically and systemically integrated at the classroom, school, and district levels in culturally and linguistically sustaining ways<sup>8</sup> by implementing effective SEL programs as well as integrating SEL practices into the cultures of our schools and classrooms.<sup>9</sup>

The rising importance of SEL nationally has been mirrored locally in New Mexico. Although SEL program implementation varies from district to district and school to school, most schools and districts in our region are involved in this work. In response to the recognition that social and emotional development goes hand in hand with academic development, many states have adopted frameworks, standards/competencies and/or guidelines that address this very issue, acknowledging that students' academic performance is directly tied to their mental, physical, social, and emotional health and wellbeing. The Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), which funds 55 schools in New Mexico, has committed to SEL as an initiative, acknowledging that when returning to school after the COVID-19 pandemic "students may not be ready to participate in formal learning until they feel emotionally, physically, and psychologically safe." In line with this trend, in January 2021, the NMPED released their own SEL Framework, a guide to support New Mexico's schools to fully engage in the critical and conscientious work of meeting the needs of the whole child by:

- training and supporting our educators,
- working collaboratively with our students and families, and
- investing in the systems and infrastructure that our children need and deserve so that they can thrive.<sup>10</sup>

# introduction



At the state level—and in districts and schools throughout our region—the mechanisms for developing systematic integration and understanding of this work are still being developed. The PED’s framework is an important start for helping educators throughout New Mexico develop a common understanding of SEL. As we work to identify our aspirations for children and youth’s SEL development, it will be equally important to identify and create the conditions that are necessary for children, youth, and adults to learn and engage in SEL practices that support wellbeing and thriving.

*Social Emotional Learning is the foundation from which education, in all of its forms, should be conducted and experienced—beginning with the building of community through relationship. The feelings of connectedness students (and teachers) gain from this foundation open the doors to deeper, more meaningful learning.— Northern NM School Counselor*

# systemic SEL approaches

As the education ecosystem adapts to prepare students for thriving in the 21st Century, skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity become central to the education process. SEL identifies practices that provide students with opportunities to engage with one another, and adults, to develop cognitively, interpersonally, and intra-personally. 21st Century students need access to pedagogical approaches, within a safe classroom environment, that support them to develop skills to navigate group conflict, understand differing perspectives, think critically, and problem solve." The most accepted SEL practices are a vessel to ensuring all children have access to healthy, safe, supportive, and joyful learning opportunities.

*A systemic approach to SEL intentionally cultivates a caring, participatory, and equitable learning environment and evidence-based practices that actively involve all students [and the adults who work with them] in their social, emotional, and academic growth. This approach infuses social and emotional learning into every part of students' daily lives—across all of their classrooms, during all times of the school day, and when they are in their homes and communities. (<https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/>)*

In recent years, much of the research guiding SEL implementation in schools has been spearheaded by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). While there are many different definitions and implementation strategies of SEL in use, CASEL defines the area of study as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”<sup>12</sup> The framework and approach from CASEL is the current consensus among researchers, and one that the BIE, NMPED, and LANL Foundation have adopted to guide their work. The model encourages developing positive, healthy relationships between children, families, educators, and community members to support whole child development cognitively, socially, and emotionally.

*SEL is learning*

*how to be a happy*

*and successful*

*human being.*

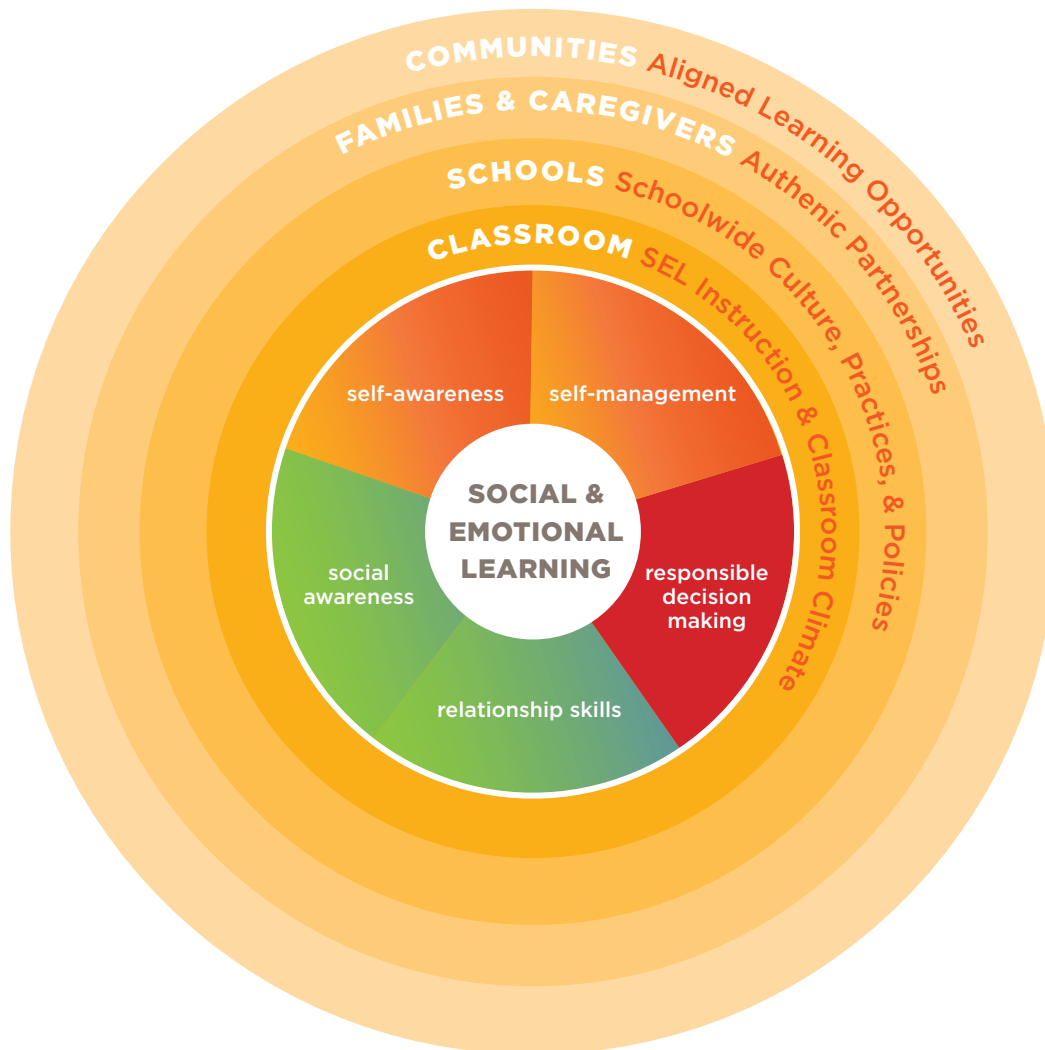
NORTHERN NM  
COMMUNITY SCHOOL TEACHER



# systemic SEL approaches

CASEL's framework is a systemic approach that focuses on five broad student competencies: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness. The framework identifies that this work goes beyond classroom activities and exists within an ecosystem that includes communities and parents. "More than a single lesson or activity, SEL is integrated across key settings where students live and learn: classrooms, schools, homes, and communities."<sup>15</sup>

| **FIGURE 1** |  
**CASEL'S SEL Framework**  
(<https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>)



# systemic SEL approaches



A preponderance of evidence has shown that students are more successful when they have access to opportunities that help them to “know and manage themselves, take the perspectives of others and relate effectively with them, and make sound choices about personal and social decisions” (p. 8).<sup>14</sup> It is important to recognize that students develop these skills and perspectives by having access to relationships and contexts that are cognitively, socially and emotionally developmentally constitutive.<sup>15</sup> A focus on these areas shows improved academic outcomes, including test scores and attendance, increased graduation rates, and reduced criminal behavior, among other benefits.<sup>16</sup> What is more, not only are the learned skills transferable across contexts, one context can positively (or negatively) affect another context.<sup>17</sup> These outcomes outline the importance of supporting a whole child’s development beyond simple academic standards and performance assessments by ensuring students have access to relationships and contexts that attend to their holistic development. There is some evidence that access to holistic SEL initiatives can positively impact outcomes in students’ adult lives<sup>18</sup>, and even in our students’ future children’s lives.<sup>19</sup> Longitudinal studies, along with many other large-scale studies clearly show that systemic access to learning environments that integrate social, emotional, and cognitive development improve students’ academic and health outcomes across multiple dimensions into adulthood.<sup>20</sup>

*I feel social emotional learning  
needs to be an integral  
part of education.  
We need to go beyond  
data driven instruction  
and look at wellness  
as having equal importance.*

NORTHERN NM  
TEACHER



### **Access to SEL has long-term impacts across generations:**

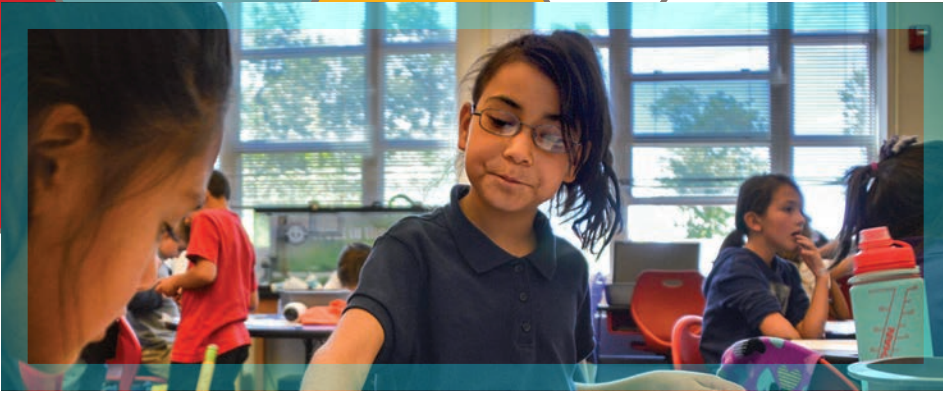
The sustained impact of effective SEL implementation has been highlighted through a longitudinal, cross-generational study conducted by the University of Washington and the University of Colorado. The study shows long term benefits of a universal elementary school preventive intervention program, Raising Healthy Children, implemented in the 1980s for parents, children, and teachers in 18 public schools in Seattle, WA. This program was one of the first to test the idea that problem behaviors could be prevented by providing

- 1 | elementary teachers with training in classroom management and instruction,
- 2 | parents with skills to promote opportunities for children's active involvement in the classroom and family and,
- 3 | children with social and emotional skills training.

