

Developing SEL Instructional Skills and Strategies

Use this guide with your staff

Schools and community centers have long served an important context for building social and emotional learning (SEL) skills. One common approach has been school- and community-based prevention and intervention programs focused on SEL.

This guide is designed to step you through the process of thinking about and creating your own SEL strategies for building and/or choosing the most effective SEL program for your school or organization.

I. ESTABLISH GOALS & PRIORITIES

Identify your school or organization's key priorities, goals, limitations, or challenges. The following questions are meant to facilitate deeper thought and discussion about the strengths, opportunities, and needs of your specific context, setting the stage for selecting an SEL program that best suits the needs of your community.

Key consideration: Review school data on such areas as climate and disciplinary records, and/or qualitative data from focus groups or interviews with key stakeholders to guide your responses to Needs and Goals questions.

Reflection: What problems or issues do we want to address as a school community?

Needs and Goals

You will need to define the specific content focus or urgent need you hope to address by implementing a new program. Examples include bullying prevention, character education, etc. With your team, answer the following questions:

- Do you have a specific mission and/or existing requirements or initiatives with which you are trying to align SEL programming, such as school climate, community service, health and wellness, art, etc.?
- Are there specific skills or social-emotional or behavioral needs you are hoping to address? Examples include empathy, attention skills, conflict resolution, etc.
- Who will take part in the program? What cultural considerations or learning needs must be addressed?
- Will the program be implemented universally across your school/organization, or is it intended to be used with a specific population?

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Key considerations:

- Research shows that urban, economically disadvantaged, and minority populations especially benefit from SEL.
 - SEL programming in the early school years has been shown to improve the culture and climate of schools and classrooms, as well as children's social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes.

Time and Structure

Determine whether there are existing schedule or timing constraints that would influence SEL programming.

- Is there dedicated time available each day/week for SEL programming?
 - Does SEL programming need to be integrated into academic time, playground time, or a specific place (e.g., classrooms, gym) within your setting?
 - Is there a specific structure or time you are hoping to use to integrate SEL programming across the school? Examples include advisory periods, P.E./health or wellness classes, and language arts classrooms.

Key consideration: Look for ways to embed SEL across the day, across microsettings, and among all adults who interact with students/children.

Leadership and Training

SEL programming is most effective when a diverse range of stakeholders is involved in the program selection process. Making decisions from the top down can undermine buy-in and compromise effectiveness.

- Who are the stakeholders involved in both selecting and implementing new SEL programming?
 - What process will you use to discuss SEL priorities and review options for SEL programming?
 - Who will be involved in each stage, and how will you ultimately decide which program to implement?
 - Who will implement the program? What kind of training will this require?



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II. BREAK IT DOWN

A. A number of barriers undermine efforts to bring SEL programming to scale, and these barriers are likely exacerbated in low-income and low-resource contexts. With your team, explore your school or organization's past and current implementation challenges.

Discuss and rate your school community's status in implementing initiatives in each of the following areas:

- Fidelity and the ability to implement the program as designed;
- Local buy-in, relevance, and cultural match enabled by autonomy;
- Financial, personnel, and structural resources;
- Integration into educational practice rather than as an “extracurricular” or add-on; and
- Sustainability and continued, consistent use over time.

Key consideration: Rigid schedules and budget priorities, as well as a lack of training and/or structured approaches, often sink initiatives such as SEL.

Reflection: In which areas has your school or organization successfully overcome barriers in the past, and in which areas do challenges still remain?

B. Consider implementing low-cost, low-barrier SEL strategies. Research shows there is a pressing need to develop and test less-intensive strategies, particularly for children exposed to poverty-related stressors and adverse experiences.

These strategies can be designed to adapt to individual, classroom, and school-specific needs and easy to implement outside the context of a comprehensive program, while still achieving meaningful outcomes. Examples include:

- Children writing and reading aloud praise for peers to promote interpersonal skills.
 - Students' use of some kind of tool or material representing a conflict escalator to explore how certain choices can worsen or improve a conflict.
 - Showing videos that depict children in challenging classroom or playground situations to prompt discussion around emotions, conflict resolution, and appropriate behaviors.
1. For more information on low-cost, low-barrier strategies, including instructional practices, how to create a pilot program, and crafting a teacher guide, visit www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/documents/kernels-of-practice-for-sel.pdf.

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III. BUILD EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION PLANS

Whatever strategies or programs your school or organization chooses, make sure the curriculum is well-implemented. Use the following reflection guide to look at how your organization's implementations comply with current research on SEL recommendations.

Structure Implementation Time

Often competing for time with academic content, SEL programs can be given short shrift. How will you:

- Integrate SEL into academic areas such as history, language arts, and social studies?
- Ensure SEL integration is done in a way that builds cultural sensitivity, respect for diversity, and social/ethical awareness?
- Align the program with the structures and routines already in place in your setting?
- Structure time to implement the program with fidelity?

Extend SEL Beyond the Classroom

SEL programs should include unstructured zones as well as classrooms. Student surveys and “hot spot mapping,” in which students draw maps of the areas in school where they feel unsafe, show that students feel most unsafe in these unmonitored, and sometimes unstructured, zones. How will you:

- Support students in navigating these spaces?
- Ensure you are intentional about providing continuous, consistent opportunities to build and practice these skills across settings?
- Extend these opportunities through connections at home and in the community?

Apply SEL Strategies and Skills in Real Time

Even with comprehensive curricula, teachers and other school and out-of-school-time staff often struggle to use program strategies in real-time “teachable moment” situations or help students



transfer and apply these skills more broadly to their daily interactions in the classroom and other settings. How will you:

- Prepare students to deal with real-time conflict resolution skills during a disagreement on the playground?
- Integrate SEL into regular classroom practice and programs?
- Integrate these SEL skills into the larger school culture?

Ensure Sufficient Staff Support and Training

An adult's own SEL skills play an important role in their ability to model skills, develop positive relationships with students, and foster positive classroom environments. How will you:

- Provide in-service support for SEL, particularly through effective approaches like coaching and mentoring? Find SEL programs or other opportunities that provide training or professional development for staff to build knowledge and develop their own social-emotional competence?
- Facilitate program ownership and buy-in?

Programs developed by outside organizations and adopted without complete transparency are sometimes viewed



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skeptically by school administrators and staff. How will you:

- Include staff and other key stakeholders in SEL planning?
 - Select programming that is developmentally and culturally aligned to student needs?

Use Data to Inform Decision-Making

Despite the general trend toward data-driven decision-making in schools, few schools employ data to guide decision-making about the selection, implementation, or ongoing assessment of programs and strategies. How will you:

- Use programs that are most suited to your contexts and the specific challenges you are facing?
 - Monitor results and hold yourself accountable?

Discuss these topics with your leadership team to customize SEL programming for your school context. •

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