By the time they were 18, students who went through the program demonstrated better academic achievement than non-participants and were less likely to engage in violence, substance use or unsafe sex. By their 30s, the program participants had gone further in school, tended to be better off financially, and scored better on mental health assessments.<sup>21</sup>

In a first of its kind study, beginning in the early 2000s, researchers conducted a study on the children whose parents had participated in the program in the 1980's. Outcomes examined in the offspring were self-regulation (emotion, attention, and behavioral regulation), cognitive capabilities and social capabilities. Risk behaviors, including substance use and delinquency and early onset of sexual activity, were also considered. The study found that the offspring generation had "fewer developmental delays in the first five years of life, fewer behavior problems, fewer symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and better cognitive, academic, and emotional maturity in the classroom compared to the control group. They were also significantly less likely to report using drugs or alcohol as a teenager."<sup>22</sup>

## systemic SEL approaches



### A NATION AT HOPE

Human learning is social, emotional, and cognitive and our skills in these areas grow and change over time, along with our values, attitudes, beliefs, and mindsets, based on the environments and experiences to which we have access. The recently released consensus, written by an esteemed panel of experts convened by the Aspen Institute, confirms:<sup>23</sup>

*Decades of research in human development, cognitive and behavioral neuroscience, and educational practice and policy, as well as other fields, have illuminated that major domains of human development—social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, academic—are deeply intertwined in the brain and in behavior. All are central to learning. Strengths or weaknesses in one area foster or impede development in others; each carries aspects of the other (Jones and Kahn, 2017, p. 4)<sup>24</sup>.*

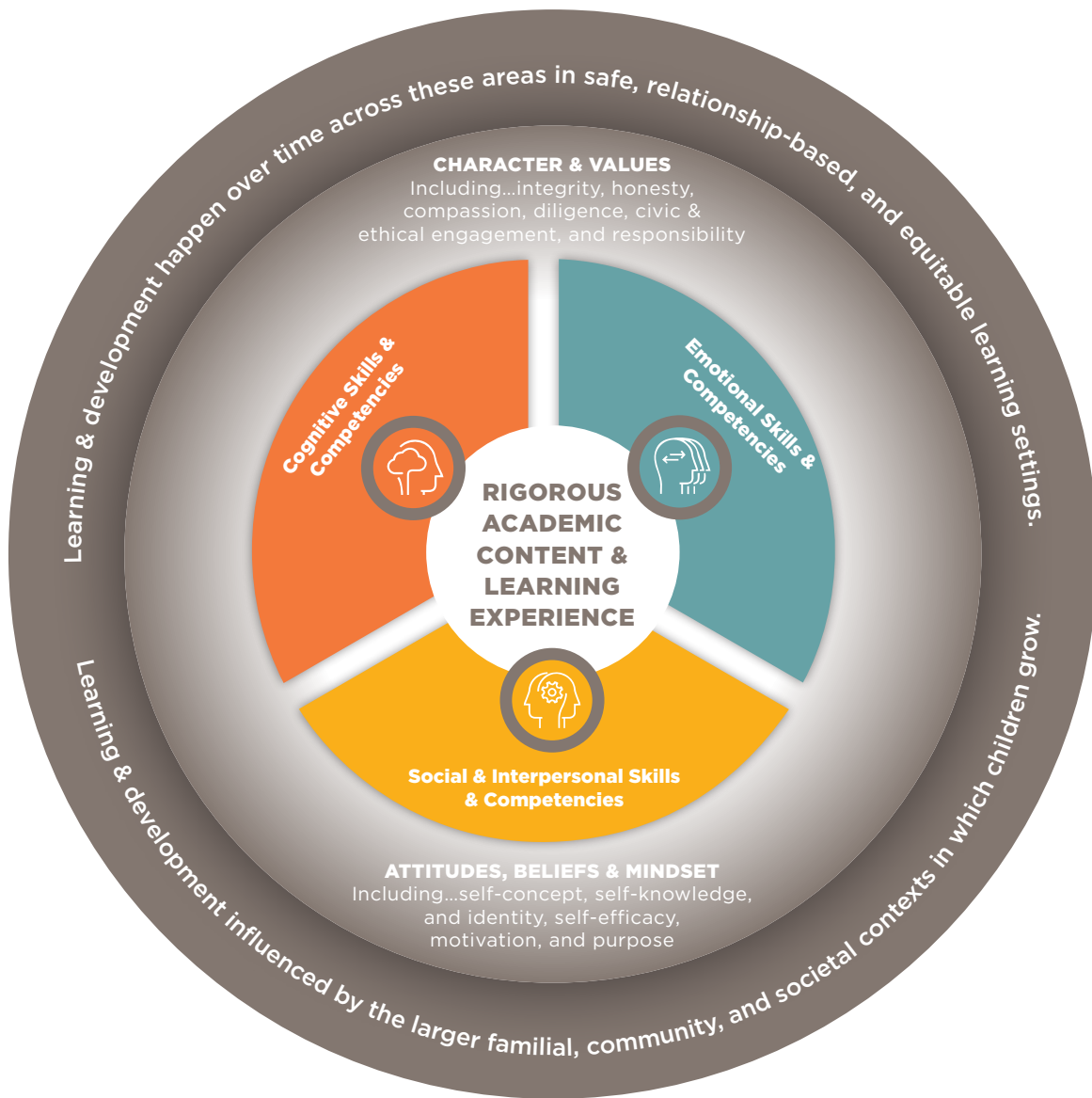
This consensus offers the education sector the opportunity to “rethink teaching and learning so that academics and students’ social, emotional, and cognitive development are joined not just occasionally, but throughout the day” (p. 20).<sup>25</sup> *A Nation at Hope* calls on policy makers, communities, and educators to ensure that students are intentionally provided with opportunities to learn and practice SEL in “academic environments that support the whole student, are physically and emotionally safe, and are based on warm, supportive relationships—including those between children and teachers that are fundamental to learning” (as shown in Figure 2).

*SEL are skills  
that help students cope  
with the world around them  
so that they can be  
academically successful.*

NORTHERN NM  
TEACHER

# systemic SEL approaches

| FIGURE 2 |  
The Evidence Base for How Learning Happens



## COGNITIVE

Including the ability to:

- focus & pay attention
- set goals
- plan & organize
- persevere
- problem solve



## SOCIAL & INTERPERSONAL

Including the ability to:

- navigate social situations
- resolve conflicts
- demonstrate respect toward others
- cooperate & work on a team
- self-advocate & demonstrate agency



## EMOTIONAL

Including the ability to:

- recognize & manage one's emotions
- understand the emotions & perspectives of others
- demonstrate empathy
- cope with frustration & stress

## systemic SEL approaches



Two powerful examples of this work include trauma informed instruction and restorative practices. At their heart, trauma informed instruction and restorative practices put relationships at that center. These approaches can help to create the safe environments that students need to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Bruce Perry recommend starting with the question, “what happened to you?”<sup>26</sup> instead of “what is wrong with you?” And then supporting students through “regulating, relating, and reasoning.”<sup>27</sup> Human beings are products of our environment; we learn to behave based on the opportunities available for us to learn. In other words, people act in ways that make sense based on their experiences. Schools are in a unique position to shift from making quick judgements about behavior and to ask, “what happened to you?” From there, schools can foster conditions that support each student’s on-going social, emotional, and cognitive growth from a place of understanding and a focus on regulation and relationships. These approaches help the adults in students’ lives create the opportunities that help students to develop new practices, tools, and insights for navigating their lives by fostering safe environments where adults lead with connection and work to heal and maintain relationships with children and their families.

*SEL is guiding students  
with strategies  
to manage their feelings  
and behaviors to better  
understand themselves and be  
academically ready to learn.  
Extremely important  
to be trauma informed  
and address needs  
throughout the day in ways  
that may be unconventional  
from before.*

NORTHERN NM  
ELEMENTARY TEACHER





### **Trauma Informed Instruction:**

Trauma informed instruction helps to provide educators with the tools and knowledge they need to build conditions for healing and learning. Not unrelated to the long history of colonial practices, high levels of poverty, and other challenges, New Mexico has some of the highest rates of children suffering from adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).<sup>28</sup> ACEs are traumatic childhood events, and include suffering abuse and neglect, living with someone who has an untreated mental illness, the death of a parent, and living in extreme economic insecurity. The more ACEs each child suffers, the more likely the trauma will lead to negative impacts on wellbeing and health.<sup>29</sup> Trauma informed instruction can provide educators in New Mexico with practices that help them to support their students' wellbeing and connection so that students are more likely to excel socially, emotionally, and academically.

One of the biggest challenges teachers want help with is managing students who exhibit challenging or defiant behaviors. Trauma informed instruction helps teachers to recognize that challenging behaviors are often related to students being dysregulated or disconnected. Trauma informed instruction recognizes that social, emotional, and academic learning requires students to engage in tasks and reasoning that students cannot always access because they are in flight, fight, or freeze response mode and they need to be supported to become regulated by being seen, heard, and understood by those around them.<sup>30</sup>

Dr. Bruce Perry's research with vulnerable children focuses on helping them to learn, think, and reflect by first helping the child to regulate and calm their fight/flight/freeze responses. Second is to relate and connect with the child through an attuned and sensitive relationship. Third, is to reason and support the child to reflect, learn, remember, articulate, and become self-assured. These three Rs (regulate, relate, reason) underlie the Neurosequential Model of Education (NME).<sup>31</sup> The NME recognizes that the brain develops sequentially and that the areas of the brain responsible for emotional regulation and human connection are needed for the cortical brain, which is needed for the cognitive tasks in academic learning to activate. SEL that is trauma informed is grounded in the understanding that managing trauma, emotions, and social situations are skills that can be learned, built on, and practiced.

### **Restorative Practices:**

As schools rethink their structures and practices to create safe and supportive learning environments that support children and youth's cognitive, social, and emotional development, an important area to address is our approaches, beliefs, and attitudes about discipline. *A Nation at Hope*<sup>32</sup> recommends that we:

*Go Beyond Discipline Codes To Teach Responsibility* and counsels against a number of problematic and common missteps to discipline and behavior management. Districts should work to reduce exclusionary policies and practices, such as zero-tolerance policies and suspensions for preK-12 students. Districts should clearly document and communicate their policies about infractions and consequences. It's also important to guard against practices, often unconscious, that reinforce inequities, such as using disproportionately strict behavior management with low-income or minority students. (P.21).

Restorative practices in schools, practices that support students and adults to take responsibility for their actions and repair any harm that may have occurred, offers alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline and behavior policies and practices.<sup>33</sup> Restorative practices work at the relationship level and aim to heal transgressions and keep all parties involved in a conflict in the community. Restorative practices are an important part of improving the overall school climate and can help reduce misbehavior, violence, and suspension rates. Strengthening relationships between administrators, teachers, and students can also reduce disruptive behavior. Integrating restorative practices has been especially powerful in schools serving low-achieving students, by recognizing that schools serving “students who are already less likely to be comfortable and engaged must make intentional efforts to foster trusting, collaborative relationships as part of cultivating a safe school environment that is conducive to learning” (P. 21).<sup>34</sup>

# systemic SEL approaches

In New Mexico, the outcomes of the Martinez/Yazzie v. New Mexico<sup>35</sup> demand that educators reflect on systemic inequities and support students in acknowledging the historical events and trauma that built those systems of inequity, while developing new practices that affirm and sustain students' and families' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and aspirations. We will include this discussion within our findings and our recommendations later in this report. Our collective aim must be focused on ensuring students from all backgrounds thrive and striving to imagine and create school communities where:

*All children and youth have equal opportunities to thrive. Social and cultural markers no longer negatively predict young people's academic, social, and emotional outcomes or their life chances. Adults honor and elevate a broad range of perspectives and experiences by engaging young people as leaders, problem solvers, and decision makers. Youth and adults engage in an ongoing process of cultivating, practicing, and reflecting on their social and emotional competencies. Learning environments are supportive, culturally [and linguistically] responsive, and focused on building relationships and community. And families, school staff, and out-of-school-time staff have regular, meaningful opportunities to build authentic partnerships and collaboratively support young people's social, emotional, and academic development, while continuing to deepen their own social and emotional competencies (Jagers, Skoog-Hoffman, Barthelus & Schlund, 2021).<sup>36</sup>*

In the following pages we share the findings from our study that can help us learn more about the ongoing work of Northern New Mexico's educators and leaders to integrate SEL opportunities in our schools.

*I believe*

*Social Emotional Learning  
is the foundation to all instruction.*

*Students need to feel  
safe, secure, and welcome  
in order to be in a place mentally  
and emotionally to focus  
on academics.*

NORTHERN NM  
MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL



This research project investigated current understanding, attitudes, praxis, training, and needs relative to current SEL practices in schools and school districts in the seven northern New Mexican counties served by LANL Foundation, which are Los Alamos, Mora, Rio Arriba, San Miguel, Santa Fe, Sandoval, and Taos counties. The study included various types of Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in the region, including conventional public schools, state and district-chartered schools, tribally controlled schools, and schools under the administration of the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE). The LANL Foundation contracted with Dr. Amy McConnell Franklin to complete the data collection and initial analysis.

Two categories of educators participated in the research: 1) leaders – including administrators, superintendents, principals, and leaders of charter and tribal schools and 2) licensed and practicing teachers, counselors, and educational assistants. Quantitative and qualitative research methodologies were implemented concurrently through surveys and focus groups. Two surveys, one for leaders and one for teachers, were disseminated between November 18, 2020, and January 15, 2021. The research took a census approach to sampling, inviting all leaders and all teachers in the seven counties served by the LANL Foundation to participate in the study. All survey responses were anonymous. Focus group sessions were recorded with agreement by participants. Twelve focus groups with leaders and teachers were conducted between December 10, 2020 and January 22, 2021. The purpose of the focus groups was to add additional detail, nuance, and narrative to the data collected by the surveys. Both methodologies followed similar lines of questioning.

The survey resulted in 573 respondents representing 20 Local Education Agencies, including 110 leaders and 463 teachers. Respondents identified as being from the following districts: Chama Valley Independent Schools, Española Public Schools, Los Alamos Public Schools, Pojoaque Valley Public Schools, Santa Fe Public Schools, Taos Municipal Schools, Tribal/BIE Schools, and Charter Schools. In sum, educators from 88 elementary, middle, and high schools participated in the survey.

Some limiting factors of this research should be noted, primarily that it was completed during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in which all schools in the state of New Mexico were operating remotely. Also, the data received was dependent on participant self-selection to participate. Some participants misidentified and took the leader or teacher survey, and adjustments were made on the back end to accommodate these errors.





The survey and focus data provided robust insights into teacher and school leader perspectives on SEL. The results reveal that educators in Northern NM have dynamic perspectives, approaches, and understandings of SEL.

## **1 | Northern New Mexico’s teachers and leaders agree that SEL is our schools’ responsibility.**

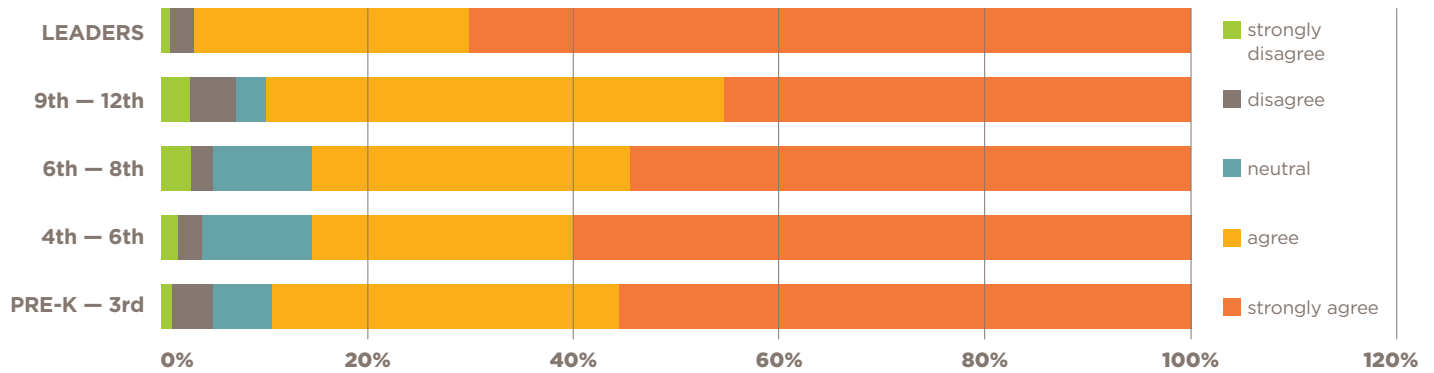
Both teachers and school leaders that completed the survey indicated that schools have a responsibility to provide social and emotional skill building opportunities. Approximately 90% of both participant groups “strongly agreed” or “agreed ” that schools and teachers have this responsibility. This finding shows that future support does not need to be invested in convincing our educators that this work is important - they are already there. Indeed, their responses indicate that many teachers recognize that SEL is necessary for academic learning. As one teacher described: *“It is crucial to address the social emotional learning with students as a precursor to facilitate academic learning.”*

At the same time, there may be differentiated work to do to build educator enthusiasm and vision for integrating SEL in our schools. For example, more than half of educators PreK-8th grade “strongly agree” that schools are responsible for providing opportunities for children to engage in SEL learning opportunities, but that trend declines for 9-12th grade educators. At the same time, 94% of leaders responding to the survey recognize schools have a responsibility to ensure students have learning opportunities that are integrated with SEL, indeed more leaders (66%) than educators (54%) “strongly agreed” that schools have a responsibility to provide opportunities to engage in SEL (See *Table 1, p. 18*).

# research findings & analysis

| TABLE 1 |

## Educators' beliefs that school has a responsibility to provide comprehensive opportunities for children to engage in SEL.



## 2 | Educators are still developing a shared language for integrating SEL systemically in our classrooms and schools.

To help us contextualize the survey responses, we asked all teacher and leader survey participants to define SEL in their own words. We also held focus groups to help us contextualize educators' responses. Our analysis of these definitions provides some insight into what educators and leaders believe schools are responsible for teaching when it comes to SEL. Responses revealed that leaders and teachers do not share a common definition of SEL. While many educators recognize the integrated nature of social, emotional, and cognitive learning, they provided a wide variety of definitions, ranging from programs or a grounding in skill building, to building strong teacher/student relationships, to more abstract, spiritual concepts and comprehensive definitions.

Teachers' and leaders' unique definitions of SEL, along with the more contextualized information shared in our focus groups, gives us some insight into how teachers and leaders perceived SEL competencies are developed in the school context. For example, in their definitions, almost half of all respondents—48% of leaders and 49% of teachers—mentioned something about how SEL competencies are learned. As one teacher described:

*Part of a complete educational experience needs to be dedicated to the learning and practice of concepts that enrich students in their ability to deal with intrapersonal problems faced in day-to-day life.— Elementary Teacher*

This response, and other responses like it, highlight an important understanding, namely that SEL competencies are teachable and learnable rather than fixed personality traits.

## research findings & analysis

Yet, there was minimal consistency in responses between teachers at the same schools, nor was there consistency between teachers and school leaders who represented the same school or district. This lack of shared definition is problematic in terms of both inputs and outputs. Having a shared definition helps educators develop a shared vision and mission for the role SEL plays in ensuring they and their students thrive. In addition, if there is no shared definition then there is no ability to measure implementation, programmatic work, or policies and culture throughout the school. SEL helps to shine a light on these aspects of schools, in support of academics and the wellbeing of educators and students. Lack of coherence is particularly problematic amongst school leaders, who set the tone and culture for the school. Within a single district, there may be multiple leaders talking about SEL but meaning very different things and enacting SEL in very different ways. Within a single school, leaders and teachers may be doing SEL, but lack a shared vision for coherently and consistently integrating SEL into their school's culture and day-to-day interactions.

Respondents also sometimes pointedly referred to curriculum programs that their individual schools were participating in, such as Second Step, PAX, Growth Mindset, and others. Other respondents identified SEL as happening most often with guidance counselors during "SEL classes." While helpful, this too can be problematic for a school if these programs and approaches are not integrated into the daily work of students and teachers and do not exist across the spectrum of the school. Some SEL programming does not seem to be sustained over time leading to the long lists of programs teachers and schools have experienced but not made their own. Other initiatives were mentioned but seemed not yet widely integrated or sustained beyond a teacher's classroom or a school. For example, restorative justice was mentioned in the survey definitions and in several focus groups, but funding and consistency for these initiatives seemed to impact on-going implementation. In response to a question in a focus group about alignment of school policies and SEL values and practices, a school counselor described the following pattern:

## research findings & analysis



In another focus group, a principal mentioned that they hoped experiences with COVID would be the stimulus to revise attendance and grading protocols to be in greater alignment with restorative practices and equity.

These instances underscore that educators in our region recognize the importance of systemic SEL implementation, but that more support is needed to ensure that the work is sustained over time and integrated into everyday approaches to education in our region. For example, in their definitions, 48% of leaders and 36% of teachers recognized that there is a relationship between SEL and students' positive outcomes including wellbeing, the ability to learn in school, and active participation in society. These understandings are consistent with data from the field of SEL, which highlight short- and long-term benefits of SEL<sup>37</sup> such as:

- A | more positive attitudes towards self, others and tasks including enhanced self-efficacy, confidence, persistence, empathy, connection, and commitment to school, and a sense of purpose,
- B | more positive social behaviors and relationships with peers and adults reduced conduct problems and risk-taking behavior,
- C | decreased emotional distress, and
- D | improved test scores, grades, and attendance.

One leader in our region summarized these points in their definition of SEL:

*SEL = the types of supports that shape learners into empathetic, caring, collaborative members of a healthy community (school, family, civic and other communities). SEL promotes self-understanding, self-care, collaboration, “relational capacities”, interpersonal skills and development of the being, as they navigate school, personal and societal systems. Promotes embracing diversity, “otherness”, others’ viewpoints, personal security, resilience.”— Principal*

*Social emotional learning  
begins with us, teachers.*

*We can't give from an empty cup.*

*Once teachers learn skills  
and tools, we can teach  
these to students.*

*This includes self-awareness,  
social relationships,  
self-management,  
and decision making.*

**NORTHERN NM  
SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER**



## research findings & analysis



The CASEL framework highlights five interrelated competency domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision-making skills. Of these, educators in our region most frequently identified three of these interrelated competency domains: relationship skills, self-awareness, and self-management. Thus, for educators in our region SEL means fostering:

- Relationship skills, mentioned by 45% of leaders and 36% of teachers in their definitions. As one teacher described, *“Social and emotional learning includes both teaching students how to identify and manage their own emotions as well as how to interact appropriately with others.”*
- Self-awareness, mentioned by 35% of leaders and 30% of teachers. For example, one leader described SEL as, *“Self-regulation of emotions and expectations with regard to others as well.”*
- Self-management, mentioned by 33% of leaders and 37% of teachers, described by one teacher as, *“Social and emotional learning is the way we teach students about social norms and acceptable ways to express and handle our emotional reactions.”*

Overall, many of the respondents indicated dispositions that are relevant to SEL. On one hand, educators’ definitions expressed care and concern for students’ social, emotional, and academic wellbeing and a willingness to connect warmly with students by getting to know and attending to their social and emotional needs, as well as their academic growth and learning. On the other hand, professional comprehensive knowledge of SEL could be strengthened by helping teachers and leaders to develop a deeper understanding of the potential outcomes and intentions of SEL. Then, as educators integrate SEL into their classrooms, schools, and districts they may develop a more sustained commitment to systemic SEL. To do this work, educators need support in understanding the web of structures and components required to nurture children’s social, emotional, cognitive, cultural, and linguistic development universally and equitably.

## research findings & analysis



This data underscores that educators in our region need systematic opportunities to expand and deepen their knowledge about SEL. Participants' definitions and focus group responses indicate that many educators identify key aspects of successful SEL implementation. We need to draw on our educators' knowledge and expertise to ensure that SEL implementation is systemic, comprehensive, equitable, and wholistic. Instead of each seeing parts of the whole, we need to help educators to see and enact the whole.

### **3 | For Northern New Mexico, SEL is geared toward students, not adults.**

One stark trend the definitions reveal is that teachers and leaders are focused solely on SEL practices geared toward students. Very few of the definitions included SEL for the adults in schools. However, as teachers and leaders engage in school transformation with a focus on strengthening students' academic, social, and emotional thriving and wellbeing, it is more and more recognized that SEL for adults is necessary. If the adults in our schools aren't thriving, the students see that. Furthermore, when adults are not at their best, it impacts their abilities to foster constructive learning environments and to nurture strong, positive relationships with students. In addition, while research shows that SEL can be taught explicitly, it is also clear that when adults model strong SEL practices, students learn from that modeling as well. The opposite is true as well, if adults talk about SEL, but don't practice it or model it well, students see that inconsistency. Thus, as educators, researchers, and organizations have learned more about strong SEL practices, the work has expanded to also focus on supporting educators' wellbeing and thriving. This support includes all adults in a school who interact with children—not just teachers.

*The 8th graders had a class  
on restorative justice  
and a club on peer mediation  
when there was funding  
and a teacher was willing to sell her  
prep time...the class worked  
better for building skills because  
they had a full hour rather than a  
club which just meets over lunch.  
The kids really liked the class,  
but it lasted only one year  
because of funding.*

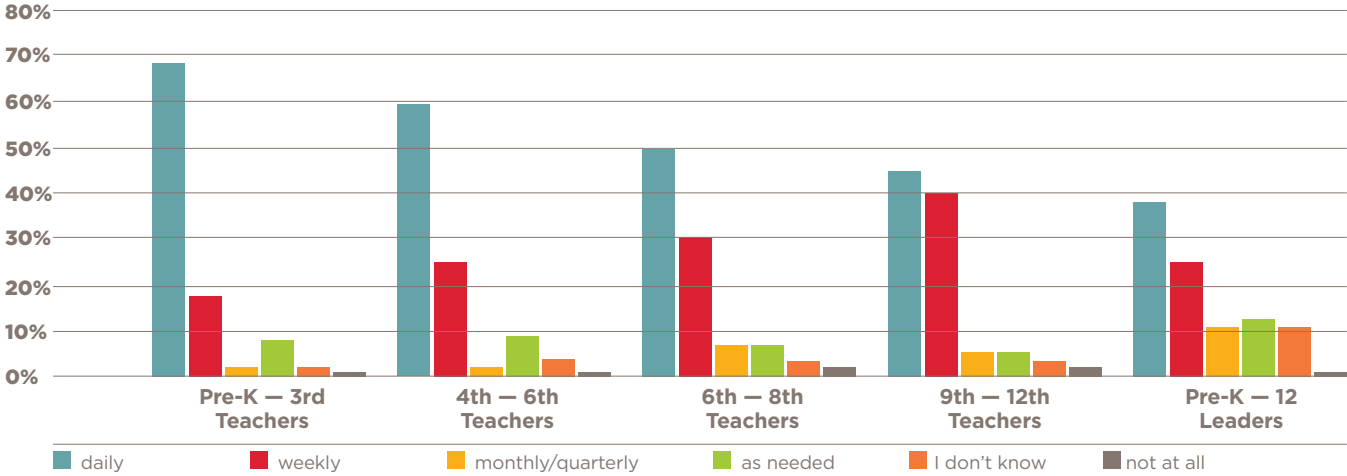
MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSELOR

# research findings & analysis

## 4 | Students’ access to opportunities to learn and engage in SEL practices varied by grade.

Educators in our region not only think schools have a responsibility to support children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development, they also act on that belief. Almost all teachers (96%) and leaders (98%) across the region who completed the survey indicated that students in their schools have access to engage in learning and practicing SEL skills. Indeed, most teachers and leaders “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that students had daily or weekly access to learn and practice SEL (See Table 2).

| TABLE 2 |  
Teachers’ and Leaders’ Perceptions About Students’ Opportunities to Engage In and Learn SEL Practices



The difference in access by grade level shows that SEL is more prevalent in elementary schools than in high schools and middle schools, and most prevalent in the early grades. The structure of middle and high schools may lend itself to this finding. Middle school and high school students have multiple teachers for shorter amounts of time during the day, as opposed to elementary teachers who more often work with one class for the entire year. Middle and high school students need support in the development of SEL skills as much as younger students, and sometimes even more so, as adolescence is a pivotal time in terms of cognitive, social, and emotional development. In addition, high school students are often engaging in the workforce for the first time, working part-time, and preparing for, and making important decisions about their next steps beyond high school. SEL helps students to develop skills and conceptual tools that are critical for 21st Century readiness.<sup>38</sup>

## research findings & analysis



There were also some differences in teachers' and leaders' reports that show the two groups have different perceptions about the opportunities students have to access SEL learning opportunities. 38% of principals reported students having daily access to learn and practices SEL. Whereas teachers' reports were greater, although, they too varied by grade level: 67% of early childhood educators reported students having daily access to engage in SEL practices, but this trend decreases as students get older, with only 45% of high school teachers reporting that students have daily access to engage in SEL practices. These variances could reflect differences in understanding of what it means to integrate SEL into students' daily learning opportunities, differences in initial and on-going training (i.e., preservice and in-service early childhood education often includes a focus on social, emotional, and cognitive development), and/or differences in the kinds of opportunities to which students, teachers, and leaders have access.

These differences vary district by district, school by school, and classroom by classroom. Ninety-three percent of schools with teachers who participated in the study (81 of 88 schools) had at least one educator indicating that their students had opportunities to learn and practice SEL skills daily. In the 7% of schools who did not have a teacher indicate daily access, at least one teacher indicated that students had weekly access to learn and practice SEL. Thus, while students in our region have access to engage in SEL practices, these practices vary widely and are most likely determined teacher by teacher, based on the opportunities the teachers have had to understand and integrate SEL into their classrooms. While ultimately teachers decide how and when to integrate SEL activities within their classroom, having more teachers respond in similar ways would indicate that they are being supported at the school and district level to systemically integrate SEL into students' daily opportunities to learn. There was minimal evidence in our data that schools and districts have a systemic approach to integrating SEL to ensure all students have daily access to practice and engage in SEL.





**5 | Teachers and leaders need and want to learn more about SEL theories and practices. The more teachers seemed to know about SEL theories and practices, the more they indicated that they worked to integrate SEL into students' daily learning opportunities.**

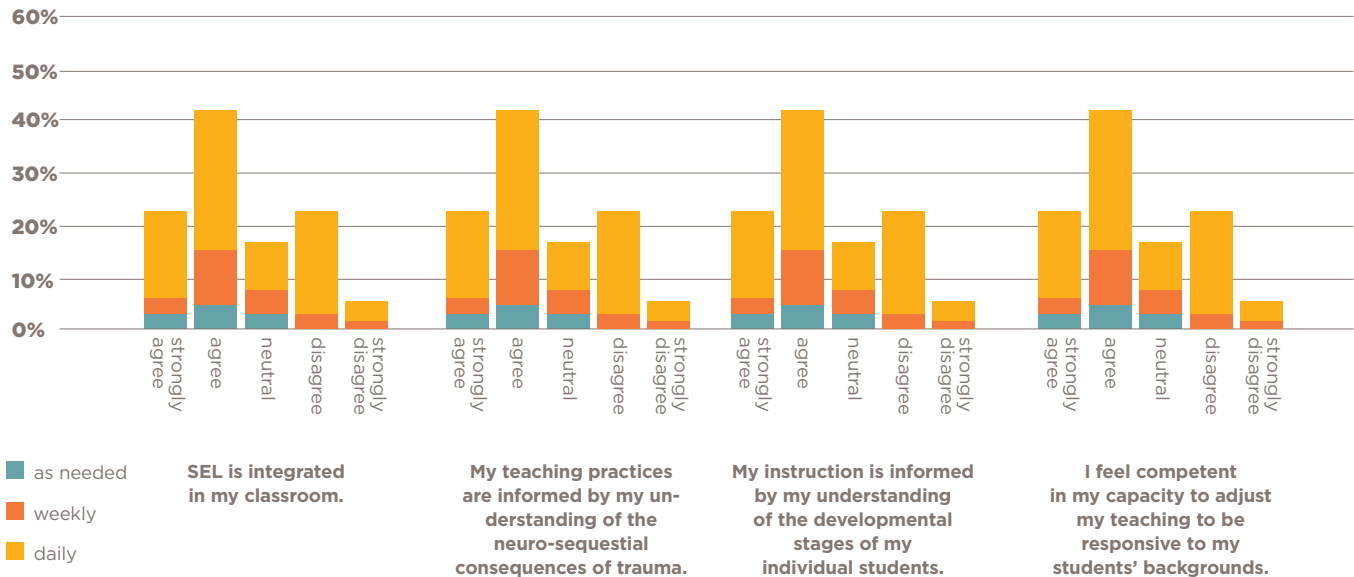
Overall, educators were less confident about their knowledge and understanding of SEL theories. However, teachers who indicated that their students had daily opportunities to learn and practice SEL, were also likely to indicate that SEL was integrated into their classroom, that their instruction was responsive to their students' backgrounds, and that their instruction was informed by developmental theories and trauma informed practices. We think this trend is promising and that strengthening teachers' opportunities to learn SEL theories and practices, will likely help teachers to integrate SEL practices more fully into their classrooms and ensure students have daily opportunities to learn SEL. For example, one educator's definition shows their understanding of how SEL is an important part of connecting with students' cultures and languages, and meeting students' needs, *"SEL is connection with the culture, language, and social needs of students."*

Overall, trends reveal that 25% of teachers are fully confident in supporting the children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Whereas 75% of teachers reported feeling less confident integrating SEL into their practice and teaching in ways that are informed by theories of human development, using trauma informed practices, and being responsive to students' backgrounds and cultures. Overall, teachers seemed most confident about their instruction being informed by human development theories, especially early childhood teachers. 27% of teachers who reported students had daily opportunities to learn SEL "strongly agreed" their instruction was informed by human development theories, 18% "strongly agreed" that their instruction is responsive to students' backgrounds, and 16% strongly agreed their instruction was informed by neuro-sequential modeling/trauma informed instruction (see Table 3, p. 26).

# research findings & analysis

| TABLE 3 |

## Components that Inform Instruction for Teachers Who Offer Daily, Weekly, and As Needed Opportunities for Their Students to Learn and Practice SEL



When an educator indicated that they “strongly believe” that schools have a responsibility to provide opportunities for children to engage in SEL, that educator was likely to indicate that they “strongly believe” they have SEL as an integrated component of their classroom, and that students have *daily* opportunities to engage in SEL practices and learning. For example, 83% of teachers who indicated their instruction was informed by the neuro-sequential consequences of trauma also indicated that SEL is integrated in their classroom. 60% of teachers who strongly agree SEL is integrated into their classroom strongly agree their instruction is informed by their understanding of the developmental stages of individual students. Thus, most teachers who reported students had daily access to engage in SEL practices also reported having a robust understanding of SEL. As one teacher wrote:

*Social and emotional learning forms the developmental foundation of the mindsets necessary for academic learning and eventually effective civic and community engagement. It includes everything from stress management, self-regulation, and self-and relational awareness to development of executive functions and decision-making. I have twenty years experience in teaching SEL alongside academics (before it was called SEL) and follow frameworks from both CASEL and Turnaround for Children.—Teacher*

## research findings & analysis



These trends are encouraging because they show that students who have daily access to SEL practices have teachers who have developed some expertise for implementing robust SEL strategies. At the same time, it is important to recognize that most teachers who indicated that they offer students daily opportunities to engage in SEL are early childhood and elementary educators who have more access to learning these theories as a part of their initial and ongoing training. All educators can learn more about integrating SEL from our early childhood educators.

Teachers can't teach what they don't know. Robust SEL practices are informed by teachers' understanding and integration of human development theories, neuro-sequential/trauma informed practices, and being responsive to students' backgrounds. Teachers need access to rich opportunities to learn these theories and practices over the course of their career. Currently, much of this education is taught in preservice programs, but due to competing priorities and limited time, many preservice teachers don't have opportunities to develop a beginning understanding of this expertise. For example, in New Mexico, a course in human development is not always required as a part of an education degree at the bachelor's level and the topic is minimally covered in alternative licensure programs. *A Nation at Hope's* consensus panel indicates that understanding human development theories is an important part of adults' capacities to support all students social, emotional, and cognitive development.<sup>39</sup> As one teacher described in their definition of SEL on the survey:

*Social and Emotional Learning is how we develop and are influenced by what we are surrounded by, our experiences, and our overall connection to those situations or the people in those situations.—Teacher*

Developing teachers' expertise in human development, neuro-sequential modeling/trauma informed instruction, and being responsive to students' backgrounds can help educators to design more transformative conditions for learning that support students' academic, social, and emotional, cultural, and linguistic development, in elementary, middle school and high school.

## research findings & analysis



Our aim should be that all children and youth have access to integrated daily opportunities to learn and develop in ways that are informed by our on-going understanding of how humans develop, how we can heal through neuro-sequential modeling and trauma informed instruction, and how our students' backgrounds can be embraced and seen as assets in the classroom. This means that, one day, all teachers will "strongly agree" that children and youth have daily access to opportunities to learn SEL that is informed by a robust knowledge of how to be responsive to student's needs, interests, and development, as they are challenged to grow and thrive in ways that will serve them in the 21st Century.


**Educators want access to ongoing professional learning.** Educators in our region recognize that they have much to learn about implementing SEL in systemic ways. Educators were asked to identify the types of supports that would be most useful to them. Teachers and administrators identified different priorities, although both see the need for more SEL professional development in the form of training and coaching. Administrators want more guidance from the state, while teachers want more local supports.

Leader respondents identified the three most useful forms of support to be:

- Required SEL professional development
- SEL coach/team for school/district
- Statewide initiative: NMPED adopts SEL standards, provides support

Teacher respondents identified the three most useful forms of support to be:

- SEL coach/team for school/district
- Free, opt-in SEL professional development
- Local SEL trainers provide lessons/training



***A Nation at Hope*** calls for educators to “affirm the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the diverse students that schools serve.”<sup>40</sup> Deeper learning recognizes that the cultural and linguistic practices we each have shape our thinking processes inside and outside of school. Adults and students thrive in learning communities where they feel a sense of belonging and know their backgrounds, cultures, and languages will be respected and sustained. This work is an essential part of transforming learning environments so that they are safe and supportive for all young people.

Culturally sustaining teaching needs to “affirm the cultural [and linguistic] backgrounds of the diverse students that schools serve, so all young people and adults feel a sense of belonging and respect for who they are.”<sup>41</sup> Affirming students cultural and linguistic backgrounds and lived experiences means using instructional materials and pedagogies that affirm and are responsive to students’ varied backgrounds, and that support them in sustaining their cultures and languages. It also means supporting educators to recognize and address their own biases and stereotypes to build learning environments that ensure all students in our schools thrive. As one educator described in their SEL definition on the survey, SEL supports them in developing an environment where students feel a sense of community and empathize with others:

*SEL is when one can understand and empathize with others from different cultures and/or backgrounds. Feeling compassionate for others and incorporating a sense of community in your classroom environment that embraces each student.— Teacher*



## research findings & analysis



In addition, our research revealed that Northern New Mexico has a cadre of local SEL experts who can help to inform this work; educators who **A** | have the disposition for SEL integration, **B** | are committed to the foundational intentions of SEL, **C** | are knowledgeable about local systems, realities and capacities and **D** | have been creative in shifting local policies and practices to align with SEL values, priorities, and practices. In the focus groups these local leaders expressed that they were grateful for the opportunity to collaborate and eager to do so more often. A place for educators to engage with other local educators dedicated to advancing SEL in the region is SEL4NM (<https://sel4nm.org>).

The CASEL framework, *A Nation at Hope*, and the research base for SEL, all recognize the developmental nature of this work; SEL competencies can be learned and applied from childhood to adulthood, within and across the contexts such as classrooms, schools, families, out of school opportunities, and communities. Our data show that educators in our region are facilitating this work in their classrooms and schools with varying degrees of understanding of SEL. This study also helps us to see the potential impact comprehensive SEL can have in our schools and communities. The work ahead of us in Northern New Mexico is to create conditions for teachers, schools, and districts to develop and implement comprehensive plans for integrating SEL into all aspects of schooling. The work includes systematically supporting the adults who work in schools so that they can support all students to thrive and know that they belong in learning environments that support their social, emotional, cognitive, cultural, and linguistic development. The richer the environments to which our students have access, the stronger their outcomes will be.

# recommendations

The research and data collected during this survey provided unique insight to the strengths, perceptions, and gaps within SEL in Northern New Mexico. It revealed that there is an overwhelming commitment and feeling of responsibility from both principals and teachers in understanding and implementing SEL practices in their classrooms, schools, and districts. However, the data also reveal that children, youth, and adults in our schools do not have systematic, consistent access to cohesive and comprehensive SEL practices as they move from classroom to classroom and school to school, especially as students get older and move from elementary school to middle and high school. The following recommendations are grounded in ensuring SEL practices are culturally and linguistically sustaining and based in our analysis of data and best practice research. Even more so, the evidence bases for how people learn, the status of schooling in our region, and the keen interest educators have to learn about and weave SEL into the fabric of our schools, challenges us to rethink what schools look like and feel like for children, youth, families, and educators. When every child and adult in our schools is thriving and being challenged to meet their full potential by having access to joyful and safe learning conditions that value our diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, we will have met the challenge – and the promise—of integrating SEL into our schools. These recommendations will help us get there (see Table 4).

| TABLE 4 |  
**Integrating SEL in Northern NM Findings and Recommendations**

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
Northern NM teachers and leaders agree that SEL is our schools' responsibility	Invest in locally developed SEL Frameworks that center culturally and linguistically sustaining practices
Educators are still developing a shared language for integrating systemic SEL in our classrooms and schools For Northern NM, SEL for students, but not adults.	Invest in the adults who make schools work: Support school leaders' and teachers' well-being and on-going SEL Professional Learning
Students' access to opportunities to learn and engage in SEL practices varies by grade.	Focus and expand SEL resources for middle and high schools
Teachers and leaders need and want to learn more about SEL theories and practices. The more teachers seemed to know about SEL theories and practices, the more they indicated that they worked to integrate SEL into students' daily learning opportunities.	Adopt statewide guidelines that establish SEL Conditions for Thriving for children, youth, and adults in every school context.

# recommendations

## Recommendation | 1

### **Invest in locally developed SEL Frameworks that center culturally and linguistically sustaining practices.**

Implementation of SEL practices at the state, district, school, and classroom level must be grounded in culturally and linguistically sustaining practices that affirm our children and youth's backgrounds and communities. CASEL's core features of SEL<sup>42</sup> include:

- Authentic partnering among students and adults with a deep focus on sharing power and decision-making between young people, educators, families, and communities.
- Academic content that integrates issues of race, class, and culture.
- Instruction that honors and makes connections to students' lived experiences and identities, and scaffolds learning to build an understanding of others' lived experiences.
- Enhancing and foregrounding social and emotional competencies needed for civic engagement and social change, such as reflecting on personal and social identities, examining prejudices and biases, interrogating social norms, disrupting, and resisting inequities, and co-constructing equitable and just solutions.
- Prioritizing students' individual and collective agency to take action for more just schools and communities.
- Focus on creating belonging and engagement for all individuals.

In response to the *Martinez/Yazzie v. New Mexico* lawsuit, NMPED, districts, and schools must work thoughtfully and intentionally with tribes, nations, pueblos, communities, equity councils, and school boards to ensure students have access to SEL that reflects community and student identities, beliefs, values, needs, and interests. SEL implementation should not look the same throughout the state, but instead, schools and districts need to develop plans and frameworks that align with and lift up the interests and aspiration of their children, families, and communities. Frameworks for implementation need to be co-created with tribal and community representation and be informed by best practices that center positive relationships and foster educational environments that are welcoming, empowering, and healing for all students, staff, families, and community partners.

As NMPED supports SEL implementation in districts and schools across the state, there must be deep investment financially and programmatically in SEL that is locally informed. It is critical that the statewide response to the *Martinez/Yazzie vs. The State of New Mexico* lawsuit include integration of SEL practices that are culturally sustaining. Refinement of the state's blossoming SEL framework should include a thoughtful, intentional plan to listen and attend



## recommendations

to tribes, nations, pueblos, communities, equity councils, school boards, and students themselves, to ensure students have opportunities to learn that attend to local, national, and global perspectives. Flexibility should be allowed for SEL programming, training, and philosophical approaches within each community; a one-size fits all approach will inevitably fall short of meeting the unique needs of our students.

As SEL frameworks are implemented throughout the state, it is important to understand the role of programs and how SEL implementation must go beyond the purchase of curricula. Programs like Second Step, PAX etc. can be helpful in providing schools with shared language and expectations, but schools and districts must go further to ensure that all students have access to classrooms and conditions that have an integrated culturally and linguistically sustaining approach to SEL. This includes the shift of systems to align with SEL practices in and out of the classroom, practices that emphasize the development of identity, agency, belonging, curiosity, and collaborative problem-solving described within the CASEL frameworks<sup>43</sup> and exhibited in the *Nation at Hope's* exemplars.<sup>44</sup>

SEL has the potential to help develop environments where students feel valued, heard, and respected as they develop the knowledge, skills, and identities they will need to thrive in the 21st Century. In the region surveyed for this study, 18 tribal nations are represented, as well as rural and urban communities. The needs for each of these communities will have some commonalities, but we must acknowledge the differences. To do this work, consultation with tribal education departments to co-create state frameworks and classroom recommendations will be vital. Framework development and feedback could be adapted for schools funded by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), as determined by their tribal councils or school boards, to ensure cultural relevance and respect in each individual community. Tribally controlled schools have the unique freedom to develop their own definition or adopt those presented by the NMPED and BIE. We must listen and be responsive to our tribal and community partners as we work to build positive relationships that help educators to create conditions that affirm the strengths, values, cultures, and lived experiences of Northern New Mexico's diverse students and families.





## Recommendation | 2

### **Adopt statewide guidelines that help schools establish SEL Conditions for Thriving for children, youth, and adults.**

To begin this systematic effort, we call on NMPED to continue the work they have started within SEL and to go further by establishing guidelines that identify conditions in schools that are necessary for children, youth, and adults to thrive.<sup>45</sup> The wide variance in students' opportunities to engage in SEL practices in Northern New Mexico indicates that SEL is less likely a shared expectation or approach at the school or district levels in our region and more likely a decision made by individual teachers at the classroom level. Such guidelines will need to include a shared definition and foundation of SEL expectations for all to understand and use. The guidelines need to delineate culturally and linguistically informed social, emotional, and cognitive learning conditions for schools and advise leaders and teachers as they create and identify developmentally appropriate initiatives and topics for their classrooms. These guidelines need to provide school leaders, teachers, and parents with common language to use when discussing students' opportunities to learn, promoting positive school culture, and addressing institutionalized racism and persistent inequities in our schools.

Supporting schools to systemically ensure that all students have access to daily learning conditions that support their social, emotional, cognitive, cultural, and linguistic development is vital for transforming our schools. Research indicates that schools who successfully implement SEL schoolwide focus on four areas:<sup>46</sup>

- Building foundational support and developing a plan
- Strengthening adults' SEL competencies and capacities
- Promoting SEL for students
- Reflecting on data for continuous improvement

[\(https://casel.org/systemic-implementation/sel-in-the-school/\)](https://casel.org/systemic-implementation/sel-in-the-school/)



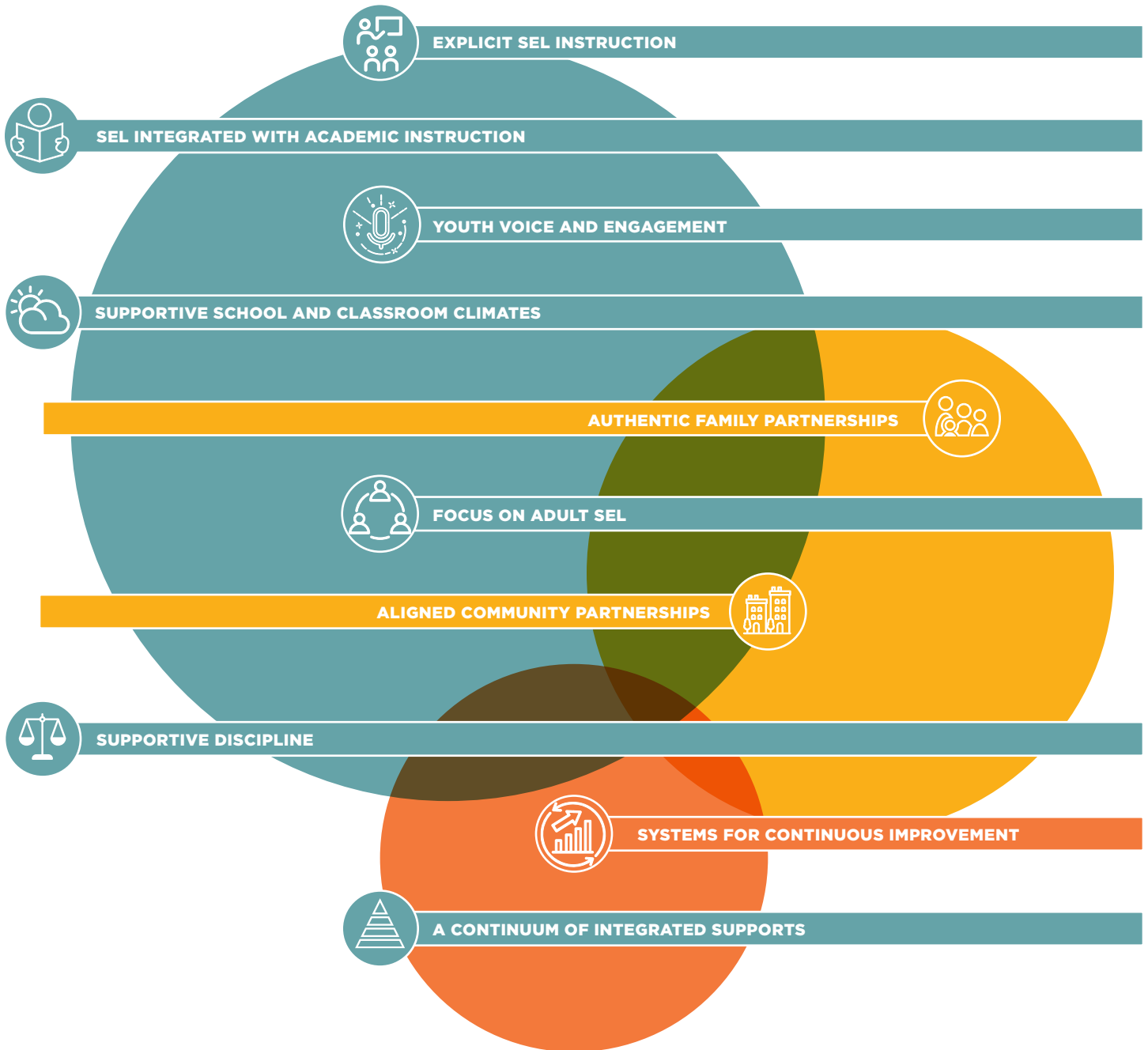


To achieve these elements, CASEL has identified ten indicators for guiding schoolwide implementation. As identified in Figure 3, the indicators include explicit SEL instruction. Establishing conditions for thriving include attending to relationships with students, families and community, support for adults within the school building, authentic student voice, and others. If the NMPED uses these indicators in the development of statewide guidelines that describe SEL Conditions for Thriving for children, youth, and adults in every school context, they will ensure every district understands the implementation of robust SEL practices that are grounded within school policies and procedures.

These guidelines need to be integrated into current efforts that drive programming and policy. For example, the SEL Conditions for Thriving should directly inform questions on the Youth Resiliency Survey (YRS) to help understand effective implementation of SEL in schools and classrooms. This may require adding questions to the YRS questions that focus on students' access to the conditions for learning described in the guidelines. The consensus described in *A Nation at Hope* recognizes that the work is deeply contextual and calls on local policy makers, educators, families, and communities to draw on the educational and neurological evidence base to develop frameworks and practices that:<sup>47</sup>

- Set a clear vision that broadens the definition of student success to prioritize the whole child.
- Change instruction to teach and integrate social, emotional, and cognitive skills.
- Embed these skills in academics and in schoolwide practices.
- Build adult expertise in child development.
- Align resources and leverage partners in the community to address the whole child.
- Forge closer connections between research and practice.

| FIGURE 3 |  
Indicators for Schoolwide SEL



# recommendations

In addition to policy work, *A Nation at Hope* calls for the transformation of learning environments “so they are safe and supportive for all young people.” Specifically, the report recommends developing settings that are physically and emotionally safe and that foster strong bonds among children and adults by:

- Building structures that support relationships—such as advisory groups, class meetings, team teaching, and multi-grade looping—so that every student is known well by at least one adult.
- Creating schoolwide cultures that encourage student voice and agency through practices such as student-led parent-teacher conferences, choice-in assignments, and participation in collaborative decision-making structures.
- Affirming the cultural backgrounds of the diverse students that schools serve, so all young people and adults feel a sense of belonging and respect for who they are.
- Ending punitive and counterproductive disciplinary strategies, such as zero-tolerance policies, that push students out of schools and classrooms.
- Bringing the assets of community organizations—including art, music, sports, and health and mental health services—into the life of the school.

It is important to recognize that creating SEL Conditions for Thriving for children and youth means also creating SEL Conditions for Thriving for adults, so that the educators in our schools have supportive and collegial relationships, have voice and agency in their work, are valued for who they are, and are supported to take risks and innovate.

Building on the findings in this report, implementing systemic SEL in Northern New Mexico means honoring the local work teachers and administrators are already doing to integrate SEL into their work. It also means creating opportunities for teachers, principals, and district administrators to reflect on those practices, to set ambitious goals, and to share what is working and not working in our urban and rural districts in ways that align with best practices for implementing SEL at the classroom, school, and district levels. From an educator’s perspective, creating conditions for thriving includes examining and changing policies, procedures, community engagement, parent connections, and attending to the overall culture of the school—with the aim of cultivating an environment of belonging, relationship, and safety. All members of a school have roles in providing and fostering SEL Conditions for Thriving, from teachers and school leaders, to custodians and bus drivers, to administrative assistants and volunteers. This role extends beyond just fostering SEL Conditions for Thriving for students—it means developing SEL Conditions for Thriving for the adults in schools as well.

*Programming from a  
social emotional perspective  
becomes a creative endeavor  
that is fluid and adapts  
to the constant changing world  
in which we live...  
[We need to] do this  
with a pure heart and  
the best of intentions  
with all of the wonderful teachers  
who have dedicated themselves  
to serving our youth and,  
most importantly,  
for the youth of today.  
We need to step up  
and show them how valuable  
they are to the world.*

NORTHERN NM  
SCHOOL COUNSELOR

# recommendations

Guidelines for SEL Conditions for Thriving need to ensure that schoolwide integration of SEL practices are supported at the district and school levels. CASEL has worked with districts across the United States to support district-wide SEL implementation, demonstrating that systemic implementation of SEL is possible and has a positive impact. American Institutes for Research (AIR) assessed the impact of systemic SEL implementation in eight large urban districts nationwide.<sup>48</sup> This research found:

- **Improved academic performance**, including improved reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), higher GPAs, improvements in standardized test scores in ELA and math achievement.
- **Improved behavioral outcomes**, including an increase in attendance and students' social-emotional competence, along with a decrease in suspensions.
- **Improved school environments**, as measured by district surveys.

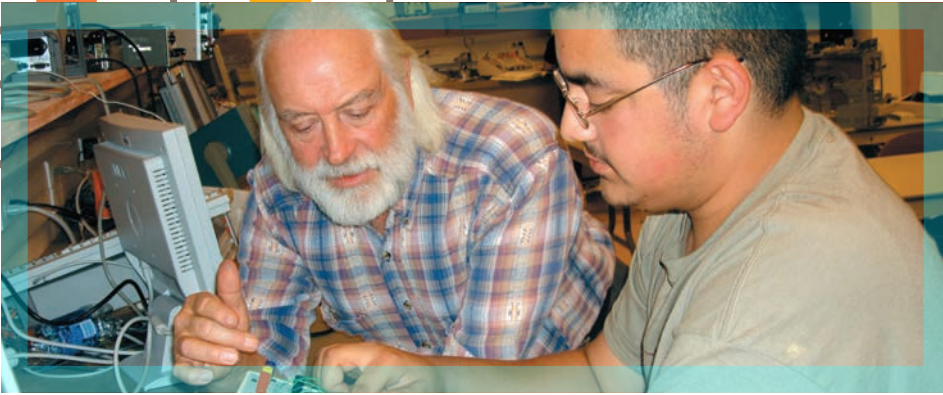
## Recommendation | 3

### **Invest in the adults who make schools work by supporting educator wellbeing and ongoing SEL professional learning.**

Fully and systemically integrating SEL into the fabric of our schools calls for supporting the educators who work with our children and youth. It calls for differentiating professional learning opportunities based on individuals' roles, experience, and knowledge base, so that the adults who work in our schools can develop the skills, knowledge, and conditions they need to transform learning environments in ways that foster social, emotional, cognitive, cultural, and linguistic development. And it means fostering working environments that help the adults in our schools thrive. The data showed a lack of confidence from educators in some of the most critical approaches to robust SEL. Continued development and support beyond pre-service opportunities is vital to successful SEL integration. Teachers and leaders are asking for more support in these areas.

Leaders want to offer SEL professional learning opportunities that include on-going training and coaching at the school and district level, and they want to align their work with statewide standards. Teachers want coaching and opt-in opportunities for professional learning that draws on local expertise. Such learning opportunities need to be grounded in research on social, emotional, cognitive, cultural, and linguistic development and align with best practices. The *Practice Agenda in Support of How Learning Happens in A Nation at Hope*<sup>49</sup> recognizes that learning and development happen over time in safe, relationship-based, and equitable learning settings.





Building adult expertise in holistic child development is one of the key recommendations in *A Nation at Hope*:<sup>50</sup>

*If our goal is for children and youth to learn to be self-aware, to appreciate the perspective of others, to develop character and to demonstrate integrity, educators—both in and out of school—need to exemplify those behaviors within the learning community. When adults model these skills for young people, their own wellbeing improves. They also need to understand how to foster these skills and dispositions in young people. This requires providing ongoing training and support to effectively implement programs and strategies that support the whole child.*

It is important to recognize that this work happens within an educational ecosystem. The development of school boards, superintendents, and principals throughout the state in schools funded both by the NMPED and BIE is perhaps one of the most crucial elements of SEL integration. There must be shared understanding, commitment, and resolution to shift school policy, develop and support staff, and build connections and programs. Sustained integration of SEL within a school will require district and school leaders to be confident on the topic and prepared to create a culture that reflects the practices and skills being taught to students. This will include practice and programming; reviewing policies that may not be in alignment with SEL practices; developing a culture amongst adults in school buildings that is supportive, positive, and models SEL practices; and providing opportunities for adults to learn and practice the same skills, including taking risks and making mistakes in a supportive environment.





The alignment of school boards, superintendents, and principals on the value and vision for SEL in their schools and districts is vital. The following components can help:

- Develop a shared definition of SEL and support school leaders and teachers to integrate it in their daily practices at the school and classroom level.
- Review policies to ensure they align with SEL commitments to restorative justice and trauma informed education.
- How can expulsion, in-school suspension, detention, and truancy policies be reimagined?
- Include families in the work.
- Including Tribal Nations and communities in the work.
- Support SEL for and with the entire school community (cooks/custodians/bus drivers in addition to teachers and administrators).
- Lead by example; support SEL for administrators so they can support teachers and staff, so they can support students.
- Stand on the shoulders of giants – use the research resources available through CASEL, *A Nation at Hope*, NM Public Education Department, SEL4US and SEL4NM to inform the work.

As each school, district, and community develops their approaches to integrating SEL into daily practices and school cultures, there needs to be a recognition that this work will be on-going with attention to facilitating continuous improvement. The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development<sup>51</sup> recommends the following for systemically integrating SEL into education (see Figure 4, p. 42):

| FIGURE 4 |  
**Systematically Integrating SEL into Education**





## **Recommendation | 4**

### **Focus and expand SEL resources for middle & high schools**

This recommendation calls for middle and high schools to rethink structures and practices that affirm the backgrounds, communities, cultures, and languages of New Mexico's youth. It calls on middle and high school educators to create conditions that ensure all youth have positive relationships with adults and with each other as well as a sense of belonging in their schools and communities. Youth need learning opportunities that attend to their social, emotional, cognitive, cultural, and linguistic development and that are responsive to their needs and interests—especially as they transition toward college and career pathways. Youth's brains and bodies are developing in unique and important ways and schools should be designed to recognize and support them as they develop healthy identities and aspirations as local and global citizens in the 21st century. Developing responsive environments means identifying additional support needed for middle and high school educators—including teachers, coaches, mentors, staff, and administrators—to understand SEL, its importance, and how it can be integrated into every aspect of students' daily experience to ensure they learn to take risks and persist in their learning.

The dynamics of SEL implementation in middle and high schools are different from elementary schools. The different school schedules, semesters, and the number of students each teacher supports means that school and program integration approaches must be different than those applied to pre-k and elementary aged students. It is vital to build learning environments that attend to the unique developmental needs of adolescents and ensure that they have at least one adult who knows them well. Integrating SEL into the daily opportunities for learning in our middle and high schools needs to be addressed in the short term and the long term.

## recommendations



*In Support of How We Learn: A Youth Call to Action* from A Nation at Hope's National Youth Commission, youth identified the following priorities for their education:<sup>52</sup>

- Every school makes sure all students have at least one adult they could go to and trust with their challenges.
- Conflict and discipline are addressed in a way that helps us find our way back in, rather than pushing us further out.
- What we learn in school is what we need later in the workplace.
- We are able to transition from grade level to grade level, school year to school year, and school level to school level without fear of what lies on the other side.
- All students could attend school without fear for their physical safety.
- Success in school is defined not just by our grades, but also by our ability to think for ourselves, work with others, and contribute to our communities.

These recommendations call for middle and high schools to seek solutions and rethink structures and practices that affirm the backgrounds, communities, cultures, and languages of New Mexico's youth, ensuring that all youth have a sense of belonging in their schools and communities. Youth need learning opportunities that attend to their social, emotional, and cognitive development and that sustain their needs and interests. Schools need to be designed in ways that recognize and support adolescents' unique developmental trajectories. Developing responsive environments means identifying additional support needed for middle and high school educators—including teachers, coaches, counselors, mentors, and administrators—to understand SEL, its importance, and how it can be integrated into learning, which may mean restructuring how teachers work with 100+ students a semester.



### Listening and Responding to Youth Voice

As high schools consider how they can be redesigned for 21st Century learning, SEL needs to be an integral part, including ensuring students have access to wraparound services and models like Communities in Schools. The youth on *A Nation at Hope's* National Commission recognize that transformation of our secondary educational opportunities means everyone needs to be involved. They call on students, teachers, administrators, families, and communities to take these words into action:

**To our fellow students:** Now is the time to stand up and join together; to advocate for one another by calling for a vision of education that supports us as whole learners. Talk to your teachers, administrators, families, and community leaders and urge them to join us in calling for the full integration of social and emotional learning with academic instruction in schools and classrooms across America. We need the support of all adults in our lives to reach our full potential.

**To our teachers:** As the adults on the front lines of our learning and development, you know that we need a full array of skills in order to be successful in your classrooms and in life. Please take the initiative and join us in calling for all teachers to teach us as whole learners.

**To our administrators and school leaders:** Please listen to our voices. Please support our call for teachers and schools to shape our social and emotional development as essential to improving our academic skills and achieving greater equity in our schools and classrooms.

**To our families and communities:** We call on you to join us—to help us advocate for the change that we need across our communities. We need you, we need these skills, and we need change.





Research and practice in the past 25 years have taught us that academic growth is tied to students' social and emotional growth, and that learning is a social activity. By attending to the social, emotional, and cognitive development of all children in culturally and linguistically sustaining ways, educators in New Mexico have the potential to create conditions for thriving. By transforming the kinds of interactions and opportunities students have in our schools, we can ensure every student is known, respected, and belongs. Integrating comprehensive SEL throughout the school day is one tool that can help educators prepare our students to thrive in the 21st Century.

SEL can help to reinvent schools as places that affirm and integrate students' linguistic, cultural, and community assets through strong relationships and being cared for in rich learning environments that foster deeper learning.<sup>53</sup> To do this vital work, the adults in our schools need support in developing and understanding a common language, to engage in SEL themselves, access to on-going professional learning, and a strong vision for developing conditions for success by centering our students' wholistic development in our work.

As our society grapples with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and continued civil unrest, we propose that it is an exciting time to be in education, as students, educators, families, communities, researchers, learning and developmental scientists, and policymakers come together to redesign schools so that every child has a chance to know and reach their individual and our collective potentials for thriving in the 21st Century. Learning and developmental scientists have helped us to understand that each child has unique strengths and potential for growth in interacting dimensions, including the cognitive, physical, social, emotional, metacognitive, cultural, and linguistic dimensions. What is more, the co-development of these dimensions enable the child to both influence their setting and positively adapt to new challenges, including transfer of skills to new settings.<sup>54</sup> Educational practices need to align with our deeper understanding of what supports children's thriving. Cantor

## conclusion



and colleagues contend that we can address inequities by ensuring all children have access to conditions that support whole child development such as:<sup>55</sup>

- 1 | Positive Developmental Relationships
- 2 | Environments Filled with Safety and Belonging
- 3 | Rich Learning Experiences and Pathways
- 4 | Intentional Development of Critical Skills, Mindsets, and Habits
- 5 | Sustaining Cultural and Native Language Acquisition, and
- 6 | Integrated Systems of Support

The educators in Northern New Mexico recognize the importance of this work. Our collective work is to support educators to develop the skills, knowledge, and practices they need to systematically integrate SEL into our schools in ways that support whole child development and thriving in the 21st Century.

*Social and  
emotional learning  
allows students to tap  
into their  
emotional intelligence  
and view themselves  
as citizens  
of the world.*

NORTHERN NM  
BILINGUAL K-8 TEACHER

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